

Fostering a Sense of Belonging and Connection in the Classroom: Addressing Student Engagement Post-COVID-19

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The COVID-19 pandemic created a variety of challenges in terms of teaching and learning in the university classroom. Post-COVID-19 instructors are being confronted with disengaged students who have experienced a significant disruption in their learning process. This article examines the ways in which instructors can enhance engagement in their courses to foster connection and belonging. Strategies to enhance connection in the classroom include committing to the use of active learning, inviting students to connect with their learning through the use of personal narratives, and ensuring that classes are accessible and inclusive to all students.

Keywords: student engagement, belonging, connection, personal narratives

Introduction

In Spring 2022, I taught an in-person crisis communication seminar course for graduating seniors. It was my second time teaching an in-person course since March 2020 when all of my courses were moved online for about a year, but my first time teaching a smaller class size (about 17 students) in-person since the pandemic began. At the beginning of the semester the campus had a mask mandate in place and we were in the middle of the cold, dreary winter months in Northeast Ohio. I noticed in the first few weeks of the semester that the class was a quiet group and not eager to engage in class discussions. At first, I attributed their subdued attitudes to the masks and the fact that it was still early in the semester. However, as the weeks advanced on and, despite my best efforts, their muted attitude remained, I began to wonder what was going on with my students.

Around mid-semester I read an article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* that discussed the “stunning” disengagement faculty were witnessing in their in-person classes all around the country (McMurtie, 2022). The article noted that many faculty were observing students who seemed zoned out in class, missing class, and missing assignments. I went into class the following day and began the class by introducing the article and its claims. I then asked the class if they felt like it was hard to be engaged in their learning. All of the students (at least all who were in attendance that day) unanimously agreed that they were struggling to stay engaged. They said that it was hard to find the motivation to be interested in their schoolwork two years into the pandemic or to find the motivation to even come to class. It was a frank conversation in which I reflected on about my own pandemic struggles and trauma. It also left me grappling with the question of how as a communication professor am I uniquely situated to address student disengagement in my classes.

The COVID-19 pandemic created immense challenges for university faculty, administrators, staff, and, of course, students. As we move forward into a post-pandemic future, many faculty members are navigating teaching students who have had a significant and prolonged disruption to their educational experience and social life. For instructors, post-COVID-19 provides an opportunity to reflect on and even reevaluate how we approach our courses (both in-person and online) and engage our students. Although fostering student engagement presented challenges pre-COVID-19, the pandemic left the majority of college students struggling with poorer mental health and well-being (Bonsakesen et al., 2022) and academic setbacks (Lederer et al., 2021). Today college instructors are dealing with the lasting impacts of the pandemic on student engagement, learning, and mental health. To help combat student disengagement, instructors should find ways to foster connection and belonging among our students who for so long have felt isolated and overburdened.

Feeling a sense of belonging and connection in the classroom has long been shown to help students succeed academically and personally (Battistich et al. 1991, 1995; Dwyer et al. 2004; Sidelinger et al., 2010, 2011; Sollitto et al., 2013). The COVID-19 pandemic severely disrupted the ability of faculty members to connect with students as many courses moved online, social distancing practices were instituted, and social life was altered significantly. There was a, perhaps, naïve assumption among university administrators and faculty that when life got “back to normal” without masks and online learning, that everything would be fine. However, post-pandemic we are finding that the scars and losses are not easily forgotten. A key challenge now is how do we rebuild connection and a sense of belonging among students who have had a disjointed educational experience for several years. Importantly, we must also consider how we can more purposefully foster connection and belonging among our students so that we are able to motivate and engage students to meet the challenges that higher education is facing writ large (e.g., declining enrollments). As such, the remainder of this essay will focus on specific strategies instructors can use to help engage students by fostering connection and belonging in their courses. Specifically, communication instructors can help create better connections in their courses by committing to the use of active learning, inviting students to connect with their learning through the use of personal narratives, and ensuring that classes are accessible and inclusive to all students.

Strategies for Engaging Students

When instructors notice disengagement in their courses, active learning is a tried and true technique that has been shown to help get students involved in the learning process (Meyers & Jones, 1993). Think-pair-share exercises, small group conversations, games, and class activities are all examples of active learning strategies. Through these active learning opportunities, instructors can facilitate interactions among students that can help them to feel more connected to their peers and their learning process. Active learning can be quickly integrated into classes to help engage students. For example, in my crisis communication seminar course, I added review games in preparation for the final exam to increase interactions and reinforce content. While many active learning strategies may work better in courses that meet face-to-face, there are ways to incorporate some active learning strategies in online courses as well. For example, online courses can include class polls, discussion forums, social media engagement, and games that can help students to feel connected to the course and the instructor even in an online setting.

Next, communication faculty are particularly well-situated to foster connection and belonging in our courses through providing students with opportunities to share personal narratives that connect with course content. Since many communication courses (e.g., interpersonal communication, family communication, health communication) examine issues innate to the human experience, communication instructors can create opportunities for students to share personal stories that are relevant to the content being discussed. Research on instructor narratives indicates that student learning can be enhanced when instructors share stories that are relevant to the content (Bolkan et al., 2020). Although the role of student narratives in shaping student learning and building classroom community remains an understudied area of instructional communication research, communication instructors are in a position to use both their own and students’ personal narratives as a pathway to foster connection and belonging in the classroom.

Instructors can use a variety of techniques to invite students to share their personal narratives that are connected to learning in the classroom. Journaling, reflection essays, class discussion prompts, and icebreakers are all opportunities to integrate student narratives into teaching. In Summer 2022, I taught a business communication course as part of a program designed to help recent high school graduates transition to college by focusing on enhancing student knowledge of study skills, academic culture, and campus life. Throughout this summer course, I provided my students with weekly check-in opportunities to share their goals for the course and the upcoming school year. I also encouraged students to share the steps they were taking to achieve their goals. I asked students why the goals they set were important to them and invited them to share their stories (e.g., struggles in high school, being a first-generation college student) so that they could see how their peers were facing the same challenges going into their first-year

of college. Through these conversations, which were admittedly time-consuming, I found that I was able to better understand what my students were going through, they were able to better understand their classmates, and they were clearly identifying the steps needed to achieve their goals in the current course and the upcoming semester. Thus, taking the time to invite and allow students to share personal narratives can help instructors to create a sense of community in their classroom.

Although instructors can actively work to boost students' sense of belonging and connection through in-class and virtual interactions, post-pandemic many instructors must now continue to work to be more aware of the many barriers students face in terms of accessibility and inclusion in college settings. Student disengagement may be a side effect of the pandemic, but instructors now have learned more about the realities of students who are often left behind because of socioeconomic challenges, learning disabilities, and racist, patriarchal structures that still exist in many institutions. Post-COVID-19 college instructors, especially those teaching online courses, need to find ways to make our courses more accessible and inclusive to students from all different backgrounds and abilities.

Examining our course delivery and the ways in which we can foster inclusion starts with inviting students to share their needs early in the semester to begin an open conversation about how instructors can help students have the best experience possible. For several years now I have used a "getting to know you" survey in the first week of class and a "check-in survey" at midterms to learn more about student needs and concerns. One of my survey questions asks students to share any "specific suggestions for the format or structure of this course" that could be incorporated to meet their learning needs. In past semesters, students have requested reminder emails for upcoming deadlines and information about tutoring services. When reviewing my "getting to know you" surveys for the Fall 2022 semester, I came across a student who noted that it was the first time an instructor had ever asked about their learning needs and expressed appreciation for even asking the question. Thus, while it is impossible to restructure our courses to meet the needs of every student, we can sometimes make minor augmentations to the course, which can increase accessibility and inclusivity.

Concluding Thoughts

The crisis communication literature teaches us that crises often create opportunities to reevaluate our practices (Coombs, 2019). Post-COVID-19 it is incredibly important for faculty members to acknowledge the challenges in teaching and learning that COVID-19 created and also recognize that there are opportunities to improve moving forward. If a major challenge on our campuses and in our classrooms is students feeling disengaged, then we have the opportunity to reimagine our courses in ways that enhance belonging and connection moving forward.

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