

Checklist for Overcoming Digital Barriers to Inclusion in Online Learning



Photo by Riaz Jahanpour for USAID / Digital Development Communications



This checklist is a practical, hands-on tool to help program teams reflect on digital barriers to inclusion during **online learning** and make adjustments that result in more inclusive practices.

The Challenge

Transitions to online learning in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic threaten to worsen digital exclusion on an unprecedented scale. According to some experts, this shift represents the “largest disruption of education systems in history,” affecting up to 1.6 billion learners in 190 countries.¹

How to Use This Checklist

Purpose

This checklist is a practical tool to mitigate exclusion that some people are facing due to digital and technological barriers in online learning. The checklist is an attempt to address the most common barriers to meaningful digital participation that participants may face.²

Who is this for?

As a practical tool, this checklist is intended for diverse kinds of international development program teams that increasingly rely on online learning to meet their program goals.

Online learning is defined as a measurable gain of knowledge and skills to improve an individual’s practice and impact in the world. This learning occurs through online platforms where convenings, courses, trainings, and discussions are hosted. We recognize virtual learning does not always work well, but we aim to make it better.

You Don’t Know What You Don’t Know.

Given the nature of online learning, programs need to recognize that they often will not know *who* is being excluded. It’s hard to know who never received an opportunity or application.

How to navigate this checklist

This checklist divides considerations into three phases: **planning**, **engagement** (such as training), and **reflection**. We recommend dedicating time to planning each phase to ensure your program can increase digital inclusion for participants.

Planning Phase



During this phase, programs should focus their efforts on reaching out to learners and better understanding their needs. Teams should test assumptions about learners, including their lived experiences and needs, as well as their broader context. These insights then need to inform decisions about logistics, budgets, staffing, and outcomes.

- While assessing participant needs, identify participant technology or digital access barriers. IREX's [Online Collaboration Guide for Facilitators](#) includes a practical digital needs diagnostic and platform selection tool.
- While assessing participant needs, identify and include participants with varying abilities. Determine what accommodations they may need.
- Plan for participants who will access content via mobile. Consider what it will cost participants to access the material if they are paying for mobile data.
- Plan for participants who may become disconnected during a session or will need to access training content offline. Even with excellent planning, you may have some participants who are excluded from live participation.
- Test any apps you plan to use across platforms, operating systems, mobile and desktop, and in limited bandwidth environments.
- Check whether your resources are compatible with assistive readers and make needed adjustments.
- Support your participants to understand their digital security and privacy needs and select platforms that best meet those needs and your training's objectives. For example, participants may use a tool like [Consumer Reports Security Planner](#) to understand digital security needs and identify action steps. [Me and My Shadow](#) can help your participants evaluate privacy needs. [PrivacyTools](#) is a site that can help you select tools and platforms that protect privacy.
- Create a space for technology support, such as a technology practice session, troubleshooting guide, or live tech support option.

Engagement Phase



During this phase, programs should use resources from the planning phase, while actively modeling inclusion and fostering a tone that demonstrates that commitment. Regularly check in with participants and adjust how you provide prompts, present material, and describe tasks.

Resources during this phase

- [Youth Essential Skills Toolkit](#) for training youth
- [Online Collaboration Guide for Facilitators](#)

- Confirm that participants can access technology and use required features or tools. Periodically ask participants whether they can access what they need.
- Establish various means of contributing to live training sessions and normalize such participation. Consider establishing signals as a means for participants to express agreement or vote. Design prompts for individual reflection that can be read, heard, and processed on individuals' own terms. Ensure captioning is used on slides and read aloud any text included on slides.
- Elevate the voices of marginalized groups or others who may be more reluctant to speak up. Notice who is speaking up and who is not and gently encourage more equal participation.
- Provide opportunities for live tech support or ways for participants to report technology issues during a session.
- Double-check that all language and images used in written and oral presentations use the most concise, direct, and effective message.
- Ensure that privacy and security settings are managed as needed to provide safety for all participants.
- Use storytelling and reflection as part of training sessions to make learning accessible. Refer to IREX's [Power Learning Tool](#) to incorporate step-by-step reflection into learning.
- If engaging external presenters, train them on the technology, the context, and your participants' needs and realities.

Reflection Phase



During this phase, your program can reflect on what did and did not work, review data from the training, and make changes. This is also an opportunity to continue communicating in an inclusive way. Make it clear that digital inclusion is a priority and provide clear, alternative ways for people to access and interact with materials outside of the live session.

- Share recorded sessions, a session summary, accompanying presentations, and transcripts so participants can review them asynchronously if needed.
- Consider surveying all participants to better understand what digital access and participation barriers they faced.
- Follow up with participants who did not participate to understand why. If you are planning future training sessions, identify barriers and work to remove them.
- Reflect on what participation looked like and identify future improvements for accessibility and inclusion. For example, refer to IREX's [Power Learning Tool](#) to incorporate step-by-step reflection into learning.

Additional Resources



UNESCO: [“Distance Learning Solutions”](#)

Edutopia: [Edutopia.org](#)

Mobility International: [“Accessibility Tips for Zoom and Other Virtual Programs”](#)

Common Sense Media: [“Wide Open School”](#)

The Girl Effect: [“Girl Effect Publishes Good Practice Safeguarding Guidelines for the Digital Era”](#)

USAID: [A Roadmap for Measuring Distance Learning](#)

- 1 *The State of Broadband 2020: Tackling Digital Inequalities; A Decade for Action* (Geneva: International Telecommunications Union, 2020), accessed December 2020, <https://www.itu.int/en/myitu/Publications/2020/09/18/07/52/The-State-of-Broadband-2020>. According to an August 2020 policy brief presented by the United Nations, school closures and learning disruptions have affected 94% of the world's student population; in low and lower-middle income countries, up to 99% of the student population has been affected.
- 2 Even the best efforts to consider and address the types of digital exclusion included here will not close this gap by themselves.