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10 Tips for Creating Community through Remote Instruction

So, you have found yourself getting ready to teach remotely with little notice. This is a stressful situation because you have to deal with new technology, rethink how you are going to present material, and redesign assessments. On top of all that, you may be wondering how you can possibly recreate the community that develops in an in-person class. Feelings of community have a powerful effect on students' sense of belonging, satisfaction with their major, and retention rates (Booth et al., 2013; Micari & Pazos, 2016). Feelings of community also promote resiliency when confronting stressful or traumatic situations (Southwick et al., 2016). Furthermore, students participating in remote instruction are more likely to experience isolation and alienation than the would in in-person classes (Rovai & Wighting, 2005). The following are some quick tips for building a community through remote instruction that are geared toward supporting your teaching needs and also supporting you and your students during a stressful time.

1. **Start early.** As the quarter gets going, it can be hard to start new policies. Because of this, try getting students used to interacting with each other online in low-stakes ways. If you want students to engage in asynchronous discussions, have them introduce themselves and comment on each other's posts before your first meeting. This can be done through a Discussion Board on Canvas ([example prompt](#)).

2. **Support asynchronous discussion.** Rovai (2001) shows that incentivizing discussion through a platform like Canvas improves students' sense of belonging. Consider creating a shared weekly discussion question for each section. Students can receive participation credit for engaging with other students' posts. Ideally, these questions will be open-ended or challenging enough that the "right" answer is arguable or nuanced. Instructional assistants (IAs) can moderate to keep discussions going and step in as need arises. IAs may want to provide varying degrees of credit depending on the quality and number of their interactions with other students. ([Example discussion board rubric](#); [Suggestions for Facilitating Engaging Discussions Boards](#))

3. **Get to know your students.** It can be hard to know your students and what they are going through when you aren't face-to-face with them multiple times a week. In addition to sending out a [get-to-know-you survey](#) at the beginning of the course, check-in a couple of times with everyone through another survey throughout the quarter. Ask how they are feeling about remote instruction, whether they feel comfortable learning this way, what they need to feel supported in their learning, and if anything has changed that they would like the instructor or IA to know (Dolan et al., 2017).

4. **Humanize yourself.** In addition to modeling your expectations for your students' own engagement, think about how you can be a member of the community in addition to the one leading the class. It may be helpful to think about what you do in a physical classroom to connect with your students. Maybe you joke with them, maybe you like to use the whole space of a classroom, or maybe you have a sense of when a particular student is confused. Consider translating these qualities to your remote classroom by sharing a funny video with your students or giving them a partial tour of your workspace. Additionally, you can use a platform like [Mentimeter](#) as a way to have students anonymously ask questions.

5. **Virtual icebreakers.** Consider using [Conceptboard](#) to do a virtual version of popular icebreakers such as "Two truths and a lie" or use [Padlet](#) to play a game like "6 word memoirs" ([more online icebreakers](#)). Consider doing an icebreaker each week at the start of section or class or even assign them as homework.



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6. **Show and tell.** Before a class or section begins, consider asking students to take a photo of something in their environment and sending it to you or an IA. Ask students to take a photo of something from a list of options such as their room or workspace, something on their desk, a sock, or a ceiling. Open class with a slideshow of their photos or, in a larger class, the photos of a particular section.

7. **Limit instructor/IA control when possible.** Unfortunately, students feel less of a sense of belonging when instructors exert control over the learning environment. This is tricky because you want your online platform to work! However, students feel more of a sense of belonging when we engage them in dialogue (Rovai, 2000). Try to get into a dialogue with your students by asking them to choose the color of your Canvas page or get them to help you pick out a class or section mascot. You can even ask students to come up with discussion questions or (virtually) bring in an example of something they are learning about and explain it to the class or section.

8. **Ask students specifically to contribute.** If you are holding class or section through Zoom or another video conferencing program, you'll soon find out that it is even harder than usual to get students to volunteer a response! Because of this, it is helpful to know which students you can call on to volunteer a story or comment. To set your students up for success, have them do a pre-class reflection where they talk about a prior experience with something from that week. For example, you may be discussing phylogeny next week, so ask your students to come up with examples of species and a past interaction with one of them. Go through these responses beforehand and, in class, ask particular students to talk about their interactions with a species. Students often feel more connected to each other when they hear their peers tell stories about their lives (Curran, 1998).

9. **Online scavenger hunt.** Instead of providing all of the relevant examples yourself in a lecture or section, give your students the activity of coming up with their own. Give them five minutes to track down a good example of something you have been talking about and then share it with the class. Students can also send it to you via chat. This kind of activity encourages feelings of community because students are empowered to bring a resource back to the class. Additionally, they have to engage with the course content to know what a good resource would be. Depending on the class, instructors may want to break students into teams and assign points to teams who come up with the most relevant example or find a good example the most quickly (d'Alesso et al., 2019).

10. **Talk to your students about the value of community.** Students respond well to being told why they are going to do something (Brown, 2001). They may not see how significant feelings of community are to their experience as learners. So tell them why you want to build a community with them – they may surprise you with how well they respond. Also, let them know what your expectations are for how they interact with each other ([Sample Community Expectations](#)). Those who are very comfortable in these environments may use terms or make jokes with which other students are unfamiliar. So let them know how you would like them to speak with each other.

Bonus tip: Be kind to yourself. You are doing a difficult thing that you may have thought you would never do and you are doing it in a stressful time. Just like you support your students as they make mistakes (also known as learning), give yourself the same leeway. Your students will probably find it reassuring to see that learning how to do something takes work and that, ultimately, you are all in this new experience together.



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