



# Tips for Creating and Maintaining an Inclusive Small Group Synchronous Online Learning Environment

## What is your name and pronouns?

Learners and teachers should have the liberty to introduce themselves according to their names, which may differ from those in the official records.

- During your first session with the students, ask them to introduce themselves with their names and pronouns. Be aware that not all names follow the Western naming convention.
- You may need to clarify with a student if the name introduced is not in your list for assessment and taking attendance. However, they should not have to justify why they use a different name.

## Turning on/off video

It is crucial to have a collaborative, inclusive, and welcoming virtual environment. While we encourage our learners to turn on their videos, they have the right to turn them off at their discretion without the burden of disclosure of the reasons. In such situations, encourage them to keep their sound on and continue to engage in the learning process using Zoom functions such as chat, verbal comments, or reactions.

Here are some reasons why a learner may turn off their video:

**Privacy:** Learners are attending sessions often from home where there may be family around but have not consented to be visible through webcam. They also have the right to maintain the privacy of their home environments, opting to keep their videos off.

**Religious:** Individuals who wear head coverings, including the Hijab, may prefer not to wear it at home, so they may opt to keep their video off.

**Health:** Headaches or eye strain from watching the screen all day may require time away from looking at the screen and being on video.

**Accessibility:** Students may have support from Accessibility Services and have been provided approval such as “*the student may occasionally turn off video during lecture, tutorial, seminar, or lab and keep audio on.*”

## Responding to a wrong answer

How we respond to and engage learners can help create and maintain psychologically safe environments, where learners feel comfortable asking for help and taking risks.

- Encourage critical thinking while validating student responses.

- Highlight part of answer that is correct or when might be right.
- Encourage students to think aloud (why, how) to see if they pick up the error, without shaming.
- Discuss what is right answer and why, and reasons we might choose the wrong answer.
- If response points to a common misconception, gently discuss, and thank the student for raising this.

**At the start of a session,  
collaboratively establish a  
shared understanding of  
how everyone will  
communicate and participate**

These may include the following depending on the context and content:

- **Encourage the use of video, if possible, to facilitate discussion, but also recognize individuals may need to turn the video off for various personal reasons.**
- **Discuss how you will take questions and how everyone can participate, e.g., “To**



*participate, feel free to unmute and jump right in, use the chat function, or use the ‘hands up’ feature in the participant function. You may also share your comments with the facilitator via a private chat if preferred.”*

- **Encourage students to ask as many questions as they need to support their learning, e.g., “There is no bad question.”**
- **Be present for the conversation, e.g., phones on silent mode.**
- **Create a safe environment, e.g.,**
  - *“Speak from your own experience and only share what you are comfortable sharing.”,*
  - *“Listen and speak up respectfully.”*
  - *“Respect the confidentiality of experiences shared in this space.”*
  - *“Lean into discomfort when exploring topics that are more sensitive.”*
  - *“Recognize that some of the content that we discuss may be difficult. If needed, take some time away from the conversation. Let me know if you need support.”*

Questions/feedback: [ofd.md@utoronto.ca](mailto:ofd.md@utoronto.ca)  
Additional resources can be found at [Office of Faculty Development](#) and [Centre for Faculty Development](#)

## REDUCE ZOOM FATIGUE AND FOSTER INCLUSION

Learning and teaching virtually for extended periods is exhausting. Students sometimes spend many hours a day learning on Zoom.

- **Avoid multitasking.** Learners and teachers set aside or turn off cell phones, close computer programs not being used, or even put a sign on the door to avoid interruptions.
- **Build-in breaks throughout the session.** For each one-hour session, take a 10-15 min health break. Teachers can also change things up every 15 mins.
- **Reduce on-screen stimuli.** Use “Hide Self View” so you don’t have to look at yourself on the screen, as it contributes to feelings of being always ‘on’.

*Did you know that faculty can get a [free Zoom educational license](#)?*