Tips for Establishing and Maintaining Student-to-Student Connections

As hard as it might be to imagine, we don't have to give up student-to-student connections when we move to an online environment. But, we do have to be very intentional in cultivating opportunities for students to create a classroom chemistry in synchronous and asynchronous online classrooms. If students have the time and space to develop working relationships with one another, it will be much easier for them to engage in discussions, problem solving exercises, and creative activities that will allow them to learn from one another. Here are some tips for creating and maintaining an environment in which students can connect with one another.

- Set the tone from the beginning by making sure that students have opportunities to talk with one another. These tactics generally can be used in both synchronous and asynchronous class settings, although some lend themselves to specific environments.
- At the beginning of the course, ask students to create their own intro videos and to watch one another's videos.
- Assign students to small groups (or have them self-select small groups), have them explore a few fundamental questions or issues surrounding the topic of your class, and to determine common interests in materials or module topics. This could be a stand-alone exercise or a beginning exercise in a series of activities for these small groups.
- Involve students in a collaborative project during the first few days of class, as an ice breaker and as a way to build collaborative learning habits.
- Ask small groups of students to map concepts located within assigned course materials by building flow charts or mind maps in Coggle or similar flowchart mapping tools.
- Use Padlet to construct a storyboard or post-it note-style visuals based on specific brainstorm or polling questions.
- Throughout the term, foster continued full-class community with some of the activities and digital tools in the "Technology Tools to Enhance Student Engagement Padlet." Your choice of tool will depend on the size of the class.
- Have students create group videos in [FlipGrid](#) that illustrate specific sets of theories or concepts within a course module.
- Place students in small groups that last across the term, to build support systems and community. Create discussion forums that alternate between small groups and the entire class.
- Have students do small, low-stakes projects across the term, or one larger group project that they present toward the end of the term.
- In synchronous classes, use breakout rooms to gather small groups of students together for discussion. Using small groups helps to frame more inclusive discussions and can help to promote broader participation. In this format, more students can find their voice, and after trying out ideas within the security of a small group, they will be emboldened to speak out in front of a larger group.
- Make sure to leave room in your class schedule for review and reflection on group activity outcomes/takeaways. Assign roles to each group member, such as recorder and lead speaker, and make sure they rotate the roles each time they gather for a small group

discussion. Have the small groups report out to the larger group after their breakout discussions, so that the conversation has the opportunity to continue in a broader format.

- For larger projects, leave time for live presentations, or for peer review/reflection on recorded presentations.
- And finally – just breathe. It is amazing what taking a few breaths together, in silence, or taking time to conduct a brief contemplative exercise over music, poetry, a botanical specimen, a person or thing in motion, can do to foster community. And this can be done synchronously or asynchronously.