Practices for Inclusive Teaching in Asynchronous Distance Courses

Inclusive teaching practices facilitate learning spaces that are welcoming and receptive to a range of student voices, preferences, and needs. These practices are particularly important in asynchronous online, distance courses since students are working separately and without the learning cues they rely on to engage and communicate in the physical classroom. Consider the following practices for making your asynchronous distance course more inclusive:

- **Set a welcoming tone**. You'll need to reach out early and often to establish your presence and build rapport with students. A welcome email sent out a week before class starts gives you an opportunity to introduce yourself and tell your students you care about their success (e.g., "let me know how I can support you" or "if you experience any problems, please don't hesitate to reach out"). Consider posting a video greeting on your Canvas home page so students can see and hear you each time they enter your course. You can also create class tutorials showing students how to navigate your course site on Canvas or how to download and use course tools. These tutorials might also be useful for walking students through your modules and explaining how they're supposed to be interacting and engaging with them as they work in your course.

- **Prioritize social connections first.** It's hard to resist the pressure to dig into content, especially if you're teaching an accelerated online/distance course in winter or summer session. When content is prioritized over connections, it's hard for students to feel a sense of belonging to your course. As a "social negotiator" in Conrad and Donaldson's (2012) phases of engagement model, create opportunities for these connections to take place. One place to look is the introductory discussion board. It gets students involved and talking early. It can also mimic personal and course icebreakers you use in the physical classroom, with students sharing photos of their personal workspaces or working together to draft an online learning agreement that identifies norms for how they will interact and treat each other in discussions. Encourage students to connect in other ways, too. Can they attend optional synchronous sessions, such as virtual coffee talks? Can they share video or audio submissions as part of their course submissions?

- **Help students establish a rhythm to guide their learning.** A predictable rhythm, or weekly pace, helps students better manage their time. This reduces the guess work of "what should I be doing" or "what's next" (Boettcher and Conrad, 2010). Think about a typical weekly module starting and ending on a Tuesday. What tasks are specific to the first day of the module? Are Wednesday and Thursday independent work days, where students are completing course readings, videos, and other content? Is Friday a discussion day where students are expected to contribute discussion posts on a topic?

Are students expected to be active in the course on Saturday and Sunday? Is Monday a wrap-up day, with students taking a weekly quiz, submitting activities, or completing discussion replies?

Resources

Berry, S.E. (2022). Creating inclusive online communities: Practices that support and engage diverse students. Sterling, VA: Stylus.

Boettcher, J. and R.M. Conrad. (2010). The online teaching survival guide: Simple and practical pedagogical tips. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Conrad, R.M. and J.A. Donaldson. (2011). Engaging the online learner: Activities and resources for creative instruction. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

For more information or to discuss how you might incorporate these ideas into your courses, contact the Reinert Center by email or submit a consultation request form.