

Designing for Meaningful Synchronous and Asynchronous Discussion in Online Courses

DESIGNING FOR MEANINGFUL SYNCHRONOUS AND ASYNCHRONOUS DISCUSSION IN ONLINE COURSES

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Introduction

This book is intended to support instructors who are newer to online teaching (or newer to using online tools for supporting in-class teaching), but it may also be helpful for those who have already been teaching online and/or integrating online discussions into their courses for a number of years and are looking for ways to improve their practice.

The inspiration for this book emerged from the work of a small professional learning group at the University of Toronto that began early into the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. This group of faculty members were grappling with the unexpected realities of having to shift their entire instruction to a remote learning context. Some had been teaching online for many years. Others had no prior experience with online teaching, and minimal experience with integrating online tools into their in-class teaching. In working through the challenges of adapting to remote teaching, this group quickly came to the realization that this kind of professional learning support was not only beneficial to them but also greatly needed on a broader scale across other programs and institutions. And so, work on this book began with the intent of sharing what was learned in an easily digestible and practical format for other instructors.

Each chapter has been designed to be read on its own, as its own starting point, and/or in conjunction with other chapters. Each chapter begins with “Setting the Context,” a personal narrative that describes why the topic is important to the author; a “Scenario” that provides an example situation on the topic being discussed in the chapter; “Learning Outcomes” and “Key Terms.” Throughout the balance of the chapter, a number of self-directed learning prompts (e.g., “Pause and Consider”) encourage readers to consider their own understandings and individual teaching contexts in relation to the ideas and examples being shared. The final section of each chapter provides a short reflection on the original scenario that allows the authors to propose what could have been done differently at the outset.

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1.

CHAPTER 1: PREPARING TO INTEGRATE DISCUSSION INTO YOUR ONLINE COURSE

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Do we really need a whole handbook about online discussions? Yes, we do. Integrating online discussions into one's courses, like any other approaches to meaningful instruction, requires careful and intentional planning.

When instructors take a haphazard approach to integrating online discussions in their courses, they run the risk of causing confusion for their students, contributing to undue stress and, in some cases, inadvertently enabling harmful conversations to take place.

This book is intended to support instructors who are newer to online teaching (or newer to using online tools for supporting in-class teaching), but it may also be helpful for those who have already been teaching online and/or integrating online discussions into their courses for a number of years and are looking for ways to improve their practice.

The inspiration for this book emerged from the work of a small professional learning group at the University of Toronto that began early into the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. This group of faculty members were grappling with the unexpected realities of having to shift their entire instruction to a remote learning context. Some had been teaching online for many years. Others had no prior experience with online teaching, and minimal experience with integrating online tools into their in-class teaching. In working through the challenges of adapting to remote teaching, this group quickly came to the realization that this kind of professional learning support was not only beneficial to them but also greatly needed on a broader scale across other programs and institutions. And so, work on this book began with the intent of sharing what was learned in an easily digestible and practical format for other instructors.

It should be acknowledged that online learning – and within that, the subset of computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL) – has a decades-long research history that existed long before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and long before "remote teaching" became of such large-scale interest. This book is not an attempt to distill that research into a short handbook. However, it does draw from this depth of expertise.

Defining What We Mean by Online Learning (also Known as “E-Learning”)

It’s essential to start this book with a brief overview of some core terminology around online learning (or to be more precise, e-learning). Having shared definitions of what we mean by e-learning can help to clarify the roles and expectations for students and instructors, and – more specific to the topic of this book – it also allows us to think about how to organize online discussions within courses in different ways.

You may find that some of these terms do not align with the ways that you notice them being taken up in your own teaching contexts. Some of that difference has to do with the fact that there is a lack of clear consensus in the field about how we ought to be conceptualizing approaches to e-learning.

The following terms and definitions have been adapted from the [Online Learning Consortium](#)’s revised definitions for e-learning. See Image 1 for a basic visual organizer of the various terms.



Image 1: Forms of e-learning (blended versus online)

Blended Forms of E-Learning

Although blended learning is sometimes treated as synonymous with hybrid learning, for the purposes of this book, blended approaches to e-learning are understood to be any approach to instruction in which there is an intentional combination of web-based learning with in-class learning. There are four basic types of blended learning: web-enhanced, hybrid, dual delivery, and hyflex.

Web-Enhanced Learning

In the case of online-enhanced learning, the assumption is that students are expected to attend their class in-person and that learning is primarily taking place through the use of in-class pedagogies. There is some uptake of web-based tools in the classroom, but they tend to be used more as an add-on than as a primary means through which learning happens.

Examples of Discussions in Online-Enhanced Courses:

- Students posting comments in a chat box or to social media while in-person instruction is taking place (referred to as “back-channeling”).
- Making allowances for students who are more comfortable sharing their ideas in a text-based format rather than aloud and in-person to post their comments in a discussion folder within the course learning management system (LMS).
- Making use of polling tools to elicit broader student engagement and sharing of ideas within in-person whole-class discussions.

Hybrid Learning

In a hybrid teaching approach, a portion of learning for *all students* is devoted to in-person experiences and a portion of their learning is devoted to online experiences. Students typically move simultaneously between in-person and online sessions as a class. There is some debate as to the exact proportion of online time that has to take place in order to qualify a course as truly hybrid versus online-enhanced. Rather than trying to come up with an exact formula to quantify the balance of in-person versus online, a good rule of thumb is to ask how **consistently** online sessions are taking place relative to in-person learning (e.g., on a fairly regular basis for all students), how **intensively** those online sessions are experienced relative to the overall learning experience within the course (e.g., students might describe that a significant portion of their learning is happening online),

and how *integral* participating in those online sessions are to achieving the overall learning outcomes in the course (e.g., students would say that the online portions of their course naturally build on and/or lead into their in-person experiences). The Online Learning Consortium distinguishes between a “hybrid classroom” (in which the emphasis of course activity is on in-person learning, with some online learning) and “hybrid online” (in which the emphasis of course activity is on online learning, with some in-person learning).

Note: A “flipped classroom” approach can be considered a form of hybrid learning.

Examples of Discussions in Hybrid Courses:

- Students work in small synchronous breakout groups in Zoom early in the week to identify the main ideas for one of the class readings, which they come prepared to share in-person later in the week in mixed-reading discussion groups (this is called a “jigsaw” learning format – see for example, [University of Michigan’s resource page on Jigsaws](#)).
- Students engage in shared annotation of an assigned chapter in their course textbook (using an application such as Perusall or Hypothes.is) prior to coming to in-person learning to work on the assigned problems in collaborative groups.
- Students come to in-person learning to participate in a hands-on lesson or lab, and then spend the remainder of the week extending on their learning in the form of an asynchronous threaded discussion.

Dual Delivery (also Referred to as “Synchronous Distributed”)

In a dual-delivery course (also referred to as “synchronous distributed” by the [Online Learning Consortium](#)), each class runs in-person and online simultaneously. Students may opt-in or be assigned to conduct their learning in one mode or the other. In some cases, students may experience both in-person and online learning within the same course, but not necessarily at the same time as their class peers (e.g., in the cohort model used in many Ontario secondary schools during the pandemic, half the students were learning in-person while the other half were learning online at the same time for the same class; groups then switched between modes on scheduled days). Instructors who teach their course in a dual-delivery mode intentionally plan for instructing both students who are learning in-person and students who are learning online at the same time with the goal of creating equivalent learning experiences for both. In a true dual design, in-person learning is not prioritized over online learning (and vice versa); rather, both support a fulsome and meaningful learning experience despite the fact that students may be engaging in the learning in different ways.

Examples of Discussions in Dual Delivery Courses:

- Small group learning in which students who are in-person are engaging in conversation with others who are also in-person, in addition to students who are joining the group through videoconferencing (e.g., Zoom).
- A whole-class discussion combining in-person and online students; the online students are participating via a video-conferencing system projected at the front of the room and a camera in the classroom, which allows students who are online to see/hear those who are in-person.
- Both in-person and online students are logging into the class video-conferencing system at the same time so that there is a sense of a shared space, and so that all students have the option to interact using a shared set of web tools (e.g., the chat box).

Hyflex Learning

In a hyflex course delivery, students have the option to participate in any given class in-person, synchronously online, or asynchronously online. Students opt-in to the learning mode that work best for their individual needs at any given time throughout the course. In some cases, students may opt to conduct their learning entirely through one mode, or they may switch between modes from one class to the next. Similar to a dual-delivery mode, instructors who teach their course in a hyflex format intentionally plan for instructing both in-person and online students (though some are online at the same time, and some are online at their own pace), with the goal of creating equivalent learning experiences in all situations. In a true hyflex design, in-person learning is not prioritized over online learning (and vice versa), and synchronous learning is not prioritized over asynchronous learning (and vice versa). Rather, both in-person and online, as well as synchronous and asynchronous participation, support a fulsome and meaningful learning experience despite the fact that students may be engaging in the learning in different ways.

Example of Discussions in Hyflex Courses:

- In a hyflex learning environment, students may be working in synchronous groups that combine students that are in-person with students that are joining via a video-conferencing tool. Students participating synchronously are also referring to notes contributed asynchronously by some of their classmates. There is a commitment in these classes to documenting synchronous discussions in the class learning management system so that it builds on what has already been shared asynchronously, and so that students who are working asynchronously can likewise continue to build on what was shared from the synchronous discussions.

Fully Online Learning

In a fully online course delivery mode, the entire learning experience for students is intended to happen remotely. There are generally no in-person learning experiences for these courses.

Synchronous Online

In synchronous online courses, classes run on fixed days and times, and all students participate in remote learning at the same time (typically via a video-conferencing tool, such as Zoom or Google Meet).

Examples of Discussions in Synchronous Online Courses:

- Whole-class discussions is held within a Google Meet session.
- Small-group (“breakout”) conversations are held on Zoom.
- Students work in small groups to discuss a question posed by the instructor; each group has its own unique question. The groups are asked to document their key discussion points related to their question on a Jamboard slide using a yellow sticky note. After 10 minutes, the groups are asked to scroll through the Jamboard slides to see the other questions and group responses (this is called a “gallery walk” – see [Penn State’s resource page on Gallery Walks](#)) and add any further points the group might consider using a green sticky note.

Asynchronous Online

In asynchronous online courses, all students are permitted to carry out their learning at their own pace within a set timeframe. Typically, asynchronous courses that involve a collaborativist learning approach (Harasim, 2017) will have students move through topics together within a shared, extended timeframe to allow for self-pacing but still with the sense of having a collective learning experience.

Examples of Discussions in Asynchronous Online Courses:

- Ongoing, weekly threaded conversations are held in a shared discussion forum.
- Students add digital annotations (e.g., highlighting important sections, posting comments) to a shared reading, at their own pace within a specified time range (e.g., using Perusall or Hypothes.is).
- Students co-construct an assignment or curate a set of class resources, at their own pace within a

specified time range (e.g., using Google Workspace tools).

Mixed Online

A mixed online course runs similarly to a hybrid course, where a portion of learning for *all students* is devoted to synchronous online experiences and a portion of their learning is devoted to asynchronous online experiences. Students typically move simultaneously between synchronous and asynchronous online sessions as a class. While there is no general consensus on the appropriate amount of time that ought to be apportioned to synchronous versus asynchronous online learning, it is advisable for instructors to consider how much consecutive time students are expected to be engaged in synchronous learning (i.e., screen time) and the workload intensity involved in asynchronous online learning activities (i.e., the volume of work relative to its benefit and given time constraints). It is not uncommon to hear students describe some asynchronous learning as “busywork” when time and workload haven’t been appropriately addressed in an instructor’s overall course planning.

Examples of Discussions in Mixed Online Courses:

- In a mixed online learning environment, one might observe opportunities for online discussions that combine those listed under the sections above for synchronous and asynchronous learning.
- Synchronous and asynchronous discussions may be designed to build off one another (e.g., a conversation begins synchronously but then continues asynchronously throughout the week).

Flexible Online

A flexible online course is primarily asynchronous by default but integrates opportunities for synchronous meetings, as needed by students. Students work at their own pace through assigned online materials and activities, and can opt to take advantage of synchronous supports that are available (e.g., booking one-to-one meetings with an academic advisor or course instructor, attending scheduled drop-in sessions with the instructor). Students are not required to meet at set scheduled synchronous times with their class peers.

Examples of Discussions in a Flexible Online Courses:

- In a flexible online learning environment, one might observe opportunities for online discussions that

include those listed under the section above on Asynchronous Online learning.

- From time to time, students may meet one-to-one with an instructor or advisor, and/or in small groups that include other class peers via a video-conferencing tool.

A Special Note About “Emergency Remote Learning” (ERL)

During the pandemic, the term “emergency remote learning” (ERL) (also called “emergency remote teaching”) emerged in response to calls from experts to make a distinction between e-learning that takes place under emergency versus non-emergency circumstances. In that sense, ERL is intended to describe a situational response to supporting academic continuity rather than a unique approach to e-learning. Over the pandemic, ERL took on many of the forms of e-learning mentioned above, and in some cases shifted between approaches as local health advisories changed. It is also important to consider that approaches to ERL may not look as “true” to the definitions listed above due to the extreme circumstances under which e-learning was taking place (e.g., in dual-delivery courses, in-person and online learning may not necessarily have been able to fully achieve experiential equivalency).

Other Considerations When Planning for Online Discussions

Aside from thinking about instructional delivery modes (see descriptions of blended and fully online learning above), there are a number of additional factors that instructors ought to consider when planning to integrate online discussions into their courses. These include:

- How will I assess an online discussion? Have I clearly communicated my expectations for the online discussion?
- How much am I asking my students to do as part of an online discussion, and how realistic is it (e.g., workload)?
- Do my students have any prior experience with engaging in online discussions as part of their learning? What do they need to know in order to engage meaningfully?
- What is my role as the instructor in the online discussion? Have I made my role clear to my students?

- How will I create an online space that is conducive to engaging in meaningful online discussions?
- How have I taken into account any potential learner needs or learning impacts (e.g., exceptionalities, language learners) such that all students are able to participate equitably and meaningfully?

Many of these topics are addressed in the remaining chapters of this handbook. In [Chapter 2](#), Lesley Wilton shares some of the important digital literacies that are critical to student success in courses that adopt online discussions. In [Chapter 3](#), Shelley Murphy discusses ways to be proactive and responsive to educator and student stress that can occur within learning environments and beyond. [Chapter 4](#) by Brenda Stein Dzaldov shares insights into how to use various types of authentic assessment to support student learning through synchronous and asynchronous online discussions. In [Chapter 5](#), Dania Wattar offers some ideas for anticipating and supporting various learner differences that can impact online discussions. In [Chapter 6](#), Jacob DesRochers provides recommendations for managing planned and unanticipated challenging conversations that emerge in online discussions. Finally, in [Chapter 7](#) Alison Mann offers some suggestions for ways that instructors can consider integrating alternative forms of communication into online discussions.

Chapter Format in This Handbook

Each chapter has been designed to be read on its own, as its own starting point, and/or in conjunction with other chapters. Each chapter begins with “Setting the Context,” a personal narrative that describes why the topic is important to the author; a “Scenario” that provides an example situation on the topic being discussed in the chapter; “Learning Outcomes” and “Key Terms.” Throughout the balance of the chapter, a number of self-directed learning prompts (e.g., “Pause and Consider”) encourage readers to consider their own understandings and individual teaching contexts in relation to the ideas and examples being shared. The final section of each chapter provides a short reflection on the original scenario that allows the authors to propose what could have been done differently at the outset.

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2.

CHAPTER 2: NOT BUSY WORK! THE BENEFITS OF NEW LITERACIES AND SOCIAL PRACTICES IN ONLINE DISCUSSIONS

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Setting the Context

After more than a decade of online teaching, I have come to appreciate the opportunities and possibilities that well-designed asynchronous discussions offer within a variety of communication modes. My experience with many learning management systems (LMS) and thousands of students has taught me that online discussions can support student learning in cognitive *and* social/emotional ways. In March 2020, when most K-12 and higher education teaching and learning moved fully online due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I was teaching in both higher education (pre-service and graduate) and elementary as a long-term occasional (LTO) teacher. I was thankful my students were somewhat familiar with using technology for learning – the kindergarten students through iPads and Seesaw and adult learners through the institutional LMSs. While most of us were unprepared for the magnitude of switching from in-class to fully remote teaching, I quickly learned that despite my comfort and experience in online teaching, what seemed most important to all levels of students was connection and a sense of belonging. The challenges faced by the teacher described in this chapter illustrate a compendium of issues that I have encountered and addressed (mainly) successfully, especially in the context of social isolation in and out of school. While I strive to create online learning environments that support a community of learners in safe and welcoming ways, there continues to be many challenges, especially as our lives outside of the formal learning context are affected by the rapidly evolving context of the pandemic. My experiences of what worked and what didn't, and my evolving understandings of online literacies and social practices, guide my steps in this teaching journey. I hope this chapter provides some thoughtful insight for planning asynchronous online discussions in both fully online and blended learning environments.

Scenario

Ali, an educator who is experienced in designing in-person discussions to support rich learning and community-building experiences, recently began teaching online. Asynchronous learning formats can seem solitary and disconnected. After all, some students may never meet in-person. Some may see online learning as unsocial or lonely. How does one go about developing social relationships with others who are so distant and somewhat unseen? Educators, who believe that learning is a cognitive process influenced by social context, may see online discussions as an opportunity to enhance learning and facilitate community. Understanding that grades are an important incentive for student engagement, and recognizing that participation in authentic discussions requires an investment of time, Ali planned to design regular online learning discussions for a participation grade of 20%. While planning these asynchronous discussions, Ali began to grapple with these questions:

- Is this pedagogical approach simply busywork? That is, is the main goal of the activity and/or activities to validate some form of regular engagement or participation that justifies 20% of the students' grade?
- Will the design of ongoing asynchronous discussions simply involve posing a few prompting questions related to required readings, and asking students to respond individually each week? Some might consider this approach to be self-study.
- Would students consider participating in online discussions as meeting a quota or completing a checklist – that is, meeting a required number of notes or words rather than engaging with the course content to learn?
- How can teacher time that is required to design, monitor, and grade online discussions be optimized?
- How can online discussions be designed to engage learners in reflecting and learning through authentic discussions with each other?
- How will students know *how* to engage in online discussions? What are the key literacies and social practices necessary for comfortable and positive engagement?
- How can asynchronous online discussions be designed to support a community of learners by fostering a sense of belonging and an environment of trust?

Learning Outcomes

- Explore how to design asynchronous online discussions to maximize student participation:
 1. Through clear and simple organization of the online environment;
 2. Through Start Here and About Week X explanations;
 3. By providing guidelines and modelling effective literacy and social practices; and

4. By creating opportunities for students to engage in social interactions to build a sense of belonging.
 - Consider ways to develop a safe and welcoming community of learners.
 - Share a variety of best practices for practical and authentic design of asynchronous online learning discussions.

Key Terms: online learning communities, online learning literacies, online learning social practices, technology transience, learning management system (LMS)

Key Terms Defined

Online Learning Communities

An online learning community refers to a group of people who are learning together in a digital space. One framework that can guide our understanding of this space is the community of inquiry (CoI). More on the CoI framework can be found at <https://coi.athabasca.ca/coi-model/>.

Online Learning Literacies

Similar to competencies, online learning literacies facilitate effective digital ways of engaging related to communication. An example of these literacies would be creating or reading and interpreting an informative subject line for an online discussion note or entry.

Online Learning Social Practices

Contemporary online learning social practices require adaptation to the digital environment to facilitate learner interaction with course content, other learners, and the instructor. A pedagogical shift to fostering cultural ways of engaging literacy influenced by the social rules governing communication is important to designing productive online learning environments. An example of these practices would be modelling commonly adopted ways of interacting such as addressing others in an online learning environment. Frequency of posting, note content, and types of interactions are examples of social practices that learners will become familiar with in each class or course.

Technology Transience

Technology transience is described by Muilenburg and Berge (2015) as the “rapid proliferation of technology tools, the frequent update of such tools, and their ever-shortening lifespans” (p. 93). This term explains that we must constantly adapt to new ways of working with digital media. Teachers are looking to achieve pedagogical goals with evolving technologies. Our students are constantly navigating digital tools that are rapidly changing.

Learning Management System (LMS)

This term refers to the digital space in which online learning takes place.

Note: For the purposes of this chapter, the terms note, entry, or post are used interchangeably to refer to a contribution to an asynchronous online discussion.

Why Consider Literacy and Social Practices in Asynchronous Online Learning Discussions?

Many teachers and instructors find well-designed online learning discussions to be powerful pedagogical practices. Reading and writing in online discussions have been characterized as comparable to listening and speaking (Wise, Hausknecht & Zhao, 2013). We know that reading and writing are literacy skills that have been developing since students’ early years. These literacy skills could align with the practices of listening and speaking in text discussions. Yet listening and speaking in online discussions do not necessarily involve the same set of literacy skills.

The following are some of the possible benefits related to literacy in online learning discussions.

From the instructor’s perspective, to:

- Encourage students to engage with course content and concepts in multiple ways as they build on and articulate their understandings.
- Motivate students to share their own contexts and learn from others.
- View the perspectives of students—that is, to consider if the understandings align with the course objectives, for example.
- Facilitate realignment in cases of misunderstanding.
- Create communities of inquiry and learners.
- Promote a sense of belonging.

- Foster a risk-taking environment.
- Revisit discussions and observe patterns of positive social practices.

From the student's perspective, to:

- Engage thoughtfully in the composition of entries (not time dependent as in a face-to-face discussion) with time to revisit the content, the questions being asked and others' responses.
- Participate in typically face-to-face classroom literacy practices considered important to learning such as exploratory talk, accountable talk, development of academic or contextual language, and transferring language forms across situations of use (Cazden, 2001, p. 169-176).
- Reflect on and articulate their understandings, and learn from others.
- Document their understandings, in a sense somewhat permanently, that can be revisited as learning is deepened.
- Develop an online identity and develop social practices with a community of learners.

Aligned with some of these benefits, an understanding of the literacy and social practices essential to online learning discussions can be helpful.



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Clay's (1991) model of literacy behaviours “respects the complexity, studies the cross-referencing of knowledge, expects different skills to be interactive, and assumes that control of this orchestration is something the [student] has learned” (p. 3). In a digital environment, literacy and social practices in discussions are enacted over distance and time by those who may not have experienced these practices previously. In an in-person classroom setting, it is possible to learn about these practices by observing others, but this process can take time. Some new online learners may not know what is expected or where to begin. It is best not to assume students know how to engage in our design of online learning discussions — the expectations should be modelled and explained.

Finally, the value of forming a community of learners must not be underestimated. Cazden (2001) believed that “as classrooms change toward a community of learners, all students' public words become part of the

curriculum for their peers” (p. 3). Well-designed asynchronous conversations can support students cognitively, socially, and emotionally.

Designing Asynchronous Online Discussions

The following recommendations guide us in the ways that Ali designs successful asynchronous online discussions to support a community of learners.

Organizing and Keeping It Simple

Ali’s goal was to organize the online discussions so that topics are clear and locating class activities is straightforward. If the online discussions are organized on a weekly basis, the title, forum, or folder can be labelled with the date and topic such as “Week 5: Oct. 12–17 – Assessment in a Digital Context.” A title like this helps students quickly identify the time frame and topic of the discussion.



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Where to Begin

Introduction Space

Ali wants students to feel a part of this learning community. Ali planned to provide a place where students can introduce themselves to each other. Even if the students know each other in some way, an opportunity to share something at that moment can be created – invite them to say hello and to share something important to them. For example, students can be asked to share an image, video, or link to an important person (someone inspiring to them such as a family member, a famous person, or a popular culture reference). Encourage other students to respond in positive ways to show appreciation for the sharing that has begun. Avoid asking students to share

something personal or sensitive, and asking them to invest a lot of time in this activity. It is meant to be a starting point. Offer a range of prompts and invite them to choose the ones that feel most comfortable to them. Ali will always aim to post a private response welcoming the students to the class.



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Start Here

Ali knows that students may not know where to begin. Ali plans to provide a straightforward note that explains how to get started. Here are some examples of what to include in a Start Here note:

- Welcome the students with a reassuring comment – after all, some may be nervous about this new learning environment, even if it is just new in the sense of an unfamiliar teacher.
- Guide the students to the Introduction Space and encourage them to join in as they begin to create a sense of community.
- Refer to guideline notes that have been shared and explain how to locate assignments, a place to pose general questions, drop-in office hours, and other important information about the course.

Ali plans to record a video welcome message briefly introducing the course and demonstrating how to navigate the LMS. See this excerpt of a welcome message at https://youtu.be/rtm6mJAb_ss and this excerpt of a conceptual overview of another course at <https://youtu.be/EInMaNOKSx0>. It is important to keep these videos short – ideally two to five minutes. Multiple videos can be provided to address separate topics.



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Organizing the Weekly Learning Spaces

Within the weekly space, Ali created an entry that is easily visible to explain the weekly activities. For example, an *About Week X* entry, such as the one below, will guide learners.

Week 5: Assessment and Evaluation in a Digital Context
Assessment in a digital context is not necessarily the same as assessment in a face-to-face context. How do we engage with the Designing Success concepts of assessment for, as and of learning through activities that take place online?

- Complete the required readings (see below).
- Participate in the discussions and activities throughout the week.
- Submit your Assessment in an Online Learning Environment Proposal due October 17.
- Create an assessment tool for an online learning discussion and share it in the "Post the Draft Assessment Tool Here" folder by the end of the week.

Readings:

in Conrad, D. & Danks, J. (2014). *Assessment Strategies for Online Learning*. AU Press. Available at <http://au.pressbooks.com.au/designingforonlinelearning/> please read:

[1] Chapter 8 -- Flexible, Flipped, and Blended: Technology and New Possibilities in Learning and Assessment. Pages 121-131.

[2] Chapter 7 -- From Technology to Interaction, Community, and Learner-Centered Pedagogy. Pages 73-88.

[3] Chapter 7 -- Planning an Assessment and Evaluation Strategy-- Authentically. Pages 107-128.

Optional: Reuben Richards at [TECOutlook](http://TECOutlook.com) (2013). About Assessment at <http://ocw.mit.edu/ocw/techedu/> (n.d.). Richards discusses "Explain Everything for Assessment."

Be sure to provide clear guidelines for participation and model these for students early in the course.

Image 1: Example of an About Week entry



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The Power of Social Presence – Building Community and Having Fun with Icebreakers

Social presence is described as the ability of online participants to project themselves socially and emotionally. In a computer-mediated environment (CME), such as an online discussion, this can be expressed through *affective responses* such as humour, self-disclosure, or the use of images of expression, such as avatars, emoticons, GIFs, and memes; through *interactive responses* by replying or referring to others; and through *cohesive responses* such as referring to *our* group, *we*, or *us*, and indicators of community building and belonging (Rourke et al., 2001). Within the weekly activities, Ali considered introducing learners to each week’s discussions by first engaging them in an icebreaker activity to facilitate social presence. Such an activity is not primarily intended to deepen learning but rather to facilitate community building. Icebreakers can involve engaging in a fun activity such as an avatar creator, meme creator, or sharing activity to help learners get to know each other in this digital space. The following is an example of such an activity.



Image 2: Example of an icebreaker entry asking learners to create a personalized meme

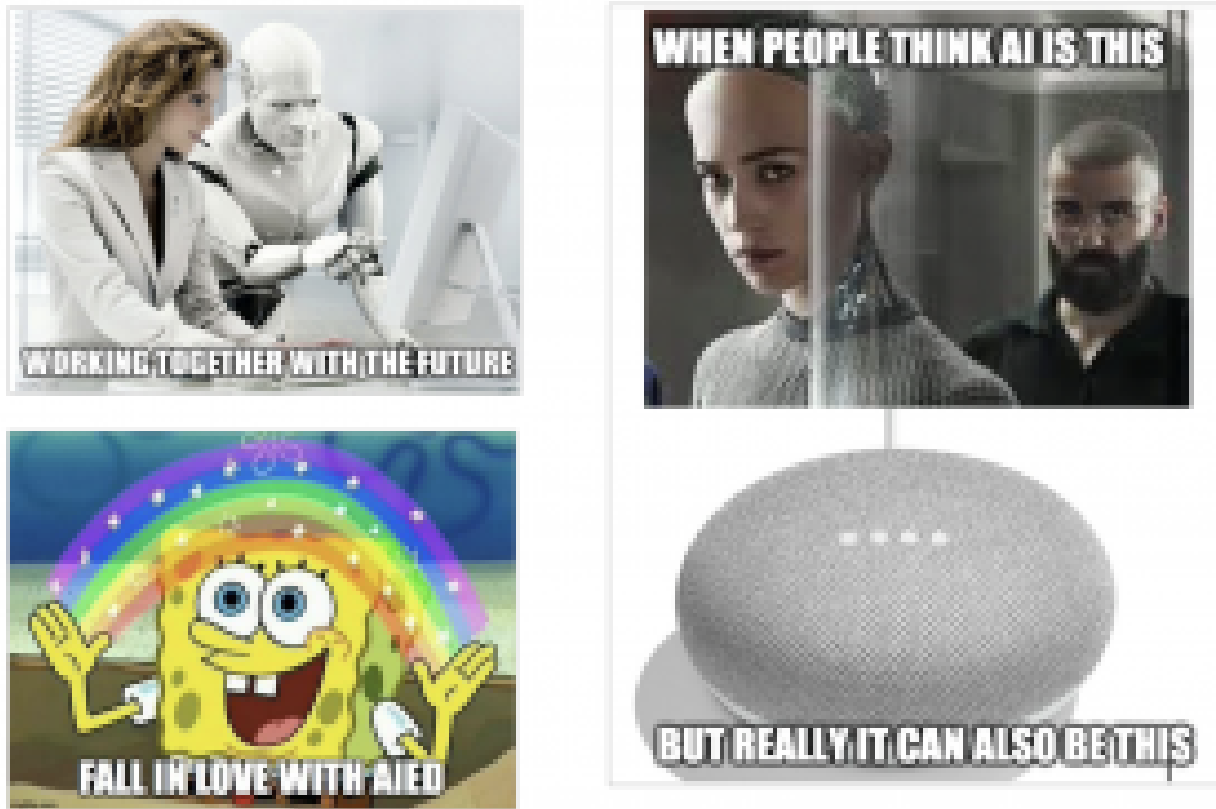


Image 3: Examples of icebreaker memes created by learners

Other icebreaker activities might include asking learners to share a picture of their ideal place to visit, a favourite meal, a most inspiring quote, two truths and a lie, an online resource, and even sharing the results of an activity such as <https://quickdraw.withgoogle.com/>. The possibilities are endless – as long as they are designed to be inclusive and welcoming. In addition, after modelling this activity, Ali intends to invite students to lead the icebreaker activities to increase participation and engagement.



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Organizing the Discussion

When online discussions take place in large groups, students can become overwhelmed with many responses to read in one space. Discussions are best organized in small groups of six to eight. Ali created a separate section within these small groups for each discussion question. It is best if each week's activities are organized in a consistent manner so that learners know where to look for the readings, the icebreakers, and questions to be addressed by their groups. Ali considered many options for dividing students into groups. Here are a few examples of groupings in playful forms:

- Favourite meal of the day (breakfast, lunch, dinner).
- Preferred times of the day to learn (early bird, midday, night owl).
- Favourite entertainment types (comedies, romance movies, documentaries).
- Ideal vacation place (home, a place with a beach, a place with lots of snow).
- Preferred season (summer, winter, shoulder seasons).
- Favourite weather (rainy, snowy, sunny).
- And even Harry Potter houses.

Creating Engaging Discussions to Foster Deep Learning and Engagement

Guiding us with three strategies for better online discussions, Sherry (2020) suggests we scaffold the discussion by encouraging informal language to allow our learners time to familiarize themselves with the language of our content. Ali will encourage multimodal engagement with visual, audio, and video responses but will also be mindful that these modes may be new to some, so simple text participation is valued, too. Ali will avoid asking “yes” or “no” questions and will “invite multiple, complex interpretations – open, high-order thinking (O-HOT) questions – they spark more responses and more substantive discussion” (p. 11). It is also helpful to prompt for elaboration — what made us think that or what does the author want us to think? We are aiming for conversation and engagement multiple times through the week.

Ali's design of the discussions will be mindful of what Hewitt (2005) refers to as *clunkers* that shut down discussions, such as personally addressed responses like “Dear Zoe,” off-topic notes, superficial comments, and agreement without expansion. Ali will intentionally remain less visible in discussions since instructor responses can be perceived as clunkers, too, because they can appear to give the right answer, even if there isn't necessarily one *correct* response.



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Finally, Ali will invite small groups of students to conduct the weekly discussions to build engagement and raise learner confidence by reframing course content to others. This opportunity will allow the students to become subject matter experts (SMEs) to a limited degree, and will allow them to experience the processes involved in planning a weekly discussion. This opportunity may also improve their participation in other weekly discussions once they understand the underlying goals of designing a discussion to deeply engage with the content and other students.

Guidelines for Online Discussions

One way to help learners develop literacy and social practices in online learning discussions is to provide guidelines. This strategy is most important because many learners may be drawing on experiences aligned with social media, which are different from a formal learning environment or experiences with other courses or teachers.

Asynchronous discussions can be designed to encourage students to respond to a question and then engage with others by responding to another's note. Ideally, an online learning discussion should have multiple interactions as students engage with the content, the instructor, and with other students. After reading an article, watching a video, or participating in an activity to become familiar with the intended content, students will engage with the instructor and their peers as they share their understandings, typically in text form.

Here is an example of Guidelines for Online Discussion Contributions that Ali plans to adopt while developing promising practices in online teaching:

What makes a good note?

These are some questions to ask yourself about your contributions, to check whether you are on the right track:

1. Does the contribution advance the current topic?
2. Is it concise?
3. Are there connections or links to the course content or other students' ideas to support your thoughts?
4. Is there an informative title for the note or entry? Does it set the context, indicate its topic and or

encourage engagement for example? It is best to avoid “*Reply*” or “*Reply to*” because this does not tell us what this entry is about. See below for more on this topic.

5. Does it do one or more of the following: share knowledge, pose well-formulated questions, constructively criticize ideas, build on what others have contributed?
6. Is it directed to the whole group and does it provide substance? Messages that are directed to an individual should be sent privately. Entries of general agreement without adding to the discussion should be minimized. If the LMS supports a *like* function, this can be used to encourage peers.
7. Does it relate to the course content or offer new relevant resources?
8. Are the contributions spread throughout the topic time period, rather than at the last-minute where it will be unlikely to receive responses from others? Is this contributing to a conversation rather than simply responding to a reading without drawing others into the conversation?

Ali will consider that the goal of “concise” in point 2 above could be guided by a word count, but it may be best to avoid assigning a word count so there isn’t a quota.



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Guidelines for Creating Informative Subject Lines — a New Literacy of Online Learning Discussions

One example of a literacy practice that online students will not typically have imported from face-to-face discussions is developing subject lines. When participating in an in-person discussion, we would not typically announce what we are about to say, nor would we wait until the receiver of the information chooses to further engage. Yet in an online discussion, we expect that participants will design a succinct and informative subject line. The title of a discussion entry can help readers decide on the relevance or importance of the note’s content before viewing. Not every note by other students needs to be read. The subject line can also act as a way finder, to quickly identify a note one might want to revisit.

Subject Line Scenario

Ali has provided an article on backwards design and learning outcomes and has asked students to respond in an online discussion. Responses from students could be represented in one of these scenarios.



The first example of informative subject lines is helpful to Ali and other learners. Instructors should guide online learners to consider the literacy practice of creating informative subject lines. Suggestions developed for creating informative subject lines in emails can be helpful for guiding students in the online learning environment.

Image 4. Examples of subject lines

Some helpful suggestions for creating an informative subject line are:

- Be succinct.
- Avoid punctuation and unnecessary capitals.
- Consider leading the reader – for example, *Learning theorists in this digital world would say...*

Salutations in Discussion Posts as a Social Practice

Studies indicate that addressing a specific learner in a general note will affect engagement by other learners (Hewitt, 2005). In general, it is not necessary to include a salutation (or a closing) in a discussion note. If the same discussion was taking place in a face-to-face classroom, shared thoughts can be addressed to anyone in the discussion. Some suggest that addressing only one learner can indicate to others that the note is not intended for them and can discourage others from responding. To easily build on others' opinions, many LMSs will allow links to notes written by others. Such links, embedded in a note, are ideal as the reader can revisit relevant ideas in other notes referred to by the writer.

Consideration of Student Participation Patterns and Social Practices

Finally, it is important for Ali to get to know the students and their patterns of participation. A study of participation patterns found that quiet participation does not necessarily indicate disengagement or lack of interest (Wilton, 2019). Some learners prefer to learn by reading what others have to “say” but are not comfortable posting a lot. This preference makes their participation less visible. English-language learners, for example, may require more time to compose and post a response. Participation measures should consider time spent reading others' responses. Ali is mindful of the importance of getting to know all students.

Reflecting Back on the Scenario

Although inexperienced in online teaching, Ali designed an asynchronous discussion environment to be inclusive, to build a sense of community, and to foster a community of learners. Ali is not drawing on discussions to create busy work that students may not see as helpful to learning. Instead, online discussions are designed to deeply engage with the learning content, the teacher when needed, and each other. Here are a few key components of the design:

- Ali is supporting online literacies and social practices. Not all students will know what to do in this learning environment. Ali provides clear guidelines and organizes in a consistent and easy-to-navigate format using Start Here and About Week X explanations.
- Ali is fostering a sense of belonging in this community of learners through cognitive, social, and emotional supports. Ali is providing a space for student introductions, icebreakers, and discussions as conversations to engage all learners.
- Brief Introduction and Course Overview videos are being recorded and shared by Ali to enhance teacher

social presence and provide information to learners in multimodal ways.

By supporting online literacies, social practices, and a sense of belonging in asynchronous discussions, Ali's community of learners will engage with each other through online cognitive, social, and emotional supports. Now, more than ever, we must provide our students with comfortable and supportive digital spaces in which to learn together.

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Helpful Resources

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3.

CHAPTER 3: CULTIVATING MENTAL HEALTH, WELL-BEING, AND A CULTURE OF CARE IN ONLINE TEACHING AND LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

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Setting the Context

Just two short years ago, I was decades into my teaching career and finally beginning to feel as though I might have a grip on what it means to be a skillful educator. I research, study, write about, and teach on the topic of mindfulness in education and supporting both educator and student well-being. In my role as a former elementary teacher and now as a teacher educator at the University of Toronto, I have been steadfast in my commitment to ensuring well-being is front and centre in the learning environments I co-create with my students. Enter the COVID-19 pandemic and the lightning speed that was needed to move to online teaching and learning. In truth, with absolutely no experience teaching virtually, this tested my basic ideas about instruction and what was possible in the online teaching environment. I wondered how on earth I would compensate for the lack of immediate physical infrastructure that had always supported my practice of foregrounding belonging and connection, well-being, and meaningful discussion. Pre-pandemic, I would not have elected to teach virtually. I realize now this thinking was, in part, because I felt sorely ill-equipped to do so and because I wasn't confident that I could establish the same connection with my students or support them to cultivate connection and meaningful dialogue with and amongst each other. To my surprise, as I began to stumble my way through learning how to teach online, I also figured out ways to continue to forefront student and educator well-being. I adapted tried-and-true in-class strategies for use in the online environment and I also developed and learned new strategies that I had not considered before. I understand now that as I entered this uncharted territory of online teaching, I was not starting from scratch. Instead, I have been leveraging my experience and understanding and using them as guides for enacting caring, inclusive, and responsive pedagogy

in a different teaching and learning terrain. This chapter outlines some of what I have leveraged and learned along the way toward this end.

Scenario

Kelly has just finished a virtual meeting with a student who has reached out for support because they are having a difficult time coping with increasing levels of stress and anxiety; they have concerns about its impact on their well-being and their academic responsibilities, including their ability to feel comfortable participating in discussions in online environments. Particularly, over the last few years, Kelly has noticed an increased need and demand for responding to students' mental health and well-being. The number of students reaching out to her has increased exponentially given these challenging times. She recognizes that because of her frequent interaction with students, she is uniquely positioned to offer both proactive and responsive support, yet she feels sorely ill prepared to do this work. Kelly, like many of her students, has also been experiencing stress and anxiety herself. Some of it is related to the rigours and expectations of her role, some of it resulting from systemic barriers, and some of it related to meeting the range and complexity of the well-being needs of students in the changing teaching terrain of an ongoing pandemic. Beyond responding to mental health-related accommodation requests and the obvious step of referring her students to the university mental health centre, Kelly is wondering how her new online teaching environment can be set up in a way that is more conducive to centering a pedagogy of care, helping her students feel more comfortable engaging in online dialogue and, more generally, helping them thrive. She would also like to know how to better attend to her own well-being needs before reaching the burnout stage.

Learning Outcomes

- Consider mechanisms of the stress response.
- Understand the importance of promoting and protecting our own well-being as online instructors.
- Promote student well-being and learning through a pedagogy of care in online environments.
- Enact on-line tools and strategies to support and resource our students and ourselves.
- Cultivate an inclusive learning environment that supports greater social-emotional ease for students engaged in online discussion (synchronous and asynchronous).

Key Terms: educator well-being, student well-being, stress, pedagogy of care, tools and strategies, online teaching environment, online discussion

Introduction



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We may ask ourselves why there is a chapter focused on faculty and student well-being within a book focused on designing meaningful discussion in online courses. Good question. This chapter pulls back the lens for a broader perspective on how we might support our students and ourselves through a compassionate and restorative approach to teaching and learning. This type of approach allows us to support student-centred learning and discussion in our classrooms more skilfully while also resourcing ourselves in, for, and through this work. This chapter will outline some considerations for paying attention to our own well-being as an entry point for greater resilience and thriving in our roles as instructors and beyond. It also outlines strategies for enacting a pedagogy of care for supporting the mental health and well-being of our students; by doing so, it has the potential to open a portal to meaningful dialogue, learning, and well-being in our classrooms.

Equity Lens

It is important to note that while the stress and anxiety discussed within this chapter are framed as wellness issues, they are also deeply influenced by harmful institutional, social, and political conditions. When we view mental health and well-being through an intersectional lens, we recognize the ways in which racism, sexism, ableism, poverty, homophobia, lack of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Colour) representation, and so on can negatively impact well-being. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has underscored discriminatory and unjust structures that have disproportionately impacted marginalized communities. To ignore these realities does a disservice to both ourselves as educators and to our students. The strategies found within this chapter are *not* offered as a means of helping faculty and students adjust to experiences of stress, anger, and discontent in response to systems of oppression. They are offered with the hope that they are counterbalanced with a commitment by educational leaders to critically analyze how the conditions that contribute to these experiences in students and faculty can be transformed.

Understanding Mechanisms of the Stress Response

There are myriad ways we can help our students and ourselves build resilience to and better manage stress. This begins with understanding the mechanisms of our own stress response. When we have a greater understanding of how stress and our nervous systems work, it can help us to manage our stress much more skillfully. Let's begin by distinguishing between a stressor and stress itself. The American Psychological Association (n.d.) defines a stressor as a force or condition that results in physical or emotional stress. Put simply, a stressor is an event that causes us stress. Stress, on the other hand, is our physiological and psychological response to one or a combination of stressors.

It is often assumed that stress is always associated with negative experiences. In fact, it's not the case. There are two different kinds of stress: positive stress (eustress) and negative stress (distress). Starting a new job or relationship, learning a new skill, or giving a presentation are all examples of when we may experience stress as positive. This type of experience often provides us with a surge of energy, motivation, focus, and flow; it typically evokes positive feelings in us. In contrast, negative stress is experienced when a current situation or future event is interpreted as threatening or harmful. Experiencing a breakup, waiting for medical test results, or facing a pandemic can lead to distress and overwhelm when we are not physically, mentally, or emotionally equipped to manage the demand we are faced with.

Our personal experience of stress (i.e., how it lands in our bodies and minds), depends on myriad factors, including genetic, social, cultural, physical, psychological, environmental, and behavioural. The same stressor will impact different folks in different ways depending on our interpretation of the stress, our lived experiences and how well our nervous systems are equipped to handle the stress. Each of us has a threshold, so to speak, of how much stress we can metabolize or manage before it negatively impacts our daily lives. Luckily, we are not passive recipients of stress; we and our students can learn to mitigate and respond effectively to the challenges of a stressor through cognitive, physical, and environmental considerations. This chapter will outline a few of these considerations.

Instructor Well-Being



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Though instructors are ultimately responsible for their own well-being, it is the employer's responsibility to provide the conditions that support and not detract from thriving in the workplace. So, it is important to note that a focus on well-being and self-care for faculty in this chapter is not an attempt to bypass the primary need to ensure our work environments are alleviating or avoiding the causes and conditions that give rise to emotional and physical distress in the workplace. Workplace culture is often a major roadblock to health and well-being. It is right to expect that work environments provide the conditions necessary to support the mental health and well-being of its instructors. It is equally important to recognize our need and responsibility to focus on our own wellness.

As educators, we likely give a lot of ourselves in service of supporting the learning, growth, and well-being of others. By focusing on our own wellbeing, we enact an essential counterbalance. The importance and benefits of intentionally focusing on our own well-being are often overshadowed by feelings of guilt for doing so. However, there are myriad reasons why prioritizing our own well-being is of benefit to us and our students. Think of your role as an instructor in an online environment as being at the helm of *the nervous system of the classroom*. Research bears out the impact of what is called stress contagion and the ripple effect of educators' levels of stress, fatigue, and burnout. When we are at ease, our students are more likely to be at ease. Reciprocally, it is also true that when our students feel less stressed and more at ease, we are likely to feel less stressed as well. Focusing on our well-being and the well-being of our students is mutually beneficial.

Here are a few recommendations:

Reach out to colleagues for support: Since many faculty members work independently, they often lack embedded structures through which they can engage in mutual support. Almost immediately after the pandemic began and my teaching work switched to online education, I was invited to join an informal bimonthly meeting with colleagues. Our intention was to support each other through a new and uncharted territory of teaching through the pandemic – with half of us being completely new to the online environment. These meetings, which continue today, have led to meaningful professional development and instructional improvement for all of us. Perhaps as crucial is that they have positively contributed to a sense of connectedness, collegiality, and well-being.

Avoid saying yes on the spot: This is somewhat different from “just say no.” As educators, we are often confronted with the never-ending stream of requests for service. At times, tenure and promotion are highly dependent on this service. Rather than being caught off guard, it can be helpful to intentionally plan and prepare a process for taking time to evaluate and respond to these requests ahead of time. This process may begin with giving ourselves time to think about whether the “ask” is feasible, important, or of interest to us. If the answer is no, it can help to remember the words of economist Tim Harford, who said, “Every time we say yes to a request, we are also saying no to anything else we might accomplish with the time” (Harford, 2015).

Recognize when we are moving into a stress response: How well-equipped we are to manage stress before it escalates to unhealthy levels influences its impact. A certain level of stress acts as a natural protector. It guides our behaviours in ways that are meant to help keep us safe. For this we can thank the natural intelligence

and wisdom of our minds and bodies. At the same time, we need to be intentional about making sure that we are not getting caught in an ongoing and constant loop of stress in ways that are no longer protective. Chronic activation of the stress response can take its toll on our physical and psychological health. So, we need to learn how to turn the alarm bells off when they are not needed (Murphy, 2019).

One of the first steps of learning how to manage stress is recognizing our unique expressions of stress. Each of us has a different early signal or indicator for when our levels of stress are about to escalate beyond what we can manage. For some folks, these early warning signals may come in the form of shallow breathing, irritability, muscle tension in the chest or belly, or feelings of heat and tingling in the extremities. Image 1 includes examples of stress cues shared by fellow educators.

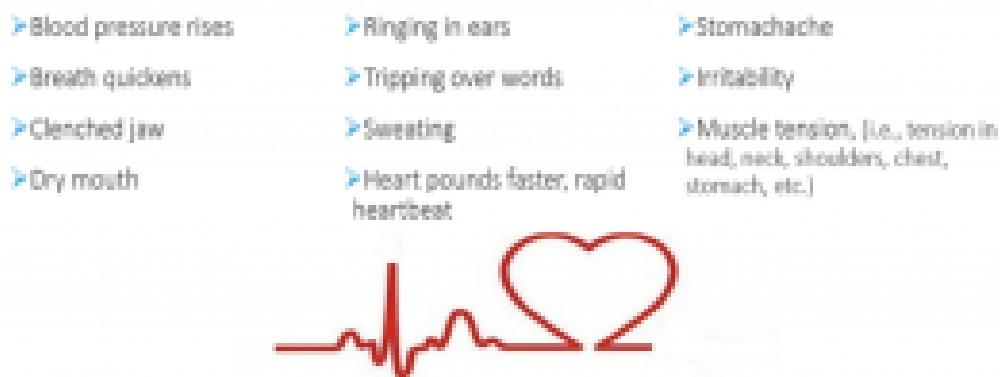


Image 1: This image outlines examples of possible stress responses

When we become attuned to our unique signals of early stress, we are more able to interrupt a larger cascade of stress responses with coping tools and calming strategies.

Have a plan for inviting our nervous systems to calm or downregulate as we prepare to enter our online teaching environments: Consider the difference between offering ourselves a much-needed reprieve and resourcing our nervous systems through calming strategies. A reprieve activity is something we choose to do in service of avoiding, distracting, or procrastinating. Folks will sometimes attempt to find comfort in things like binge watching, social media, comfort foods, etc. None of these are inherently negative, however, they do little or nothing to resource us to better manage our stress in the long run. An example of how we might resource ourselves as we prepare for and teach synchronously is to take just one or two minutes before logging onto our online platforms to activate the calming or parasympathetic response in our bodies. Over time, the repeated action of intentionally calming or downregulating our nervous systems helps us to move

into more of a default state of calm. If we are comfortable with focusing on our breathing, we might take just a few intentional, deep, and slow breaths in and out. We may try to gently extend our out-breath just a few seconds longer than the in-breath. This helps to activate the parasympathetic nervous system, which controls the body's ability to relax. [Click here for an online breathing tool.](#) We may also activate the relaxation response by engaging through one or more of the senses we have available to us. We can stop for 30-60 seconds and listen to the sounds in our environments, or look around the room and bring attention to the different shapes and colours before us, or bring curious attention to our bodies and the points of contact as we sit, stand, or lie where we are. Each of the above activities invites us to tap into a greater state of presence, which often helps us to activate the calming response. We can choose a relaxation activity that is most comfortable for us.

Student Well-Being



An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:

<https://ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub/designingforonlinediscussion/?p=32#h5p-12>

Study after study has found a majority of university students report anxiety as one of their primary health concerns (e.g., American College Health Assessment, 2019). In fact, research on students from over 34 campuses across Canada has shown that 89% of Canadian college and university students experience high levels of psychological stress (Rashid & Di Genova, 2020). Aside from the rigours and expectations of their education programs, a number of adverse conditions have been found to contribute to these rising levels of stress and anxiety. These include a lack of critical resources, illness, childhood trauma, and/or ongoing experiences of interpersonal, systemic, and structural racism, discrimination, oppression, and injustice both within and beyond the education system itself. Not surprisingly, the pandemic has added additional stressors as most students have had to adjust to ongoing uncertainty, shifts in and out of remote learning, and a loss of support systems that previously buffered them from social isolation and disconnection. BIPOC communities have been disproportionately impacted in all aspects of the above, which has created further barriers to access, opportunity, and success.

Additionally, many students report experiences of stress and anxiety in response to being asked to engage in online dialogue, either synchronously or asynchronously. Most instructors would agree that dialogue is an essential tool in the classroom. However, research suggests that one in five speakers experience high levels of communication apprehension (Richmond et al., 2013). This apprehension can be influenced by a number of

factors including introversion or shyness, and stress or anxiety. With an increase in online learning through platforms that offer opportunities for dialogue, speaking apprehension can be exacerbated by the inability to notice or respond to nonverbal cues, and so on (Rombalski, 2021). So, how do we create an online learning environment that engenders feelings of comfort and relative safety and promotes well-being?

As educators, we are uniquely positioned to be well-being advocates for students because of our regular contact with them. Many students will approach their instructors for advice and support before reaching out to formalized services, which is likely why instructors have increasingly voiced their need for guidance in this area. While specialized training and concrete resources offered by our institutions are crucial, there are ways to draw on student resilience and embed support through the implementation of our teaching work.

Research shows we can do this by enacting a pedagogy of care that prioritizes cultivating experiences of safety and inclusion within our classrooms. A culture of care is created when education systems and educators are responsive to students' need for holistic well-being (e.g., academic, emotional, and social development) and when educators prioritize developing caring relationships with and amongst their students (Noddings, 1992). This whole person and restorative approach to education contributes to the conditions necessary for our students to learn, comfortably engage in online discussion, and thrive. [Click here to watch educator Rita F. Pierson's TED Talk about the importance of care.](#)

Here are a few ways each of us can cultivate a culture of care within our online classroom environments:

Prioritize our own well-being: There are myriad downstream benefits for the classroom environment and student well-being when we prioritize our own. (Refer to Section 2: Instructor Well-Being).

Communicate and enact equity-minded pedagogy:

- *Review the course syllabus for representation* of contributions by BIPOC, people with disabilities, LGBTQ+, and other populations that have been historically excluded (i.e., readings, viewings, guest speakers). [Click here for an example of a university syllabus review guide focused on equity.](#)
- *State how our positionalities influence our pedagogies.* Understanding and acknowledging our own levels of power, rank, and privilege (racial, economic, social, ability etc.) and our understanding of the dynamics of systemic barriers help to create a climate of trust, connection, and inclusion.
- *Create a diversity or inclusion policy to include within the syllabus.*
- *Acknowledge and attune ourselves to the diverse identities, cultures, contexts, histories, backgrounds, abilities, and needs of students* by inviting introductions before the course begins or within the first week (refer to example below). Share our introductions as a model. This gives us an opportunity to get to know our students better and build community with and amongst students from the outset (see Image 2).



Instructions for Getting Started with Introductory Note

Shelley Murphy

8:08 Shared Thu Sep 9, 2021, 6:07 PM

Create an Introductory Post on Pepper:

Click on New Note to start your post. Add a Title: 'Hi! I'm -- [your name]'.

This Introductory Post will help me get to know you and will also help build and foster community for us all.

This post could be an audio or video (1-2 minutes), a written note with or without image(s), or any combination of the above (if you choose to make an audio recording, there is an audio icon within the Pepper note system. Click the image of the microphone, record, and then select 'Add Audio to Note'. You may notice a pause as the audio note is loading).

Here are a few optional ideas for sharing within your introduction:

Something you feel makes you uniquely you, favourite hobby, personal projects, favourite childhood book, accomplishment you are proud of, previous career, where you grew up/are currently living, most recent book read, something you do for self-care, what you are most looking forward to over the next 2 years in the LIT, one question you have or topic you hope to learn more about within this Literacy teaching course, etc.

If you are creating an audio recording, please begin by introducing yourself by saying your name. If you are **not** making an audio introduction, please make a brief audio recording of your name within the same note as your introduction (this will give folks an opportunity to hear how to pronounce your name correctly).

[Reply](#) • [Edit](#) • [Delete](#) • [Flaggers](#) • [Pop](#) • [Pin](#) • [Like](#)

Image 2: Instructions for creating an introduction

Offer an introductory message to students that explicitly communicates your commitment to care:

As education philosopher and care theorist Nell Noddings (2009) has argued, organizing education around themes of care, “does not work against intellectual development or academic achievement. On the contrary, it supplies a firm foundation for both” (p. 7). The following message, written during the time of the pandemic, comes from Social Work Professor, Dr. Gita Mehrotra:

Since we have varied levels of experience with online education, different levels of comfort with technology, diverse challenges related to the pandemic and beyond, and varied things going on in our personal lives at the moment, in this space, I ask us to practice self and community care. I ask us to meet each other with flexibility, grace, and compassion as we find our way forward. We will have glitches, we will likely change plans as the course goes on, and we will make mistakes. But, we will also show up, care for one another, read some cool stuff, ask ourselves hard questions about social work and social justice, do our best, and continue to learn and grow. I am committed to doing my best to support you. I care about you and your learning. We are in this together. (Mehrotra, 2021, p. 539)

Become familiar with markers of distress and how to respond: Particularly over the last few years of the pandemic, many of our students have experienced trauma, grief and overwhelm. Instructors play a central role in supporting student mental health because they are often in a direct position to be aware of changes or markers of student distress, or students reach out to us directly. While we may not be trained to offer counseling, we can play a critical role in helping students get the support they need. We can do this by reaching out to students in distress, offering a listening ear, and/or, when it’s called for, referring students to university mental health services.

Survey our students: By asking questions, we can gain a better understanding of their experiences and how

to better support their academic and well-being needs. With just a few simple questions, we can gain important information about their lived experiences, strengths, challenges, and needs.

Begin each class with a check-in/temperature check: Particularly in online environments, students' emotional experiences are not easily apparent to instructors – even with cameras on. As it turns out, they are not always apparent to the students themselves, either. By inviting students to pause and consider and share how they are feeling at the start of class, we send a signal of care and of valuing more holistic ways of knowing. Research also suggests that when we invite students to attune to their nervous systems and name what they are feeling, it helps to ease the stress response (Lieberman et al, 2007). Additionally, it gives instructors valuable information about what might be influencing students' online classroom experience. A brief temperature check at the start of class can come in the form of inviting students to take 30 seconds or so to gauge and share their current emotional and/or physical state. Students may be invited to share a word or two in the chat (either publicly or privately), respond to a poll, or use emoticons or emojis (see Image 3). It turns out that the use of emoticons or emojis in online environments help to reduce transactional distance in virtual learning spaces by providing students with opportunities to feel a greater sense of interaction and psychological proximity with and from their instructors (Zhou & Landa, 2020). By inviting students to stop for a moment and orient themselves to their current mood or physical state, it also invites them to get out of the busyness of their worried minds. This invites a moment of mindfulness and a greater sense of ease as they transition into online discussion and learning.

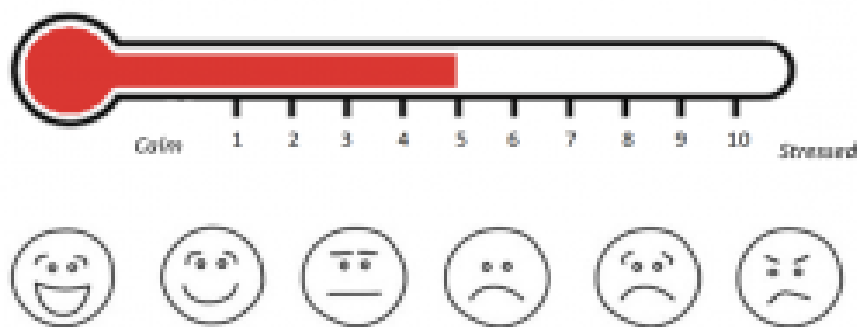


Image 3: Temperature check using emoticons or emojis

Invite discussion through online dyads, triads, and small groups: Particularly in the midst of the pandemic, students have experienced rising levels of stress and anxiety that have resulted, in part, from social isolation and experiences of disconnection. This has a negative impact on attention, cognition and overall well-being. When we offer opportunities for collaboration, interaction, and small group discussion, this can help mitigate students' experiences of stress and anxiety while also building community and connection. This, in turn, can help support thinking, reasoning, and wellness.

Incorporate movement breaks: Research conducted over the past 25 years has shown the positive impact of short, frequent movement breaks on positive affect, learning and student well-being (e.g., Donnelly & Lambourne, 2011; Rhoads et al., 2020). An effective movement break can come in the form of simply inviting students to stand for a moment and stretch, or through a brief guided movement practice. Inviting students to move and take a break from looking at their screens also provides a much-needed break for their eyes. [Click here for three-minute guided movement break](#) videos that can be incorporated in both synchronous and asynchronous learning environments.

Model calming or grounding strategies in class: Research shows that very brief mind-calming practices at the start of class improve the quality and depth of student learning and provide useful skills to help them cope with stress both in and outside of the classroom (Murphy, 2018). Additionally, when students are invited to tap into their parasympathetic nervous systems (a state often called rest and digest), they are more likely to feel at ease when engaging in both synchronous and asynchronous online discussion.

Examples of strategies:

- Arrive at least 10 minutes early to the virtual classroom. Consider playing a calming visual or sound for when the students arrive. [Click here for online options \(also refer to Create a Virtual Wellness Room below\)](#).
- Invite the students into very brief breathing or mindfulness activities. Keep in mind that we should have some general understanding of these practices before offering them to others (i.e., our own experiences of practising mindfulness and/or breath exercises). These practices should be offered in trauma-sensitive ways. For example, students should be invited into practice rather than compelled; students should have a choice in whether to have eyes opened or closed or cameras on or off during this time. It is important to note that not everyone is comfortable focusing on their breath. [Click here for guided trauma-sensitive mindfulness practices recorded by the author](#).
- Create or co-create a Virtual Wellness Room. A Virtual Wellness Room is designed to be an interactive experience through which we and our students can participate in brief calming or energizing activities. These activities can be done either synchronously or asynchronously. Each link embedded within an object within the Virtual Wellness Room leads directly to an on-the-spot tool, strategy, or activity for students to participate in. These approaches come in the form of online calming videos or audio recordings, breathing techniques, guided mindfulness practices, guided movements, calming art activities, and so on. I have created a template of a Virtual Wellness Room to explore, try out, and, if preferred, adapted to create a more personalized space. [Click here for the template](#) and [click here to learn how to build a personalized Bitmoji](#). Alternatively, [click here for instructions on how to create a Virtual Wellness Room from scratch](#). Image 4 shows an example of a Virtual Wellness Room.

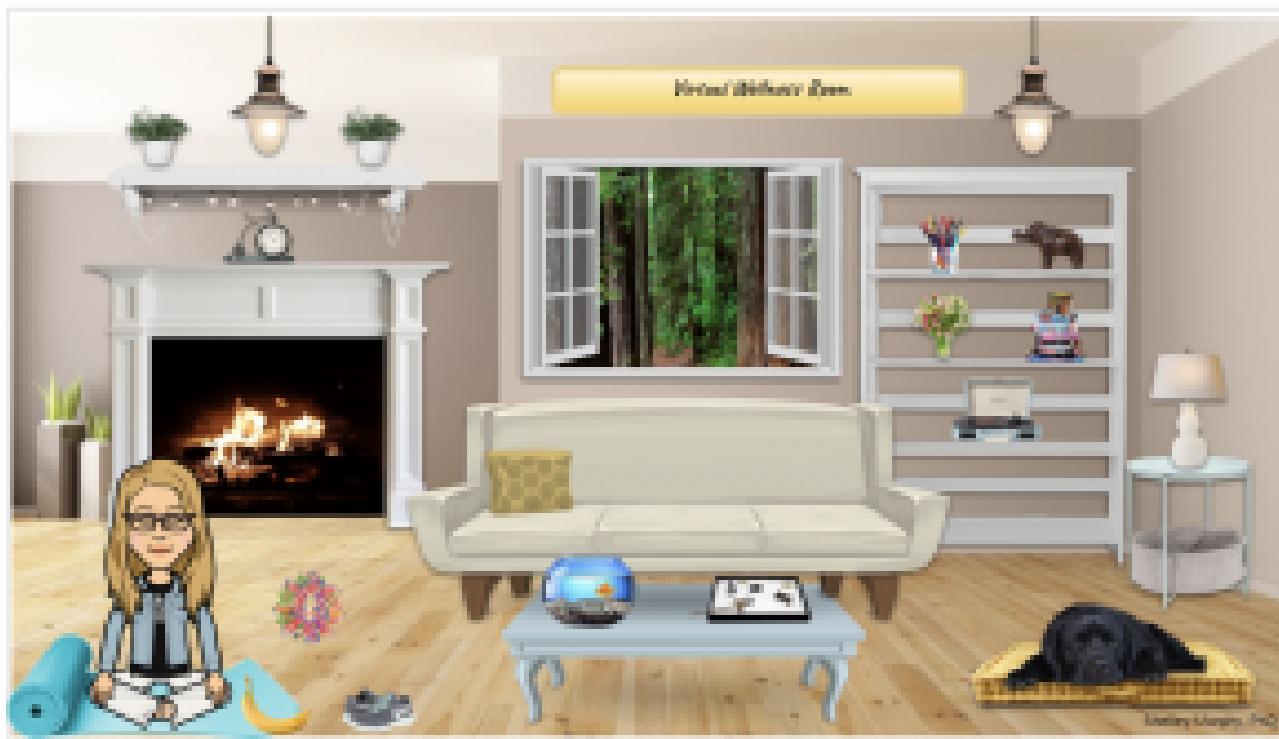


Image 4: Screen Capture of a Virtual Wellness Room

Reflecting Back on the Scenario

As we will recall from our opening scenario, Kelly was interested in learning how to cultivate an online learning environment that could support her students' mental health and wellness needs and be conducive to care, connection, meaningful dialogue and learning. Kelly was also interested in attending to her own well-being needs. Here are a few essential ideas that Kelly considered and implemented:

- As a start, Kelly began to focus on her own well-being. She learned that the most powerful strategy in her classroom is her commitment to her personal well-being practice. She recognized that her capacity to support her students' well-being is limited by her own. Once she committed to focusing on her own well-being, there started to be a palpable ripple effect in the classroom. Additionally, by intentionally committing to her own well-being, she began to build the tools and skills necessary to better manage the inevitable stressors in her work life and beyond.
- Kelly surveyed her students at the beginning of her course and throughout to gauge their strengths as

well as their academic and well-being experiences and needs (i.e., through surveys, polls, regular temperature checks and check-ins, etc.). This approach helped to co-create a culture of care and responsiveness.

- Kelly became familiar with resources offered through her university’s mental health services and became familiar with recognizing markers of distress in her students.
- Kelly committed to inviting students into brief calming practices and movement breaks at the start and/or middle of each class as a way to center a pedagogy of care, more holistic ways of knowing, and well-being.
- Kelly increased the number of opportunities for students to engage in dyad, triad, and small group discussions.
- Kelly co-constructed well-being support in the online classroom environment by enacting strategies that were responsive to her students’ interests, strengths, backgrounds, prior experiences, and needs.

By promoting and protecting our own well-being and by cultivating an online learning environment that honours and develops student wellbeing, we offer the conditions necessary to build a culture of care, to invite meaningful discussion, and support resilience and thriving in our classrooms and beyond. As bell hooks [sic] (1994) wrote, “To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin” (hooks [sic], 1994).

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CHAPTER 4: AUTHENTIC ASSESSMENT IN ONLINE LEARNING

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Setting the Context

As a former Ontario teacher and principal, I began working at a large Ontario university after receiving my PhD in 2012. During my 25 years in Ontario schools, I spearheaded and supported many successful school improvement plans, and one idea was foundational in all my work: *Assessment practices that were transparent to students inspired promising instruction and meaningful learning*. I quickly remembered that, in the university world, assessment *of learning* (or evaluation/grading) was the main means of assessing students, often through major papers, assignments, or exams. Bringing my own experiences with assessment to university teaching, I integrated ongoing feedback into my assessment practices, making success criteria clear and providing opportunities for students to co-construct assessment criteria and use peer and instructor feedback to improve their own learning. I also used my students' classroom discussions and work samples to guide my instruction, to the extent that a 12-week, 36-hour course allowed.

In March 2020, when our courses moved fully online due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I was suddenly presented with the challenge of using synchronous and asynchronous environments simultaneously in my courses but had no prior experience with online teaching. Yes, I had used a learning management system to post assignments, PowerPoint slides and articles, but that was the extent of my expertise with using technology in my teaching. At first, I spent most of my time just trying to figure out how to run my classes on Zoom; however, I soon joined a community of instructors and, together, we learned how to modify our typical in-person learning practices to support intentional online discussion, teaching, and learning. As 2020 turned to 2021, we moved into other supportive technologies such as pre-recording and editing lectures, using apps like Google Jamboard, Google Slides with add-ons and investigated various ways to understand, promote, and assess online discussions. The obvious challenge of meaningful and authentic assessment that supported

learning became my own focus for improvement. Obviously, not everything I tried worked, but what follows is what I learned and some of the applications that worked!

Scenario

BSD is a university instructor with more than 10 years of experience. When she began teaching courses online in March 2020, she made many assessment errors, including trying to grade asynchronous discussion threads without clear success criteria or judging participation by counting the number of times a student posted a response or spoke in the whole-group Zoom meeting. She realized she was assigning marks and judging her students through general impressions and attendance. Her students began asking, “What counts for this part of the mark?” or “What if I’m not comfortable speaking in a whole group on Zoom?” BSD’s goal was to focus on authentic assessment, to create opportunities for her students to use the “skills, knowledge, values and attitudes they have learned in the performance context of the intended discipline” (Conrad & Openo, 2018, p. 5; Goff et al., 2015, p. 13). She put a lot of effort into avoiding the common pitfalls of assessment and evaluation she had already experienced while teaching university courses (e.g., too much marking/grading, unclear expectations that were difficult to explain to students, lack of opportunities for learners to act on feedback, discussions and lectures that were disconnected from the learning objective). This new online learning environment gave her the chance to implement many ways to engage with authentic assessment using *online discussion* that she would strive to implement in a way that would neither privilege nor exclude any of her post-secondary learners.

Through an examination of some of the tools used in BSD’s 36-hour online course, this chapter will seek to support university educators to challenge conventional assessment processes and leverage the online environment to create authentic assessment and learning opportunities for post-secondary students, without having to “mark” every task to make it relevant or meaningful for learning.

Learning Outcomes

- To consider the various types of assessment (assessment *for*, *as*, and *of* learning) that can be used for online discussion in synchronous or asynchronous learning environments.
- To share a variety of practical, authentic approaches to assessment through examples of online discussion and interactions.
- To challenge current conceptions of participation, engagement, and professionalism in assessing learning online.

Key Terms: asynchronous, synchronous, assessment as/of/for learning, apps, learning management system

Understanding Online Assessment

Guiding Principles for Assessment

It is imperative that we consider the fundamental principles and research that guide assessment and evaluation. Assessment must be viewed through an intersectional lens in order that we may assess students while considering the impact of their backgrounds and experiences on learning.

To ensure that assessment, evaluation, and reporting are *valid and reliable*, *instructors must consider practices that are:*

- Fair, transparent, and equitable for all students; *assessment must be implemented with a consideration of your own underlying beliefs/biases about the nature of assessment, tools for assessment, and “acceptable” standards* (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017).
- Supportive of all students, including those with special education needs, those who are learning the language of instruction (English or French), students who are gender diverse, Black, people of colour, and/or Indigenous peoples.
- Carefully planned to relate to learning goals and, as much as possible, to the interests, learning styles and preferences, needs, identities, and experiences of all students.
- Communicated clearly to students at the beginning of the course and at other appropriate points throughout the course (creating redundancies that support learning).
- Ongoing, varied in nature, and administered over a period of time to provide multiple opportunities for students to demonstrate the full range of their learning (Government of Ontario, 2020-21).

Promising Assessment Practices

As you assess in the post-secondary environment, it is imperative that some promising assessment practices be included in online teaching, even though it might create the necessity for additional instructor organization at different times (e.g., not all the “marking” is at the end of a learning cycle). Promising assessment practices include:

- Providing ongoing descriptive feedback that is clear, specific, meaningful, and timely *to support improved*

learning and achievement.

- Supporting students to develop these self-assessment skills to enable them to assess their own learning, set specific goals, and plan next steps for their learning.
- Providing multiple means of participation and engagement in learning, considering your own underlying beliefs about the nature of participation and what factors inform your beliefs.



An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:

<https://ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub/designingforonlinediscussion/?p=34#h5p-13>

Three Types of Assessment: Assessment *for* Learning (guiding instruction), Assessment *as* Learning (student-involved assessment), and Assessment *of* Learning (grading)

In Ontario schools and across post-secondary institutions, assessment is no longer understood simply as grading. Instead, it is the process of gathering information that accurately reflects an individual's learning (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 28).

There are *three types of assessment* that support learning, whether in online or in-person environments:

Assessment for learning “is the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go, and how best to get there” (Assessment Reform Group, 2002, p. 2).

Some tools used for “assessment for learning” that are related to online discussion include:

- Descriptive feedback on assignments provided by peers and/or the instructor *prior to submission for grading*, which can be shared in a synchronous or asynchronous online discussion.
- Tickets in the door/out the door (i.e., mini reflections at the beginning or end of the lecture) based on


text read/viewed or lecture given, which could be shared in an online discussion format.

- Small/large discussion groups (e.g., breakout groups) to support application of skills and knowledge learned through reading/viewing and applied to authentic situations relevant to the discipline.

Assessment as learning “focuses on the explicit fostering of students’ capacity over time to be their own best assessors” (Western and Northern Canadian Protocol for Collaboration in Education, 2006, p. 42). Information gathered is used by students to monitor their own progress towards a learning goal, make adjustments, reflect on their learning, and then set their own goals for new learning.

Some tools for “assessment as learning” that are related to online discussion include:

- Access to clear learning goals and success criteria/rubrics for a particular learning goal/objective/assignment, which can be discussed and clarified in online discussion with peers or the instructor.

Date	Topic	Class/Assignment Requirements
<p>Class #1 September 22 Attendance due</p> <p>All assignments links need to be completed by Sunday September 29th 11:59 pm.</p>	<p>WELCOME!</p> <p>Focus: Introduction to the course, situating yourself as an educator in this program/this community, the Ontario Curriculum</p> <p>Overall Guiding Questions: What learning and/or experiences do we bring to the program/course? In what ways do we identify and sharing ourselves? Who and how do we bring socio-political issues forward in our work? What does this course entail? Introduction to Course and Course Outline / Assignments and Syllabus</p> <p>A goal for next week!</p> 	<p>Reading: Miller and Rose, Visible Learning and the Science of How We Learn (Chapter 4: Your Personality and Teacher)</p> <p>and</p> <p>Writing: Ted Talk, How We Think from Building Critical Connections for Equity</p> <p>This reading and writing will be used for a part of an experiential activity for our first class. Please review the reading/reading before class!</p> <p>Access to Course Outline/Assignment Paper(s)</p>

Here is an example of a course outline that supports assessment as learning. The focus of learning and the learning goals (or guiding questions) for learning are already included in the course outline, and will be repeated during instruction. When discussions are posted or created, the students have a clear context for those online discussions.

Image 1: Course outline that supports assessment learning

- Students’ written reflections on their own learning and progress towards goals (e.g., responding to prompts such as, “What would you stop, start, continue?” “What did you learn?” “How do you know?” “How will this new learning impact your understanding of real-world problems?”).

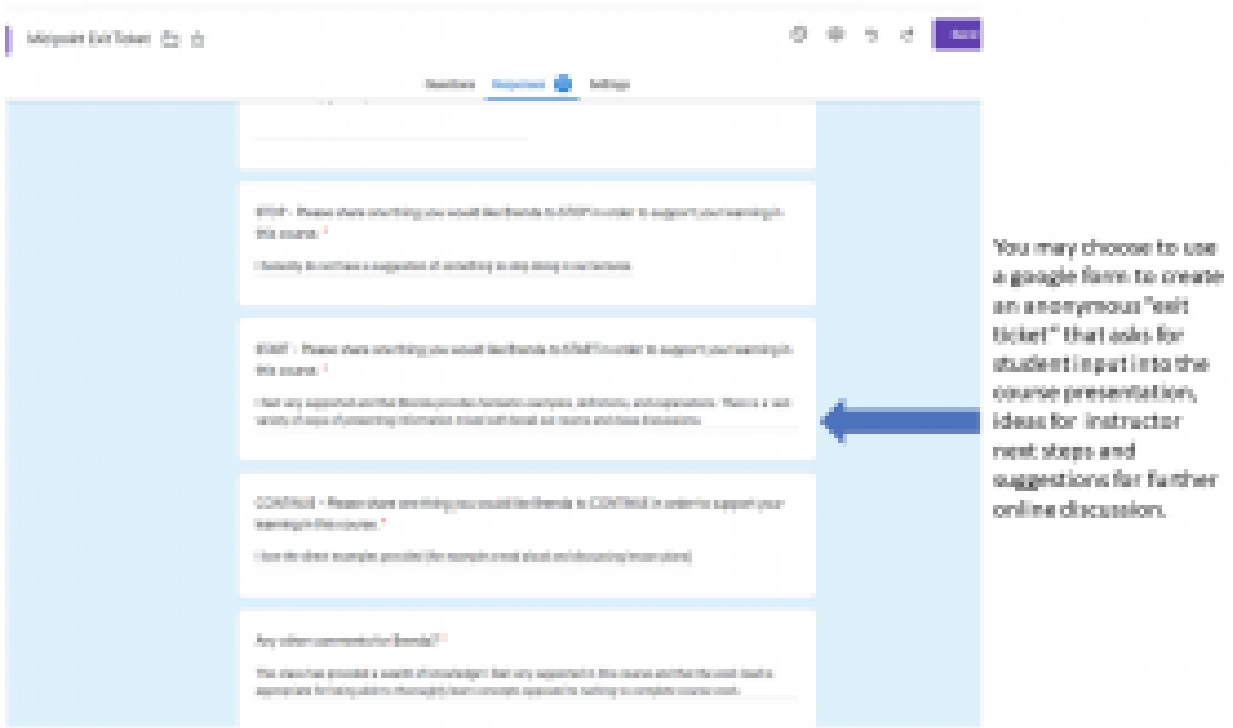


Image 2: Example of a Google Form

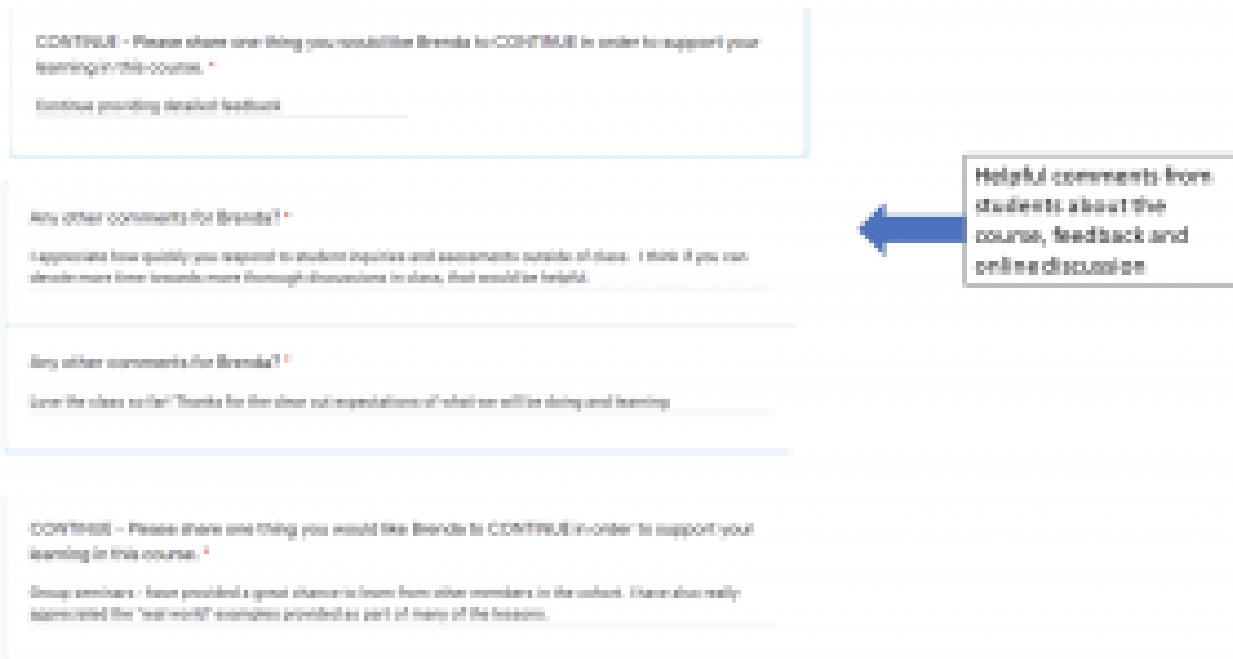


Image 3: Samples of course feedback from students

Assessment of learning “is the assessment that results in grades which are intended to reflect how well a student has learned. It often contributes to pivotal decisions that will affect students’ futures. It is used to summarize learning at a given point in time, and make judgments about the quality of student learning, based on established criteria, to assign a value to represent that quality” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 31).

Some tools for “assessment of learning” that are related to online discussion include:

- Tests/exams that can include time for collaborative discussion of questions in synchronous or asynchronous discussion groups.
- Graphic representations of learning (e.g., mind maps, simulated environments, slide shows, audio or video files), which can be shared/discussed and given feedback before final submission.
- Short, written reflections that focus on application of ideas worth small portions of an overall grade and that include feedback to support future reflections.
- Students discussing and co-constructing/sharing criteria to guide grading.



An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:

<https://ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub/designingforonlinediscussion/?p=34#h5p-14>

Authentic Assessment Practices that Promote Online Discussion

Although university educators may default to grading essays and tests or conceptualizing participation in a particular way that privileges or excludes certain learners, assessment can be made more authentic by using one or more *assessment for/as learning* practices. Instructors can provide explicit and varied criteria for engagement

in their instructional practices. Discussion and feedback along the way can support students to move forward and complete a graded assignment more meaningfully.

Authentic assessment through discussion for learning can occur in both/either synchronous or asynchronous online environments.

We can place students into small group breakout rooms (synchronous) or into pre-created small groups (asynchronous) with a particular discussion question or prompt. If this is done synchronously, assign a reporter who will share specific highlights of the discussion back with the whole group.

We can provide interactive documents or formats for students to “discuss, comment, or add ideas” when discussing information. We can choose any of the following tools: a Google Jamboard (Image 4), a folder in a learning management system (Image 5), a Padlet (Image 6), or a Google Doc (Image 7) to accomplish this task. When we use these tools, we will have a permanent record of discussion to support our planning and instruction.

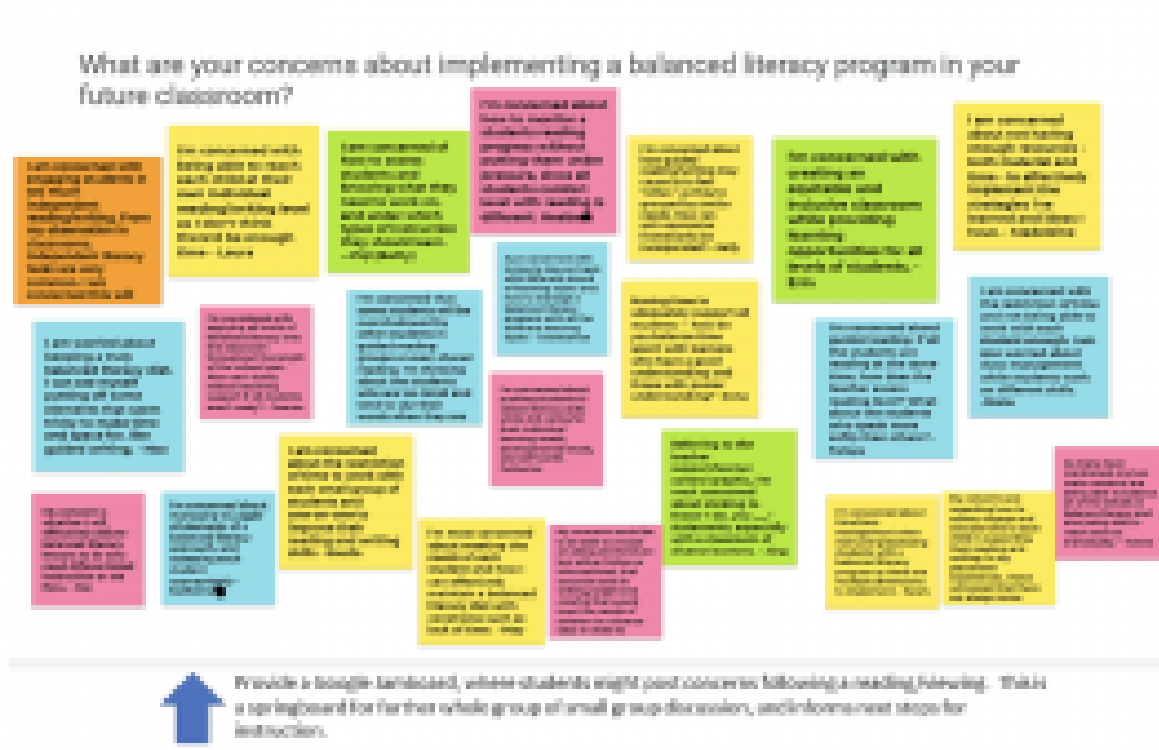


Image 4: Sample of a Google Jamboard.
 (See <https://jamboard.google.com/> where you can create your own Jamboard)

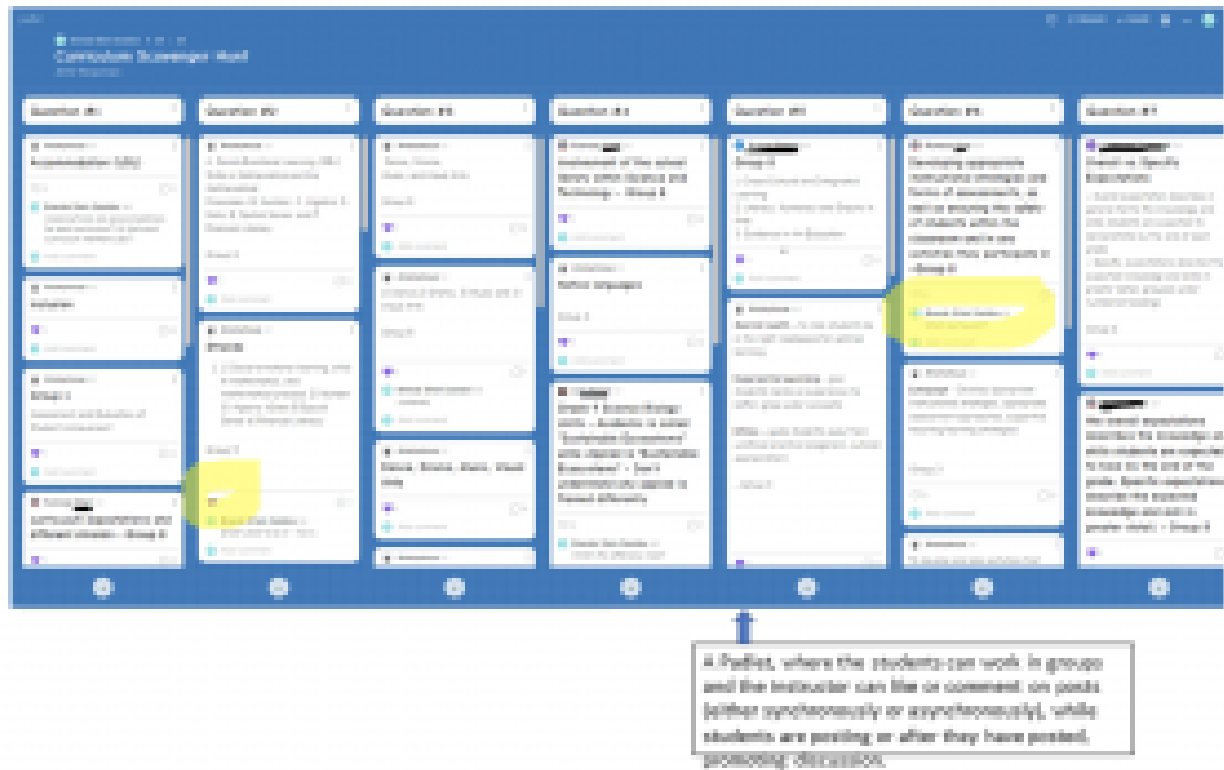


Image 5: A sample Padlet.

(See <https://www.padlet.com> where you can create your own Padlet.)

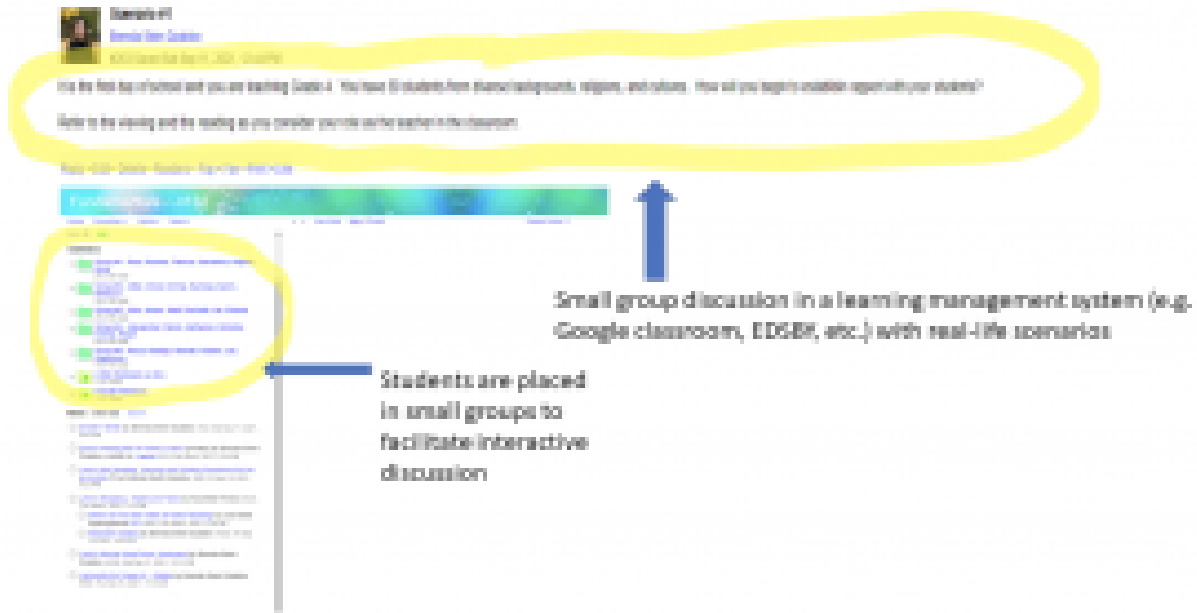


Image 6: A sample folder in a learning management system.

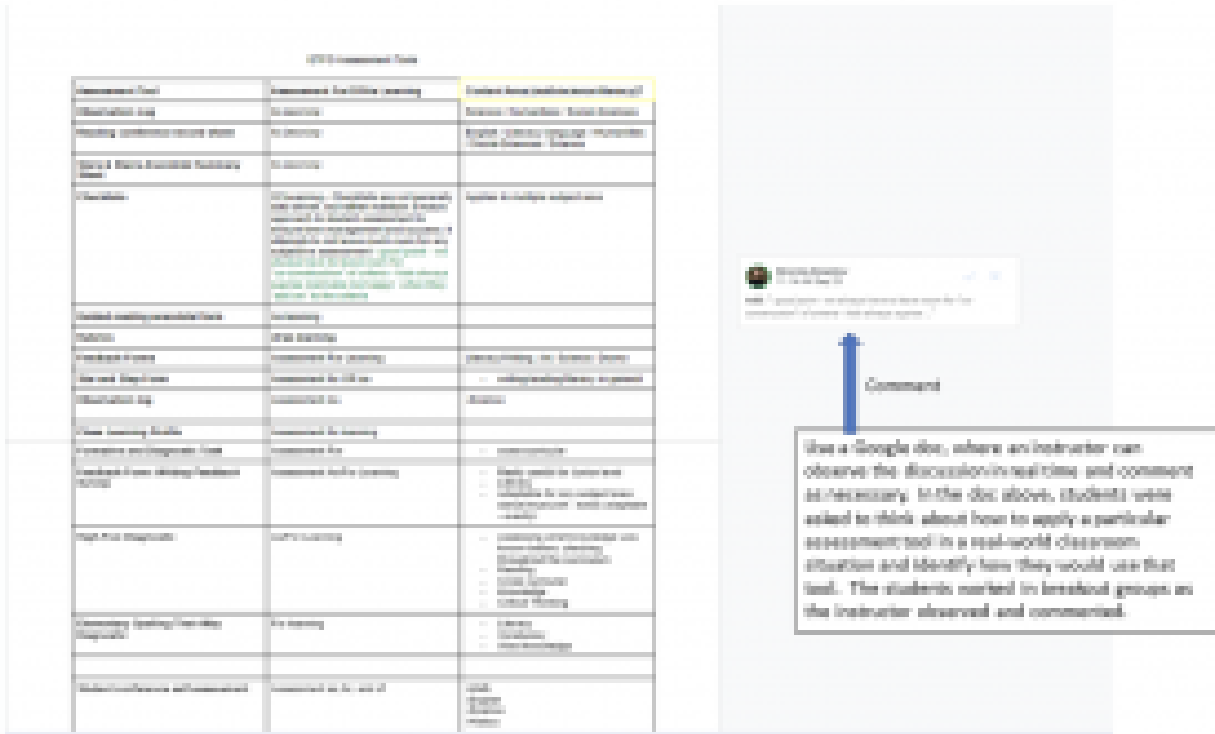


Image 7: A sample Google Doc.
 (See <https://docs.google.com/document> where you can create your own document)



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There are many ways for our students to participate actively in the assessment process. One way is to ensure that the criteria for assessment are clear (see Image 8). We can be open to adding/clarifying criteria if students make a reasonable case to consider.

Quality of Responses (Peds or full-text notes):

Responses make links back to ideas from the readings, draw connections to experiences from practice and/or share additional direct information you are bringing to the discussion (e.g., connections to reading you're doing in other courses, pulling ideas together from experience and research to contribute a new idea or identify central questions/issues)

Responses/products are connected to the prompt/discussion but do not summarize the reading

Responses/products are more than just unsupported states of personal opinions

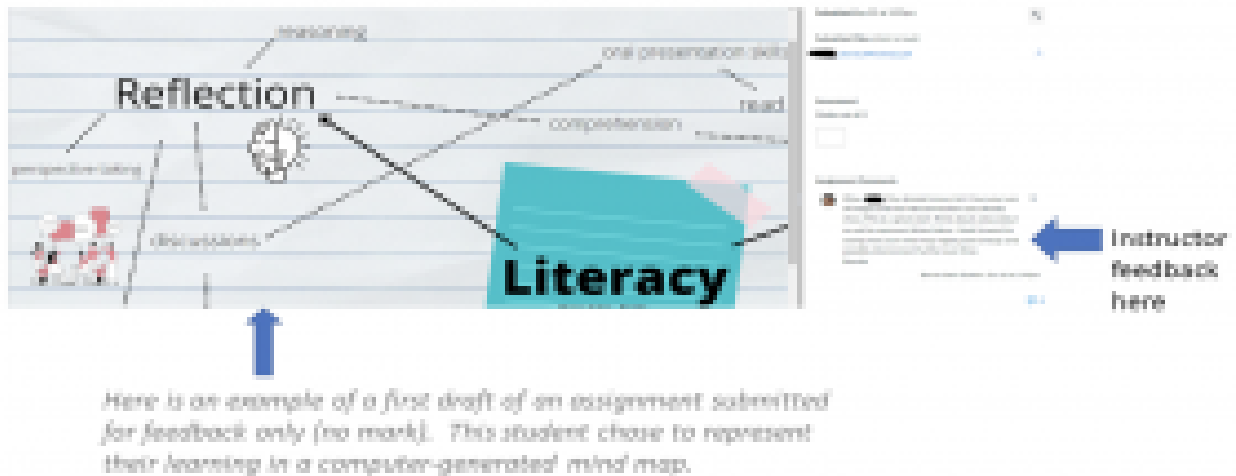
Response notes add to the breadth of the discussion with thought-provoking questions or new information

↑

- Provide clear criteria for successful learning (and grading); share the criteria often, and invite TCs to contribute ideas to these criteria

Image 8: Sample of criteria for successful learning

In order to make assessments available to a wide range of learners, we can lean away from always expecting/privileging one type of submission (e.g., usually written). We can give students the opportunity to share their thinking in multiple ways (e.g., point form, audio or video submissions, graphic submissions). See Images 9 and 10 below.



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Here is an example of a first draft of an assignment submitted for feedback only (no mark). This student chose to represent their learning in a computer-generated mind map.

Image 9: Sample of an assignment submitted in a graphic format

What do you think/learn about the book after a course/reading/viewing?

- based on my experience, read about... (mention a line from the book) for a brief on... (define a term)
 - 1) explain what the topic is... (state the main idea)
 - 2) how it relates to... (connect to other concepts)
- based on... (mention a line from the book) for the... (state the main idea)

What do you have a few... (describe a change?)

- that... (state a general observation about the book)
- specific... (mention a specific example)
- for example, I... (provide a detailed example)
- the... (state a general observation)
- the... (state a general observation)

Here is an example of a submission in response to instructor prompts that is a reflection on a reading/viewing. Students can choose to submit their thinking in non-standard ways (e.g., point form), as long as they respond to the prompts. Students receive feedback (that inform future work) and a mark on these short submissions.




Image 10: Submission of an assignment in a non-standard way

Make sure to provide supports for students who might require them (e.g., live transcripts, closed captions, notes, slides) in order to improve access to discussion and learning, and make assessment more authentic.

Give choice and feedback along the way, even when grading, to support students to assess their own learning and plan/share their own next steps.

Grading Participation, Engagement, and Professionalism in Online Discussions



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online here:

<https://ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub/designingforonlinediscussion/?p=34#h5p-16>

Engagement and professionalism, or participation, are challenging areas to assess or evaluate fairly. Some instructors use:

- Attendance lists.
- Number of times a student speaks in a whole group discussion.
- Number of times a student posts in an online, threaded discussion.
- Quality of posts and add-on notes in online, threaded discussion.
- Whether a student leaves their camera on or off during discussion (e.g., large or small group).

If you choose to use any of the above criteria for assessing professionalism, remember:

- Be proactive and prepared to share your rationale for students' grades.
- Consider ways your understanding of professionalism may exclude some students (e.g., whole-group participation).
- Think about which students might be privileged or excluded by how you conceptualize participation in the online environment.
- A participation mark might benefit those learners who are more ready to get online and post their first thoughts, while disadvantaging folks who prefer to take the time to reflect more deeply before sharing their ideas (Openo, p. 165).
- Students must be aware of the criteria for success; once you have decided on the success criteria, ask the students what other criteria they believe would be important for their professionalism/engagement grade (see Image 11 for an example).

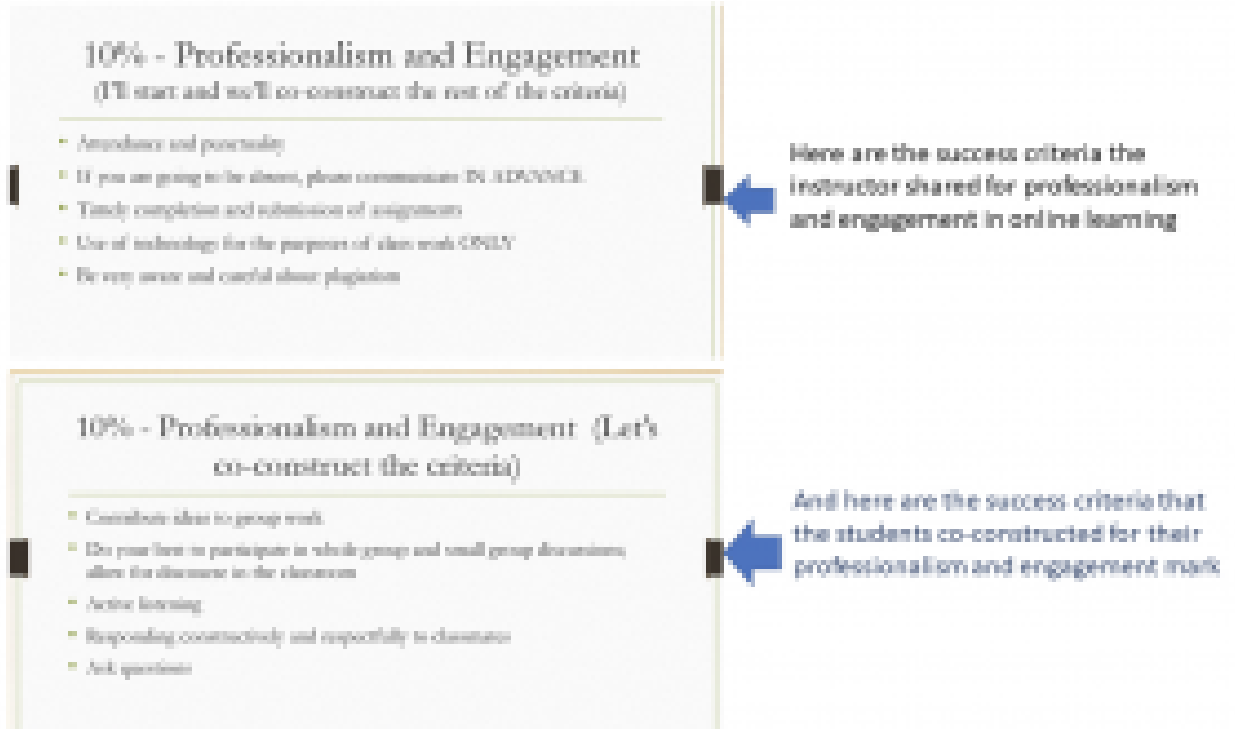


Image 11: Sharing success criteria



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- Equity issues will impact some students more than others (e.g., poor Wi-Fi, people in the background, discomfort with sharing in a whole group, discomfort with writing in a chat based on writing skills).
- Students can be very engaged in learning, but not comfortable participating orally; provide choice and communicate the right to pass.
- When asking students to engage in discussion, we can repost success criteria to create redundancies and provide support.
- We can provide exemplars (samples or models for expected responses), but allow for choice of format.

- We can read the notes/discussion created by our students, to give some specific and some general feedback along the way. As students respond to comments/questions from us and others, you can use these as examples of their thinking, participation, and engagement.
- We can give students opportunities to comment on another student's questions/responses with constructive ideas that are informed by their own experiences and/or learning in our courses.



Image 12: One way to spark creative interest

- We can support online discussion by sharing links between students' ideas in various discussion groups (either synchronously or asynchronously).
- We can allow students to participate anonymously at times; at other times, we can have students include their names, so we can use the information as assessment for learning.
- We can allow students to have input into assessing their own participation, based on the criteria set at the beginning of the course (Conrad & Openo, 2018, p. 165).

Reflecting Back on the Scenario

Online discussions and assessments have changed significantly in BSD's courses. She can use a variety of online tools to track and engage with online discussions. She organizes small groups, sometimes randomly and sometimes based on the assessment information she has gathered. Students are given the opportunity to submit assignments for descriptive feedback, from peers and from herself. As she gives feedback on discussions and assignments, she uses many redundancies, repeating information in various places (reposting learning goals and success criteria, assignment expectations). She uses authentic scenarios from both students' lives and her own experiences to create opportunities for students to apply new learning to authentic situations. She still finds herself doing a lot of reading and commenting during her students' discussions, as well as marking their final products, which are submitted based on choice of format. For BSD, assessment of learning is much clearer and much more aligned with goals for the course. Clearly, the opportunities to discuss and act on feedback makes a difference for her students' online learning.

Finally, here is an interaction that sums up assessment that guides instruction and supports students' own next steps towards learning (follow Images 13 to 16). Take a small step, try one idea, and challenge conventional assessment processes in the online environment to create authentic assessment and learning opportunities for your own post-secondary students.

Students were given a reflection assignment to complete asynchronously for each reading/viewing prior to the class for that content area. They must complete four out of five over the time in the course. First, students are given prompts for the assignment.

Seminar #1 Response - Seminar Participants only Published 7, 100

Seminar participants will submit a 1-page response due on Monday 10/18 responding to the following prompts:

- What did you know/think about this topic prior to the seminar reading/reading?
- What did you learn or how did it change your thinking?
- How will the information from this reading/reading inform your future teaching?

Your response should NOT be a summary of the reading. In your response, show evidence of thoughtful reflection on ideas/theories within the reading (e.g., highlighted meaningful ideas, included specific examples connected to the reading, related to prior experience/understanding, connected to future work in teaching).

↑

This response is submitted prior to participating in a small group, student-facilitated seminar. The assignment expectations are repeated for every seminar.

Image 13: Prompts for the assignment

Examples for one-page response
 Example One Student
 10/18/2020 10:14 AM

Here are the example responses from previous students who have given me permission to share these examples. Some have different prompts than what are being used now, but it still gives you an idea. Please make sure to include [this](#) in line of comment I provide directly to the reading/reading.

- Example 1 (with different prompts)
- Example 2 (with different prompts)
- Example 3 (with different prompts)
- Example 4 (with different prompts)
- Example 5 (with different prompts)


←

Examples are also provided for this assignment. Students can respond in a variety of formats.

Image 14: Exemplars of one-page responses

The student submitted their first response and received a mark as well as actionable feedback.

Assignment Comments

 A good first response! In future, try to make the clear theory-practice link in the final part. What, specifically might you do, based on your new learning?
Brenda Stein Dardov, Oct 4 at 7:52pm

The instructor's feedback for this student's first submission, which received a mark of 4/5.



 Thank you, Brenda. I will take note of that.
Fatima Sally, Oct 4 at 8:45pm

Image 15: Example of a student's first feedback response

The student's next response was excellent, and addressed issues shared in the feedback.

Assessment
Grade out of 5

5

Assignment Comments

 Hi Brenda,
I have attached my Seminar Response 2. I have taken into account feedback from the previous assignment. I hope it is alright. Thank you.
[Redacted] Oct 6 at 10:13pm

 An outstanding response. Thanks for acting on the feedback [Redacted] :-)
Brenda Stein Douklev, Oct 14 at 9:09am

 :) Thank you, Brenda. Appreciate the guidance.



The same student's next response – graded as 5/5 and improved based on feedback.

Image 16: Example of student's second feedback response

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5.

CHAPTER 5: SUPPORTING MULTILINGUAL STUDENTS IN ONLINE DISCUSSIONS

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Setting the Context

This chapter merges two of my areas of interests and expertise: supporting multilingual learners and teaching online. These two areas are of a great important for me, both professionally and on a personal level. It builds on my journey as a multilingual learner who continues to work with multilingual students in different settings. My personal journey has guided my research and teaching practice toward supporting multilingual learners and students from immigrant and refugee background. Integrating technology and teaching online has been another an area of interest in both teaching and research. However, the shift to online learning after the COVID 19 Pandemic has increased the need to look deeper at issues related to online teaching and online discussions. Since the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020, I have worked with different instructors to help them transition to online teaching. I was also part of a Professional Learning Network (PLN) which included different instructors from the University of Toronto. This chapter was born as a result of discussions and collaboration that took place in this PLN to identify promising practices in the areas of online teaching and learning. Furthermore, many of the case studies, examples, and suggestions included in this chapter are based on actual conversations that I have had with students and mentees. Their input, struggles and success stories motivated me to write about this to help online instructors accommodate the needs of multilingual learners. In short, the chapter presents some of the challenges that face multilingual students in online discussions and offers some promising tips to help instructors design meaningful online discussion that accommodates the needs and interests of multilingual learners.

Scenario

Ms. Bright teaches at the Master of Teaching program. In her class, Sara is usually quiet, rarely participates

in synchronous class discussion, and participates minimally in online forums. Ms. Bright was marking Assignment 1 when she came across Sara's assignment. To her surprise, Sara's assignment was of an excellent quality. Her ideas were well developed, and her assignment was a great joy to mark. While Ms. Bright was very delighted to read Sara's work, she wondered why Sara was not participating in online discussions. Her paper was of an excellent quality and illustrated Sara's interest in the course.

After returning the assignments, Ms. Bright left a note for Sara to see her after their next class. She wanted to know why Sara was not participating, even though she seems to have a deep understanding of the course's content. When meeting, Sara explained that as a language learner, she hesitates to talk during synchronous discussion, as it takes time for her to formulate her ideas in English. Additionally, she is always worried about how her classmates will judge her entries on discussion forums, so she keeps them as brief as possible.

The conversation left Ms. Bright in wonder. She had wrongfully thought that Sara was not interested in the course. However, she was starting to think that she should be doing something to support Sara's participation in discussions, but what is it that she needs to do?

Learning Outcomes

- Develop an understanding of the unique needs of multilingual students.
- Explore a range of promising practices to accommodate the needs of multilingual learners in the synchronous and asynchronous classes.
- Strategies to support online discussion in the synchronous and asynchronous classes.

Key Terms: multilingual students, language learners, promising practices, online discussion, synchronous learning, asynchronous learning, translanguaging pedagogy

Introduction

The number of multilingual students in higher education in many countries has increased. This increase is due to technological developments, globalization, and the increasing number of immigrants and refugees in many societies (Guo-Brennan, 2020). Furthermore, the move to remote learning as a response to the COVID-19 global pandemic has forced many educational institutions to shift to online delivery models (Ferdig et al., 2020) and, as such, many instructors are now considering how online discussion tools can support learning. This increasing move to online education, coupled with the increasing number of multilingual students, warrants an examination of online discussions, both asynchronous and synchronous, and its implications for multilingual students.

Multilingual learners often come with unique strengths and needs. Being able to offer appropriate accommodations by taking the needs of multilingual students into consideration when it comes to online teaching (and online discussion in particular) can allow these students to share their rich experiences, and provide unique perspectives and insights that benefit all students.

Online discussion can take different forms. Many courses include online discussion components to support deep learning. Modalities of online discussion can differ and include writing in forums, threaded discussions, posting in platforms such as Google Jamboard, Padlet, Mentimeter, and video-based discussion including live synchronous discussions. Multilingual learners can face additional challenges when it comes to online discussions, which include receptive and expressive challenges, as well as cultural differences.



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Challenges Facing Multilingual Students in Online Discussion

Multilingual learners often do double the work when it comes to formulating and discussing ideas. First, they need to understand the language and make sure they are familiar with the content terminology in English. Next, they need to be able to communicate their ideas in the target language. Many learners have clear ideas and rich thoughts but require time to translate their ideas into English. This procedure requires processing time as students attempt to formulate ideas and discuss them in person. In synchronous online discussions, instructors may not pick up on some social cues that are often easier to detect in face-to-face classrooms. Hence, it can be difficult to notice some students who may need more time while trying to formulate their thoughts.

Participating in text-based online discussion also requires a unique set of skills and may pose some challenges initially, as multilingual learners establish how to interact with their peers virtually. An example of these challenges includes developing cultural understanding about the etiquettes of online discussion. Zengilowski and Schallert (2020) mention how most students, in the last three decades, have encountered some form of online interaction through online tools and have had the experience of posting reflections and answering questions related to an assigned reading before class. While this experience holds true for students in countries

such as the United States and Canada, it is not as accurate for multilingual learners. Many multilingual learners may have attended schooling or post-secondary education internationally in systems where access to the Internet, and sometimes electricity, is limited. As a result, these students may not have had the same educational experience of engaging in academic discussions through online platforms. Moreover, international multilingual students may not be familiar with writing that focuses on expressive personal reflection (Kiernan, 2018). As a result, the style and genre of writing that is often required in online discussions and text-based discussions may be new to many multilingual learners. The innovative nature of this experience is particularly true for students who come from disciplines such as science and engineering, where procedural writing and informational texts are used more heavily than personal narratives.

In summary, multilingual learners often face additional challenges when it comes to online discussion. These challenges include the need to have time to understand and communicate ideas in English, as well as the need to learn the type of writing required for personal reflection and shorter, text-based discussions.



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So, What Can Instructors Do to Support Multilingual Learners in Online Discussions?

Getting to Know Students

The first step is to learn about students, their strengths, and their needs. This step can be done in different ways, including a *getting to know students* pre-class survey (see Appendix A), where students can talk about different accommodations that have worked for them in the past. For example, instructors can add simple questions – such as, How can I help accommodate your needs? or How do you learn best? – and offer more specific questions about students’ prior experiences with online learning, online posts, and threaded discussions. Other instructors may want to set up a phone call or online conference to talk to the students, get to know them personally, and understand their needs. Surveys makes it easier to keep data and refer to

it throughout the course, while conferencing with students allows instructors to establish a connection with students at a personal level and give them insights about students' backgrounds, and so on.

Modelling

Modelling is important in online discussion and can benefit all learners, especially multilingual learners. For example, in one class a professor asked students to pick a quote and write a response to the quote in an online discussion forum. This was one student's first year in a graduate education program. Since the student, while bright, had never been asked to pick a quote before, they struggled to figure out what a "quote" meant. The student thought that a quote was something that was outstanding or was a famous saying by a famous person. They did not realize that a quote could be any excerpt from the text that they could choose to comment on. The student sought help with the assignment and was relieved to figure out that discussing a quote basically meant choosing *something* from the reading that caught their attention and then discussing it.

A task that felt overwhelming for a multilingual learner suddenly became easier to comprehend after viewing an example. The struggle and the challenge that the student faced in this basic online activity could have been avoided if the instructor had modelled how to pick a quote or took the time to share some examples of quotes from a course reading. In short, modelling expectations in online discussions and providing examples of discussion posts can help multilingual students learn how to interact better in text-based discussions.

Centering Language and Culture

When teaching a class, especially one with multilingual learners, it is good to acknowledge the experiences that students bring to the class. Instructors are encouraged to focus on the richness of experiences that multilingual learners bring to classes rather than on skills that they still need to learn. This process could be done by allowing students to explore and discuss questions related to their multilingual and cultural experiences, and to allow students to make cultural and linguistic connections. Instructors offering online discussions can also consider discussion topics that centre and explore students' linguistic and cultural identities, and allow them to explore their unique experiences.

Translation Narratives

Considering that the experiences of multilingual learners may vary, many learners may be trained to write formally but may lack the knowledge and practice of reflective writing. To help students transition into new educational environments and adjust to new writing tasks, Kiernan (2018) proposes engaging students in "translation narrative." Translation narrative can be done as an assignment that includes three parts: "a group translation, translation reflection, and the translation narrative" (p. 98). Inspired by this example, instructors

can design an activity or online discussion prompt to encourage cross-cultural understanding and help learners share their expertise in their field. For example, an instructor may ask students to find a quotation from a text in a language they understand, translate it, and share insights in discussion. Students who only speak English may choose a piece written in a highly academic language and try to simplify the text to explain it to their colleagues.

These activities can engage learners and allow them to build on their linguistic resources and make connections between learning in English and their native language(s). Furthermore, these activities allow students to benefit from a translanguaging pedagogy (García, 2009; García & Leiva, 2014), an approach that allows students to utilize the richness of their linguistic repertoire as they learn new concepts and make sense of ideas in a new language. Translanguaging allows multilingual students to use their different linguistic resources to learn both language and content (Baker, 2006; Mazak, 2018). It is a pedagogical approach that considers students multilingual and multicultural identities (Mazak, 2018), and serves to enhance learning by helping students utilize many linguistic resources to help them communicate. A translation narrative is one example in which translanguaging is used where the input (i.e., reading) language is a familiar one, and the output (i.e., written) language is another one, such as English.

The following table (Table 1) includes examples of discussion prompts that can be used to help multilingual learners build on their cultural and linguistic resources, and to deepen students' understanding of different courses.

Table 1: Fields of study and examples of discussion prompts

Field	Examples of Discussion Prompts
Architecture	Look for text that discusses the fundamentals of architecture. Translate the text. Tell us about how this relates to our discussion of fundamentals in previous classes. The text can be from a source that is written in a different language. If English is the only language we speak, we may pick text on architecture from a different country.
Education	Look for online resources on parental engagement presented in different languages. Translate one of the texts. This could be a post in an online form, blog, or the like. Explain how parental engagement is explored from this perspective. How does this support our practice as educators?
Math	Find a concept in math and look for its meaning in different languages. What does the translation of this concept tell us about how this concept is perceived in different cultures?
Biology	Look for examples of biodiversity in one region of the world. Consider an international text discussing plants and animals that live in the region. Translate the text and tell us how biodiversity in that region compares to the prairies in Canada.
English	Find an excerpt of a poem in a different language. Translate it. Tell us about the feature of the poem, and its similarities and differences with the kinds of poems we explored in this unit.

Sentence Stems

In addition to encouraging students to utilize different languages to engage them in online discussion, offering templates or sentence stems (Rodriguez-Mojica & Briceno, 2018) can help start conversations. This approach helps multilingual learners who often require explicit language instruction to focus on questions and share their insights. The following are some examples of sentence stems that can be used for online discussion posts:

In this article, the author discusses the importance of _____.

While I agree that _____, I believe that _____.

This reminds me of _____.

I chose this quote because _____.

One thing that I learned from this chapter is that _____.

The authors provided important recommendations regarding _____.

I wonder whether _____.

I think _____ because _____.

Reading this article made me think about _____.

I noticed that _____.

MidPoint Check-Ins

Completing midpoint check-ins helps us to understand how students are doing, learn about their experiences, and how they can be supported. For example, conferring with students or using online forms (such as a midpoint check-in) can help students communicate their needs about their learning in the course in general and online discussion in particular (see Appendix B).



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Creating a Resource Folder to Support Multilingual

Learners

Consider adding a *resource folder* to the learning management system with tools and ideas to support multilingual learners. This folder could include some tips and tricks to help online discussion, such as suggested reading and writing strategies, translanguaging strategies, and technological tools to assist in skimming text and writing. It could also include additional resources that are offered by the institution to support multilingual learners' development, such as a writing centre or professional development sessions. The folder could also include tips on discussions, exemplars, and videos with captions. Students can also be invited to share resources that have helped them in the past to support each other.

Inviting Students to Share Resources

As instructors, we can leverage the resources in our classes and invite students to support each other. One way this can be done is through dedicating a thread in online discussion that relates to how students work best, and sharing tips and tricks. For example, early in the semester, instructors can ask students to share three helpful tips on how to participate in online discussions, resources that they have used at the institution, or helpful tools, websites, or blogs. Finally, a *Questions* thread or folder can be created where students can pose questions and seek answers from their peers.

Leveraging Multimedia Tools

Finally, students and instructors can use technological tools to support their understanding and communication. These tools can include translation software (e.g., Google Translate, DeepL Translate), closed captioning, or live transcription to offer real-time captions and translations, which helps students improve their understanding of discussions. Other tools like Mentimeter, Padlet, and Google Jamboard can also be used to engage learners in discussions by leveraging visuals to support learning. Sharing links to such tools and any prompts before classes and giving enough time for text-based discussions allows multilingual learners to process information, think, and communicate ideas in online discussions more effectively.

In short, there are many strategies that instructors can use to support multilingual learners. These strategies start by developing an understanding of multilingual learners and how they learn. They also include using pedagogical strategies and approaches that support multilingual learners, such as translanguaging. Next, instructors should seek many opportunities to hear students' voices, and learn about their experiences and what works best for them. This process can be done through getting to know students through surveys,

conferencing with students, and mid-course check-ins. It can also be integrated into discussion activities that utilize students' knowledge and encourage them to build on their cultural and linguistic strengths. An example of such activities includes translation narratives and encouraging students to share content-related text and ideas from different cultures and languages. Finally, technological tools and assistive technologies can help learners engage in discussion by helping them maximize their understanding, and providing enough time for them to engage in discussions.

Reflecting Back on the Scenario

If we were to revisit our case of Sara in the beginning and apply some of the learning that took place in this chapter, we could start by looking at the reasons why Sara excelled in class assignments but hesitated in discussions. Sara learned how to compose academic essays and write academically. She enjoys the subject matter and has an interest in the topic. However, Sara has not received enough practice on posts that include reflection and peer discussions. She worries about how her peers will judge her entries, especially as she thinks of herself as a language learner and worries about *native speakers' perceptions* of her work and intelligence. Moreover, Sara takes time to process new ideas in English, think about them, and formulate her thoughts to discuss them in English. To help Sara increase her participation in class, Ms. Bright can help Sara by implementing the following strategies:

- Giving Sara an opportunity to discuss interesting insights about her linguistic and cultural assets. This opportunity would allow Sara to increase her confidence and share rich aspects of her experiences with classmates. Sharing such insights will likely yield an increased appreciation and better understanding of her by her classmates. Sharing a quick “translation activity” as mentioned above or a template to help start reflection on past experiences will serve as a great starting point.
- Turning on live transcripts or captions during synchronous discussions will help Sara utilize both her listening and writing skills, which may improve her understanding of live discussions and the potential to participate in these discussions.
- Sharing course resources and prompts before class to give Sara time to review class work beforehand and prepare her points for class discussions. Also, pausing and offering some wait time after proposing a question during class.
- Providing a variety of opportunities for online discussions both oral and written, synchronous and asynchronous, and modelling how to answer questions and respond to peers. In this way, Sara can build on the examples provided to practice her discussion and reflection skills.
- Adding a *resource folder* to the learning management system with tools and ideas to support Sara and other multilingual learners in the class.

- Creating a discussion thread or prompt that encourages students to talk about how they learn best, and to share tips and tricks that have helped in the past. In this way, Sara can learn from others and may realize that she has more to offer than she had thought.

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6.

CHAPTER 6: NAVIGATING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS: STRATEGIES FOR EQUITABLE AND INCLUSIVE ENGAGEMENT

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Setting the Context

My first difficult conversation in higher education occurred in a sexual violence prevention seminar. I was a new facilitator, and wildly unprepared for the high degree of misinformation that would be brought into the space by new students during “Frosh Week.” I quickly learned that I needed to equip myself with tools for “calling students in” versus “calling students out” when dispelling myths about survivorship. I arrived to sexual violence prevention work as a survivor of on-campus violence. However, my relationship to this work has been the foundation for larger questions about equity, diversity, inclusivity, and Indigeneity in higher education.

With the shift to remote teaching and learning, I began having larger conversations about navigating difficult conversations in remote learning and teacher education. I have developed resources for the Faculty of Arts and Science at Queen’s University that engage the topic; I have facilitated workshops in the Faculty of Education (where I presently work and learn), and the Centre for Teaching and Learning; and I have been an invited lecturer to Dominican University of California, where I’ve engaged both in-service and pre-service educators in self-reflexive exercises to help evaluate when a conversation may be difficult on the basis of identity, relationships, and our social positions.

This chapter offers strategies and perspectives that have been effective in my own teaching and learning. Having said that, I share these approaches not as “best practices” or “promising practices,” but rather considerations that may be useful in helping us develop our own approaches to difficult conversations and our own ethics of care.

Scenario

Ezra is a new assistant professor at a small university's faculty of education in Ontario. Their semester is off to a busy start, as they are teaching three sections of a multi-term course, recently began supervising two new graduate students, and they serve as the faculties' equity, diversity, and inclusion coordinator at the associate dean's request. With a mounting workload and tight deadlines, Ezra is also worried about supporting meaningful learning in their remote classroom.

Ezra has just finished delivering a training module on universal design for learning (UDL) to their first section of second-year teacher candidates. They've made it a practice to spend 15 minutes reflecting on the course content, the students' interactions, challenges that emerged during class, and teaching wins (practices they will continue to use in future lessons). Ezra notes that monitoring the classroom chat on Zoom was a challenge; they also observe that some students appeared more confident in sharing opinions that they perhaps would not have expressed in face-to-face instruction. As they begin to revise their lesson plan for their next section of students, they receive an email from a student. The student explains that they felt uncomfortable in their breakout sessions because one of their peers continuously monopolized the group discussion. Further, the student expresses concern about the safety of breakout sessions, as the same peer student shared damaging stereotypes about individuals with intellectual disabilities. As they begin to draft their response to the peer student, they receive a second email – a similar concern, but this time a student has identified that someone has posted a harmful comment in an asynchronous discussion thread intended for students to engage in further discussions after class. Ezra realizes they are struggling to navigate difficult conversations in the remote classroom.

Learning Outcomes

- Explain what makes an interaction or conversation difficult.
- Identify some practices for establishing an equitable learning community.
- Evaluate our own teaching strategies to identify instructional mediums that foster inquiry-based learning and encourage critical thinking.
- Appraise our syllabi for potential difficult conversations and prepare a plan for addressing these topics effectively.

Key Terms: planned discussion, unplanned discussion, misinformation

Self-Talk

Prior to the start of my first semester of teaching, a mentor asked me a seemingly innocuous question: “Why you and not someone else?” Anticipating my desire to respond in the moment, they added, “Sit with this question as you design your syllabus. How will you support your students in a way that another candidate can’t?”

Apart from degree qualifications, I was a unique candidate because of a lengthy history of instructional support and—at the time—I held a contract with the university in which I was advising instructors in developing learning outcomes and materials for remote delivery. My mentor’s question tossed me into an existential crisis. The question was not about being the “better candidate.” Rather, I was being asked to unpack my identities before I began to conceive of my students’ needs. This relationship to instructional design is self-reflexive. I am reminded of a print that hangs above a colleague’s desk: We teach who we are.



An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:

<https://ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub/designingforonlinediscussion/?p=38#h5p-21>

When thinking of my syllabus, or helping an instructor design or revise their syllabus, I sit with the list of questions represented in Table 1. Reflecting on our identities and experiences is the first step towards building a learning community where difficult conversations can be had. How we answer questions about our identities is a valuable exercise in evaluating what self-work needs to be done before the dialogue.

Table 1: Reflecting on our identities

Who are we, and how do our identities and positionalities inform our teaching practices? For example,

- | | |
|------------------------------|---|
| Self-Knowledge | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• I am a White, queer, cisgender male. I am a survivor. I am a settler. I have the responsibility of challenging colonialism in my university. I am continuously working to decolonize my pedagogy. I need to recognize how I benefit from my privilege and the ways in which my privilege may directly (or indirectly) disadvantage BIPOC students, faculty, and staff.• How do we recognize the multitude of social locations (race/ethnicity, Indigeneity, gender identity, gender expression, class, sexuality, geography, age, disability/ability, migration status, religion) that influence a student's engagement with their learning? |
| Purpose Relationships | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• How do we want to contribute to the people around us?• Who can we access as dependable supports?• How do they hold us accountable?• What are our relationships to the spaces we occupy?• What are our relationships to our work (teaching, research, writing, activism)? |
-

Self-Knowledge

Identity work, as a reflexive practice, sets the groundwork for understanding how we will navigate a difficult conversation in our classrooms. For example, when facilitating workshops on sexual violence prevention, I often return to the following question:

Who am I, and how does my identity position inform my teaching practice?

I am a White, queer, cisgender male. I am a survivor. I am a settler.

As a White man, doing sexual violence prevention work within a university, I often think about the ways in which I occupy spaces where anti-violence work takes place. I have learned to sit with the process of White men's anti-violence ally development – this often consists of a disclosure of my own survivorship, correcting myths about the sexual assault of men and boys, and navigating microaggressions that tend to arise through the discomfort of White men talking about sexual violence prevention as a compulsory workshop during Orientation Week, or as a requirement of Varsity Athletics. As a survivor, I have learned to recognize what topics are sensitive – I may avoid speaking on these topics, relying on didactic slides or other educational tools. As a White settler, I've also learned to take ownership of how I may be complicit in an ongoing system of racism and colonialism within the institution that I work. I am candid when I share about my roles and responsibilities, and open to feedback on areas for further learning as a facilitator.

Self-knowledge is developing an ethic of care for the community that we are engaging with. How we recognize our own social locations creates space for us to consider the identities of our students.



An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:

<https://ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub/designingforonlinediscussion/?p=38#h5p-22>

Purpose

How do we want to contribute to the people around us? Our abilities to support difficult conversations first begins with understanding either why they need to occur or what institutional conditions serve as an incubator for their potential occurrence. What is the purpose of the dialogue? Further consider, how does our teaching make connections that are context specific, and engage broader realities? Supporting difficult conversations requires using learning materials in which students see themselves. This learning material may celebrate the tacit knowledge that students have, creating space to recognize the learner as an expert.

Are we aware of the voices privileged within our syllabi and instructional materials? We need to seek out learning material that engages a myriad of identities to represent authentic experiences. We need to ask ourselves, “Do I need to speak here?” We can centre voices of other scholars/folks in our teaching, drawing on lived experiences rather than our interpretations of these experiences.

Finally, we need to ask ourselves if we are sensitive to individual students’ readiness to be receptive to sensitive topics? The remote classroom often does not permit the same observation of social dynamics. Affect and potential hostility are masked by blank screens, challenging our ability to evaluate how a topic is being received. We need to take time to build classroom competencies before engaging students in topics that elicit conflicting responses. When building our syllabi or workshops, we might ask ourselves:

- What information may students require before they can engage with the topic?
- If we anticipate gaps in students’ understanding, how can we supplement students’ learning with resources that can be accessed prior to, during, or after their learning?
- Is the information in question, “nice to know” or “need to know”? If it is “nice to know” information, consider offering this information as recommended reading. If it is “need to know” information, consider using learning materials that can build a foundation to more effective dialogue.

Relationships

Difficult conversations do not take place in isolation. After a difficult conversation, it is important for both us and our students to have a space to connect with/or access supports, and to continue learning. Who can we access as dependable supports? Think of colleagues, mentors, friends, a therapist. To the same end, who can our students access to debrief a difficult conversation? Think of student mental health services, interfaith chaplains, Indigenous Elders, and peer support systems.

Table 2: Relationship-building

Anticipate	Assess	Commit
Who will be present in our learning communities? How can we accommodate their needs? What knowledges do they bring with them?	What ideological positions do we possess and how do they hinder our teaching? What spaces do we occupy? How do these positions and spaces impact the ways in which we communicate knowledge?	Check our emotions, biases, and the resources in our tool kits. What can we unpack before we enter our learning communities?



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<https://ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub/designingforonlinediscussion/?p=38#h5p-23>

How Difficult Conversations Emerge

There are two forms of difficult conversations: the planned and the unexpected (see Table 3 and Table 4). Both occurrences require sensitivity to ensure conversations remain equitable, and the community continues to be a welcoming environment.

Table 3: Planned discussions

Planned Discussion
<p>Planned discussions are scheduled, content specific, emerging from learning material, or guided exploration of the topic.</p>
<p>1. Establish a Framework: Use specific questions/readings to frame the discussion.</p> <p>Planned discussions are also complex. For example, there are whole-group conversations, breakout discussions, and individual reflective discussions where the student is in dialogue with themselves.</p> <p>Some questions which require opinion or view sharing are for reflective moments. The students are engaging in a collaborative learning moment. Questions of this kind are just for table discussion, away from the instructor, they are not shared with the class.</p> <p>Alternatively, we may invite table groups to share to the larger classroom community, such as 'think-pair-share' activities. In these moments, the question may be used to elicit further critical thinking about lesson concepts.</p> <p>Questions intended for self-reflection (e.g., sitting with oneself) should be kept private. Student self-reflection is a safe space for independent learning to occur.</p>
<p>2. Clarify the Purpose: What kinds of questions could we pose that would most effectively help students meet learning goals?</p> <p>Like unplanned discussions, we need to determine if a topic is better addressed as a class or individually.</p>
<p>3. Develop Class Guidelines: Etiquette best practices and rules for respectful engagement.</p>
<p>4. Form Connections: We can provide students with a point of connection: an assigned reading or discussion question can set the tone of class discussion.</p> <p>Prior to instruction we may invite students to engage in a written reflective exercise. The purpose of the exercise is to orient students to the topic, but it is also to reinforce the use of journaling in class. The use of consistent written prompts can create a space where topics requiring a higher degree of sensitivity, have a personal space to occur that does not hinder the learning of others.</p>
<p>5. Debrief: It is important to synthesize what has been shared and highlight key concepts/ideas.</p> <p>We may create space for further meaning making to occur, for example assigning supplemental reading/podcasts/articles, or providing resources that students can access at their own discretion. For example, when teaching about anti-Black racism, I provide a document of supports that welcome all learners. This document includes further learning, but also resources that are trauma informed and aims to anticipate the needs of learner, whoever that learner may be.</p>

Table 4: Unplanned discussions

Unplanned Discussion
<p>Unplanned discussion is often spur-of-the-moment. These discussions are student initiated, topical, and situational. Unplanned discussions may occur because of events or circumstances outside of the classroom (e.g., political moments, traumas, environmental events). They may also occur if our framework guiding the planned learning is unclear, for example: We have assigned a question intended for self-reflection but have allowed for table discussion about the question to occur within the learning space.</p>
<p>1. Prepare: We need to know our biases and what topics we are comfortable discussing in class. Are we comfortable discussing the scheduled topic?</p> <p>We also need to create space to be flexible with our class discussions. For example, we can think of a scenario where a group activity has been assigned and it is not going as planned: Students seem disengaged, perhaps the instructions could have been clearer, or the technology required for the lesson is not working. Evaluating how the students are engaging with the lesson, can help us determine whether we need to modify our expectations of the intended learning. One method for managing expectations is by engaging in process called “chunking,” we reveal small concise instructions withholding the next set of instructions, so we can pivot focus when needed.</p> <p>Consider the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chunk 1: Think about what you have learned about <i>x</i>. • Chunk 2: (Pair), With your elbow partner take 5 minutes to share about <i>x</i>. • Chunk 3: Share your thinking with your table group or we may invite the students to share their thinking in a whole-class discussion. <p>From the above we may observe three strategies used to monitor discussion. Our instructions are (1) specific, and (2) time bound. Time bound instructions set parameters around how long students will engage in discussion, “take 5 minutes” helps students have focused conversations, with an effort to limit side chat (e.g., weekend plans, online shopping, etc.). (3) Our instructions are also limited, by chunking our instructions we can determine if we want students to proceed to ‘pair’ or ‘share.’</p> <p>Chunking our slides also ensure our instructions are clear.</p>
<p>2. Respond: We need to take a moment to determine whether the issue should be addressed as a class or individually. If a response is better suited outside of the class, redirect the focus without shutting down engagement.</p>
<p>3. Depersonalize: If a student is inflammatory or devalues the perspectives of others, consider a response that distances the content from the student. “That is a view I have heard before / that some people hold. What might be... what do we think...?” We can engage the topic as an example of an idea currently circulating without engaging the student directly, which can lead to a confrontation. If needed, we can engage with the student after class.</p>
<p>4. Debrief: A difficult conversation can quickly feel like an us/then conflict. In these moments, it is easy to feel like our responsibility is to make the student adopt our view. Highly emotional content requires space for students to sit with their emotions. Reframing the purpose of the lesson can help move the discussion forward, without stifling learning. Students should leave the class with a sense of closure, understanding how the conversation that just took place relates to the course and their learning. Mindful moments, such as journaling, creates space to express feelings privately.</p>
<p>5. Connect: Microaggressions and conflict from students in class can often feel personal and harmful toward us, as the instructor. We need to connect with colleagues and supports in our own circles. Recognize that our experiences of these situations are valid and may need care.</p>

Now that we’ve established the difference between unplanned and planned discussions, let’s imagine what unplanned and planned discussions may look like in the context of Ezra’s universal design for learning (UDL) training module with second-year teacher candidates.

Ezra has received two emails from students that express concerns about the safety of online discussions. The first student addresses concerns that we will unpack below under the heading “Planned Synchronous Discussion.” The second student raises concerns that we will address under “Planned Asynchronous Discussion.” In both scenarios, I will share strategies that Ezra could have implemented to help mitigate the harms caused in both the synchronous and asynchronous discussion (see Table 5 and Table 6).

Table 5: Planned synchronous discussion in action

Planned Synchronous Discussion	
<p>Problem: The student explains that they felt uncomfortable in their breakout sessions because one of their peers continuously monopolized the group discussion. Further, they express concerns about the safety of breakout sessions, as the same student shared damaging stereotypes about individuals with intellectual disabilities.</p>	
<p>1. Establish a Framework: Breakout sessions in the remote classroom require a degree of vulnerability from students. Often, breakout sessions are randomly assigned, which means students could be interacting with peers for the first time.</p>	<p>Our initial instinct when assigning breakout sessions is to offer a question or action item for students to discuss as a group. These sessions can go awry when they lack clear structure and purpose.</p> <p>Prior to forming breakout sessions, we can provide students with a clear timeline (e.g., you will have 10 minutes to complete x or discuss y).</p> <p>When forming our breakout sessions, we may elect to have an accountability mechanism in place to ensure students stay on task. For example, at the end of the breakout session, one person from each group will upload their notes to our classes' online learning platforms.</p>
<p>2. Clarify the Purpose: Establish a simple objective, plainly explaining the purpose of the exercise. We can create space for students to ask questions about the task before we open the breakout rooms.</p>	<p>Breakout sessions shouldn't be rushed. They serve a clear pedagogical function and students should understand why they are completing the exercise.</p>
<p>3. Develop Class Guidelines: Prior to the start of every class, I review a "Housekeeping" slide with my students that address the objectives of the lesson, call their attention to due dates, but also reminds them of our class policy for engagement in all forms of discussion (e.g., when sharing to a class, when sharing with a peer, when interacting in a group). Netiquette best practices and rules for respectful engagement are in place to hold both us and our students accountable. Don't shy away from sharing these practices to the point of redundancy: students are often more considerate in classroom discussions when the class guidelines have a prominent seat at the table.</p>	
<p>4. Form Connections: Prior to opening the breakout session, take time for students to self-reflect. An assigned reading or reflection question gives students the space to develop an informed opinion. I have grown accustomed to using journal prompts at different stages of a lecture to encourage meaning making, but also to prime discussion. This strategy may look like students taking five minutes to answer a question about the topic of the day, that they can then draw on when sharing with their peers. Emphasis is often placed on the value of thinking through a contribution, before sharing it with members of the learning community.</p>	
<p>5. Debrief: It is important to synthesize what has been shared and highlight key concepts/ideas. Taking time to debrief after a breakout session allows you to return to the key points of the exercise. The debrief connects the purpose of the task with the learning objectives of the particular class. We may invite students to ask questions or invite a few groups to share what they learned during their breakout sessions.</p>	

Table 6: Planned asynchronous discussion in action

Planned Asynchronous Discussion	
<p>Problem: A student has identified that someone has posted a harmful comment in an asynchronous discussion thread intended for students to engage in further discussions after class.</p>	
<p>1. Establish a framework: When preparing for online asynchronous discussions, consider the following measures:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the forum clearly defined? • Will we require students to start a thread before they are able to read and respond to their peers? • Will we or a TA be moderating the discussion forum? If yes, will the moderator approve individual posts before they appear to others? <p>Often, how we establish our presence in a discussion forum influences how our students interact with the space. Passive discussion forums where students engage with their peers, without feedback or evaluation from the teaching team are often more susceptible to netiquette concerns.</p> <p>Before implementing a discussion forum, we can determine the objectives of the forum. How will the forum enrich learning? What is the function of the discussion forum in our courses?</p>	
<p>2. Clarify the Purpose: Like breakout sessions, we need to establish a simple objective, plainly explaining the purpose of the forum topic. When creating a discussion forum topic in the online learning platform, a significant amount of attention is given to the forum description. It is here where I remind students of our class guidelines. I also indicate that the forum will be monitored by the teaching team, creating the illusion of omnipresence. Students often respond better to discussion forums when they see that the teaching team (be it the instructor or teaching assistant) has a vested interest in the topic.</p>	
<p>3. Develop Class Guidelines: As before, netiquette best practices and rules for respectful engagement are in place to hold both ourselves and our students accountable. Depending on the class size, we can write these rules as a community. We may choose to review class guidelines synchronously before the discussion forum task is assigned.</p>	
<p>4. Form Connections: Like breakout sessions, discussion forums also require a degree of self-reflection. I often pair discussion forum engagement with a secondary assessment item to support meaning-making. For example, students may complete a critical reflection that they submit for evaluation, before engaging in an asynchronous discussion with their peers on the topic of the critical reflection. The aim of pairing a critical reflection with a discussion forum task is to help students form multiple connections to the learning material.</p>	
<p>5. Debrief: Once the discussion forum has closed, we can take a moment to review the various interactions that have occurred in this learning space. It is not necessary (nor practical, depending on the class size) for us to review all the submissions. However, reviewing some of the interactions in the forum will allow us to offer collective feedback on the exercise. It is here where we can address common themes that may have emerged in the discussion forum, correct misinformation that may have appeared in some discussions, and provide further information when necessary to further supplement the learning that occurs in these discussion spaces.</p>	

Key Takeaways

Difficult conversations and controversial topics can be an important learning opportunity for students. These occurrences force us to confront our privilege, challenge our biases, and unpack the ways in which our beliefs and values shape our world view.

How Do We Set Students Up for Success When Navigating Difficult Topics?

We can model critical engagement with course material and give students the tools to scrutinize assumptions and biases. Encourage the use of appropriate language and terminology in reference to marginalized groups, from a strengths-based perspective.

What's the Right Timing for a Difficult Discussion in a Remote Environment?

We can ensure that sensitive discussions are introduced after we have given sufficient time and space for community and capacity building .

The class's ability to maintain an equitable learning environment can be assessed prior to a course discussion to mitigate potential harm.

Provide Content Warnings, Not Trigger Warnings

For example, “Next week we will be talking about residential schools and viewing a film that details the experiences of two survivors...” rather than trigger warnings such as “Some of you may find next week’s material distressing.”

This ensures we are providing an overview of the content without suggesting how students might feel about it. Rather than giving students an opt-out of content, we can provide our rationale for including content in the course and explain how it relates to the learning outcomes.

Misinformation

Misinformation often leads to “hot moments” in class discussions. Learning to evaluate a student’s response to difficult topics, and mediate contentious and potentially inequitable claims, is a challenge for all educators. Here are some suggestions on how we can handle these moments in the classroom:

- Establish a clear purpose.
- Include a statement in our syllabi about our commitment to equitable learning environments to pre-frame conversations.
- Uplift marginalized voices.
- Check our emotions and biases and lean on community supports when needed.

Reflecting Back on the Scenario

If we look back to our scenario, we will recall that Ezra has just finished delivering a training module on universal design for learning (UDL) to their first section of second-year teacher candidates. Let's consider some of the strategies from above, that they could apply next time they teach:

- Ezra notes that monitoring the classroom chat on Zoom was a challenge.

Ezra may consider indicating at the beginning of class times during instruction in which students can make use of the chat feature to pose questions. Alternatively, Ezra may make use of a real time collaborative platform where students can pose their questions, and they will answer at designated moments during class time. These platforms are sometimes helpful for allowing students to ask questions that they otherwise would not ask for various reasons (e.g., worried about perceptions from the instructor or their peers).

- Ezra observes that some students appeared more confident in sharing opinions that they perhaps would not have expressed in face-to-face instruction.

Prior to the start of every class, Ezra can make use of a “Housekeeping” slide, in which they remind their students of the class policy for engagement in all forms of discussion. They may also open the class with reflexive journaling, which creates the space for thoughtful reflection before peer-sharing, or whole class discussion.

- Ezra receives an email where a student shares that they felt uncomfortable in their breakout sessions because one of their peers continuously monopolized the group discussion. The student expresses concern about the safety of breakout sessions, as the same peer student shared damaging stereotypes about individuals with intellectual disabilities.

Ezra may need to re-evaluate the instructions and types of questions they are using for breakout sessions. Some questions which require opinion or view sharing are for reflective moments. If it is anticipated that a question requires a high degree of sensitivity, Ezra should use this question as a prompt for solo-reflection. A breakout discussion should be specific and timebound, with a clear learning outcome.

Prior to the breakout session, Ezra may also hold space for students to engage deeply with a reflection question or assigned reading. This exercise gives students the space to develop an informed opinion. Before sending students away, Ezra may emphasize to the class the value of thinking through a contribution, before sharing it with members of the learning community.

- Ezra receives a second email; a student has identified that someone has posted a harmful comment in an asynchronous discussion thread intended for students to engage in further discussions after class.

Ezra may pair the discussion forum with a secondary assessment item, in which students are required to complete a critical reflection that they submit for evaluation before they are able to post in the asynchronous discussion forum. Signalling to students that discussion forums are a learning space and assessment item can help reinforce the types of dialogue we wish to see in this space. Further, Ezra may consider establishing their (and/or their TA's) presence in the discussion forum by modelling contributions, but also by providing responses to students. Demonstrating an active presence within this space can often mitigate the netiquette concerns raised during Ezra's UDL module.

While the strategies shared here have been helpful in my teaching practice, I think it is important to acknowledge that difficult conversations still emerge in my learning communities, despite the strategies shared above. With practice and time, we can learn to navigate difficult conversations in the (remote) classroom. I think there is humility in 'navigating,' as I recognize that we move through these spaces with care, and not without difficulty.

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7.

CHAPTER 7: INTEGRATING ALTERNATIVE FORMS OF COMMUNICATION IN ONLINE DISCUSSIONS

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Setting the Context

As an educator with over 14 years of online teaching experience (K–12 and higher education), I have come to learn that, when done well, a discussion board can serve as the hub and heart of online learning communities. I have experienced many seasons and styles of online discussion boards, and I continue to explore and develop iterate these based on feedback from students' experiences. The challenges faced by students in the scenario below illustrate some of the many issues I have observed and (mostly) resolved over time through alternative forms of communication in online discussions. It is my hope that this chapter provides some insights to help you find ways to integrate a variety of communication modes for online discussions in your courses.

Scenario

Have a look at the discussion in Image 1.

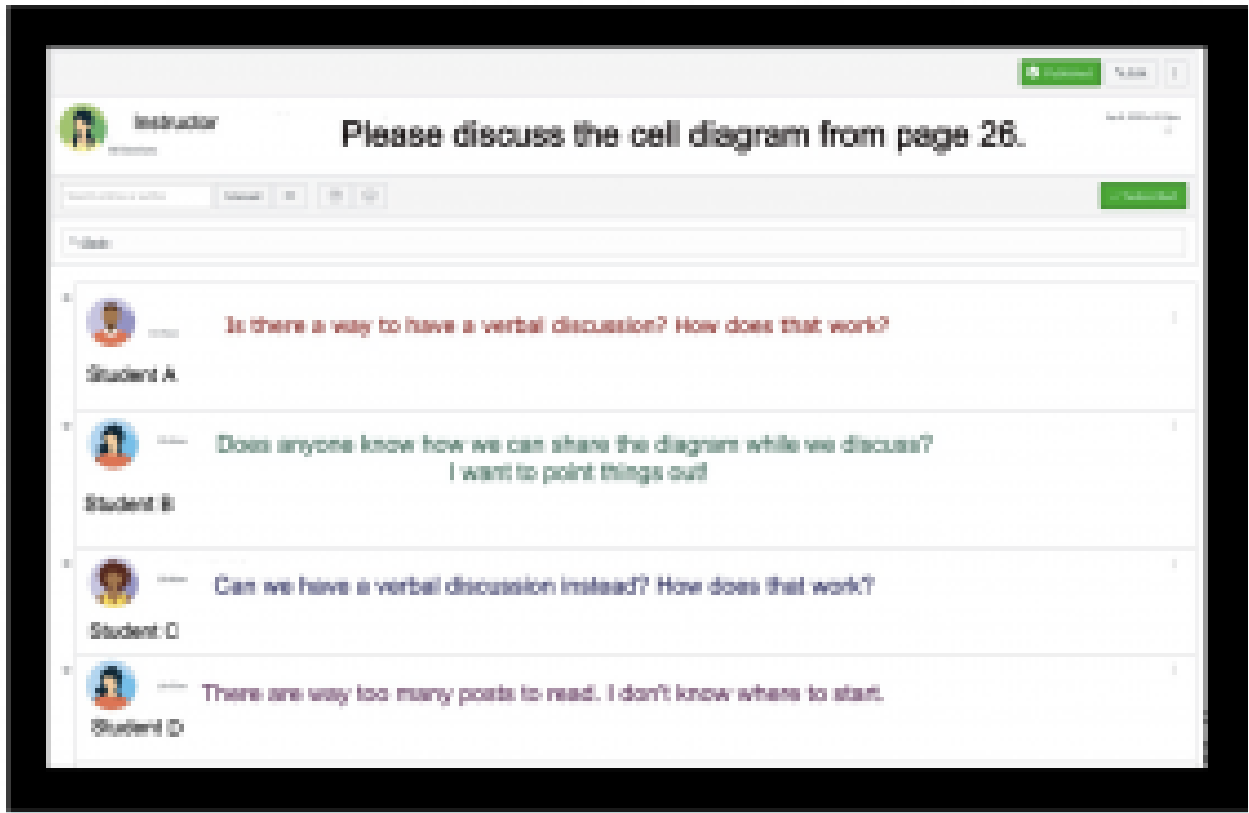


Image 1: Class discussion board

As shown, the instructor in an online biology course is experiencing a lack of interaction and engagement on the class discussion board. Some students are asking for additional modes of communication, and it appears that others are having trouble with the threaded discussion format. Student A is an English language learner and is wanting to work on his English skills using both verbal and written communication with his peers. He is hoping there will be opportunities for both forms of communication. Student B learns best when she can interact visually with course content and loves to highlight text and annotate diagrams. She is hoping there will be an opportunity to discuss course content with peers using visuals. Student C knows that she can excel in discussions when they are verbal, and she also likes to make use of her hands to communicate. With her attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), she knows that she will struggle with discussions if they can only be typed. She wonders if there are options or alternatives to text-based discussions. Student D is struggling to keep up with the number of posts she needs to read. It is her first online course, and as a busy parent, she would much prefer the ability use audio recordings to respond to her peers' interesting posts.

Learning Outcomes

- Identify a range of alternative methods and tools to promote online discussions (e.g., video, voice threads, text-based discussion, use of avatars).
- Determine and purposefully select which forms of communication are best suited to discussion topics.
- Understand how different forms of communication can be used to meet the needs of all students (universal design for learning [UDL]/differentiated instruction [DI]).
- Be able to devise and design discussion activities to promote interaction, and active and meaningful learning.

Key Terms: chat-based platforms, collaborative annotation, constructivism, community of inquiry, universal design for learning, online discussions



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About This Chapter

While text-based discussions often play an integral role in online learning environments, there are instances where they may not be the best fit for learning objectives or may not be the most effective form of communication for some students. In this chapter, we will discuss and explore how instructors can use alternative forms of communication in online discussions to foster student engagement, interaction, and active learning in fully online, blended, and flipped learning environments. We will also have a look at how using universal design for learning (UDL) can be used to accommodate all students to best suit their communication needs.

We will cover three broad alternative forms for online discussions which include the following items: use of video and audio, chat-based platforms, collaborative annotation and social e-reading tools. While tools and applications change and evolve over time, we will share some examples of promising tools currently in use for online discussions. These forms will be discussed with constructivist learning theory and a community of

inquiry framework in mind. Some of the tools that will be explored in this chapter offer alternatives to a text-based discussion in the classroom and are opportunities to embed UDL into courses.



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What Does Current Research Tell Us about Discussion Boards in Online Learning Environments?

As a result of recent global and societal circumstances due to COVID-19, online learning has arguably become an integral and necessary dimension in the higher education landscape. Much attention and interest have been focused on better understanding how students communicate and interact in online contexts. Arguably, discussion boards are one of the most common strategies used to support student interaction and communication in online learning environments. Facilitating community in online learning environments is crucial and the discussion board can often act as a central hub for community building and interaction. Both constructivist learning theory and the community of inquiry framework have fundamentally shaped online discussion boards.

Constructivist Learning Theory and Online Learning

A constructivist approach to teaching fosters active learning, builds community, and places emphasis on student-centred learning. There is little dispute that constructivism is a key driving theory behind principles of online learning (Dooly, 2008). Discussion boards, alongside video conferencing, chat rooms, synchronized whiteboards, and interactive presentation tools, are helpful participatory tools used to maintain effective social interaction and student engagement in constructivist online learning environments. Incorporating alternative forms of communication, such as video and audio, can further enrich and deepen interactions and offer students a choice of communication mode(s).

The Community of Inquiry Framework

The community of inquiry (CoI) is a highly used framework for online course design. The CoI framework is a model that considers three presences – social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence – as central to the educational experience. Social presence is the capacity to present oneself socially through personal characteristics and effects in an online context (Community of Inquiry, n.d.). Cognitive presence refers to the relationship between a student’s personal understanding and discourse with peers (Community of Inquiry, n.d.). Teaching presence can be described as the course design, facilitation, and development of community in online learning contexts. Teaching presence directs both cognitive and social processes to provide meaningful student learning experiences (CoI, n.d.). Social and teaching presence can be elevated using multi-modal tools, including video and audio recordings or virtual meetings . Using a variety of forms of communication such as video, audio, avatars, and text in discussion boards can significantly increase relational interaction and foster engagement. For a primer on the community of inquiry framework, please click [HERE](#). For more on constructivist approaches using CoI, see Swan (2017).

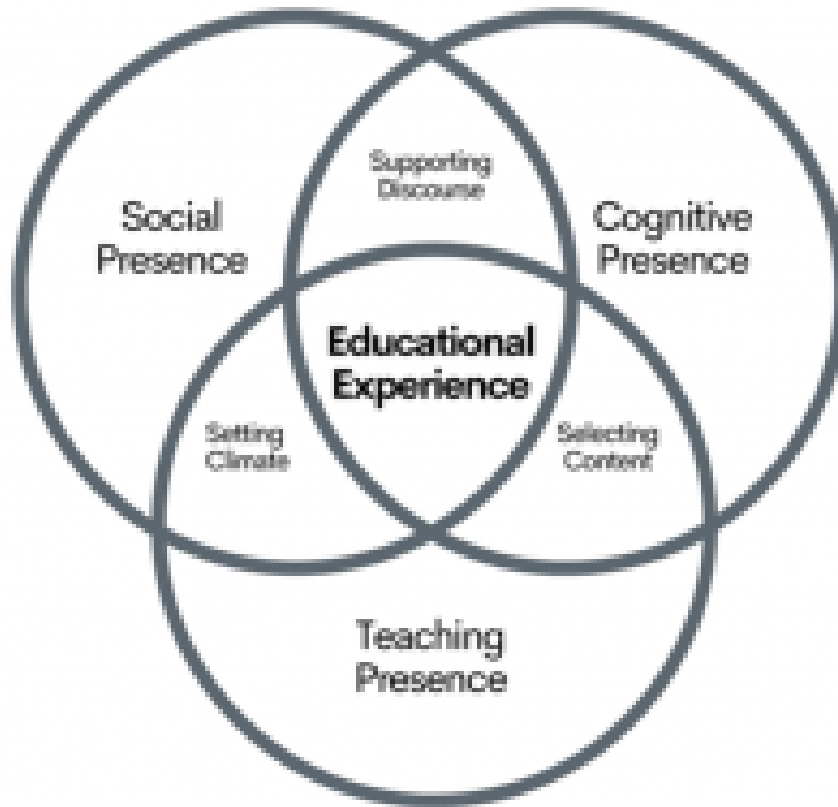


Image 2: The three presences of the Col framework

Placing Universal Design for Learning at the Centre of Course Design

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is one of the most effective course design frameworks instructors can use to provide *all* students, regardless of their background and ability, equal opportunities to learn and succeed. Offering all students multiple means of engagement through flexibility and choice, and by addressing the diversity of student needs, ultimately leads to a more inclusive and effective learning experience. For more on the UDL framework, see the [Center for Applied Special Technology \(CAST\)](#).



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The following section will provide an overview of three alternative forms of discussion-based learning in online environments: video and audio, collaborative annotation and discussion platforms, and chat-based platforms.

Disclaimer: Before integrating or using any of these tools and apps for your courses, check with tech support at your institution to ensure compliance and privacy issues are met and are suitable for the diverse needs of students (e.g., Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act [[AODA](#)] and Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act [[FIPPA](#)]).

Video and Audio

Video and audio tools can enrich discussion, increase human connection online, and add a personal dimension to responses. The use of video in online discussions has been known to enhance group cohesion and affiliation, thereby boosting student participation and engagement (Pinsk et al., 2014). In one study, video-enabled discussions were found to be more effective than text-based discussion at creating social and teaching presence (Clark et al., 2015).

Furthermore, video and audio features are now embedded in most learning management systems (e.g., Canvas, Blackboard, Moodle, and more). These embedded features are accessible and easy to use, and students can record multiple takes until they are pleased with their response.

Using External Applications for Video and Audio Discussion

Learning management systems are not necessarily required for video and audio discussions to take place in online learning environments. One current app that has gained much success in both K–12 and higher education online contexts is [Flipgrid](#). Using Flipgrid, instructors can assemble “grids” to facilitate video discussion, which is similar to the look of a message board. An instructor can provide a question and students can reply for all to view. At this time, there is no limit to the number of responses on the grid, however, one constraint is that students can only reply to the instructor’s post and not directly to those of their peers. Flipgrid can be used as a stand-alone tool or can be integrated into existing learning management systems. With the latter option, students do not need to sign in to Flipgrid and there are fewer clicks required.

Considerations: Video and audio tools add a personal dimension to responses. In video, students can view facial expressions, tone, and hand gestures, which can greatly enhance meaning and even avoid misunderstanding or ambiguous text. This feature has been shown to be particularly helpful for English language learners. Having a choice of text, audio, and video response for discussion can increase confidence and agency.

The use of video and audio features requires a webcam and audio-recording capabilities, which may not be available to all online learners. An initial course survey can be used to gather information on access to technology and broadband prior to the start of lessons. Additionally, discussion board features may not offer subtitle captioning, which can pose a barrier for some students.

Collaborative Annotation and Discussion Platforms

Another emerging and dynamic alternative approach to discussion boards is collaborative annotation and discussion platforms. Also known as “social e-readers,” these tools allow multiple learners to critically engage with a text or object synchronously or asynchronously. Learners can engage cognitively with course materials and their peers by marking up texts/objects, responding to prompts, engaging in discussions, asking questions, and more. Just like how a student can highlight a textbook and add notes in the margin, social e-readers go a step further and allow all users to highlight and take notes collaboratively and interact with comments by others. Collaborative annotation tools can capture student thinking and processing in the moment (Adams & Wilson, 2020) and can help instructors identify gaps and challenges with student understanding.

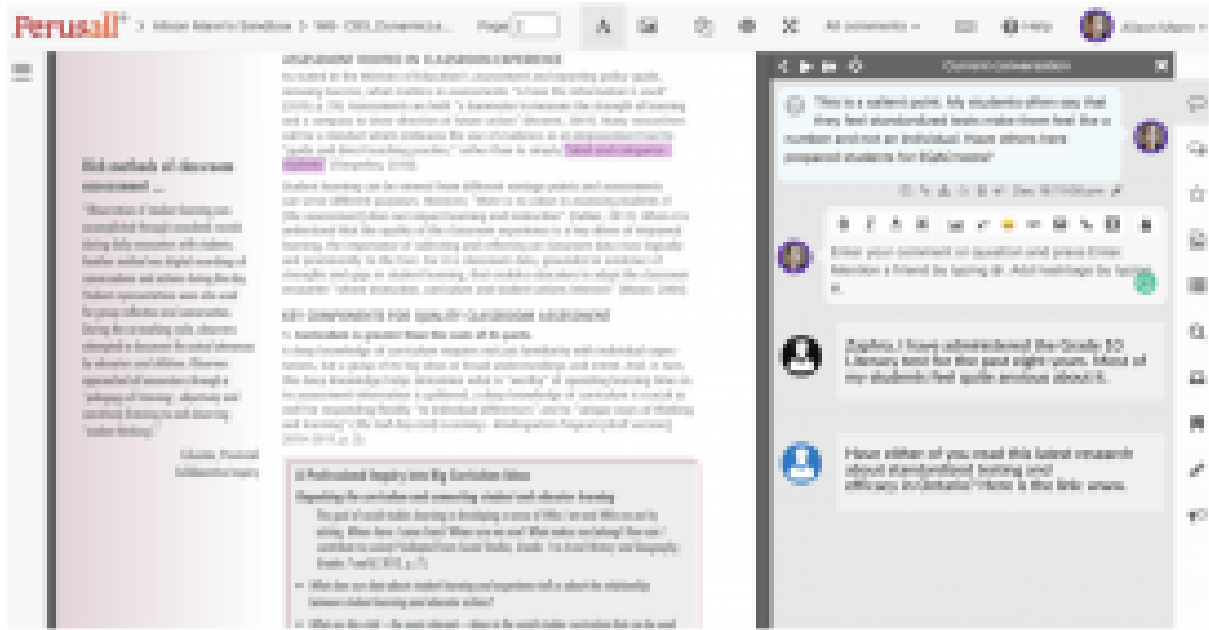


Image 3: Perusall

[Perusall](#) is an example of a free social e-reader and has gained much traction in higher education in online, flipped, flex-mode, and in-person classes (see Image 3). Designed at Harvard University, Perusall is supported by ongoing research and can be integrated into learning management systems or used directly on their websites. Perusall designers aim to target intrinsic social motivation and extrinsic motivation. They explain that intrinsic motivation is achieved by leveraging a student’s natural drive to have collective experiences and interactions with peers. Interactions on Perusall occur through class chat, peer-to-peer chat, annotations on course content, and by peers asking questions and providing answers. Recognizable social media discussion features such as emojis, hashtags, and upvoting make interactions more appealing for users. Extrinsic motivation is achieved through the ability for students to monitor their own progress and level of interaction. Perusall can be automated to gently “nudge” students to engage with course content when needed. Finally, instructors can track each student’s progress through course analytics to monitor active reading, number of comments and annotations, as well as upvoted comments. A social e-reader like Perusall uses a constructivist approach to learning because it places students at the centre of the learning experience and encourages them to build meaning together. The instructor’s role in this environment can be to facilitate and scaffold student learning through probing, asking questions, and redirecting discussions when required.

Considerations: Students can be placed in groups according to need. Assignments can be modified for each learner (e.g. an alternative reading for ELL students). A “confusion report” can be generated to indicate areas

in the course content where questions are most frequently asked and where students may be struggling with content.

Chat-Based Platforms

Chat-based platforms are another effective alternative to traditional discussion boards. Chat-based platforms such as [Discord](#) and [Slack](#) offer participants a robust space to communicate using many of the recognizable elements and features of social media platforms such as liking, using reactions, tagging, and direct messaging. Research has noted how students tend to communicate during their courses through other means, such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp (de Lima et al., 2019) and often use these spaces for backchannelling. Social media backchannelling refers to social chats, often initiated and organized by students, as an informal space to discuss course work. Because students are already accustomed to social media chat, embedding chat-based platforms is an efficient way to initiate online discussion using recognizable features and a quick learning curve. Students have expressed that chat-based platforms feel more spontaneous and add a sense of vitality to the learning experience (de Lima et al., 2019). In the same way discussion board forums can be organized by topic or theme, chat-based platforms, such as Slack, use “channels” to keep discussion topics focused and organized.

Considerations: Ensure the chat-based platform you use fits with your institutional requirements.



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Reflecting Back on the Scenario

This chapter has shared some practical alternative forms of communication for online discussions. As we have learned, offering alternative forms of communication has the potential to meet the needs of all learners and can increase student, teacher, and cognitive presence significantly. If we circle back to our scenario from the beginning of the chapter, what alternative approaches might you now consider for the online discussions in the class? What could have been done differently? Which tools do you feel ready to explore?

Remember, while new apps, tools, and programs continue to evolve and emerge in online environments, it is up to instructors to ensure that the foundations of effective online teaching are prioritized, such as implementing the community of inquiry framework, taking up a constructivist learning approach, and applying the UDL framework. Together, these approaches can help build a meaningful and engaging online community.

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8.

CHAPTER 8: FINAL REMARKS

This is where you can add appendices or other back matter.