

DUT Guide: Inclusive online teaching and learning: Examples from HE teachers during the COVID-19 lockdown

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Abstract

During the COVID 19 lockdown, higher education (HE) teachers and students had to adapt to working, interacting and learning in digital spaces. This guide provides examples of HE teachers' inclusive and effective online teaching and learning practices during the lockdown. The examples include curricular, pedagogic, organisational, relational and affective approaches, all of which were implemented by teachers intent on providing inclusive and effective learning opportunities for their students. This selection of examples is offered to HE teachers seeking inspiration for the development of their own inclusive and effective online teaching and learning.

Points of practice

1. Clarify expectations
2. Ensure effective communication
3. Use humour and a personal touch
4. Develop a meaningful and relevant course curriculum
5. Manage online group work and collaborative learning
6. Review the role of the online teacher
7. Show care

Background

During the COVID 19 lockdown, higher education (HE) courses were rapidly moved online. This shift impacted on teaching and learning experiences for teachers and students (Georgsen & Qvortrup, 2021). As HE educational developers, we became aware of teachers who enabled effective and inclusive online teaching and learning. In this guide, inclusion is understood as 'pedagogy, curricula and assessment, [which] are designed and delivered to engage students in learning that is meaningful, relevant and accessible' (Hockings, 2010, p.1).

This definition is commensurate with Universal Design for Learning's (UDL) principles, which prioritise

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overcoming barriers to learning (Rose, 2001). A UDL-designed course diversifies course content, design and delivery and affirms there are multiple ways to learn (Merry, 2021). Although UDL originally prioritised accessible course design and assistive technology for students with physical or neurodiverse learning needs, UDL-designed courses were soon recognised as beneficial for all students (Burgstahler, 2021) and were of particular value during the lockdown (Costelloe & Reale, 2021).

While there were teachers and students who experienced an impoverished pedagogic relationship during the lockdown (Tarc, 2020), there were those who saw 'an opportunity to build inclusive digital spaces from the ground up' (Harris et al., 2020, p.12605). As illustrated in the tips below, this 'ground up' approach to online teaching and learning was often enabled by the teachers' immutable commitment to an inclusive teaching philosophy. The shift to online teaching and learning challenged learners globally, especially those with no or limited digital access (Broom, 2020). However, even when digital access and study time were limited, one positive outcome of having access to flipped and asynchronous learning resources was that students could manage their learning and revisit teacher explanations and expositions (Georgsen & Qvortrup, 2021; Harris et al., 2020).

In this guide we share inclusive, online teaching and learning practises, developed and implemented by 20 teachers who recognised there are many ways to learn, thereby exemplifying UDL principles. These teachers taught in different faculties at two Danish universities during the COVID 19 lockdown. The teachers' capacity to focus on students as learners rather than on their own capabilities as teachers signalled their professional development as HE teachers through 'Phase 1 Emphasis on teaching' to 'Phase 2 Emphasis on learning' (Kugel, 1993, p.316). It is apparent from these teachers' online practises that through their creative and informed use of digital tools and platforms they actively engaged and included students as learners.

The teachers shared this guide's tips with us through informal interviews and gave permission for us to disseminate their practices through publications. Whilst these teachers were not knowingly applying UDL principles, the examples illustrate how their open-minded approaches to diversification facilitated effective and inclusive online teaching and learning. This selection of examples is offered as inspiration for inclusive and effective online teaching and learning.

Tip 1: Clarify expectations

Teachers and students come to any new course with their own expectations of the course and their respective roles and responsibilities. When it is an online course there's another layer of expectations around online protocol (Easton, 2003).

Teachers who are familiar with online technology's interactive opportunities are in a better position to plan effective and inclusive online teaching and learning (Georgsen & Qvortrup, 2021; Harris et al., 2020). One teacher clarified their expectations for online interaction and guided students on how to use the digital tools including 'raise your hand function' to signal wanting to contribute, and the chat function for asking questions during an exposition. Another teacher signalled the value they attributed to peer interaction by inviting student groups to meet in Zoom breakout rooms during online classes to discuss the next task. The students appreciated these scheduled opportunities to meet, discuss and clarify their understanding of tasks with their peers, as they would have done in face-to-face situations. By keeping online channels open, students had a variety of ways to check in, ask questions and clarify what they were expected to do and learn (Harris et al., 2020).

The next example was specifically implemented to support international students; however, these approaches to onboarding new students could be universally applied to student cohorts. When redesigning a programme as an online iteration for international students from very different cultural backgrounds, the programme facilitator recognised how vital it was to clarify expectations from the outset (Killick & Foster, 2021). They

developed a pre-sessional communication strategy and changed their previously one-way dissemination of practical information about the programme to an interactive approach, using a variety of social media platforms. In addition, the programme facilitator scheduled online Q & A sessions during the programme, providing an informal space for students to ask disciplinary and practical queries, with the online platform's chat function providing another Q & A forum.

Tip 2: Ensure effective communication

Effective communication was generally interpreted by the teachers as facilitating two-way interaction, making use of the possibilities afforded by online communication channels (Easton, 2013). There were recurrent examples of keeping the chat function open during classes to encourage interaction. Students, including students who were reluctant to speak out in class, posted questions on the chat or emailed their queries to their teacher after class. It was noted how the name labelling in Zoom/MS Teams made it easier to use students' names, a feature which personalised interaction and helped identify the international exchange students, who may need further explanations. One teacher deliberately addressed students by their names, something they said they would not have done in a face-to-face class. By applying this forthright approach, they signalled to the students that they were noticed and included in class interactions. Another teacher maintained a meta dialogue with their students about the adjustments they were making to facilitate learner access, such as increasing text size, speaking more slowly when presenting, using breakout rooms more frequently and checking in with the students: 'Did this exercise work well? Is 15 minutes enough?'

As recommended when planning online teaching, many of the teachers replaced teaching curricular content with more time for group and in-class discussions, and peer feedback (Tarc, 2020; Persky & Pollack, 2010). Teachers recognised the need to provide a safe space for informal interaction, with one protecting the last 15 minutes of every online class for queries and discussion. One shared their PPT slides via an alternative platform and prioritised the Zoom screen for visual exchange between them and their students. Another teacher described how they reiterated the importance of the course's online learning activities by contributing their own concluding comments on the students' blog discussions. In another course, when tasked with sharing anonymous peer feedback, students enjoyed the novelty and interactivity afforded by the Annotate tool in Zoom. These examples highlight the significance of course delivery and teachers' readiness to adopt alternative modes of online communication.

Tip 3: Use humour and a personal touch

HE teachers have been found to use humour 'i) to facilitate student learning and ii) to engage students' attention in the classroom' (Bakar & Kumar, 2019, p.22). In addition, when teachers incorporate humour into online classes it can provide 'mental breaks' from the cognitive concentration required by online learning (Schatz & LoSchiavo, 2006, no page). A common thread through these examples is how teachers reset the teacher-student boundaries by encouraging more informality and by role-modelling acceptable informal interaction. One teacher shared how they deliberately set the tone during the synchronous sessions, seeking to keep the students engaged by staying positive and energetic throughout. In an attempt to maintain student engagement and pace the same teacher, aided by the participant list and name labels provided by Zoom, directed their questions at specific students. Students have been found to better prepare and to be more mentally ready when they expect to be asked a question (Dallimore et al., 2004). This preparedness may well have set these students at ease as they appreciated being noticed by their teacher and engaged in the exchange.

Many teachers sought digital opportunities to develop humorous and personalised interactions. Teachers who laughed at their own digital faux pas – like forgetting to unmute – allowed themselves to be the butt of the joke and fostered a 'we're in this together' environment. Building online relationships and developing trust was a priority for those teachers who encouraged more informal student interaction like posting emojis to show

reactions to questions and answers and inviting playful behaviour in the plenum. Another designed practical learning activities which required the students to use what they had in their kitchens to illustrate their explanations and presentations. These personal touches extended beyond curriculum to fostering wellbeing, a significant need for many students especially during the lockdown (Georgsen & Qvortrup, 2021).

Tip 4: Develop a meaningful and relevant course curriculum

Course curricula are broadly predefined by course descriptions but the universal pandemic provided some courses with relevant opportunities to apply learning to the then-current situation. A teacher for a Public Health course capitalised on the opportunity provided by the pandemic and designed a relevant learning activity for their class. Not only did this adaptation of the curriculum provide the students with a meaningful and relevant learning focus, it enabled the diverse student cohort to draw on their own national and cultural experiences and understandings (Harden & Laidlaw, 2013). In this way the students' reflections and knowledge provided valuable comparative and international learning resources and encouraged the students to see themselves and each other as critical curricular contributors. This inclusive approach is significantly different to learning situations where international students feel their knowledge is deficient because of their novice status in the local or national culture (Killick & Foster, 2021).

Teachers who designed and hosted curricular podcasts on course topics involved students in the process including interviewing guests. This alternative way to make curricular content available led to students feeling more connected with their teachers and peers. One of the teachers thought the students were put at ease listening to the presenters' informal and welcoming tone.

Another teacher, after reflecting on the advantages and disadvantages of having cameras on or off during online classes, identified a curricular opportunity. The teacher's reflections on the use of cameras during teaching sessions deftly fitted in a session they were teaching about Foucault and surveillance. As all the students and the teacher had their own experiences and views on whether students could be expected to have their cameras on during an online class, they held a class discussion on the online classroom as a panopticon and the unease associated with possibly being watched. See Tip 6: Role of the teacher for more on the use of cameras in online classes.

Tip 5: Manage online group work and collaborative learning

When planning online group work and collaborative learning, the teacher is tasked with designing an appropriate learning activity, organising the groups and selecting appropriate digital tools and online platform (Harris et al., 2020). Integrating group work into taught classes provides learners with opportunities to apply their learning and negotiate meaning with their peers; it also provides cognitive breaks from passive participation and is well documented as an effective mode of active learning (Godz et al., 2020; Brame & Biel, 2015).

Teachers found they could exploit features of digital platforms which facilitated the organisation of diverse groups, such as randomly allocating students to groups and selecting and moving students between groups. This approach enabled teachers to re-allocate students before opening up the groups. One teacher took the opportunity to match an international student with a group they knew would be inclusive and another teacher ensured groups included a mix of international and home students. Without this direction by the teacher, students tend to form homogeneous groups, which can isolate students, such as international students who do not fit the norm (Killick & Foster, 2021).

Teachers mentioned how in order to keep students engaged they directed online group work more than when organising face to face group work. This direction included chunking tasks, requiring group members to take responsibility for specific tasks, scheduling specific deadlines for clear outcomes, including 10-minute breaks to

allow group and class discussions to extend. Students were re-assured and felt safe posting anonymously via a range of digital interfaces, including Padlet, PollEverywhere and e-Whiteboards. By referring to the online classroom as a laboratory where they tested digital tools, the teacher encouraged students to take risks and trial new technology. Teachers found they facilitated more peer-to-peer activities than before the lockdown and they designed activities which required students to provide peer feedback via blogs and file sharing platforms.

Alongside this tendency to direct online group work more than face-to-face group work, teachers also recognised the motivational significance of student autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000). One teacher encouraged their students to select their preferred presentation mode, such as the e-Whiteboard, screensharing or simply talking. Leaders of a study programme listened to student feedback and switched the programme's e-learning site and online platform to one which suited them better. Teachers who designed and hosted a curricular podcast involved students in the production and interviewing process. Inspired by this and relevant findings, they are planning to develop more student partnership and audio contributions by students (Bolliger & Armier, 2013).

Tip 6: Review the role of the online teacher

Through their reflective re-interpretations of their role as online teachers (Hodges & Fowler, 2020), the teachers demonstrated their awareness of the students' learning and personal needs (Kugel, 1993). There were examples of teachers experiencing 'cognitive dissonance and resultant professional growth' (Easton, 2003, p.103), including those who reviewed their former attitudes about what it means to be an inclusive teacher. One spoke about their re-evaluation of what it means to be an inclusive teacher, and how they now acknowledged how personality traits like introversion can affect student participation.

Although initially some teachers found it disconcerting when students kept their cameras turned off, there were shifts in teacher expectations. For example, one shared how they changed their perception of their role to that of a radio host who would not expect to see their audience. Others shared how screen presence affected roles and perceptions of roles. A teacher commented on how the Greenlandic students in their class found the teacher's screen presence less intimidating than their physical presence in a face-to-face class. This teacher thought the small gallery of participant faces on Zoom helped equalize the power differential between the teacher and students.

The move to online teaching taxed even those teachers who adapted their teaching to accommodate the new normal and maintain their inclusive pedagogies. Among those who missed the opportunity to circulate round a class and interact spontaneously with the students, one adopted a personal online approach. They visited student groups in their breakout rooms and engaged in 1-to-1 conversations asking students how they were, and shared how they had noticed a student absence. The students appreciated this personal touch and absence rates reduced.

Tip 7: Show care

It is argued that we are predisposed to care for others (Gilbert et al., 2017) and these seven tips include many examples of compassionate teaching and learning. Here we share teacher and student behaviour which specifically fosters inclusive and caring learning environments. Many teachers showed care by making themselves available for informal and formal interactions, such as sharing an online coffee time at the start of a class, staying visible and online at the start of a break so students could easily ask questions, hosting weekly online drop-in meetings for students to share queries and to get reassurance from their teachers about their studies. There were also examples of sensitivity to human needs, such as including more breaks during online classes to prevent screen fatigue, and encouraging students to join in with their gymnastics' routines at the start

of the class. The teacher thought this helped students feel more at ease in the digital space as well as encouraging them to prioritise their health and wellbeing with physical exercise. And another had a vase of fresh flowers visible during each class, sharing something natural and beautiful.

Aside from these teacher actions, teachers encouraged students to care for each other through peer interaction in class and informally. One provided a breakout room space and discussion starter questions such as 'What was your main take-away from today's texts?' to help scaffold interaction. Students were also observed sharing unsolicited care, helping each other out with tasks and sharing advice on digital tools.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 lockdown had, and in many places continues to have, a global impact on individuals' ways of life. Those engaged with teaching and learning in HE, be they teachers, students or the many diverse support staff, had to adapt to what became the new normal. In so doing, there were HE teachers who, alongside managing the impact on their personal, academic and professional lives, successfully practised inclusive teaching pedagogies and prioritised students as learners. Through their informed and often creative adoption of digital tools and platforms, these teachers overcame barriers to online and isolated learning and helped create safe, inclusive and accessible learning environments. In addition, there were examples of curricular creativity and responsiveness to serendipitous opportunities, which led to relevant and meaningful learning activities, and innovative resources.

If we are faced with another lockdown, what can HE learn from teacher and student experiences and ensure we are prepared for online teaching and learning which is inclusive and effective? Reflecting on the teachers' narratives and examples and in addition to the seven tips for teachers discussed above, there are also important aspects of the institutional environments which could scaffold inclusive online teaching, such as:

1. Enable HE teachers' professional development so they are confident they have the competencies and expertise to put the 'emphasis on learning' and not just teaching (Kugel, 1993).
2. Develop all teachers' digital literacy. Provide UDL-inspired courses, resources and consultancy on how to make effective and inclusive use of digital tools and platforms in their teaching.
3. Entrust educational developers in collaboration with students and teachers to co-develop pedagogic and wellbeing principles and practices which prioritise inclusive and effective teaching.

Tribute to Stacey Cozart

It is with great sadness I share with you that Stacey Cozart, the co-author of this guide, died in February 2022. Stacey consistently demonstrated her commitment to inclusive, quality education throughout her work as an educational developer at Aarhus University, in her leadership of the DUN SIG 'Teaching and Learning in the International Classroom' and through her involvement with international projects, including EQUIiP. Stacey has left much to inspire ways to develop effective and inclusive teaching and learning in HE.

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