



## Creating a Safe, Welcoming, and Positive Environment for Your Online Students

### SPEAKERS

Courtney Plotts, Tierney King, Deidre Price, Flower Darby

#### **Tierney King** 00:01

This is the Faculty Focus Live podcast sponsored by the Teaching Professor. I'm your host, Tierney King, and I'm here to bring you inspiration, energy, and creative strategies that you can utilize in your everyday teaching. How do you make your online class feel welcoming and safe for your students? Unlike the face-to-face classroom, you don't always have the opportunity to greet students with a warm smile and ask them how they're doing. So how do you bring these in-class approaches to your online environment? In this episode, we'll cover techniques on how to be culturally responsive in your online courses. We'll provide tips on how you can format your online class to be warm and welcoming, and we'll cover assimilation strategies for non-traditional and marginalized students in the online environment. To start Flower Darby offers strategies to foster social belonging, such as using student testimonials and a name story exercise in her program, How Can I Become a Better Online Instructor?

#### **Flower Darby** 01:04

There has been some recent research on creating psychologically safe spaces in our online classes, some very simple things that we can do to help our diverse students feel as if they belong. And it's really important even in an online class to create that sense of belonging for our students. So one simple strategy is to use visuals of diverse people. Even in the background, if you're lecturing or like, say a mini lecture video, if there's a way to capture people behind you. Or if you can use a visual that just represents people of diverse ethnicities and cultures and sexual orientations, you can help our students really feel that they belong in the class too. You can pair inclusive text with these images. So this research found that female students were more likely to enroll in a computer science class when there was an image of several different diverse women paired with a caption that said, "Women work in computer programming, and you can too." A simple social belonging intervention that you can create for your students is to help them read testimonials from former students about how they first worried when they came into this online class. But over time, they came to feel that they belong in the course and that they could be successful. After your students read those testimonials, have them write about the experience of the other students. And then follow that up by having your students write notes to

incoming students about how they can feel that they're welcome and ready to engage and be successful. Here's another idea. We want to make sure that we're teaching culturally responsive online classes. I feel that this area has been overlooked in the past. So we want to acknowledge that cultural differences permeate our online spaces. And for this thinking, I'm really indebted to Courtney Plotts, who's been doing some great research in this area. Here's some things that you can do to acknowledge the cultural differences that are coming into your class. As part of your introductions, you can assign a name stories exercise, where students explain their name. If necessary, give some pronunciation tips, and tell how they came to get that name. We can learn a lot about each of our cultural backgrounds, and diverse Heritage's by encouraging students to share a little bit about literally who they are and how they got their name. As an instructor, you can also model respect for all viewpoints for the diversity of political and different kinds of viewpoints that might come into your classes. And here's here's a touchy one Courtney has found in her research that sometimes students are marginalized in, for example, online discussion forums, if they reveal a detail about their personal life and preferences. Other students may not know how to respond to that. And so sometimes those students are either marginalized overtly or covertly by the way that students are responding or not. So you want to keep an eye on your discussion forums and see if you see any evidence of some kind of just lack of engagement or perhaps an inappropriate engagement, and you can monitor those and reach out to any students who might be making a misstep. You may even choose to delete a discussion post, but you just really want to be aware of cultivating a healthy environment where everybody is respected and welcomed in your class.

#### **Tierney King** 04:59

In addition to modeling respect for all viewpoints in your online course, there are different ways to craft and create a positive online environment with the look and feel of your course. Deidre Price explains how you can create a positive and transparent online teaching environment that students will feel encouraged to participate in her program, How Do I Establish an Engaging Atmosphere in my Online Classroom?

#### **Deidre Price** 05:22

The feel of a course is natural in a traditional environment. But we have to work at crafting a positive environment in an online classroom space to make those things transparent and authentic. Now, online classrooms can often feel like websites, or they can read like textbooks, as opposed to feeling like an authentic classroom space, where students are encouraged to take part in an active learning community. Now, what's an overall goal for the right feel? I think it should be warm and welcoming. I want to put my students at ease. I don't want them logging into the online classroom and basically feeling like they've entered a textbook. I also want it to seem well-oiled, like I've done my homework, and I'm prepared to teach their class. Finally, I want it worth repeating. I want my students wanting to come back and expecting new content. I want them expecting a real person on the other end of the line when they're reaching out for help. So what does this mean? Let's unpack each part. First of all, how do we make an online classroom feel warm and welcoming? A lot of us naturally do that in a face to face environment. We smile, we say hello. But how do we do that online? Well, one of the ways we can do this better is through visual elements content and tone. So how do we use visuals? First of all, you can look at the interface itself. An online classroom when it's not personalized, looks a little bit sterile and cold. We can add things with the to the design default to make sure that the classroom space feels

inviting. We want to use widgets or items on the landing page that are more personal, and establish some kind of conversation with the students. You want to give them opportunities to interact. So it looks like you're looking for them to participate and hoping that they're interacting with each other to think about the colors that you choose. There may be some default colors that are set for your institution. But think about the colors you're using within the online environment. And use those not to yell at students with highlighting in red, but instead to create a warm, welcoming atmosphere. Think about blues and blacks in terms of readability. But also think about avoiding certain color combinations that may be a little off putting. A lot of instructors tend to highlight information. But that can get overwhelming when you're doing a lot of that a lot of the time. And think about avoiding bold fonts as well. The combination between all caps, bold, and highlighted material underlined can be very, very off putting for students. And it almost seems like the instructor is yelling, when the instructor may actually only feel like they're emphasizing important information. Think about the types of images you use as well. And think about your student demographic. Students are used to fresh new images. With high quality photography, you want to make sure you're using current images that are crisp and fresh. And nothing that's dated or blurry or just altogether absent. I try to avoid clipart. And I do encourage all my instructors to work on creating original photography that they can add to their classrooms. It personalizes it, but it just allows for a more real feel in the online classroom and prompts students to be more real as well. So how can we improve content? We can include a range of information to anticipate questions, big picture and small picture. And of course, this is more easily said than done. It's easier if you've taught the course a couple of times, and you kind of have used some of the same assignments. And you know how students might struggle or the questions that they might ask. And it will allow you to create a more welcoming atmosphere when you say I know you'll probably have this question. Or some of you might be thinking, you know, how am I going to do this? What websites will I use? How am I going to try to accomplish the goal what the instructor has said? Well, if you go ahead and anticipate that and you talk about it head on, it allows for you to see more real as an instructor and also see more engaged and plugged in to their needs and also invested in their success for the class. Now another way we can improve content is using a drill down model. You want to start with the big picture questions. And our goals and objectives for the course don't lose sight of that. A lot of instructors will provide that information on the syllabus, and then they forget about it when it comes to the actual assignments that they're giving. You want to make sure you connect those dots for students. It allows the course to feel really clear and connected and cohesive. And that puts students at ease. If it seems like If you've got control of the path and the pace for the course, they'll definitely follow suit.

### **Tierney King** 10:05

Lastly, Courtney Plotts explains how you can increase support for marginalized students taking online course, and how you can support diverse populations while also increasing positive learning outcomes in her program, Online Engagement and Assimilation Strategies for Nontraditional and Marginalized Students.

### **Courtney Plotts** 10:22

So the question becomes now what is assimilation. And for our purposes, today, I'm going to use the definition that's going to make the most sense for what we're talking about today. It's a psychological construct of a strategy used to mitigate the acculturated process or acculturative stress. We see this a lot in studies for new students, new student orientation to take down the isolation. They're kind of

experiencing acculturative stress. And so sometimes, what we want, what we want as instructors, is for students to assimilate into our class and not necessarily with ethnic culture, but yet with the academic culture. So a lot of times people ask me when I'm talking about assimilation, isn't assimilation a bad thing? Well, it depends if we're saying you have to assimilate to this ethnic culture, because this is a bad thing. But if we look at academic culture, and we all have a kind of talk about what we want our students to do in those spaces, especially in online spaces, it's pretty much the same. We want them to log in, we want them to participate, we want them to complete work. And that's how we know students are assimilated, because they're doing that transactional behavior. There is an assignment, they complete it, there is a deadline, they meet it. So it's not a bad thing. The challenge is if you drew a circle in between ethnic culture and academic culture. One of the challenges is a lot of the research on online learning is based in a Eurocentric framework. And for me, this is something that I just find really fascinating, because my mother is from Germany, and my dad is African American. And so it's kind of that middle ground, where it's like, you know, I can see one side, and I can see the other. But when we look at this, again, one of the challenges is when we're working with marginalized populations, that sometimes there's that disconnect between the ethnic culture, and the academic culture, as well as the academic expectations, and the cultural expectations. So again, we just talked about this ethnic assimilation and the learning environment. Ethnic assimilation is not what we're trying to do. We're not trying to tell people leave your culture behind, leave everything that you know behind, because this is better. But what we do want is students to say, I feel comfortable in this space. I feel comfortable with my peers. I'm getting that sense of community and academically, I'm meeting my benchmarks, or I'm meeting the requirements to be successful. How do you want your online culture to be, and I'm sure you guys have traveled and gone to conferences, and there's some conferences you feel super welcomed, and everybody's pumped and happy. And there's some conferences and you're like, you know what, I think I'm gonna go home a day early. And so we want that same kind of concept for our online classes. And this is extremely important for communal cultures. Because online learning is a very individual process, even though we have students collaborate or work on peer assessment or peer editing, we still need to kind of have some idea of what we're trying to do with that. So strategy one - one of the things that you could do is create a community rubric. This is something that you could post every week to let the community know, or the class know how they're doing. And the easiest way I can tell you to do this, and we have a whole trainings on this and stuff like that, but at its basic core, what you're doing is you're building a rubric of soft skills that you want that you release to the class every week, based on those on the soft skills. So if you want, you know, if you want respect - and these are just random - something like respect, building diversity, you know, reaching out of your comfort zone or you know, whatever you can make it as, you know, soft and fluffy or as businesslike as you need to. But giving this out once a week in the announcements, it'll change the behavior of the classroom, because it's more of a "we" and everyone feels that they can contribute something. And it just helps the community know because I'm sure you guys know, like, we've talked about this ad nauseam. You know, if you're an online about building a sense of community, we talk about it all the time, but we never give it a framework for students to build on their own. All right, our last is strategy building mini cohorts. And I'm just going to run through this real quick. So what is the successful community cohort look like? The best model that we've developed that we've gotten the most positive feedback on is developing a course that's a service learning course. If you have one already, this could be great. Working with the students, academic, you know, your instructors, you know your instructional designers, and really establishing the sociocultural norms and values of individual classrooms. And

then what you do is, the students who take this course, are able while they're in their courses, to help build cohorts, and to help kind of navigate those other questions. So it's almost like a TA that kind of focuses in a simulation of students. And again, this isn't mandatory for students, this isn't something that you would, you know, to make students do, but it helps because we see them doing it naturally. They do it naturally. They say, "Hey, if anybody wants to study group..." "Hey, does anybody know..." "Can anybody clarify this assignment?" Hey, hey, hey, and again, some people, especially with the working adults, they're not going to have time for some of the stuff. Some people will, some people won't. But the bottom line is, especially with this, and again, just just think about this question, If I am a student who's online, studying online diversity, how do I get my experience if I live in rural Iowa? Again, if I'm an online student, my major is psychology, I live in rural Iowa, in a very small town, how do I get to interact with other people? How do I practice those soft skills when everyone around me looks the same? Or everyone around you know, you don't have access to, you know, just a diverse group of people. The bottom line is, is you do the service learning cohort, you assign people to the cohorts for the collaboration. And then the benefits are it decreases assimilation back to the places where we don't want students. We don't want them re-assimilating on their Facebook, we don't want them re-assimilating in, you know, all sorts of stuff if it's an unhealthy relationship. Sometimes online learning is people's mechanism to get out of really unhealthy situations. And so that's the benefit.

**Tierney King 17:19**

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