

Resource Guide

Community Building Strategies for Alternative Courses

Classrooms that incorporate some form of remote, on-ground, and/or online teaching can be challenging. However, prioritizing student care and creating a more student-centered learning environment will help establish a sense of community in your course and make it more conducive for learning. Below are a few ways you can help build an equitable learning community.

- **Care first, Content next:** In times of crisis or change, students bring with them a number of concerns, challenges, and personal issues that can be a barrier to being present in the classroom. This is also true when having to adjust to a new learning environment. Consider how you may take a teaching approach that “is not centered on the technical aspects of teaching rather on pedagogical practices that promote care for the whole students and class collective.” (Raygoza, León, and Norris, 2020). While there are many ways to exhibit care, here are a few suggestions that you may want to consider when starting an alternate course format:
 - **Keep it simple** – spend the first few classes getting students comfortable with the new format.
 - **Provide reassurance.** Reassure students you will figure out your new learning environment together.
 - **Ask students how they are doing.** Poll students or have students write a one-minute paper. When possible, reach out to individual students in need.
 - **Establish a schedule.** Help students develop and maintain a schedule that prioritizes learning as well as overall health (good sleep, exercise, diet).
 - **Be flexible.** Consider being flexible with deadlines.
 - **Remind students of additional services.** Remind students of services available to them such as the Writing Services, University Counseling Center, and Campus Ministry. Provide links and direct contact information.

- **Incorporate active learning exercises:** Leverage technologies to provide opportunities for students to interact with one another. Some learning activities will have to be amended in order to accommodate remote or online learners; however, a few easy activities can help bridge distance and get valuable feedback on students’ learning progress. Here are a few examples:
 - **Live Polling.** Use Zoom’s polling feature or other polling platforms like Google Forms or Poll Everywhere to poll students about the course material.
 - **Backchannel:** Use tools to give students a space other than in-class discussion to provide feedback. Zoom’s chat feature offers a great way for students to ask questions, discuss topics related to the course, or to provide an alternative for students to interact. Other tools like Google Docs, Slack, GroupMe, or even

tools within Blackboard can be great resources for backchanneling with students

- **Collaborative Notetaking:** Offer a space for students to work together class notes using Google Docs. Gather students into groups, have them rotate as lead -taker for each class session.
- **Group Work:** Use collaborative tools that allow all students to participate in group activities. Google Docs, Google Slides, or Office 365 tools can provide ways for students to work collaboratively.
- **Establish A Consistent Communication Plan:** Maintaining good communication will help keep students on track and feel like they are an active part of your learning community. Here are just a few considerations to help you establish and maintain good communication for your course.
 - **Provide a consistent method for communication.** Use consistent tools to communicate with students that are easy for students to access. For example, using the course site on Blackboard to post and distribute information, upcoming due dates, and other information.
 - **Offer clear instructions on how students can reach you.** Provide specific instructions on how and when to best reach you. Inform students how long it may take for you to respond during the week, after hours, and during the weekend. Also, set virtual “office hours” for students to reach you during the day.
 - **Communicate early and often:** Let students know about changes or disruptions as early as possible, even if all the details aren’t in place yet, and let them know when they can expect more specific information.

Resources

Bruff, D. (2020). Active Learning in Hybrid and Physically Distanced Classrooms. Retrieved 24 June 2020, from <https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/2020/06/active-learning-in-hybrid-and-socially-distanced-classrooms/>

Hooker, C. (2020). Remote Learning Communication: How to Best Connect with Students. Retrieved 24 June 2020, from <https://www.techlearning.com/how-to/remote-learning-communication-how-to-best-connect-with-students>

Raygoza, M., León, R., & Norris, A. (2020). *Humanizing online teaching*. Retrieved 24 June 2020, from <http://works.bepress.com/mary-candace-raygoza/28/>

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