Building Community Online

Students experience online courses much differently than other learning formats. For the most part, they are digitally separated from the content, their peers, and their instructor in an asynchronous, self-paced format. A burgeoning literature on distance education has soundly concluded that building a sense of belonging is essential for creating dynamic, rigorous, and transformational online learning experiences. This sense of connectedness helps combat feelings of isolation and lends to an inclusive online learning environment that encourages students to freely and regularly participate. Unfortunately, community-building requires ample time, effort, and patience from faculty who are often unaccustomed to online formats or rely on direct visual cues that do not easily translate or work online. Below are suggestions you can consider to build community in your online classroom:

- **Factor in ample time for introductions and student supports in the first week**. Getting-acquainted discussion boards, instructor welcome videos, icebreaker activities, syllabus scavenger hunts, and getting-started modules are excellent strategies for acclimating students to the online learning experience, introducing them to specific features of your course, and building a sense of community at the start (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 2010). Adopting one or more of these activities allows students to share personal information and learn more about their instructor and peers. Although the threaded introductory discussion board is a staple of the online experience, many online faculty are turning to video-based discussion boards or web-conferencing tools to facilitate initial discussions and exchanges with and between students.

- **Condition collaboration from the start**. Design your online course with collaborative activities and regular interactions in mind. Groups projects, shared assessments, crowd-sourced study guides, social bookmarking activities, and regular discussion boards are simple activities that, if used from the start, condition a sense of community and encourage students to participate regularly and meaningfully with each other and to group discussion. To keep these activities relevant and interesting, consider switching group assignments or responsibilities so students have the opportunity to work with each of their peers and focus on different learning tasks. A corollary benefit of collaborative learning activities is that they mitigate size problems in larger classes, and naturally focus on the cognitive and social needs of students, as leaners, in the learning process (see Blumberg, 2019).

- **Reflect on your role and purpose.** Derived from Conrad and Donaldson's (2012, pp. 14-22) *phases of engagement* model, online teaching requires a key shift in pedagogical thinking, with faculty relinquishing their role as the "center of the class" and instead adopting the role of "lead facilitator." This means that our main responsibility as online

faculty is to be a steward of the type and quality of learning taking place; directing students' attention to specific material, asking them to reflect on key puzzles, debates, and themes individually and in tandem with others, and facilitating the flow of the learning process. Conrad and Donaldson (2004, p. 11) suggest viewing your role as a "social negotiator," or welcoming and conditioning a sense of belonging in the beginning, to the role of a "community member," or a shared member in the learning experience, at the end. Through this transition, students come to the realization that the course belongs to them through shared governance over the types of interactions and discussions that take place.

Resources

Wlodkowski, R and Ginsburg, M. (2010). *Teaching intensive and accelerated courses: Instruction that motivates learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Conrad, R.-M. and Donaldson, J. (2004). *Engaging the online learner: Activities and resources for creative instruction*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Conrad, R.-M. and Donaldson, J. (2012). *Continuing to engage the online learner: More activities and resources for creative instruction*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Blumberg, P. (2019). *Making learning-centered teaching work: Practical strategies for implementation.* Sterling, VA: Stylus.

For more information or to discuss how you might incorporate these ideas into your courses, contact the Reinert Center at cttl@slu.edu.