



Department of Higher Education



Supporting connections with students in online learning

Why might we need to reach out more to students in online learning?

It is highly likely that the rapid move to online learning in response to the Coronavirus outbreak will exacerbate already existing inequalities, and impact negatively on vulnerable groups. Students who live in cramped homes, or who have no stable home at all, who are unwell, or who have caring responsibilities may struggle to stay in contact and keep up with their studies, just as many of us as staff members will be struggling at this time. As a result, it may be worthwhile considering what we can do (however small) in order to offer our students regular opportunities to maintain and strengthen connections with their course community.

What is the theory and evidence pertaining to connections and online learning?

A recent systematic review of the factors affecting e-learning in health sciences education identified several factors that hinder learning and motivation, one of which was poor interactions between learners and facilitators (Regmi & Jones, 2020). Other research has pointed to the importance of the 'connectivity' between the teacher and student with regards to successful student learning (e.g. Ali, Hodson-Carlton, & Ryan, 2004; Knipe & Lee, 2000). Joyner, Fuller, Holzweiss, Henderson, & Young (2014) identified the importance of interaction outside the online classroom and suggested that ***“accessibility of instructors through specific online office hours and meetings scheduled upon student request appears to impact student-instructor connections”*** (p. 443).

In their model of Community of Inquiry, Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) identify three dimensions of presence in online learning: social presence, teaching presence and cognitive presence. In maintaining connections, the dimension of social presence is particularly relevant as it relates to being students and teacher being personally and socially connected.

Social presence refers to ***“establishing a supportive environment such that students feel the necessary degree of comfort and safety to express their ideas in a collaborative context, and to present themselves as real and functional human beings”*** (Anderson, 2006, p. 344).

Sung and Mayer (2012) found that there are 5 facets of social presence:

- Social respect e.g. timely responses to queries
- Social sharing e.g. sharing information and expressing beliefs
- Open mind e.g. receiving positive feedback
- Social identity e.g. being called by name
- Social intimacy e.g. sharing personal information

What can we do to maintain connections with our students?

These ideas are designed to be suggestions only and each staff member should consider what they may be realistically able to do. At the very least, offering an opportunity for students to ask questions, either asynchronously or synchronously, or reaching out to students to maintain connections, may be invaluable for students who may need additional support during this time.

- Zoom office hours, to maintain 'face-to-face' interaction
- Emails to 'check in'
- Weekly videos to begin the week, setting out what will be happening in the course during the week, providing updates, and emphasising sources of support available to students
- Discussion forums, where students can chat with each other and post questions to which teachers and peers can respond
- Coffee/Check-in mornings via Zoom, for a short informal catch up and chat
- Create and play virtual synchronous and asynchronous games, such as a pub quiz based on the course content

Further resources

Ali, N. S., Hodson-Carlton, K., & Ryan, M. (2004). Students' perceptions of online learning: Implications for teaching. *Nurse Educator*, 29(3), 111-115.

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Knipe, D., & Lee, M. (2002). The quality of teaching and learning via videoconferencing. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 33(3), 301-311.

Regmi, K. & Jones, L. (2020). A systematic review of the factors – enablers and barriers – affecting e-learning in health sciences education, *BMC Medical Education*, 20, 1-18.

Sung, E., & Mayer, R. E. (2012). Five facets of social presence in online distance education. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 28(5), 1738-1747.