

Building Community in Online Classes

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Introduction

Lucille McCarthy's insightful 1987 study "A Stranger in Strange Lands" demonstrated that community was an integral part of learning in the college classroom. In her words, "Students' relationships with each other, like those between students and teachers, are created as students interact within the classroom structures the teacher has set up. These classroom structures grow out of teachers' explicit and tacit notions about writing and learning" (McCarthy 257). This sense of community is even more critical for online instruction ([Donovan](#); Poll et al.). Given the uncertainty caused by COVID-19, it is even more imperative that we plan to teach online—and thus strive to build community online—even for those of us who may begin the semester teaching in the traditional classroom. Simply put, if we engage our students in both face-to-face and online community-building from the very beginning, it will greatly ease the transition should we move to online courses sooner than expected.

Building Community

Early-semester community-building strategies

Teacher introduction

- Introduce yourself in class as you normally do, and then follow up online with further details. The video mentioned in the next item is another way to bridge between face-to-face and online interaction.
- Create an introduction video to your Canvas course, which guides students through the Canvas setup and gets them used to interacting with you online. They should get to see your face in this video, since you'll be wearing a mask in-class. Follow [this link](#) to instructions for making a video, and see the video I made for my CO 150 course [here](#).

Student icebreakers

- *In-class icebreaker*: Have your students introduce themselves with a fun fact, answer a strange/interesting question, etc. I'm sure you've all got ideas for this part. If not, check out [these suggestions from the CO150 Common Curriculum](#).
- *Follow-up icebreaker on Canvas*: For this activity, have students post a brief video to a discussion board in which they develop their introductions. They might share another fun fact, answer other interesting questions, or share some other appropriate information about themselves. Their classmates should then ask questions in the discussion board to learn more about each other. This small assignment achieves the following objectives:
 - Students introduce themselves both in class and online.
 - Students interact with each other through multiple modalities, in this case through (socially distanced) face-to-face interaction, video, and text.
 - Students get immediate practice with synchronous and asynchronous learning.

- Through the videos, students see each other without masks.

Early small assignments

- Include several low-stakes activities throughout the semester—especially during the first two weeks—that get students talking to each other in class and on Canvas: group activities (see “**Socially Distanced Activities**”), Discussion Boards, “coffee shops” (see below), etc.
 - While your feedback is always important to students, it is an indispensable tool for building community during the first few weeks. [Brown](#) recommends the following “ABCs” for online feedback:
 - “**Acknowledge** the student's input. A quick response by the instructor helps to begin the interaction with the students and keeps them motivated.
 - **Build** on students' ideas by adding content, perspectives, experience, reference to the readings, etc.
 - **Conclude** with a focused follow-up question as a way to tie off the conversation with all students. I like to use a provocative question that facilitates critical thinking that goes beyond the facts.”
 - “Modeling how to carefully read one another’s discussion posts and follow up with additional probing questions can lead to students sharing rich dialogues that enhance learning and relationships” ([Donovan](#)).
- “Nudge” students who seem to be struggling or who disappear early ([Chronicle](#)).
 - Email students after each absence, especially during the first two weeks. These kinds of nudges establish expectations for attendance and participation and demonstrate for students that they are missed when they are not in class. These nudges are also important for students who make a habit of not participating in online discussions and peer reviews.
 - Email students who don’t perform well on early assessments/assignments, offering to help them to understand why they did not do well and how they can do better on future assignments.
- Create a “Coffee Shop” space in your Canvas for students to talk to each other in no-stakes interactions, and encourage some posting there early in the semester (“[Example](#)” 11.7).

Maintaining Community

- Maintain regular discussion board assignments and respond to your students’ work on these assignments.
 - Respond to your full-class discussions by text and video. For example, after several students have responded to a discussion board prompt, you might write a brief response in which you acknowledge what these students have said and provide a thoughtful question to prompt deeper discussion from the students who have not yet posted. Then, after all students have responded and you have read over the full discussion, post a brief video in which you make a general response to the class’s work.
- Set up opportunities for students to do small group work in both text and video platforms. Have students record their video chats on Zoom or Teams so that you can review them and provide any feedback you find necessary.

- **Build in a mechanism for students to provide regular, anonymous feedback on the course (“Example” 11.6).**
 - **For example, you can design simple, anonymous surveys through Google Forms or Microsoft Forms and post link to a survey regularly throughout the semester. For example, I have set up my Canvas page to post links to [this survey](#) at the end of each unit (roughly every four weeks). You can also set up your survey as an [ungraded Quiz in Canvas](#). If you are confident that you will use the same survey each time, you can set them all up at the beginning of the semester and set Canvas to make them available to students on specific dates.**

Works Cited

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