Designing and Teaching an Inclusive Course

A Guide for Faculty

Table of Contents

At Wiley Education Services, we empower learners to create positive change.

The term "learners" does not only describe the students who take online courses. We also support faculty during their learning journeys. We want to help them teach inclusively so that all students can succeed in the classroom. This guide provides faculty with recommendations on how they can promote diversity, equity, and inclusion in their online courses.

In early 2021, we embarked on an effort to provide designers, faculty, students, and administrators the resources they need to work towards more diverse, equitable, and inclusive online classrooms. The purpose of this guide is to provide faculty with recommendations on how they can promote diversity, equity, and inclusion in their online courses.

Areas of Focus

We compiled recommendations from universities across the United States to identify eight key areas of focus when creating an inclusive online classroom.

These components are:
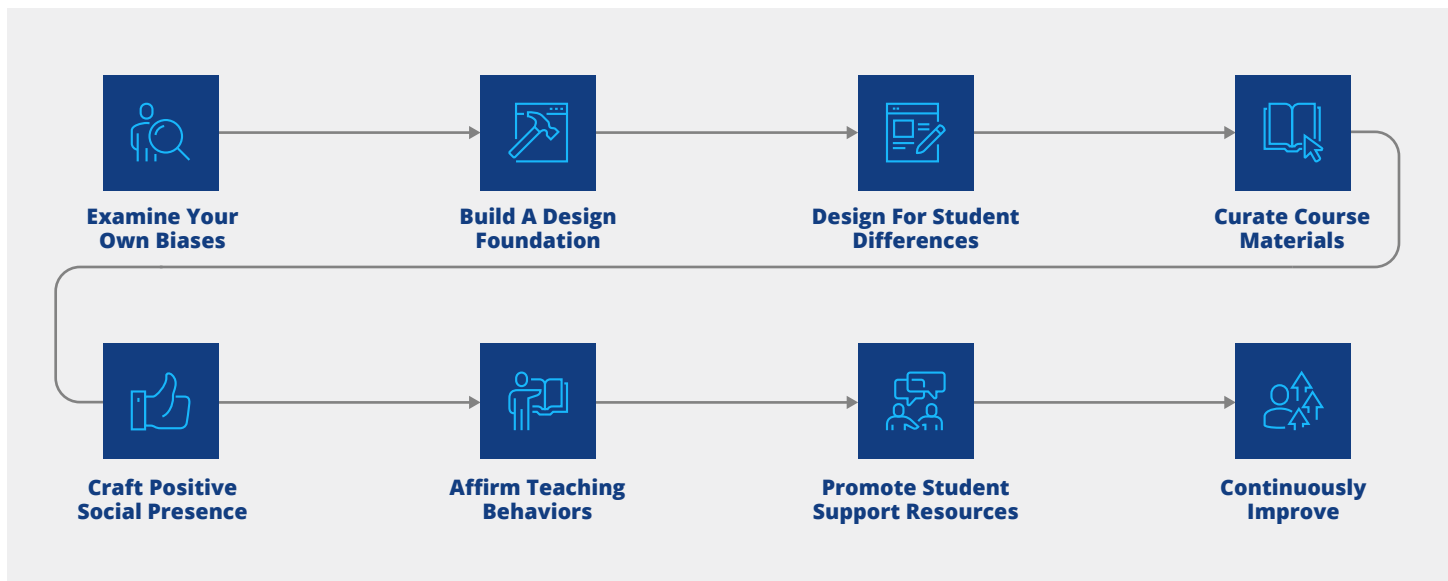
Although we tend to think about the dichotomy between designing (planning) the course and teaching it, some of the recommendations in each category may cross over from design to teaching or vice versa.

Equally important, remember to carve out time after the course to reflect on the experience and incorporate student feedback to plan future improvement. These recommendations can help faculty move beyond reflecting on inequalities and help guide them towards creating a concrete plan to dismantle the formal and informal systems of oppression currently in place.

The important role of faculty is to support best practices for creating and teaching diverse, equitable, and inclusive online courses by:

- Examining and building awareness of their own biases.
- Engaging in learning, listening, and critical reflection.
- Asking questions and engaging in dialog with their university, programs, and departments.

The Four Cs Framework

Our overarching goal is to support faculty on their learning journeys towards foundational behaviors necessary for creating a strong class community. These practices can be summarized by the four Cs framework (Sedlovskaya, 2020).

Courses who have a strong, inclusive class community have faculty who:

- Demonstrate Curiosity about their students' viewpoints and opinions and ask follow-up questions that affirm their experience.
- Demonstrate Candor, or honesty and frankness, in their conversations. Being honest and upfront about how their experience is different from others, and in what ways, creates space for those with different experiences to share their thoughts.
- Display Courtesy to their students by being respectful and remembering that intention and impact can differ and helping to confront and diffuse situations where students are negatively impacted.
- Exhibit the Courage needed to share their experiences and to listen and understand others when they share theirs. Speaking up for inclusion can often take a great deal of courage, showing courage by participating in inclusive ways and recognizing the courage of others will create a space where diversity and equity can thrive.

For examples of how Sedlovskaya implements the four Cs framework in her courses, read her discussion here.

Starting the Conversation

Learning more about the institution, program, and/or department's practices as they pertain to diversity, equity, and inclusion is a good place to start.

Faculty can connect with peers and leaders to discuss and ask:

- What DE&I initiatives are being pursued at the university, program, or department?
- Does the university, program, or department have an anti-racism statement?
- Does the university, program, or department have an inclusive language statement?
- Does the university, program, or department offer bias training?

We invite you to consider some recommendations as you redesign your course to promote equity and inclusion so that all students feel invited to learn in your online classroom. The goal is to provide options and ideas. Please refer to the References section for links to the original resources for more information.

Examining Your Own Biases
The first step to building an inclusive course is building awareness of your own biases.

- Identify your own implicit biases. Reflect on how your own biases might affect your interactions with students and the development of your course. Self-assess your implicit biases with the resource page from the Yale Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning (n.d.).
- Commit to sustained education and professional development to counter implicit biases.
- Expand your network. Studies have shown that cross-group connections and friendships decrease preferences for prejudice and social hierarchy (Suttie, 2016).

Building A Design Foundation
Strong instructional design serves as the foundation for building an inclusive course. These recommendations will help the majority of your students. Your course may already meet them, but please take a moment to review and reflect on areas of possible improvement.

- Encourage learner autonomy by including opportunities to self-select topics, draw on personal interests, or share with peers. This can also be a good opportunity to involve students in shaping your syllabus and pedagogical choices. For example, involving students in selecting criteria for a discussion board rubric includes them in the process and develops student investment in assignments they may feel are only cursory.
- Allow students to play an active role in online discussions by encouraging small-group work and using breakout rooms in synchronous sessions. When assigning breakout groups, be intentional with the composition of groups and create rules for inclusive meetings. Being mindful of your students' styles and setting inclusive norms will help ensure that all students have a space to share ideas.
- Share examples of what successful meeting learning objectives looks like. These examples especially help support first-generation students who may not clearly understand unstated expectations.
- Plan frequent, low-stakes assessment that begins early in the course. These assessments can provide useful information about how students are progressing and offer opportunities for students to practice before taking higher stakes assessments.
- Employ active learning techniques and apply universal design principles to learning activities. This may require thinking beyond traditional test and paper formats. Instead, consider providing students with multiple ways and opportunities to demonstrate their learning.

Designing For Student Differences

Next, go beyond designing for the "average student" by designing for student differences. The key theme for this group of recommendations is flexibility.

- Review your participation requirements. Keep in mind that students studying from home may live in difficult or unsafe conditions or in an environment where they cannot be their authentic self. This may impact their participation significantly, and their behavior may shift for synchronous versus asynchronous activities. For example, students who conceal their sexual orientation at home may feel uncomfortable referencing their orientation when others can overhear.

- Verify that course materials are accessible. Remember that accessibility accommodations may be helpful to multiple groups of students. For example, captioned videos may also help multilingual students, and offering inclusive office hours (e.g., mixed times or days) benefits students who are employed or have caregiving responsibilities.

- Question your assumptions surrounding what students need to be able to do or what they must understand to be successful in your class. Where possible, provide space for different learning tendencies, and communicate explicitly about how students can demonstrate learning in varied ways.

- Offer students flexibility with deadlines and workload when possible, and provide feedback on how they are progressing against timelines.

- Reflect on what it means to be "knowledgeable" in your field. Keep in mind that not all students may demonstrate their proficiency in the same way. Consider adapting assessments to allow multiple methods of demonstrating knowledge.

Curating Course Materials

Expanding course materials to reflect diversity in source and opinion prepares students for their personal and professional lives by mirroring our global community.

- Be transparent about material selection and share with students the reason why you chose the materials and how you organized them. Examine how your own biases—about learning or students—may influence your perception of which materials you emphasize and how students should engage with them.

- Evaluate your course materials to ensure that they reflect a diverse society and world, making sure to create opportunities to recognize and value different viewpoints (Gamrat, 2020). This includes:

  » Ensure that your syllabus sets the tone and expectations for course materials and interactions.

  » Critically evaluate assigned materials that may be problematic and consider adding supplemental materials and creating discussion prompts to engage with students about them.

  » Question if your course materials represent multiple identities and viewpoints. If your materials appear to be largely homogeneous, reflect on possible reasons for this, including tradition, inherited materials, or convenience. Address whether these reasons are sufficient to continue without change.

  » Review course content for cultural references, examples, and scenarios to guarantee realistic diversity.

  » As much as possible, include materials that reflect a wide range of perspectives, experiences, and backgrounds, and represent and respect them as legitimate sources of critique or knowledge.

- Explicitly name and discuss the agenda(s) and historical biases of your field, examining how they impact the current course.

- Supplement your course materials with background information and multiple types of examples to facilitate learning. Students returning to the classroom after a long time benefit from this information.

- Reach out to on-campus resources or professional groups to provide role models and guest speakers for students who demonstrate a broad representation (Gamrat, 2020). If in-person or synchronous visits are not possible, seek out interviews for students to read or watch.

Crafting Positive Social Presence

Our online course design emphasizes fostering social presence, derived from the Community of Inquiry (Wiley Education Services, 2021). Two important steps for crafting a positive social presence include proactive planning and establishing mitigation strategies if the class climate sours. The following recommendations suggest some ways to do this:

- Include a syllabus statement that recognizes diversity and respects and affirms student identities.

- Proactively plan group formation, keeping in mind how student demographics may impact online discussion forums, collaborative assignments, or student engagement with course materials (Gamrat, 2020).

- Foster belonging for all students by establishing and supporting a class climate based on the four Cs framework for building a strong class community (Sedlovskaya, 2020). Create online discussion guidelines for difficult conversations and consider working collaboratively with students to create a community agreement for online behavior.

- Create courses with a strong, inclusive class community by doing the following:

  » Reflect on how you share or do not share power in your classroom, and consider forming student leadership roles during class sessions. This gives students the opportunity to share their expertise and allows students to codesign course elements. For example, invite students to suggest discussion topics or act as a moderator.

  » Provide opportunities for students to share their learning with each other with the goal of building class solidarity rather than competition.

  » On day one, set the tone about the interactions in the class: students should understand that the online classroom is a place for collaboration and to challenge each other respectfully, while being mindful that this is a space where everyone can share their perspectives safely.

  » Be prepared to monitor student interaction and have a plan in place on the first day of class for how you will manage conflict between students. Learn to recognize and address microaggressions and concerning language in discussion boards, chats, and other places where students interact.

Affirming Teaching Behaviors

In your commentary or engagement with students in discussion, take the opportunity to voice a wide range of perspectives yourself.

- Be aware of how well versed students may be with the "hidden curriculum" of higher education and online learning. Take steps to explicitly share these when possible.

- Prioritize student well-being, and model self-care behaviors. Keep in mind that both visible and invisible stressors may impact students. Certain actions encourage student well-being, including the following:

  » Being compassionate, generous, and flexible with their needs

  » Sharing your own challenges and how you respond

  » Asking students for feedback on how you can be mindful of their challenges

  » Making time for breaks and encouraging your students to do the same

  » Learning about and noticing early warning signs of student distress or overload

  » Check in with students regularly, and remind all students about available resources (e.g., mental health services, support groups).

  » Promote an inclusive learning environment by being flexible and offering students multiple ways to participate and demonstrate their learning. This includes (Gamrat, 2020):

    · Providing frequent and varied interaction opportunities

    · Being mindful of imposing unwanted focus on students (e.g., singling students out, making minority students inappropriately visible)

    · Inviting students to contribute diverse opinions through questions that do not have a single right answer

Affirming Teaching Behaviors, continued

- Archive recordings or resources for review at a later time.
- Consistently model and use inclusive language (Gamrat, 2020). Begin by introducing yourself by your preferred name and your gender pronouns, and during discussions, try to pull in examples that speak across diverse populations.
  - » Allow students to control when, where, and how they share their pronouns and preferred names.
  - » If a student doesn't disclose their pronoun, eliminate the pronoun by using the student's name.
- Prepare for challenging moments by establishing classroom expectations and guidelines and develop strategies to address challenging classroom moments directly.
- Share responsibility with students for taking on other perspectives and for sustaining a productive learning community through direct guidance and modeling productive behaviors.
- Engage students in a small-group introduction activity at the beginning of the course (Gamrat, 2020; Sedlovskaya, 2020). Possibilities include:
  - » Use an interest survey to connect with students as individuals and to connect them with similar students who may have the same or similar interests.
  - » Ask students to email you a self-introduction. Responding to each student's email establishes trust and builds a foundation for future connection.

Promoting Student Support Resources

Faculty cannot provide everything for all students and sometimes need help supporting students outside the course. Having resources available for student support and encouraging students to use those resources is especially important for online learners who are not co-located with on-campus offices or do not have easy access to non-faculty staff.

- Ask students to reach out to you if they have issues accessing the technology needed to fulfill course requirements. Consider using a survey rather than directing students to initiate the request for help. Work with students who have issues by offering alternative assessments that they can complete with their current technology.

- Adapt relevant faculty resources for student use, such as information about how to turn a phone into a Wi-Fi hotspot, access e-textbooks, troubleshoot connectivity issues, and use university libraries' various online services and resources.

- Communicate with students about how the online learning format may influence their study strategies. Students new to online learning or who begin online courses at higher levels may not have had contact with available resources or strategies for success.

- Share resources for student support, and explicitly encourage their use, including:
  » Planning for student needs surrounding tech support
  » Communicating regularly about course changes
  » Setting the expectation that students who need learning support can and should access available resources

- Guide students seeking help to the appropriate service or resources (e.g., accommodation requests, academic support, technical support).

Improving Continuously

Inclusive instructional design is a continuous process of improvement. After teaching the course, take some time to review how it went, and draft a plan for future terms. Consider what you learned and what you need to learn.

- Practice active reflection regarding your course materials, delivery, and interaction with students (Hollister, 2020; Gamrat, 2020). Suggested activities include:

  » Watch recorded synchronous sessions and focus on your delivery. For example, what tone did you use with students, who did you call on, what kinds of examples did you use, and were the examples clear?

  » Ask students to provide specific feedback about their learning experience.

- Develop a continuous improvement plan with concrete steps.

- Learn how to recognize and address microaggressions and concerning language in discussion boards, chats, and other places students interact so that you can share your knowledge with faculty or program leadership.

- Engage in development opportunities to improve your understanding of students, including how their identities impact their lives and how you can acknowledge the trauma of racism and other inequities. Use what you learn to reflect on your expectations of the "ideal" student and whether all students can equally meet your view.

Conclusion

Integrating inclusivity and anti-racism in teaching and learning is a complex and holistic endeavor. It's truly a journey, not a destination. The most important step is to commit to this essential work — the work of inclusivity and anti-racism — and embrace a mindset of continuous learning. By making these commitments, faculty can create more supportive and inclusive environments for students.

We encourage you to find approaches that enable the voices of all students to be acknowledged and heard.

Let us know how you support inclusion in your course and on your campus. Visit us at edservices.wiley.com, we look forward to connecting with you.

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