

# PLANNING CULTURALLY INCLUSIVE ONLINE COURSES



Online courses bring together a community of learners with diverse backgrounds, experiences, and expectations of the online learning space. The suggestions below outline ways to build an online learning environment that supports the inclusion and success of culturally diverse learners. The strategies below are informed by Gunawardena et al. (2019).

1

## SURVEY STUDENTS ABOUT TECHNOLOGY ACCESS AND EXPERIENCE

Questions to ask about technology access may include: (1) Do you have access to a smartphone, tablet, or computer? For how many hours daily? (2) Do you have the capability to participate in classes and conferences by audio or video (e.g. Zoom)? (3) Do you have access to internet or a data connection that is sufficient for accessing course materials (videos, file downloads)? To access a survey template with these questions in Moodle, turn editing on, "add an activity" and select the "feedback" activity (megaphone). In the setup screen, select the "templates" tab and in the drop-down menu select "student technology survey".

You may also wish to find out about student experience with digital literacy skills with questions such as: (1) Have you previously taken an online course for credit? (2) Do you know how to use Word/ PowerPoint/ Excel? (3) Do you know how to create an online portfolio or blog page?

The results of your survey will highlight places where you may wish to embed additional learning technology support into the course, or modify content to make it more accessible (e.g. adding the ability to download transcripts if videos are inaccessible because of a poor connection).

2

## PROVIDE AN ORIENTATION MODULE FOR YOUR COURSE

We often design online learning experiences based on our implicit expectations of online learning processes. However, many of our learners may be unfamiliar with online learning, and others may come to the learning environment with a different "script" for how online learning works based on their past experiences. Providing an orientation module introduces learners to the "micro-culture" of your course and the ways that they can expect to work together with you and the other learners. Provide information about the teaching and learning philosophy of the course, as well as communication guidelines, clear instructions for individual assignments and group work processes, and information about how learning will be assessed.

The orientation module might include:

- A video orientation to the course page
- A brief personal introduction to help your students connect to you
- Suggestions for how to organize learning in the course each week
- "Netiquette" and guidelines for online communication

3

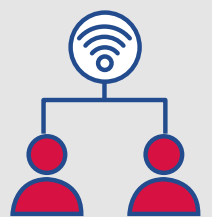
## OFFER SUPPORT IN NEGOTIATING IDENTITY AND BUILDING SOCIAL PRESENCE ONLINE

Students may have different experiences and preferences in constructing their online identity and social presence in the course. Some students may be comfortable presenting aspects of their individual identity, while others may prefer to focus on a shared social identity. Allow students choices in how they choose to construct their social presence online (e.g. by choosing between a photo post or an avatar). For tasks like introduction posts and other community building activities, provide your own example, or offer to provide feedback on student posts before they are publicly placed on the class forum.

4

## PLAN YOUR COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

Aim for clear, concise, and frequent communication with students. In an online course, students are more likely to stay on track if they receive proactive communication and timely reminders from you. Consider varying the mode of your communication – include written, audio, and video communication where appropriate.



5

## ALLOW FLEXIBLE PATHS TO LEARNING AND DEMONSTRATING KNOWLEDGE

Where feasible, provide choices for students in how they will access information or complete learning activities. If you are able, allow students to choose from more than one mode of communication for their learning; some learners (e.g. those who are working to increase their English language skills) may learn more effectively if they can combine video and reading in their learning. Consider providing flexibility around the forms and media used for assignments to allow for variability in learner preferences and access to technology.

6

## CONNECT STUDENTS WITH A NETWORK OF SUPPORT

In the online learning environment, students miss opportunities to connect face-to-face with learning support services. Normalize help seeking as a part of the learning process by providing direct links to counselling, learning centre, accessibility, library, and Indigenous services for students. Model help seeking behaviour with students, and encourage students to engage with services as a part of their ongoing personal development.

**Reference:** Gunawardena, C. N., Frechette, C., & Layne, L. (2019). Culturally inclusive instructional design: A framework and guide. Routledge.