

How to Accommodate for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the Online Classroom

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Getting an online degree is not as simple as one may believe and is often more challenging than getting a traditional degree, as the learning experience is completely different. Digital education comes with a unique set of challenges for students, such as adaptability struggles, technical issues, computer literacy, time management, and self-motivation (Kumar, 2015). However, in more recent times, virtual educators are faced with a new dynamic on the rise for their students, and that is understanding how to accommodate diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the online classroom.

Diversity: This transformation from place-based learning to digital learning means for the first time in history, multiculturalism is at the forefront of higher education. The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (2016) defines multiculturalism as "the co-existence of diverse cultures, where culture includes racial, religious, or cultural groups and is manifested in customary behaviors, cultural assumptions and values, patterns of thinking, and communicative styles." Instructors will now need to think of new ways to build learning communities while embracing diversities in their online classrooms. This shift toward multiculturalism in the online environment also calls for a new paradigm toward multicultural education. According to the National Association for Multicultural Education (n.d.), "multicultural education advocates the belief that students and their life histories and experiences should be placed at the center of the teaching and learning process and that pedagogy should occur in a context that is familiar to students and that addresses multiple ways of thinking." In other words, colleges and universities must advance the improvement of culturally responsive and responsible educational programs, including looking at the whole student and experience that s/he

brings into the online classroom, rather than focusing solely on the name on the screen or written work submitted. This is not a new idea. Malcolm Knowles (1980) theorized that learning for adults is experiential and utilizes background knowledge. This idea is more important than ever, given the rich diversity in students present in the online classroom.

Equity: The uprise of DEI factors is getting harder for leaders to ignore especially in a time when power is radically shifting from where it was once guarded and nearly inaccessible to the hands of everyday people as seen through high-profile socially-driven movements, such as [Women's March](#), [#MuteRKelly](#) or [Transgender Equality](#). These movements are caused by expanding political dissent and unjust treatment of affinity groups. It becomes evident through the actions of these social movements that the call for equity is a must and higher education administrators would be remiss not to answer the call. The concept of equity can have a variety of definitions, contingent upon the unique circumstance; however, at its center, the idea includes giving everybody regardless of their demographic the particular devices that they need to be effective (DiFranza, 2019). The dichotomy in this idea is that it can be difficult for the online instructor to know which approaches would benefit individual students, given the potential for relative anonymity of the online classroom. Given this potential gap, one of the most effective instructional tools that educators can leverage is to embrace unique perspective, personalities, and experiences in their students, and work to gain a deeper understanding of these qualities through caring and genuine inquiry and by creating a classroom culture of respect and exploration.

Inclusion: Inclusive instruction endeavors to serve the needs of the whole student, regardless of individual demographics or personalities, and make a positive impact on their motivation to engage with subject material. Hearing different points of view can improve the learner experience by exposing everybody to thought-provoking discussions on conventional and contemporary issues and arranging to learn within the students'

specific circumstances while exploring those unique circumstances. Ambrose et al. (2010) contend that "students are more motivated to take control of their learning in classroom climates that recognize them, draw relevant connections to their lives, and respond to their unique concerns." In other words, inclusive teaching expands upon an educator's basic instinct to make sure all voices are heard and that all learners get an opportunity to take an interest completely in the learning process, by delving somewhat more profound into why participation imbalances exist (Salazar et al., 2009). This is not an easy task for instructors. Students bring a variety of rich elements of diversity, most of which are initially hidden from instructors. While encouraging students to learn through the lenses of their experiences, talents, and background, educators must also balance the need to ensure that the classroom remains open to all ideas, inclusive of all perspectives, and respectful to all -- especially in the public areas of the classroom, like the discussion board. This requires instructors who are also open to different ideas and perspectives, authentically curious about the individual experiences that students bring to the classroom, and committed to providing the time and care necessary to see each student as a unique and whole person.

Conclusion: With the continued growth of online learning, accessibility to education is becoming increasingly barrier-free to students of all backgrounds, demographics, and socioeconomic statuses. Given this shift, it is integral that online administrators and educators adopt an approach of continuous improvement in their practices of embracing aspects of student and colleague diversity, equity, and inclusion. Curating an inclusive learning experience is the collective responsibility of all members of the educational infrastructure and must become a component of the educational lexicon.

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