



CHAPTER 2

Designing and Using Online Discussions to Promote Social Justice and Equity

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

- Asynchronous: Students participate at times that work best for their learning while meeting a set schedule of deadlines.
- Discussions: Interactions among peers guided by the instructor.

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Instructors:	People teaching online courses, including those involved with course design.
Microaggressions:	Acts of everyday systemic racism which include acts of disregard or subtle insults stemming from often unconscious attitudes of white superiority (Bell et al., 2016; Solorzano & Perez-Huber, 2020).
Online learning:	Post-secondary, credit-bearing coursework that is delivered through a learning management system (LMS) such as Blackboard or Canvas.
Persistence:	Students enrolling in a course and completing it with a passing grade.
Synchronous:	Students participate at the same moment in real-time.
Underrepresented:	Students who have historically been less well represented in higher education (e.g., LatinX and Black students).

INTRODUCTION

The online student population continues to grow as students look for convenience and flexibility. To illustrate, the Strada Center for Education Consumer Insights (2020) surveyed 22,000 Americans that included a diverse group of learners of all ages. One of their findings indicates 59% prefer online-only or hybrid models over exclusively face-to-face experiences with the preference for online learning even stronger for Women and Black learners. This growth and interest is promising as online courses are often equivalent in quality to face-to-face courses (Bowers & Kumar, 2015) and provide access to higher education for students who otherwise may not attend. However, some studies show students have

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lower persistence rates for online courses than face-to-face courses (Hart, 2012; Xu & Jaggars, 2011). Instructors must consider how the influx of diverse students can provide new opportunities for online course design.

Today's online learners differ from online learners of yesteryear, which may contribute to lower online persistence rates. It seems the iconic distance learner of the Twentieth Century/early Twenty first Century who was geographically isolated or bound, an older adult, and goal-oriented is no longer as prevalent. As we move deeper into the Twenty first Century, and technology continues to evolve rapidly, the distance education population is shifting to learners that are more diverse, tentative, and younger (Bawa, 2016). For example, 45% of today's online learners are undergraduates living on-campus (or within proximity) while taking a mix of face-to-face and online courses due to the flexibility online courses afford students (Raza et al., 2020; Seaman et al., 2018). It is essential to note today's online learners understand, value, and engage in social interaction and collaborative learning and possess strong interpersonal and communication skills (Bawa, 2016). This is key because interactions and collaboration are deemed critical to student success and necessary for post-secondary persistence (Tinto, 1993). Fostering these relationships is easier in face-to-face courses, yet more difficult and often lacking in online courses (Callister & Love, 2016; Cherney et al., 2018). As a result, it may be difficult for online students to feel part of an institution's social fabric, which is critical for student success and retention, thus impacting online student persistence.

Moreover, there are issues of equity and inclusion that arise in online courses that must be addressed because they also likely contribute to lower persistence rates. These concerns are illuminated when we consider that some groups of students who have historically been underrepresented in higher education are even less well represented in online courses (e.g., LatinX and Black students). For example, an analysis of administrative data at one university showed Black and LatinX students were 10–20% less likely to enroll in online courses than their white counterparts (Cheslock et al., 2018). Studies analyzing nationally representative data show similar trends, noting the odds of minoritized students enrolling in some or all online courses ranged from about 14 to 26% less depending on the academic year (Ortagus, 2017). As a result of this underrepresentation, they lack an online presence, which impacts LatinX-white and other achievement gaps, hypothesized to widen with the additional challenges associated with online learning. When students from underrepresented

groups attend online courses, their persistence rates are lower than for face-to-face courses (Kaupp, 2012).

It is important to remember when we discuss underrepresented groups and the barriers they face, that we recognize we are talking about populations who were, and still are, historically and systematically excluded. We need to be cognizant of language, because inaccurate and exclusionary language can suggest that these situations simply came to be, as if by accident. However, the first step in unpacking inequality in online spaces is to acknowledge that it exists by design. Some examples of the challenges specific to online courses that exist for underrepresented groups include bias and microaggressions, absence of their culture, and access to technology. In the end, these barriers impact student persistence.

In this chapter, we begin by describing in more detail the reasons some groups of students are underrepresented in online courses and why they have lower persistence rates when they do attend. Then we consider online discussions and their impact on students from underrepresented groups. To improve online student experiences, we outline a plan that emphasizes the creation of a welcoming classroom culture, grounded in culturally responsive pedagogy, universal design for learning, and opportunities for transformative learning to create equitable small group online discussions using multi-modal asynchronous and synchronous technologies. Within this plan, we address concerns related to adequate bandwidth and access to technology. Through a proactive approach, we share how to build off student strengths and minimize difficulties while also using any challenges that may arise as opportunities to promote growth. Resources and a lesson plan checklist are shared to support instructors in implementing equitable online discussions and navigating difficulties in a meaningful way. Ultimately, we share how to create more inclusive online courses that broaden access for underrepresented students while also making classes more accessible to all.

UNDERREPRESENTED ONLINE LEARNERS

Bias and Microaggressions

First, bias and microaggressions are important to consider when looking at underrepresentation of some groups of students in online courses and their low online persistence rates. Microaggressions are acts of everyday systemic racism which include acts of disregard or subtle insults stemming

from often unconscious attitudes of white superiority (Bell et al., 2016; Solorzano & Perez-Huber, 2020). Examples of microaggressions include people of color being ignored by salesclerks, watched for shoplifting, complimented for speaking “good English,” or expected to perform a certain way (e.g., teachers expecting students of color to not perform as well as white students). Compounding these acts is the lack of awareness by those who commit microaggressions that they have done anything offensive (Ortega et al., 2018). Microaggressions are associated with a lower sense of belonging among those that experience them (Lewis et al., 2019) and over time microaggressions have harmful cumulative effects including psychological, physiological, and academic tolls (Solorzano & Perez-Huber, 2020).

Unfortunately, many of the same kinds of microaggressions identified in in-person classrooms can also be identified in online learning environments (Cohn, 2016). While instructors may not have the same opportunities to see and hear their students in online courses, students will see the materials posted and likely the instructor too. The findings of a large-scale study of online course enrollment pages suggest that visual and verbal cues send important messages about the diversity climate of a course, shaping students’ anticipated sense of belonging and success, ultimately impacting their decision to enroll in online courses (Kizilcec & Kambhampaty, 2020). In addition, there is evidence that LatinX students and other students of color perceive racism and microaggressions in online courses more frequently than in face-to-face courses (Barraclough & McMahon, 2013; Mills, 2020) and there is consensus that instructors must deal with them immediately (Cohn, 2016; Maslowski, 2020; Ortega et al., 2018; Plotts, 2020a). In short, some students are being excluded from online education due to bias and microaggressions and, by extension, from critical learning opportunities.

CULTURE

Second, cultural norms and values shape how people think and behave, which in turn influences how one teaches and learns (Gay, 2010). As a result, one would assume culture is always on the minds of instructors as they design courses, especially online courses given lower persistence rates. Nonetheless, Plotts (2020a) argues that culture is often ignored in online spaces, leading to online courses that are not aligned with the values of underrepresented students. Plotts (2020a) also argues that considering

students' culture in online environments is perhaps more important than in face-to-face environments as online spaces are void of social cues. In fact, researchers have found ethnic and cultural consideration to increase course attendance and individual participation (Booker et al., 2016).

The mismatch between culture and underrepresented students in online courses is evident in the individualistic approach to most online course design, which is based on academia's bias towards white culture. This approach includes assignments completed individually even though many underrepresented students, such as LatinX and Black students, identify with collectivist cultures. Collectivist cultures tend to value collaboration, communication, and relationships, which are supported in learning environment utilizing small learning communities and collaborative assignments (Plotts, 2020a). Unfortunately, opportunities for small learning communities may be more limited in online courses compared to face-to-face classes. Consequently, underrepresented students may experience cultural conflict with typical online structures due to barriers that limit their connection with others (Luyt, 2013; Ojeda et al., 2014) impacting their satisfaction and persistence.

Access to Technology

Third, some suggest a lack of access to high-speed internet and the technology needed to fully participate in online classes as other contributing factors to the underrepresentation and low persistence rates of some groups in online courses (Johnson & Mejia, 2014). Technology is essential for students taking face-to-face classes but perhaps even more so for those taking online classes. In a face-to-face class, it is easier for instructors to make accommodations for students without access to technology by having computers available that students can use during class. In addition, campuses typically provide internet to on-campus students without access fees, and it is possible to provide low tech assignments (i.e., pencil and paper) if necessary. Online courses require frequent use of fast and reliable internet technologies to complete course activities. This means those without access to a reliable computer and high-speed internet cannot fully participate, thereby jeopardizing success for already marginalized students, creating a sense of shame and anxiety, and leaving students feeling like second-class citizens. As an example, consider the [photo](https://www.ksbw.com/article/photo-showing-2-salinas-girls-doing-homework-outside-taco-bell-goes-viral/33834659) (<https://www.ksbw.com/article/photo-showing-2-salinas-girls-doing-homework-outside-taco-bell-goes-viral/33834659>) of

the students doing their homework outside a Taco Bell on social media that gathered substantial attention. For students like these, it is important to consider the added time and energy required to access resources when they are not readily available at home. What is the “success cost” for those students?

To be sure, access to internet and technology is an issue that arises for students across all populations and is part of the larger issue of income inequality as lower income students often struggle with unreliable internet and subpar technology (Baraniuk et al., 2017). However, over the years, the enrollment gaps between LatinX and white peers has widened in online-learning environments by nearly 50 percent. Some tend to suggest this is due to limited access to technology (Johnson & Mejia, 2014). Another factor to consider is that unlike face-to-face classes, to fully participate in online classes students also need to have access to quiet workspaces (NYU Steinhardt, 2020). Without a quiet place to attend online classes and study, the fastest internet or newest technology will not make a difference. To improve online student persistence, institutions need to support online students in obtaining both the tools they need and spaces conducive to learning, while also supporting instructors in their knowledge and understanding of the different types of tools available and the bandwidth requirements to use them.

So far, we have illuminated today’s online learner as one that is diverse, tentative, and young, who values relationships, collaboration, and social interaction, yet opportunities to foster these relationships may be limited online while easier in face-to-face learning environments. Additionally, the mismatch between culture and the online environment, experiences of bias and microaggressions, and access to technology have been identified as prevalent issues across groups in online spaces and likely contribute to the underrepresentation and low persistence of some groups of online learners. Issues of equity and inclusion that arise more often in online courses than face-to-face courses must be addressed to improve student persistence. Still, despite these challenges, online formats can provide a valuable option for students when done thoughtfully. Thus, the task is to take the currently available research and use it to inform the creation of online learning environments and interactions that are mindful of students’ culture and systemic racism, and address access to technology. In the next section, we share how online discussions can accomplish this while simultaneously supporting student persistence.

ONLINE DISCUSSIONS

Benefits

Regardless of delivery modality, online or face-to-face, discussions are commonly defined as verbal interactions among peers, guided by the instructor, and deemed an effective method of actively engaging students in course content (Freeman et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2009). In general, discussions help with community building, provide opportunities for peers to support each other and interact with content, and prepare students for collaboration in the workplace (Poll et al., 2014; Uijl et al., 2017; Zach & Agosto, 2009). There are two types of online discussions: Asynchronous (Kauffman, 2015), which are usually text-based responses through a learning management system (LMS) threaded discussion board and synchronous (Francescucci & Rohani, 2019; Yuan & Wu, 2020), usually through video conferencing, such as Zoom. With both types of online discussions there are numerous benefits.

For example, online peer-to-peer discussions have been found to support knowledge construction for students across racial and ethnic backgrounds (Ke, 2013). Also, online discussions prepare students for future workplaces where online collaboration will be the norm. When designed in a culturally sensitive manner and free of microaggressions, online discussions with peers also benefit social presence because they increase sense of belonging while decreasing feelings of isolation (Andel et al., 2020; Wang & Wang, 2020). Social presence, or the perception that you are not alone in an online environment, is positively associated with positive academic outcomes (Richardson et al., 2017). This research aligns with Tinto's (1993) assertion that students need both academic and social integration to persist in post-secondary education. Whether online or face-to-face, discussions are a way to support this integration and student persistence.

Challenges

Even though there are many benefits to online discussions, common approaches to online discussions may need revitalization as many students still seem to prefer face-to-face discussions (Jaggars & Xu, 2016; Majid et al., 2015), which undoubtedly contributes to low persistence rates for online courses. Students report disliking the transactional nature of asynchronous discussion boards, miss the spontaneity and immediate feedback

of face-to-face discussions, and report discussion boards sometimes feel like busy work (Hurt et al., 2012; Majid et al., 2015). The way to increase social presence is through quality interactions, rather than a precise number of interactions (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005). As such, discussion boards, which are often grounded in posting a certain number of times (Page et al., 2020), are perhaps counterintuitive to social presence development. Additionally, asynchronous discussions can be scary for students who lack confidence, are shy, or have learning disabilities because their posts will be visible for a long time, which can feel threatening (Darby et al., 2020; Dahlstrom-Hakki et al., 2020).

Meanwhile, synchronous online discussions are used less frequently because the real-time component impacts the flexibility and convenience students want from online courses (Raza et al., 2020). Instructors are also reluctant to use synchronous discussions because students express frustration with these discussions due to technology tools not operating properly or a weak internet signal disrupting their interaction (Basaran & Yalman, 2020; Fatani, 2020). In both asynchronous and synchronous online discussions, students dislike the lack of nonverbal feedback and body language due to limited information in video feeds and text (Dixson et al., 2017; Gordon, 2020), which also likely impacts social presence. In spite of these challenges, there are new research and technology tools available to improve online discussions.

Steps to Improve

Because online learning is still relatively new, research regarding designing effective online discussions is sparse compared to research on face-to-face discussions. However, some promising findings address the previously shared downsides of online discussions. For example, Clinton and Kelly (2019) found that informing students about the usefulness of online discussions improved student attitudes. When used flexibly and with the technology access of students in mind, synchronous discussions can support students in experiencing more closely what is possible in face-to-face courses than what asynchronous tools can provide (Gilpin, 2020). Others suggest that blending asynchronous and synchronous discussions can help retain students who would otherwise fail to persist in online courses (Hart, 2012; Joksimović et al., 2014; Leeds et al., 2013; Zhan & Mei, 2013; Gilpin, 2020). New advances now make it possible to post in a multi-modal format to discussion boards using text, audio, and video

(Ching & Hsu, 2013). These developing tools offer students choice and flexibility in how they interact with their peers while also, through the visual component, making an online course seem more like a face-to-face or blended course (Page et al., 2020). These benefits notwithstanding, it is also essential to consider the unique needs of underrepresented groups when designing online discussions.

Underrepresented Groups

It is important to acknowledge two groups of students that are perhaps impacted the most by online discussions—LatinX and Black students. When it comes to connecting with others in online courses, which is crucial for social presence and persistence, one barrier for both groups is the widely used asynchronous discussion board that typically requires typed responses to long threads of posts. Research indicates Black students may be less active when participating in online text-based discussion boards than white students (Ruthotto et al., 2020). Plotts (2020a) hypothesizes this is because of the history of the Griot in Black culture which prioritizes oral conversation and storytelling (Collins, 2011). Ruby Paine (2018) also discusses that poverty, particularly among Blacks, is hallmarked by entertainment and developmental learning through speaking and listening. This also holds true for rural white students living in poverty. Because of the mismatch between online course design, which often includes text-based discussions, and cultures that are geared more towards oral interactions, students from these groups may struggle. Domingue (2016), suggests one way to address these issues and make discussion boards more inclusive for all learners is by allowing students to upload video or audio clips.

Evidence also suggests that microaggressions and bias impact online discussion participation for underrepresented groups. LatinX students experience microaggressions more often in online courses than face-to-face courses, which undoubtedly also impacts their participation in online discussions (Barraclough & McMahon, 2013). Others hypothesize the reason Black students are less active in online discussions than white students has to do with the presence of bias and microaggressions (Mills, 2020). That said, asynchronous online discussions may afford students better opportunities to respond to peers' microaggressions than synchronous or face-to-face discussions because they provide students time and space for reflection on how to best communicate and address the

issue. In contrast, identifying microaggressions can be particularly difficult in online discussion boards where comments may be “embedded in voluminous textual entries – and therefore easily missed by well-meaning instructors who ‘speed read’ through hundreds of posted discussion threads” (Cohn, 2016, p. 1). Page and Colleagues (2020) argue that asynchronous audio and video interactions may also facilitate more authentic and respectful discussions when tackling controversial topics because peers seem more “real.” For both synchronous and asynchronous online discussions, not being in the same physical space may also enhance feelings of safety when confronting microaggressions (Eschmann, 2020) because, to some extent, students can maintain moderate to high levels of anonymity that can, in some cases, lead to increased participation (Haythornthwait & Andrews, 2011; Jenkins, 2011). On the whole, there are many benefits specific to online discussions and opportunities to address microaggressions and bias for underrepresented groups.

A related issue has to do with discussion group size. Some suggest group size can have a significant impact on social presence with 3–5 students per group being optimal (Akcaoglu & Lee, 2016), however many online discussions, whether asynchronous or synchronous, are large whole class events with sometimes upwards of 30 students. Akcaoglu and Lee (2016) assert that small group discussions afford the development of relationships and a sense of community better than whole group discussions. Moreover, Plotts (2020a) notes that small online discussions, whether asynchronous or synchronous, support the persistence of students from collectivist cultures by capitalizing on their ability to collaborate with others. All in all, small group discussions seem to align with the values of underrepresented groups and with those, in general, of today’s online learners.

In summary, there is a need to create online environments that build off students’ strengths and preferences for authentic interaction and collaborative small group learning. Also, research indicates it is vital to minimize difficulties and remove barriers that students may encounter in online discussions, such as microaggressions, racial bias, and the use of text-based communication if online persistence rates are to improve for underrepresented populations. Recent technological advances can aid in this endeavor, but merely adding a tool is not enough. In the next section, we provide specific suggestions for rejuvenating online discussions. Through the creation of a classroom culture grounded in culturally responsive pedagogy, universal design for learning, and opportunities

for transformative learning, instructors can create equitable small group online discussions that foster persistence and improve enrollment using multi-modal asynchronous and synchronous technologies. We also share accommodations that address bandwidth and access to technology.

DESIGNING AND USING EQUITABLE ONLINE DISCUSSIONS

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Traditional online course design often aligns with academia's bias towards white culture (Plotts, 2020a). However, by doing so and not considering the diverse culture and values of learners, this type of course design does not support the socialization process of all in online environments, and likely perpetuates low online persistence rates. Thus, it is important to filter the design of online courses and, specifically, online discussions through a culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP), sometimes referred to as culturally responsive teaching. CRP is a proactive approach, not an after-thought, that can be accomplished by considering the unique needs, values, and experiences of today's online learners to include specific ethnic and cultural aspects of online learning, such as those shared earlier in regard to underrepresented groups (Heitner & Jennings, 2016; Woodley et al., 2017).

These unique factors then become instrumental in course design and provide a foundation so that students from underrepresented groups are better situated for academic success by supporting them as they balance between their own culture and the prevailing culture of the online environment (Campbell, 2015; Woodley et al., 2017). See Woodley and Colleagues (2017) for more information about CRP and implementing best practices in online spaces. It is generally agreed that small group discussions are effective for students from a variety of cultures (Plotts, 2020; Woodley et al., 2017); thus, this is a key practice aligned with CRP. Nevertheless, designing and carrying out small group discussions in the online environment can be complicated and at times sensitive. However, there are some practical things instructors can do to scaffold equitable and inclusive online discussions. Here are a few suggestions:

Collaborate with students to develop discussion guidelines. Ask students what is important to them, get feedback, and revise. This is also a great way for instructors to get to know their students—who they are, their interests, and values (Plotts, 2020a; Woodley et al., 2017). Instructors

may also share a draft of the guidelines as a starting place and ask students for feedback before revising. Either way, revisit the co-constructed guidelines throughout the course by checking in to see how students are doing with upholding the guidelines. You can do this check-in with a survey, online discussion, or both. By working with students to create discussion norms, instructors ensure that more than white academic values are represented.

Create connection. Discussions work better when students feel safe and comfortable with one another, especially for students from under-represented groups. So, instructors should consider adding discussion prompts that ask students to discuss something unrelated to the course work that will get them to share something about themselves (Ecklund, 2013; Plotts, 2020a; Woodley et al., 2017). These types of discussions simulate the “hallway conversations” that often occur at the beginning and end of face-to-face classes, when students chat with one another. Instructors might also consider discussion activities that require students to connect course content to their cultural backgrounds and the cultural backgrounds of their peers (Peralta Online Equity Initiative, 2020).

Grading. To create a true collaborative culture that reaches more students, instructors need to reflect on their grading practices. First, instructors should consider group discussion grades rather than individual grades or a combination of group and individual grades. In addition, having course information in advance is important for online students (Mupinga et al., 2006), especially when it comes to grading. Regardless of how instructors grade discussions (group, individual, or a combination) it is recommended that online discussions account for 10–20% of the overall course grade as a way to motivate students to engage in productive discussions (Aloni & Harrington, 2018; Rovai, 2007). Also, instructors should provide students specific examples along with grading rubrics at the beginning of the semester as a tool to reduce anxiety and foster self-directed and reflective learning (Rovai, 2007).

Finally, instructors should be mindful that not all students come able to write in academic language. Plotts (2020a) asserts instructors should not get rid of academic standards in online discussions but, rather they should prioritize student growth and development related to new content/concepts. For example, she argues that if instructors want to really know what their students know, then when using text-based discussion boards, they should not grade spelling and grammar. She also suggests letting students share their sources informally rather

than formally (e.g., APA, MLA, etc.). For instance, instructors might allow students to state “I found some information in [insert article name and link] to be interesting because it supports [insert claim]” rather than require a formal in-text citation. Another culturally responsive practice, which we will discuss more later, is for instructors to provide multi-modal options for engaging in discussion boards, including posting short audio and video clips (Gay, 2010). This might seem counterintuitive for instructors because it is important for students to develop their academic writing skills; however, there are other times instructors can work with students to hone these skills.

Provide consistent and timely feedback. Instructor presence in online courses is important and must be intentional to ensure a safe and inclusive learning environment. One strategy instructors can use to show their presence is providing predictable feedback to students. Doing so allows instructors to monitor for bias, stereotype threat, microaggressions, and correct these issues when present. At the same time, an opportunity might be created for instructors to share how they work to manage their own biases, which empowers students to identify, learn about, and address their own biases (Peralta Online Equity Initiative, 2020). For asynchronous discussions, instructors can scan discussion board threads with an emphasis on supporting the points of view of those from underrepresented students and highlighting small groups that are showing the values consistent with the discussion guidelines. For synchronous discussions, instructors can have students document their work in a shared document (e.g., Google Doc), that is shared with the instructor and those in the group. Then much like with the discussion board example, instructors can read about the discussion and provide their thoughts/feedback directly in the document, so it is visible to students (Ecklund, 2013).

When concluding all types of discussions, it has been shown to be beneficial for instructors to gather take-a-ways from group members and themselves and post the take-a-ways in the announcements section of the LMS (Plotts, 2020a). All students can benefit from this shared discussion. Regardless of the mode for providing feedback, instructors should use cultural norms and phrases that are familiar to students (Plotts, 2020a), which might include posting audio and video recordings rather than just text feedback.

Universal Design for Learning

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is often mentioned in the same circles as CRP and some suggest that together they create a powerful way forward (Darby, 2020). However, UDL lacks a research base to support many of the claims made by its supporters (Murphy, 2020). Nonetheless, given the prominence of UDL in relation to CRP, we will address UDL because there are many benefits for students when online discussions are designed through both a CRP and UDL lens. Specifically, we will share how motivational access applies to the design of equitable online discussions as students do not all come to online courses with the same readiness to engage.

By offering multiple paths to get to the same learning outcome, UDL is a framework that supports learner variability resulting from culture, skills, abilities, interests, experience, and socio-economic status (Takacs & Zhang, 2020). UDL reflects an awareness of the unique nature of each learner and the need to accommodate differences through flexible approaches. UDL encourages instructors to proactively consider who is experiencing barriers and to design learning experiences available for all students that take these barriers into consideration (Cast, 2013). What is good for one student, might help others; then students can select and benefit from those materials that are the best fit for them to maximize their progress. It is important to note that if none of the materials provided are relevant to students' lives, then all is for naught—and lack of motivation is a serious barrier to learning (Keller, 2008; C. Kim & Keller, 2010). Interest and motivation as they relate to learning is better supported by research than UDL and even a little interest or motivation can make a big difference (Rieber & Estes, 2017; Renninger & Hidi, 2020).

While instructors are learning about their students' ethnic and cultural backgrounds, they should also learn about them as a learner. What motivates them? What are their interests? Find out what makes them “tick” as a learner. Then instructors can use this information in their course design and students will be more engaged. More engagement leads to a deeper understanding of content and facilitates a desire to learn more (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000), leading to increased persistence (Renninger & Hidi, 2020). An easy way to address learner variability, incorporate UDL, and motivate students in online courses is by adding collaborative group work, such as online discussions (Nagpal, 2020).

Remember, collaborative group work, when done in small groups, is a strategy aligned with CRP. However, online discussions are in need of revitalization beyond CRP to be inclusive. Instructors need to go beyond merely providing small group online discussions and instead be intentional about supporting student agency and offering choices when designing their courses. This also simultaneously addresses some of the ethnic and cultural barriers discussed earlier. An emphasis should be placed on sequencing synchronous and asynchronous discussions in ways most responsive to the needs of students. Here are a few suggestions:

Nurture student agency. As shared earlier, Clinton and Kelly (2019), propose informing students about the usefulness of online discussions and making the connection to motivation straightforward. Do students see the relevance and importance of what they are being asked to do? By explaining the power of discussions as a learning tool, instructors report more buy-in and enthusiasm. At the same time, instructors should provide students with an “escape hatch,” in which a student can ask privately to be assigned to a different discussion group, no explanation needed (Ecklund, 2013).

Offer students choice in how they participate. Students can post directly to LMS discussion boards via asynchronous audio, video, or text. There are tools such as [Voice Thread](#) and [Flip Grid](#) that can accomplish similar things. Additionally, it is important for instructors to know there are new products like [Hypothes.is](#) and [Perusall](#) that look to make reading a social activity by allowing students to annotate a shared text. However, collaborative learning annotation tools are beyond the scope of this chapter. Instructors might also consider using video conferencing technologies to facilitate live online discussions as some students report preferring real-time interactions like this even though they lose the flexibility they desire. Offering students a combination of asynchronous and/or synchronous discussions can provide options for both preferences. This blend allows students some semblance of the “anytime, anywhere” aspect of online learning they desire while also supporting the development of social presence. Keeping in mind technology disparities, Stanford (2020) urges instructors to be mindful of the bandwidth required for any activity. It takes quite a bit of bandwidth to use the video conferencing tools required for synchronous online discussions and to upload audio and video clips to multi-modal asynchronous discussion boards.

Gilpin (2020) suggests instructors survey students prior to the start of the course to not only get to know them, but also to gather information on the kinds of online discussions they prefer as well as their access to technology and internet. See Woodley and Colleagues (2017) for examples of technology and access questions. Then that information can be used by instructors to plan the types and amounts of online discussions within their courses and to create small discussion groups. Furthermore, instructors will be able to identify students who may need assistance with technology and direct students to where/how to get help. Instructors should also solicit on-going feedback from students on their experiences and be ready to modify discussions based on the changing needs of students.

Offer students choice in what they discuss. Provide students with 3–4 questions or activities related to the lesson. Then let students pick which one they want to discuss with their small group. Choices like this can be used in either the asynchronous or synchronous format. When using choice with asynchronous discussion boards, instructors also might consider letting students build off the initial post of a peer rather than having to post in response to one of their prompts. This is especially helpful for those that are late to posting and all they have left to say is what everyone else has already said. Much like in a real-time conversation, with this option, students can build off what a peer has already posted for their initial post, creating fertile ground for a rich back and forth discussion. For both types of discussions, also consider having a “create your own discussion” option, where students come up with their own prompt, get instructor approval, and then post or discuss their response.

Let students lead. One of the most powerful ways to empower and transform students is for them to have a role in the design of course activities and even lead activities (Woodley et al., 2017). Rather than everything coming from the instructor, students report enjoying discussions in which content specific questions come directly from their peers—giving them choice and agency in the direction they go with course topics. Additionally, students can offer support to one another, and share experiences which relate to the course work (Buelow et al., 2018; Page et al., 2020). Instructors then have the opportunity to mentor and coach students one-to-one when they are leaders, which can be empowering and transformative (Woodley et al., 2017). Within each small group, instructors should consider identifying discussion leaders on a rotational basis so that all students are engaged in a leadership role at some point and facilitate a

discussion. Student-led discussions can be used in either the asynchronous or synchronous format—for examples of guidelines and grading rubrics for both types refer to the “Suggestions for Future Reading” section.

Transformative Learning

So far, we have illustrated how CRP and UDL can be used in tandem to foster more equitable and inclusive online spaces and online discussions, which can be empowering and transformative. Much of this discussion has centered on using audio, video, and text to create opportunities for student-to-student collaboration and interaction, but with this comes opportunities to enact harm. It is important instructors are equipped to deal with microaggressions and other forms of bias or oppression in online spaces because as Plotts (2020a) shares, “students need to feel safe—if not, they stop attending.” However, instructors should not shy away from online discussions, rather, they should see them as an opportunity to promote growth and change. Transformative Learning (TL) is grounded in using students’ experiences as a starting point for learning, reflection, and discourse (Ortega et al., 2018) and complements CRP and UDL. TL provides a platform to address microaggressions through the “direct naming and acknowledgement of the act and engaging all students as key stakeholders in transforming the conditions of the classroom” (Ortega et al., 2018, p. 33).

A key to successfully implementing TL is situated in the role of the instructor. It is crucial that instructors know their students’ cultures and are aware of possible microaggressions to be able to identify them when they occur. Along with that, direct and meaningful instructor facilitation must be intentionally built into online discussions. This means instructors educating students to prevent microaggressions and bias and when incidents undoubtedly do occur, responding in a thoughtful and timely manner (Cohn, 2016; Maslowski, 2020; Ortega et al., 2018; Plotts, 2020a). While this is not easy, the experience can be a rewarding growth opportunity for both students and instructors. Researchers provide some insights specific to online discussions and preventing/dealing with microaggressions. Here are a few suggestions:

Facilitate online discussions. Instructors should begin by educating students about microaggressions and bias specific to online environments. Then they need to read, view, and listen consistently to all student dialogue posted on discussion boards or shared in synchronous meeting

notes. Time is of the essence when dealing with microaggressive statements (Cohn, 2016; Maslowski, 2020; Ortega et al., 2018). Instructors should encourage students to preview their discussion board posts before posting and prepare for their synchronous discussions ahead of time by reviewing the prompts and jotting down points they want to make (Ortega et al., 2018). Instructors should also require students to support their perspectives with evidence and use that as a basis for their arguments (Ortega et al., 2018). That does not mean students must cite their evidence formally using APA or MLA, rather, they do need to informally share where they found the information that backs up their claims. For instance, “I found some information in [insert article name and link] to be interesting because it supports [insert claim].”

Check in periodically with students. Instructors should build a short self-reflection into each online discussion (Cohn, 2016; Maslowski, 2020; Ortega et al., 2018). This is important for both types of discussions because even with asynchronous discussion boards, instructors can miss things and may not interpret posts the same way as their students. The self-reflection can be a survey completed by each group member that only the instructor views or it could be publicly shared with the entire group through a discussion board or synchronous meeting notes. Possible questions for individual reflection shared by Ortega and colleagues (2018) include: “How did it feel to participate in this discussion?” “What was the experience like for you?” “Were you able to say what you wanted?” “Are there additional thoughts you have that you would like to contribute?” Plotts (2020a) also provided the following sentence stems that can be used to facilitate small group reflection: “[We are] fully seeking to understand different points of view and opposing points of view are respected,” and “[We are] aware of cultural and ethnic differences and create a safe space for all.”

Address microaggressions immediately. One best practice for instructors when addressing microaggressions is to collaborate with a colleague. Even though it might take longer, in the end, it likely will take students farther (Ortega et al., 2018). Instructors should also be sure to keep all students involved, including those responsible for the microaggressions. Depending upon the circumstance, this might mean one-to-one, small and large group interactions. For example, in response to a microaggression, instructors could post a response to an asynchronous discussion board that offers more inclusive language/perspectives along with an explanation related to historical legacy and including links to articles or

videos to supplement the explanations (Ortega et al., 2018). If addressed in this manner, it is important for instructors to make sure all students view and read the explanations, so they might consider posting in both the current discussion thread and also use the announcement feature of the LMS. At other times a synchronous discussion with all group members might be more appropriate. Both options support community and connection amongst peers and fosters the group's capacity for resiliency and growth moving forward. See Ortega and Colleagues (2018) for an example of a decision tree for addressing microaggressions that can be modified by instructors for a variety of online spaces.

Refer students in need of additional support. Plotts (2020a) reminds instructors it is also important for them to be knowledgeable about the campus agencies who support students struggling with anxiety, depression, acculturated stress, and marginalization. They should keep the mental health of students in mind before, during, and after difficult conversations. When needed; instructors should refer students to campus agencies for additional support.

In this section, we shared how UDL, CRP, and TL can be used together to foster more equitable and inclusive online discussions. The suggestions offered reflect strategies that can be used at different points in time as well as in the moment when problems arise. See “Appendix A” for a lesson planning checklist that complements these suggestions. Further, accommodations that address bandwidth and access to technology were discussed. Ultimately, we presented how to create more inclusive online courses where everybody gets to learn, no one has to out themselves, and all are welcome, by the very design of the class.

CONCLUSION

The shift in higher education from a face-to-face delivery model to an online delivery model requires instructional design that puts students at the center and leverages the unique advantages of the online environment. But the online environment does not inherently always create the equity we think it does. Intentionality is key to planning, building, and maintaining connectedness through online discussions that are designed to support the success of all students in online spaces. The day when we no longer speak of “online learning” but only “learning” might arrive sooner than we think, and when this time comes, we want to ensure the success of all students.

APPENDIX A

Designing and Using Equitable Online Discussions Checklist

Prior to the first discussion, instructors should...

- Share the purpose and usefulness of discussions.
- Survey students to learn more about their discussion preferences and access to technology.
- Based on survey information, create small discussion groups, prompts, and determine type (asynchronous and/or synchronous). Individually reach out to students who may have technology needs to problem solve.
- Co-create discussion guidelines with students.
- Share the grading rubric.
- Educate students about bias and microaggressions in online environments.
- Plan how to address bias and microaggressions when they occur.
- Identify campus agencies who support students struggling with anxiety, depression, acculturated stress, and marginalization.

During each discussion, instructors should...

- Facilitate discussions by providing consistent and timely feedback.
- Continue to educate students about microaggressions. Keep an eye out for those “teachable moments.”
- Be ready to immediately respond to bias and microaggressions.

After each discussion, instructors should...

- Immediately review student self-reflections and contact students about concerns that arise, especially as they relate to bias and microaggressions. Refer students to campus agencies as needed.
- Gather take-aways from group members and yourself and post the take-aways in your announcements.
- Provide discussion grades and feedback in a timely manner.

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SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE READING

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CHAPTER 3

Designing the Syllabus for an Online Course: Focus on Learners and Equity

Emily A. Johnson

KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Accessible:	The degree to which something is easily located, fully used, and/or completely understood.
Discourse:	The social and interpersonal context of any piece of communication: written, spoken, built, or enacted.
Discourse Analysis:	Dissecting discourse to discover its effects on humans' lived experiences and the world.
Equitable:	The degree to which something is accessible to all peoples, taking into account differing identities, backgrounds, contexts, and systems of oppression.

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