

Nurturing a Classroom Community During Distance Learning

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Classroom Management

Strategies like using a variety of groupings and having students meet each other during online office hours can help build strong relationships.

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Loren, a middle school language arts teacher about to start his sixth year in the classroom, recently emailed me. In part, he asked, “I’m at a loss and feeling anxious about the coming school year—have you thought about how teachers and students will build relationships and classroom communities during virtual learning?”

A former English teacher in my 21st year as a teacher educator, I served as Loren’s instructor during his teaching licensure program. Having recently pivoted to teaching future educators in an online format, I answered Loren’s query with a resounding “Yes!”

Simultaneously working to create community with adult learners while helping them consider how they’d implement such structures with adolescent students, I’ve settled on some key principles for both young people and their future teachers.

Shrink the Class

My recent courses averaged 24 students—too big for much one-to-one interaction in a face-to-face or online environment—and I knew I had to shrink the class. While classrooms are made up of groups this large (and often larger), learning goes best when it's an individual affair.

Using teacher check-ins and one-to-one and small group meetings: In the past few months, I've been using the first half hour of my classes for one-to-one and small group meetings, some of which were required and some of which were optional. The format depends on class content, project sequences, and individual students' needs.

For example, at the start of each course, I've been meeting with each student individually for 10-minute "looping conferences," with each next student arriving eight minutes in, which gives them an opportunity to speak with me as well as some of their peers. While these meetings often focus on a particular project, they give students a chance to ask me—and, perhaps even more important, ask their peers—questions that they might be reluctant to pose in front of the whole class. I've also been using the last half hour as small group meeting time, and I check in with each group each day, often for just a few minutes.

While these meetings have primarily been about building relationships and community, they also have provided accountability for students, as what can seem like a casual check-in also serves as a bit of a friendly but teacherly nudge to be sure they are on task. This structure would work for most middle and high school teachers in online classrooms.

See and Be Seen

Even with the best face-to-face instruction, some students fly under teachers' radar and are rarely seen or heard by adults or their peers. In virtual contexts, I want to be sure my students are seeing each other and being seen by their peers and by me.

Using picture quizzes, daily greetings, and video calls: I ask every student to let me take a screenshot or send me a photograph, which I use to create a picture quiz—a grid of their faces that I email to them, post on our class website, and include in every online presentation opening. We use this tool to greet each individual at the beginning of every class, and I also use it to track attendance and participation: I can keep notes of dates missed or the number of

times each student contributed on printed-out or slide show presentation versions of the quiz.

Requiring students to keep their video feeds on during online classes can raise concerns about technology equity and bullying, especially among teachers of middle and high school students. Nevertheless, I believe it's important to have a video-on policy for student teachers, since I want them to wrestle with these questions and consider the power of being seen. I expected them to have their cameras on at all times, and we discussed how obligating adolescents to do so even at the start and end of class could help them engage with us (their teachers) and each other. We also bid farewell to each person at the end of each class, and individuals turn off their cameras as we say goodbye.

Be Upfront and Explicit About Grouping

Almost every teacher has heard students grumble about having to work with unfamiliar or disliked classmates. Future teachers have the same reactions in their university classes, though often they don't express these laments. These days, because many of us have been socially isolated for months, we have an even greater obligation to bring students together by having them work with all of their peers.

Using home teams, intentional groups, and intelligent pairings:

Across my recent classes, I required students to work in a variety of groups—which I introduced ahead of time or within the first few days of class. I was upfront with my students: I told them in multiple communications before and during our course that a teacher's mission should include helping students get to know and respect their classmates.

I used four group structures: random breakout groups of three or four; heterogeneous home teams of five or six that met every class and were based on students' diversity; small groups that changed each week and were determined by student interests; and pairs determined by students' responses to a matching survey (e.g., for my recent young adult literature class, I used their answers to questions such as "What books offer guiding principles for how young people and you will live your lives and learn and teach?").