Toolkit for inclusive teaching strategies

How to build belonging online

Module 7
Module 7: How to build belonging online

🏁 Start here!

You have six sections to complete in Module 7:

- Introduction
- Principle 1: Represent learners and their lived experiences
- Principle 2: Support learners to bring their ‘whole-self’
- Principle 3: Develop emotional resilience
- Apply the strategies
- Put it into practice

Then we recommend you set up a group discussion to:

- Reflect on the module

✏ Before you begin, we recommend that you get yourself a notebook for taking notes as you work through the toolkit.
Introduction

What’s Module 7 about?

Quote

Before we start, read the quote from Marian Wright Edelman, Founder and President of the Children’s Defense Fund.

How does this relate to a learner feeling like they belong in your classroom?

“You can’t be what you can’t see.”

💭 Why do we need to build belonging online?

‘Belonging’ is the feeling of connectedness to a group or community. When we feel that we belong we feel safe in our identity and able to express ourselves.

Feeling a sense of belonging means that learners are more motivated, healthier, happier and achieve higher grades.

But according to research, one in four young people don’t feel that they ‘belong’ in school, and creating a sense of belonging in the online classroom is arguably more challenging than in a traditional classroom.

In this module we’ll look at how to make your online environment more inclusive to help learners feel they belong.

You may already be using many of these techniques in your online classroom, if so, take note of what is already working and areas you might be able to adjust.

✏ Are you ready to start?

Take out your notebook. As you go through this module, take notes on:

- What inclusive strategies you already use
- Anything you hadn’t considered before
- What other small improvements you can make to create a more inclusive practice in your classroom
Principles and strategies

Read about three principles that lead to your learners feeling a greater sense of belonging, and strategies for using them in your classroom.

Principle 1: Represent learners and their lived experiences

Before you begin this section make a note on the following question:

- What identities do your learners bring to your classroom?
  For example, ‘I identify as dyslexic’, or, ‘I identify as the oldest sister in my family’.

What is this principle?

By representing a wide range of learners and lived experiences in the materials we teach, we can give learners a range of role models, help learners see themselves in others, and make the idea of success more tangible.

Online learning is an opportunity to look beyond the textbook and provide a more diverse set of resources and perspectives to learners that represent different identities, experiences and issues (e.g. emotions, learning or home life).

How does this benefit our learners?

Motivation and engagement is increased when we’re able to ‘see ourselves’ in the learning material.

Learning about different perspectives and worldviews also helps to develop critical thinking skills and tolerance within our classrooms.

How can you apply this in your online classroom?

- **Strategy 1**: Invite learners to contribute to lesson planning
  - Learners can find, co-create or decide on additional materials or tasks
  - Provide opportunities for learners to give feedback privately if they feel excluded or need support (e.g. using a Google form)

- **Strategy 2**: Make content local
  - Find examples online of local English speakers (e.g. podcasts) with the learners’ first language to give attainable role models

- **Strategy 3**: Personalise tasks to be about your learners’ own experiences
  - If possible, integrate social media into the lessons to add authenticity

Prepare to discuss:

- How might you create opportunities for learners to connect learning to their culture, interests and things that matter to them?
Principle 2: Support learners to bring their ‘whole-self’ to the lesson

Before you begin this section make a note on the following question:

- Think about a place you feel comfortable to be yourself… What is it about that place that allows you to feel yourself?

What is this principle?

Often people feel they have to ‘be a certain person’ in a learning environment. They feel restricted, even frightened, to be their true selves. Learning environments can be daunting places, especially for those who feel - for whatever reason - that they don’t ‘fit in’.

This principle is about supporting learners to bring their ‘whole-self’; to feel comfortable in expressing who they are, how they feel, and how they relate to learning.

How does this benefit our learners?

All learners can benefit from bringing their whole-self.

One of the worst things about school can be the feeling that a child cannot be themself. This often leads to ‘masking’, an act that reduces a learner’s ability to learn, taking up vital emotional energy and thinking.

By allowing learners to be open about how they are feeling, what they’re happy or worried about, is an important way of both relationship building and helping to feel positive about learning. Adopting a whole-self mindset can be liberating and help with a learner’s mental health.

Furthermore, it becomes easier for the teacher to prepare personalised lessons based on who the students are; and personalised learning is far more engaging than learning that feels impersonal and distant.

How can you apply this in your online classroom?

- **Strategy 1**: Use check-in activities with your class. A check-in is a short activity at the beginning of a lesson that answers the question “how are you feeling?” in a more creative and safe way.
  - Learning to express feelings can be difficult (for many reasons). Consider safe ways to introduce the check-in. Explain why you’re doing it and model yourself (keep it short!). Encourage participation, but don’t force learners.
  - Try non-verbal check-ins. For example, using a digital whiteboard, ask learners to choose an animal they associate themselves with today, what colour they feel, or draw an avatar that represents them.
  - For large groups consider using the chat function, or break-out rooms

When done well and done regularly, check-ins can strengthen remote learners’ connection with one another; improving trust, culture and communication (and removing
feelings of awkwardness). There are examples of ‘check-in’ activities in the discussion section of each toolkit module.

Prepare to discuss:

- How might your different learners’ identities affect their ability to express themselves?
Principle 3: Develop emotional resilience

Before you begin this section make a note on the following question:

- Do your learners learn better when they are happy or stressed? Why?

What is this principle?

Developing emotional resilience means developing the ability to overcome stressful, challenging and sometimes traumatic experiences in our lives.

‘Stressful’ situations for our learners can range from large-scale traumatic events (e.g. school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic) to the day-to-day stress of school life.

The online classroom may add to feelings of isolation, confusion and loneliness, which in turn will affect their wellbeing and ability to learn. Emotional resilience can help to combat this.

Emotional resilience can follow a process of:

1. recognising when we’re experiencing emotions
2. labelling the emotion
3. contextualising the emotion to be less damaging, or reframing our response to the emotion.

How does this benefit our learners?

Learning success can be affected by our emotional state. Self-generating positive emotions and self-regulating negative ones can help learners focus and learn better.

Developing emotional resilience in SEN learners who may have difficulties managing their emotions is particularly important to avoid learners becoming overwhelmed.

How can you apply this in your online classroom?

- **Strategy 1**: Create time and space to journal emotions. Provide prompts like ‘write down one thing to be grateful for’.

- **Strategy 2**: Set up online peer learning networks to build space for connection.

Prepare to discuss:

- What are some challenges to developing building emotional resilience in your specific context?
- What are some benefits?
Check your understanding

Review the strategies suggested throughout this module and add the most useful ones for your context to this table. Make a note for each group with an idea of which learners in your class would benefit from this, or a challenge you see with using this strategy.

What other strategies do you have to help learners facing these barriers?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Potential emotional barrier experienced by learners</th>
<th>Strategy you can use to build belonging online</th>
<th>Principle behind strategy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unmotivated to learn from textbook</td>
<td></td>
<td>Represent learners and their lived experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of confidence, feeling like an outsider</td>
<td></td>
<td>Support learners to bring their ‘whole-self’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overwhelmed by the stress of school</td>
<td></td>
<td>Develop emotional resilience</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Apply to your classroom

Think about an activity that you are planning to do with your class in the next week. Make notes about:

What changes can you make to:

- represent learners and their lived experiences
- support learners to bring their ‘whole-self’
- develop emotional resilience.

Make some notes to share with in your group discussion on:

- the changes you will make
- the benefits for your learners
- any challenges you see with using this strategy.

👏 Nice work. You’re done for today! Your next task is to meet your group to discuss your ideas from the module.
Reflect on the module as a group

Welcome to your group discussion for Module 7 on building belonging. This is a self-facilitated peer-learning session. Please follow the guide to go through the activities. Nominate a person for each letter A, B, and C.

When it is your turn, lead the activity by reading the instructions aloud to the group and ask any questions. See below for details of each activity.

Note: The group discussion is a powerful way to share ideas and build a sense of community and accountability around inclusivity at your school. However if you’re not able to join a group discussion in your context, the activities can also be completed alone as reflection and review tasks.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity leader</th>
<th>Activity name</th>
<th>Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher A</td>
<td>Check in and introductions</td>
<td>Five minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher B</td>
<td>Group review</td>
<td>Ten minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher C</td>
<td>Group reflection</td>
<td>15 minutes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Check in and introduction - led by Teacher ‘A’

Before you begin, prepare for the session with a ‘check in’. A check in is a short pause at the beginning of a meeting to reflect on how you feel at this moment.

It might be that you have just had a very stressful class, or maybe you were running late today and feel in a rush. Sharing with the group helps to build empathy. When we have shared we are ready to begin the discussion.

Take 15 seconds to draw a simple shape that represents you today. Then introduce yourself: tell the group your name and show the group your shape, giving a very short description.

Spend about five minutes on this section.

Review - led by Teacher ‘B’

Choose a strategy and take turns and tell each other one or two things about this strategy. Spend about ten minutes on this section.

1. Differentiating the content: what learners learn
2. Differentiating the process: how learners learn
3. Differentiating the product: how learners demonstrate their understanding of the knowledge or skills

For example:

Since reading the module, have you used any of the strategies?
Do you have any more examples of how this principle can be applied in the online classroom? Have you used any of these in your online classroom? Was it successful?

Reflect - led by Teacher ‘C’

Discuss the following reflection questions from the module as a group. Spend about 15 minutes on this section.

1. How might you create opportunities for learners to connect learning to their culture, interests and things that matter to them?
2. How might your different learners’ identities affect their ability to express themselves?
3. What are some challenges to developing building emotional resilience in your specific context? What are some benefits?

If you’re interested in this topic check out the links for further reading: