Chapter 12
Hello, Is Anyone There?
Strategies for Building Relationships in the Online Classroom

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ABSTRACT

It is well known that the online classroom structure can cause students to feel isolated and unsupported. Asynchronous discussion boards and digitally submitted assignments as well as not seeing the instructor or classmates face to face make for an impersonal learning experience. Knowing how to effectively connect with all students and working to build caring, authentic relationships can improve the online education experience for both the faculty member and the student. This chapter includes a review of evidence-based existing literature on building faculty-student relationships and making caring connections in the online environment. In this chapter, two online doctoral faculty members who have a combined 34 years of experience teaching in online classrooms provide practical strategies for building faculty-student relationships with the hope that current and future online educators can implement these strategies to better support student well-being and success while simultaneously promoting faculty satisfaction.

INTRODUCTION

In 1985, the first online degree program was made available by the National Technological University, according to *Forbes.com*, and since then, the growth of online training and education has nearly mirrored the success of the Internet (Learn.org, n.d.). Online learning has grown exponentially with each year's enrollments exceeding the previous year. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2023), among postbaccalaureate students in Fall 2020, 2.2 million (or 71 percent) enrolled in at least one distance education course. 1.6 million students (or 52 percent) of total postbaccalaureate enrollment, took online courses exclusively. With the enormous number of enrollments in online undergraduate and

graduate degree programs, it is critical that faculty go beyond sharing content knowledge and know how to build relationships with students to create caring connections in the online classroom. Online instructors oftentimes struggle to engage with and build meaningful relationships with students in the virtual environment, and without this critical component in place, online students report a lack of interest, in turn, they produce a lower quality of work and report less overall satisfaction. There are a host of tools and strategies that may be used by the online instructor to build meaningful relationships with students and increase these satisfaction levels (Jeffrey, 2019). It is well known that the online classroom structure can cause students to feel isolated and unsupported. Asynchronous discussion boards and digitally submitted assignments, as well as not seeing the instructor or classmates face to face make for an impersonal learning experience. Knowing how to effectively connect with all students and working to build caring, authentic relationships can improve the online education experience for both the faculty member and the student.

The Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework is threaded through the content of this chapter. In particular, Garrison's CoI framework is known for three elements – social presence, teaching presence, and cognitive presence – that are deemed critical for fostering a community of actively engaged participants (Garrison et al., 2010). The three elements combined contribute to student engagement, performance, and building community. Social presence (participants' ability to establish themselves as real/authentic selves in their academic community), cognitive presence (participants' ability to construct meaning and confirm understanding), and teaching presence (instructor's ability to design, facilitate, and provide direct instruction) as a trifecta cultivate a community that provides optimal support for student learning. Purposeful community building using the CoI is a critical component of fostering successful student engagement and performance in class.

Existing research about online teaching and learning includes mostly factors related to student success, persistence to degree completion, and student satisfaction (Alison et al., 2020). It is widely understood by stakeholders that online learners need support beyond academic instruction. In addition, instructors who teach online doctoral courses play a vital role in students' experiences as these students are engaged in the highest level of academic study and require specific types of connection, communication, and support. When students feel connected in the classroom, stronger classroom interactions and discussions often occur and that feeling of connectedness helps retain learners and create classroom community investment. The connections that can occur in a community of practice are incredibly important when considering the implementation of online courses (Blevins et al., 2021). Cultivating trusting relationships by providing students with numerous opportunities for authentic, spontaneous, supportive discussion with people they know well emerged as central to fostering a sense of community among online learners (Cornell et al., 2019). This highlights the importance of building faculty-student relationships.

In a survey of 344 faculty at land-grant and research-intensive institutions, Bolliger et al. (2019) discovered that faculty found students' sense of community to be key to engagement and satisfaction in online programs. Eighty-eight percent strongly agreed that community was important. Sixty-six percent said community extends beyond classes. However, only 37% said that there was a system in place at their institution to help online students build community. Given that faculty are the primary point of contact for online students, learning more about their perceptions of the online community is critical for supporting online students' success.

There are numerous strategies that faculty members can use to connect with students, including one-on-one video meetings, group video meetings, recorded announcements and messages in the classroom, phone calls, text messages, and other technological tools. While the use of technology is a critical

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