

Five Ways to Build Community in Online Classrooms

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“I’m sorry to bother you, but...” was the opening line of every email I received in the first week of this semester. This line was usually followed by nothing that would actually bother me: a question about the week’s materials, a link to an interesting resource, a discussion about a potential research topic, and the like. This was all despite my many attempts to ensure that students did not feel like they were imposing whenever they contacted me: a pre-semester introductory email, a video welcoming them to the course, my biography and teaching philosophy, virtual office hours, and multiple reminders about my contact information. Yet, with all of my entreaties to reach out, I was still dealing with the real issues of isolation, fear, and frustration that results in students leaving their online courses. To combat these feelings, professors—myself included—have to deliberately, consistently, and relentlessly work to build student-faculty and student-student relationships in online courses.

As educators, we know that building community in the online environment increases the likelihood of student success. Finding ways to concretize something as ephemeral as “a sense of belonging” can be difficult; however, here are five places where you can start:

1. **Make yourself available.** As the professor, you are the touchstone of your online course community, which means you need to model citizenship in your course. Upload a photo and provide instructions for students to do the same. Personalize your course wherever you are able by using original video announcements, overviews, and lectures. Establish the tone of the community through class correspondence, discussion board replies, and assessment feedback. Often, this also requires you to give students some of yourself

(an anecdote about your weekend or a link to something you found interesting). When students are comfortable with you, they are more comfortable learning, participating, and sharing in the learning environment.

2. **Create a communication plan.** Communication is essential to any relationship, and before you ask students to put themselves out there, you have to show them that it's safe to do so. Before the start of a semester, create a calendar of when you will reach out to each student individually. After the first week, reintroduce yourself and let them know that you're available to them. Before and after midterms are great opportunities for confidence-boasting. And before finals is a good time to remind them that your door (or inbox!) is always open. These communications reinforce the importance of individual attention and personalized education.
3. **Encourage interaction.** Classroom interactions happen by proximity in the brick-and-mortar classroom, but in the online classroom, you have to be more deliberate about student-student and student-faculty exchanges happen. "In" the classroom, you can use synchronous sessions, communal discussion boards, group projects, student presentations, wikis, and peer review groups. "Out" of the classroom, you can help create study groups and establish crowd-sourced notes. Like all interactions, these should be meaningful, relevant, and theorized to avoid confusion or resentment that can sometimes result from group interactions. When done successfully, however, these interactions create not only a community of learners but can also become lasting friendships.
4. **Build "outside class" spaces.** Unlike the brick-and-mortar classroom, online classrooms can feel all encompassing, lacking the traditional space and time borders that demarcate the classroom. This often means that there is no "before" or "after" class when much of community-building often occurs. In an online course, you have to consciously build in these "outside" spaces that are free from content delivery and assessment. Make "water cooler" or "café" discussion boards where the class can talk about current events and common interests. Create a social media page for the class where ideas can be shared. Watch a virtual event together and discuss it afterwards. Deliberately creating social moments acknowledges this fundamental aspect of education.
5. **Bring the outside in.** Paradoxically, online courses can also feel compartmentalized and isolated from the wider campus community. In our courses, we need to remind students that they are a part of large campus culture. Post announcements about events happening on campus. Assign attendance at webinars and live-streaming events for course credit. Encourage them to take part in campus organizations that are especially friendly to distance and continuing education student. Explain how to access student support and resources. As possible the only touchstones to campus, faculty members have to be ambassadors for the college community.

Being deliberate, consistent, and relentless, we can build communities in our online courses that help students to connect with not only with the course materials, but with one another. And by working to create these relationships, we can turn "I'm sorry to bother you" emails into "I'm glad I have someone to reach out to."

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