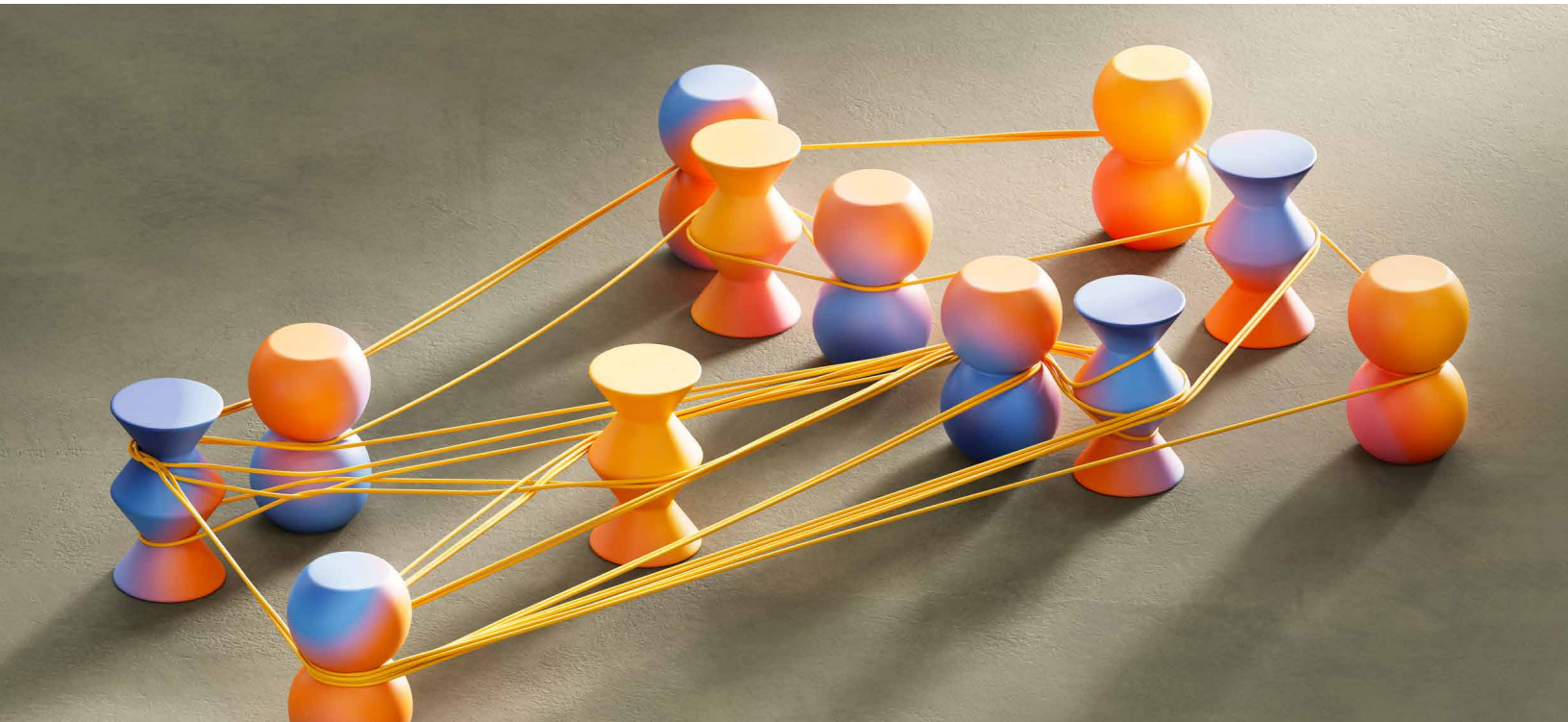
HARVARD BUSINESS IMPACT

A collection of popular articles
from *Inspiring Minds*

MUST READS

The Power of Connection

Simple Strategies to Help Students Feel Seen and Supported



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Foreword

As educators, we think a lot about student engagement—how to spark it, sustain it, and measure it. But we often overlook what's at the heart of that engagement: connection.

When students feel connected to each other, to us as their instructors, and to the material we're exploring together, they're more willing to share ideas, take risks, and build the kind of collaborative spirit that deep learning depends on.

In a world that can feel increasingly lonely, polarized, and AI-assisted, these moments of genuine connection matter more than ever. This collection of *Inspiring Minds* articles offers practical ways to build them.

You'll find strategies to help students feel seen and valued, ideas to deepen peer connection, and techniques to energize participation—from using class breaks creatively to fostering community in asynchronous online spaces.

Together, these pieces form a toolkit for creating classrooms where dialogue thrives and every student knows they belong. When teaching is rooted in connection, students don't just participate more; they invest more deeply in their learning, in one another, and in themselves.

Lucy Swedberg
Executive Editor
Harvard Business Impact

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Great Teachers Make Students Feel Noticed

3 Ways to Improve Students' Attendance and Academic Success

by Zach Mercurio

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Tamanna Rumee / Unsplash

Several years ago, I participated in a faculty discussion about declining in-person class attendance. As the group explored solutions, an instructor named Elena shared a story about a student who often missed class.

At first, Elena didn't think much of the absences; when present, the student was engaged—always asking questions and surrounded by classmates. But after yet another missed class, Elena decided to talk to the student. "I could tell your friends really missed you yesterday," she said. "They weren't laughing as much before class. And I really missed your great questions. It just wasn't the same without you."

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The student lit up. And she didn't miss another class that semester.

It's an approach Elena now repeats. She makes it a point to let her students know their unique contributions are seen and their presence matters. Since doing so, Elena's noticed a clear shift in attendance and engagement.

The power and urgency of noticing

Elena's story may seem simple, but it points to something deeper—something many students long for and too few experience.

In 2020, Gallup released a study of 75,000 alumni of colleges and universities and found that just 27 percent strongly agreed that they had a professor who "cared about them as a person." A 2024 survey of 1,100 college and university students revealed that 28 percent of students reported feeling isolated, 23 percent reported feeling "left out," and almost two-thirds of students felt lonely. In one poll of 66,000 students, just 50 percent said they thought their teacher would notice if they were absent.

> **Caring for students starts by showing them you truly see them.**

It's hard for people to care if they don't first feel cared for. Feeling seen is essential to fulfilling our fundamental need to *matter*—a prerequisite for motivation, well-being, and lasting engagement.

Students who felt their teacher cared about them were 1.7 times more likely to be thriving, according to Gallup. And an analysis across 46 studies found that faculty-student relationships in which students felt genuinely cared for were linked to improvements in nearly every aspect of academic success.

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Caring for students starts by showing them you truly see them. Elena picked up on the student's absences, took the time to tell her, and then reinforced how she added value to the class.

Elena practiced a skill called noticing, which is crucial to a student's sense of mattering. Noticing is the deliberate act of paying attention to the details, ebbs, and flows of someone's life and work.

So, how do we become better noticers for our students? Here are three approaches to try.

1. Know the barriers to noticing others

Educators are always crunched for time, and the first barrier to truly seeing others is hurry. Hurry and care can't coexist. Noticing others takes time, but when educators rush, it becomes too easy to cancel an office hour, forget to check in on a struggling student, or put off responding to a student's email question about an assignment. Noticing also requires attention, and the erosion of our ability to pay attention is another barrier to seeing others.

Research by psychologist Gloria Mark shows that our average attention span for a single activity has decreased from over two minutes in 2004 to just 47 seconds today. The decrease is due to increased distractions and information overload.

> **It's hard for people to care if they don't first feel cared for. Feeling seen is essential to fulfilling our fundamental need to *matter*—a prerequisite for motivation, well-being, and lasting engagement.**

One result of the strain on our attention is that interactions become automatic. Our encounters with students feel stale. Grading becomes

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robotic. Walks down the hall are rushed, avoiding eye contact with passersby. This attentional autopilot can cause us to miss signals: a student starts engaging less, a colleague's voice takes on a different tone, or someone seems less energized than they used to be.

The good news is we can get out of attentional autopilot through "articulated intention"—being deliberate in setting goals for how we want to show up in our interactions to ensure we're making people feel seen. This starts with consciously deciding to slow down.

2. Make space and use time for connection

Educators need to proactively create opportunities to connect more deeply. This doesn't mean adding more meetings. It means optimizing the interactions they already have.

Here are some ways to start:

- **Use real-time interactions for relationship-building.** The adage "most meetings could be emails" is popular because most meetings and interactions we have in school and work settings are information transactions. Save those for email and other text-based platforms. What can't be an email is checking in on how a student is doing on a project they were struggling with or supporting a learner who's feeling overloaded. Make space for discussing *how* students are doing, not just *what* they're doing, in your real-time interactions.
- **Leverage in-between moments.** The composer Claude Debussy wrote, "Music is the space between the notes." It's in that space that the sounds are heard and felt. The same is true in a classroom. The "notes" are class time, evaluations, or other scheduled touchpoints. Classroom culture and connection are built in the in-between spaces—the few minutes before class starts, a run-in with a student at the local coffee shop, or the moments when students are filing out of class. Use these transitions as checkpoints. In virtual spaces, take advantage

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of when students log on a bit early and are waiting for class to start. If you teach asynchronously, personalized comments on discussion posts or assignments are a great place to check in. Alternatively, you might consider having open virtual office hours with no agenda. The key is to use technology for connection, not just efficiency.

- **Pay attention and use noticing language.** One way to immediately improve your attentional skill is to write down what you observe. If a student shares a specific interest with you in a conversation, write it down. If another was noticeably engaged in a particular part of class, note it. It also helps to create some reflection time in your day to specifically reflect on what you observed with your students. You might even have a memo pad or notebook dedicated to this practice. Then, share back what you see. As you do this, use noticing language such as "I saw that . . ." or "I wrote down that . . ." or "I remembered that . . ." These are all signals to people that they're seen.

3. Gather deeper insights so you can anticipate their challenges

After you've carved out the space and time to connect with students, what you do in that space matters. To truly notice students, it's important to gather deeper insights about them and how they're doing.

To start, try the following:

- **Ask meaningful questions.** When interacting with individual students, go beyond the greetings like "How are you?" or "How's your day?" or even "How's class going?" Ask questions that reveal the details of your students' lives and experiences. Your questions should be clear, open, and exploratory. For example, "What has your attention today?" or "What's been most meaningful today?" or "What is challenging you right now?" Ask questions that allow for more than a "yes" or "no" response. Instead of, "Did the group project go well?" you might ask, "What was most interesting to you about the group project?"

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Finally, be exploratory, not evaluative. Instead of, "What's the status on your assignment?" you might ask, "What's been going well? Any roadblocks I can help with?"

- **Check in on energy and emotions.** One well-researched practice is to do a green, yellow, red check-in at the start of class to get a sense of students' energy (green means you're able to be present, yellow means you're somewhat stressed, red means you're overloaded). You could do this via a poll and share the results of the class so everyone understands the way others may be showing up. Or you might ask students to reflect on and share the answers to questions like "What's giving you energy today?" and "What's taking away energy today?" What's important is to not jump in to "fix" what you observe—awareness is the goal. Later, you might say, "I noticed you were a 'red' today; what can I do to help?"

- **Monitor recurring struggles and offer "proactive compassion."** The more you start to see your students, the more you'll learn about what they struggle with. One way to build the skill of compassion is to regularly reflect on the difficulties you notice. Are they tied to certain times in the semester? A particular project or assignment? Is there something happening externally (e.g., current events) that may require acknowledgment and action? Then, think about the signs you may look for to anticipate that struggle. Finally, identify the resources you have or actions you can take to alleviate that struggle. For example, in one of my classes, students were feeling overwhelmed by a writing assignment that was due at a busy time in the semester. In response, I set aside half of the next class for writing time. The following semester, I anticipated this challenge and built a writing workshop into the schedule. I could see students visibly relax. This type of "proactive compassion" signals to someone that you see them, are responsive, and are there to support them.

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Creating the foundation for quality engagement

For educators at all levels, the quality of the outcomes you get from students is usually determined by the quality of your relationships with them.

Quality relationships start with quality interactions, and feeling seen in these interactions can predict feelings of trust—the foundation of high-performing students.

Take the time to ensure every interaction you have begins and ends with noticing the students you serve.

A version of this article first ran in HBR and was adapted by the author for an educator audience.

Explore more

Classroom Management **Student Engagement** **Student Support**



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To Connect with Students, Be Open and Honest

You'll Create a More Supportive Learning Environment

featuring Michellana Y. Jester

Editors' note: This article has been modified from its original version.

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PM Images / Getty Images

The need for educators to lean into empathy and show students support has only grown over the years. When educators recognize and understand their students' needs as whole people, they are better able to reach learners where they are.

In this Q&A, Michellana Y. Jester, a lecturer in the Global Economics and Management Group at MIT Sloan School of Management, shares how she is embracing her own vulnerability and creating new ways to connect with her students.

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Q. What should our learning environments look like today to best support where students are at mentally?

A good learning environment, whatever form it takes, is one that helps learners feel mentally and physically safe so they can succeed.

We know that students coming into a learning environment have very different experiences and vary in their willingness and readiness to engage. So, we've had to become more mindful of what it means to create a supportive learning experience.

We need to ask our students and each other, "How are you doing? How are you feeling?" It's important to take that pause.

> **We want our learners to come in and feel welcomed, respected, and supported. That means thinking about how we can meet their needs as whole people.**

Q. How can educators help students address any prolonged feelings of burnout and mental exhaustion?

I normalize giving students the opportunity to talk about what's going on with them. We as instructors tend to think, *You may be feeling a certain way, but you're going to have to put that aside because I'm teaching now.* But we must give students the space to unpack whatever that conversation is that they're having in their heads, because otherwise it blocks their ability to hear what we're saying.

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> **We often think that things like check-ins and reflections take up too much time, but they're actually very helpful ways to allow students to get the conversation they're having in their heads out.**

I also suggest not getting stuck on what you think class participation is supposed to look like. Class participation traditionally means you raise your hand and talk or, in a remote class, you turn your camera on and engage. But meeting students where they are means allowing them to just not be ready to engage in the same way that you may want them to. Giving them other opportunities to engage, maybe by writing responses or having discussions in small groups, can help.

And don't be afraid to reach out to students if you notice that they're especially disengaged or otherwise struggling—not in a way that is meant to be punitive, but just in appreciation of where they are right now.

Q. How do you motivate students to take advantage of the opportunities you create for them to speak about their feelings?

For a class I taught last fall, I sent out four surveys in the time between when they registered for the course and when they stepped into the classroom. That's a lot. But I really wanted to do some pulse checks, as well as help them understand what was going to happen in the class and what they should expect.

I also like doing quick check-ins throughout the course, so students feel that they have a voice in what we're doing in the classroom. For example, I ask students to say what they liked, what they learned, and what they would recommend.

For group work, I like to use "fist to five," where I ask students to get in their teams and rate how it's going. They each hold up one hand and at

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the same time reveal a fist or up to five fingers. So, from zero to five, how do you feel you're doing as a team? It's a quick spot check, and if there is a discrepancy among team members, it can spark that conversation.

To get at students' emotions on a given day, a colleague of mine uses a picture of a battery that is color coded and asks students to choose the color that represents how exhausted or energetic they feel in that moment. That's a fun way to check how students might be feeling. Another way I check in with students is to ask them to pull three items from their bag or what's around them and tell a story. One item that represents where things were for them a few days ago, one that represents what they're feeling right now, and one that represents what they see in the future. So, someone might say a pen represents them slogging through the work, and glasses represent looking into the future. Students make up whatever story they want; the idea is to call on people to reframe and talk about their experiences and feelings in a new and different way.

I also work with teaching assistants, who are students as well, and I rely on them to tell me things that are going on with the class that I would just never pick up on by myself. I give them license to say how they think the students are doing overall or even if they think something is going on with a particular student. Then we can strategize ways to help. Sometimes I will connect with that student, and sometimes I will ask the teaching assistant to talk with them as a peer. I'm always open to any approach that helps me figure out how students are feeling and find the best ways to connect with them.

Q. What changes have you made in your teaching to ensure your students feel connected to the material?

There's been this recognition that we're bringing our whole selves into the classroom. I am more mindful of slowing down and ensuring that everyone's coming along for the journey.

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I added questions of the week as a way for students who missed class to be able to engage in the in-class discussions. However, I found that these questions—which students had all week to answer—were also helpful for other students who perhaps needed extra time to process and think about what they wanted to say about the lesson. These weekly questions allowed all students to engage in the material in a new way, making new connections and reflecting on different aspects of the learning.

I also like to remind my students that we're on this learning journey together. I see my role as a facilitator. I bring what I know to the table, and I want my students to bring what they know to the table. As educators, when you offer the people around you—both students and faculty—the opportunity to be on the learning journey with you, they want to join you.

Q. How can educators today create more supportive and authentic learning environments?

I'm often struck by the way so much of educating perpetuates this outdated idea of the "sage on the stage" who's supposed to know everything. I think the learnings from the past several years can lead to a more open and welcoming learning environment if we let it.

Educators can take advantage of this breakdown to create a classroom culture that's more democratic and welcoming. I often tell my students that I want to know their perspectives on what we're learning. I think that there's so much richness of experience in our classrooms and I want to bring those experiences into the conversation. I think this attitude and the respect it necessitates is one of the keys to creating a supportive learning environment.

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It's also time to be open and honest with students and colleagues; it's OK for educators to be vulnerable and say how we are really doing.

It can relieve the pressure of showing up and being "on" if you just aren't feeling it that day. We are now more open to giving ourselves permission to talk about those things and hear them from others. And while there is an element of fatigue, I don't think any of us are all the way out at any given time. Instead, when we're feeling energized, let's lean in, and when we need to conserve some energy because we're feeling run-down, let's pull back. And let's be open to having these discussions, both for ourselves and our students. Once we do, I think we'll continue this way of engaging going forward.

Explore more

Classroom Management **Perspectives** **Student Support**



Michellana Y. Jester is a lecturer in the Global Economics and Management Group at MIT Sloan School of Management. She works to design unique, innovative learning experiences to assist students and business leaders in their personal and professional goals. With more than two decades of experience in strategic management consulting and organizational and leadership development, Jester has helped a variety of organizations—from corporations to business schools—face complex challenges and move to action.

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4 Ways to Foster Better Classroom Connection and Increase Engagement

by the *Inspiring Minds* editors

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Andrea Comi / Getty Images

When we foster a sense of community and belonging in our classrooms, engagement increases and learning outcomes improve.

Students are more likely to ask questions, seek help when needed, and share their ideas when they feel comfortable and supported. If you sense your students aren't forming bonds with you or each other, it may be time to consider whether you're creating enough avenues for connection.

While it can be challenging, the effort you invest in building community and a supportive classroom environment is well worth it, as it contributes to a more positive and effective educational experience for all students.

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These four impactful strategies—taken from various *Inspiring Minds* articles—along with some simple exercises to put them into action, can help.

1. Fold in light-hearted exercises designed for student bonding

If we dedicate class time to fostering connection, this will signal to our students that we value building relationships and are not solely focused on academics. Pamela Kramer Ertel suggests these light-hearted exercises to try in your class.

"Find someone who . . ."

Create a template with a nine-space grid in which various criteria are listed. For each grid space, students must find a different person in the class who meets the criterion listed. Here are some examples:

- Find someone who is an early riser.
- Find someone who hates games like this.
- Find someone who is always running late.
- Find someone who is new to this university.

As students circulate around the room (or in virtual breakout rooms), they must find someone for each grid space and fill in that person's name. This quick activity lightens the mood and ensures students are getting to know their peers.

Bounce Card strategy

Use "Bounce Cards" to help students strengthen their listening skills and deepen their conversations with classmates.

Kramer Ertel provides a card for each student that lists key questions or prompts to discuss with a partner or small group. "The questions can be

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generic so that the card can be used to discuss any topic. ('Rephrase what your partner just said,' or, 'That's a great point because . . .')," she suggests.

For example, rather than respond to a video clip in class with "I liked it," the Bounce Card forces students to dig deeper. You can also adapt the questions on the card to suit students' varying needs. For those who struggle with conversational skills, this can be a great template for helping them develop more thoughtful responses.

For more light-hearted exercises, read Kramer Ertel's full article.

2. Keep it personal by highlighting students' individuality

Personalizing the classroom encourages students to connect with each other and speak up in class, which leads to a more memorable learning experience. Try the following:

Incorporate students' favorite art

Kramer Ertel suggests creating emotional connection with students through art. Ask your students to send you their favorite songs or artwork, then over the course of the term, feature one (or a few) of those pieces at the beginning of every class.

"I'll start each class playing a different student's favorite song or music video. They love it and appreciate that I actually paid attention to their responses," says Kramer Ertel. "I also share personal and professional stories and family photos with the hope that my students will feel more connected to me and thus more motivated to open up themselves."

Hold a "t-shirt day"

To help unify students and celebrate their differences, Hayden Noel and Maria Rodas hold a "t-shirt day" for which everyone wears clothing that represents where they are from. They have seen Disney World tees

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on students from Florida and Taj Mahal shirts from students in India. Throughout the class session, students are asked to comment on their t-shirts whenever they speak up in class.

Tip: Try expanding the parameters by allowing students to wear any shirt that represents their interests—from music to nature to social justice causes.

Ask students to share their "aha moments"

Kramer Ertel asks students every week to write down "aha moments" from their learning.

Instead of calling on them individually, she uses the "ripple method" to have them share their responses with a partner or small group before asking for volunteers willing to share with the whole class. This eases students into the exercise, reduces anxiety about sharing, and fosters deeper connection.

"The students soon realize that their experiences are just as valid as everyone else's and that we are all in this together," says Kramer Ertel. "They also realize that some of their perceived failures become some of their most precious learning experiences."

3. Celebrate student wins

Ensure your students feel seen by making an effort to acknowledge their achievements. Noel and Rodas reward their students (with items from their university's school store) for making exceptional contributions to class. Using school accessories as prizes can also help students feel included in the campus community—especially if they're remote.

Noel first started this approach by mailing a magnet with a small note: "Now, go out into the world and be successful!" What began as an informal reward system ultimately became a part of the classroom dynamic because students loved it so much, he says.

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Tip: If mailing items is too expensive or labor intensive, try sending students funny memes or digital stickers to celebrate their achievements.

For more ideas on how to connect students in large online case courses, read Noel and Rodas's full article.

4. Create spaces for connection outside of class

The above approaches will help jump-start connection, but if you're feeling like students are still not forming bonds with each other, try creating opportunities for them to connect outside the classroom.

One good way is to set up online communities, through free apps like GroupMe or Yellowdig, where students can write to each other.

"Like a modern-day study hall, these groups are collaborative, equitable spaces where students can look out for each other, ask questions if they're having problems with the course content, and interact without my presence," says Patricia O'Brien-Richardson.

If you want something that you can monitor a bit more, create a virtual co-working space where students are invited to meet, say, once a week to work on individual tasks related to the course, suggests Gleb Tsipursky.

"They can study in silence, but students are encouraged to speak up when they have a question about what they're working on," says Tsipursky. "Senior students jump in to help junior students; those who know more about a subject can help those who know less. The goal is for students . . . to mentor each other, learn from each other, and bond."

Tip: Try polling your students to figure out what weekly time works best for the virtual study hall.

For more tips on how to create connection with all your students, whether they're in person or remote, read Tsipursky's full article.

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Building relationships is the key to real engagement

When students feel seen and valued, not just as learners but as individuals, they are more likely to engage, collaborate, and thrive academically. Prioritizing connection enriches students' learning experience by making them feel like they are a part of something bigger than themselves.

As educators, it's up to us to foster our students' sense of belonging by being approachable, showing genuine interest in their success, and creating opportunities for connection—both inside and outside the classroom.

A version of this article originally ran in the October 17, 2023 issue of The Faculty Lounge. *Sign up here to receive this weekly newsletter.*

Explore more

Classroom Management **Student Engagement**



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Gleb Tsipursky is a behavioral scientist and former professor at The Ohio State University. He now serves as CEO of the boutique hybrid work consultancy Disaster Avoidance Experts, consulting for higher-education institutions on adopting a hybrid-first culture. He has written eight books, including the post-pandemic *Returning to the Office and Leading Hybrid and Remote Teams*, as well as *Never Go With Your Gut*.

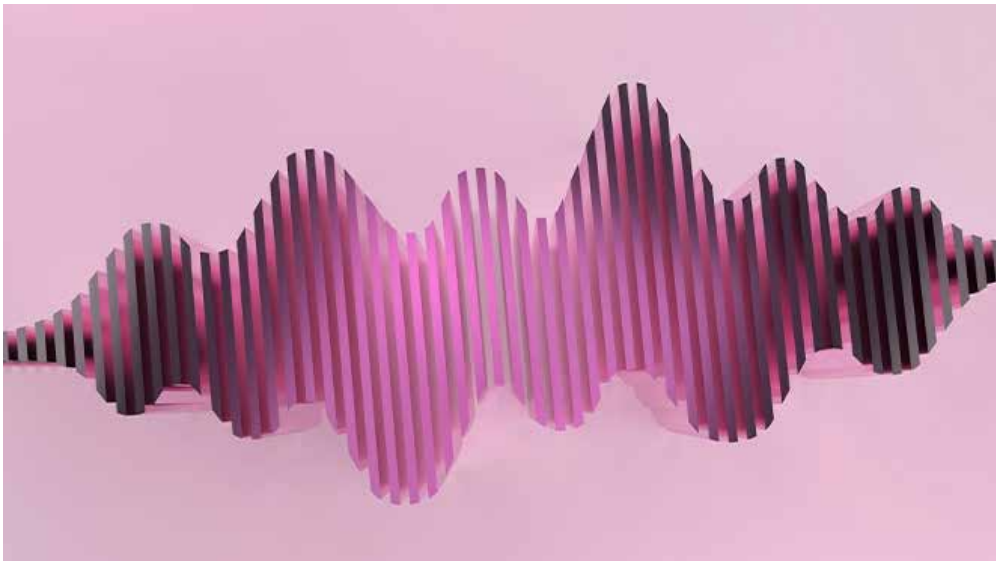
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Why Students Stay Quiet—Even When They Like You

Peer Connection Drives Participation. Here's How to Cultivate It.

by Karen MacMillan

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Allison Saeng / Unsplash+

When I started teaching, I knew it was important to build good relationships with my students so they could feel comfortable speaking up and taking risks. I worked hard at it, and in one small class I ultimately found a way to develop a good relationship with every single student. It was exciting—I had done it and was ready to reap the rewards.

But I soon discovered that although each of the students spoke readily in our one-on-one meetings, many fell silent as soon as we gathered

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as a group in the classroom. I was flabbergasted: where was the high engagement I had expected?

As I looked at the faces across the room one day, a lightbulb went off. While these undergrads may have felt comfortable with me, they were not so relaxed around each other. It was then I realized that while strong teacher-student relationships were critical, so were solid peer relationships. If I was to get students to take risks (like speaking up in class), I had to make the environment feel safe, and that included making them feel comfortable with each other.

Building relationships doesn't mean students need to become close friends with me or each other. Instead, my goal is to build high-quality connections that can handle the expression of emotions, conflict, and new ideas. The good news is that building these connections not only motivates student learning but also makes the classroom a better place to be—something that is good for everyone's mental health, including my own. How lovely is it to walk into a room and get the sense that people care about you?

Over time, I've landed on a few practices that consistently help me create opportunities to strengthen student connections. These methods have led to more engaged students who are nicer to each other (and to me) and are more respectful during conversations around contentious topics. Let's explore each.

1. Make space for students to share more about themselves

I used to think that any class time spent not focusing on the core material was wasted time. I've since realized that investing precious time in getting to know each other pays huge dividends. Here are two ways I take purposeful pauses and ensure students have the space to learn about each other.

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The "Smart/Not-So-Smart" exercise: At the beginning of a new term (preferably during the first class), I like to open with an activity that shows everyone has good and bad moments. The idea is to show vulnerability right off the bat as evidence that my class is a safe space to do so.

First, I tell students about my killer GMAT score (ninety-ninth percentile); then I tell them about the time I accidentally got into somebody else's car in a store parking lot (that wasn't even the same make as my car).

Then, I put them into pairs to share their smart/not-so-smart moments before asking them to share one or both with the class. Interestingly, they almost always tend to share the not-so-smart moments (maybe because they are funnier).

Once we know some humbling secrets about each other, it humanizes the environment and people become less worried about stumbling in class.

> **Humans are aching for connection, and the classroom is a natural place to foster it. Solid relationships are the soil in which learning grows.**

The "Three Photos and Explain" exercise: I ask students to pull out their phones and share with a classmate three recent photos that reveal something about themselves. I do a quick debrief afterward and let students talk about what they shared and why.

We learn about things like pets, friends, hobbies, and travel. The energy level in the room changes immediately. When we have a glimpse into one another's personal lives, we tend to see others differently and offer more grace. I still remember being surprised by a gruff student, whose pictures

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I expected would be very serious. Instead, he showed snaps of his cat and talked about how much he loved her. None of us looked at him quite the same after that—and we certainly stopped making assumptions.

2. Do your homework and fold in student experiences

While the exercises above help students open up and feel at ease sharing about themselves, it's important to plan for more natural moments when they can contribute—and tie those contributions back to the day's lesson.

One way I do this is by studying the background information (e.g., hobbies/interests, highlights of the last year, and work/volunteer experience) our program office puts together for each class and bringing what I learn about students into discussions. (This information can also be collected through a brief survey in an early class.)

> **Investing precious time in getting to know each other pays huge dividends.**

For example, I might say, "Avina, you've worked in tree planting before. How are the demands in that job similar to those described in today's case?" Another option is, "We're talking about highly dependent teamwork today. Junsoo, you have experience as a competitive rower. How much dependence exists in that sport?" A third possibility is, "The class has been sitting for a while. Alexa, you know a lot about yoga. Would you mind leading us in a few stretches before we get into the next topic?"

Students seem to appreciate being seen and love being the "expert" in that moment. It also provides openings for students to start a later conversation about common interests.

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3. Ban devices (with exceptions) to keep the focus on each other

Even the most interesting backgrounds and best prompts fall flat if students aren't truly present with one another. To minimize distractions, I enforce a no-device policy in my classroom (with exceptions for students with accommodations or on simulation days).

I explain the policy with a story: One semester, while sitting among students during a team presentation, I couldn't stop watching a nearby student shop for clothes on their laptop. No matter how hard I tried, my attention kept drifting back to their screen. That moment convinced me that if devices were allowed, real connection in the classroom would always be undermined.

> **Without screens, students pay fuller attention to one another, which makes it easier to debate ideas and take risks in discussion.**

Of course, when students first hear about the policy, they usually grumble. They love the freedom to multitask during class. What's remarkable, however, is that before long, many admit it feels good to be unplugged. Conversations flow more naturally, people look at each other more, and the room feels safer and more relaxed. By the end of the term, over 90 percent of my students said they supported the ban, and several have even gone tech free in their other classes.

To make this work, I take some additional steps:

- **Provide evidence:** I review research with the class, showing that devices erode human relationships and academic performance. For example, even the mere presence of a phone can reduce connection and conversation quality, while having someone look at a phone

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during interactions (i.e., "phubbing" or phone snubbing) reduces engagement. Laptop multitasking hurts both users and neighbors and the impact on bystanders is significant. Though students may prefer typing notes, writing by hand promotes deeper processing.

- **Highlight the importance of listening:** Without screens, students pay fuller attention to one another, which makes it easier to debate ideas and take risks in discussion. It's hard to share openly when the person beside you is glued to their online poker game, or when you're the distracted one yourself.

Framing the policy as a way to maximize learning conditions—not as a power move—helps students understand my reasoning and eventually see the benefits of detachment for themselves.

Relationships are the building blocks of a learning community

Classrooms are a powerful social context. If learning were just about content, instructors could simply send students a list of books to read. We hold classes because most learning happens during interactions. Instructors and students together engage with the content and challenge one another's ideas and mindsets. The very act of discussion can help us make sense of the material.

Since implementing the above strategies, I've seen these wonderful outcomes:

1. **"Greater" engagement:** Students take more chances, opening themselves up to new ideas and perspectives.
2. **Healthier conflict:** Disagreements are met with patience. The extra grace students offer one another is liberating and self-replenishing.
3. **Stronger relationships:** Students are kinder—to me and each other—both inside and outside of class.

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Students also tell me how much these connections matter. I run into former students, sometimes years later, who share how much they miss our class's sense of community. Humans are aching for connection, and the classroom is a natural place to foster it. Solid relationships are the soil in which learning grows.

Explore more

Classroom Management **Student Engagement** **Student Support**



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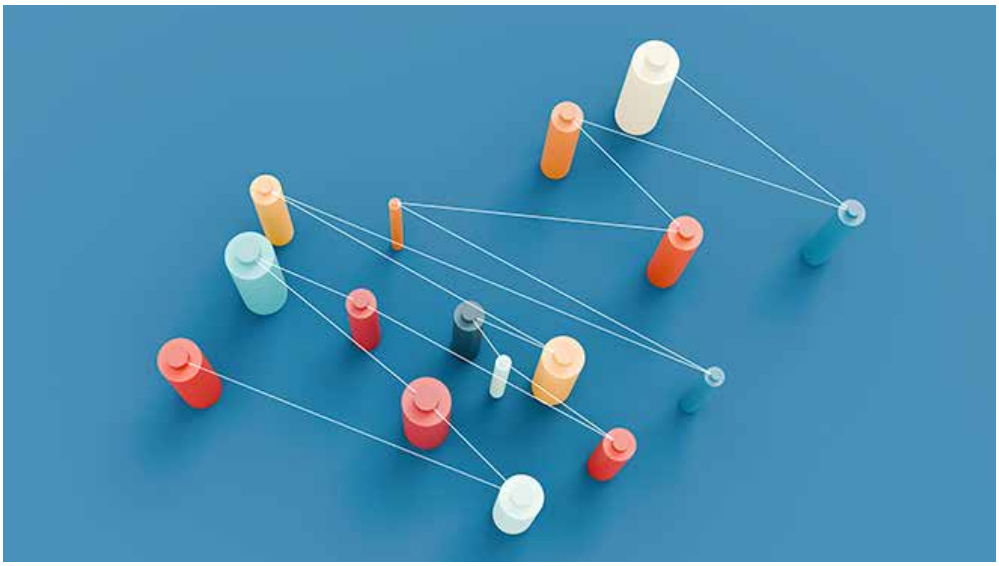
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A Better Way to Spend Class Breaks

Move from Screen Time to Face Time

by Russell Clayton, Mark Julien, and Craig Hyatt

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In most classes, breaks are treated as free-for-alls: time to grab a coffee, check emails, or scroll through social media. After all, most of our students are digital natives; their phones are never far from reach. But this approach to break time causes students to miss out on something vital to their learning experience: talking to each other beyond formal class discussion.

While seemingly innocuous, these independent tech engagements inadvertently put students in silos. When they turn their attention not to each other but to the glow of their smartphone screens, they hinder the networking and peer learning foundational to their education—and, in the case of the MBA students we teach, vital for success in their careers.

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We even noticed that educators were susceptible to spending the entire break devoid of human interaction. It was these observations that led us to experiment with a novel approach to the classroom break: "Tech and Detach."

How Tech and Detach works

The concept is extremely simple. Starting in the spring of 2023, during our typical MBA classes—usually held in two- to four-hour blocks—we implemented a structured 10-minute break. The first five minutes are designated "Tech time," during which students are free to engage with their personal devices as they wish. The subsequent five minutes, however, are a mandatory "Detach time," when all technology is put away and the focus shifts to face-to-face interaction within the classroom.

> **The absence of the digital barrier seemed to lower the threshold for interpersonal interaction.**

We initially weren't sure how this initiative would be received. We knew a complete ban on technology was unrealistic; many students use their phones for academic purposes during class time and for tending to family, work, and other life obligations during breaks. This is why we designated time for digital engagement specifically before the deliberate pivot to human connection.

The results, honestly, surprised us. We had anticipated a potential improvement in focus after the break from technology (which we saw), but the most significant impact was on the social dynamics within the classroom. Students started interacting more, engaging in spontaneous conversations, and building the networks we encourage them to cultivate.

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Implementing Tech and Detach in your classes

Based on our experience, here are five practical tips for implementing Tech and Detach breaks effectively in your classrooms.

1. Communicate the purpose

At the beginning of the semester, clearly explain the rationale behind Tech and Detach breaks. Emphasize that it's not about penalizing technology use, but about creating intentional space for building connections, a crucial skill for future business leaders.

To ensure students have already had a chance to get comfortable with one another before the first Tech and Detach break, we kick off the first session of our courses each term with a strong icebreaker (view the sidebar to see our favorite). Ultimately, this leads to better conversations during class breaks right away.

Start with a Strong Ice Breaker

Our favorite ice breaker is called "the five Hs," which stand for these categories:

- **Heritage:** Where are you from? What's your family like? What traditions have shaped you?
- **Heroes:** Who do you look up to? Who has had a positive impact on your life?
- **Hardships:** What have you been through that's changed or affected you? What's made you stronger?
- **Highlights:** What events or achievements are you proud of? What's made you happiest in life?
- **Hopes:** What do you look forward to in the future? What are some of your goals?

These are great because each one inherently ties back to students' personal lives and experiences. Our students most often choose heritage and heroes.

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2. Assign non-academic discussion prompts

To encourage engagement during Detach time, consider providing the class with general, non-academic discussion prompts. When we first introduced Tech and Detach breaks, we gathered some informal feedback from students to see what would make the networking portion more effective. Several students mentioned that having a specific conversation prompt would help alleviate the pressure of what to talk about in the early sessions, when students may still feel a bit shy. They suggested light-hearted topics like "What's your favorite restaurant in [your city]?" or "What's the most interesting show or movie you've watched recently?"

These lighthearted prompts can break the ice and spark conversations. Additionally, we have come to value the use of non-academic prompts for two reasons: they provide a cognitive recharge from the class material, and hearing the answers to the non-academic prompts helps our students see each other as humans rather than just as classmates.

3. But leave space for organic chats

Students value the prompts early in the semester, when they don't know one another as well. But we often stop assigning prompts during the last month or so of the term. This forces students to work through the pressure of making small talk without a predetermined topic, a skill that will be of value to them in the workplace. By this point, they're typically comfortable enough that a prompt isn't needed.

4. Vary the Tech/Detach ratio

While the initial five-minute/five-minute split worked well for us, some students suggested experimenting with a three-minute Tech time followed by a seven-minute Detach time. This adjustment caters to those who feel a shorter tech window is sufficient before transitioning to interaction.

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The structured approach of Tech and Detach acknowledges the reality of our digitally integrated lives while still carving out time for meaningful human interaction.

Though our students have never requested more Tech time, there are undoubtedly students who will sometimes need or want more time on their devices. We make it clear before our first Tech and Detach that, while students are encouraged to put their phones away and connect with their classmates, they should use the time in the way they feel they need to. Consider polling your students to find the optimal balance for your class.

5. Introduce random pairings

Near the middle of the term, try randomly assigning students into pairs or groups for Detach time. This helps break down social circles that may have formed in the first few weeks and encourages interaction among individuals who might not typically engage with one another. Randomizing students into pairs can be done in a low-tech manner—such as numbering off students around the room and pairing them according to number, or using AI to randomize the class roster into groups of two.

The impact of connecting students

The structured Tech and Detach break facilitated a shift from individual digital engagement to collective human interaction. Since we've started using this technique, students have reported getting to know their classmates better, forging stronger connections, and, for some of the older students, even feeling a sense of nostalgia for a time when technology wasn't the default mode of interaction.

Consider the experience of one of our students. In a late-term feedback survey for the course, she shared, "During one of the tech breaks,

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someone from across the room came over to talk to me and my [class] partner, and I absolutely loved it. . . . I don't think they would have come over if we were all on our phones/computers." Her observation highlights a crucial point: the absence of the digital barrier seemed to lower the threshold for interpersonal interaction.

Some might argue that allowing technology use during breaks could detract from peer engagement. However, the structured approach of Tech and Detach acknowledges the reality of our digitally integrated lives while still carving out time for meaningful human interaction. The goal isn't to eliminate technology, but to consciously choose when and how we engage with it in the learning environment.

Explore more

Classroom Management **Student Engagement**



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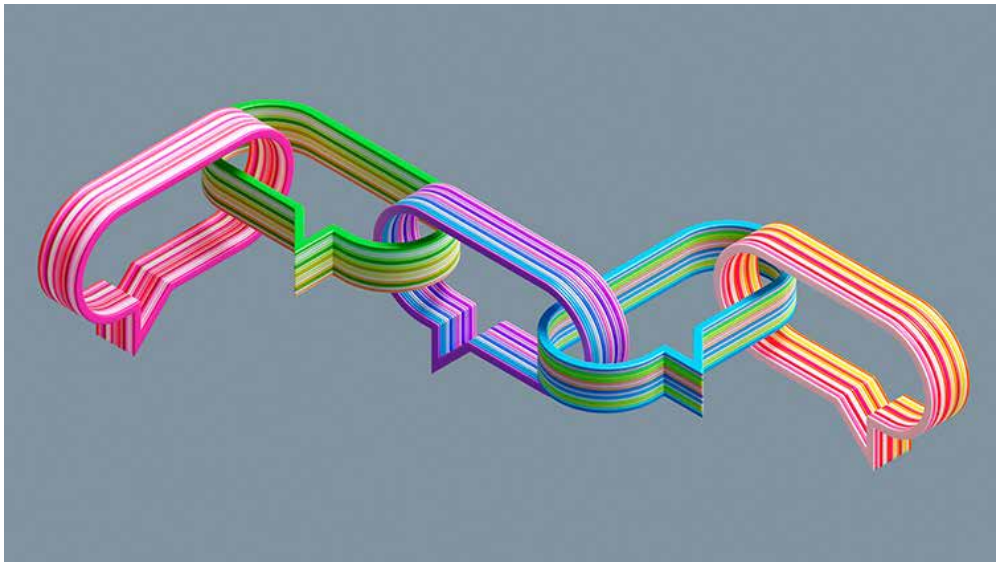
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Asynchronous Courses Still Need Human Connection

3 Strategies to Boost Student Interaction and Engagement

by Trish Berg

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Jorg Greuel / Getty Images

Online students are struggling with a lot of the same challenges that today's remote workers are facing. People miss interacting with other people, reports Brent Pearson, founder and CEO of Enboarder, citing a finding that two-thirds of remote employees feel their peers have the biggest impact on helping them stay connected and engaged in their work.

To bring more interaction to remote work environments, the National Institutes of Health has called on companies to create synchronous channels that imitate spontaneous, in-person "watercooler conversations."

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This might include virtual coffee breaks (informal video calls), daily check-ins (formal team video chats), and using collaborative tools (such as Slack).

I believe universities should follow suit and prioritize adding synchronous moments into asynchronous learning. After all, as college educators, we are preparing our students for their future careers, and many of them will work remotely. Teaching them how to stay connected in a remote world is a key part of their learning process and career preparation.

As a university professor, I have seen many changes in higher education over the last 30 years. Much of this change has involved technology advancing, further pushing us away from our students and making genuine social connections more difficult. However, if we are proactive, we can use technology—even generative AI—to foster human connection and preserve the essence of teamwork and camaraderie in this digital age.

Here, I'll share why it's important to provide opportunities for human connection within asynchronous courses. Then, I'll offer three strategies to create these synchronous moments in your classes and transform the online experience for your students.

Why add synchrony to an asynchronous world?

Many students are drawn to online courses for their flexibility; when a course is fully asynchronous, learners can engage in its content whenever works best for their schedule. Therefore, adding synchronous moments to these courses must really be meaningful and done well in order to add value for students. Remember, synchronous time is precious—it can be quite inconvenient for online students to meet at a specific time each week when they expect complete flexibility.

Research indicates that including synchronous elements, such as weekly Zoom team discussions, into asynchronous courses improves learning outcomes. In their study about synchronous discussion sessions, educator Jesslyn Nicole Farros and her colleagues found that

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"students who participated in any amount of synchronous sessions performed better in the course." In my own courses, I have seen improvement in weekly quiz scores and higher overall exam scores in online courses for which I have added synchronous connection points.

> **As college educators, we are preparing our students for their future careers, and many of them will work remotely. Teaching them how to stay connected in a remote world is a key part of their learning process and career preparation.**

Adding synchrony can also positively impact cognitive processes, encourage peer engagement, promote positive attitudes, and improve retention. Most students (more than 50 percent, according to one study) favor some use of synchronous events in their online courses as well; they find value in real-time sessions for things like office hours, guest lectures, exam reviews, orientations, and team projects. This calls for educators to find a balance between the flexibility students desire and the human connection points they need to be successful.

Traditionally, asynchronous courses rely on online discussion boards for peer and professor engagement—for example, students post their answer to specific content questions by Thursday and then reply to two of their classmates' posts by Sunday. Then, faculty can engage in those discussions and provide insight as well. While this format is good for collaboration, traditional discussion boards are not a human connection tool.

These discussion boards have also become more ineffective with the progression of gen AI. An increasing number of my undergraduate and MBA students are simply using AI tools such as ChatGPT to both write their initial discussion posts and reply to their classmates. This has

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turned the activity into a copy-and-paste assignment, which negates the learning process and further removes any human connection.

So, what can we do about it?

3 ways to bring human connection to your online courses

I have successfully added synchrony to my online courses while maintaining the flexibility of asynchronous learning. These techniques are simple to understand and easy to implement, yet they can have a profound impact on your students' connections, as well as their academic growth and retention.

1. Faculty-led Zoom discussions

I offer optional, faculty-led online discussions via Zoom during weeks one, three, six, nine, and 12 in a 14-week term. I provide a Zoom link on the homepage of Canvas, our learning management system (LMS), and send out a reminder announcement on Monday of those weeks. It is a predictable time, which makes planning easier for students. I try to schedule these discussions in the evening on Mondays or Wednesdays, which have proven to be the best nights for students to attend.

During this live one-hour discussion, we go over the assigned discussion questions that are connected to the learning outcomes for the current week. The questions are posted on our LMS prior to the Zoom meeting so students can be prepared for in-depth discussion.

To support my students' success in the course, I conclude each Zoom session with a 10- to 15-minute open forum where they can ask questions about assignments or course material, or we just talk about how things are going this semester. Sometimes it is as simple as me asking, "How did the football game go last week?" or "How did your job interview go?" This relaxed conversation time reflects those brief chats

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we have with students at the beginning or end of an in-person class, when real social connections are made.

> **Research indicates that including synchronous elements, such as weekly Zoom team discussions, into asynchronous courses improves learning outcomes.**

I allow this live discussion to replace one weekly assignment for students who attend and actively engage. This could be a small homework assignment or reflection paper. I also record these sessions and post the recording link in a class announcement for any student to watch if they choose.

These chats have become a simple way to add synchrony to my online courses, and my students have reacted positively. One student noted that my "commitment to fostering student engagement and active learning in the course was evident through the interactive online discussions," while another shared that "the Zoom discussions really encouraged a positive atmosphere and motivated me to participate and dive into the material on my own."

The earlier finding—that students who participate in any amount of synchronous sessions perform better in their courses—suggests that optional discussions like these can provide significant benefits to student learning. In my experience, giving students the opportunity to discuss course material and engage in (or even listen to) casual conversations helps deepen their engagement and learning.

2. Recorded peer discussions

Synchronous moments do not have to necessarily include the professor. I like to place students in assigned teams of five to six and have them meet every week to record a 20-minute team discussion via Zoom. I

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create an assignment with 7–10 discussion questions for the students to go through as a group.

It works best to assign a team leader to set up and record Zoom sessions, lead the discussions, and then submit the video link through our LMS for me to view and grade. I go over Zoom etiquette with the class so their recordings are professional. I also share the rubric I use to grade their discussions, which assigns individual scores based on whether they state their name, keep their cameras on, engage actively, and demonstrate critical thinking.

This option retains tremendous flexibility, as each team has seven days to find 20 minutes to meet online. It also encourages community among students and gives them an opportunity to build teamwork and leadership skills.

> **These chats have become a simple way to add synchrony to my online courses, and my students have reacted positively.**

Since implementing these peer discussions, I have seen so much independent growth in my students. One of the key benefits of the peer discussions is that I'm not there. There are students who are more introverted and intimidated to speak when I am in a Zoom discussion with them, but when it's just the student teams, they engage more, speak up more, and shine in ways I don't always see when I'm present.

3. AI-supported synchronous learning

Instead of worrying about students using gen AI in online courses, we can find ways to embrace this technology to encourage engagement and connection.

I use many AI tools to add synchrony to my online courses, including Edpuzzle and Nearpod, which allow educators to create interactive

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lessons with real-time feedback. With Edpuzzle, you can take videos from YouTube or ones you create, edit them, add voiceover, and embed questions for students to answer. You can then invite students to a live Zoom session or assign the video to students and track their progress in real time.

> **Technology can easily push us away from our students unless we proactively find ways to keep the human connection strong, especially in online courses.**

With Nearpod, you can create an interactive lesson by importing existing presentations (PowerPoint, Google Slides) or by building new ones and then adding interactive activities. These activities can include polls, quizzes, questions, or collaborative discussion boards. Once created, you can assign the Nearpod lessons to students and either have them participate in a live Zoom session or complete the work as a self-paced assignment alone or in teams.

Then there is gamification. According to Luis Fernando Pérez Armas, "At its core, competitive gamification is more than just making learning fun. It's about leveraging competition to drive change, growth, and transformation." Gamification that leverages AI can add opportunities for your students to experiment, fail in real time, and become more resilient.

One example of this is Classcraft, which integrates gamification with an AI-driven summarization tool that uses a strategy called "Turn and Talk," where students engage in peer-to-peer discussions via Zoom on a given topic (at a time of their choice) and then submit written reflections based on these conversations. AI evaluates these reflections in real time, providing faculty with summaries that highlight common themes, misconceptions, and levels of understanding across the class. Beyond AI summarization, students can create avatars, join teams,

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and participate in quests that align with your curriculum—adding gamification that makes learning fun.

Making online learning human-centered

Technology can easily push us away from our students unless we proactively find ways to keep the human connection strong, especially in online courses.

By adding synchronous moments to my online courses, I've enabled my students to foster stronger connections with me, their peers, and their university. It's elevated students' online learning from a purely transactional experience into one that is engaging, human-centered, and truly transformative.

As educators, our role extends beyond delivering content—we are preparing graduates for the realities of their careers, many of which will involve remote and independent work. According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers (2025), 96.3 percent of recent college grads believe communication is a critical skill they need in their career, yet employers report that only 53.5 percent of them are actually prepared to communicate professionally. Integrating human connection into online courses can close the communication gap, enhancing students' career readiness and ensuring their future success.

Explore more

Course Design **Digital Learning** **Student Engagement** **Technology**



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