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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



How to Build Community in Online and Hybrid Classes

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Blog Series: Online Teaching, Online Learning

July 31, 2020

Tags: online teaching | online learning | hybrid teaching | small group strategies

In a recent survey about the past spring 2020 semester, 65% of the college students surveyed said that they had much fewer opportunities to collaborate with other students when classes went online. 50% said that the online classes did worse, or much worse, at making them feel included as members of their classes. Honestly, I'm surprised that the numbers weren't higher! I worry about how we'll build community in our classes in the fall when we'll have to start classes remotely or with strict social distancing rules in place. I worry about the quality of learning in my discussion-based courses because I know it decreases sharply whenever class members do not trust me and each other enough to have real conversations. And I worry about my first-year students because they don't have any existing relationships on campus. How lonely will their first semester in college be, and how damaging will that be to their learning and their mental health?

Helping our students build relationships with each other and with us may be our most important task in the fall. So how can we do it? Here are my best ideas so far:

Stable small groups

I'll divide my classes into groups of 6 to 8 students, and they will work together regularly for at least the first month. They will:

1. Interview each other and introduce each other to the rest of the group in a blog post, a piece of art, a podcast, or video.
2. Post responses to course materials to a group discussion board, respond to each other's posts, and build on that interaction in class discussion.
3. Review and respond to group members' paper drafts.
4. Meet with me or the TA during office hours as a group.
5. Meet with me as a group during class to discuss course content (using a tutorial format).
6. Reflect on and trouble-shoot group dynamics: What role do you play in your group? Who talks the most? The least? How can you improve things?
7. Develop explicit norms for how to interact with each other.
8. Keep an eye on each other and let me know if somebody is struggling.

Create space to discuss how they are doing

College students across the nation were already struggling with mental health issues like depression and anxiety and, not surprisingly, early data indicates that the past six months have made it worse. So, in the fall, I'll focus more on how my students are doing. I plan to:

1. Assign and discuss course materials on mental health early in the semester. I'll show that I'm aware of the issue, that I understand how important it is, and that I recognize the stress that they are under.
2. Practice what I preach:
 1. Be flexible and compassionate and when possible give them the benefit of the doubt.
 2. In the beginning of each class, ask how they are doing and listen carefully to the answers. Avoid rote by mixing up the question: *How did you sleep last night? What will you do for fun this weekend? What do you wish your professors knew about your life right now?* Play with different ways for them to answer: small groups, poll, share with the class, or write anonymously.
 3. Make clear that I understand that some of us are more private than others and that they don't have to share if they don't want to.
 4. Email individual students to check in or to give them feedback: *You were unusually quiet today, are you okay? I loved your deep question about Buddhism, thank you! Thanks for bringing Mary's idea into the conversation and for opening a space so that she could speak.*
 5. Refer them to campus support services when needed. I'm not qualified to be a therapist.

Take care of ourselves

The past six months have been difficult for most of us, and the work I'm calling us to do takes time and energy. Don't be a hero. If you take this on, skip other stuff.

What stuff? Well, here's what I'm skipping:

1. I'm not adding any content to my classes and I'm not revising any assignments (except as mentioned above).
2. I'm using class time for the community building and mental health work instead of doing it outside of class. Content coverage will suffer, and I'll learn to be okay with that.

Most of all, I'll keep reminding myself that I'm teaching during a crisis. Perfection isn't needed and I won't strive for it.

Works cited

Suddenly online: A national survey of undergraduates during the COVID-19 crisis. Digital Promise, July 2020.

<https://wabash.center/2020/07/how-to-build-community-in-online-and-hybrid-classes/>