



# Building Community Online

Learning & Teaching Commons  
Fall 2023 Resource Packet

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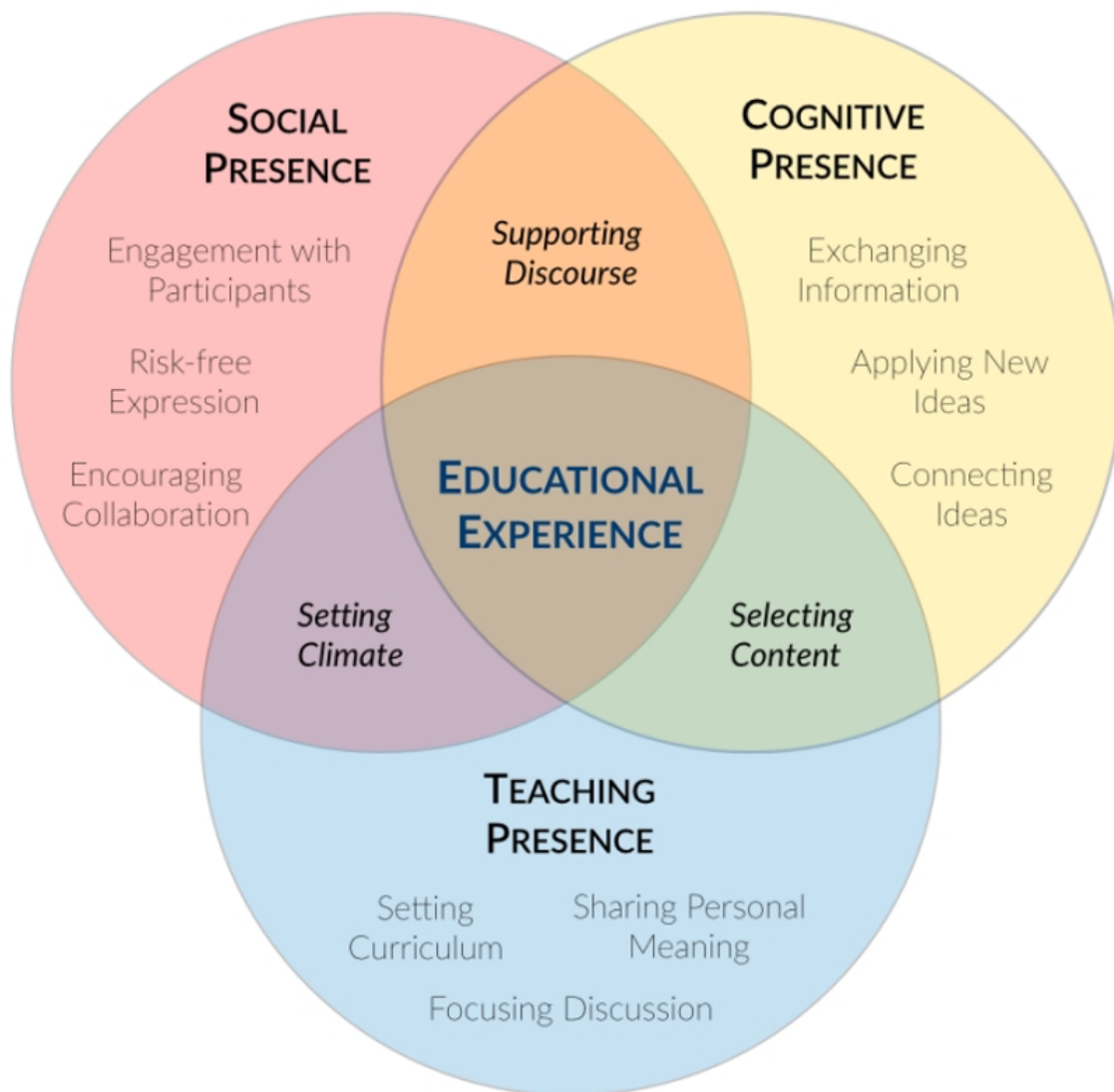
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## The Community of Inquiry Model

The Community of Inquiry model is a widely used framework for thinking about engagement in online courses. The article [Strategies for Creating a Community of Inquiry through Online Asynchronous Discussions](#) gets into many strategies for engagement, explaining the how and why of improving particular practices. It's worth a skim. Practices like providing prompt but modest feedback, peer facilitation, protocol discussion prompts, and providing audio feedback, were found to support multiple presences in a review of the literature.

deNoyelles, A., Zydney, J. M., & Chen, B. (2014). Strategies for Creating a Community of Inquiry through Online Asynchronous Discussions. *MERLOT Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, 10(1).

## The Community of Inquiry Model



Adapted from Garrison, D.R., Anderson, T., Archer, W. (1999) Critical inquiry in a text-based environment: Computer conferencing in higher education. *The Internet and Higher Education* 2(2), 87-105

## Barriers to Engagement Online

To meet the challenge of creating community online, it behooves us to first attend to what can get in our way. Below is a list of key barriers to engagement online, organized into three areas.

**Social**—infrequent interaction, or purely text-based interaction lead to feelings of isolation or can lead to missing or misinterpreted social cues.

What to do:

- Post welcome video with course expectations
- Invite student intro messages, icebreakers
- Use announcements, discussions, and email to make your presence felt
- Teamwork and collaborative assignments
- More ideas about building instructor presence:  
<https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/online-education/creating-a-sense-of-instructor-presence-in-the-online-classroom/>

**Administrative**—unclear expectations, lack of feedback, limited availability of instructor, inconsistent navigation, unnecessary or complicated technology

What to do:

- Provide students with effective feedback
- Provide clear instructions, rubrics and reminders in advance
- Responsive communication from faculty (check that email all the time!)
- Provide technical resources and tutorial videos

**Motivational**—Repetitive activities or lack of varied resources; misconception that online courses are easier; lack self-directed learning skills.

What to do:

- Chunk content
- Incorporate stimulating multimedia content
- Promote authentic learning with connections to the real world
- Provide students with choice in assignments

The article [The New Rules of Engagement](#) has some good ideas about working with our students to co-create rules of the road for engaging each other in online class environments. It profiles several faculty's specific approaches in their classes, rather than providing a laundry list of general ideas. An excerpt:

[John LaMaster] builds community through small but meaningful gestures. At the start of each class, which is taught in a hybrid setup, he shares an interactive online chart to take attendance, in which every student puts their name on a "seat." The chart signals that he considers them all part of the classroom, whether they're in person or online.

He also plays music at the beginning of each session to relax the students. When studying linear functions, for example, they were greeted with Johnny Cash's "I Walk the Line." For a lesson on domain and range, he played Gene Autry's "Home on the Range."

He frequently asks what's working and what isn't. Once, he says, a student asked why he gave them repeated chances to redo homework problems but was stricter with quizzes. After he explained that he was trying to prepare them for what it would be like to take their exams, students came around. "Eyes were open to, 'Oh, he's not doing this to be a jerk, he's doing this to help me learn,'" LaMaster says. "I'm so delighted that they can put that out there, and I can help them be part of understanding the learning process."

[James Lang] notes that people give their attention to those who pay attention to them. So, call on students. Bring up something they wrote on a discussion board or in an essay, and ask others to respond. Be clear about why you think engagement is important, and reward students for participating in activities in which they're interacting with others.

"There's nothing radical here," he says of his strategies. The shift is more in the professor's mind-set. "Stop thinking so much about trying to eliminate distraction," he says. "Instead, you want to think about how to support and sustain attention."

McMurtrie, B. (2020). The New Rules of Engagement. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.  
<https://chronicle.com/article/the-new-rules-of-engagement>

## Using Our Lines of Communication

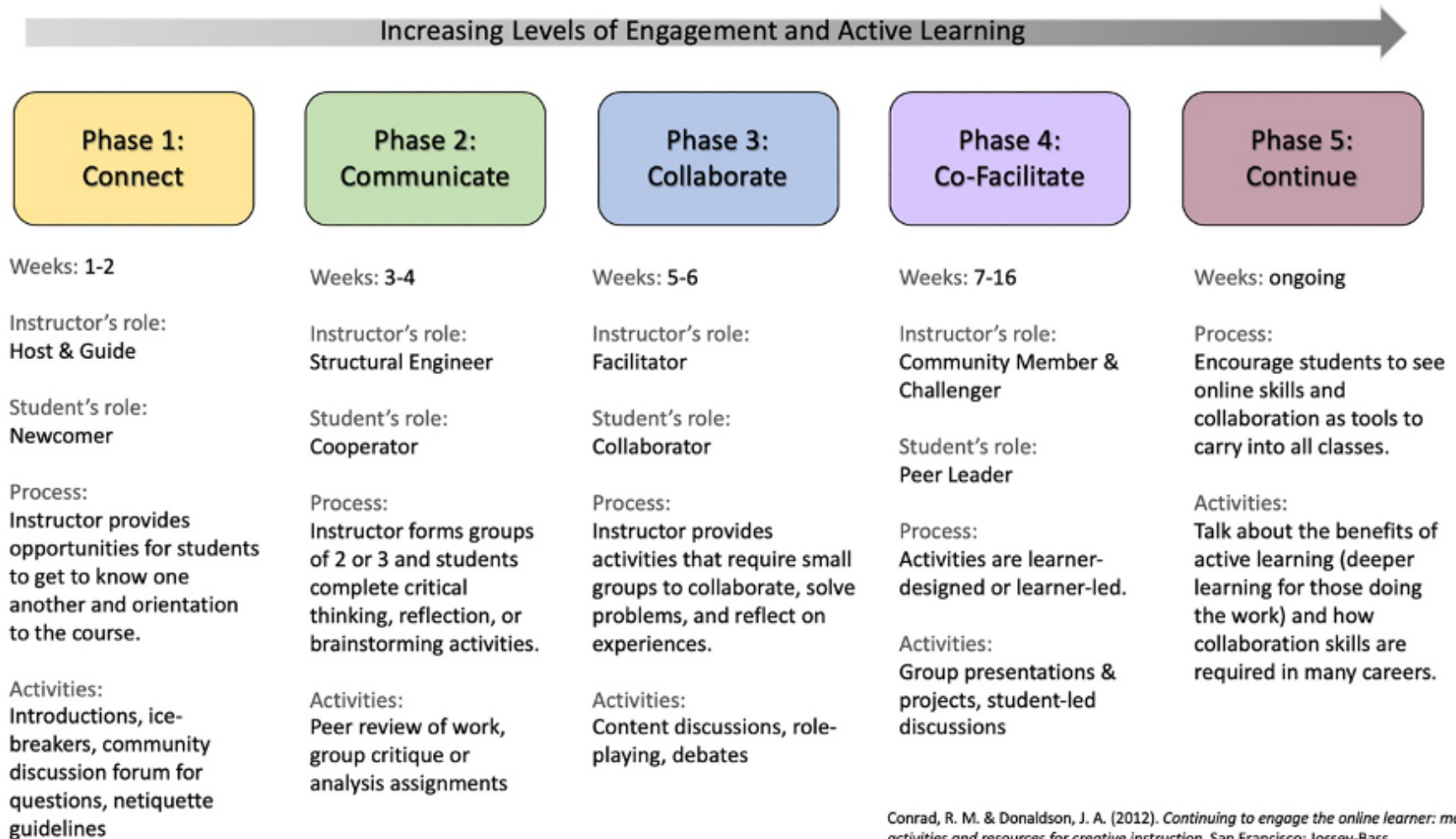
With teaching online we can feel like we lose the energy of the in-person classroom, but we gain some communication advantages—if we use them. We can use the chat function in Zoom, shared documents, discussion boards, polls and other platforms to build in small but frequent ways of taking the pulse of the whole group. One way to do this that works well online are "minute papers," in which students jot down a metacognitive reflection on their learning in response to questions like "What was the most important thing you learned during this session?" or "What do you still not understand?" or "What has most piqued your curiosity?" or "the muddiest point," in which students journal briefly on a concept that remains most confusing or unclear to them." These are often used to end a class or even as after-class surveys, but they work quite well at the beginning of class or in the middle of a session to get everyone checking in. And they don't have to be just for your eyes—have students post minute papers in the chat, or anonymously on a shared document. Students can use an editing or commenting function to pose responses or questions to each other's statements. Or, have them post their responses on a whiteboard in Zoom or Microsoft teams, and they can then work together to arrange comments into themes or put them into conversation with each other.

Here are some other engagement moves to consider:

<https://bokcenter.harvard.edu/key-moves-online>

## Increasing Levels of Engagement Over Time

This is a handy-dandy table for thinking through engaging students over the arch of group development during a quarter. It suggests specific instructor and student actions to take advantage of each phase of engagement and to help build toward the next.



Conrad, R. M. & Donaldson, J. A. (2012). *Continuing to engage the online learner: more activities and resources for creative instruction*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

## Using Positive Psychology for Learning Communities

I have found the Broaden-and-Build Theory of positive emotions, developed by Barbara Fredrickson over the past few decades, to be a helpful guide when I'm thinking about how to open a class session or prepare students to tackle a particular kind of activity together, in class or even asynchronously. Fredrickson and colleagues (I was briefly one of those, as an undergraduate research assistant many years ago) have demonstrated something that perhaps we know intuitively: the mood we're in changes the way we think and act. This isn't news; and yet how often do we, as teachers, make moves to impact the collective emotion of our students to set ourselves up as a group to work and learn together most effectively?

The basic gist of the theory is that positive emotions "widen the array of thoughts, action urges, and percepts that spontaneously come to mind." A favorite piece of art may inspire awe, whatever is going on in nature right now might bring serenity, something unexpected or funny amuses us... And these emotional experiences make us more observant, more flexible, more open or more holistic in our thinking.

The way this works—and why it works, evolutionarily speaking—is that the expansive form of positive emotions work to catalyze the development of resources in the form of skills and capacities, placing people on positive growth trajectories. Accessing creativity, curiosity, and experimentation is great for survival. Ample research has shown that people who experience and express positive emotions more frequently than others are more resilient, resourceful, socially connected, and more likely to function at optimal levels.

The power of the theory, to me, is in the details. Take a look at the chart below, thinking about what kind of task or conversation you want to invite students into for a particular session or period of study. I look through the 'Thought-action tendency' column to find the kind of action I think suits the task at hand, or I look through the 'Resources accrued' column for the kind of skills or experience I hope the students will develop. Then, I find the correlating emotion for that tendency or resource, and I design an icebreaker activity that might help prime that emotion. For example, if we're about to engage in experiential learning, I want an icebreaker that puts students in touch with their joy. I might have them pair off and tell each other about a game they played as children. If we're embarking on knowledge development, I want to prime interest. This might be done with a simple pre-quiz on the subject (using the poll feature in Zoom).

This isn't about manipulating students or forcing them into a particular mood. A simple icebreaker isn't magic; it can't erase someone's anger or cure sadness. But it will have an impact on many students, in the moment, and that might help a group come together in an experience more effectively than if we didn't prime them for it emotionally.

**Table 1.1** Ten representative positive emotions

Emotion label	Appraisal theme	Thought-action tendency	Resources accrued	Core trio in mDES item
Joy	Safe, familiar unexpectedly good	Play, get involved	Skills gained via experiential learning	Joyful, glad, or happy
Gratitude	Receive a gift or benefit	Creative urge to be prosocial	Skills for showing care, loyalty, social bonds	Grateful, appreciative, or thankful
Serenity (a.k.a., contentment)	Safe, familiar, low effort	Savor and integrate	New priorities, new views of self	Serene, content, or peaceful
Interest	Safe, novel	Explore, learn	Knowledge	Interested, alert, or curious
Hope	Fearing the worst, yearning for better	Plan for a better future	Resilience, optimism	Hopeful, optimistic, or encouraged
Pride	Socially valued achievement	Dream big	Achievement motivation	Proud, confident, or self-assured
Amusement	Nonserious social incongruity	Share joviality, laugh	Social bonds	Amused, fun-loving, or silly
Inspiration	Witness human excellence	Strive toward own higher ground	Motivation for personal growth	Inspired, uplifted, or elevated
Awe	Encounter beauty or goodness on a grand scale	Absorb and accommodate	New worldviews	Awe, wonder, amazement
Love	Any/all of the above in an interpersonal connection	Any/all of the above, with mutual care	Any/all of the above, especially social bonds	Love, closeness, or trust

## A Pitch for Audio

While many of us use video in online classes, either as teaching material or as a way of increasing our teaching presence through video announcements and such, not as many of us have fully explored the potential of audio. In this recent episode of Lecture Breakers (don't be turned off by the title; this is a fantastic, super practical podcast), Barbi Honeycutt waxes poetic about why audio can bring a sense of closeness in our classes, and many ideas for ways of using it. [Lecture Breakers Episode 146: Audio Ideas! 10 Creative Ways to Use Audio in Your Courses](#)

# Build a Resilient Learning Community

By Julia Metzger via [Teaching at Evergreen](#)

## ***Be a good model***

There are a number of ways you can model respectful, personalized engagement in your remote teaching environment. Upload a photo and provide instructions for students to do the same. Personalize your Canvas site wherever you are able by using original video announcements, overviews, and lectures. Establish the tone of the community through class correspondence, discussion board replies, and assessment feedback. Often, this means offering appropriate details about your own life (photos of your pets, recipes for all the canned food you just bought). Encouraging students to reach out to classmates with similar life circumstances can be a powerful first step to building peer-to-peer relationships. And modeling how to carefully read one another's discussion posts and follow up with additional probing questions can support students' willingness to share their thoughts.

## ***Create a communication plan***

Communication is essential to any relationship, and before you ask students to put themselves out there, you have to show them that it's safe to do so. Before the start of a semester, create a calendar of when you will reach out to each student individually. After the first week, reintroduce yourself (especially if this is a new course or program) and let them know how you're making yourself available to them -- virtual office hours, etc. Be explicit about your credit policy and your willingness to accommodate students who may be struggling or in crisis. The middle of the quarter is a great time for confidence-boosting and letting students know how they're doing; they will be particularly anxious about how you are evaluating their work in this context.

## ***Encourage interaction***

Classroom interactions happen by proximity in the brick-and-mortar classroom, but in the online classroom, you have to be more deliberate about how student-student and student-faculty exchanges are set up. Online classrooms can feel all encompassing, lacking the traditional space and time borders that demarcate the classroom. Accordingly, one frequent suggestion is to create spaces that are not explicitly academic, where students can talk about mutual aid and common interests. One faculty calls these more informal social spaces "coffee shops"; giving spaces unique names can help create a sense of communal identity. As in face to face instruction, collaborative assignments can also help students build community with one another.

## ***Bring the outside in***

Online learning environments can feel compartmentalized and isolated from the wider campus community and the world as a whole. Staff are working hard to sustain extra-curricular culture, and you can encourage students to attend these virtual events as well as



letting them know how they can access student support services. You can also assign attendance at webinars and live-streaming events for credit. Or you can watch a virtual event together and discuss it afterwards. Deliberately creating social moments like these acknowledges the fundamentally collective aspect of education.

Spending time up front on helping students connect with one another and with you will help them stay engaged throughout the quarter.

- Provide as many opportunities as possible for students to connect with each other, both via structured class activities and via more informal unstructured class time.
- You may want to consider offering a Q&A discussion thread that is mostly run by students (but where you pop in occasionally) where they can ask each other questions related to the program, or a forum for students to share their interests and resources.
- Consider a Welcome discussion thread that invites students to post a video sharing their name, pronouns, and some fun facts about themselves.
- Another option is to invite students to synchronous sessions where you are not attempting to cover any content—perhaps a kind of study hall, where students can ask you questions as they come up, or an informal lunchtime check in. If you can help them facilitate setting the time, so much the better—students are often overwhelmed at taking class from you or asking other for post-class time to schedule—even if they would benefit from the opportunity you suggest.
- As you know, the more you invite students to share information about themselves, the more carefully you need to set up guidelines for this kind of sharing. Having a clear policy in place for acceptable language and including some kind of netiquette statement can help with this. Here is one [resource for netiquette statements](#).

### Resources for Digging Deeper

Manturuk, K. (2018, October 19). [Online Discussion Forums Create Sense of Community in Online Learning](#). Duke Learning Innovation.

Wehler, M. (2018, July 11). [Five Ways to Build Community in Online Classrooms](#). Faculty Focus: Higher Ed Teaching Strategies from Magna Publications.

[Community-Building Online](#) is a toolkit of Open Resources from @OneHEGlobal & @Unboundeq for building community in online spaces.