

## **A Collection of Teaching Tips: Teaching through the Pandemic**

# **Building a connected community within a course**

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The transition to an online course environment during the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a sense of disconnection and isolation. This teaching brief shares my experiences using evidence-based strategies to build community within a course.

### **Teaching and learning context**

Systemic disruption due to the COVID-19 pandemic exposed many of the flaws in higher education, especially around the inequity and inflexibility somehow inherent in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) courses (Asai, 2020). Many students take college level required STEM courses coming from a place of being marginalized and disadvantaged which leads to a low sense of belonging and belief in their ability to grow in their learning (growth mindset).

I teach multiple sections of a large-enrollment introductory biology course for science majors. Each section enrolls anywhere between 100 and 400 students.

These students have diverse backgrounds and career aspirations (approximately 80 different majors take the course). Due to the large class size, student encouragement, engagement and inclusivity becomes a challenge. I use several evidence-based strategies (Tanner, 2013) to address these challenges when teaching face-to-face and online.

### **Connection to course-learning outcomes**

In Spring 2020 while the country was living through a pandemic and social unrest, I began thinking more deeply about what I could do to communicate care to my students, while building a truly inclusive classroom for all (Dewsbury, 2017; Dewsbury & Brame, 2019). What could I do to check in with them, to understand how to help them be successful in the course during this time of uncertainty and isolation? I added developing a sense of community and safety within the course environment as a competency-based course learning outcome to my syllabus.

### **Applied teaching strategy: A check-in survey**

To achieve this course learning outcome, among other things, I designed a survey for students to complete at the beginning of the semester that contained the following write-up:

"This year has so far been challenging for all of us. Depending on the day, I am filled with a mix of pain, sadness, fear, stress, uncertainty, motivation, and most importantly, hope. Recently, I came across this quote that resonates with me, "Your pain is the breaking of the shell that encloses your understanding."  
- Khalil Gibran

I want to help you learn and succeed in this course and provide a safe and equitable environment for all my students. The questions in this survey are designed as a way for you to check-in with me and let me know how I can help you succeed.

I'm here to listen.

1. How are you doing?
2. Complete the following prompt: I wish my professor knew... (What do you wish I knew about you)?
3. How can I help you be successful in this course?
4. When would you like me to hold student hours/help sessions? Pick the time listed below that works best for you OR Fill out a Scheduling Poll.
5. What structure of student hours would be most helpful to you? (e.g. Q&A, coffee and conversation, discussions about study skills, etc.)"

Students responded to this survey by sharing how they were coping with the isolation during the pandemic, how they were working to maintain financial stability, and that they still wanted to continue learning in the course.

I responded to let them know that I heard them and would do my best to support their learning over the course of the semester. I then set up weekly help sessions (BioChats) based on when most students were available. I also added a collaborative learning component to the course so they could interact with peers.

### **Why this strategy worked**

During the synchronous BioChat help sessions, I started by grounding the conversation, sharing my own experiences to create an environment that was mutually vulnerable and a safe space to share. Starting each session in this way, as well as ending with something we were looking forward to or hopeful about, helped to frame the course concepts within an environment that supports their well-being.

This practice also helped students engage deeply in the discussions, apply concepts they were learning to answer questions through the [Kahoot!](#) formative assessment tool, ask me questions about concepts, and quiz each other on concepts they were mastering. I also shared resources on well-being and self-care throughout the semester and engaged students in a discussion about stress and well-being through the Discussions feature on Canvas.

### **Key takeaways**

Students responded well to these strategies. They interacted with each other, with me (the instructor), and reached out when struggling. I was able to bring my authentic self to the classroom; my students' sense of belonging increased over the course of the semester as evidenced partly by the analysis of pre-post assessment data that I collected during the semester.

My students' sense of curiosity and connectedness also improved as noted by conversations I had with students, my learning assistants, and emails that I received throughout the semester. Irrespective of the course setting, these gestures can help create a course that is built on the [Principles of Community](#) that are [foundational](#) for Iowa State University.

## References

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