

Developing Relationships in an Online Environment

Stephen Wills, Georgia College & State University, United States

The European Conference on Language Learning 2020
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Relationship building is one of the main goals for engaging students in online learning environments and are seen as the foundation of online learning design (Ames, 2020; Cummings, 2020). Although this is not a new topic of examination, it is a topic that is evolving on an ongoing basis. This article will explain and show examples of various tools and techniques that can improve social presence in an online environment. Some specific tools and ideas that will be shared include: varying options for discussion/reflection other than traditional discussion boards, creating a “home base” to encourage students to answer each other’s questions, enhancing human presence and student participation during online lessons, creating a type professional learning community to analyze each other’s teaching videos during internships.

Keywords: Online Teaching, Online Learning, Learning Community, Online Engagement

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Developing Relationships in an Online Environment

Scheduled to go live during the summer of 2019, the faculty at Georgia College completed the conversion of our academically successful but financially inviable face-to-face MAT in Special Education program into a 100% asynchronous online program. The track record of success of programs that move from face-to-face to online is tenuous at best. Research indicates that a large number of new online faculty have a low level of understanding of the way online learners learn (Bawa, 2016). Many times, face-to-face faculty attempt teach or design online courses with minimal knowledge the pedagogical aspects of online teaching and learning. Consequently they work under the assumption that methods for maintaining active engagement in face-to-face environments will work equally well online. Videoing the lectures and classroom activities that took place in our face-to-face classroom sessions would not have the same effect as being in the classroom in person. Online learning does have many advantages over face-to-face instruction. For example, with online instruction, time constraints are gone. With online teaching, professors can provide direct instruction in short segments, avoiding long lessons that often lose student attention. In online courses, I provide instruction using series of 10 minute screencasts, online resources, field-based practice and written and verbal reflections. The lack of time constraints allow our students to work during a time that is free from distractions and gives them the choice of the amount of content that they choose to cover in one sitting.

Despite knowledge of the advantages of online instruction, we realized the need to maintain the relationships that were so key to the academic success of our face-to-face program. We wanted to avoid the stereotypical image of the isolated online learner interacting only with a video of a virtual professor. Our challenge was to create face-to-face types relationships with the instructors and with each other in an online environment.

Finding ways to entrench something as volatile as “sense of belonging” is a formattable task in an online environment, however, here are six strategies to try.

Adopt a Mentor-Led Cohort Model

One of the aspects of our face-to-face program that made it successful was our cohort-based, mentor-led model of teacher preparation. Being cohort-based, our teacher students took all of their special education courses as a group. The cohort was also assigned a mentor leader, this mentor leader would teach at least one course to the cohort to the semester as well as supervise their internships to insure that there was a consistent connection between the college classroom and performance in the field. The first decision we made in our online conversion was to keep the mentor-led cohort model. We currently have two cohorts of students. Each cohort takes all of their special education classes as a cohort. Each cohort is also assigned to a mentor leader, the mentor leader will be with them throughout their journey in the program teaching them at least one class per semester and ends out serving as their “go to” person in times of need as well as times of celebration. This type of relationship with a faculty member enhances communication with all faculty. Also, retaining the cohort model, students were able to form relationships with each other and maintain contact

in and out of class and make themselves available to each other and supportive of each other.

Host a Visible Real-Time Orientation

Many of our MAT students are pursuing their second career, or are current paraprofessionals or provisional teachers. They often have not been in a student in years and are intimidated at the thought of masters level work. Studies show that online courses have a 10% to 20% higher withdrawal rate than face-to-face courses with students reporting feeling isolated and overwhelmed (Jaggers, 2011; Bawa, 2016). The first days in any new setting inform every subsequent experience. Feeling welcome and greeted are the first steps to building community and a sense of belonging. This is especially true at the beginning of an online program. We begin our program with a synchronous orientation that is recorded and posted on Basecamp for later viewing. During this orientation, all of our of our professors participate. We explain the navigation of our online platform and basecamp, review ethical expectations, and introduce them to their fellow cohort members. This humanization of professors and fellow students puts most students at ease and enforces the importance of continuing communication and community.

Create an Outside Communication Platform

We created a space outside of our learning management system to maintain ongoing communication between students and faculty and among students themselves. In our MAT program, we use the *Basecamp* app for this purpose. In Basecamp, students and faculty can post messages to the group or select members of the group. The app is also phone compatible, so students can be alerted on their phones when posts are made. Faculty use the app to post course related matters such as reminders or clarifications. Faculty and students can also post non-course related information such as registration, job openings, university events or cohort celebrations. The most impactful use of Basecamp is that if a student has a question about a class, they can post the question and either a professor or a fellow student can answer the question in a timely manner. Having students take ownership of each other's questions is helpful for both students and professors. As a professor, not having my email inbox flooded with the same question or news of the same non-functioning link is certainly helpful to my productivity.

Create Classes Structured for Collaborative Learning

Another strategy we used to facilitate online relationships is to have the students working together in small groups. In Dow (2008) participants indicated that continued interactions and structured collaborative activities increased both the quality and quantity of student engagement. It is difficult to maintain engagement and communication among a cohort of 25 without the rising of leaders who talk for the group. The purpose in creating smaller groups is to ensure active engagement and communication with all students. Therefore we often have small group discussion boards set up so that the student cannot view the post of others until they have posted themselves. This way, everyone gets to state their opinion without copying the ideas of others or trying to side with the majority opinion. Within their small group, they

can form deeper relationships within their group. One specific small group project involves a Lesson Study where students observe videos of each other's teaching and rate each other's practice within the context of one of the CEC's High Leverage Practices. With all the students being new teachers, I avoid having peers rate overall teaching effectiveness. The evaluation of lessons within the specific context of a selected High Leverage Practice avoids any situation of "the blind lead the blind" and promotes the implementation of evidence-based practices.

Maintain Ongoing Faculty Visibility

According to Bawa (2016), online learners tend to communicate with professors after problems have occurred rather than seeking clarification before problems. I can't tell you how many times, beginning students start their email by saying "I hate to bother you, but" followed by a legitimate question seeking clarification before a problem exists. Faculty need to be visible to our online students so that they know your humanity and that you have their best interest. For online faculty, the term "visible" means seeing our faces as well as hearing our voices. I post a video introduction to myself and the course in the announcements tab as students log in to any class at any point in the program. By the end of the program, students know me and know how to navigate the course but I still post a video usually telling a story of my experience with the course content. To maintain being seen, I also schedule video-based office hours and conferences and often show myself in the corner of my screencasts as I am presenting information. Being able to see faces also allows the utilization of smiles and facial expressions that communicate in way that are often missed or misinterpreted in writing or voice.

Maintain Ongoing Student Visibility

Students need to be visible to each other. Students being able to see and interact with fellow students usually helps them realize that the other students have the similar insecurities and can be seen as members of the same team. In an attempt to make students visible to each other, we use the Flipgrid app to have video discussion boards. Many of our students were familiar with Flipgrid and were able to help each other. In addition, the Flipgrid app is user friendly on phones. When I compare the student engagement in traditional written discussion board versus video-based discussion boards, students are much more likely to spend time viewing, rather than reading, the posts of others and responding to those posts. At the beginning of the program, many students are very scripted and rehearsed in their video discussions, by the end of the first course, students are able to be themselves and feel comfortable sharing ideas in a less than perfect, more human, manner.

Conclusion

At Georgia College, we overcame the obstacles associated with the move from face-to-face to online programming. The result was a successful close-knit learning community of students and faculty that supported each other not only academically but also in multiple aspects of life. As educators, we know that the creation of community increases the likelihood of student success whether it is in an online environment or a face-to face environment (Wehler, 2018). Our primary goal in the

design goal for our newly online MAT program was to maintain the student and faculty relationships of our face-to-face program while changing the format to online with the goal of creating an atmosphere of active student engagement with each other, the faculty, and the course content. Through being actively engaged, students know whether they are progressing through the course in an efficient manner. This increased awareness of expectations and continuous feedback from multiple sources contributes to our ultimate goal of greater student success.

References

Bawa, P. (2016). Retention in online courses: Exploring issues and solutions-a literature review. *Sage Open*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244015621777>

Dow, M. (2008). Implications of social presence for online learning . A case study of MLS students. *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science*, 49(4), 238-239 Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.lib.purdue.edu/stable/40323753?seq=8>

Jaggers, S. S. (2011). *Online learning: Does it help low-income and unprepared students?* Retrieved from <http://csrc.tc.columbia.edu/media/k2/attachments/online-learning-help-students.pdf>

Wehler, M. (2018). *Five Ways to Build Community in Online Classrooms - Faculty Focus: Higher Ed Teaching & Learning*. Retrieved from <https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/onlineeducation/five-ways-to-build-community-in-online-classrooms/>

Contact email: Stephen.wills@gcsu.edu