

Mixed Classroom Educational Model in Online Education (Phase 1)

In February 2020, we introduced the VU Mixed Classroom Educational Model: an educational approach that builds upon differences to enrich the learning experience for all students present. The aim of this model is to help students learn how to open up to differences, to co-create an inclusive environment and to capitalize on different perspectives in order to create value. Capitalizing on differences does not entail compromising between different perspectives or approaches or merging them into one uniform perspective or approach. Instead, it uses the differences and possible tensions between perspectives and approaches to stimulate critical thinking, develop analytical skills, and generate creative solutions.

Why this document?

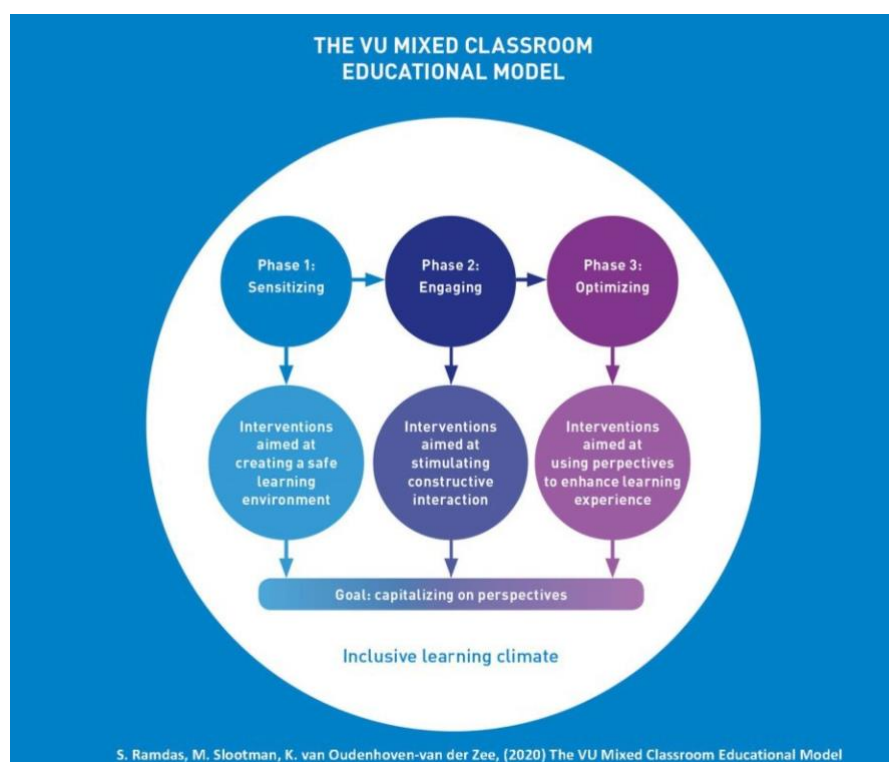
The aim of the Mixed Classroom Educational Model is to improve our education at VU Amsterdam, in order to pursue our educational goals. However, to continue to do so when all educational activities take place online is a new and an unprecedented challenge for everyone involved. In order to support teachers who have enthusiastically embraced this model, or were just starting to be curious, we have extended the strategies and learning activities in the Educational Model to work in the present situation of online education. It is meant as an addendum to the original document¹, that you can find [here](#). We cover phase 1 here. The 'virtual' extension of Phase 2 and 3 will follow later.

The VU Mixed Classroom Educational Model at a glance

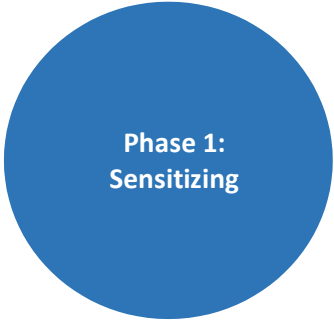
The VU Mixed Classroom Educational Model is built on a three-phase process through which students learn how to capitalize on different perspectives and approaches. We distinguish between the following phases, taking place in the classroom:

1. **Sensitizing** students to their own frame of reference and the existing diversity in the classroom, and creating a safe learning environment to do so;
2. **Engaging** students to interact constructively with different perspectives present in the classroom;
3. **Optimizing** every students' learning process by having them capitalize on different perspectives and approaches.

An essential element in these three phases is an **inclusive (online) learning climate**.



¹ S. Ramdas, M. Sloopman, K. Oudenhoven-van der Zee (2020), The VU Mixed Classroom Educational Model



Phase 1: Sensitizing

During phase 1, the emphasis is on two main themes: sensitizing students to their own frame of reference and to the existing diversity in the group, and creating a safe and inclusive learning environment to do so.

Central questions teachers can have during this phase are: How do I create an inclusive learning environment online? How can I invite students to share their perspectives in an online classroom? How can I stimulate students to examine their own frame of reference? How do I frame diversity in a positive way? How do I feel safe, being the teacher?

Strategies and activities for **phase one** in an online setting:

- **Establish ground rules for interaction and discussion:** This strategy proves to be even more important in an online environment, where a certain extent of anonymity or the permanency of written posts in a discussion forum can influence student behaviour. This can especially be the case when English is not students' native language (Alexander, 2002). For teachers, it is harder to gauge student reactions without access to their facial expressions and other non-verbal communication. Collaboratively establishing ground rules for how interaction will take place online is therefore necessary. Discussing questions like: "How will discussions take place?" (Will we react to the teacher and each other via the chat window, or are we allowed to interrupt someone; will discussions have a place in the live online sessions or do students feel more comfortable discussing in a discussion forum?) "How will we communicate in the general chat window?" "How do we feel about private chats between students during an online class?" "Can we edit and/or delete posts to a discussion or forum?" "How will we address transgressions in online communication outside of the live online sessions?" "What do we agree on regarding recordings of the tutorial/webinar?" can prove useful. Organising this in a learning activity will help.

Some examples:

- **Contract:** Using a tool like [Mentimeter](#), [Tricider](#) or a Google doc have students come up with their own ground rules for interaction. The following questions can be used as starting point: "What do you need from the group to participate in online discussions? If we have to collaborate, how will we do that? How are we going to disagree with each other?". This exercise can be used for project groups to establish ground rules for interaction and collaboration, or for big groups to establish ground rules for discussion during online lectures or webinars. Since most of these tools provide students with a certain amount of anonymity, they most likely share what they need. Results can be posted online, so that they are available to refer to or check in on for the rest of the course.
 - **Breakout groups:** Create groups in Canvas, break-out groups in Zoom or Microsoft Teams and have students come up with a set of rules they as a group decide on. They can do this before the live online session and post their collaborative findings to a discussion board. The results can be reflected on during a live session. This is especially useful if students are collaborating in groups throughout the course.
- **Reduce anonymity:** An online classroom can feel especially anonymous. In most systems for example, students cannot see the entire class at once. This can lead to feelings of unsafety, which in turn can lead to less contribution, or worse, hinder the learning process. Using an icebreaker, or taking time for an online introduction (during an online session or outside it) can be helpful. It can also help to take the time for your own personal introduction.

Some examples:

- **Pictures:** Create a discussion in Canvas and ask students to pick and post a picture (using the Flickr search option) that best represents them, or what their expectations are of the course, and why. This can be done before the course starts.
- **Objects:** During a live online lesson, ask students to pick an object in their vicinity that is special to them, and ask them to hold it to the camera and share why they chose it.

- **Name generator:** For larger groups, use an [online tool](#) to randomly pick names to select someone to answer a question. These questions can be posed by the teacher as well as other students. All students can get called on, which means they have to stay alert and listen to each other's explanations. The focus is taken away from providing a single right answer. Instead, this gives students the opportunity to build on each other's answers.
- **Monitoring learning climate:** In order to keep track of whether the online learning climate is still perceived as safe and inclusive by all students, it is useful to set up processes for students to give feedback on how they are experiencing their learning environment throughout the course in an early stage. Teaching online gives us access to a lot of tools that can collect students' experiences in the online classroom, most of them anonymously.

Some examples:

- **Quiz:** Set up a short quiz and ask students to fill out the questions every other session. You can create a [Likert scale quiz](#) in Canvas, and select the option for students to remain anonymous. Questions you can add are: "Did you feel included?", "How did you contribute to a safe learning climate?" or "What worries you?"
- **Contract:** As explained above, the established ground rules can be reflected on by the group. For example, by voting on the rule they feel still needs work. Or by putting the rules in order of successful implementation by the group (using [ranking questions](#) in Mentimeter works well)
- **Explore values and assumptions:** Valuing diverging perspectives starts with the acknowledgement that multiple views exist and are present in the online classroom. In order to do this, it can be helpful to have students reflect on their previous educational setting, their personal talents, or their backgrounds. Most of the learning activities in the original VU Mixed Classroom Educational model can be executed online, provided that subgroups (Canvas) or breakout groups (Zoom) are made within larger online groups.

A variation on an existing exercise:

- **Memes:** Students find a meme (or picture, or proverb) that for them sums up their background and post it to a discussion thread. To create a safer learning space, especially for a group that has not met offline before, the instructor can create Canvas subgroups for students to share their images in and discuss them.
- **Induction of identities:** Although research shows us that students are more inclined to share their unique views in the group when they experience both belonging and a sense of allowed uniqueness, stimulating expressions of individuality can be challenging in an online setting. Using subgroups in Canvas or breakout groups in Zoom allows us to use learning activities described in the original VU Mixed Classroom Educational Model.

A variation on an existing exercise:

- **Grid:** Divide students into groups, and ask them to create collaborative document (i.e. [Google Docs](#)) to create a grid or table. Students then fill the grid/table with things they have in common as a group, and skills that the individual members bring to the group that are unique to them. This document can serve as a basis for agreements on working together as a group.

Who?	In common?	Unique traits?
Samaira	- We all live in Amsterdam. - We're all struggling with studying online. - We're all aiming for a good grade for this assignment.	Good at Excel
Lotte		Out of the box thinking
Wesley		Motivating group
Abdel		Time management
Chun		Creative/writing