Inclusive Online Environments: Creating Inclusive Meetings and Teaching Environments at UVic

Contents

This document was prepared for use by members of the UVic faculty and staff in support of our work to create welcoming and inclusive environments online as well as in person, to serve UVic's diverse community effectively. Additional related resources are listed on the EQHR website.

Introduction

Creating equitable online environments require us to uphold the same principles of integrity and respect as we do in person. Practicing these principles can be hard during crises, which increase stress and reduce people's ability to engage. Our response needs to be actions to become aware of context and ensure everyone can participate fully. These actions include reflection and planning; accommodations for the diverse realities of those you are working with; and deliberate strategies to build inclusion.

Foundational principles include:

- Equity, diversity and inclusion **(EDI) are a priority**. Address these first to ensure participants can focus on content without discrimination or worry
- **Diversity** affects experiences. Learn about the diversity of power, position and marginalization of participants and reduce any negative impacts
- We each have different types of positional **power** which may be exacerbate by technology

- Work to increase **trust** by addressing reality and perceptions of discrimination
- Respect **context**: acknowledge and give space for impacts from individual and collective events

Approaches that can actualize these principles include:

- Create barrier-free environments (implement **universal design**)
- Be **flexible**, providing options at the start and adjusting as you go
- Be **transparent** about what you know, sharing information and your reasons for decisions
- Ask about, **listen** to, and **show respect** for people's experiences and needs
- Respect **privacy** (don't ask too much or demand sharing) and provide information and practices to facilitate **confidentiality** and online security
- **Accept** that sometimes things will be **awkward** online. Normalize acceptance of this

How to prepare for going online. Read about others' experiences; connect with others to share ideas; and build empathy and EDI strategies by reflecting on your own position and experience and how it may differ from or be similar to others'.

Technology may be a barrier for participants for reasons related to disabilities, socio-economic position, personal beliefs, or responsibilities people may have. You cannot count on participants having the technology, time, money, or access to secure internet, to participate in the ways you expect.

Solutions to increase accessibility of online work and learning:

- Use universal design: multiple means of representation and engagement (synchronous and asynchronous)
- Select free, widely-available technologies where possible and explore university resources
- Find support for setting up spaces for work and accessing technology (library loans, sharing)
- Add captions or alt-text and describe the content of all pictures, videos, slides

Strategies for inclusive virtual meetings
Focus on unity as a team, healthy interactions, and advancing the work in a low-stress manner.

- Start slowly and carefully: a good foundation will enable you to move forward well
- Work collaboratively with the team to identify needs and reduce/re-establish priorities
- Be a supportive leader by being clear on expectations and being flexible
- Manage stress and mental health (your own and others') by reducing agendas & expectations, extending deadlines, acknowledging responsibilities outside of work/school, and establishing and respecting clear boundaries for all participants
- Allow plenty of space for questions and solicit feedback
- Focus on relationships. Be aware of people's experiences, and offer empathy and flexibility
- Prioritize social connection throughout and between meetings. Most people need to make personal connections before getting down to work
- Expect mistakes and roll with them with patience and grace
- Structure meetings: Clear and simple agendas, posted early. Keep meetings short. Include a list of participants. Arrange ways to hear from all participants (e.g., circle formats; raise hands to participate; list of speakers; chat; etc.). Establish limits for speaking length. Distribute minutes
- Front load information (e.g., meeting process, follow-up, deadlines, expected participation)

- Address power and minimize imbalances: Include personal check-ins as well as business-related check-ins. Use the informality of being home to personalize and create connections (watching professional boundaries). Ensure all sharing is optional. Rotating speaking order. Check in with quiet folks (but no pressure). Ask who or what is missing
- Use the technology you are on to increase engagement: surveys, round tables, small group meeting rooms, poll questions, chat box
- Silence is not agreement. Ask for feedback, at multiple times and using different methods, during and between meetings.
- Plan for technical support, learn your tech and take time in meetings to make sure it's working. Add ways to let you know if technology isn't working (e.g., text the meeting host if there are problems). Continue to experiment to find what works for the group
- Keep checking in, observing and reflecting to identify any barriers to inclusion or micro and macroaggressions that might be present

Strategies for inclusive virtual teaching
Set up course to be clear, flexible and inclusive:

- Focus on core content and let go of extraneous content and work
- Front load your expectations and address questions throughout the course
- Combine synchronous and asynchronous instruction to maximize impact
- Use intake conversations or forms to hear about students' current reality and needs. Store securely and destroy at the end of the course. Check in regularly for updates or new needs. E.g.,
  - An open-ended invitation to share anything they want to about their circumstances
  - What do you need to thrive?
  - What technology do you have access to?
- Start course with a welcome message and icebreakers, to model the building of community
- Create ways for students to reach out to you and respond (assignments, open invitation). Throughout the course, use or invite asynchronous or private check-ins
- Prepare for language and place-of-origin differences in forms of communication
- Ensure everyone knows where and how to get mental health assistance

Build an inclusive classroom climate, starting with your attitude of inclusion and respect

- Be approachable and accessible in attitude and practice
- Hold space for community building, allowing participants to reflect and learn from each other
- Consider how to apply Indigenous epistemological principles (including relationality, the interconnection between sacred and secular, and holism) and pedagogical principles (including experiential learning, face-to-face relationship building, place-based and intergenerational learning, holding each other up)—in an online environment
- Set up session with clear participation rules: human rights expectations, respect for all participants, and acceptable and unacceptable forms of interaction
- Acknowledge language barriers and create different ways/times to participate
- Choose to not use video to remove stress. Or, make video opt-in with no penalty for not using it
- Develop a protocol for indicating a desire to speak to avoid "talking over"

- Stay active online (during sessions, and between sessions) and responsive to student questions/work so students feel seen and engaged

Asynchronous teaching tips: A useful way to engage which requires set-up and monitoring

- Ensure clear, simple instructions about expectations
- Provide online resources for students to view on their own time
- Provide clear context and carefully frame questions and discussion prompts to reduce risk of racist, sexist, ableist, or other discriminatory comments
- Monitor the boards and respond to racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination
- Use technology to build community. Create an online poll, ask learners to create blogs, or start a class hashtag on social media

Synchronous teaching tips: Can be valuable and requires care to ensure equity in access

- Create agendas with clear, simply written descriptions of activities
- Create clear processes. E.g. everyone will be called on to participate, how to "raise your hand"
- Facilitate focus and reduce multitasking through clear expectations, interaction during session
- Start sessions with check-ins; ensure technology works; and some form of engagement
- Build in engagement at least every 3-5 minutes. Options include:
  - reflection questions/writing, chat/text, journaling, drawing/sketching, embodiment activities, breathing/meditation, taking an action (send an email, look up a link, contact someone) and more
- Encourage peer conversation, including small group work (including activities outside regular meeting times with changing subgroups). Give EDI and process guidelines, then space to explore
- Include planned and spontaneous breaks. Have participants look away from the screen, stretch, breathe, "bio-break," do an activity with some slack time, and more
- Embrace silence. Give time to reflect and respond; hold space for those slower to respond
- Embrace repetition. Keep returning to key EDI approaches and key content/principles

Institutions can support equitable teaching through more counselling support and access; offering shorter courses; enabling smaller concurrent course loads; and providing support for moving classes online, including TAs, tech support and investing in technology for use by students.

When problems arise …

Going slowly and laying a foundation for inclusion will help reduce problems down the road. Regardless, barriers to inclusion may still arise. For support in addressing these, reach out to the following people and groups depending on what is safe, useful and relevant for the context:

- Your unit's equity committee
- Equity and Human Rights office
- Your supervisor, chair or other person in administration
- UVic's Centre for Accessible Learning
- Other resources and people you trust