

## **HOW TO ENSURE A SAFE, COLLABORATIVE AND RESPECTFUL ONLINE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT**

Online learning can offer many benefits for teachers and students, such as flexibility, accessibility, and diversity. However, it also poses some challenges, such as ensuring a safe and respectful online learning environment. In this article, you will learn some tips and strategies to create and maintain a positive and productive online learning community.

Building a safe and collaborative class environment can be the difference between a student excelling and a student struggling.

It won't happen overnight, or in one lesson, but a safe and collaborative class can be nurtured and developed consistently over time. Some students feel comfortable contributing and interacting with their peers from the beginning, but for some, interacting takes time. Achieving comfort with class interaction is well worth the time and effort required to overcome apprehension.

To feel safe and comfortable collaborating, instructors must ensure students grasp the objective and learning goals of each project. These aspects may need to be presented in multiple ways to connect to the diverse learning needs of students. This could mean sharing assignment instructions through written form, rubric, and orally during the in-class time. When students are connected to and reflect on the purpose and objective of the activity, they have a chance to participate in their own unique manner [3].

One of the most important factors in building this positive environment, whether online or in person, is trust. When students trust each other, they are more willing to share information and solutions. They will also be more engaged when working as a team.

Trust must be developed by both the professor and by the students themselves. This means removing assessment bias, valuing all feedback, questions and opinions, providing opportunities for students to share their unique perspectives and provide meaningful feedback that demonstrates care and concern for students' academic success and personal well-being.

Technical difficulties are unavoidable in a digital world. There are few things more frustrating than the wi-fi going down mid-sentence or in the middle of a lesson or group work session. That being said, it is important to approach the digital classroom with an understanding of these types of challenges so that students do not have added stress for elements out of their control [1].

It is also important to realize students differ in terms of the technology and workspace they have available to them. It's important to address this early on in a supportive way, so students know their work quality and classroom interactions are what is most important and not the type of monitor or computer they are using [4].

Students in an online learning environment often have varying struggles and competing commitments outside of the course. Some students have moved out for the first time, some are working part-time jobs, and others are balancing a full degree with family obligations at home [5]. Whatever is going on, these unique experiences are a great opportunity to infuse diverse thoughts and opinions into course material.

It is common for students to feel less connected to their classmates and the course material through digital learning, however, there are ways to remedy this. Instructors should make it clear early on what they expect from their students in terms of participation and involvement. In addition to setting the expectations, it is important to explain why participation and engagement in the course material are necessary to get the most out of the course.

Rather than focusing on the limitations of online learning, acknowledge the challenges and reflect on the gains from this type of virtual environment, including developing a skillset with virtual programs, and preparing for a work environment students may experience after graduation. Online learning also allows flexibility for students, and in many cases, it can bring individuals together from a wider geographic area [6].

Peer assessment and peer learning is an effective way to build trust in a safe and collaborative class environment. Teachers feature, including anonymous peer assessment, team-based learning, and class discussion address these concerns and help engage students in their learning while developing the ever-important soft skills and critical thinking skills.

Establish clear expectations and guidelines. One of the first steps to ensure a safe and respectful online learning environment is to establish clear expectations and guidelines for online communication and behavior. You can do this by creating a code of conduct, a netiquette policy, or a digital citizenship agreement that outlines the rules and norms for online interactions. You can also involve your students in co-creating these documents and have them sign or acknowledge them. Make sure to communicate these expectations and guidelines frequently and consistently, and to model them yourself.

Encourage dialogue. Promote debate and inquiry in class, across different mediums. This can include written discussion boards, public speaking opportunities, small group live discussion and peer feedback. It is through open and honest dialogue students can engage more deeply with course material and expand their worldview through conversation with their peers. Whether through anonymous and bias-free peer assessment or through open discussion, instructors should foster open and constructive dialogue.

Provide feedback and support. Another way to ensure a safe and respectful online learning environment is to provide feedback and support to your students. Feedback is essential for online learning, as it helps students monitor their progress, identify their strengths and weaknesses, and improve their performance. You can provide feedback through various channels, such as emails, chats, video calls, or online tools. Support is also important for online learning, as it helps students feel connected,

motivated, and valued. You can provide support by creating a sense of presence, showing empathy and care, and offering resources and assistance.

**Bias-free assessment.** While we may be well-intentioned, it can be difficult to omit our personal biases from our work, our conversations. Assessment bias can occur with the type of assignment, how the assignment is asked, and the examples provided in the assignment. Assessment bias can also occur through the professor or peer interactions. One effective way to address assessment bias is to incorporate anonymous peer assessment. When students provide feedback to each other without knowing whose work they have in front of them, they are more likely to focus on providing critical and motivational feedback. Additionally, students will feel more comfortable providing genuine assessments to their peers when they know it is anonymous.

**Foster collaboration and engagement.** Another way to ensure a safe and respectful online learning environment is to foster collaboration and engagement among your students. Collaboration and engagement can enhance online learning, as they promote social interaction, peer learning, and active participation. You can foster collaboration and engagement by designing interactive and meaningful activities, such as group projects, discussions, or games. You can also use online tools and platforms, such as forums, blogs, or wikis, to facilitate online collaboration and engagement.

**Incorporate opportunities for inquiry.** Inquiry-based learning not only is a powerful learning strategy, but it is an effective way to engage students and demonstrate appreciation and value for students' individual interests and perspectives. By providing freedom and agency over what and how students demonstrate their knowledge, students will feel empowered to incorporate their unique perspectives, and opinions. This not only leads to a more welcoming and safe class environment, but it can expand the learning for the entire class when they have exposure to diverse viewpoints.

**Monitor and intervene.** One more way to ensure a safe and respectful online learning environment is to monitor and intervene when necessary. Monitoring and intervening can prevent or address online issues, such as cyberbullying, cheating, or plagiarism. You can monitor online activities by using analytics, logs, or reports, or by observing online interactions. You can intervene by contacting the students involved, providing guidance or feedback, or enforcing consequences.

**Conduct regular check-ins and in a variety of ways.** It is critical instructors check in on their students to understand how they are doing, and what challenges may be occurring. Check-ins help students understand their instructor cares and appreciates their input. Not every student will be willing to share feedback in a class or 1:1 setting, so it's important to provide different ways to receive the feedback. For example, emails, surveys, scheduled meetings, and class discussions can all be used to conduct check-ins [2].

**Promote diversity and inclusion.** Additional way to ensure a safe and respectful online learning environment is to promote diversity and inclusion among your students. Diversity and inclusion can enrich online learning, as they expose students to different perspectives, cultures, and backgrounds. You can promote diversity and inclusion by acknowledging and celebrating diversity, creating a culture of respect and tolerance, and providing opportunities for cross-cultural communication and learning.

**Evaluate and improve.** Last but not the least way to ensure a safe and respectful online learning environment is to evaluate and improve your online teaching practices. Evaluating and improving can help you identify what works and what doesn't, and how to enhance your online learning environment. You can evaluate and improve by collecting feedback from your students, reflecting on your own experiences, or seeking professional development or peer support.

**Conclusion.** Safe learning spaces empower students to reach their full potential. They encourage students to step out of their comfort zone and take a leadership role in their own learning.

As humans, when we look back at our most memorable learning and life moments, we gravitate to the feelings and emotions those moments evoked and not on the experiences themselves. With this in mind, it is critical our learning environments allow students to approach course material and interactions in a positive, safe, respectful and collaborative way.

Professors should help facilitate peer assessment and peer learning with these exact principles in mind. They have to increase student engagement, develop critical thinking and soft skills, and enable students to take more control over their learning.

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