

Five Easy Ideas that Build Bridges to Your Online Learners

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As an online instructor with many students, it is challenging to remember details about every learner who has passed through my virtual classroom. But there are some whom I will never forget.

I could sense this student was frustrated early on after the first project when she made some very derogatory remarks about the class, which quickly mushroomed into accusations about our course and the university. I could feel the tensions escalating. I read a lot of “always/never” statements to which I could have responded. But I did not. I could have let her rant and most likely fail herself out of my course. But I chose not to allow that either. Rather, I chose to engage this student head on even though we were in an online platform. I chose to be “present” in her displeasure and build relational bridges.

So here’s an interesting question: How *do* you effectively connect with students, form relationships, and be present in their lives in an online platform? Community is such a valuable commodity that is often overlooked. Students want to know their facilitator will support them, be active in their course, and create a sense of belonging. “Instructor-student relationships lie at the heart of humanizing, serving as the connective tissue

between students, engagement, and rigor” (Pacansky-Brock, Smedshammer, and Vincent-Layton 2020, 2). We must never underestimate the impact of authentically relating to our online students.

Online learning can feel very isolated and stressful for our learners. Many are raising families or are single parents working full or part time jobs, dealing with aging parents or sick siblings, or working through a major crisis in their life—all while completing their education in a virtual setting.

Many studies and articles explore ways to successfully build community and be active in your own online courses. Michelle Pacansky-Brock speaks to its deeply-impacting results:

“When students relate to an online instructor as something more than a subject matter expert and begin to conceive of themselves as part of a larger community, they are more likely to be motivated, be satisfied with their learning, and succeed in achieving the course objectives” (2015).

So what are some overarching principles for building community in your online setting? First, make sure you have “presence.” This means students see tangible evidence that you’re active and engaged in their course. One author goes so far as to say that “an online teaching presence is the binding element in cultivating a learning community” (“Establishing an Online Teaching Presence” n.d.). Second, show empathy—that you have a sense for when students need extra support due to struggles in their lives and you actively respond. Third, have a personal awareness of your students. Do things in and out of your class to understand your students on a personal level (Pacansky-Brock 2015).

What strategies are you using? I’d like to offer five easy and effective ideas to grow presence, empathy, and awareness with your online students.

1. **Be intentional in learning about your students.** For example, you could survey them in the first week of class. Here are some prompts:
 - In one word, describe how you’re feeling about this course.
 - What is the one thing that is most likely to interfere with your success in this class?
 - What is one expectation that you have of me as a facilitator during this course?

Note student answers and then target your responses to those individuals who may seem overwhelmed or anxious (Pacansky-Brock, Smedshammer, and Vincent-Layton 2020).

2. **Be a frequent communicator.** Whether it’s through announcements, video, or email, be present in their lives. Do you know one of the easiest ways to do this? Consistently respond to their communication within 24 hours and make their progress important to you. This builds such a strong perception of care. And they will value your detailed attention.

3. Be personal in communication. A simple way to do this is to use the name of your learner when responding through email or a discussion post. I do this with every email. Read your response to be certain it has a tone of, “I’m happy to assist you, and I’m here for your success.” Communicate in student-friendly language that is complete, supportive, and understanding. I guarantee your students will notice.

4. Be seen by your students. Use your smartphone or computer to create informal videos in your own space. Students love this. They want to know their professor is a real person with life struggles, families, hobbies, and interests. For example, you could greet your students each week with a brief video, send a supportive video message to a struggling student, or post a picture of a current life event (Pacansky-Brock, Smedshammer, and Vincent-Layton 2020). [Here’s an example of an informal video](#) I recently took for my online course—a reminder to keep pushing through the upcoming semester, while relating to them that not all uphill ventures are easy, but they are worth it.

5. Be empathetic. Read between the lines of your students’ communication and come alongside them when there’s pain or stress. Treat them as individuals who need compassion. Share vulnerable stories from your own life and work with them when they are hit with difficult situations and cannot meet due dates. Students want to know that you care about them in their challenges.

So, what happened with my student? I chose to be present with her, be empathic, and be aware of factors outside of our class that were contributing to her angst. It took time, but we made progress. And by the end of the course, I was humbled and grateful to read that I had been the most helpful professor she had in all her graduate work. That I always provided feedback, was encouraging, understanding, and there to help when needed.

I do not write these things to draw attention to my online instruction; rather, these serve as reminders as to what can lead to significant student outcomes. Students need our learning objectives, our content, and our authentic assessments. But mostly they just need us as caring human beings. They need someone who is not going to react *to* their lives but rather partner with them *in* their lives. Especially in their struggles.

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References

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