

Strategies for Overcoming Barriers to Fostering Inclusion in Online Classrooms

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While professors have long been navigating diversity and inclusion challenges for in-person teaching, the challenge becomes more complex as instruction moves to an online format. This begs the questions:

1. Why is inclusion important in online higher education and what are the benefits of online classroom inclusion?
2. How do socio-economic and cultural disparities manifest in the online classroom?
3. What strategies can online professors implement to foster greater inclusion in the class?




The Importance of Inclusion




Learner Engagement & Institution Repercussions

 **Culture plays a critical role in online learning contributes to detrimental educational and psychological consequences.**

 If students begin to feel that culture is not valued, acknowledged or considered they:

- Can experience feelings of isolation, alienation, and even depression.
- Not only does culture have an impact on the overall classroom experience, but it has also shown to affect learning, motivation, and satisfaction.
- Can become disengaged as a result.


 Disengagement contributes to students not doing well and dropping out:


- Schools need students to meet learning objectives and failure to be inclusive compromises student learning hindering the meeting of learning objectives.
- Online courses already have higher attrition rates than traditional classroom environments.
- If students increasingly desire and need online options, but don't feel welcomed and drop, it is a financial loss for the institutions.

(Kang & Chang, 2016; Milheim, 2017; Aragon & Johnson, 2008; Harris & Martin)

Reduced Engagement → Increased Attrition

Importance to the Institution

 If students are increasingly desiring online options, but don't feel welcomed, and it's possible that there's an impending reduction in the desirability of in-person classes, this is an important consideration for colleges and universities because the loss of online students means a financial loss for the institutions (Harris & Martin, 2012).

 The challenge is that diversity inclusion strategies are often at odds with American higher education principles.





Facets of Diversity & How They Can Pose Barriers

Economic
Cultural
Language & Communication
Collective vs Individualistic
High-Low Power Distance

Demographics of Online Students




According to Learning House (2017), students that opt for online learning tend to be:

- **Lower socioeconomic status:** 47% of online students have incomes below \$39,000
- **Ethnically diverse:** 37% of undergraduate students identify as belonging to a race other than white; 33% of graduate students identify to non-white races
- **Diversity among the Caucasian student population:** a significant number may struggle in the online classroom as a result of their age, gender, socio-economic background, and/or prior educational background.




Students from all ethnicities may experience socio-economic hardship that can hinder success in the online classroom (Rogers & Wang 2009).

Economic Adversity

 According to Bawa, (2016) students of low economic status experience

- a) greater family obligations;
- b) a higher cognitive load as a result of lacking experience with online learning systems and lesser interaction with the instructor;
- c) reduced motivation resulting from course design and minimal real-world context in the course materials;
- d) while they may be comfortable with personal technology they are likely to be uncomfortable with formal education technology;
- e) may experience greater dissatisfaction with course quality and perceived differences between students and instructors.

 Additionally van Breda (2018), asserted that socioeconomic factors and development status contributes to one's level of resiliency. Thus, individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may face greater obstacles to success in the classroom and have lower levels of resiliency to overcome them.

Economic Adversity Impacts the Persistence



If more students with lower-socio economic status are comprising our classrooms then it is important that we recognize their barriers to success. For example:

- Having extensive family/work obligations could mean → they're more prone to facing hardship with deadlines.
- Socioeconomic hardship could diminish resiliency → a higher likelihood to withdraw the from courses or entire program after missed deadlines.
- Challenges with technology or negative perceptions around course content → feelings of inadequacy, dissatisfaction, or alienation → increased drop out.



Thus, with greater diverse students enrolling in online programs, there is greater urgency to prioritize the use of instruction, course materials, and student support that reflects and meets the needs of these diverse students.



Failure to prioritize inclusion will contribute to higher online student attrition.

Professor Considerations & Strategies for Economic Adversity



Considerations



Strategies

Cultural Representation



The online classroom reflects the institution's and/or faculty's cultural values, artifacts and general nuances of the culture of the designer any of which could be at odds with the values of students from different cultural backgrounds (Kinasevyeh, 2010).

- If the cultural background of the student is disconnected with that of the instructor, receptivity to learning could be substantially impacted because perceived ethnic, racial, linguistic, social, religious, or economic differences can hinder the motivation to learning (Altugan, 2014).
- This disconnect between the student and the learning experience can contribute to feelings of isolation, alienation, low- confidence and play a role in the student's likelihood to persist in the program.



The question becomes, what are some key cultural student factors that should be considered by the instructor and subsequently what are some strategies for diminishing the disconnect and promoting inclusion?

Professor Considerations & Strategies for Culture



Considerations



Strategies

Language Confidence and Communication



A barrier for culturally diverse students' success in the American online classroom is their confidence level with the English language.

- A student's proficiency in writing and grammar results in the possibility of losing excessive points on assignments for grammar and spelling errors.
- Uncertainty around cultural norms regarding classroom communication and how to express disagreement appropriately in English (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2003). As a result, some students for example may be hesitant to disagree in online discussions because they don't want to appear argumentative to their peers (Uzuner, 2009).
- Instead of risking appearing argumentative, they end up being overly agreeable, vague, or have participation that is under-developed and does not meet substantive discussion requirements.
- The result is either earning lower grades because they are perceived to not display adequate critical thinking skills, or they might skip the assignment as a result of lacking confidence, gain resulting in poor grades and impacting their performance.

Language Confidence and Communication

- Both writing proficiency and communication uncertainty pose a challenge for instructors who seek to promote inclusivity because what is the best, fair, equitable remedy is not clear.
- In the case of grammar errors, the question becomes should the professor be more lenient on their grading of students' papers that they suspect to be English as a second language learners? What about students who English is their first and only language, and yet their writing and communication is still a reflection of their culture?
- In the second scenario with the brief discussion participation, how is a professor to know if a student's participation is under-developed as a result of a cultural hesitation or as a result of poor effort?
- Still yet, how is an online professor to know a student's culture or socioeconomic background? Traditionally, professors and instructors have been trained to strictly adhere to rubrics, but is this part of what is preventing an inclusive classroom?

Professor Considerations & Strategies for Language & Communication



Considerations



Strategies

Collective and Individualistic Learning



The American classroom is a highly individualistic endeavor with grades largely based on individual performance, and the online classroom tends to be even more so as a result of its self-directed nature.



Students from collectivist cultures who may be more community centric in their learning, accustomed to sharing ideas and working in groups. (Kang & Chang, 2016; Uzuner, 2009; Tapanes et al, 2009). Students from collective cultures:

- could more easily experience feelings of isolation in an online environment which again could exasperate the temptation to withdraw.
- their willingness to share resources and information, desire to help peers could be problematic in a classroom based on individual performance, so far as resulting in them being perceived as engaging in academic dishonesty.
- students from highly collective cultures more often get docked on assignments for inconsistency or lacking citation (Strangfeld, 2019).

Professor Considerations & Strategies for Collectivism vs Individualistic



Considerations



Strategies

High/Low Power Distance



The United States is considered to be a classic low-power distance culture and in higher education this manifests as norms in which professors and students can speak openly and directly. Students are encouraged to ask questions and even to question their professor.

- Students who come from a high-power distance culture may perceive speaking out and questioning as a sign of disrespect and thus may be uncomfortable communicating directly with their professor (Hofstede, 1980; Uzuner, 2009).
- Professors may misinterpret a student's lack of communication as a lack of engagement. In the in-person classroom, the professor might notice this type of student's engagement by observing their behaviors such as by their attentive body posture and/or note-taking. However, when these physical cues are missing in the online environment and a student appears to be "absent" or disengaged because they don't ask questions, and if they don't ask questions their performance may be hindered as a result of not obtaining clarification (Milheim, 2017; Tapanes et al., 2009).
- These students additionally may not perform well on assignments related to active inquiry such as discussion forums. Again, another instance possibly resulting in lower performance/grades which hurts the student's self-efficacy and can make them feel alienated thus risking retention.

Professor Considerations & Strategies for Power Distance



Considerations



Strategies



How Can I Be An Advocate of Diversity & Promote Inclusion?

Action Steps for Professors To Promote Inclusion

- The first step to promoting inclusion in the online classroom is to have an understanding of our students and gain an understanding of how socio-economic and cultural differences shape student perceptions.
- The second step is for the professor/instructor to begin efforts at mitigating the potential disconnects resulting from diverse backgrounds. There is not one single solution but rather it is a process of examining the classroom for opportunities to enhance inclusion.
- Reflect on your own personal beliefs of the principles of higher education and consider if any of these beliefs are potentially at odds with promoting diversity.

Every Little Step Makes a Difference

While this may feel like a big under-taking, this is a highly worthwhile endeavor.

- There is an increasing demand for online learning and a corresponding increase in student diversity demanding it, thus it has become urgent to examine the high attrition rate (Herbert, 2006; Heyman, 2010; B. Smith, 2010).
- By gaining a better understanding of diverse students and integrating strategies for inclusion in the online classroom, learning can be enhanced and attrition reduced. This benefits the overall classroom environment, the students and the institutions (Allen & Seaman, 2011; Overton, 2007; Stanford-Bowers, 2008).

Questions & Comments

Thanks

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