# Chapter 10
# Fostering Connections in the Online Learning Environment:
## Using Intentionality, Empathy, Creativity, and Accessibility as Tools for Connection

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## ABSTRACT

*Student retention and success in online programs seems to be closely related to their perceived sense of connection with their faculty, peers, and institution. Using activities that create opportunities for interactions and communal learning reduces attrition rates and enhances the learner's experience. In fact, Ouled Salem identified four critical strategies that distance educators can use to foster meaningful connections in the online learning environment: intentionality, creativity, empathy, and accessibility. This chapter will go into detail about each of the four skills and outline evidence-based activities that can be used in the online classroom to create and maintain meaningful relationships.*

Forming meaningful connections is essential in online education (Harrison, 2021). In fact, an extensive body of research supports that student success in online classrooms relies heavily on the confluence of pedagogy, faculty-student interactions, student engagement, and connections between students (Harrison, 2021; Ouled Salem, 2023). Moore's (1997) theory of transactional distance, which discussed the important facets of distance education, highlighted the importance of adopting a comprehensive approach that uses creativity to engage students in activities that foster connections and create a sense of belonging. Using activities that create opportunities for interactions and communal learning reduces attrition rates and enhances the learner's experience (Haddock et al., 2020; Christian et al., 2021). Further, Moore (1997) put great emphasis on effective, consistent, and ongoing communication between teachers and students and highlighted dialogue as a predictor of student satisfaction and success. Similarly, Ouled

Salem (2023) identified four critical strategies that distance educators can use to foster meaningful connections in the online learning environment: intentionality, creativity, empathy, and accessibility. In this chapter, we will go into detail about each of the four skills and outline the benefits of fostering meaningful relationships and connections among students and between students and their faculty. Further, we will suggest evidence-based activities that can be used in the online classroom to create and maintain meaningful relationships.

## Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter you will be able to:

- Identify how intentionality, creativity, empathy, and accessibility facilitate students' perception of positive connections in the online classroom.
- Apply strategies to increase intentionality, creativity, empathy, and accessibility in the online classroom.
- Apply strategies that infuse multicultural awareness in creating online classrooms that facilitate connections.

## INTENTIONALITY

While the world has largely resumed its pre-COVID-19 state, new strains of the virus, most recently Arcturus, continue to emerge and cause unprecedented challenges. As a result, the present and future of face-to-face education remain precarious, despite the availability and accessibility of vaccinations (Weintraub, 2021). When COVID-19 unexpectedly forced an expedited shift to fully online instruction in 2019, many institutions were not equipped to ensure a smooth transition. Martin et al. (2022) therefore highlighted the importance of continuing to elicit research on effective online education and transcend the initial response to the COVID-19 pandemic by putting in place clear guidelines on intentional transitions from face-to-face to online instruction.

Martin et al. (2022) discussed the importance of intentionality in online education within the context of COVID-19. They highlighted the importance of using a trauma-informed lens and creating a variety of opportunities to interact with students on affective, cognitive, and behavioral levels. Intentional online instruction must transcend traditional pedagogy to create effective and comprehensive syllabi that meet online students' learning and contextual needs (Raza & Reddy, 2021; Martin et al. 2022; Tse et al. 2018). By implementing a trauma-informed lens, online educators are better equipped to provide students with the necessary support and resources (Martin et al. 2022). Martin et al. (2022) further argued the importance of intentionality in creating opportunities for social engagement as it is critical for students' wellbeing.

There exists substantial potential for online learning environments (Martin et al., 2022; Tse et al., 2018). In fact, student reports indicate higher satisfaction rates when instructors are intentional and thoughtful about their pedagogical approach (Tse et al., 2018). Moreover, instructors who have a long-term commitment to the course, meaning that they teach the course more than once, take a hands-on instructional approach using different technologies and resources, and use a collaborative approach to curriculum design elicit student engagement and success (Tse et al., 2018). Further, instructors must design e-portfolios that use a variety of modalities that intentionally meet learning outcomes and stu-

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