

NOTES

1. Whereas “synchronous” learning happens in real time, “asynchronous” learning is done without real-time interaction.
2. All of the students who coauthored this article are white (as is the instructor), received A-level grades in the course, and had stable access to a personal electronic device and the Internet. To mitigate bias, we also drew from feedback given by a broader pool of students over email and via an anonymous survey. The generalizability of our experience also is impacted by other factors. None of the students enrolled in this course requested accommodations for disabilities that could not be easily applied in an online format; neither did anyone report extenuating circumstances beyond what is expected during a global pandemic. The predominantly white and wealthy composition of the broader student population at Queen’s University is also a factor.
3. The name of this student was modified to preserve anonymity for professional reasons.
4. This is the demographic cohort succeeding Millennials, born between the late 1990s and the early 2010s.
5. Indeed, the diplomats they embodied during the simulation are experiencing similar challenges as a result of COVID-19 (Septiari 2020).
6. In Zoom, but Slack also includes channels and is a good alternative.

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MAKING HUMAN CONNECTIONS IN ONLINE TEACHING

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Effective teaching is not simply delivering content. More than 40 years of research shows that increased interactions and meaningful relationships between students and professors are associated with student persistence and success (Delaney 2008; Kezar and Maxey 2014). This finding is especially strong for students of color, first-generation students, or academically struggling students (Amelink 2005; Anaya and Cole 2001; Ishiyama 2002; Strayhorn and Terrell 2007).

Yet, the inherent distance imposed by online teaching and learning can make meaningful interactions between faculty and students difficult. The casual interactions that professors and students have on campus—continuing a discussion after class, mentioning a grant while waiting for the elevator, chatting after a speaker—often have positive outcomes for students (Kuh and Hu 2001) but are unavailable in an online environment.

Instead of simply shrugging our shoulders and bemoaning the loss of these interactions due to COVID-19, the burden is on

faculty to create opportunities for connection with students in our online classes. Research shows that the instructor is more important than any other aspect of an online course (Muljana and Luo 2019; Nistor and Neubauer 2010) and the quality of faculty–student interactions consistently predicts online retention and success (Gering et al. 2018; Jaggars and Xu 2016).

How can faculty connect in meaningful ways with students in our online classes? Doing so effectively takes creativity and authentic caring. Without these efforts, our online classes risk becoming hollow shells in which little learning takes place and only the most self-motivated, privileged, and persistent students survive.

Building Rapport with Students

I realized something was wrong in my first online class when I saw the grade distribution at the end of the semester. I taught online Introduction to Political Science with the same textbook, lectures, and assignments as the in-person course, but more students earned Ds or Fs or dropped out completely from the online version. I soon learned that this was not unusual. The distance inherent in the medium makes it difficult to connect with students, and retention is consistently lower. So, I tried an experiment. For five years, I made a particular effort to connect with my students on a human level, communicating well and personally reaching out to them. I called this approach “rapport building.” By the end of five years, I had increased retention in my experimental online sections by 13%, making them statistically indistinguishable from my face-to-face sections (Glazier 2016).

With so many courses moving online due to COVID-19, faculty are faced with immense teaching challenges. The following recommendations to improve retention and success are drawn from my own experience and grounded in the research of scholars who focus on humanizing, connecting, and building rapport with students (Aragon 2003; Glazier 2016; Pacansky-Brock, Smedshammer, and Vincent-Layton 2020).

Start Early

Begin building relationships with students by reaching out to them before the semester even begins. Send a welcome email introducing yourself, attach the syllabus, and ask a friendly and innocuous question related to the course content that will help you get to know your students and demonstrate that you care about their success. If you show students that you care from the very beginning of the class, they are more likely to come to you when they need help.

Humanize Yourself

The more students see you as a real human being, the more they will remember and prioritize your course. A short welcome video is a good idea, as well as a brief check-in video every week. These videos do not have to be perfect—it is okay if pets or kids make a surprise appearance; your students may have pets or kids, so this helps them to connect with you as a real person and to stay engaged with the class.

Get Personal

As often as possible, send students the message that you are personally invested in their individual success. The online environment can be anonymizing so anything that lifts that barrier and gets you personally engaged will help students succeed. Use their

first name, refer to comments they previously made in discussion posts, mention if you previously had them in a face-to-face class, and make sure that the feedback you provide on assignments feels personal.

Provide Opportunities for Interaction

Building rapport is not a one-way street; ensure that students have opportunities to also interact with you. Be present in discussion boards, hold Q&A sessions, distribute a midterm survey in which

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students can provide anonymous feedback on how the course is going, and allow students to vote on subtopics or case studies for upcoming lectures. Think creatively about ways to engage students in the online environment.

Be Compassionate

Combine a pandemic, an economic recession, and many highly visible instances of violent racism, and it is likely that our students are experiencing trauma in their life outside of the classroom. Consider asking about the challenges they foresee at the beginning of the semester and follow up to ask how they are doing and how you can help. If you notice missed deadlines or reduced attendance, check in by email, telephone, or text. Consider sending personal email reminders before assignment due dates or adopting a flexible deadline calendar.

Final Thoughts

Holding synchronous classes via videoconference may seem like a perfect way to connect with students, but it takes care and thoughtfulness to ensure that this format is not impersonal and isolating. Synchronous discussions or reviews can build community; however, we are deluding ourselves if we think we are connecting with students who log on just to be lectured at with their cameras off and their microphones muted.

The most important component of building rapport is authenticity. Decide what will work best depending on your teaching style, course load, and class size. It is more difficult to build meaningful relationships across the digital divide. Technology can make connecting with students easier—tools such as mail merge simplify sending personal emails and Zoom can be great for holding office hours—but, in the end, what really makes a difference to our students is a personal connection. ■

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FORCED EXPERIMENTATION: TEACHING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT ONLINE AMID COVID-19

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Challenges from COVID-19 were especially severe for teaching classes about civic engagement and organizing. Students who were previously instructed to practice the knowledge and skills learned in their communities were forced to move to e-learning. How can instructors teach civic engagement through distance learning? This article uses a class I taught during spring 2020, "People Power Change: Leadership as a Practice," to demonstrate the use of a "three-H approach." This approach focused on students' head, heart, and hands through public narratives, strategizing, and taking action while also reexamining disruptions as opportunities.

The costs associated with decision making could cause students to settle in inertia without continually searching for the optimal state (Porter 1991), particularly when there is no external stimulus (Carden and Wood 2018). External shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic, therefore, provided excellent opportunities for experimentation, innovation, and re-optimization (Acuto 2020; Dias et al. 2020), especially when previously devised plans were no longer viable.

In this course, which originated from Dr. Marshall Ganz's famous organizing class at the Harvard Kennedy School of