

The Power of Identity in a Virtual Classroom

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The Power of Identity in a Virtual Classroom: Supporting International Students in Your Online Courses

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Microphone on, recording session set, closed captioning activated...

Teaching in a virtual classroom can at times feel somewhat, well, mechanical. The infectious excitement of the first day of school when meeting the new students in your classes differs in a digital sphere, but it can still be just as thrilling. With many participants joining from across the world, it is important for faculty to not only deliver the course content, but to consciously dissolve the anonymity of this medium through recognition of each individual student. Who is in your classroom? How will you introduce everyone to create a classroom culture founded in values of support, respect, and active participation? Introductions between faculty and students will not only create a positive community and build trust, but it can also assist faculty to add course content through the lens of the student's experiences and interests. Expanding lesson plans to include examples from all regions of the world can increase student engagement. Representation matters, and with the recognition of each student is the opportunity to invite their unique knowledge, wealth of experience, and personal voice into your course content.

In addition to adapting to a new digital experience, many students may be joining from differing educational experiences which can exacerbate the challenges students experience working in an online environment. To support the student's transition into a virtual Canadian classroom, it is also important to host transparent dialogue(s) on topics such as online etiquette, management of practicalities (such as differing time zones), and expectations of professionalism and academic integrity. There are many ways to provide support to international students joining our virtual classrooms. Here are some issues international students could be facing in your virtual classes and tips to help you support them better:

- **Online fatigue** – “Being on a video call requires more focus than a face-to-face chat... we need to work harder to process non-verbal cues like facial expressions, the tone and pitch of the voice, and body language...” (Jiang, 2020). If your video is off while presenting, students who are also developing their English language skills may struggle with the lack of access to such non-verbal cues that would inform their interpretation and understanding.

Tip: Turn on the closed captioning during virtual sessions to provide another tool for students to follow along during live sessions. In addition, consider posting materials in advance of class to encourage review of the files prior to a synchronous session.

- **Time Zone** – Differing time zones may become a logistical challenge for students to actively engage with their professor.

Tip: Poll your students: who is joining from what time zone? This information will empower you to plan accordingly, such as scheduling office hours during a window of time that is reasonably accessible for all participants. For example, if many of the students in one class are joining from India or Iran, scheduling office hours at 9:00 a.m. EST will align with the end of the day in these regions (that’s 6:30 p.m. UTC in India and 5:30 p.m. UTC in Iran).

- **Technology** – In many regions of the world, access to the Internet can be restricted or censored.

Tip: Plan ahead for such challenges. Can your students access the platforms you will include in your course, such as YouTube? To manage this, be transparent at the beginning of the course and identify all platforms you will use. Offer the students an opportunity to communicate any concerns so you can proactively work together to ensure the student will be able to access materials and meet the course deadlines.

In a virtual classroom, the identity of faculty and students can perhaps be compared to the Wizard behind the curtain in the *Wizard of Oz*, simply a voice delivering information. It is imperative to invest the time to explore who joins each virtual class, giving thoughtful consideration to their needs, perspectives, and experiences. When designing course

materials, it is important to look past the metaphorical curtain and humanize the relationship. Most simply, get to know each other. Recognizing the uniqueness of each individual and designing your online engagement rooted in understanding will lay the foundation for your “yellow brick road” of virtual classroom collective success.

References

Jiang, M. (2020, April 22). *Why zoom video chats are so exhausting*. BBC.

<https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20200421-why-zoom-video-chats-are-so-exhausting>

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