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Building a sense of community in online courses

Abstract

From the first months of 2020, COVID-19 transformed the landscape of education worldwide. Numerous educational institutions were forced to move their courses online due to the circumstances of the pandemic. This was the case at Akita International University in Akita, Japan. As the semester came to a close in July 2020, students were given an opportunity to reflect on their experiences with online education via end-of-term course evaluations, focus groups, and public meetings with university administration. From the results of these opportunities to share experiences in remote and virtual education, the authors were reminded that online learning can be a lonesome endeavor. However, it does not need to be this way. A sense of community, camaraderie, and shared purpose can be developed within the online teaching and learning environment. This article will offer suggestions generated from the authors' experiences. All suggestions have the authenticity of having been successfully utilized in the authors' online classrooms.

Keywords: online education, academic community, ice-breakers, check-in activities, student hallway conversations

Introduction

On March 19, 2020, the president of Akita International University, a small public university in northern Japan, announced that all courses planned for the spring 2020 semester would be held “via online, distance education.” (N. Suzuki, personal communication, March 19, 2020)¹. This decision, which the university president described as “an emergency measure,” was due, he explained, to the announcement by the World Health Organization that the circumstances of the COVID-19 illness had spread to the point where it should be considered a pandemic. Along with this announcement that all classes would move online, the start of university courses was postponed by approximately three weeks. The decision was made to utilize the university Moodle® system and Zoom® for course delivery. Aside from some faculties that decided to augment these modalities with other software or additional online venues, the majority of instructors utilized these two functions (along with email), to deliver their courses.

One of the concerns of instructors entering this online environment for instruction was how to ensure that students maintained or developed a sense of community while engaged in online instruction. It was also identified as a concern of students via the notes from a meeting between upper administration and university students (Y. Kumagai, personal communication, August 27, 2020)². As Tucker (2020) explains,

First students who feel they are part of a learning community online are less likely to feel alone during this time of social isolation. Second, teachers who invest the time and effort needed to develop a sense of community online will have more success engaging students who are learning remotely. (Trucker, 2020)

This article will offer modalities for developing a sense of community among students in an online teaching and learning environment. The modalities are applicable to many online teaching and learning environments at the university level and, with thoughtful adjustment, to courses below the tertiary level.

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¹ E-mail regarding remote teaching for the spring 2020 semester.

² E-mail regarding end-of-term student course evaluations.

About Akita International University

A brief mention should be made about Akita International University (AIU), what it is and why the pandemic impacted it in a particularly harsh manner. AIU is a modest sized public prefectural university in Akita Prefecture. Almost unique in Japan, it is a public university that is English medium. From its university website (Akita International University, n.d.) we learn that it has approximately 1000 students. Part of the degree requirement is for AIU students to spend one academic year abroad at one of AIU's 200 partner universities. In exchange for hosting AIU students, AIU's partner institutions send approximately 200 students to the AIU campus to take courses for one or two semesters. Due to the number of international students, and to the degree seeking students from around Japan and Asia, the danger of travel was such that gathering students on campus was not feasible or safe. In his explanation to students about why AIU would continue to only offer course online into the autumn semester of 2020, AIU President Norihiko Suzuki explained (2020, para. 3), that, even though AIU was intending to only allow students to come to the campus who were currently living in Japan, still

it would be a hazardous situation. We would be accepting students from all over the country, and we would have students from areas, and traveling through areas, that have been impacted by this surge in infections. We do not want to put anyone at risk. ... Given all of these circumstances, we have made the difficult, but necessary, decision to continue to have a closed campus and only online classes. (N. Suzuki, personal communication, March 19, 2020).

These circumstances, the same that forced the closing of the campus and movement to online education in the spring, also challenged the faculty to improve the online teaching and learning experience for themselves and their students. As the Dean of Academic Affairs of AIU explained at a faculty department meeting,

Last spring, students were encouraged by our willingness to move our curriculum online. They were also very forgiving as we struggled to come to grips with the technology. Now, we have a certain comfort level with Zoom and online instruction. As we move into the fall semester ... students have the right to expect that we improve their experiences and make the online teaching and learning environment the best experience possible. (P. Dougherty, personal communication, 2020)³

Research

Maslow (1968) argued that human beings have as a fundamental component of their psychology a need to feel as if they belong. According to Rosenberg and McCullough (1981), a sense of belonging generally denotes a feeling that one is both important and consequential in relationship to others; basically, that one matters. As interpreted by Elliot et al. (2004) this sense of belonging may be understood as "the perception that, to some degree and in any of a variety of ways, we are a significant part of the world around us" (p. 339). Elliot et al. (2004) further illuminated this sense of belonging as comprising two areas, or categories, of concern. The first category involves the individual feeling that he or she has the attention of others. The second category involves the understanding that there is a "bidirectional" relationship between an individual and his or her peers, or those in his or her social orbit (Elliot et al., 2004, p. 341). This relationship is understood by Elliot et al. (2004) as one in which the individual may be relied on and also may rely on others to fulfill needs, and provide support, as necessary.

Seymour Sarason (1974) in introducing his view of the "psychological sense of community," posited that the self-identity was tied to our sense of belonging to a community. It was, as he termed, one of the "major bases for self-definition" (p. 157). McMillan and Chavis (1986) offered that this sense of community was comprised of four components: (1) membership, (2) influence, (3) integration and fulfillment of needs, and (4) shared emotional connection. Without segueing into details unnecessary for this article, it may be explained that in this context, the first component, membership, is self-explanatory. Individuals need to see themselves as part of a group. The second component, influence, means, according to McMillan and Chavis (1986) that the individual has a sense that he or she may both influence the group and that the group is allowed to influence the individual. The third component, integration and fulfillment of needs, regards the individual's sense as, what Sarason (1974) expressed as "an acknowledged interdependence with others, a willingness to maintain this interdependence by giving to or doing for others what one expects from them" (p. 157). Finally, the last of the four components, shared emotional connection, might be understood as what McMillan and Chavis (1986) identified as the "definitive element for true community" (p. 14). Of the features of shared emotional connection outlined by McMillan and Chavis (1986, p. 14), the authors mention one that is critical to the development of a sense of community within a classroom setting – the "contact hypothesis" which simply explains that the more individuals are allowed to interact, the better are the

³ English for Academic Purposes Program and Foreign Language Education Programs business meeting.

chances that they will form a bond. This is supported by Strayhorn (2018) who argued that peer interaction is an essential in developing a sense of belonging and, therefore, it is also necessary for successful pedagogy to give attention to developing opportunities for positive student interaction in the classroom.

Definitions of this “sense of community” may be Sarason’s “perception of similarity to others, and acknowledged interdependence with others, a willingness to maintain this interdependence by giving to or doing for others what one expects from them, and a feeling that one is part of a larger dependable and stable structure” (Sarason, 1974, p. 157). Or it could be the definition provided by McMillan and Chavis (1986) where the sense of community is described as “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (p. 9). In essence, and from both definitions offered, a sense of community exists in the minds of the individuals identifying with a group and is (at least psychologically), a supportive development. Regarding developing a sense of community within the milieu of education and participation in a classroom, either physically or through remote education, we can refer to several sources to develop an understanding of where to start the process.

A survey in 2000 of 220 university students in the United States posed two questions as paraphrased here (McGlynn, 2001): (1) In your courses are there teaching methods or techniques that are particularly helpful for your learning and, (2) are there classroom behaviors that teachers have that motivate you to learn? The results of the surveys may be summarized in three points: (1) Students wanted their teachers to know their names and a little about them, (2) they want their instructors to be humane, and finally, (3) they want their teachers to respect them as a person, including their opinions. This fits Toor’s (2020) cogent observation, as she forayed into online education in the spring of 2020, that her students, “wanted real-time interaction with me, and perhaps even more, with their peers in the class” (para. 22).

This mirrors other findings that indicate the importance of humanizing and managing the learning environment. Wilkinson and Ansell (1992) explained that the emotional ambiance of the classroom relates to the attainment of academic success, and McGlynn (2001), again, emphasized that it was essential that students begin interacting with one another from the earliest moments of even the first class. Further, and significantly, research indicates that student resilience and attainment are more reliant on the relationships they create in class than on what their instructors instruct them via the course materials (McGlynn, 2001). As Walton and Cohen (2007) argue, the lack of a sense of belonging may impact student academic performance in a negative manner.

In the aftermath of the first semester of online courses, university administration organized oppor-

tunities for students to share the experiences they had as they moved into the world of online learning. From these opportunities and in reviewing the results of end-of-term student course evaluations, the vice president of the university outlined several recommendations from students (Y. Kumagai, personal communication, August 27, 2020) which are paraphrased here:

- 1) Students recommended that ice-breakers be included in the first- or second-class session. With the online learning they felt that they were not really getting a chance to meet their peers and get to know them.
- 2) Recommended as well, was to have breakout room sessions immediately after a group assignment or project. This could be given in order for the participants to have a chance to exchange contact information and organize a group schedule to complete the assignment or project.
- 3) Another suggestion was to open the class session earlier, or keep it open for a short while afterward, so that students could simply talk with one another. This basically allows for “hallway” conversations and simply gives the students a chance to connect and interact casually.

Developing a sense of belonging or community in a classroom, according to the research outlined above, is an essential task of the pedagogical process in the classroom. The authors posit that this applies equally, if not more so, in the environment of the online teaching and learning environment. What will be outlined in the following section of this article are specific techniques and activities that may be used to accomplish the teacher task of encouraging a sense of community in their online classroom.

Methods and tools to develop a sense of community in online courses

The authors have utilized several methods and online tools to help students develop a sense of community in the context of their online courses. Some of the ideas would be applicable in face-to-face class settings as well. The methods and tools outlined below were tried in course and class settings during the spring, and first semester, where the authors taught all of their courses online. Anecdotally, the results were encouraging. We have divided the suggestions into ice-breakers, check-ins, and peer networking and communication support.

Ice-breakers

There are four ice-breaker activities will be introduced and explained. These four activities can (and have) utilized the Zoom Breakout Room function and give students the chance to interact with one another to begin (and continue) the process of developing a sense of belonging and community. The four ice-breaker activities are the following:

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1. PechaKucha of Me
2. Personal Reference Inventory
3. The 4 “What” Questions
4. Uncommon Commonalities.

Each of the four will be explained, in some detail, below. All were successfully utilized in classroom environments by the authors.

1) PechaKucha of Me:

PechaKucha was developed in Japan in 2003 by two architects – Astrid Klein and Mark Dytham of Klein Dytham Architecture – based in Tokyo (PechaKucha, 2020). The central idea is to make presentations that are short, engaging, and to the point. PechaKucha of Me is an activity that allows students to quickly share a great deal of interesting information about themselves with their classmates.

There are five simple rules for the PechaKucha of Me presentation: (1) the presenter may use only 20 power point slides, (2) each slide has one picture on it, (3) there are no (or very few) words on the slides, and, (4) each slide allows only 20 seconds for explanation. The total time allotted for the whole presentation is approximately seven minutes.

The central idea is that this should be an opportunity to learn about each other. Therefore, among the topics presented in the slides should be the following items:

1. A slide showing the student at a younger age (showing family members is optional and not required).
2. A slide showing the student’s hobby or pastime (ideally showing the student practicing the hobby or pastime).
3. A slide showing a trip that the student took that they really enjoyed.
4. A slide showing the student’s future dream (career, travel, university, etc. – something to indicate what the student wants to do in the future).
5. Other slides/pictures that can help to show the audience something interesting about the student.

The purpose of the activity is for students to introduce themselves to their peers in the class. They are encouraged to speak about themselves and communicate points about their personalities and lives that they feel comfortable sharing. This allows them to learn about one another, find commonalities, celebrate unique experiences or attributes, and start the process of bonding as a class.

2) Personal Reference Inventory (PRI)

The Personal Reference Inventory (PRI) that the authors have developed was adapted from Berko (1998) and it can be reconstituted with different questions as necessary, but the principle elements should be the same, which means that it is a set of questions geared at getting students to share information about themselves and to learn information about their peers in the class.

In essence, the PRI is a set of questions that are shared with students either before class or via the Zoom Chat Function during the class session. The instructor should be willing to give examples of his or her answers, in order to lessen any shyness the students might harbor. Once the instructor reviews the questions and offers his or her own answers, students should be informed that they will be randomly assigned to Breakout Rooms and, once in the rooms, they should work through the questions. Here they should offer their own answers and listen to the answers of their peers. One of the authors typically instructs his students to select at least one response from each breakout room member to share when the rooms are dissolved in, what is usually a ten-minute time-frame depending on the numbers of breakout rooms and the number of students assigned to each breakout room.

What follows is the list of questions used in a breakout room session at the start of the spring 2020 semester, which was April in Japan:

1. Who is your hero?
2. What irritates you the most about the world?
3. What do you consider to be your greatest accomplishment?
4. What celebrity would you like to change places with?
5. What would be the title of a book about your past?
6. What three words describe your abilities to get along with others?
7. Which part of the world would you like to visit?
8. Which food best describes your personality?
9. What is the most important discovery in life?
10. Who was/is your greatest influence?

The purpose of the PRI is to allow students to share about themselves and to learn about their fellow classmates. The questions can be adjusted or changed as needed. The concept is the same in all cases, as students benefit from learning about each other and developing a sense of community.

3) The 4 “What” Questions

The 4 “What” Questions exercise was developed by the authors and is a simple exercise. It is shorter than the PRI, but equal in many ways in that it elicits a response from students. The questions are either shared before class, in class via the shared screen function in Zoom, or in the Zoom chat function either as a shared file or simple cut and paste and sent via chat to Everyone.

1. What are three things that worry you as you start this course?
Worry 1:
Worry 2:
Worry 3:
2. What is your strength as a student or person?
3. What do you need to work on as a student or person?
4. What would you like to learn in this course?

Similar to the case of the PRI, it is helpful if the instructor shares his or her own responses to the question prompts prior to sending the students into their Zoom breakout rooms. The central purpose for this activity is to give the students a chance to bond or commiserate over shared concerns or worries. A secondary point is that this also allows for the possibility of the class peer group to act as support for their fellow students, helping to scaffold the course through a network of mutual support. Finally, the insights into the minds of students as they embark on the course also grants the instructor a window on how he or she might assist students. If a student is concerned about the homework load, for example, the instructor can take time, if not to diminish the workload, to explain to students why each assignment is essential to support their learning of the material. It can also allow instructors to know specific items that student might want to learn, or take away, from the course. This can be folded into the curriculum if it is not already there, or emphasized if it is already part of the study plan.

4) Uncommon Commonalities

Introduced by Barkley et al. (2004) "Uncommon Commonalities" invites students to learn about their peers and share information about themselves while searching, as the eponymous title of the task implies, for points of commonality among the team membership as well as locating points that are either unique to each member, or are uncommon.

These are the stages of the activity:

1. The instructor assigns groups of four to zoom breakout rooms.
2. Students are given the Uncommon Commonalities Assignment.
3. They are asked to choose a Zoom Breakout Room leader.
4. Groups get together and first list individual things about themselves that define them as people).
5. Groups then discuss each item, finding things that 1, 2, 3, or 4 of them have in common.
6. When the group finds an item that all of them have in common, they list that item under 4; when they find something that 3 of them have in common, the list that item under 3, etc.

The purpose of this activity is to help the students find compatriots among their classmates as well as giving them an opportunity to share things that are special about themselves. In the context of Japan, this exercise supports a cultural affinity for community identity.

Check-ins

Check-ins are classroom activities that can give a quick window into how students are feeling and how motivated they might be at any given moment. They also allow the instructor to diagnose how well students are grasping the topic or absorbing the

skill which is under consideration in the class. These simple, check-in activities can help to foster good rapport with students and increase the efficacy of teaching and learning. They can also help break down feelings of anonymity, and this is especially true in larger courses. It can also, as expressed by Angelo and Cross (1993), provide useful information about student learning and motivation with a minimum of time commitment. It can help students monitor their own motivation level and learning. Importantly, it can provide evidence that their instructor cares about them and about their learning. This applies directly to McGlynn's (2001) three points explained earlier regarding attitudes and things that students want from their instructors in the context of the classroom and their learning. The two activities covered in this section will be (1) Anxious/Happy and (2) Zoom Chat Polls and Quick Questions.

(1) Anxious/Happy

At the beginning of a course, or at times during the course such as prior to mid-term examinations, mid-term holidays or vacations, or other significant events, the authors ask two simple questions of students and then assign them to breakout rooms to discuss their answers. The first question is: "What is making you anxious right now?" Or, it might be worded as: "What is one thing in your life that makes you anxious?" The second question is: "What is making you happy right now?" Or again, the instructor might word it as: "What is one thing in your life that makes you happy?" The instructor can then put the students in their break out rooms. They are told to discuss their answers with their peers. Depending on time, the instructor might ask that when students return to the main room, they share one or both of their answers with the class. The instructor might also simply ask the students to articulate their response to him or her individually.

The purpose of the Anxious/Happy check in is simply to allow an instructor to do a very quick survey of student mental and physical wellbeing. It also gives students a chance to commiserate, celebrate, share, and offer support or empathy. It also honors McGlynn's (2001) finding that students want the teacher to know something about them as well as Wilkinson and Ansell's (1992) admonishment that the emotional climate of the classroom matters in relation to academic achievement. Also, knowing someone is interested in one's wellbeing is supportive in most contexts.

(2) Zoom Chat Polls and Quick Questions

Chat Polls

Instructors can make good use of the Zoom chat function by conducting quick chat polls. For example, after covering a topic, concept, or drill, an instructor can ask students to give a Likert scale directly, and anonymously to his or her classmates. Here, the classmates take a scale of 1 through 5, where 1 means that they understood everything clearly and

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need no revision and 5 means that they are unclear on the topic, concept, or drill, and desire a repeat. Numbers given between 1 and 5 can indicate the level of clarity across the class and indicate whether time should be spent on revision. It may also indicate if time is better served if the teacher spends time directly helping one or two students who indicated a significant level of confusion. This activity helps the instructor diagnose if any or all of the students have an understanding of the material under consideration or if they all (or simply just a few), need some help or intervention. As the “poll” is done in such a way that each student’s response is known only to the instructor, there is a protective element of anonymity.

Quick Questions

Developed with Angelo and Cross’s (1993) “Muddiest Point” in mind, this activity – Quick Questions, allows for students to indicate at the end of a lesson if they have any questions, or need any clarification of any points. This can be done as both a break out room activity or simply through the chat function. If it is done as a break out room activity it gives shy students an opportunity to speak with their peers about opaque points that they want clarified and to have the insulation of a group question addressed to the teacher rather than a solo question. In the context of teaching at a Japanese university, this often encourages questions in general due to the hesitancy that some students display when it comes to addressing questions to their teachers. Additionally, this exercise, if done in a break out room setting, often allows for students to share their understanding and answer each other’s questions.

If the exercise is done via the chat function, the instructor can direct the students to send their questions to everyone or just to the instructor. This possible anonymity might encourage the shyer students to reply with a question or ask for clarification of some point from the lesson. The purpose of Quick Questions is to give students structure and set time to make sure that they understand what is going on in the class. It provides them with ways to engage with the teacher and with their peers to make sure that class matters and materials are clearly understood.

Hallway Conversations

Prior to the pandemic, when university campuses were open, students would often arrive early to class and chat with each other or possibly stay after class to have a conversation with their peers. Likewise, they would meet in the school hallways and stop to talk. These social interactions should be viewed as important and necessary exercises in building a community and in encouraging a sense of belonging among students. The way that an instructor can allow students to still engage in these “Hallway Conversations” is simple. Let students know that the zoom class session will be opened fifteen minutes early and that the instructor will let students in the zoom session when they arrive, but will not have his or her earphones on

or laptop sound on so that students can simply speak with one another if they wish. Likewise, if possible, the instructor can keep the class session open in a similar fashion. This simply provides students with a venue to interact with their peers.

Conclusion

The authors have introduced four classic ice-breakers that have some pedigree in face-to-face classrooms but can be, and have been, utilized in the online teaching and learning environment: the *PechaKucha of Me*, the *Personal Reference Inventory*, *The 4 “What” Questions* and *Uncommon Commonalities*. These activities allow the students in an online course to begin and continue the process of community building and networking. Further, the authors have introduced the check-in activities of Anxious/Happy, Chat Polls, and Quick Questions to allow an instructor to check on students’ wellbeing and understanding. Lastly, the authors have offered ways that an instructor might allow students to have venues for interaction and conversation, giving them the online space to summon, and maintain a sense of community.

In conclusion, the authors would like to share the words of one of Akita International University’s vice presidents. At the end of the spring semester of 2020, after completing the first semester where all university instruction was online, he reminded faculty that, while the challenge of online teaching and learning was new to most faculty and to most students, in light of student responses compiled from the end-of-term student course surveys, students had, in his estimation, responded positively to the experience. In his own words:

We are all aware of how challenging it was to move our curriculum online. We know that the online teaching and learning environment was new to most of our faculty and almost all of our students. The results show that our AIU students generally valued our institutional and personal efforts in providing quality instruction in the international liberal arts through the use of online mediums. (Y. Kumagai, personal communication, August 27, 2020, para. 2)

Online learning can be a lonely undertaking. However, as the authors have shown, it does not need to be this way. It is important for all who are willingly, or forced by circumstances, to teach online realize that they have the agency to help students develop a sense of community, a feeling of camaraderie, and a sense of shared purpose within the online teaching and learning environment. Indeed, as has been explained, developing a sense of belonging and community in a classroom, should be seen as an essential task of the pedagogical process in the classroom, whether that classroom exists in a brick and mortar building or in the virtual world.

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WE RECOMMEND

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