



# Developing Online Community—Strategies

## *Strategies: Social Presence*

- Introductions.** Use the first week of class for students to get to know one another and to create an atmosphere where students feel welcome. This can be done through student introductions and activities, such as Icebreakers, which allow students to get to know one another. The more students know about other members of the learning community, the more trustful and responsive they become in terms of academic discourse.
- Turn on cameras.** During Zoom meetings, have students turn on their cameras on to aid in social presence.
- Promote student cooperation.** Assign a variety of assignments that promote student cooperation. Encouraging students to help one another is an essential component to having a successful learning community.
- Group work.** Divide learners into small groups to engage in collaborative work and discourse. Groups should have between 3-4 students. It is OK to change the groups at least once during the semester so learners can engage with multiple perspectives throughout the course.
- Respect students' diverse opinions/statements.** Students should feel that their point of view is acknowledged by other course participants. Students should not have to worry about being judged on their statements.
- Encourage non-academic conversations.** Provide a discussion forum where students are able to interact with one another in a respectful, non-academic environment, like a Student Social Lounge.

## *Strategies: Cognitive Presence*

- Diagnose misconceptions.** Diagnose misconceptions by assessing students' prior knowledge.
- Have students post discussions before seeing peer responses.** Change the settings for discussion boards so that learners are required to submit their own post before they are able to see and respond to other posts. This results in more original posts because learners are not able to see and base their thoughts on the work of their peers but, rather, must draw on the source material and their own critical thinking to address the prompt. Consequently, learners are more likely to respond to each other's posts though deep, meaningful discourse, as opposed to superficial agreement.
- Model discussion starters.** Provide a sentence starter bank for discussions and model using these. For example, provide students with a list of "I agree because..., I respectfully disagree because..., I agree with what you're saying, but would like to add..." to support them in discussion threads.
- Promote rigorous critical thinking.** Use Bloom's Taxonomy to compose discussion prompts/questions drawn from the content to be learned that promote rigorous critical thinking.
- Provide multiple representations of content.** Provide multiple, varied opportunities (text-based, audiovisual, simulation, etc.) to acquire knowledge that accommodate a broad range of learning preferences and meet learning outcomes.
- Make an authentic connection between the course and the real world.** Students thrive off of understanding why or how course content relates to their future and how they can use it to benefit themselves. Purposefully place students into the shoes of a professional in their field and learn how to think critically from the eye of that profession.
- Create interactive tutorials.** Create interactive tutorials (like interactive videos, such as EdPuzzle) to support students in accessing the different parts of the course.
- Provide options for completing graded assignments.** Allow for options and different pathways within the learning. Use learning menus or choice boards. This could also include offering flexible options to complete coursework by offering partner or groupwork.
- Encourage a growth mindset.** Encourage the development of a growth mindset as compared to a fixed mindset to teach students responsibility in their learning process and to keep track of their learning. This can be done with self-reflection assessments, such as reflection assignments, keeping a journal, or blogging.
- Encourage students to respectfully challenge one another.** Create a classroom community that celebrates probing questions, skepticism, and other ideas that can be explained. Guide students to respectfully challenge one another by coming up with solutions based on their own reality and developing counterarguments that keep the conversation going, while also considering their classmate's experiences. Identify areas of agreement/disagreement and encourage constructive dialogue between two differing views
- Use technology to enhance the content of your course.** Examples:
  - Flipgrid student videos for discussion and response
  - Padlet or Jamboard for student responses
  - Zoom breakout rooms for smaller groups
  - Interactive videos with embedded quizzes with EdPuzzle
  - Interactive lessons with Nearpod or PearDeck
  - Incorporate shared documents into lessons

## *Strategies: Teacher Presence*

- Build the curriculum before the course starts.** It is vital that instructors have the entire course content and architecture determined before the course start date. It takes considerable time to detail course objectives and goals and to design collaborative activities that meet the course objectives and goals.
- Course Organization.** Ensure that all of the resources, assignments, and other instructional tools are organized. This allows students to easily navigate through the course as well as ensure that they can access everything needed for success.
- Communicate if the course schedule changes.** Communicate with your students if your schedule, assignments, or course structure changes. Students need to know what to expect.
- Make sure your course is in a logical order.** Students should be able to easily find activities and due dates both on the syllabus and in the modules.
- Expectations.** Ask students what their expectations are for the course in the first week.
- Initial course survey.** Do a quick survey in the first week of the course to collect data about students, and then adapt your course to your students to suit the experiences that they bring to the course.
- Respond to each student's introduction post.** Mention something that the student talked about in their introduction when speaking to them later in the course. This shows that you're paying attention and remember details about your students.
- Promote a safe and respectful classroom environment.** Students that feel comfortable in their online community tend to have higher cognitive presence. If safety isn't established, students will only share and participate enough to "get by." Implementing exercises, such as Getting Started activities, show students that they are in a safe learning environment. This is very important and makes students feel comfortable. Don't get so focused on the content that you need to teach that you forget to make everyone feel welcome and comfortable.
- Make sure all students feel welcome in your course.** It is extremely important for students to have a sense of belonging in the classroom. Ultimately, this falls on the shoulders of the instructor to make every student feel welcomed and engaged so that no student feels isolated. Creating a welcoming and respectful atmosphere at the beginning of the course can lead to a stronger community
- Provide weekly checklists/updates.** By providing a checklist or update for each module, you are ensuring that students feel comfortable and organized with the class, while providing a level of oversight and direct instruction not normally provided in online courses.
- Place students in groups from the beginning** (particularly for large enrollment classes). Provide a more intimate environment for students by placing them in groups at the beginning of the course, and only requiring students to provide discourse with these particular students in their own discussion boards. Instead of students having to weed through the entire class' responses, this allows for collaborative learning in a smaller sized group.
- Be punctual with deadlines.** Ensure that all students can easily find when assignments are due. In addition, a course outline should be provided to help students guide themselves through the course. Deadlines can be established effectively by utilizing the Canvas modules and assignments with set due dates within each instance. Do not have multiple time parameters in a single module or single assignment. This can be confusing for students. Due dates across multiple modules or assignments is equally misleading.

- Create an introductory video.** Create an introduction video of (a) yourself for your students and (b) a video course tour. Different applications can be used for this purpose, such as Adobe Spark, WeVideo, and Flipgrid.
- Create a welcome message.** Have a welcome message for your course. This welcome message would include the following information about the instructor: (a) who you are (professional and personal background); (b) a photo of yourself; (c) convey your enthusiasm about working with the students; and (d) discuss what the course is about.
- Model academic discourse.** From the beginning of the course, model the expectations of academic discourse that learners will need to exhibit. Provide examples of the types of responses that will elicit a high level of discourse and participate in several threads of discourse (such as discussion boards) with learners. Doing this in the beginning stages of the course will show learners how they are expected to communicate moving forward.
- Video record lectures.** Provide video recordings of lectures for on demand viewing.
- Synchronous sessions.** Design synchronous sessions on Zoom or Teams so you can meet and interact with students. Consider using breakout rooms to facilitate small group interaction.
- Provide timely and frequent feedback.** Try giving feedback via audio or video for graded activities. Audio and video feedback is much more personable and sometimes can provide more information than text-based communication can convey. This type of feedback will keep students interested in the course and engaged with you. Keep it informal as if you were having a conversation with them.
- Chat rooms.** Conduct chat rooms (instant messaging) with your students to have active discussions.
- Rubrics.** Provide rubrics for every graded activity. This strategy will provide students with a checklist to self-check all requirements before submitting an assignment. Rubrics help students practice monitoring and evaluating their own learning. Rubrics let students know how they will be graded.
- Summarize discussions.** Summarization allows for students to remain on topic and understand the issue or question brought up by the instructor. Either the instructor or the learners (for extra credit) can summarize whole or small group discussions to promote deeper analysis and reflection skills.
- Provide examples of expected work.** Teachers should provide examples of work expected from students, so students have something to follow. These examples can come from previous students in the course.
- Have an open line of communication with students.** An open line of communication between instructors and students is important because students need to feel that they are able to work with their professors if they have a problem. Being understanding when non-class related problems arise from is important.
- Address students by name.** Address each student by name, and in future conversations, remember a detail the student shared to make the experience more socialized.
- Virtual office hours.** Implement virtual office hours for individual students and small groups of students to pop and ask questions and offer support.
- Use humor with caution.** Though it can help to establish a positive social presence, the limitations of text-based communication carry a risk of misinterpretation. It may be best to wait until social presence is firmly established and you are sufficiently familiar with the personalities of your learners (and vice-versa) before leveraging humor with confidence.
- Nonverbal communication—Emoticons, Bitmojis, and Memes.** In an online course, it is difficult to substitute for facial expressions. Find your own authentic way to show social presence. Some simple ways to create a presence in an online classroom is through Bitmoji, emojis, and memes. In a

virtual environment, there is a lack of visual body cues so creativity can help. Emoticons can be effective emotional tools to emphasize the emotion behind a message when visual and auditory keys are absent.

- Show students that you make mistakes, just like them.** Convey that it is OK to make mistakes. Mistakes are encouraged. This is important as learning comes from making mistakes. Therefore, set a climate where mistakes are tolerated
- Guide conversations.** As an educator, engage in the discussions. If you see conflict in discussions, as an educator you can help monitor and guide the discussion to a more positive path. If you were in a classroom, you wouldn't let your students continue to argue, you would step in. Everything in your class is your responsibility.