

Starting Strong in Remote Courses: Cultivating Community from the First Click

Why Cultivate Community, Connectedness, and Belongingness in Online Courses?

- Logging into an online course for the first time can feel like walking into an empty classroom, with only a pile of syllabi on a desk (Darby & Lang, 2019). Students may feel confused, alone, or unsure where to start.
- In contrast, research shows that when students feel a sense of connection and belonging in their classes, they experience increased motivation, engagement, and satisfaction in their courses, which result in greater achievement of learning outcomes.
- It is important to create this sense of community in your courses during the “high opportunity zone” – the period between course registration and the end of week two. (Walton & Cohen, 2007)

Strategies to Lay the Foundation for Community and Belonging

Record a Welcome Video



- Keep it brief (<5 minutes)
- Informal is fine - record using your phone or webcam
- Remember to caption your video
- Share a story of vulnerability, failure, or growth
- Tell students how to find important information about the course

Distribute a Student Survey



- Use a survey to learn more about your students' expectations, needs, challenges, and preferences related to online learning
- Request a copy of OTL's Get to Know You student survey by contacting otl@uoguelph.ca

Make a Communication Plan for the Semester



- Schedule times to check discussion forums, respond to messages, etc
- Schedule regular announcements
- Consider holding virtual office hours to connect with students
- Be present and consistent



Strategies to Support Connection Throughout the Semester

Encourage Student-Student Interactions



- Develop sub-communities by assigning students to small groups for the semester
- Students can interact with their sub-community on discussion boards, breakout rooms, during ice breakers, etc.
- Create opportunities for collaboration – e.g., collaborative course notes in Google Docs, Resources page that students contribute to, think-pair-share, collaborative concept mapping, group projects
- Create a space for informal interactions – e.g., a café or lounge in the discussion forum

Facilitate Introductions (Break the Ice)



- Call the ice breaker something else (Engaging Opening, Discussion Starter, etc.)
- Participate in the ice breaker yourself
- Avoid asking students to be vulnerable too early
- Provide structure and clear expectations for engagement
- Break students into smaller groups
- Vary the response type – text, emoticons, images, polls, verbal discussion
- If possible, link your ice breaker to the course content
- Start the ice breaker when students begin entering the Zoom session

Create a Course Charter/Learning Pact



- Create a charter detailing terms of engagement in your course
- Create the charter in collaboration with students
- Consider offering a small incentive for students to engage with the course charter

Additional Resources

Faculty Focus, Five Ways to Build Community in Online Classrooms, <https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/online-education/five-ways-to-build-community-in-online-classrooms/>

KP Cross Academy, 6 Strategies for Building Community in Online Courses, <https://kpcrossacademy.org/building-community-in-online-courses/>

Community Building Activities, <https://oneheglobal.org/equity-unbound/>

Lecture Breakers podcast on Creating a Culture of Connection in Online Courses, <https://barbihoneycutt.com/blogs/podcast/episode-44-how-to-create-a-culture-of-connection-in-your-synchronous-and-asynchronous-online-courses-with-chad-littlefield>

Jesse Stommel, How to Build an Online Learning Community, <https://www.jessestommel.com/how-to-build-an-online-learning-community-6-theses/>

