

## Foster a Sense of Belonging to an Online Community

Research shows that feelings of isolation can be a major contributor to student attrition in online courses (Hart, 2012). These feelings are best addressed with practices that help to build a strong course community. This can be accomplished with assignments that require students to get acquainted with, respond to, and work with fellow learners (Nilson & Goodson, 2018).

For example, an introductory discussion forum can be designed to help students get to know each other at the very beginning of a course. Instructors can build upon this initial connection by creating pair and team assignments that require students to engage with each other regularly in real time. These types of personal interactions help students create a support network among their fellow learners (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011).

Below are examples of activities that help build a strong online course community.

Purpose	Activity
<p>Early in the course, provide an opportunity for students to meet each other, share their interests, discover their commonalities, and discuss their differences.</p>	<p><b>Introductory discussion forum: top five recommendations</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Post your preferred name, your year in school, and your major(s) and minor.</li> <li>2. Provide a list of your top five recommendations of things to do, to see, and to eat that you would give to someone visiting your campus town or your hometown for the first time.</li> <li>3. After you have posted, read through your peers' posts and reply to at least two people:               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. one person with whom you have a shared or similar recommendation and</li> <li>b. one person who shared something new to you that you would like to try.</li> </ol> </li> </ol>
<p>Provide early follow-up opportunities for students to engage one-on-one with another student.</p>	<p><b>Think-pair-share options</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Assign students to read an article or chapter or to watch a video related to the weekly module's content. You might provide prompts such as:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How does this resource connect to previously learned content in the course?</li> <li>• What more do you want to learn about this topic in terms of your own learning goals?</li> <li>• Write down two to three questions that you have about the assignment.</li> <li>• Write down two to three things you found most interesting about the assignment.</li> </ul> </li> <li>2. Create pairs of students, and have them share their written responses, insights, and questions via chat, by text, by video chat, or by phone. Ask that one student from each group post the insights or questions from their shared exchange to the full class discussion forum with a prompt such as:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What we wish we understood better.</li> <li>• What we thought was most interesting.</li> </ul> </li> <li>3. After all pairs have posted to the full class discussion forum, follow up on the discussion forum or use the learning management system's (LMS's) announcement tool to:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• summarize posts and highlight any themes,</li> <li>• clear up any points of confusion, and</li> <li>• connect the discussion to the next activity in the module.</li> </ul> </li> </ol>

<p>The purpose of this activity is to provide students with an opportunity to work together—apply the concepts and skills learned to a real-world scenario.</p>	<p><b>Small group activity: Real-world scenario discussions</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Create discussion groups of four to five students, and provide a private discussion forum for each small group. You may also encourage group members to use other communication tools that they may be more comfortable with to facilitate more open and free dialogue.</li> <li>2. Provide a real-world, problem-based scenario designed to have students apply what they have learned from course readings, minilectures, or problems.</li> <li>3. Ask students to deliberate various solutions to the scenario and come to an agreement on one solution to share with the full class.</li> <li>4. Assign one student from each small group to post their group’s solution to the full class’s discussion forum.</li> <li>5. Ask students to read and reply to at least two other group’s solutions.</li> <li>6. End the activity with a summary of the full class discussion, highlighting the similarities and the differences, and clarifying any misconceptions.</li> </ol> <p><b>NOTE:</b> You may consider assigning or letting students choose group roles. Below are some examples of roles that are helpful for effective small group discussions that require reporting back to the full class discussion forum.</p> <p><b>A facilitator or leader</b>—helps the group to begin interacting and moderates discussions, ensuring everyone is involved. A facilitator or leader makes sure that all of the discussion questions and prompts are addressed—and that the other group roles are being fulfilled.</p> <p><b>A reporter</b>— summarizes the small group’s discussion and posts it to the full class discussion forum.</p> <p><b>A critic</b>—raises counterarguments and/or introduces alternative viewpoints.</p> <p><b>A checker</b>—confirms that required readings or resources are being used in discussions and that they are cited correctly in the group’s summary post.</p>
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