



University of Birmingham

Learning about each other is a critical part of building community in the classroom. A comfortable community encourages people to participate in and take the risks that help learning occur.

For example, learners participate in discussions and ask questions rather than remaining silent. In online sessions, creating this sense of community is just as vital to student engagement and learning, if not more so, since online learners are often initially concerned with a sense of invisibility as they cannot “see” each other.

The time to begin building a positive learning environment is at the beginning of the semester. That way, students begin to develop relationships and understand the norms of their class. Activities planned for the first week should include introduction of module participants as well as an activity related to course content. A good first step is student introductions.

I Am Teaching a Module Online and I Would Like My Students to Get to Know Each Other. What Can I do?

Whether you are teaching a F2f, blended or online module you need to explain the need to build a community because:

- Students find it easier to communicate with classmates when they know a bit about each other.
- Better student groups can be formed when goals and interests match.
- You will want to better understand the class and the students as individuals.
- A sense of community allows students to feel more comfortable sharing thoughts, suggestions and information.

Create an opportunity for students to share a bit about themselves. Students can:

- Introduce themselves online on the WebCT discussion board.
- Communicate with each other by responding to each other’s introductions.
- Post their picture or develop a personal Web/Wiki page.

It is important to model the behaviour yourself. You should post your own introduction (include some personal information) and respond to students’ introductions.



Give Me an Example

During the first week, introduce the module or programme and explain that the students will first be taking time to get acquainted with one another to form an online community and assess each other's current skill levels. Ask your students to write an individual profile and post it on the discussion board within WebCT for the first week. Students might include:

- Their background (education, experience with course topic, work experience, culture, job, family or other relevant information).
- What they hope to gain from participating in the course.
- What they bring to the course.
- Anything else they would like the class to know.
- An interesting point about themselves.

You may wish then to transfer this information then to a Student's Who's Who page within WebCT along with their picture. If you are using a Wiki you can get the students to create their own page.

There are many Ice-Breaker type activities that can be successfully adapted for blended and online induction sessions.

More Ideas

- Create a personal Wiki or Blog site. Ask students to also develop a personal Web page within a Wiki or Blog.
- Suggest that students refer to each other's introductions later in the module and remind them to update their own introductions throughout the module.
- Set up a virtual "Pub / Cafe," an online discussion area where students can talk about the topics that interest them, just as on-campus students might do over coffee.
- Try an introductory team building activity. For example, create an online bingo game or treasure hunt. These activities help students get to know each other better and learn how to navigate the course Web site.
- Arrange for a chat room or audio conference session where students get the opportunity to talk face-to-face.
- Where possible take advantage of any F2F sessions you might have (such as residentials) to model online communication in a safe environment first using Post-It Notes and then going online.

Other Considerations

Some students may be shy or less open to sharing their biographies. Allow students to decide what they would like to share by offering guidelines for introductions rather than prescribed contents.

Adapted by Danielle Hinton from the University of Calgary ITBL Series which is © and licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 2.5 License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.5>

Where Can I Go for More Information?

- **Creating an Online Learning Community**
Downes, S (1999)
<http://www.slideshare.net/Downes/creating-an-online-learning-community>
- **Building Online Learning Communities: Effective Strategies for the Virtual Classroom**
Palloff, R & Pratt, K (2007)
San Francisco : John Wiley & Sons
- **E-tivities: The Key to Active Online Learning**
Salmon, G. (2002).. London, Kogan Page Limited.
- **Promoting Learner Independence through Pre-Induction**
Greenhill, D
<http://vipassana-blog.net/wp-content/uploads/poster.pdf>
- **Establishing an Online Community**
College of Education's Learning Technology Center at the University of Texas at Austin.
<http://www.edb.utexas.edu/education/centers/ltc/services/technet/teachnet/tnclass/community/>
- **Dispatches from Distance Education, Where Class is Always in Session**
Young, J.R. (2000, March 3). The Chronicle of Higher Education, p. A41.
<http://chronicle.com/free/v46/i26/26a04101.htm>
- **Your College E-Learning Team**