Developing a Sense of Community Online

Online instructors can facilitate a sense of community in their class that promotes student trust, builds enthusiasm, and makes the class more enjoyable for both instructor and students.

Creating a sense of community is important to online learners. Such a sense of community will increase student retention and satisfaction. Social psychologists began the investigation into the creation of online communities, under the auspices of social presence theory. Social presence theory hypothesized that the sense of awareness of the other participants in an interaction shaped the communication in that interaction. Gunawardena (1995) and others used that theory to describe the online user's sense of social presence or community.

The greatest difference between face-to-face (F2F) classes and online classes is the loss of social cues like eye contact, body movement, vocal quality, and facial expression. All of these usually help build community in the classroom, so when a class moves online, new methods are needed to re-imbue that sense of community. Below are some recommendations for building a safer and more welcoming collaborative online space.

1. Faculty-Student Interaction

Your relationship with your students is of primary importance in any classroom. Here's some things to try online.

- Establish a relationship with students before the course even begins. Two weeks before the first day of class, make your course available on Blackboard. Include a video introducing yourself and talking about your expectations for the students and for the course. Give the students any information they may need to order the books and other supplies, and to navigate the system used for the course. Include a copy of your syllabus. Establish yourself as a caring professional who knows the content and can guide students to success in the field.
- Create Virtual Office Hours using a chat room, instant messaging (IM), blog, discussion forum, etc. Let the students know how often you will check whatever you create. If it is synchronous, they will probably expect an immediate response. Explain why that probably won't happen! You might offer them a phone number or other emergency line where they can get in touch with you very quickly. You might also consider creating an approachable avatar for yourself at the Office Hours. It can be something that injects

your personality into your relationship with the students. If the students find it fun, they may attend those Office Hours more than they would in one of your F2F courses.

- Early in the class, assign some sort of icebreaker for class participants, where they tell something about themselves. This could be related to your discipline or just something about their personal life. This can help you feel more empathy for them, and also help them make connections with their classmates. In any case, at least have the students introduce themselves and be sure to respond to each person's introduction.
- Giving students feedback is important, but grading can consume much of your life if you let it. Use light grading techniques and give group feedback rather than individual feedback where possible. For example, using a brief video lecture to congratulate three students by name on their assignments, and remediating one mistake made by "a few people" even if it is the same person every time.
- Use humor sparingly. It can easily be misunderstood online.
- Use emoticons to signal emotions. This replaces the facial expression, voice tone and body language one uses in F2F instruction.

2. Student-Student Interaction

- When having students work together online, be sure to vary their work partners. This will help them learn about the other students, and will also ensure that the free rider moves around the class and no-one gets stuck with that person all the time.
- Protect student privacy by allowing them to use avatars instead of photos if they like.
- Monitor student to student conversations. Step in at the first sign of a flame war or disrespectful conversation, and explain why the class must behave civilly towards each other. A flame war on a discussion forum or other conversational tool can get out of hand *very* quickly, so limit the number of venues that you have to monitor.
- Use a variety of methods for not only organizing the conversation (i.e. different discussion protocols) but also a variety of discussion formats (discussion forums, blogs, Flipgrid, etc.).
- Teach students how to operate a team. Make that part of the class instruction.
- Ensure that student avatars are linked to student posts for the class.
- If you have a small class, ask students if you can carry over blog responses from one semester to the next to enrich the blog for the next cohort. This is especially useful with small classes.
- Add an Internet Cafe as a social forum for discussions not directly tied to coursework.
- Reply to student work using a podcast or vodcast. Keep these short (no more than 5-10 minutes).
- Use RSS feeds to share information with students.
- Use video discussion forums like Flipgrid (https://help.flipgrid.com/hc/en-us/articles/360007460474-Getting-Started-Educators) as an alternative discussion method.
- Provide encouragement to the students on their progress.

3. Model Desired Behavior

- Teach students how to do the work you want to see. This includes any technology you want them to use as well as how a team should work, how to do library research, and assistance with writing for the class.
- Post a screencast (using Jing or Skype for Business) of you working through a problem or explaining how to use an online tool.
- Use Social Bookmarking (such as Diigo) to share bookmarks with students.
- Use Linkedin to create a professional relationship with your students.

4. Monitoring Undesired Behavior

- Read through all of the discussion forums and posts. Since online disagreements can turn into flame wars overnight, read them every day. When you see discourtesy or potential problems, address them immediately. Immediately make inappropriate posts unavailable.
- Correct misconceptions when you see them.

5. Enrichment

- Post weekly connections of class material to the news.
- Post weekly photos or art related to class material.
- Post announcements to keep the class up-to-date, but send announcements through email if they are essential to success in the course. Provide an RSS feed of announcements that students can receive as texts on their smartphones.
- Expressive elements are the spice of the course, the unusual or quirky elements that distinguish it from all of the other online courses. It is window dressing, but sometimes that touch of gingham makes all the difference. The human interactions in the class are more important, and take less time to develop and keep updated, so the window dressing ideas are left for last in this tip sheet.
- SUNY Cortland provides Ensemble as a way to host streaming media (https://cortland.libguides.com/c.php?g=954832&p=6889616).
- If you have questions about how copyright law affects what you can and cannot use in your class, contact the Memorial Library (https://www2.cortland.edu/library/about/policies/copyright.dot).
- Images should be interesting but do not distract from class. They can be illustrative examples, concept maps, etc. but must include text alternatives (alt-tags) for students who are visually impaired. Images in the public domain can be found online with Google Advanced Image Search (http://www.google.com/advanced_image_search). The results can then be filtered by usage rights (at the bottom of the search page).
- Use Ally to provide alternative formats based on student preferences.

6. Engaged Scholarship

- Use the different cultures and locales in which your online students are located to your advantage. Have them conduct local research and then share it online with you and their classmates. This has the potential for greatly enriching a class, and even discovering new directions for student and faculty research.

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