

CTL workshop: Promoting Student Wellness during (Virtual) Instruction

The end of pandemic teaching and learning finally seems in sight, but the collective fatigue and stress felt by students (and instructors) will likely shape our remaining months in the virtual classroom. Instructors might wish to support student wellness, but they might not see how to do that while challenging students academically. Join us in this session to hear about some concrete ways Sarah incorporated student wellness activities into her course design, built trust and community among her students, and heard back from students about improved learning. You will then have the chance to reflect on how you can integrate these practices into your own (virtual) instruction.

I. Pre-work:

- Syllabus
 - Include “Statement of Support” on syllabus
 - My statement of support: “During this time of national and international upheaval, I recognize that you may be pulled in different directions. Current crises create challenges for each participant in this class, and Zoom is a far from perfect medium by which to conduct a class of this nature. Nonetheless, I shall do my best to accommodate your situation and will happily work with support staff to help you succeed academically. I will strive to create an inclusive, supportive, collaborative classroom and will do my best to give you the tools, feedback, and support to succeed.”
 - Create a “[getting to know you](#)” questionnaire to be submitted before the first day of class (geography, pronouns, music requests)
 - Have students sign up for 15-minute slots for informal office hours during Week 1 (depends on class size)
 - Specify the purpose of office hours. What I tell my students: “office hours are opportunities to discuss course material, queries, concerns, and other issues related to your academic success. Feel free to join even if you don’t have any questions; conversation can be a lovely gateway to meaningful insight.”
 - Use discussion board as part of graded assignments, make it part of students’ homework to respond to their peers on the discussion board
 - Create “Shared space” folder on Canvas for students to post whatever material they find of interest related to the class

II. First class (most important time to build community):

- Welcome students as they enter the room
 - Create community commitments and have students sign the document in agreement during class (see “A” below)
 - Begin with a broad question (i.e- “what is [topic of the course]?”). Collate their answers to the question, then have them discuss their answers via think-pair-share
 - Tell them that they will revisit these answers at end of quarter to see how their thoughts have developed

III. Subsequent class sessions:

- Greet each student as they enter the room, begin each class by asking if anyone has lingering questions
 - If using the discussion board is a feasible option for your class, refer to students’ comments in your lecture/opening comments

IV. Useful activities to pepper throughout the quarter:

- Weekly handout that gives students a road map for where the discussion will go + resources for further reading, also includes a weekly quote from one student’s discussion response
- Affirmations (see “B” below)
 - These can offset midterm slump (I used this during election week), works very well in the final session as well
 - Have each student write their name on a piece of paper, then pass each sheet of paper around the classroom so everyone has a chance to answer the question “what did you appreciate about this person’s presence in our classroom” for each classmate
- Student evaluations (see “C” below)
 - CTL can facilitate anonymous midterm evaluations in Week 5
 - In final session:
 - give students an opportunity to give feedback about the syllabus (what to add/remove/change)
 - Give students time to fill out course evaluation
- *Virtual setting only:*
 - Canvas poll: “yes/no/it’s complicated” questions to prompt discussion
 - Canvas breakout rooms (2-3 students) with a general question prompt (i.e. think-pair-share)

A. Sample of community commitments:

- Don't be afraid to admit you don't know something
- Allow for quiet time for reflection, silence can be just as crucial to learning and absorption as continual talking
- Take criticism in good faith, respond with respect

B. Sample of students' affirmations for each other:

- "I really love how much levity you bring to class. You are wickedly funny, and I really enjoy your takes on the material!"
- "You've got such an incredible way of bringing the material into the 'real world' in a way that's so emotionally and intellectually effective. The connections you make are always so thought-provoking, and you can really tell that you care."
- "Your contributions to the course, both in the discussions and during class, are consistently nuanced, insightful, and carefully considered. No matter how distracted I may be, I always find myself perking up and paying attention whenever you speak because I'm consistently pushed to deeper insights by your contributions."
- "Thanks for your comments every week on the Canvas page! You're always the first and I admire your work ethic. And your comments are always so good too."

C. Sample from course-end evaluations:

- "Prof. Derbew has excelled at creating what is truly a safe and welcoming space for people to candidly share their thoughts and experiences and to constructively respond to fellow students on material that, in other contexts, may have felt daunting or too close to home. Prof. Derbew's genuine care and investment in the personal wellbeing of each student in the class clearly manifests in each interaction, and she manages to keep us accountable for our work while also being kind and fair with her accommodations. She is generous with her time and knowledge, with a reference ready at hand for virtually every question one could think of. Obviously I could go on forever, but to summarize: take this class."
- "Despite being apart from each other, we were kept completely interested and engaged for the full three hours of every seminar session. Our weekly responses on the discussion board, often a chore in other classes, proved to be a highly effective and engaging learning experience and opportunity to have meaningful dialogue and discussion with fellow students."
- "This is one of the best courses I have ever taken in my educational career. Clear expectations and assignments allowed for a richer exploration of the material."