

Facilitating Effective Student Introductions

Learning about each other is a critical part of building community in the classroom. A comfortable community encourages people to participate in and take the risks that help learning occur. For example, learners participate in discussions and ask questions rather than remaining silent. In online classes, creating this sense of community is just as vital to student engagement and learning, if not more so, since online learners are often initially concerned with a sense of invisibility as they cannot “see” each other.

How Do I Get Started?

The time to begin building a positive learning environment is at the beginning of the semester. That way, students begin to develop relationships and understand the norms of their class. Activities planned for the first week should include introduction of class participants as well as an activity related to course content. A good first step is student introductions.

I am teaching a class online and I would like my students to get to know each other. What can I do?

Explain the need to build a community in an online environment because:

- Students find it easier to communicate with classmates when they know a bit about each other.
- Better student groups can be formed when goals and interests match.
- You will want to better understand the class and the students as individuals.
- A sense of community allows students to feel more comfortable sharing thoughts, suggestions and information.

Create an opportunity for students to share a bit about themselves. Students can:

- Introduce themselves online.
- Communicate with each other by responding to each other’s introductions.
- Post their picture or develop a personal Web page.

It is important to model the behaviour yourself. You should post your own introduction (include some personal information) and respond to students’ introductions.



Connect with us:

5th Floor Bio Sciences

Phone: (403) 220-4949

Email: lcfeedbk@ucalgary.ca



Give Me an Example

During the first week, introduce the course and explain that the class will first be taking time to get acquainted with one another to form an online community and assess each other's current skill levels.

Ask your students to write an individual profile and post it on the discussion board for the first week. Students might include:

- Their background (education, experience with course topic, work experience, culture, job, family or other relevant information).
- What they hope to gain from participating in the course.
- What they bring to the course.
- Anything else they would like the class to know.
- An interesting point about themselves.

More Ideas

- Create a personal Web site. Ask students to also develop a personal Web page within a tool such as Blackboard.
- Suggest that students refer to each other's introductions later in the course and remind them to update their own introductions throughout the course.
- Set up a "Coffee House," an online discussion area where students can talk about the topics that interest them, just as on-campus students might do over coffee.
- Try an introductory team building activity. For example, create an online bingo game or treasure hunt. These activities help students get to know each other better and learn how to navigate the course Web site.
- Arrange for a chat room or audio conference session where students get the opportunity to talk face-to-face.

Other Considerations

Some students may be shy or less open to sharing their biographies. Allow students to decide what they would like to share by offering guidelines for introductions rather than prescribed contents.



Where Can I Go for More Information?

1. Online Instructional Design & Pedagogy - Creating an Interactive Online Community

Provides further suggestions from creating and continuing to build an online community. From Northwest Vista College.

http://www.accd.edu/nvc/areas/disted/frk/interactive_community.htm

2. Building Learning Communities in the Online Classroom

Provides tips for building relationships in an online course. From Piedmont Virginia Community College.

<http://www.pvcc.edu/teachingcenter/tutorials/tips%20for%20building%20learning%20communities.htm>

3. Establishing an Online Community

This link gives a number of suggestions for active teambuilding initiatives. From the College of Education's Learning Technology Center at the University of Texas at Austin.

<http://www.edb.utexas.edu/teachnet/community.php>

4. Dispatches from Distance Education, Where Class is Always in Session

An article that focuses on student experiences in an online course.

Young, J.R. (2000, March 3). *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, p. A41.

<http://chronicle.com/free/v46/i26/26a04101.htm>