

Together, Apart: Creating Meaningful Learning Community Connections in the HyFlex
Classroom

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College learning communities are considered to be beneficial to the educational experience. Among the benefits of offering learning community experiences is the link to enhanced student engagement as well as retention (Kern & Kingsbury, 2019; Piercey & Cullen, 2017). Fostering a strong sense of community, they offer students the chance to form meaningful connections among one another while progressing through the curricula required for their respective degrees. Encouraging active learning and placing a notable emphasis on collaboration, participation in learning communities allows for students to engage with one another frequently and routinely, while contributing symbiotically to the learning community environment.

While learning communities typically interact through in-person courses, gatherings, and events, the global COVID-19 pandemic has complicated the in-person experience. In an effort to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, many universities have transitioned from in-person attendance to hybrid, HyFlex (hybrid-flexible), or distance learning models. Purdue University's Krannert School of Management is one such example, offering HyFlex and distance learning courses.

In particular, the Introduction to Management and Information Strategies course, taught by assistant professors from the Parrish Library of Management and Economics, has been reimaged as a HyFlex course. The course is attended by freshman students from the Larsen Leaders Academy, a learning community that "offers high achieving business students a community of like-minded peers and professionals dedicated to fostering their natural aptitudes and encouraging their success" (Purdue University, 2020, para. 3). Students participate by attending class in-person once a week and completing asynchronous learning activities via the Brightspace learning management platform. Alternatively, other students have elected to take the course entirely online, completing course assignments and activities asynchronously through Brightspace and viewing lectures captured via the BoilerCast lecture service, powered by Kaltura Classroom.

In the HyFlex learning community classroom, establishing a sense of community and connection is all the more crucial. Students will be interacting with fellow members of their

learning community regularly, offering them the chance to formulate relationships early on, ideally establishing a network of fellow scholars and a support system as they advance through their academic careers. The limitations and complications of students in different geographic locations and time zones calls for additional creativity in terms of engagement, for which the asynchronous learning activities are particularly helpful.

One of the more practical ways of offering asynchronous opportunities for engagement is the use of discussion boards. From formal, assessed questions to the inclusion of more informal discussion questions, they offer room for students to share their thoughts and to connect with one another. Early in the course, the instructors offered opportunities for students to post about their backgrounds and interests as well as their expectations for the course. As students contributed their postings as well as photographs to portray a more holistic portrait of themselves as learners and individuals, the discussion thread became fertile ground for students to comment upon others' postings, react to the content shared, and begin establishing connections. In particular, international students participating in the course from their native countries were especially engaged in the discussions, connecting with their classmates through this more informal thread.

Likewise, instructor-student relationships could also be strengthened through the use of discussion boards as well as video conferencing tools. The instructors of the course offered an "Ask Me Anything" (AMA) thread, in which students could pose questions to the instructors regarding the course as well as more informal questions, such as how they became interested in the fields of business and librarianship. In an effort to offer a more organic approach to learning more about students, the instructors also held virtual "coffee talks" or informal office hours via Zoom, allowing students to virtually interact with one another as well as the with the instructors.

Furthermore, one of the strongest tools for engagement and more formalized approaches to developing connections was the opportunity for students to participate in virtual teams on several occasions throughout the course. All students were assigned to a team and navigated ideal communication tools and meeting times among one another in order to complete the series of group challenges assigned to them. Paralleling the importance of effective participation in virtual teams during the pandemic in numerous industries, students were expected to address their assigned challenges as part of a virtual team, research and analyze data, and present their findings digitally. While doing so, students were able to connect with learning community classmates beyond the confines of the classroom as well as their geographic locations.

Overall, the pandemic has motivated the adoption of a wide variety of approaches in an effort to offer opportunities for connection and engagement in the academic setting. With in-person meetings not being ideal, the need to create or capture a sense of community and meaningful relationships is all the more important. Virtual options for connection and engagement are ideal tools to implement in the HyFlex classroom and strengthen student skillsets regarding their participation and communication abilities on in-person or virtual teams.

References

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