5 Ways to Connect with Online Students

By Flower Darby

I'd been teaching online courses for 10 years — and, I liked to think, had become quite efficient and effective in the format — on the day it dawned on me that I was treating my online students as if they weren't actually people.

Most of my university's courses, in normal times, are offered in buildings, not online, and I teach in both realms. My epiphany came in March 2018, when a student I'll call "Lori" emailed to explain why she hadn't followed directions on an assignment. I'd required students to submit a quick video of themselves, but she'd posted an audio with her photo attached. In the week before the due date, she explained, she'd been beaten up by an ex-boyfriend. With a swollen and bruised face, she'd been too embarrassed to post a video. And without knowing the back story, I'd docked her grade.

Clearly, my well-intentioned effort to "create community" online — by requiring students to show their faces so we could get to know one another — had backfired. I realized I'd been treating my online students as names on a screen, grading tasks on a to-do list, rather than as people with varied life circumstances. I subsequently changed the assignment to *encourage but not require* students to show their faces in videos. And I changed my thinking about how I interact with online students.

As higher education prepares for a fall semester that will be **entirely or partly online**, amid Covid-19, many of you are taking the opportunity to **improve your online-teaching skills**. Helping you do that is the aim of **this series**. Today's topic is among the most crucial: how to connect with online students as people.

Why is that so vital? Three reasons:

- **Because those connections won't happen by accident.** In a physical classroom, you use "immediacy cues" — eye contact, smiles, tone of voice — to welcome students and support their contributions. Compare that with the isolation experienced by online learners. You are not there in person to convey all those nonverbal messages of support. Nor can students draw on the physical presence of other learners for the social support so essential to learning.

- **Because teaching is about relating.** An appropriately critical 2019 report, "**Does Online Education Live Up to Its Promise?**," emphasized "the critical role of frequent and meaningful interaction between students and instructors for increasing the quality of the online educational experience and improving student outcomes and satisfaction." Such interactions are especially important for **practicing inclusivity and equity** in online classes.

- **Because it's good for the soul.** This past spring, more than a few faculty members new to remote teaching reported feeling discouraged and disconnected from their students. The solution: Reach out to your students more frequently this fall. As Harriet Schwartz wrote in an **April 2020 blog post**: "To the degree we can communicate to our students that they matter and we care, we are likely to receive the same messages in return. Compassion stirs compassion. Gratitude begets gratitude. When we connect with students' basic humanity, we are likely to feel renewed in our own."

OK, fine, you may be thinking, *I'll reach out more often in my fall courses. But how?* Here are five simple yet effective techniques for being more personal, yet professional, with online students:

Set times for interactions, and stick to the schedule. You need to be there for online students, as you are for those in face-to-face courses. Being there in person happens automatically, naturally, during class or office hours. The same is not true online. Being there for online students requires more intentional effort.

So create a weekly schedule to engage online students in ways that are both visible and supportive. Two of the most effective: (1) Post regular, encouraging announcements on the course page of your college's learning-management system, and (2) participate routinely and frequently in the class discussion forum.

Such communications reach many students, just as you do when you make announcements, give instructions, or share stories in person in a physical classroom. Schedule time to be with your students online, and honor that commitment. They need your presence more than anything else.

Build in flexibility wherever possible. Without sacrificing rigor, or going against the grain of your own teaching standards, are there ways to build in some wiggle room for online students? That is a powerful demonstration of your compassion and humanity, especially for those who are juggling a job and family obligations along with their coursework. It shows that you care about them and their success.

Once again this fall, you may be dealing with plenty of students whose preference is for in-person classes. Building in plenty of different options and pathways will help them succeed online. When they see compassion baked into the structure of the course, they will feel supported *by* you and, therefore, more connected *to* you.

In practice, that might mean your late-work policy is more forgiving in an online course than in a face-to-face classroom. Instead of a draconian policy that allows no late work whatsoever, consider one that recognizes competing demands on online students' time and helps them to do the work — the learning — even if it's not on your preferred timeline.

My favorite way to do that — handing out "oops tokens" — comes from Linda B. Nilson's **powerful book**, *Specifications Grading: Restoring Rigor, Motivating Students, and Saving Faculty Time.* Those get-out-of-jail-free cards give students permission to turn in work late or redo an assignment, no questions asked. I've had students use the tokens to deal with disruptions caused by natural disasters, critically ill children, and, in one case, a missing father.

As a faculty member, you will find no better way to connect with online students than by understanding that they have lives outside the LMS, and by building that understanding into your course design.

Create short, authentic videos. In person, students get to know you during those casual conversations before and after class. In online courses, especially those heavy on asynchronous teaching, your students need to see and hear you. Short videos posted on the LMS allow for rich, nonverbal communication in a way that the written word does not. When you create mini-lecture videos, greetings, and announcements, you can maximize the potential of vocal intonations and facial expressions to punch up your message. You can better grab and hold your students' attention. You can reach out through the webcam to suddenly be present with your online students, wherever they are.

Your videos need not be polished, professionally edited, or overly rehearsed. In fact, students want to see the real you — with a stray hair out of place, a dog barking in the background, or a slight trip of the tongue. Perfection is not the goal; connection is. Not sure how to get started? Check out Karen Costa's **new book**, *99 Tips for Creating Simple and Sustainable Educational Videos.* It includes QR codes that give you access to sample videos.

Communicate. Intentionally. A lot. Just like your students, you will have unexpected challenges, major and minor, arise from time to time. Is grading an assignment taking longer than you thought it would? Send a quick announcement to update students on your timing. Did your child care fall through this week? Are you sick in bed, unable to dredge up the energy to interact online? Does your mother need your time and attention after an illness? Tell your students. Say when you hope to be back in the online saddle.

In a physical classroom, you would mention any of those problems if they were going to affect your ability to teach class. Do the same online. How much detail you choose to share is up to you, but show your online students the same basic courtesy as you would in person.

Your students are anxiously awaiting your feedback, guidance, and instruction. They will understand when life happens, as long as you let them know.

Be vulnerable. Above all, connect with students online this fall by letting them see you're not perfect. Still learning how to teach online? Invite them into your journey. Ask them what works. What could you do better? When you're willing to learn from, and with, students, you model a sense of humility, a desire to improve, a willingness to change your mind. I can't think of a better lesson to teach in today's increasingly contentious world.

Treat online students with respect and compassion — treat them like the people they actually are — and they will blossom. They'll respond by giving you and your course more of their time and energy, too. And that will result in better, more engaging online classes in which you and they will thrive.

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