# Making classes inclusive

Creating an environment in which a diverse group of students work and learn together productively can be challenging. Establishing an inclusive learning environment can contribute to more effective classes by equalising participation and promoting productive group dynamics. [Key principles of inclusive teaching](https://ctl.ox.ac.uk/inclusive-teaching-steps) contains further guidance on this.

This resource provides guidance to help you plan and teach inclusive classes that accommodate and take advantage of student diversity. You may also want to consult the guidance on [managing tutorial dynamics](https://ctl.ox.ac.uk/tutorial-dynamics) and [facilitating tutorial discussions](https://ctl.ox.ac.uk/facilitating-tutorial-discussions) as some of the ideas covered in these resources apply across teaching settings and can be adapted for small group teaching.

Encouraging contributions

**Provide thinking time.** Many different factors will influence whether a student volunteers an answer to a question. However, requiring a few seconds of thinking time for all students after asking a question gives time for students to formulate an answer and decide whether to contribute, and so can lead to an increase in students volunteering answers. Evidence indicates that it also results in answers that are longer and more complex.

**Think-pair-share.** This involves giving students a minute to think or write down ideas in response to a question, then asking students to talk in pairs, comparing their ideas and points where they agree or disagree before sharing more widely with the whole group

**Invite written contributions.** Some students may find it helpful to think through their ideas by writing, so try giving students a minute to jot down ideas before verbally participating. When teaching large classes online you may also want students to primarily contribute via the ‘chat’ function as this will enable all to contribute and avoid the problem of facilitating multiple voices at once. However, be aware that patience will be needed as not all students will be able to type equally quickly.

**Invite anonymous responses.** Allowing students to contribute responses anonymously is particularly beneficial for those students who perceive contributing as ‘risky’ and worry about giving the wrong answer. This can be done via the collection of anonymous post-its or by using an [online polling system](https://ctl.ox.ac.uk/vevox).

**Appoint a ‘reporter’.** When asking students to work in smaller groups, consider randomly appointing one member of each group as a ‘reporter’ who will voice the group's answer. This will take responsibility off individual students who may be concerned about whether their answer is correct. Appointing different reporters for different tasks also ensures that a variety of voices are heard.

**Actively invite contributions.** It may be obvious that only a few students in the group are contributing ideas. Try explicitly inviting students who haven't spoken to participate using phrases such as ‘I'd like to hear from someone who we haven't heard from yet today’ and allow time for these students to formulate a response. If no one comes forward after waiting, consider asking students to discuss responses in pairs before calling on specific students who haven't yet contributed. For online classes, be explicit about the ways that students can contribute and if possible, give students a choice, for example, they could virtually ‘raise a hand’ then speak, or they could type their message. It can take time to respond to these, so it's helpful to make students aware of the fact that they may need to be patient waiting for you to pick up on their point or that you may need to respond to some questions after the class, for example, via email.

Promoting active participation

**Group work.** In large classes, consider splitting students into smaller subgroups to work together to solve a problem, prepare a short presentation, or discuss an idea. Evidence indicates that encouraging students to work with, and rely on, their peers increases participation and discussion. This is also beneficial for groups where there is a diversity in terms of prior knowledge, disciplinary approach and so on, because students will need to clarify and question their ideas as they collaborate. Starting with a ‘low-stakes’ exercise first can help students to practise group work.

**Open up questions.** Rather than always responding to students’ questions yourself, open them up to the rest of the group to see what other students think. This will help to show students how they can learn from one another. In addition, students will be more engaged when they know they are expected to listen and respond to other students’ ideas.

**Set preparatory tasks and questions**. So you can make effective use of class time and allow all students to prepare and contribute, set an agenda for the class alongside preparatory tasks, such as asking students to read some material or answer a series of questions. Students can then complete tasks individually or in groups where one member reports back before or during the class. You could also provide optional material for students depending on their prior level of learning or particular interests, but make sure it is clear to students which tasks are compulsory and which are optional. This will give students the opportunity to prepare, read and go over material, which may be particularly important for students new to the topic. Having students prepare in advance can also help with online classes where is likely to be a longer delay between you asking questions and students typing responses.

Gauging learning

**Identify prior knowledge.** Some students may have much deeper knowledge of the topic than others or have quite different perspectives or methodologies. Take time to gauge what students do or don't know and how they approach questions, for example, by asking students to complete a brief task in the first class or by using an online poll for students to answer questions anonymously. This will give you a clearer idea of the spread of knowledge, the level at which to pitch your teaching, and where you can use this diversity by creating opportunities for students to share their knowledge with the wider group.

**Reflect on ongoing learning.** Assessing students’ learning can be challenging in a large group, but it can be helpful for you and students to know what they've learnt. Providing regular reflection exercises which require students to summarise their learning or using anonymous polling allows both you and students can see what is going well and which areas need clarifying.