The Ultimate Guide to Creating

Community

in the Virtual Classroom

TOP HAT

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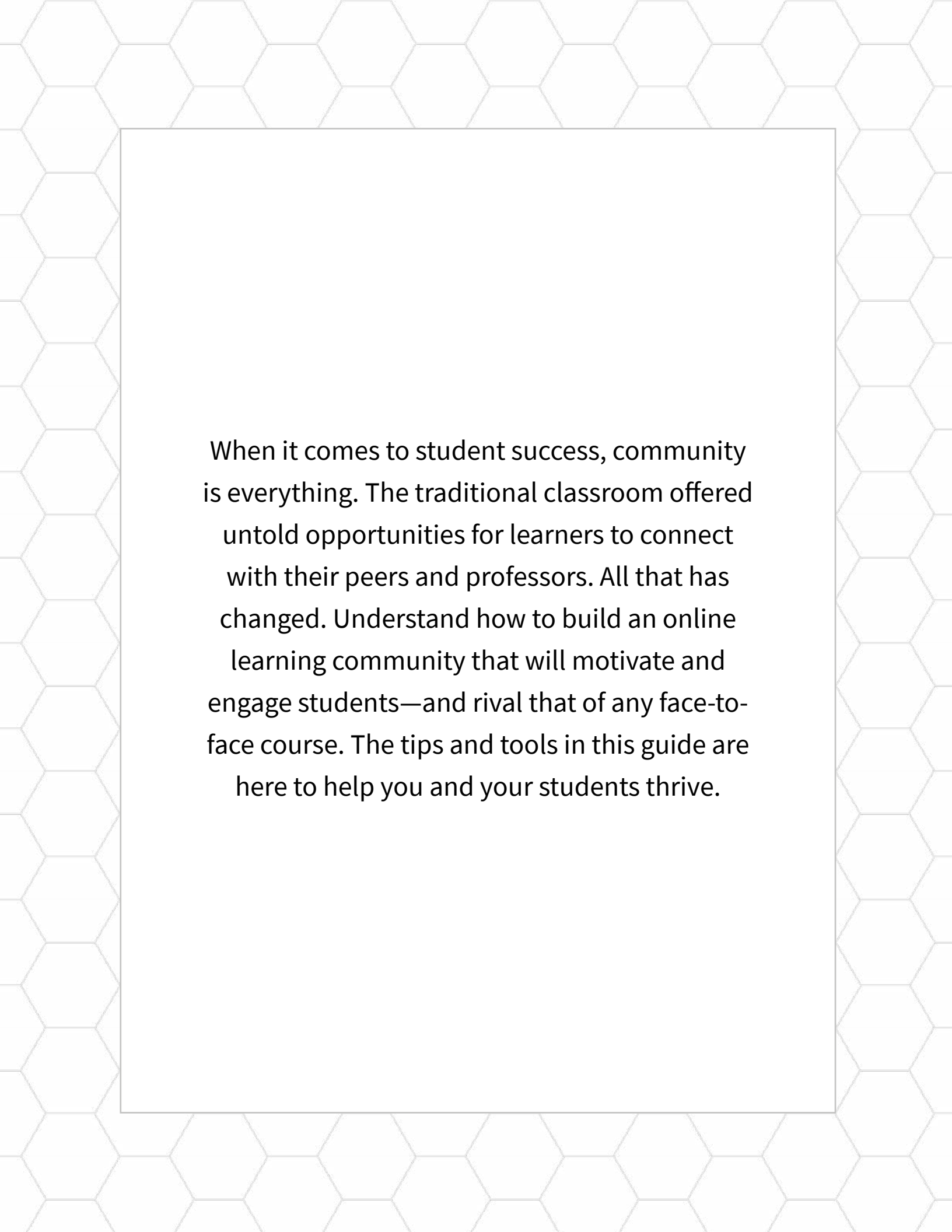
When it comes to student success, community is everything. The traditional classroom offered untold opportunities for learners to connect with their peers and professors. All that has changed. Understand how to build an online learning community that will motivate and engage students—and rival that of any face-to-face course. The tips and tools in this guide are here to help you and your students thrive.

Community: The Cornerstone for Student Success

Put yourself in the shoes of a college freshman starting classes in fall 2020. Your campus is likely closed and you're learning online, perhaps for the first time. You can't walk into a lecture hall and say hello to the students sitting next to you. You can't linger after class to talk with your professor. You can't exchange notes with friends or huddle together to organize a study group.

So much of what we take for granted as part of the higher ed experience now looks completely different. Absent opportunities to connect with peers and faculty on campus, the virtual classroom has become the place for students to find that human connection.

In the age of COVID and the shift to online learning, creating community has taken on renewed importance. So has knocking down the misconception that technology-mediated learning doesn't lend itself to cultivating the all-important feeling of belonging students crave. It may not happen with the same spontaneity as it does in a traditional classroom. And it does require creativity, planning and nurturing. But fostering a sense of community is every bit as possible in the virtual classroom as it is in a physical one. And given the importance of community and connection to student success, it's now more essential than ever.

Like any transition, creating an online learning community takes fresh thinking and the willingness to try new things. But with the right approach, you can turn your virtual classrooms into places of relevance, vitality and fellowship. Even if the semester is already underway, there are plenty of ideas and activities you can use to build the kind of connections that engage and motivate students and make the learning process meaningful for everyone.

We'd like to help you do just this.

In this guide, we explore the foundations for creating a vibrant online learning environment: How does your role evolve from instructor to that of 'community manager'? How can you make learning more inclusive and accessible to ensure every student participates? And most important, what are the tools, activities and approaches you can use to get students working and collaborating together?

We'll answer these questions and more to help you create an online learning environment that is more accessible, more empathetic and ultimately more human—one that will enable all students to thrive.

Community Matters

In the spring 2020 shift to remote teaching, 86 percent of students said they missed the social experience with other students while 84 percent missed face-to-face interactions with faculty.[1] Looking toward the fall semester, almost 9 out of 10 faculty members rated the importance of fostering community as moderate to high.[2]
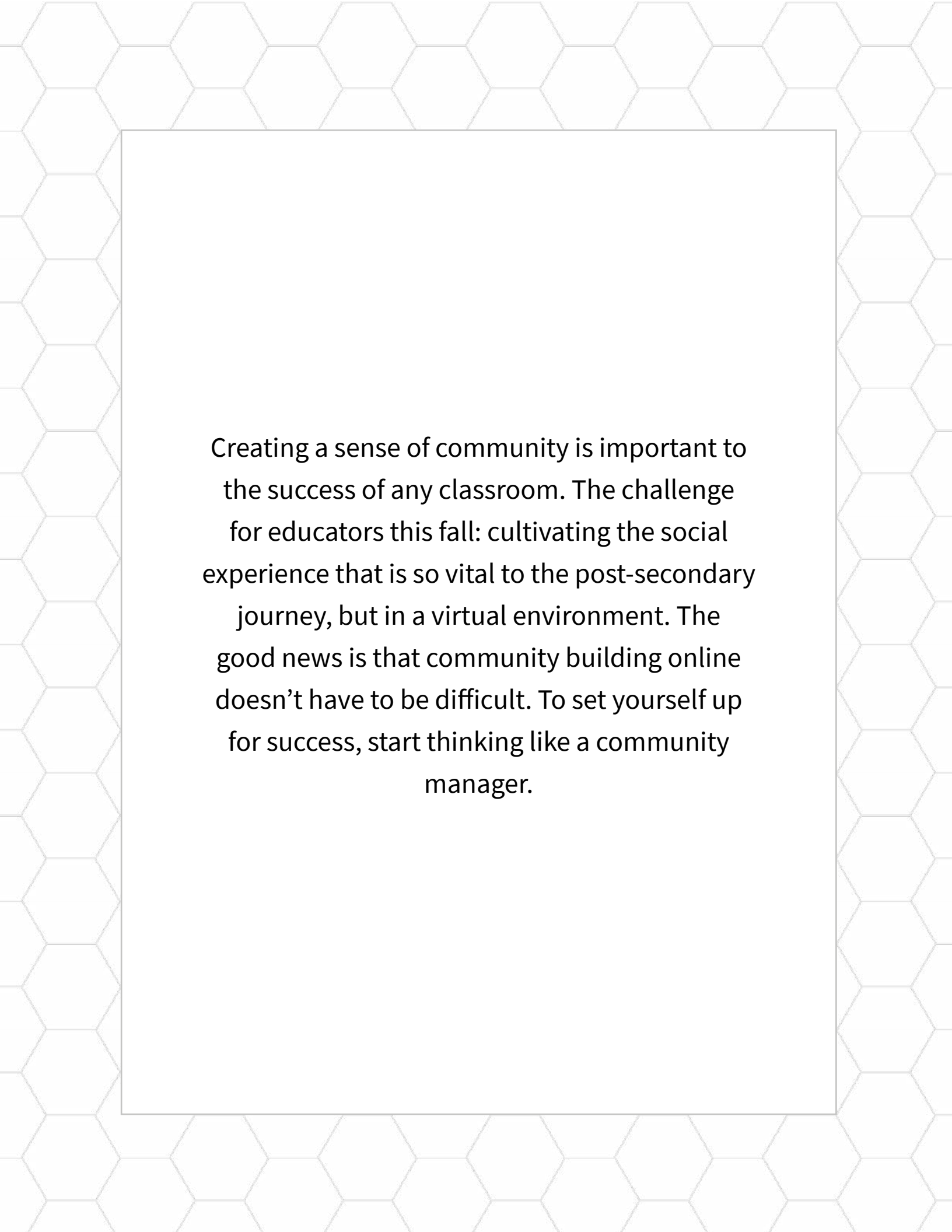
Motivate and Engage Every Student—
By Becoming a Community Manager

Creating a sense of community is important to the success of any classroom. The challenge for educators this fall: cultivating the social experience that is so vital to the post-secondary journey, but in a virtual environment. The good news is that community building online doesn't have to be difficult. To set yourself up for success, start thinking like a community manager.

Rethink Your Role—Embrace Community Management

A community manager seeks out new ways to engage students, and advocates for belonging and inclusion in and out of the classroom. The following nine approaches will help you strengthen connections with your students and drive purposeful engagement, whether you're teaching online, in person or some combination of the two.

1. Set Goals

What does success look like in terms of engagement? At the start of a learning activity, set objectives for real-time or self-paced interaction. For example, clearly outline how many times students should share responses in an online discussion board. Doing so will help you gauge learner progress and understand what recurring activities are working and which aren't.

2. Know Your Audience

What are the backgrounds and areas of interest of your students? Use a student interest inventory—as expanded upon below—to gauge academic and non-academic preferences as well as students' personal interests and circumstances. Doing this early in the semester will help you understand how to tie course content to their hobbies, passions and academic goals, which will ultimately get them more interested in their learning.

TRY IT IN YOUR CLASS

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Group Resume

For this icebreaker activity, split students into groups of 4–6. Have them state their hobbies, interests, work experience and additional factors included in the worksheet. This exercise works best in virtual breakout rooms and students can submit an image or PDF of their worksheet via Top Hat's file submission tool or in your learning management system (LMS). More great examples are below.

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3. Establish Your Tone & Voice

How does your passion, humor and empathy fit into your course delivery? While educational technology is great for connecting with students remotely, instructors new to teaching online may find it comes at the expense of having their personality shine through. Reflect on what makes you tick and look for opportunities to bring this to life in your course. This could mean sharing photos or areas of interest outside of class, or offering course announcements or case studies that match your background and unique experiences. All this will help humanize the online learning process and better replicate the feel of a traditional classroom.

4. Set Engagement Criteria

How will you allow your students to participate? In the same way that you have distinct preferences for how you communicate, so do your students. Be flexible. For those less inclined to speak up in front of classmates, a discussion thread is a great alternative. Also, consider relaxing the rules around grammar and punctuation for online discussions. For many, using video, memes and GIFs are valid forms of communication in their personal lives. If the goal is active participation, broadening what is permitted will help get more students engaged.

5. Understand Student Comfort Levels

Do all students need to have their cameras on in a live class? Not everyone has access to a stable Internet connection nor may they want to show their home environment on camera. Ensure real-time course components are balanced with opportunities for self-paced reflection through discussion forums or reading assignments.

#HigherEd

"Possibly helpful hint: Second week of synchronous classes and my students are exercising their rights not to turn on their videos so I asked them to place a photo, avatar, or meme on their profiles to indicate their current mood. They have embraced this and I've seen some fun stuff that makes speaking to a laptop tolerable and seems to engage them more with one another."

Kass McQuillen

6. Have a Plan

How can you make strategic use of activities to engage learners? Deliberate efforts to facilitate collaboration will allow you to build community among and with students. Mixing active learning opportunities with lectures, labs and discussions outside of class can help students explore course material in a deeper, more inviting way.

7. Give Students a Way to Interact With Each Other

What channels do students have access to for peer-to-peer engagement and collaboration? Ensure students have ways to support one another through ed tech or your LMS when it comes to group work, or just for staying in touch.

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Peer-to-Peer Collaboration

"During online lectures, I created opportunities for teamwork by enabling small group discussions in virtual breakout sessions. During the sessions, the students discussed practice problems and concepts, and I made myself available on-demand to provide support."

Frank Spors
Associate Professor, College of Optometry, Western University of Health Sciences

8. Provide Frequent Feedback

What channels can you use to engage with students? Participation in class is reciprocal, meaning students' contribution depends on your own responses via live video, in discussion threads or through your LMS. Ensure you have daily blocks in your calendar to reply to student messages and share feedback and guidance.

9. Revisit Your Objectives

How are your efforts at building community progressing? The early activities you facilitated served as benchmarks for student engagement—now use insights from those exercises to refine what you have planned for the remainder of the semester. Ensure the approaches you carry forward build upon community-centric values and leave behind the techniques that don't.

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Weekly Insights

View and analyze participation and assessment results in the Top Hat gradebook. A Weekly Course Report, delivered to your inbox, highlights students who excelled and those who struggled with course content—providing you with a chance to contact learners to offer support. With the Weekly Course Report, no student is left behind and everyone has a chance to succeed.

Learn More

Develop a Teaching Presence—By Being Your Authentic Self

With higher education's pivot to digital, cultivating a teaching presence can go a long way towards creating a sense of community. But in a remote environment, it can also be more challenging. Beyond the fact that a computer screen is now a barrier between you and your class, students may not be learning at the same time and pace as one another, meaning your presence must extend beyond your live or asynchronous curriculum delivery.

As you would in your face-to-face course, let students in on your background and interests beyond academia. If you can forge an environment of mutual empathy, students will feel more comfortable turning to you for support in and out of your classroom.

Be An Empathetic Leader

Creating meaningful interactions with students will make them feel a sense of belonging—though doing so can be difficult in online teaching. Follow these best practices to ensure you're able to bring your empathetic self to the virtual classroom.

1. Be Sincere and Candid

Start class with a personal story or anecdote to help students relate. Balance emails and course communications with passion and, if possible, connect the material to what's happening in the world and students' backgrounds. Allow your personality to shine through in the content you share.

2. Act on the Interests Of Students

Take the unique circumstances of students into account when designing learning activities. For instance, gauge what students want to learn about through frequent discussions and connect course content to their passions. Material that is relatable will motivate students to continue engaging.

3. Be Radically Available

Offer virtual office hours by appointment to ensure students get timely answers to their questions. Better yet, consider calling these 'student hours' to make it clear that you're there for them (more on this in chapter 4). During live classes you can also arrive 10 minutes before or stay 10 minutes after to have informal discussions and learn names and backgrounds.

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Help Students Feel Comfortable Around Each Other

"Students are given assignments completed by 10 of their peers, as a peer review mechanism, and identify micro-themes that they share in common. The point is that no matter who they are or why they're here, they should see that there is someone else who is like them, even if the class has 70 or 1000 people."

Lindsay Tan
Associate Professor, Interior Design,
Auburn University and Top Hat Customer

Craft a Meaningful Teaching Presence

An inviting teaching presence helps form and strengthen bonds between you and your students. The three pillars of a strong teaching presence are course design and organization, sparking discussion, and humanizing teaching. The following are some best practices for each of these categories.

Course Design and Organization

- Share an inviting message at the start of your course before the course overview
- Create opportunities for peer-to-peer learning outside of class time through group projects and having students respond to one another via discussion boards
- Comprehension checks distributed throughout lessons allow students to reflect on what was covered—and indicate the areas that you may need to review

Sparking Disucssion

- Dedicate the first couple classes to building trust through interactive activities and icebreakers
- Monitor discussion boards and take notes during live conversations to ensure equal participation and effort among students
- Encourage students to share any thoughts they have around course material and reward them with participation points

Humanizing Teaching

- Ensure you correct common misconceptions early on through [diagnostic exercises](#), formative assessments and pre-tests
- Make abstract concepts more digestible by using analogies, multiple examples, visuals, personal stories or even pop culture references
- Incorporate additional subject matter experts into your classroom through course readings, case studies or guest lectures

Put Community at the Center of Your Curriculum

According to Michelle Miller, Professor of Psychological Sciences at Northern Arizona University, building community isn't just something you do in the first 10 minutes of class. It's the product of good course design. Discussions, activities, how learning materials are presented—each ingredient in your course should be planned in a way that connects students to each other and to the instructor. As fun as an icebreaker might be, group projects, assignments and active learning exercises can be even more effective in getting students to connect and work together by creating a shared sense of purpose.

Incorporate Active Learning Into Your Course

These active learning strategies—which are grounded in learning science principles—will help you and your students learn from one another.

1. Space Out Deadlines and Tests

Frequent small assessments can be more beneficial than a longer form paper. Weekly quizzes help students apply what they have learned in small chunks improving knowledge retention and confidence.

2. Spaced Syllabus

Low-stakes or no-stakes quizzes help students recall information from previous modules without students feeling overwhelmed. An alternative option is to have students compare what they have learned today to concepts from earlier in the course.

3. The Minute Thesis

Similar to an exit ticket, students state the most important or challenging thing gleaned from a synchronous class. Students have a chance to voice confusion with course material allowing you to use these insights to tailor your next class.

4. Connection 10

Time set aside for reflection at the end of a real-time class can help students link ideas in the classroom to other avenues of their lives. Consider having students answer: "why does the concept matter in the world outside the classroom?" Doing so will help students realize what their academic and social communities have in common.

5. Student-Generated Exam Questions

Give students a say in the testing process by letting them share ideas for exam questions. Not only does this help students reflect on what they have learned through the course, it also solidifies connections between concepts.

Teach with an All-in-One Virtual Classroom Solution

Make learning online more active and engaging with Top Hat's virtual classroom capabilities. Present slides, ask interactive questions and let your students see you—all in one place. Learn more about how Top Hat elevates the online teaching experience.

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CHAPTER TWO

Get to Know
Your Students

Knowing your audience is arguably the most important step in building connections with your students. What are their goals for choosing this course? What lights them up outside of class? How has their lived experience shaped their journey to higher ed? And, more tactically, how well equipped are students to become active members of the learning community?

Understanding what interests and motivates students allows you to connect course concepts in more meaningful ways. It also makes learning more relevant and engaging.
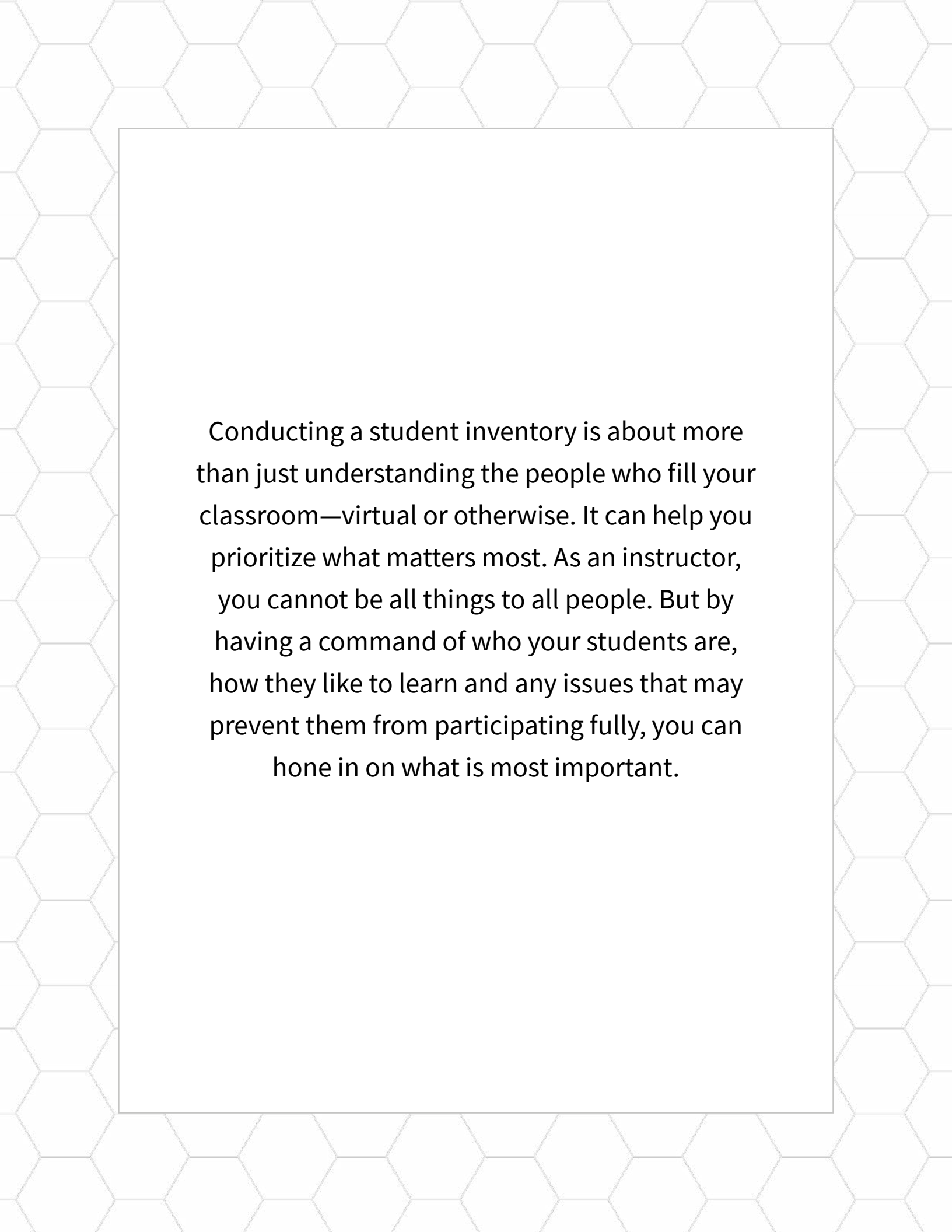
Use a Student Interest Inventory

What are the issues that matter most to your students? Ask them early and often. Find out what they're passionate about and what media they're consuming. Understanding the cultural milieu of the classroom makes it easier to find common ground.

One way to personalize the classroom experience is with a student interest inventory. These helpful forms function as a 'get to know you' that can be distributed prior to the start of the semester or in the first week of class. They can also be used at the beginning of a new course module to bridge student interests to upcoming course concepts.

Here are ideas for your survey to get you started.

Focus Area	Why It's Important	What To Ask
Academic Priorities	Understanding your students' educational background and academic goals can help you connect course content to their larger motivations for attending your class.	• What is your major? • How does this course fit into your degree plan? • What is your total course load this semester? • What is most important to you in terms of your learning objectives for this course? • What are your career plans and how does this course fit into them?
Barriers To Learning	It's important to identify the potential barriers to learning some students face when designing assignments, exams and class presentations. This way, you can get ahead of the curve to provide flexible alternatives and ensure a level playing field.	• Do you have reliable access to a computer/Internet? • Do you have access to spaces conducive to quiet study? • What responsibilities do you have outside of school? Work, family, extracurriculars? • Is there anything that might prevent you from attending class or • participating fully in this course?
Learning Preferences	Getting feedback from your students early and often is a great way to ensure they feel they have a stake in their own learning. It can also help avoid missteps by focusing on activities and approaches that will resonate with your class.	• Give an example of a classroom learning activity where you learned the most. Why? • What qualities made them effective? • What about the least effective course or instructor you had?
Outside of Class	Finding common ground beyond academics can provide great fodder for making personal connections with your students. It can also make learning more engaging by connecting course material to areas of interest outside of class.	• What's your favorite hobby? • What's your favorite food/movie/book/musical artist? • Where would you like to travel to most in the world? • If you could meet anyone, dead or alive, who would it be? • As we begin this course, what else should I know about you?

Conducting a student inventory is about more than just understanding the people who fill your classroom—virtual or otherwise. It can help you prioritize what matters most. As an instructor, you cannot be all things to all people. But by having a command of who your students are, how they like to learn and any issues that may prevent them from participating fully, you can hone in on what is most important.

Leverage Your Student Inventory to Build Connections

The results of your inventory don't have to be for your eyes only. Consider sharing them with the entire class to help students get a better understanding of those around them. This can be done live through video conference or by using a discussion board. If you have a large class, pairing up students to discuss the results and then sharing their insights with the rest of the class (think-pair-share) is a great way to break the ice and get students reflecting together.

Get Students Interacting with Icebreakers

Icebreakers play an important role in creating a more inviting environment for students, especially in the first few days of class. A good icebreaker will help you spur discussion, build camaraderie and allow students to feel welcomed in your virtual classroom.

Storytime in Three Words

Ideal for smaller class sizes (20–30 students), each student contributes three words to a story. This can be done live through video conferencing or by sharing their words in a discussion thread. The story can begin with a prompt from the instructor, such as what they did over their summer break or what they hope to accomplish in the course.

Three Ps

Divide students into small groups or have them post in a discussion thread. The goal is to share three facts about themselves: something personal, something professional and something peculiar, such as an interesting hobby or habit. It should be noted, the personal facts don't have to be anything too personal; it could be something as simple as a country they've always wanted to travel to.

What's in Front of You?

Have students take and share a picture of something salient in their immediate workspace—perhaps a photo or object with special meaning. They then share the significance behind their choice. This icebreaker provides a humanizing behind-the-scenes look into the reality of remote learning. If you have a large class, these photos can be shared through a discussion thread or in small batches as the semester unfolds.

Then Versus Now

In this exercise, instructors pose 'then vs. now' questions in a discussion thread. For example, 'what did you want to be when you grew up?' and 'what career do you picture yourself having now?' Results can be shared and compared in a word cloud to show the variety of student answers. Time permitting, you can call on students to share a short anecdote about their responses.

Around the World

Instructors provide a click-on-target question in the form of a map and encourage students to click on their geographical location. This is fun for both small groups or large classes, and can also provide the instructor with a stronger understanding of students' schedules, given their time zones.

Spark Great Discussion

Discussion forums are a powerful way for students and faculty to build community in online learning environments. Well planned discussions create opportunities for students to practice and sharpen a number of skills, including the ability to articulate and defend positions, consider different points of view, provide constructive feedback and create in-depth reflective responses. Here are a few ways to create more engaging discussions in your classroom.

Make Discussion Moderation Every Student's Job

According to Kathleen Ives from the National Laboratory of Education Transformation, instructors who encourage students to act as stewards of online discussions often end up seeing higher levels of engagement. Sharing accountability—and making this expectation explicit—ensures that everyone has a stake in making discussions meaningful and productive.

Include Multimedia Elements

Adding videos, GIFs and images for your class to react to help students reflect on course content in different ways. Not only are these great ways to stimulate discussion, by diversifying how students learn, you are more likely to maintain engagement and attentiveness during class.

Have Students Submit Their Own Discussion Questions

Sarita McCoy Gregory from Kennesaw State University recommends having students submit ideas for discussion questions along with their responses. This can make the process more fun and engaging while helping students develop higher order thinking skills.

Encourage students to comment on their peers' answers

By asking students to reflect on their peers' answers, you give them the chance to learn from each other. Providing a framework for this is important in keeping things on track. For example, you might ask students to identify the strengths of a peer's response and what they could do to make their argument even stronger.

Making Discussions Inclusive

Jesse Stommel, a Digital Learning Fellow and Senior Lecturer at the University of Mary Washington, emphasizes the importance of building a 'community of care.' This involves prioritizing relationships and wellbeing over compliance or having the correct answer. Modelling the right behavior is paramount. Stommel recommends asking genuine, open-ended questions and not being afraid to let the conversation wander. Celebrating risk-taking and modelling "what it looks like to be wrong and to acknowledge when you're wrong" can build a more trusting environment.

Form Community With and Among Students

In the rapid shift to emergency remote teaching in spring 2020, 86 percent of students greatly missed the opportunity to connect and socialize with one another while 52 percent lamented the loss of regular access to faculty.[3] The following are some tactics to help you get to know your students' histories and educational journeys in formal and informal ways.

Learn Student Names

The small things matter. In a [study](#) of a large undergraduate biology class, it was found that an instructor's ability to remember and call students by name led to students feeling more valued, more invested in the course, and more comfortable seeking help.

Peer Review Assignments

David Boud, a professor at the University of Technology Sydney, says that peer learning is "a way of moving beyond independent to interdependent or mutual learning." Giving students the opportunity to grade each others' work, particularly with low stakes assessments, or provide constructive feedback is one way to achieve this. To do this effectively, ensure students understand the learning objective and share a grading rubric or framework to encourage constructive feedback.

Adopt Communication Channels For Informal Conversations

Sometimes the best conversations are spontaneous. Providing informal channels for students to communicate allows them to collaborate on assignments, share study tips and discuss activities and interests outside of class.

Create A Graffiti Wall

Have students use a whiteboarding or online drawing tool to write, draw and otherwise demonstrate their understanding of a particular concept. Encourage collaboration by having students add words or images to their peers' creations. Novel approaches like this can help deepen understanding while providing instructors with a high-level understanding of how students are progressing through course material.

Implement Weekly Questions

Ask students one question each week to give them a chance to share what is going on in their lives outside the classroom. Ask questions like "Share your favorite topic to research outside of school" (sports statistics, outer space, history of a random item, a particular television show, etc.). This is a fun way to get students engaging and can help you identify themes or points of connection that are relevant to course objectives.

Use Assessments to Know Where Students Are At

One of the best ways to build an effective online learning community is making sure students receive frequent and effective feedback. The key in online learning is to establish a consistent rhythm for doing just this.

Diagnostic assessments are one way to accomplish this goal. They can help gauge class and individual progress, allowing you to zero in on more challenging concepts or individual students who may need help. Here are some examples to get started.

Concept Maps

This approach gives students the opportunity to learn through visual connections and sketches. Students are asked to create a visual representation of a concept or piece of information after they are provided with an initial question (related to course material). When forming a map, concepts are joined together using connecting words like "are," "can be used for" and "that contain," to name a few. This type of assessment demonstrates how students structure and connect course concepts and may expose gaps in knowledge. It can also be used to stimulate conversation and debate or as an opportunity to reflect on learnings.

Response Journal

Response journals are personal records that students keep to reflect on material that they are watching, reading or listening to. They can be used to strengthen connections between students by asking them to comment on each other's entries, discuss points of disagreement or ask questions.

Poster Presentations

Posters and other visual displays give students the opportunity to unpack their learning in a different way than they would with a written assignment. They can either upload photos of their poster for other students to comment on, or can post a short video of themselves explaining their content.

Muddiest Point

This is a quick assessment technique that asks students to take a minute to write down the most difficult or confusing part of a lesson, lecture or reading. This is an easy way for instructors to understand where students are struggling most. By asking the class to provide tips and suggestions to their peers, it's also a great way to stimulate discussion and deepen the understanding of course concepts in different ways.

Frequest, Low Stakes Quizzes

Michelle Miller, Professor of Psychological Sciences at North Arizona University, emphasizes regular low-stakes assessments as opposed to the one big killer assignment that shows up in the final week of the semester. This is a great way to assess comprehension while providing a consistent rhythm for student feedback. This also helps prepare students for capstone assignments or high-stakes exams by building their confidence.

Make Learning Active—and Bring Students Together

Active learning is about engaging students in activities that deepen learning. Infusing dialog, debate, writing and problem-solving exercises throughout your curriculum has been shown to yield many benefits. Beyond bringing people together, this includes student satisfaction, knowledge retention and improved exam performance. Here are some simple ways to incorporate active learning into the online classroom.

Practice and Feedback

Consider how you'll give students an opportunity for practice and feedback with both low- and high-stakes assignments. For example, students could analyze and annotate an assigned reading with their classmates using an online teaching platform or LMS.

Polls And Quizzes

If you normally ask students questions to break up lecture content, you can ask similar questions in online discussion forums or by using polls or quizzes. This boosts engagement while identifying gaps in student learning.

Video Assignments

Rather than handing in a paper, students can complete video assignments or make video presentations using digital tools that allow them to easily record both screen content and their video stream.

Interactive Readings

With digital course materials or 'smart' textbooks, you can incorporate active learning principles into reading assignments. Sections of text can be broken up with multimedia elements and embedded questions to test for understanding before students move on.

#HigherEd

Your first-year students are having trouble making friends right now because of social restrictions, masks, etc. Use breakout rooms & groups and give good advice: "Before you start working on your task everyone introduce themselves, say where you're from, etc." #PandemicTeaching
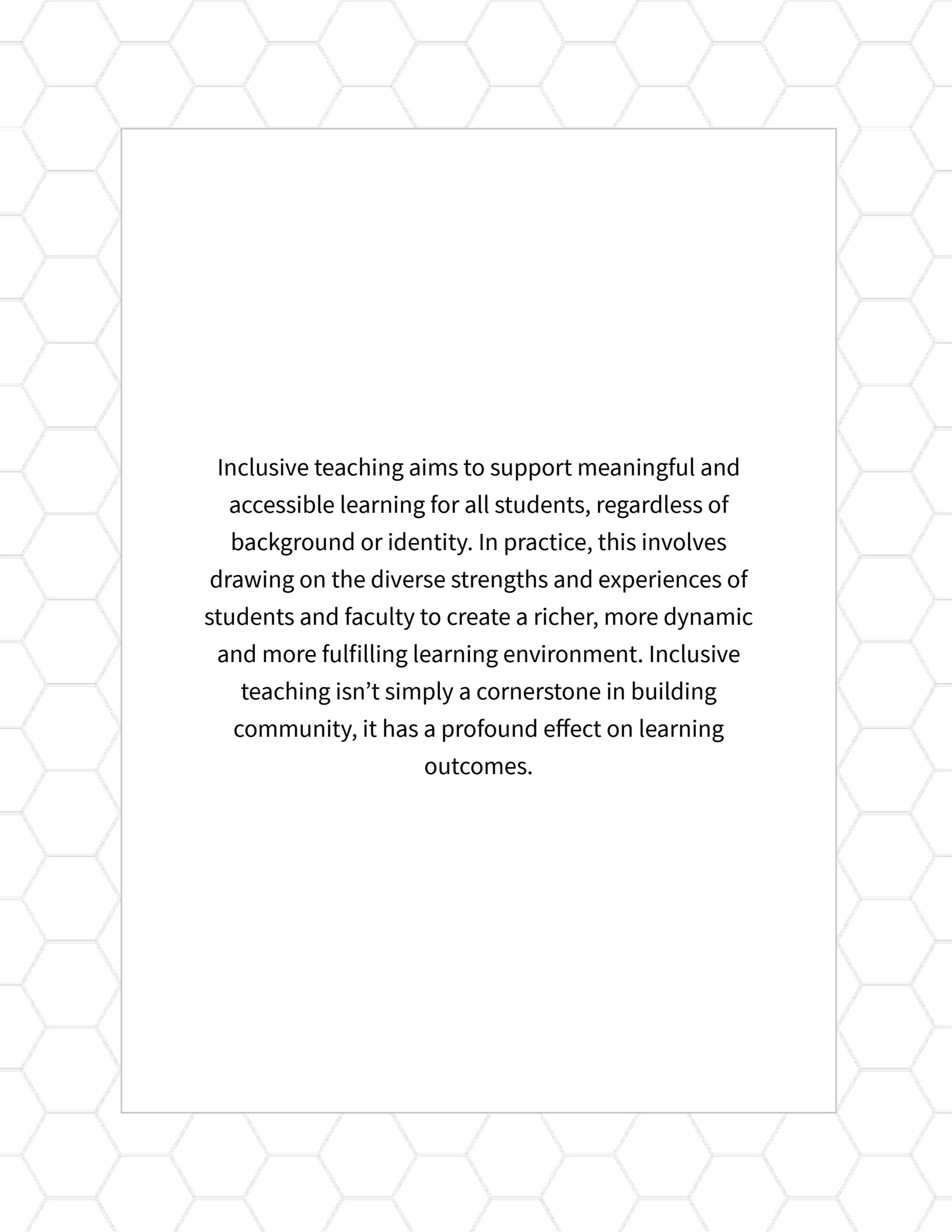
James M. Lang

It may take a little planning and experimentation but creating a deeper sense of community in your online courses is well within reach. Integrating activities and tools to understand and engage students on an ongoing basis will bring people together while giving you insights to provide meaningful feedback and keep people moving forward in the right direction.

Inclusivity in the Classroom

Inclusive teaching aims to support meaningful and accessible learning for all students, regardless of background or identity. In practice, this involves drawing on the diverse strengths and experiences of students and faculty to create a richer, more dynamic and more fulfilling learning environment. Inclusive teaching isn't simply a cornerstone in building community, it has a profound effect on learning outcomes.

Put Inclusive Teaching Into Practice Online

The principles of inclusive teaching ensure students feel a sense of belonging and have access to the learning materials and support they need in order to realize their academic potential.[4] Here, we provide four principles to help you lay the foundation for an inclusive online classroom.
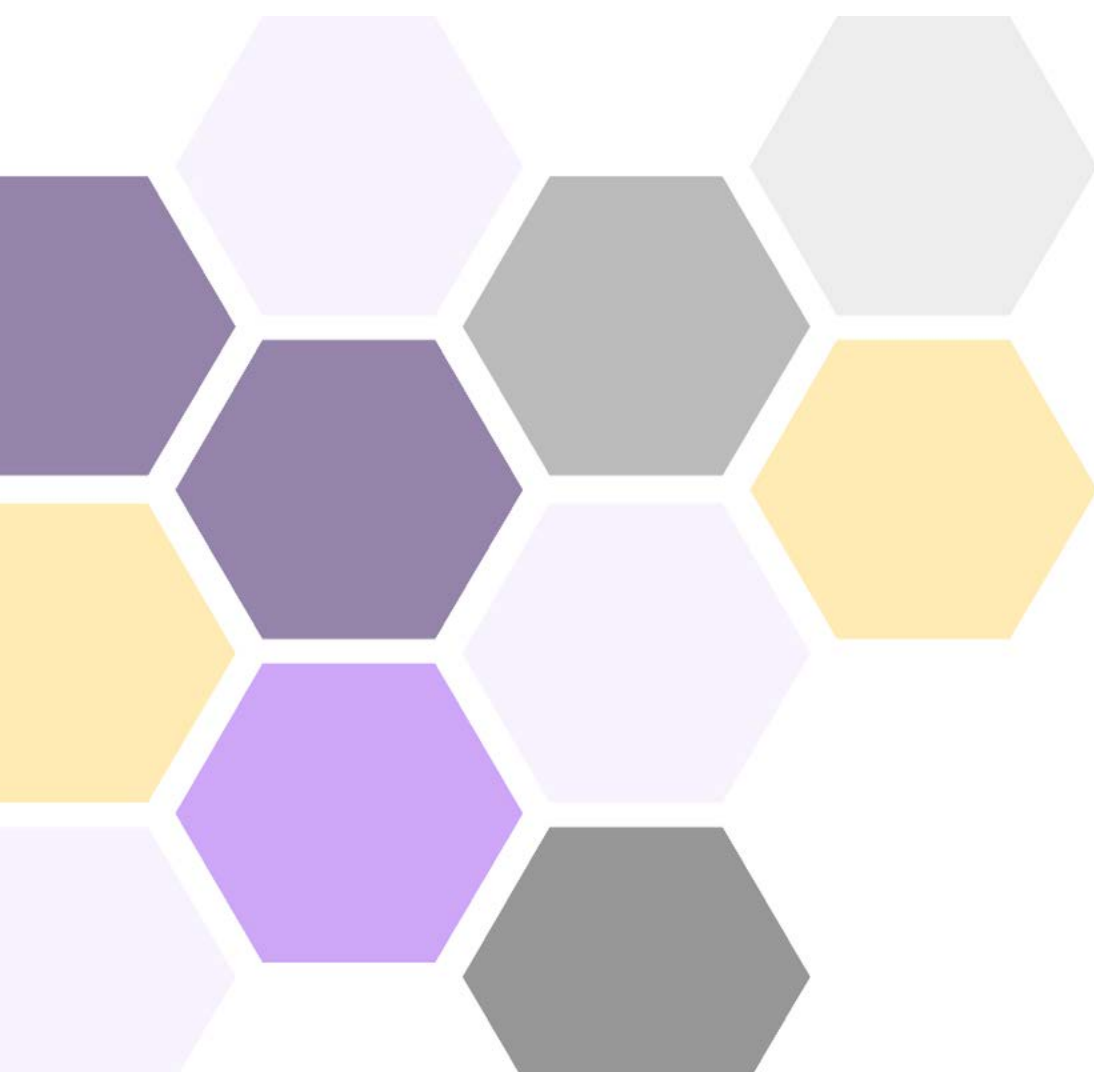
Reflect On Your Own Teaching Beliefs

Take the time to examine your own experiences, relationships and impact to identify opportunities for change.

- **Reflect on Your Students' Identities:** Examine the contexts and conditions in which students may find themselves while taking your course. Reevaluate the assumption that all students are in a space that provides them with a productive learning environment.
- **Monitor Your Interactions with Students:** If you are recording your live class sessions, try re-watching the videos and taking notes on student interactions, the types of examples you use and the clarity of your explanations. Consider asking yourself what trends or specific actions stand out, and the impact they might have on your students.
- **Ask for Feedback:** Try asking a trusted colleague or mentor to observe your online course setup or view one of your recorded lecture sessions and provide their comments.

Establish a Classroom Climate That Fosters Belonging

It is important to understand your learners, their backgrounds, previous online experiences and individual needs. Online courses provide unique opportunities to check in with your students and partner with them to create a supportive learning environment.

- **Use an Online Survey Tool:** Ask your students about their preferences, needs and concerns regarding your online course. How do they like to collaborate with their peers? What lecture style works best for them? What is their preferred method of communication (email, course announcements, discussion board, etc.)? Their responses can help you be more mindful in accommodating students' personal situations and addressing potential barriers to learning.

- **Ensure Students Are Able Meet Your Expectations:** This can include holding virtual office or '[student hours](#),' dedicating specific blocks to responding to emails, chats and other messages, and making time to simply check in. At the beginning of the semester, take time to walk your class through the different tools and systems they will rely on to fuel their learning.

- **Provide Opportunities for Interaction:** Informal activities such as chatting in discussion forums, group channels or through video conferences will help build a sense of community and ensure students feel more connected to each other.

Set Explicit Expectations

For many students this may be their first time taking an online course. This provides an opportunity to discuss what you expect of your learners and what they can expect of you as an instructor.

- **Create Community Agreements:** This can be done in a shared document or a discussion thread where students provide their own perspectives on online etiquette, norms and expectations. Students can also be charged with doing their part to establish and maintain an inclusive and supportive online learning community.
- **Make Assignment Expectations Explicit:** Take time to provide clarity about assignment instructions, how and when they should be submitted and what resources are available to ensure the work can be completed successfully. Walking them through an example can really help bring this to life. You can also share rubrics with students to ensure the grading process is transparent.
- **Make Use of Frequent Quizzes:** Provide a number of low-stakes opportunities early in the semester for students to demonstrate their learning. Early success will help them to stay motivated as the semester unfolds.

Select Course Content That Recognizes Diversity

Consider ways to integrate relevant online course materials that reflect diverse perspectives. You can also encourage students to play an active role in this process by sharing resources they find online.

- **Ask Students to Share Materials:** Consider encouraging your students to share articles, videos and news media that relate to course topics and reflect a range of different backgrounds and perspectives.

- **Diversify Your Syllabus and Course Materials:** If you assign text or media that may be problematic or incorporate stereotypes, identify the shortcomings and consider supplementing them with other course materials. Encourage your students to think critically about course materials and potential biases to strengthen their analytical skills.

- **Make Use of Real-World Examples:** You can draw on external resources, and more personal anecdotes that are relevant to the social and cultural diversity of your students. This helps ensure students see themselves and their own backgrounds reflected in the community you've built.

The learning environment we create is directly correlated with student motivation, engagement and the likelihood of persisting and succeeding in their studies. An inclusive, trusting environment also has the added benefit of inviting greater participation and risk taking. After all, exploring, challenging and wrestling with ideas is what higher education is all about.

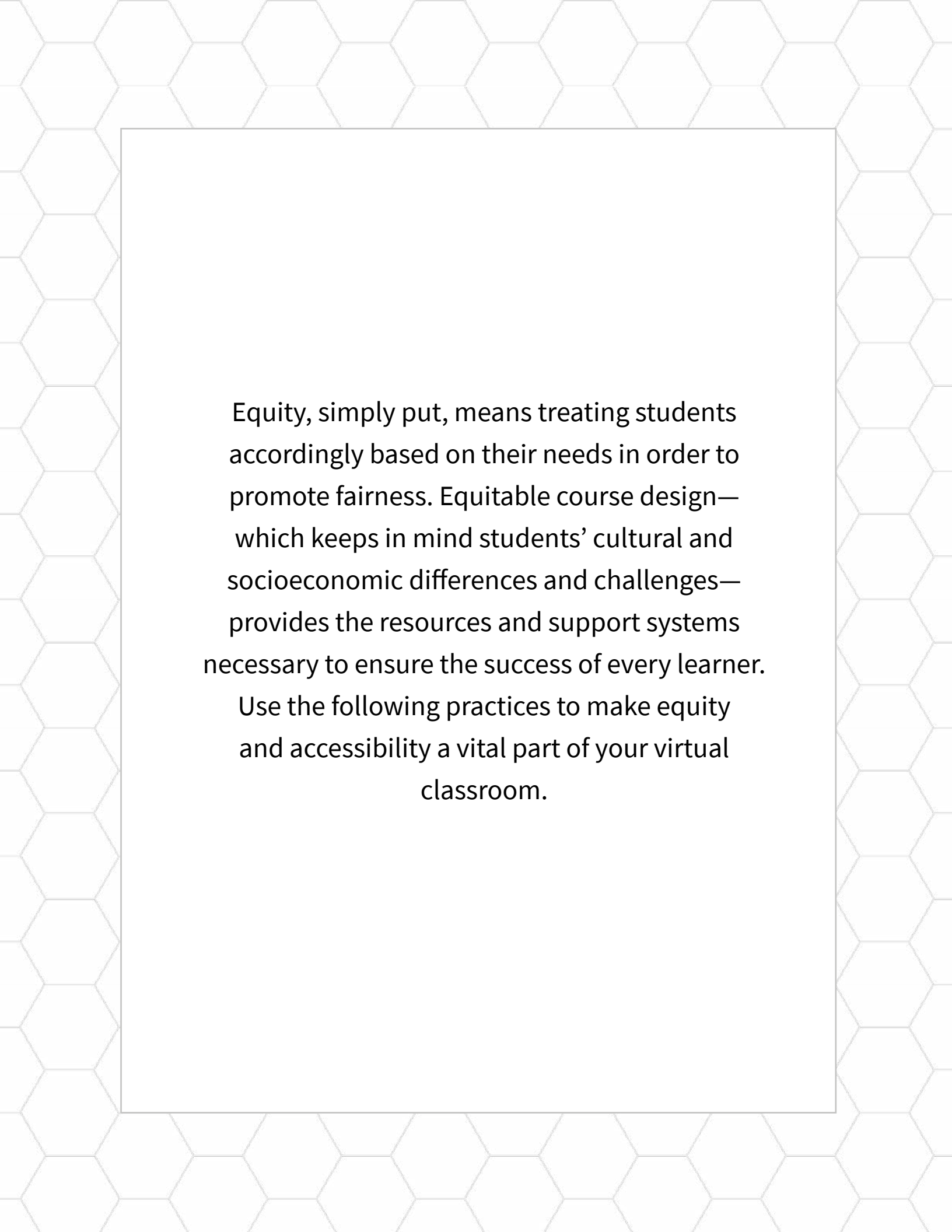## Fuel Student Learning with Actionable Insights

Attendance, participation, quizzes, assignments—don't just track the data, get the insights to ensure every student succeeds. See how our Weekly Course Report makes it easy to understand class performance and pinpoint students in need of extra help.

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Make **Equity** a Touchstone of Your Classroom Community

Equity, simply put, means treating students accordingly based on their needs in order to promote fairness. Equitable course design— which keeps in mind students' cultural and socioeconomic differences and challenges— provides the resources and support systems necessary to ensure the success of every learner. Use the following practices to make equity and accessibility a vital part of your virtual classroom.

Make All Students Feel Welcome

Every educator wants students to get the most out of their course. Aim to facilitate a communal culture in your classroom—one that is based around relationships and has a 'feel good' atmosphere.[5]

Doing so will ensure your students learn from you and their peers and not just from assessments or tasks.

To create a communal culture, start thinking of yourself as an equity-minded instructor. Question your own assumptions, recognize the stereotypes that harm student success and evaluate your pre-existing attitudes to create change. Prioritizing student success can take work—here are some helpful resources to get you started.

Recognize Your Implicit Biases

Implicit biases are unconscious attitudes and decisions that influence your worldview. Everyone has them and you can recognize your own by taking a test offered by [Project Implicit](#), an initiative from Harvard University. Awareness is the first step to avoid making students feel separate or less valued. Being aware of your biases enables you to be a better support system for students and can help you encourage student success.

Create a Tailored Online Classroom

Once you're aware of your unconscious biases, consider how they influence your classroom. The [Leading Equity Center](#) offers three, free self-paced modules, which will help you create an individualized online environment that improves student outcomes. Students will have access to the resources they need to excel in your course—such as additional writing support—while others may receive extra time to complete assessments based on their unique individual circumstances.

Include a Basic Needs Security Statement in Your Syllabus

[The Hope Center for College, Community and Justice](#) is a nonprofit action research center that documents food and housing insecurity experienced by students in the U.S. The Center offers actionable tips on creating a [basic needs security statement](#), which students can refer to when seeking help related to safe places to sleep or in times when face-to-face learning took place, their campus' food pantry. This statement may also encompass mental health services and financial support resources that your campus offers, ensuring a more holistic approach to supporting student wellbeing and success.
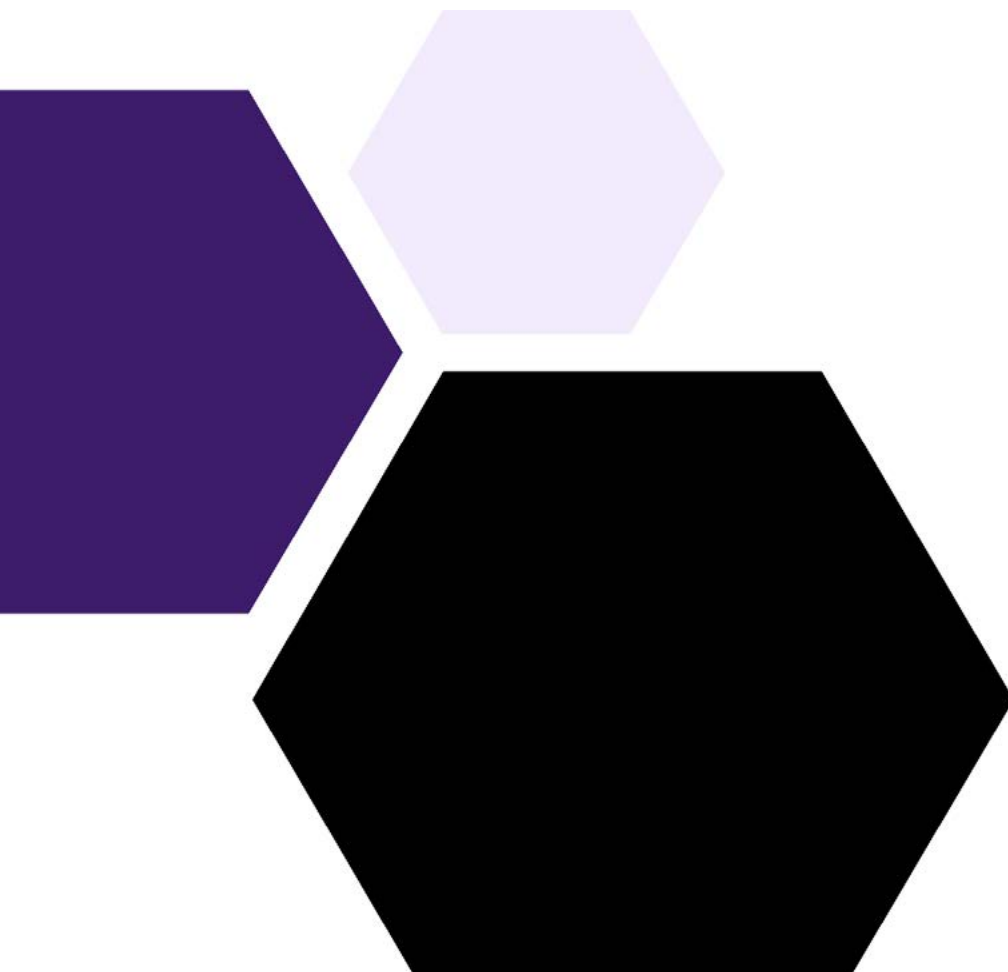
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"Basic needs security statement from my syllabus: "Any student who faces challenges securing food or housing and believes this may affect their learning is urged to contact the Dean of Students. And let me know if you're comfortable doing so, because there are ways I can help.""

Jesse Stommel

Represent All Cultures and Backgrounds

Culturally responsive pedagogy responds to and celebrates a variety of backgrounds. This pedagogy involves educators recognizing and eradicating their own cultural biases, understanding students' cultural backgrounds and nurturing them to promote a sense of belonging. While institutions need to make their own adjustments to reflect the changing times, instructors can begin by incorporating culturally responsive teaching into their classrooms by following these guiding principles.

	Best Practice	**Make It Work in Your Course**
Create an Inclusive Classroom	Ensure students have multiple ways to get to know each other.	Consider breaking students up into groups that represent a variety of cultural backgrounds.
Reinforce Positively	Encourage students to share what readings and case studies they would like to see in your course based on their values and backgrounds.	Class constitutions—a course document where students provide input on what and how learning takes place—ensure all voices are represented.
Enhance Meaning	Facilitate course experiences that draw on higher order thinking skills. Address real-world issues in an action-oriented way.	Provide timely and relevant case studies for students to work on. Consider offering resources, support systems or even information on how to get involved with activism (such as GoFundMe links) to ensure discussions continue beyond your classroom.
Continuously Listen to Students	Collect regular and frequent feedback in order to facilitate a holistic learning environment built around student needs.	Stop-start-continue exercises are where students indicate what they wish you would stop doing, what they wish you would start doing and what they would like you to continue doing with respect to content delivery, assessments and more.

BECOME AN ACTIVE SUPPORT SYSTEM

"Interior design has been a narrow funnel to success depending on race. I incorporated equity in my teaching because I feel the weight of the world in all the decisions I make. I'm going to use my privilege to do what I can to help."

Lindsay Tan
Associate Professor and Program Coordinator, Interior Design,
Auburn University and Top Hat customer

Make Your Community Accessible

Accessible teaching means accommodating individual student needs and circumstances—and providing learners with multiple ways to engage with course content. Universal design for learning (UDL) can help you do this, through these three pillars.

	Best Practice	Make It Work in Your Course
Multiple Means of Representing Content	Ensure course content is presented in at least two ways.	Complement live lectures with lecture recordings or PDF transcripts.
Multiple Means of Action or Expression	Ensure course content is optimized for different learning styles.	Balance lectures with text, media and discussions to appeal to all students' needs and strengths.
Multiple means of engagement in learning	Enable collaboration among students.	Use breakout rooms or small group activities to replicate an intimate community feel.

A Framework For Student Success

Do you understand how students are performing academically—and how to support them in an online environment? Providing tailored support starts with open and regular communication. At a time when learning and teaching don't always occur at the same time, feedback loops allow for increased unity, transparency and trust—and help students realize that you're a support system and mentor for them to turn to during uncertain times. Here are some best practices to increase student-professor connections through formative assessments.

1. Highlight What Good Performance Looks Like

Share rubrics listing what A-F grades encompass, then have students mark a sample paper based on your criteria. Students can compare responses, leading to a class-wide discussion on why they graded the assignment that way—and what's expected of them when completing an assignment. These discussions replicate the peer-to-peer learning that was a big part of the on-campus experience.

2. Provide Timely, Action-Oriented Feedback

Formative assessments allow for increased communication between you and your students. This communication must be reciprocated during grading to ensure students are set up for success for future assignments. While marking assessments, provide timely and tailored feedback based on where students should direct their attention. This might include highlighting a particular area of your syllabus or including a link to a YouTube video that reviews the concept(s) they struggled with.

3. Reframe 'office hours' as 'Student Hours'

Position yourself as a community figure students can turn to for support—which shows your care and concern for their wellbeing outside your classroom. As a [philosophy PhD student](#) from the University of Southern California notes: "A lot of students don't know what "office hours" are, and assume it's limited time for you to be working (which they feel guilty for taking up), rather than time set aside specifically for them. I started calling them "student hours" last term instead, and way more students showed up!"

4. Ensure Students Have Multiple Opportunities to Succeed

Everyone needs some extra help once in a while. Help students by offering opportunities to resubmit an assignment they did poorly on. Or reward students with a one to two percent bonus on an upcoming assessment if they attend a virtual study session offered by you or your teaching assistants (TAs). These are just two ways to set students up for success by being empathetic and offering them a second chance when it comes to assessments.

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"Do you have a strict attendance policy? If so, students w/ chronic health issues, including mental health issues, will be penalized through ableism. Reconsider what it is you're grading when you grade attendance· Is it course content mastery? If not, why're you grading it?"

Karen Moroski-Rigney

Take Your Lecture Recordings to the Next Level

Easily record class meetings, including slides, discussions and more so students don't miss out on the 'in-class' experience. Improve self-paced learning by making students feel like part of a community, even if they can't be there in person.

Book a demo

Practical Ideas

Inside Your Classroom:

- Recognize your own implicit biases
- Use an ePortfolio—a digital space housing students' work in your course—to track and measure progress and goals
- Facilitate surveys to gauge student comfort and satisfaction
- Exercise extra patience with mature and international students who aren't as familiar with postsecondary norms and for whom English may be a second language[6]

Outside Your Classroom:

- Include typically under-represented scholars and research in your reading list
- Design your course content to represent student demographics
- Follow the 'we greet,' 'we meet,' and 'we work' framework for your office hours as outlined by Viji Sathy

Create Community—At Your Own Pace

In the face-to-face classroom, the feeling of belonging was a vital pillar of the student experience. It made students feel comfortable and welcome, strengthened camaraderie between educator and learner and promoted collaboration, engagement and interaction. Community was a reason for students to plan study sessions with friends, to stay late after lecture and bat around ideas, to attend office hours in order to get a sense of their learning progress. When it came to student success, community was everything—but that doesn't have to change in the remote classroom. With the right strategies, the same sense of belonging can be created virtually.

In an ideal world, you'd be ready to start your first day of the new term with experience-based ideas for how to forge a sense of community in your classes. But this term is far from ideal. Cut yourself some slack and recognize that creating community—while nice if you have a plan from the outset—can also be established as you go. Take it for what it is: an experiment you can have fun with and one you can continuously refine to suit the needs of your students and course.

Problem-solving activities, discussion questions, presentations, group work—it's never too late to get started. Even small exercises can go a long way towards creating the class you want. The more you invest in incorporating active learning techniques and make learning collaborative and participatory, the greater the return will be for you and your students.

In the same way that many drops of water fill a bucket, small actions can forge an online learning community that reduce feelings of isolation and loneliness among many students who have no separation from home, school and work life. Ultimately, facilitating opportunities for interaction will help strengthen camaraderie, trust and empathy between you and your students—an aspiration worthy of every educator.

1. Top Hat. (2020). Adrift in a Pandemic. 3,000+ Higher Ed Students on Remote Learning and their Plans for Fall 2020. https://tophat.com/teaching-resources/interactive/adrift-in-a-pandemic

2. Top Hat. (2020). COVID-19 Faculty Preparedness Report. https://tophat.com/teaching-resources/interactive/faculty-preparedness-survey/

3. Top Hat. (2020). Adrift in a Pandemic. 3,000+ Higher Ed Students on Remote Learning and their Plans for Fall 2020. https://tophat.com/teaching-resources/interactive/adrift-in-a-pandemic/

4. Columbia Center for Teaching and Learning. (2020). *Inclusive Teaching and Learning Online*. https://ctl.columbia.edu/resources-and-technology/teaching-with-technology/teaching-online/inclusive-teaching/

5. Adapted from "Strategies for More Inclusive Teaching" Derrick Spiva at Top Hat Engage 2020.

6. Adapted from "Top Hat as a Tool for Justice" by. Natasha Liebig at Top Hat Engage 2020 and Derrick Spiva