STRATEGIES TO BUILD COMMUNITY IN THE ONLINE CLASSROOM

OSUN Teaching Resources

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Creating a Personal Touch

Before the course create a "Virtual Welcome Package" where you'll be welcoming them to their new learning community. On the main course page post a brief video of yourself greeting students and welcoming them to the course.

Send a message to students with the link to the video and invite them already before the course to log-in and explore some links (prepare in advance some interesting links perhaps outside of your LMS and not containing course materials but tangentially relating to the course content). This e-mail/message will serve as a teaser, inviting students to log in days before the beginning, perhaps they will use this time to familiarize themselves.

At the start of your online course, create a "Virtual Meet-the-Group" forum and include a personal introduction post about yourself. Encourage everyone to contribute their picture/video, short bio or introduction to the group with personal details (hobbies, interests). Base icebreaker activities on that forum.

During the course: To make up for lack of personal touch online, design "icebreaker"activities also in the middle of the semester, where students do exercises getting to know each other e.g.

- Name one thing happening in your life right now that is positive.
- Name one thing happening in your life right now that is negative.
- Share a question you have about something.

- Name one thing that brings you energy and joy.
- What's one new and interesting thing you've been thinking about lately?
- State something you're very grateful for.
- What do you want to accomplish for yourself today? For someone else?

(Questions are from
https://wabisabilearning.com/blogs/literacy-numeracy/building-classroom-community)

Model this exercise by sharing some information yourself (answering questions, sharing an anecdote about your weekend or a story). When students are comfortable with you, they are more comfortable learning, participating, and sharing in the learning environment.

Creating A Supportive Learning Environment

Create the opportunities for communication to happen and be actively engaged (when students see you putting time into discussions and engagement, they'll be more encouraged to participate themselves.)

Teacher-to-student engagement

- Offer weekly online office hours: Let your students know what days or time frames you will be online via chat, video or phone calls. Indicate your office hours in the calendar of the course.
- Encourage participation with every outgoing message: In your regular communication (e.g. an email 1 week in advance announcing the plan for the upcoming week. Try to email them on the same weekdays and give deadlines at the same time) consider including in your posts not just the link to assignments but a link to LMS with some quick and easy survey or interesting content that is relevant for the course. This will encourage them to log in to LMS and making them answer a survey (even if it is only 3 questions) fosters participation.
- Reach out proactively fostering personal relationships with students (although in bigger classes difficult to do) via personalized responses to their discussion boards posts, personal emails, provide feedback to their work when possible via voice (with fewer written comments). When commenting on students' work, you can use Jing (a program that allows you to record your screen image, including movements and audio). Another tool for video feedback is VoiceThread. A VoiceThread is a collaborative, multimedia slideshow that holds images, documents, and videos and

allows people to navigate slides and leave voice comments, recording movement of the cursor on the screen.

- Check in on non-performing students: leave individual video messages – easy to do on Skype, Whatsapp or in Zoom you can record yourself and .mp4 format and post the link in your google drive and send the link for viewing to the student.

Creating an Engaging Learning Environment

Encourage student-to-student interaction.

- Assign student-led discussions in the online forums when giving text or video content to learn
- Identify students who are good at taking class notes and then they will share them back with the whole class.
- Design more pair-and group-activities setting up small study groups, for supportive mentoring of fellow learners, where they do assignments together to help build connections and community in your course. Encourage study in teams with their own deadlines and regular meetings, set a purpose for each meeting.
- Study buddies or E-buddies--make them do an exercise in pairs, connect online and with cameras on try to do the assignment – for those who have problems with self-management. Then report how effective it was with submitting drafts of what they accomplished
- For study groups, create a code of conduct – from a collaborative exercise where everyone is sharing input, e.g. asking them What do you appreciate   from your classmates? What can you do to communicate with your peers   in a supportive manner? How can I better show empathy toward other students in this course? e.g. code of conduct rules: Practice active listening and supportive communication with your group mates. Offer constructive and actionable feedback, not just criticism. Make suggestions to group members that may need help. Address issues within the group early, and communicate any issues that can't be resolved by the group to your instructor.
- To give your students plenty of opportunity to engage with the content and each other you can encourage them to find and discuss relevant and interesting resources in a forum or   discussion thread e.g. "Links to Explore" throughout the semester

How do we instil discussion where everyone feels comfortable and safe? How do we teach discussion not as merely expressing opinions but negotiating, finding agreement, looking for points where we come together?

1. "say-back exercises" Practice active listening by reformulating the message to the person who just said it.
2. Students comment on each other's comments. providing constructive comments on peer and group assignments
3. Acknowledge good responses publicly –Thank students publicly in the threads for submitting good comments. This will serve to model the types of responses you expect from other students as well as give positive reinforcement to the student.
4. Explore differences: create assignments with other classes from the OSUN network where students will have to put themselves in environments where people are from very different backgrounds. Alternatively, assign students to join a local community outreach group or volunteer in a charity. Make these experiences and student's reports of how they immersed themselves in the diversity of others' experiences part of the course program.

Ongoing Feedback

 Give plenty of opportunities for feedback, both on tools (which ones not working, what problems with bandwidth etc) and on content.

- Midway check-in feedback after the first 3-4 weeks on how things are going. This feedback should cover content and teaching methods, and request any areas requiring improvement. discussion board, surveys, mentimeter.com. Examples of questions: Regarding our work in class so far, what do you feel best about? What is one thing you're struggling with in class? Share a question you have about something.
- Acknowledge the difficulty Towards the middle of the semester when their zeal is slackening a bit, think of ways to boost their morale. E.g. instruct students to take 5 minutes to review something that they have accomplished in their life that they did not think they could do. Identify: What was the goal? What were the obstacles? How does it feel to have accomplished this? Each student can choose what theme music they would like the group to listen to as they take center stage online. Everyone shares from 3-4 minutes and then the group listens to the excerpt. This music theme can be made the theme of the semester or of the group. Helps to create sense of belonging to a group

Create An online Community also <u>beyond</u> the LMS

- Create a private group on social media sites like Facebook or LinkedIn, create a Twitter hashtag for continued conversation outside of the course.
- Build up group cohesiveness through personal sharing and make it fun! to keep the energy levels high. Video, music, images.
- Each student can create their own https://flipboard.com and collect there links they find interesting.
- Hold a Virtual Coffee Hour where you can discuss current events and common interests, Post announcements about events happening on campus. Assign attendance at webinars and live-streaming events for course credit. Encourage them to take part in campus organizations that are especially friendly to distance and continuing education students. Faculty members have to be ambassadors for the college community.
- Create intentional space for **celebration**: Creating virtual spaces and rituals for celebrations and socializing can strengthen relationships and lay the foundation for future collaboration. Find ways to shorten the affinity distance.
- Create a spotify playlist with music for the course where each student adds their favourite tracks
- Create a blog for the course: "When students have their own space in which to write and in which to interact with other students, it has a completely different feel to it than an LMS discussion board. In a blog, you can be yourself, creating your online presence week by week, post by post, a personal continuity that just does not happen in a discussion board which belongs to everybody/nobody. When a blog is yours and when you share that blog with others, it's fun and exciting in a way the LMS rarely is (at least in my experience)."
https://oudigitools.blogspot.com/2020/05/summer2020-blogging-adventure.html
- Before the course identify platform where students will be creating their online e-porfolio to showcase their progress throughout the semester that can be made private or accessible for all. https://wakelet.com or https://padlet.com. It can include throughout the semester excerpts from students free writing, collages of images, portfolio entries, self-assessment, reflections on assignments and what they learned.
- End the course with a final not only exam but a fun assignment. E.g. short 1-min video "what I have learned this semester" or …