Building Connection and Community

As with the other documents, the learning theory is up front and the idea bank follows. So if you are fully on board about the importance of building connections and community in your courses, you might skip to the idea bank on page 2.

Relevance: Why do experienced teachers need to worry about this topic when switching to physically distanced/hybrid/remote teaching?

In traditional classes, we build a classroom community somewhat naturally. Students talk casually with the professor and each other before and after class, and they bolster these connections through interactions outside of class (stopping by a professor’s office, running into their classmates in the hallways or the library, etc.). There are also personal bonds that develop when we talk to each other in class, especially when we can see people’s faces and expressions. These connections will be much harder in physically distanced or remote classrooms, so we will have to be much more intentional about developing a sense of connection and community among our students.

This issue extends outside of the classroom as well. The dean’s office is thinking about the co-curricular and social bonds that are important to the law school experience, and we would welcome your feedback and ideas there! For now though, each of us can help by building community in our own classes.

Learning Theory:

We may think of connections and community as something that’s nice to have, but it’s actually essential to student learning. Research shows that a sense of community at school is associated with increased motivation, greater enjoyment of class, improved conflict resolution skills, and more effective learning. This research also shows that building this sense of community is much harder in online or hybrid courses. Students in online environments struggle with the feeling of isolation, so we need to think intentionally about how to build these connections in a physically distanced/hybrid/remote course.

The theory on building community in an online course is built around the community of inquiry model. This model recognizes that student learning depends on more than just the content -- it also depends on interactions between the students and between the students and the instructor. The model has been represented as follows:
Social presence refers to the development of an online environment in which participants feel socially and emotionally connected with each other. Cognitive presence describes the extent to which learners are able to construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection and discourse. Teaching presence is defined as the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the realization of meaningful learning.

This can feel a little abstract, but the main idea is that you need to think intentionally about how students will interact with the content, how they will interact with you, and how they will interact with each other.

With online courses specifically, the literature says that the best practice is for instructors to be present in the course in some way most days of the week (excluding weekends). This does not mean that the instructor has to have office hours or other synchronous communication every day; the key is that they connect with the students and the course in some way. For example, they might participate in group discussion boards, send out reminders of due dates, or post mini-lectures. On the flip side, you want to leave some room for the students to engage on their own and with each other. Faculty presence in a discussion board, for example, can have an outsized impact—they might be reluctant to weigh in on a topic after you weigh in—so you want to be judicious with how and when you participate. The same type of research isn’t available on physically distanced classes because they are so new, but it’s worth thinking about how you can be present (but not too present) in a physical classroom as well.

On a broader level, balance is key. We all want to have lots of good formative assessments and lots of community building exercises, but we also don’t want to overwhelm the students. One piece of feedback we heard from the students in the evaluations was that professors often compensated for the lack of in-person classes in the spring by assigning far more work than they normally would have assigned. Assuming there’s probably some truth to this feedback, we need to adopt these techniques judiciously. Be selective about the community-building exercises you include. Consider giving students choices, so those students who really want to engage with their classmates can do so, while those who may be balancing family or other commitments can take a more streamlined approach.

Idea Bank:

The goal is not to do all of the things below. You would overwhelm your students and exhaust yourself if you did! Instead, use these ideas as a starting point, pondering which ones best fit your personal style and how you can adapt them to your specific course design.

Welcome Videos:
- Record a short video of yourself to introduce yourself to your students. Make it fun. Show your kids, your pets, whatever! Let them see you as a person rather than just the teacher behind the mask at the front of the room. You might also talk about what makes the course important/relevant/fun and how they can succeed in it. Here’s a good example of a script for this sort of video.
- Have students record short videos of themselves in the first week of class. You can use Blackboard or a tool like Flipgrid to do this. You might ask them to give their name, their hometown, and a fun fact about themselves. Then you can record a short video of yourself giving the same information and perhaps a bit more about your background and hopes for the class. Encourage the students to have fun with the videos and then make them all accessible to the whole class, so they can get to know each other a bit better.
- You might also consider icebreakers throughout the semester. We typically use them on the first day of class and then assume the students will get to know each other organically throughout the rest of the
semester. In physically distanced or remote courses, we may have to work harder to introduce (and re-introduce!) the students to each other.

- You can also ask students to fill out a longer questionnaire at the start of the semester that asks a whole host of information about their background, why they came to law school, and their broader interests.

**Get to know them personally.** It may be harder to get to know students when they are behind a mask or screen, so you will have to be more deliberate about making personal connections.

- Learn every student’s name, ideally in the first week or two of class. Consider using the pictures in Blackboard or the picture quiz feature that Paul Birch created.
- In addition to the welcome videos above, consider video prompts that will help you link something personal or unique about the student to their name or picture. You might ask them about their highest-priority goal for the class, their most memorable “Aha!” learning moment, or their biggest, boldest dream for their future. Or you could go more fun and ask about their favorite board game, food, or place to visit in their hometown.
- Consider setting up Zoom coffee dates with small groups of students. In your later communications with them, try to refer back to things you know about them from these more personal meetings.
- Hold a totally optional book club time where you talk about a book related to the course material. You can also talk about shorter articles or videos.
- Hold a totally optional session to talk about course content in the news. If you teach a business related course, you might talk about what the heck happened at WeWork. If you teach Civil Procedure, you might talk about why people either love or hate class actions. The goal here would be to bring together a smaller group in a less formal setting. You might hold these smaller sessions over Zoom so people can see each other without masks on.

**Simulate Unstructured Classroom Time.** In an in-person class, students will often arrive a bit early and chat with their classmates. Or they will stay after class to ask you a question. You can provide similar opportunities in an online class. Let the students know that you will open up the Zoom class ten minutes early, but will mute your own mic and speakers, so they can talk to each other. You can also tell them that you will stay after class for 10 minutes for their questions.

**Build fun moments into class.** Before class starts or during a break, screenshare word searches or crossword puzzles and allow students to work together using annotation tools to solve them. You can also post trivia questions as kahoots.

**Combine fun and attendance:** Kristen has a good idea for using Poll Everywhere to take attendance in a fun way: “I use a poll everywhere question in the first 2 minutes of class that asks things like ‘What’s your favorite decade?’, ‘What’s your favorite type of candy?’ and ‘What are your plans for spring break?’ – usually I do multiple choice (sometimes with a right answer, if I feel strongly – as in, the 80s is clearly the most optimal decade) but on rare occasions I do free response. In both cases, it gets us talking from the beginning about something not class related, and gives the students a chance to know each other and me.”

**Use virtual office hours to connect with students.** Professors often find that no one comes to their virtual office hours (or their in-person office hours…). One author recommends a few tips for designing well-attended virtual office hours.

1. Rebrand them. Rather than calling them “Office Hours,” which can sound formal and unappealing, call them “Coffee Breaks about Corporate Law” or “Torts over Tea.”
2. Reduce the frequency. Some professors teaching online courses have found that it is better to have virtual office hours at the end of every unit, rather than every week.
3. Invite questions ahead of time. Allow students to submit their questions ahead of time anonymously.

Create group camaraderie.
- Put the students into groups and give them opportunities to earn points for their group. The groups can compete against each other to gain the most points. For example, in her Business Associations course, Jessica plans to break the class into “houses” named after Delaware Court of Chancery judges (her motto -- if you’re going to geek out, geek all the way out…). Each class will include one or more opportunities for the houses to gain points. The winning house will get all of the course glory.
- The groups could go further, especially for 1Ls. One author states that she assigns her students to groups and they then “name their groups, share numbers, act as a study group, and keep track of each other. In the past, groups have taken care of FaceTiming in missing members. Summer and Fall this year, I’m nudging groups together based on schedules and holding small group sessions where I can answer questions and give them a collaborative task. In a hyflex model, I’m thinking to ask groups to choose their attend live and attend digital days together so I can throw the digital groups in breakout rooms while the live students complete the task in class, and groups with singletons out on “in” days can just FaceTime in members.”
- Hold a trivia contest between groups of students on course material. The winning team can get extra participation points or just more course glory. Brandon Methany in Admissions is our in-house expert on trivia contests, so he may be able to provide some direction. If you are teaching 2 1L sections, consider competitions between the sections or between your sections and another professor’s sections.

Assign students to study groups. In a regular semester, study groups can develop naturally. It is harder for students to connect with each other in a physically distanced classroom, so you might assign study groups to start. You can assign the groups a few early assignments that they turn in for a completion grade to create incentives for them to meet as a group (likely online). Not all of the groups will work well together, but it will help some students form connections.

Develop fun moments in class. Ask students to send you pictures of their pet or their favorite baby picture or their favorite trip. Feature a few at the start of each class.

Notice positive contributions. Send students a personal email when they have a good contribution in class, in a discussion board, or in another assignment. Keep track of who has received emails and see if you can send at least one or two emails to every student during the semester.

Humanize your tech.
- Humanize Blackboard. The default Blackboard interface can feel really distancing. Consider adding your own profile picture and/or adding images in your posts (here are directions -- go down to “add images in the editor”).
- Humanize your course materials. Avoid the black-on-white slides. Think about slide templates that are a bit more engaging. Add pictures, videos, etc. to text-filled slides. If you add pictures of people, make sure you spotlight a diverse group of people.

Use Slack. Create a slack channel for the students to ask questions, share funny memes, etc.
**Extra Credit Group Projects:** Create fun challenges that students can do for modest extra credit points. They can perform a song related to the course content, act out a skit, or create a poster. Or given the state of the world, they can come up with a course-related guide to washing your hands:

![Extra Credit Group Projects Image](image)

**Collaborative Start, Stop, Continue:** Students work in pairs or small groups to provide their thoughts about what they'd like their instructor to start doing, stop doing, and keep doing in class. The groups then submit their responses to Blackboard or a free online bulletin board (e.g., Padlet, Lino). Instructors follow up by summarizing the results and discussing what will change/not change, and why.

**Be human and seize unscripted moments.** Rather than editing every mistake out of your recorded lectures, leave the bloopers in the videos. Laugh about it in the video if you stumble over your words or your cat knocks over the camera. They appreciate these moments more than highly produced videos that lack all personality. You might also seize on unscripted moments in synchronous classes when something goes wrong or someone makes an unexpected joke to laugh as a group. Pause in those moments rather than rushing back to the course content.

**Additional Resources:**

- [Teaching to Connect: Community-Building Strategies for the Virtual Classroom](#), by Sharla Berry
  This paper explores four specific strategies for building community online: reaching out to students often, limiting time spent lecturing, using video and chat as modes to engage students, and allowing class time to be used for personal and professional updates.

- [Building Community in Large Classes](#), University of Waterloo Centre for Teaching Excellence
  Plenty of specific ideas for student-to-student interaction and student-to-instructor interaction.

- Video on [Building Virtual Rapport: Real Relationships for Effective Online Learning](#), by Andrele St. Val
  Great short video with ideas on building connections with students.