What Do Safe, Respectful and Inclusive Virtual Classrooms Look Like?

As teachers head back to school—whether that is in person, online or a hybrid model—fostering a safe, respectful and inclusive classroom is as important as ever. How do safe and inclusive classroom practices apply to digital spaces and what can educators do to establish those norms and carry them out throughout the year? Just as you create safe, respectful and equitable physical classroom spaces, many of us are learning how to bring those best practices online. Our list of suggested strategies is long. That’s why our first tip is to start by selecting one or two items that are most relevant for your setting and teaching goals.

Get to know your students.
- Find engaging and creative ways for your students to get to know each other and for you to get to know them. This can include regular icebreakers, how you structure morning meetings to advisories, and inviting students to share aspects of their identity that are fun and interactive.

- Online classrooms provide an opportunity to see into the lives of your students in new ways. You may ask students to share some of their favorite items, photos or objects they would not be able to bring to school. If you have an online classroom space, allow students to change their profile picture to something that represents them, and add their pronouns.

- Spend intentional time up front and throughout the year to get to know your students, adapted to the age level you teach. This can include asking them to complete a beginning of the year questionnaire (hobbies, interests, family information, how to pronounce their name, what they’re excited about and anxious about, their accurate pronouns and names, etc.), brief one-on-one virtual meetings and using icebreakers early and throughout the year. If time permits, request longer one-on-ones in the beginning of the year. And especially for students who may feel marginalized, experienced exclusion, bias or bullying, try to learn more about that in order to help.

- Getting to know parents and families in age-appropriate ways is an opportunity to help students succeed and feel safe. Find ways to reach out early in the school year—either by phone, email, video visit or questionnaire. Seek to understand more about their thoughts, feelings and expectations for the coming school year, how the summer has been and if there’s anything you should know that can impact their child. Be sensitive to health disparities and financial challenges that families are facing. Acknowledge that young people have varied access to technology and space for doing schoolwork. Your goal is to make a connection with parents and families and invite an opportunity for ongoing communication.
At the beginning of the school year, together establish virtual community agreements. Develop ground rules together, some that are similar to in-person guidelines (e.g., give space/get space, confidentiality, no offensive or biased comments or "jokes") and others that are specific to virtual spaces (e.g., no side conversations in the chat or texting, no screen shots, no sharing offensive imagery).

Create a welcoming virtual space and a sense of community. This can include finding different ways and opportunities for students to participate (chat function, polls, verbal discussion, hand signals, breakout rooms, sharing through audio and video recordings, etc.). Create norms and routines for how virtual class and non-class time will take place and find ways to invite student input into that process. Some suggestions: designing a banner or icon for the class, creating a class Facebook page or a shared google doc, asking students to share their favorite songs to start class with or using during a break.

When you hold synchronous classes or group office hours, establish the rules for whether students’ cameras will be on or off and allow students to use virtual backgrounds for privacy. Follow school guidelines (i.e. some schools require students always be “off camera”) and if there aren’t school guidelines, allow students to choose whether they are on or off camera. Encourage students to personalize their off-camera image with a picture of themselves, a bitmoji. family member, pet or another picture that says something about themselves.

Pay extra attention to students’ social and emotional needs.

Provide a variety of ways that students can express feelings. It can be difficult to read emotions, moods, body language and facial expressions virtually. In addition, students may have a lot of strong thoughts and feelings about the pandemic and other current events. Institute regular mood and emotional temperature checks where students can share how they’re feeling,
either using an emoji, thumbs-up or down, 1-5 barometer scale or a one-word feeling check-in. Follow up if there are any students who seem overly distressed. At the end of each week, have students complete a google form survey to let you know how their week went, how they’re feeling and if there’s anything they want you to know. If needed, you could integrate some additional social and emotional activities periodically throughout the year.

- In order to address students’ important social needs, use a variety of modalities to encourage discussion and collaboration. This can include using different strategies during synchronous time together like small group break-out rooms, large group discussion, using the chat function, polls and easy, free word cloud generators like Mentimeter. Consider creating smaller learning communities within the whole class the way you might have a desk cluster, helping students build relationships within the larger class. During asynchronous work time, consider projects that involve students working together in pairs small groups.

- Provide the space for students to communicate in different ways. Students have many ways they already use to communicate; ask them what they like and see if it may be appropriate to bring into the classroom setting. If using chat and messaging functions feels safer and more comfortable for some students, allow them to share their thoughts and reflections that way instead of always reverting to verbal discussion. Be mindful that school—whether in person or online—should provide a variety of ways for students to express themselves.

- For additional ideas especially school-wide efforts, see CASEL’s Reunite, Renew and Thrive: SEL Roadmap for Reopening School.

Be aware of bias, bullying and online hate that can happen under the radar.

- Unfortunately, whether school takes place in person or online, young people find ways to target others with bias, bullying, cyberbullying and
Embrace new tools for new learning.

- Through unsupervised messaging, students can use the chat function to send mean and biased messages to their peers. They can create documents and slide shows and fill them with inappropriate and offensive words and images. In one school district, students posted documents filled with racist and heterosexist language. Remember to address this kind of behavior explicitly in your digital community agreements and highlight it with students regularly. Teach and discuss ways students can act as allies and encourage them to reflect on how they interact in digital spaces.

- As much as possible, disable functions that lend themselves to this type of behavior and check in with students regularly to assess whether this is happening. Work with your school or district to understand and improve those guidelines.

- Reflect on how your practices (e.g., curriculum, discipline, materials, access, routines, participation) promote or diminish equity in your virtual classroom.

Embrace new tools for new learning.

- There are many advantages to online learning and communities. For one, new tools can help students find low risk ways of bringing their voice into the discussion. In a physical classroom, some students may not feel comfortable expressing themselves verbally in whole class discussions. Online classrooms can slow down discussion and encourage participation in fun and easy ways. Students you might not hear much from verbally may participate more by using polls, chat or creating something.

- Think of this as an opportunity to expand your assignments and pedagogy by using engaging online apps. Your students are a good source and honest critic. Asking them what they like may also invest them more deeply in the learning. Try apps like Flipgrid, Sutori and others.
Whether instruction happens face to face or online, teachers want to be in community with their students. For students to learn and flourish, they must feel safe, respected and included.