



## **Shuffle the Deck: Establishing a Sense of Belonging**

Being a teacher explains that there is something magical about being physically in a classroom with your students. A traditional classroom is a place where you quickly get to know each other. It seems easy to remember someone's smile or look of eager curiosity as they sat among students. In contrast, it is more challenging when 25 students literally appear to be the size of a postage stamp on our 5×5 virtual classroom grid! Since many of us have moved to online teaching, the question is how to bridge that gap and come up with a few ideas.

To provide a sense of belonging in distance learning classes, these are a few things that seem to work out and that you may wish to try to help build a sense of community:

### **An early email greeting**

Before the semester begins, send out an announcement asking that they each email you (using your school email address) about one of their interests and strength and weakness they may have regarding your class. This helps you get to know them and provides a quick link to their email for future correspondences. Here, they might write something personal that could impact their performance in the classroom, such as medical conditions (one of my students currently has epilepsy, so she may miss class due to her seizures) or accommodations they may need. If a student is hearing impaired, I will make certain that any pictures I include on handouts have specific descriptions that may be stated aloud by a digital reader. This allows for you

to correspond before you first meet. Write each student's name at the top of a separate index card (that they will never see) and jot down a few notes about the students on the front of the card.

## **Ensuring everyone knows everyone**

During the first week of class in our discussion board, I have students write about themselves. I want my classroom to be a place like the television show *Cheers*' song, "Where Everybody Knows Your Name." First, provide your own response as a model and have each student provide their own response—request that everyone read all of them. I ask, "Please tell us some information about yourself. Tell us what makes you unique. For example, what is a hobby or interest that you have? Where did you attend high school? What have you been doing during the pandemic that gives you hope? Please answer with a brief paragraph. Thank you!" Here you have an opportunity to get to know everyone. While reading these responses, you may add to the index card notes and begin matching faces with students' attributes.

## **Spending time together during one-on-one conferences**

Prior to the first half of the semester, if possible, set a goal to meet with all your students individually during one-on-one mandatory conferences. During the second day of classes, post a questionnaire that asks specific questions about your class that they must respond to prior to your meeting. Be prepared to learn about your students' lives outside of the class. Right before each conference, I review the corresponding card to help me connect with each student. During our talk, I have often been astounded by what I have learned about my students and know that because of classroom time constraints, I may never have known these things if we had not met during this conference. One of my student's grandfather's name is on a plaque in the town next to me because he was a hero during WWII. Another student risked his life to come to the United States. I reserve about 25 minutes for them to read aloud their answers from the questionnaire, and we also spend time talking about their interests.

## **Shuffle the deck**

The index cards are also useful tools for calling on students randomly. When you need someone to respond to one of your questions and all you hear is silence, shuffle the deck and draw a name. Whether you want someone to be



the first to present or you request someone to elaborate on what another student has just said, just shuffle the deck. Since they do not know who will be called upon, they must listen and be ready to share ideas. This promotes engagement and fairness since no one, including the instructor, knows who will be called on.

## **Using the back of the card for more personal information**

As you move through the semester, use the back of the cards to write down any concerns you may have about student performances. This may include dates in which you have emailed a student regarding poor attendance or notes about a student's lack of progress. You may wish to jot down the names of any resources you have suggested or contacted, such as the student's advisor. In contrast, you can also use the back of the index card to jot down positive things, such as the fact that a student has made a good effort to discuss ideas or has shared a unique response. When I notice that a student has gone above and beyond the call of classroom duty a few times, I send out what we call "Kudos" to the students (this is also viewed by their advisors). Using the backside of the card ensures that these notes remain private and are easy for you to see.

All in all, spending extra time corresponding online, meeting in conferences, and using index cards has created a recipe for improving engagement in my classes. It has helped to make distance learning, well, less distant!

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