Taking Anti-Racism Curriculum Online: Breaking Down Barriers, Building Trust, and Encouraging Engagement

Discussion facilitates learning, and there are many benefits to discussion (Brookfield, 2005). Yet, instead of discussion in the online learning environment, we often see an oversimplified exchange of opinions. There is a lack of depth, connection, internalization, and engagement with each other’s opinions, all things that make discussions such a valuable learning tool. This can be even more challenging when the content of the course is difficult, emotional, and invites personal vulnerability. In this session, we explore the challenges with facilitating meaningful discussion in online anti-racism courses while managing emotional labor and the effects of the pandemic. We discuss how the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework can give us new ways of thinking about our courses. You will leave with resources for UDL, teaching strategies that have been used and proven effective in these courses, and ideas for how to implement them in your own course.

Keywords: online discussion, Universal Design for Learning, anti-racism

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It is proven that discussion in the classroom helps learning. Brookfield (2005) stated that there are 15 benefits of discussion. These include benefits related to critical thinking: exploring a diversity of perspectives, increasing students’ awareness of and tolerance for ambiguity or complexity, helping students recognize and investigate their assumptions, increasing intellectual ability, helping students become connected to a topic, affirming students as cocreators of knowledge, helping students develop skills of synthesis and integration, and leading to transformation. There are also benefits related to engaging in stronger discourse: encouraging attentive and respectful listening, developing new appreciation for continuing differences, showing respect for students’ voices and experiences, developing the capacity for the clear communications of ideas and meaning, developing habits of collaborative learning, and increasing breadth and making students more empathetic,

However, one of the negative aspects of online courses is that *discussions* often do not occur as often as in face-to-face formats. Students often take a transactional lens to this dyad relationship and create their responses to any questions asked, respond dutifully to another student, and then consider their work complete. These responses are often devoid of critical thinking or emotional investment. The majority of the benefits of discussion are not gained in this type of interaction. As Friere stated, “dialogue cannot be reduced to the act of one person’s depositing ideas in another, nor can it become a simple exchange of ideas to be consumed by the discussants” (1993). Yet, this is the behavior we often experience from students, thus minimizing the learning opportunity available in the classroom. Collaborative learning is viewed as the most powerful principle of online course and delivery (Pallof & Pratt, 2007) and this research seeks to identify best practices in re-engaging the value of discussion in this new learning platform. The result is a disconnect between the power of online learning and the benefits of discussion, particularly given the constraints of the average online, asynchronous classroom discussion. The proposed session will explore these questions, invite best practice strategies, and introduce an implemented case study pedagogy used in a highly diverse and equity-focused university,

**Theoretical Foundation and Teaching Implications**

In order to address the challenges of guiding students into thoughtful and meaningful discussions, course design can begin with the integration of the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework and guidelines. UDL is a framework to improve and optimize teaching and learning for all learners that is based on scientific insights into how humans learn (CAST, 2021). This set of principles provides guidance on how to meet the diverse needs of all learners by reducing physical, cognitive, intellectual, and organizational barriers to learning (Rose & Meyer, 2002). There are three principles of UDL (CAST, 2021). First, provide multiple means of representation to give learners various ways of acquiring information and knowledge. Second, provide multiple means of expression to provide learners alternatives for demonstrating what they know. Third, provide multiple means of engagement to tap into learners’ interests, challenge them appropriately, and motivate them to learn.

The UDL Guidelines are a tool used to guide and implement the principles of the UDL framework. They can be applied to any topical domain and modality of learning. The guidelines are framed in the three principles of UDL, and then provide goals and strategies for access to information, the build of the learning experience, and how to help students internalize the content. Several strategies were utilized in the course to overcome the obstacles to learning through discussion.

**Learning Objectives**

There are two main learning objectives for this session. First, participants will learn about the teaching strategies leveraged in two courses on anti-racism. This learning objective will be met through a discussion and demonstration of two courses on addressing racism in the workplace, taught by diverse instructors.

Second, participants will be able to apply at least one piece of new information into their current online course development and pedagogies. It is easy to go from session to session, gathering information, and then not taking the time to apply it when the conference ends. Our hope is that each participant leaves this session with just one small idea they can implement immediately.

**Exercise Overview**

This session will be underpinned by the use of two anti-racism courses as examples of how online pedagogy can be improved. These courses are under-graduate, upper-division courses at a state university with an average of 30 students in the college of management. While each course explores different topics, both are centered around anti-racism. With a sensitivity that these courses hold different complexities for BIPOC and marginalized students, our approach to this work starts with the premise that we cannot understand or hold empathy for “the other” until we first “know thy- self”. Sessions within these courses focus on introducing content, building trust, and creating a safe container while helping students engage in self-exploration. This helps students take ownership of this significant learning experience, which is positioned as being valuable for both career-readiness and life. We view these courses as having a moral mandate to build capacity for students to actually be able to navigate their workplace and world more aware and confidently, not just to pass the course for the grade.

There was concern for both of these courses about the depth and level of engagement achievable in a fully online asynchronous format. As hard as we try to encourage active engagement in the online discussions in online courses, students mostly fall into the routine of posting their initial responses, posting a reply to someone else, and then not engaging any further. There are often no discussions, but rather a series of posts. In addition, the topics explored in these courses added another level of complexity, with a higher level of trust and vulnerability required to enhance the learning process.

In order to address these concerns, we employ a number of teaching strategies to engage students, model vulnerability, earn trust, and encourage active engagement in discussions. First, we strive to model the behaviors we want students to adopt. We do this by putting ourselves out there so they put themselves out there. One presenter records a video with a “real” introduction of herself, taking about her dimensions of difference, her privileges and oppressions, and her journey towards becoming an anti-racist. This helps break the ice, take those first steps in being vulnerable, and get to know each other on a deeper level than most online course introductions, setting the stage for open and honest conversations.

Another strategy leveraged is creating guardrails for our learning. Student are invited to add to or revise these guardrails, and everyone must agree to them. While all classes agree to norms and rules, it is even more essential when the discussion is focused on addressing racism. In these guardrails, we agree to behaviors such as assuming positive intent, speaking our truth, avoiding stereotypes, seeking to understand, and managing our mental well-being. These guardrails also help set the stage, but also gives each of us a shared agreement on which we can approach all of the conversations we have later in the course.

There are a few strategies used to encourage active, thoughtful participation in the online discussions. First, one presenter enforces two deadlines. Students have one week to engage in any learning activities created and write their initial posts to the questions asked. Then they have one week to reply to others. Second, the presenter grades on “active engagement”. Students are expected to respond thoughtfully to anyone who has responded to them. Third, students are given this space to interact with and learn from each other. While the instructor reads everything, they only intervene when it is necessary.

Another strategy is designed to increase collaboration. Student teams are assigned one of the topics related to anti-racism and provided a portfolio of resources (videos, books, articles, organizations) to pull from. Their assignment is to step into leadership and become the subject matter expert on that topic. The outcome is a 15 minute zoom recorded sharing using PowerPoint that is saved and uploaded to D2L for all students to view. Students receive a worksheet probing questions related to the content for each video as well as have the opportunity to provide ratings on “relevance, preparation, presentation” as well as feedback. Team engagement cultivates a sense of support for students in this virtual environment that can be effective, particularly when exploring sensitive and life-relevant content.

Further, each student team provides two questions at the end of their video challenging their team mates to “apply critical thinking”. Thus far, those questions have been incorporated into the final exam as essay questions that students can choose from. The high impact learning opportunity creates a demand for rigorous engagement through the learning, presentation development, and presentation process. The self-led team structure encourages creativity and engagement. The professor sets up “team zoom meetings” for 30 minutes each, at least twice per team, throughout the semester to ensure that there is face time, community building, platforms for discussion and feedback, as well as the opportunity for verbal expression simulating the rich culture provided by the face to face or hybrid class model.

There is ample evidence that these strategies have been successful. Students have shown a willingness to share more of themselves than they normally would do in an online introduction. They all agree to the guardrails for learning, and state that it sets the tone for having open, difficult conversations. The students show the highest level of engagement in the online discussions seen in any of our online courses. The average discussion topic has 135 posts, for an average of 4.5 posts per student per topic. This is a considerable amount of work given they have four topics to participate in every two weeks! Finally, we frequently receive positive unsolicited messages from my students, such as this email received after the fourth week of this semester from a current student, which stated, “I wanted to thank you for this course. I really appreciate the format, particularly the discussions. So many classes have mandatory discussions that do not result in meaningful conversations. I love reading posts from my classmates and gaining insights from them.” (Confidential, personal communication, February 9, 2021).

**Session Description**

The proposed session will be 60 minutes. In the first 15 minutes, we will share the background of the anti-racism courses, their evolution to an online asynchronous environment, and the strategies leveraged in the design and facilitation of the course. Next, we will spend 10 minutes exploring course modifications possible to the learning environment, with an example of modification presented. During this presentation, participants are encouraged to ask questions about this course and the approach used.

The next 15 minutes will be a facilitated discussion. We will engage the participants by asking for feedback on these courses, and inviting them to share strategies they have used in their courses.

The remaining 20 minutes will be spent encouraging the participants to apply the strategies shared in their own courses. They will be broken into small groups to share their ideas and questions for 10 minutes. Each small group should have a note-taker, who will share the highlights of the group’s discussion back to all participations. The final 10 minutes will be spent in a debrief of their ideas and discussions.

References

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