

Creating Community in the Virtual Classroom – Advice for Instructors and Students

This document summarizes and synthesizes lessons and advice presented during small group discussions with faculty, staff, and students during the “Creating Community in The Classroom” session held on November 3, 2020.

What We Learned

- First-year students are having trouble making connections. They can't rely on previous relationships formed on campus, so their academic courses are primary opportunity for making social connections and feeling part of a Grinnell community. A number of ideas from students and faculty for how to implement this in classes is below.
- Students worried about the lack of a consistent approach among instructors. The wide range of expectations for synchronous meeting times and workload creates some confusion regarding work/life balance. Students reported that some classes tried to maintain the academic rigor of a typical semester while other classes seemed to have been adapted to meet the new conditions of teaching and learning.
- Even as students become more comfortable with online learning tools, it remains difficult to keep up with coursework while meeting other obligations and navigating the challenges posed by COVID. One student noted that “the sympathy that professors showed in the Spring is now missing, but the virus is still here.”

Advice to Instructors:

- Informal and non-academic discussions are valued by students. Take time to chat at the start of class. Check in about life, resources, connections to classes in more structured ways. Students also appreciate informal conversations at the start of class about their experience with the class material. Some faculty are starting their synchronous sessions 10 min early to allow for informal opportunities to talk.
- Don't try to make the class serve the syllabus. The syllabus needs to serve the circumstances.
- Collaborating with students on the pace and content of the course helps build a sense of community and shared mission.
- Students begin to question the workload of a course when the professor can't keep up with the grading. Set reasonable expectations for yourself and your students.
- Be willing to accept that there will be side chatter during breakout sessions; this helps students support each other. Let students know that it's okay to take time to get to know each other. Allow breakout groups to extend beyond the class session.
- The chat feature can be a useful tool by allowing students to comment in real time and signal that they are listening. Simple affirmations of a comment or a question by classmates in the chat can encourage students to be active participants in discussion.
- Students noted it was often helpful to work with the same small group throughout the term. Working closely with a few classmates can be very productive.

- Establishing a sense of norms is very important. For example, set clear rules for how students should enter into classroom discussion.
- Technical difficulties can create a great time to “bond.” If the faculty member was temporarily disconnected or setting up technology, students are given unstructured and spontaneous opportunity to interact and that can be good for building relationships.
- Students find individual meetings with instructors to be very helpful, but some are hesitant to reach out or to attend virtual office hours. Find ways to check in individually with students.

Advice to Students

- Students play a significant role in welcoming each other to the classroom community. Invite other students to share their opinions, questions, and ideas. Set up a group chat or initiate study groups to support each other’s learning and social connections.
- Students should take the initiative to reach out to faculty and reciprocate the getting to know each other.
- Keep your video on during class whenever possible to help instructors and classmates respond to important visual cues.