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# Come Join the Party: Lessons Learned Fostering Inclusion in Online Learning

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# Come Join the Party: Lessons Learned Fostering Inclusion in Online Learning

**Abstract**

This article invites scholars of teaching and learning in higher education to consider the ways in which instructors can use practices of inviting inclusion to create an environment in which students can feel— and be—included in online classrooms, especially since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Using the analogy of a "block party" and to illustrate the practices envisioned, the authors explore their and others' practices of teaching online in ways that foster inclusion, with attention to their experiences teaching during the pandemic. The authors conclude by reflecting upon what has been learned because of pandemic-informed teaching and learning experiences.

Cet article invite les chercheurs et les chercheuses en matière d'enseignement et d'apprentissage dans l'enseignement supérieur à examiner les façons dont les instructeurs et les instructrices peuvent utiliser les pratiques d'invitation à l'inclusion pour créer un environnement dans lequel les étudiants et les étudiantes peuvent se sentir - et être - inclus dans les classes en ligne, en particulier depuis le début de la pandémie de la COVID-19. En utilisant l'analogie d'une « fête de quartier » et pour illustrer les pratiques envisagées, les auteurs explorent leurs pratiques et celles des autres pour enseigner en ligne de manière à favoriser l'inclusion, en prêtant attention à leurs expériences d'enseignement pendant la pandémie. Les auteurs concluent en réfléchissant à ce qu'ils ont appris grâce aux expériences d'enseignement et d'apprentissage éclairées par la pandémie.

In this article we consider what we've learned to develop and deliver online courses in the midst of 'the' COVID-19 pandemic—and currently, as we tentatively move towards post-pandemic times. In doing so, our aim is to contribute to the scholarship of teaching and learning in higher education alongside existing understandings of inclusive education and pedagogy.

To do so, we open with an invitation to imagine a block party, a party for neighbours typically held on a shared street or other communal space. In this imagined party, neighbours begin to come to know one another and/or to build upon existing relationships. Ideally, such relationships might extend beyond the party. As we imagine this kind of communal event, and before the party even begins, we consider what is needed to create an environment that facilitates inclusion, that promotes interactions, and that contributes to meaningful connections. There are many such details: the host or hosts ensure that flyers are put in mailboxes and notices are posted on community online forums; permits to close streets are acquired; barbeques and coolers are borrowed; tables are set up; and music and/or a band is arranged. These hosting activities create the conditions for a successful block party where everyone is welcome to attend, bring something to share with others, and stay a while. During the party, the hosts are attending to the attendees' needs ensuring newcomers are introduced; mixing and mingling with guests, visiting everyone just enough, et cetera, so the party is shaped by all those who attend. And after the party, the tables and chairs are put away, decorations are recycled; and the street is swept. And perhaps more significantly, the hosts reflect on what went well and what might be changed next time.

We use this block party analogy as one entry point into our evolving understanding of the intentional work that goes into teaching online in ways that foster inclusive learning communities. In doing so, we reflect along our block party timeline—on what must happen *before*, *during*, and *after*. In this analogy, we see instructors as *hosts* within their online classes, responsible for creating an environment that enables students to productively engage with their instructor and with each other. We envision the online classroom as a (potential) virtual community, one that varies depending on the learners themselves—the party's attendees—thereby recognizing the role of learners as co-creators and co-contributors to the experience of the class. Instructor responsiveness is required, and is, of course, shaped by the community. And, afterwards, we envision the need for instructors to reflect upon the experiences and wonder what might be different or better next time. In thinking in these ways, we offer an invitation to those concerned with inclusive online teaching and learning in higher education to join us as we reflect and make suggestions for better practice.

As educators, and through our self-study approach, we began this conversation during the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic, wondering how the very real, pressing realities of "emergency" remote and/or online teaching focused our attention to necessary and (ideally) novel online pedagogies. It goes without saying that we wanted to create the conditions for excellent online learning experiences.

Through our conversations, we were drawn (and recursively redrawn) to the block party analogy; a party is, after all, an actual event, something tangible that allows concrete reflection. And while we recognize that no analogy is perfect, this one has helped us. Though none of us are wedding planners, party planners, or event planners by profession, one of us has coordinated more than her share of children's birthday parties and we've each been involved in our communities' events throughout our lives. At any rate, reflections structured by this analogy have allowed us to contextualize our own learning within the broader context of the scholarship of teaching and learning. (Perhaps, too, the idea of a block party carries more than a little nostalgia for pre-pandemic times). As we write this, and enter our third year of pandemic-infused teaching and

learning, we continue to wonder together with a shared commitment to teaching in ways that foster inclusion—recognizing that we are still learning.

Within our analogical block party space, we have organized this paper into sections. *Before the party* begins with an introduction to ourselves in relation to this and who we are in relation to this work and these wonders. Next, *during the party*, we explore our and others' practices of teaching online in ways that foster inclusion, with attention to our experiences during the pandemic. Finally, *after the party*, we reflect upon what we have learned and what we might wish to carry forward with us into the future. But before our reflections, we offer a brief description of our methods and methodology.

## Methodology and Methods: Reflective Party Planning and Virtual Confetti

Through our ongoing conversations we found that the block party analogy permitted a more suitably colloquial and accessible language to reflect upon our successes and failures—who enjoyed themselves and who did not. More simply, we recognized what was useful and what was not. Our reflective and collective efforts may be best described within a self-study methodological framework (Baroud & Dharamshi, 2020; Buchanan & Mooney, 2023; Kim et al., 2021; Moorhouse & Tiet, 2021). That is, we were interested in the immediate efficacy of our online courses and how students took those up, and more broadly, we thought about how such reflections informed the larger conversation about community in the context of online learning. For, as Phillips (2021, p. 2) described, the pandemic-fueled mad dash to the online pedagogical world was imbued with vulnerability: "The unexpected transition from face-to-face teaching to online learning required a climate of trust, shared and co-learning, leaving both teacher educators and students vulnerable." Vulnerability at the height of the pandemic resonates not only with Phillips' classroom, but, for some at least, a larger resonance in teaching and learning in higher education. Returning to our analogy, despite planning our community block party, we recognize that where there is planning, there is nevertheless always a degree of unknowing, a degree of risk, a degree of vulnerability (e.g., gate-crashers may photo-bomb any carefully contrived natural conviviality).

This reflective self-study emerged from a year of bi-weekly conversations about the sudden shift to online teaching and learning. Our conversations were shaped by, and recorded as, our collective collaborative writing via Google Docs over a year. These writing sessions informed our teaching, which was always simultaneous to our reflective meetings. This article, this writing, is an artefact of our conversations and may be thought of as a particular reflective moment in our analogical block party. The exuberance of our confetti cresting the wave of pandemic isolation may have ended, but our ongoing efforts at block party planning have not.

That being said, there are limits to our block party analogy, and we confess that a better analogy may be that we threw a *virtual* block party, albeit one with a significant degree of active participation—much like *Choir! Choir! Choir!* who led many virtual sing-alongs on various streaming platforms, complete with song lyrics, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Just as in-person sing-alongs may be related to, though not equivalent to, virtual sing-alongs, in some ways the virtual environment has its own nomenclature. Online learning is constitutive of at least three components: social presence, cognitive presence, and teacher presence (Carrillo & Flores, 2020). Indeed, Fiock thinks through these three components as applied to the "widely cited 'Seven Principles of Good Practice for Undergraduate Education,' [in order to] apply the guidelines to improve online student experiences" (Fiock, 2020, p. 140).

Social presence speaks to the ability and perception that participants see themselves as 'real,' as actual agentive actors who happen to be online—not as avatars with colourful fictive biographies. In a sense social presence is to acknowledge and own one's social realities albeit in a different medium (Fiock, 2020). Cognitive presence may be described as "the ability to construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection" (Fiock, 2020, p. 137). Although these three components (cognitive, social and instructor presence) describe overlapping aspects of online learning, the teacher dimension seems to garner significant attraction. The instructor may create scaffolded spaces in which structured reflection may occur. More simply, instructors create opportunities to enable cognitive presence—and cognitive learning. Further, teacher presence facilitates sociality, and ideally in ways such that participants come to recognize their online participation is constitutive of an identity in community. That is, sociality online becomes its own participatory space where identity, community, and learning are linked (Farnsworth et al., 2016). But again, within this reflective self-study, our primary focus here is on teacher presence as it seems a logical point for our reflection. While we acknowledge the interconnectedness of social, cognitive, and teacher presence, we have chosen to reflect on actions that we took in order to facilitate learning.

And we are not alone in the focus on teacher presence. Indeed, many researchers speak of it, and in a number of ways. For instance, in describing ways to foster online educational communities, Berry (2019) suggests teachers reach "out early and often" (p. 169); that they limit "lecture time, and increase … discussion" (p. 170), and they use "multiple technical features of the virtual classroom to encourage discussion" (p. 171). Oyarzun et al. "summed up in this phrase 'they do not care how much you know until they know how much you care.' It was apparent that these students felt that this instructor cared about them and cared about their growth" (2021, p. 119). Or stated differently, "teaching presence drives social and cognitive presences" (Oyarzun et. al, 2021, p. 122). In looking at ways of fashioning an online pedagogy of care, Moorhouse and Tiet (2021) similarly claim that "[t]eaching presence is contingent on the teacher's ability to create a supportive and caring community for learning" (p. 212). Or, within our analogy, the party planners take seriously the responsibility for creating a good party.

## Before the Party: Guessing the Guest List

*Welcome. You are invited to our neighbourhood block party. Bring a chair and your household. We are looking forward to connecting with you.*

### Introducing Ourselves and Our Practice

We have come to the wonders and questions about how this pivotal time—shaped by, but not only by, the COVID-19 pandemic—has led us to think about inclusive practices in education, broadly understood; instructor and student communities in online teaching and learning; and, even, how recent experiences are (re)shaping practices in the face-to-face classroom. Joining others concerned with dialogue between scholars concerned with the scholarship of teaching and learning in recent years, including Manarin et al. (2022), and for context setting purposes, we begin by introducing ourselves and our own entries into the pandemic as a way of situating our contributions to this collective work and recognizing that, as with any block party, the hosts themselves are influencing the ways in which the experience unfolds.

### Scott Anthony

Like many of us, I had to suddenly teach completely online as the pandemic made its way to Saskatchewan, Canada. I teach within our Inclusive Education Certificate at the University of Regina. The Certificate may be taken post-baccalaureate or simultaneous to our undergraduate degree in education. In this way, our classes are diverse with a mix of pre-service and in-service teachers. Accommodating this experiential diversity is a challenge since it is not uncommon to have some student teachers that have not yet written their first lesson plan, and those in-service teachers that have written a seemingly infinite number of plans. At times, the more experienced teachers may not be as technologically familiar as our often less experienced pre-service teachers. Additionally, in Saskatchewan, there are numerous Indigenous students and those from a number of cultural backgrounds. Indigeneity runs through our teacher education program, as well as our Inclusive Certificate. In short, there is a diversity of experiences, abilities and cultures within our classes that need to be accounted for as we work towards more inclusive online educational experiences.

### Jenn

I was on the verge of booking a flight to Australia for my sabbatical research when rumblings of a global pandemic began. I hesitated at that time to make a significant change to those plans. But, borders closed and flights were canceled, and it was looking like we would be staying home for a while. Although I was not scheduled to teach until the fall, I felt that a good way to fill that unexpected void was to prepare for teaching online. I had heard of Zoom, and had attended a meeting or two via Zoom, but I had never taught on Zoom. From my vantage point, there were two aspects to this learning—the technology side and the community side. Attending webinars and scouring the internet for information, as well as studying the instructional briefs from the university, allowed for a relatively quick understanding of the technology side of things, but I soon realized that creating community in an online environment was going to be significantly more challenging. This soon became my central concern and focus.

Teaching in Inclusive Education at the University of Regina, I am cognizant of not only teaching about inclusive education, but also practicing inclusion in the way I teach. Clearly with the pandemic and the consequential shift to online teaching and learning, accessibility and inclusion would necessarily take on a different meaning. For some, this would be a positive redirection; for others it would be challenging, daunting, and perhaps even an unworkable means of learning. It became important to me to not only learn how to set up and structure synchronous Zoom classes with breakout rooms and online polls, but to also find a way to foster community and a sense of belonging—especially critical during such an unnerving time of uncertainty and concern.

### Christie

At the onset of the pandemic, I was preparing to move to the University of Regina to take on a decanal role in the Centre for Continuing Education (CCE) in the summer of 2020. In March 2020, however, my focus shifted to supporting instructors, students, and staff at the University of Alberta's Faculty of Extension to transform their learning environments—as was the case almost everywhere in Canada—to fully online and remote learning. Leading a team of instructional

designers and elearning specialists as part of my portfolio meant that those first weeks were especially demanding. In the URegina context, online learning is coordinated through CCE and so my soon-to-be new colleagues were experiencing similar challenges within their context.

This also means that I was not teaching during the time of the initial pandemic shift to remote learning, though I was thinking constantly about how to support those who were experiencing the tools of online learning for the first time. Looking back, I realize that the priority was nearly entirely technical. Like many others, I was focused on ensuring that each course had access to a section within the institution's learning management system and that instructors knew how to access and operate the institutional web conferencing platform. There wasn't time to think about good teaching practices, accessibility, inclusivity, or even basic usability, beyond the tools that were already integrated into the systems. In a way, and in order to complete the 2020 winter term, the panic of the early days of the pandemic meant setting aside best (and sometimes even just barely acceptable) teaching practices.

And yet, as it became apparent that the pandemic wasn't going to end after an easy two-week lockdown, many of us working in the space of teaching and learning support began to turn our attention to making subsequent terms better. What did instructors need to know (and know how to do) in order to create better learning environments and experiences for their students? What supports and tools could be implemented at scale to enable better teaching and learning in a remote environment? Because of the question of scale, though, most of the answers to these questions were again focused on technical skills and technical interventions. It's this reflection, more than two years into the pandemic, that brings me to wonder about the ways in which we can move forward in better ways, learning from the experiences of pandemic-driven remote learning, in ways that might transform and support sustained and intentional online learning in the future.

**Online Presence and Baking Bread: Fostering Inclusion Before the First Online Class**

As instructors, we introduced ourselves through online introductory forums; we worked to model what is (and is not) appropriate to share with the class; and we tried to bring something of ourselves into the context of the class. For instance, in the early days of the pandemic, sharing photos of bread baked became one way to connect before the class began, especially when students responded with photos of their baking and other pandemic life-at-home moments. In other words, much like the block party we've imagined, introductions and name tags (or Zoom's name display) alongside the practice of bringing something to share (even virtual food) is a practice that can begin to foster inclusion even before the first class begins.

While introductions are not an unusual practice—in face-to-face or in online teaching—the intentional practice of *inviting* introductions that include meaningful details can help to develop learner-to-learner relationships and instructor-to-learner relationships. For online teaching, especially by Zoom, we have noticed that this can increase the likelihood that students will share their video during the live and synchronous portions of the class. We have observed, for instance, that students do not automatically turn on their cameras, for a range of reasons, to participate in an online class. We discuss this below, but note here that the *invitation* matters as one way of fostering inclusion across a diverse community of learners. In other words, this relational work is essential if we are to foster inclusion and a sense of community in our online classrooms, and that relational work begins before our first online meeting.

## During the Party: Working the Room

*I'm so glad you're here. What brought you to this neighbourhood? Have you had a chance to meet many of your neighbours? Let me introduce myself.*

## Online Curriculum as an Imagined Community: Who Is Invited to Our Party?

We recognize that there is always interplay between what happens exclusively before a class and what happens as a class begins; there is overlap in the space and time of what might be considered *the beginning*. That is, as noted above, fostering inclusion across a diverse community of learners does not begin on the first day of teaching; it starts much earlier. Each of us has discipline-specific areas and are comfortable conversing within those academic communities. Although content specificity is important, our argument here is that it needs to be accounted for within a framework of EDI (Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion). For example, the journals *Teaching Exceptional Children*, *Teaching Exceptional Children PLUS*, and *Intervention in School and Clinic* are all excellent journals that tend to be targeted towards practitioners, towards teachers teaching in the inclusive classroom. These conversational milieus are ideal resources for a myriad of inclusive instructional strategies, including Content Enhanced Learning (CEL), and Cognitive Strategy Instruction (CSI). As the course curriculum becomes populated with articles and resources for the given topics, a larger perspective is helpful. Glancing at the readings, several questions related to EDI may emerge. For instance:

- Who is represented in my course curriculum? In other words, who may feel as though they are invited to learn?
- Who is not represented in the curriculum? And relatedly, who may not feel invited to participate?
- Who is not represented in the course curriculum, but whose representation is assumed or taken for granted? In this case, such students may always and already feel invited. They may understand learning as a-cultural, an impossibility.

In other words, *before* the class begins, planning for inclusion—in the course design and content selection—matters and requires a practice that is intentional and attentive to diversity.

## I'm Here in Name Only

Alongside attention to the course design and content selection, awareness of how online technologies will be used to facilitate inclusion is necessary. As technology becomes easier to navigate, more kinds of online participation are possible. Online conversations may be enhanced through the sharing of screens, use of whiteboards, break-out rooms, informal and quick online polls in the virtual classroom, using emojis, et cetera. But, these types of online participation possibilities do not happen automatically. That is, along with these enhancements are the very real challenges including Zoom fatigue, where users experience weariness, even disinterest, in using online learning platforms. Perhaps one of the ways we see this the most is through the shutting down of video cameras during online classes (Castelli & Sarvary, 2021). Indeed, there may be several legitimate bases for such an action; some students require and/or prefer privacy. An in-home camera constitutes a much different kind of participation than in-person attendance in a

university classroom. Some students may be "concerned about personal appearance, …. [or] concerned about other people and the physical location being seen in the background and having a weak internet connection, all of which our exploratory analyses suggest may disproportionately influence underrepresented minorities" (Castelli & Sarvary, 2021, p. 3565). For these reasons, our university's policies do not make camera-use mandatory.

But there are some benefits to using video cameras. For instance, non-verbal cues aid communication, so video cameras may therefore help to create a more inclusive learning space. Having observed a relationship between relationality and camera use, during the first synchronous class, we find that saying hello and having a brief conversation with every student—camera on— can be a meaningful and authentic gesture for students and professors. Students seem more inclined to be camera-on if they are having a personal conversation with us. Each subsequent synchronous class, we continue to greet students individually. Additionally, we use breakout rooms for small group discussions and for during-class exercises. Since these activities require active participation and conversation, students are more likely to leave their cameras on, particularly if they have already done so.

While the practices we describe do help to create an environment of community and inclusion, questions remain for us, especially: How can we foster community when learners want to keep their cameras off? While recognizing the very real reasons for doing so, we wonder about effective ways to invite participation in alternative ways. For instance, how can students participate in a textual way and how do we facilitate that (Garrison et al., 1999)? How do we encourage students to build relationships with one another? What kinds of online activities or assessments can we design that foster inclusion and community?

## How to be a Better Online Host: Instructor Presence that Facilitates Online Communities

As discussed above, Fiock et al. (2021), among others, identified instructor presence as a pivotal dimension for effective online learning. Fiock et al. (2021) defined instructor presence as consisting of "three sub-elements—(a) facilitation of discourse, (b) direct instruction, and (c) instructional design and organization—that work together to create a collaborative-constructivist learning environment" (p. 55). They found that students who scored instructors higher on these sub-scales, performed better than those who rated instructors lower (Fiock et al., 2021). If *instructor presence* is critical to facilitating cogent and inclusive online communities, how do effective instructors begin to create the conditions for *instructor presence* to be experienced by students themselves? We offer several strategies for instructors below.

## Strategies for Creating and Hosting a Synchronous Online Class

First, consider the much-watched Barry White Jr. YouTube video in which this exemplary teacher has a personalized greeting for every student entering his classroom each day (WCNC, 2017). While it may be a challenge to this virtually, instructors can greet each student, camera on, as they enter into our virtual block party classroom. As described above, we have found that starting the class with a quick conversation with each student increases the likelihood that students will turn on their cameras.

Second, we make no claim to being experts in e-learning interfaces. Like many instructors, we work in a university where our learning platform allows some customizable features within structured choices. We have found it helpful to take students on a virtual tour on day one. Through

direct instruction modelling, we explore where lecture slides, class notes, exercises, readings, assignment dropboxes, et cetera, are located, and we ensure that we demonstrate the collapsible menus.

Third, it seems that there is a relationship between direct lectures and webcam shut down; the longer the lecture, the greater the number of shutdowns. We try to limit direct lecture since there is a reverse momentum impact. Once turned off, there seems to be an impetus needed to get students to turn them back on. So, we try to capture momentum early in the course and each individual class.

Fourth, we have found that the larger the number of learners, the more likely it is that they will turn off their cameras, particularly during whole-class activities. Students may be more willing to engage if they are put into smaller groups of, for instance, four or five students. The break-out groups need to be small enough such that any one student who does not actively participate will be noticed.

Additionally, facilitation of discourse is especially important. And, as obvious as this sounds, we need to participate in the conversation; we need to visit the breakout rooms. Visiting groups gives students and the professor accountability. Students understand that the professor will be participating at some point. The more meaningfully the professor participates in the discussions, the greater the likelihood that the entire class will function as an inclusive community. As professors, we need to push students to consider viewpoints that they have yet to do so, for example. The more that the professors participate in the breakout rooms, the greater the likelihood that students will request assistance and input from professors. Relatedly, we assign during-class assignments in the breakout groups. These assignments are related to the week's topic and are later assessed, creating another form of accountability.

Fifth, ensuring students are prepared to contribute and share their knowledge in class helps. This may begin with giving students something specific to say—not unlike asking a guest at a block party to bring a dessert. Indeed, our students bring their lived experiences to the classroom, too, and are often knowledgeable about many topics. Sometimes, their educational reflection is constrained to a few salient, perhaps even traumatic, memories of teaching. Our goal is to lift up school experiences, alongside more researched knowledges in order to foster a more in-depth and less personality-dependent conversations. So, we assign readings or videos; and we require students to write an article/video review. In this way, students come to class prepared to speak on a topic with some knowledge. Accordingly, there is a variety of reading responses and informed opinions within any online class. Students come prepared to converse. Even pre-service teachers come prepared with some reflection.

Sixth, every reading response is publicly posted in a discussion forum three days before the synchronous online class and we begin our synchronous class with brief conversations about the forum's discussion. A facilitation group is assigned weekly to comment upon all the reviews, and lead these small group discussions. By requiring students to cross-post throughout the week asynchronously, we create possibilities for richer virtual synchronous discussions, irrespective of camera use. We have found exemplars of effective posts and cross-posts to be helpful.

This facilitation group is responsible for collecting and highlighting the salient themes that emerge from the posted reviews. For example, the topic of the week may be Individual Education Plans (IEPs), and there may be many sub-themes, such as culturally responsive IEPs, ways and means of fostering family participation in IEPs, using IEP boxes within the inclusive classroom to ensure that goals are addressed, et cetera. Students are randomly assigned into small breakout groups and each group has one facilitation group leader. The faculty instructor visits each group

and listens to all the conversations, giving comments where appropriate. These comments tend not to be evaluative, simply giving background or an example of what is being discussed.

The above is not intended to be an exhaustive list but, rather, is intended to offer some key observations and suggestions based on our collective experiences. We also recognize that the above strategies assume both a synchronous online class experience and class sizes that imply ease of one-on-one interactions. While this emerges from our own experiences, we know that very large classes or asynchronous classes may require alternative strategies. For instance, in large asynchronous courses, a weekly (or more frequent) announcement can serve as both a greeting, a reminder of what's to come for the week, and sometimes a recap of the previous week. Within some courses, written notes or announcements may be an opportunity for instructors to reflect broadly upon what they are seeing in assignments or discussion forums; and instructors might answer (or anticipate) questions common to the point in term or course. Instructor responses offered in response to individual reflective journal blog posts, forum posts, or full-class group discussions can also help to serve as effective instructor-student communication and interaction.

## After the Party: Reflective Party Favours

*Thank you so much for coming to the party. I hope we can connect again sometime soon.*

### Lessons Learned: How the Next Virtual Block Party Will Be Even Better

How can we take what we have learned from teaching online during the COVID-19 pandemic to teach more effectively online within an inclusive framework? At the beginning of 2020, quite suddenly, and with emerging clarity, the COVID-19 pandemic was about to change the learning landscape. The initial thought was that the shift would be temporary and short lived; now, in the third year of lingering pandemic-infused teaching and learning, we have come to realize that what we have learned may have more of a permanent place in how we teach in an online environment.

So, what have we learned? To be effective and inclusive in an online environment we have to know who is coming to the party and that *all* neighbours have been invited—and we must preemptively create an environment that is representative and broadly addresses the interests and potential needs of the invitees. We want people to come to our party and to feel not only welcomed, but valued, for what they bring—the invitation matters, and much can be done before the first class. Once students arrive, engagement and relationality become paramount; once they arrive, they become our collaborators and co-creators. For example, in our classes, we often ask students to identify their motivations for taking the class or what intrigues them personally or professionally about the subject matter. This information, unique to every student, and every group of students, shapes the way we lead discussions and respond to student work. In this way, responsiveness to students informs the ways in which instructors can optimize online learning experiences. Via instructor presence this is accomplished through the facilitation of discourse, direct instruction, as well as instructional design and organization (Fiock et al., 2021).

### Then: Shifting Because of the Pandemic

With the onset of the pandemic and resultant school and university closures, there was a brief lull in learning as the major shift to online teaching and learning took place. Understandably,

the initial priorities of teaching online were related to technical aspects—in most cases simply learning how to navigate an online platform such as Zoom. With variations across the country, and globally, universities embarked on more than a year-long hiatus of in-person instruction. Challenges soon became evident and, to varying degrees, virtually universal. How can we ensure student learning? How do we create a sense of community and belonging in a virtual classroom? How can we encourage attendance and maintain engagement? And how can we do these things while also respecting privacy and personal space as we virtually enter student's homes and lives.

## Now: Shifting Despite the Pandemic

With the abating pandemic, and gradual and fluid return to in-person teaching, we are recognizing and acknowledging a changed learning landscape. There are discussions related to expanding options beyond in-person and online teaching and learning. As a residual effect of the pandemic or perhaps an important outcome, universities are rethinking how courses should be offered to students to allow for greater flexibility, accessibility, and learning opportunities. Having had the occasion to learn online, students are now calling for a range of, and varied, modalities of instruction. Universities are listening. At many universities courses are now being offered through in-person, fully online, blended, or hybrid formats—providing choice and opportunities not afforded in the past (Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2021). The very nature of this shift has enhanced inclusivity. We know that some students prefer online learning, some prefer in-person learning, and some prefer a hybrid version—or, a combination of modalities. We also know that online teaching provides greater accessibility *geographically*, with a greater reach to rural and northern communities; *financially*, with students able to stay home, thereby reducing living expenses; and through *learning and mobility preferences*, by reducing those experiencing challenges in social settings and for those needing greater mobility flexibility.

As we have continued to reflect upon the lessons and learning of the pandemic, in our classrooms and scholarly contexts, we have been drawn to consider the ways in which experiences and practices of the pandemic can guide us to change the ways in which we teach going forward. For instance, much as a host of a block party might plan for rain, each of us has been moving towards crafting a revised attendance approach—recognizing and acknowledging that illness and injury, of students or ourselves, can be anticipated as a possibility over the course of a semester. While similar considerations were present prior to the onset of the pandemic, the ways in which illness manifests and is managed has shifted since COVID-19 emerged as a presence in our lives, recognizing a greater consciousness of community responsibility in the potential transmission of some illnesses. And so, when teaching a face-to-face course, we are now called upon to both convey to students that they are not expected to attend class in person while ill; and we are then called upon to make this a practical reality. Even in classrooms without the equipment for a fully hybrid experience, offering remote attendance through institutional web conferencing systems, can be facilitated through a laptop or two. Including recording policies, and retention policies, in advance, becomes equally important. Statements such as these recognize—and accommodate—individual student experiences and situations, including those who, for instance, may attend class in person but live with those with compromised immune systems.

Another impact of the shift to remote and online learning at the scale necessitated by the pandemic has been a shift to online proctoring and invigilation of exams. In many fields exam-based assessments are common and, some would argue, necessary. And yet, online proctoring and invigilation is not universally inclusive and favours those students who have access to private and

quiet test-taking spaces and those who have their own newer computers and high-speed internet access. Reassessing our own assessment strategies, in favour of those that are *not* exam-based, limits the disadvantages of online proctoring and invigilation tools—another important consideration moving forward.

## Conclusion: Until We Meet Again

We end where we began, thinking about the ways in which we and our teaching practices have been shaped by the pandemic, and the ways in which we think about inclusive online teaching and learning. For us, using the analogy of the block party as a way of thinking about instructors as hosts—from preparation to presence to pondering the next iteration of a class—anchors our argument for fostering inclusive practices *as* community practices. In this way, we recognize that inclusion in a classroom—online or elsewhere—requires attention to the relationships between instructors and students experiencing a community of learning, together. As well, we advocate for and acknowledge the need for instructors to continue to think with and alongside their students, before, during, and after the class, with the aim of inviting and creating an ever-improving environment of inclusion, inclusivity, and community.

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