TL;DR version: build better communities by creating a safe environment, encouraging connections and making each participant become a "real" person through the use of online tools. Your presence matters; make sure you are engaging and passionate. Tools to try: Zoom, Padlet, Collaborate, Evernote, Seesaw, Twitter, Web Whiteboard, Boomerang, TLDR.io

The GL🌐BAL Connector

Building Better Online Communities

According to social learning theorists, for learning to happen successfully, individuals must be a part of an environment where they can construct ideas, culture, histories, and meaning as the result of ongoing social interactions and collaborative functioning (Tryon and Bishop, 2009); in other words, they must be a part of a community.

But what constitutes a community, and how can we ensure we are able to create this experience for our online learners? How can we ensure students not only collaborate, but cooperate with each other, and care enough about the experience to see the course to its fruition? To understand how a thriving community is formed, we need to analyze it through a variety of lenses.

Creating a safe environment is key to developing a vibrant community. While people face-to-face will often refrain from engaging others negatively, the virtual nature of an online course makes it easier for negativity and destruc-

Angela Jurgensen - Chief Editor
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tive comments to erupt. Students may feel their opinion is not important if their questions are made fun of, for example. This type of interaction will inevitably cause students to shut down and disconnect from the course. But how to create a safe environment for our students online?

According to Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2001), in order to create a safe environment for all to voice their opinions and to facilitate more equitable involvement among participants, it was better for online students to reveal only very limited set of personal characteristics. However, in reality, this makes it more difficult for participants to care for the group. If we look at Brewer's person perception model (1988), revelations of personal characteristics are crucial for each individual to make connections to who they are and where they fit in within the group. If we find that a group has nothing to offer, or the people in a group are too different from us, then it becomes more difficult to actually care for the group. In reality, just as in face-to-face relationships, the more the group shares, the more connected they become.

So, to think that the amount of information shared between the people in the group would be a detriment is actually looking at the victims of the situation and expecting them to somehow change their behaviour; it would be like saying that it's a person's fault if they had their wallet stolen from the outside pocket of their jacket; "Maybe they should have had it in their pants' pocket instead". In reality, the person who stole the wallet is to blame; the thief's actions are the ones which need correction.

This brings us to the first step for a good online community. That is, creating clear guidelines of behaviour, and explaining right from the start what is and isn't acceptable. As the moderator, it is most of all important to be consistent with their message, and allow for no deviation from the original set of rules. If someone asks a question, for instance, and someone else makes fun of it even if a little, it is the moderator's role to kindly point out to the student who is not following the guidelines that this is not acceptable behaviour, while at the same time validating the first student, as every question is good and worthy of an answer.

Besides these

guidelines, an important second step to consider is actually often the cause of antagonistic behaviour between students online. As mentioned before, people who only know each other online often don't have an attachment, or even fully consider the other person as a "real" person. If all they see are words on a screen, it's harder to make a human connection, and on subconscious level, we create a distance that goes deeper than merely kilometers. In order to humanize our classroom online, it is necessary to have frequent "face-to-face" conversations and discussions with the class, at least once a week. In order to do this, some LMS programs such as Blackboard Collaborate are not ideal; they can only offer a disembodied voice, or a very small video of whoever is talking, without sharing the expressions or feedback of the listener. Our reviewers at the Global Connector recom-

mend Zoom, which allow for everyone to see the whole group at the same time; it gives the illusion of a real person-to-person conversation, and most closely recreates the feeling of community.

Besides having clear guidelines and good face-to-face interaction, there are other ways to ensure a cooperative community: planning for group work, for instance, as well as utilizing the break-out room abilities of Blackboard Collaborate; community boards, to encourage asynchronous discussion and feedback; and finally, ensuring that the community is able to continue to communicate indefinitely after the course is over, learning through each other's future experiences through the use of tools such as Google plus.

However, while the Global Connector encourages creating a Google Plus community for the benefit of the stu-

dents, as it may encourage discussion in certain topic matters for deeper and greater understanding, it categorically does not condone the use of Google Plus to share assignments or to run a class, due to its major drawback: Google Plus lacks a method of organizing and classifying, and although it may seem like a creative and visual tool, it quickly becomes overwhelming as crucial information gets lost in the sea of imagery. It simply does not provide the same structure and feeling of safety as other tools out there. As an online educator, knowing how to select the right tool for the right job to ensure the success of the highest number of students is an important point, which can make or break a course.

Finding a balance between our goal to develop an online community and our need to keep the course well organized, safe and not overwhelming is an art, and it may take a few tries before one achieves this balance. As new tools become available, it is clear that better and stronger communities are ahead of us, and it has never been a better time to become an online educator. As humans, we all want to feel connected; facilitating this connection will ensure the success of your online course.

MAGGIE CON-EKTED

The YOU Factor

So, you have your first online course all set up: you have chosen a good LMS (you're trying Moodle!) and all of your course content is there. Good for you! But two weeks later, you have only one third of the class size you started with, and you are left wondering if your content is boring, or if kids these days are simply not into learning anymore.

Maybe the problem is not the kids, or your content – maybe it's YOU!

Hold on a second – we don't mean you're a boring teacher. Far from it. You may be great at explaining things, so great that you decided to teach this online course. Being successful means you will be able to reach many more students with your subject. But being successful may require something a little different than what you think.

As it turns out, your presence online is an extremely important factor to determine the success or failure of your online course. What is online presence, you may ask? As the name implies, it is the way you make students feel you through

Capricorn Dec 22 - Jan 20
It's time to shake things up this week, Capricorn! Take your online course to a new level by adding an introduction video of yourself to the front page of your course content. Step out of your comfort zone and the results will pay off!

Pisces Feb 20 - March 20
You are a friendly person by nature, Pisces; it's time to know when to say "enough". Your online course is running out of control. You must enforce your own guidelines or you run the risk of turning every other student off from your course.

Taurus Apr 21 - May 21
Today is the day you start organizing your life, Taurus! You won't forget about that important item to research, or what a student asked about anymore. Check out Workflowy.com and prepare to be amazed. You can carry your organized to-do list always with you, no matter where you are.

Cancer June 22 - July 23
Your community online is thriving, Cancer, and it's probably because you are so involved. Your presence is warm and inviting, and it keeps everyone engaged. Remember not to take negative comments against you too seriously; you can't please everyone at all times.

Virgo Aug 24 - Sept 23
Way to go, Virgo! Your constant nagging and fussing is perfect for online classrooms; you really keep on top of students who don't hand in their work or show up for class, and that is truly commendable. Be careful not to smother them with your worries, though; mother hens should have their limits!

Scorpio Oct 24 - Nov 22
Dear Scorpio, your high standards are not easily met. When dealing with online students, keep in mind that each one will have their own abilities, their own lives and their own background. Allow for these differences to come through and be ready to give people extra time when delivering assignments.

Aquarius Jan 21 - Feb 19
We know that you like to liven things up and that you don't like being restricted, Aquarius, but your inbox is starting to look scary. Check out some online tools like Boomerang to control the flow of information! You will be able to be even more creative.

Aries March 21 - April 20
Hey Aries, your students love hearing about all of your feats, but maybe it's time for you to step out of the limelight and let them comment on each other's posts. Stop jumping the gun. Everyone knows you know the subject; let your students contribute on their own, and your community online will improve considerably.

Gemini May 22 - June 21
For this week, we have a challenge for you, Gemini: you will commit to one main method of communication until the end of your course. You switch LMS so often, your students can't figure out where you are. May we suggest something simple and effective, such as Blackboard Collaborate?

Leo July 24 - Aug 23
You have spent a lot of time creating an online presence; Leo; now it's time to encourage your students to create their own as well. Help them develop a chatting/forum through Google Plus, so that they can talk about your course and ask questions. You should also encourage them to create their own blogs.

Libra Sept 24 - Oct 23
Maybe it is time to reassess your control of your online classroom; you have been a little too hands-off and diplomatic, Libra. Your presence has been very weak, and your students feel like pirates on a ship. Reign them back in by recruiting one or two student moderators to help you, and bring forth more Zoom discussions.

Sagittarius Nov 23 - Dec 21
This is a warning, Sagittarius! You tend to kick things that don't work quite quickly, but online learning is not so simple. Don't make quick blanket judgement on any specific online tool based on the opinions of one group. Every group has a different dynamic, and you must test things again before forming an opinion.

Connecting Communities
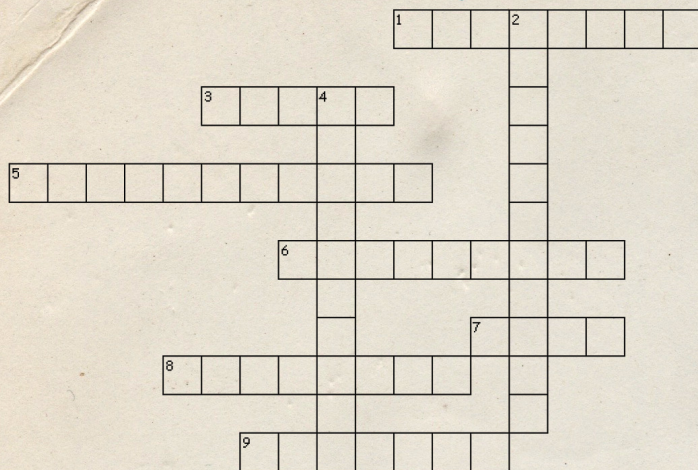
Across

1. I can be a better educator if I increase my _____ in my online classroom.

3. _____ are a good way to keep asynchronous communication going, as well as forums.

5. By encouraging personal connections, we can increase _____ between groups

6. It is important to define from early on what is acceptable _____ .

7. _____ is one of the best tools to create a feeling of connection with our group.

8. A good tool to try in order to sort out the flow of information online is _____

9. For the community to thrive, the first thing to implement above all others is _____ between participants.

Down

2. Blackboard collaborate is another way to enjoy _____ communication.

4. We can help set the stage for a healthy community by implementing...

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the computer screen, listening, giving advice and teaching – like a real person. The teacher presence also assists in creating learner-to-learner, teacher-to-learner and content-to-learner interactions.

It may seem hard at first to break through the barrier of the computer screen, and you may think that online teaching is meant to be limited; in reality, it can be even richer than face-to-face. When

Online Presence?

done well, an online community will allow you to get to know your students often much better than in a regular classroom; by the same token, your students should know more about you as well.

To get your students participating on inquiry processes, creating content and having fun with your online course, you can use online collaborative tools such as Seesaw. You could also make quick quizzes that your students have to respond to in real time, using tools such as Kahoot! or use gamification tools and portals, such as Classcraft, where students are able to collaborate in order to help members of their group, learning and growing together. But these tools alone, albeit fun, are not enough to keep students engaged; your presence, and the way you interact with your students, is of the highest importance.

In order to increase your presence in the classroom, you should personalize your course material. For instance, besides a detailed bio about you and a welcoming photo on your "About Me" page, you could have a welcome video on your course's home page. You could also have a video explaining why you are passionate about your subject matter, and what will be learned during the course -- think of it as a teaser for the course, and also a love note to the subject matter!

You could make a point of sharing one personal bit of information every week with your students; it could be an article you wrote, photos of your dogs, a detailed description of your fancy dinner; little things can help your students create a better picture of you, and thus, grow more connected. You could call this "Mrs. Smith's Minute" or some other fun name.

Your tutorials could be personally made for your students with tools such as Camtasia. If you choose to have videos displaying a subject, you could ensure you include your own self in the beginning of the video as an introduction, as well as at the ending of the video (this can be simply done with video editing tools such as Windows Movie Maker). You could also

According to Lowenthal, P. R., & Parscal, T. (2008), open-ended critical thinking questions are a good way to help your discussions move forward, but the way you respond during a discussion can also help you establish a good presence online. It is important to mediate, to encourage and reinforce student contributions; at the same time, encouraging debate between students is a good way to maintain interest. For instance, if someone states a point, and if someone else disagrees, you could point out "That was an interesting opinion, student B; quite the opposite from student A. Would you like to respond to student B?"

Of course, presenting content and summarizing discussions is also a good way to have a good presence; after you have let students discus and grow their own knowledge based on what they know, the summary at the end of your community's interactions is a place you can show your expertise.

But perhaps the most important thing you can do is encourage and facilitate online discourse through a series of fun group activities that help you create the group structure by allowing people to interact on a personal level (Salmons and Wilson, 2008). In other words, you must have good ice breakers and think of ways for your students to reveal parts of their personality, so that the members of the group can find a common ground in which they can relate to one another.

For instance, you could ask students to make a list of hashtags containing parts of their personality, and write this on a board; they could then take photos of themselves holding this board, and upload it onto your Padlet community (www.padlet.com). You would, in turn, add your own picture with your own hashtag, adding to your community. This is a fun ice-breaker as well as a way to make yourself visible for your students.

One more interesting thing to try, which may help bring your course from "virtual" to "Real" with your students, is requesting students to work on an actual paper notebook. With the current tendency to go completely digital, it is easy to see many people screaming "PAPERLESS ONLY"!!! The views of the Global Connector are that paperless is indeed the way to go, and we're in many ways already there; more and more courses can be taken online without the use of any actual paper books, and the idea of taking notes on paper format seems antiquated. But many studies now suggest that writing down your thoughts and reflections on paper actually help your brain make connections and retain material, as the memory is recorded on different areas. Having a notebook for your class, and using prompts to ensure the notebook is used adequately also ensures every student has a keepsake of their learning in

the end of class.

Remember to be yourself, and to get involved. Teaching online is not for the weak of heart, as it requires actually much more work and organization; there is no way to "swing" a class. Everything has to be planned well for the class to work, and every class has to include heart. Don't be afraid of being silly, over-the-top or weird; letting your guard down online helps students feel like they know you, and helps them also let their guard down. It is a fun world to be an educator! Now, go check your course and see what can you do to spice it up. Throw some Cayenne in it, and most of all, teach with your heart!

CYBER PETER

Resources for content:

Slagter, P. J., & Bishop, M. J. (2009). Theoretical foundations for enhancing social connectedness in online learning environments. Distance Education, 219-315.

Kear, K (2010) Social presence in online learning communities. Proceedings of the 7th International Conference on Networked Learning, 541-548

Lowenthal, P. R., & Parscal, T. (2008). Teaching presence. The Learning Curve, 3(4), 1-2, 4.

Source Pictures:

Front page graphic of two talk balloons: https://social.ogilvy.com/wp-content/uploads/4842907.jpgV

Teacher source for online presence: https://teacherwise.wordpress.com/2013/09/

Source for Horoscope: http://www.entreelibre.info/horoscope-11/

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