Using Small Group Check-ins to Maximize Peer Engagement and Support Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in Online Courses

Love it or hate it, group work has its place in online higher education. Group projects provide opportunities and positive outcomes for students to take leadership roles, learn personal accountability and project management skills, network with peers, negotiate roles and workload, and more.

On the other side, especially when courses are online, the "people" factor can sometimes interfere with the positive outcomes of group projects: responsible students who take on all the work, lurkers who do not contribute but who "earn" the same grade, members who drop a course mid-project, conflict over topics and/or roles, schedules that do not allow for synchronous group meetings, and the list goes on. Some instructors avoid group work altogether in online courses because of these "people" factors and because too many students are untrained in group work skills. It seems too daunting to train students and still cover content online.

Yet, online students want more social and emotional connections with their peers, their instructors, and their content. But, can we provide these connections in online courses without going the route of group projects, especially in courses with large enrollments?

Let's think about how small groups *can* work for students.

What if we take away high stakes group projects and focus on the power of small groups?

Targeted, small group check-ins can provide the means for peer engagement and for relevant social and emotional learning, both of which contribute to student retention and success. Small group check-ins centered on social and emotional learning (SEL) activities can occur throughout the semester and in multiple modalities, synchronous online meetings or asynchronous tools, and meet diverse needs and goals.

SEL scholars Stocker and Gallagher define SEL as "the development of information, mindsets, and skills that allow individuals to identify and manage their emotions, enhance their awareness of and empathy for others, and establish and work toward personal goals" (2019, p.25). Stocker and Gallagher frame SEL activities using the five components of Collaboration for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL): Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Responsible Decision Making, Social Awareness, and Relationship Skills (2019, p.25). Introducing SEL in the course syllabus and embedding it in course objectives and content helps students to see its value and feel prepared for check-ins.

To keep SEL check-ins relevant and out of the realm of "busy work," instructors can align these activities with course-level learning objectives, course content, and course assessments. Scholar Ashley Taplin promotes presenting SEL activities with intention, "sharing with our students the why behind SEL content, just as we do with academic content. Explaining why we check in, why we ask students to pair up, or why we work through different problem-solving strategies is core to meaningful and successful SEL" (2021). Instructors can choose to assign points to incentivize student participation, but creating activities that are relevant and that scaffold course content/assessments might be enough.

What activities are relevant for on-going SEL check-in meetings?

First and foremost, small group "first week" check-ins are vital for students to feel connected and to build meaningful relationships with peers. While whole group course introductions are important tools for community building, they can also feel intimidating and students can feel let down if this introduction is their opportunity for peer interaction. After the big introduction, scheduling small group check-ins right away in the first week facilitates closer connections and community building on a smaller scale. To be intentional about SEL, this initial check-in should include an introduction to SEL, it's place in the course, and the "why" for the specific check-in (Taplin, 2021). It's important that the first and all following check-ins include specific prompts and "why" statements, and Taplin provides a multitude of helpful examples.

Possible examples for early-in-the-semester check-in groups:

1. Reintroduce themselves in the smaller group
2. Brainstorm a small group guide for communicating, listening, and interacting to maintain respect, empathy, and learning. Ask that they take notes and keep this for reference
3. Share their challenges and successes in the first week
4. Share what they know or their questions about campus or larger community resources—where to find comfort food, student organizations, institutions for meeting religious or social needs
5. Share their goals for reading, labs, or homework for their different courses
6. Share their processes for conducting research and/or writing papers
7. Share midterm changes in goals and managing time
8. Share learning experiences
9. Share midterm challenges and successes
10. Share preparation strategies for final exams and final projects

How do check-ins work in terms of tools?

Small group check-ins can work for both synchronous and asynchronous online modalities. For those already holding synchronous online meeting platform sessions, breakout rooms are perfect. For those courses that are totally asynchronous, students can conduct small groups in real time or not real time (NRT). They can also use a multitude of tools, including: Blackboard, Brightspace, or Canvas group tools, subgroups in VoiceThread, Google Meet or Spaces, and other Google Suite tools, Zoom, GoToMeeting, etc. Instructors might let students decide on the tools to use or they might set up small group spaces in the LMS.

Should check-ins be graded and how should they be assessed?

If check-ins for small groups are relevant and tied to course objectives in some way, it makes sense to assign low-stakes points. In their "A Guide to Incorporating Social-Emotional Learning in the College Classroom," Gallagher and Stocker provided students activity handouts with instructions and had students submit these via their LMS (2018, pp. 13-15). Because these check-ins are peer engagement-focused, Gallagher and Stocker did not grade content and opted for a variation of complete/incomplete and weighted the SEL activities at 5% of the total grade (2018, pp. 15-16). In this way, students had point incentives for participating in SEL activities, but they retained agency in regard to how they participated. Small group check-ins should be "safe" for social and emotional learning, keeping them low-stakes, student-centered, and student-mediated is probably the best route.

Small group SEL check-ins provide students with relevant and low-stakes opportunities for meaningful peer engagement, community building, and social and emotional learning, all of which can benefit student retention and success.