**How Not Using Zoom is Helping my Class Engage and Learn About Diversity and Inclusion Topics**
3 minute read

I live in a rural area and have struggled to access reliable high-speed internet. As you can imagine, this causes me a lot of frustration. When all classes moved online I knew I would not be able to Zoom with my class or record video for them to watch. So, I turned to a method I’ve found useful in the past – asynchronous discussion boards.

For my Diversity and Inclusion in the Workplace class this method has helped my students learn and talk about topics many shy away from. This the *magic* of asynchronous discussion boards.

First, some definitions –

Asynchronous learning means that students can engage with the material and assignments on their own time. For some students this works for them. It provides flexibility for students who need to travel to access internet, who have children, or other obligations. For other students, they may need support and encouragement to schedule the work into their day to not put it off or forget to complete it. Learn more [here](https://er.educause.edu/articles/2008/11/asynchronous-and-synchronous-elearning).

Discussion boards provide a way for students to post their answer to a question or questions as well as reply to their peers’ posts. Think of it as an academic Facebook post with a required conversation below. In the settings of discussion boards Canvas allows you to require students to make their first post before seeing other’s posts. I recommend this to ensure students critically think about the material on their own. [Here’s](https://community.canvaslms.com/docs/DOC-13016-4152724374) information from Canvas on how you can set up a discussion board.

Now, the magic –

Diversity and inclusion topics are tough. We are all on a lifelong journey to learn about difference, uncover our own privileges, and live more inclusive lives in the workplace and personally. No one is an expert – there is always, *always* more to learn. We are only ever real experts in the intersectional ways in which we personally identify.

Even for the most seasoned D&I practitioner, conversations about difference are challenging. They require vulnerability, humility, and open-mindedness about experiences one may have never considered before. There is also the very natural worry of offending someone. Of saying the wrong thing. We may have very positive intent but sometimes our impact does not match.

I've found that online discussion boards actually allow the class to hear many *more* diverse opinions and perspectives than if we were face-to-face virtually or in-person. How often have you had 100% of students in a traditional classroom setting really engage and participate in discussion? For me at least, this has been very rare.

On the discussion board those who identify with outsider groups (sometimes called marginalized or minority communities) are physically distanced from others. They have the relative safety of knowing that in this space their classmates will have the time to respond thoughtfully in writing rather than responding with whatever their immediate reaction (verbal or non-verbal) might be to their perspective. (I spent a lot of time creating an inclusive culture - this safe space does not happen quickly or without thoughtful intention)

The discussion board gives insiders (sometimes called majority group members) the opportunity to hear outsider experiences. By definition, these are perspectives the insiders have not lived. They may be experiences they have never considered. Or, perhaps insiders had never had the chance to learn enough about that perspective to understand the impact it has on someone’s life.

The asynchronous discussion board also gives insiders the chance to take the time to thoughtfully respond with empathy and ask questions to understand the outsider’s experience.

This conversation dynamic of outsiders having the space to share their experiences and insiders being open to listen, is necessary for organizations to shift the power dynamic and create a more inclusive culture. It is the insiders who have the power to change policies and procedures but who have less information about the outsider’s perspective. Outsiders have more information but less power to influence change.

By gaining perspective and practicing intercultural conversations, students grow personally and professionally. Greater intercultural competence (sometimes called cultural intelligence) is correlated with more satisfying relationships and more career opportunities. Students also learn a useful technique they could integrate into an inclusion strategy in their future place of work. Of course, being able to have intercultural conversations in-person is the next step; but, for the beginning of one’s D&I journey, online discussion boards are a great place to start.

If you've had asynchronous online discussions, has that worked for you? What methods have you found useful for teaching about diverse perspectives? How do you create an inclusive classroom culture? Connect with me, I’d love to learn from you!

**Recommended reading:**
[The Inclusion Dividend: Why investing in diversity and inclusion pays off by Kaplan and Donovan](https://www.amazon.com/Inclusion-Dividend-Investing-Diversity-Pays-ebook/dp/B00COG9VFI)

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