BUILDING COMMUNITY IN ONLINE ENVIRONMENTS

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the sudden educational shift has added to the exponential growth of online learning and adoption of education technology to help students be successful in completing their intellectual activities (Li & Lalani, 2020). Despite its continuous growth, online learning can be a barrier to socialization, which equates to a decrease in classroom community spirit (Novak & Bramao-Ramos, 2020). Promoting social interaction in online learning often relies on faculty intentionally creating class-adjacent socializing to encourage active participation in the classroom (Novak & Bramao-Ramos, 2020) as well as engagement and sense of belonging (Andrews, 2018).

Below are six strategies to help increase socialization in online learning environments.

➡️ **Provide a discussion board for online introduction.** Have students create introductions of themselves so that they can connect with one another easier. These can be done as written posts with photos of the student/from the student's life or as a video post. Be sure to have the students reply to a few of their classmates' posts as well to ensure interaction. Also, do not forget to post an introduction yourself, so that your students can establish a rapport with you, too! To learn more about the benefits of creating short introductory videos, please watch this video from Dr. Charles Cwiek from the Haslam College of Business.

➡️ **Provide an introduction of yourself in the syllabus.** Including a short introduction of yourself, much like you would give on the first day of class, will help make you seem more "real" to your students, which will help them feel more connected to the class. Review Teaching and Learning Innovation's "The Syllabus" webpage for more information.

➡️ **Design icebreaker activities so students can get to know each other.** Dividing students up into groups and having them engage in an icebreaker activity can help them develop their own social presence online and allow them to get to know their classmates. You can utilize games, such as I Spy or Two Truths and a Lie, or simply ask them to discuss what Netflix show they have been binge watching or what new music they have discovered since the pandemic began (Saad, 2020).

➡️ **Design Class-Adjacent Communication Activities.** For educators, specifically those who teach in online learning environments, building a class community begins with designing communication activities. You can create a weekly Zoom chat using strategies found in this Inside Higher Education article, host a virtual Bingo night, or start a virtual "brown bag lunch" event to increase online socialization.

➡️ **Plan a Virtual Field Trip.** Having students attend a virtual activity, such as a virtual museum tour that is relevant to your course and then discuss it in groups via discussion boards or Zoom breakout rooms is a great way to create a sense of community among your students. The *Smithsonian Magazine*, *Mental Floss*, *Time Out*, and *Interesting Engineering* provide lists of museums that offer free virtual tours.

➡️ **Implement collaborative learning techniques.** Collaborative learning requires students to work with one another, which increases their sense of community and belonging, resulting in reduced feelings of isolation (K. Patrick Cross Academy, n.d.). Asking students to engage in activities, such as Jigsaw, Think-Pair-Share, and Brainwriting will help them connect to one another.

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For more resources on this topic, please refer to our Teaching During COVID-19 Resources. Questions? Email us at tli@utk.edu.