

## How to Build Online Social Presence: Strategies for Community Building

**Trish Harvey**

Hamline University, United States

**Karen Moroz**

Hamline University, United States

**Jennifer Carlson**

Hamline University, United States

**Abstract:** With an increase in Synchronous online learning, there is a shift in how current teaching practices are impacted and what is important to students and student learning. Synchronous teaching is not taking face-to-face strategies online, instead, it requires intentional design and thoughtful planning. To that end, this paper discusses pedagogical strategies for designing online spaces that create, cultivate and sustain social presence. Literature and research that support the connection between social presence and student learning will be shared, including the presenters' recently published text *Effective Learning Environments in Higher Education Online Settings: Establishing Social Presence*. The framework presented in this text separates Social presence into three themes: social climate, membership in a learning community, and students feeling real. In this paper, authors elaborate on how instructors can build community in online courses.

**Keywords:** Social Presence, Synchronous Online Learning, Online Teaching Strategies

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### Introduction

With an increase in synchronous online learning, current teaching practices are shifting and what is important to students and student learning is being impacted. Synchronous teaching is not taking face-to-face strategies online. Instead, it requires intentional design and thoughtful planning with online teaching and learning specifically in mind. To that end, this paper discusses pedagogical strategies for designing online spaces that create, cultivate and sustain social presence. Literature and research that support the connection between social presence and student learning will be shared, including the researchers' recently published text *Effective Learning Environments in Higher Education Online Settings: Establishing Social Presence* (Moroz, Harvey & Carlson, 2022). The framework presented separates social presence into three themes: social climate,

membership in a learning community, and students “feeling real”. In this paper, the researchers elaborate on how instructors can build community in online courses, specifically during synchronous sessions.

An advantage of synchronous online learning environments is the ability to bring together students from different parts of the country and even from around the world. This enhances a course through a diversity of voices and experiences, as these students bring a variety of perspectives and experiences and can add richness to course discussions. The wide array of locations represented, however, does “require a bit more planning and preparation due to time zone differences, but the trade-off for these diverse student perspectives is worth the effort” (Moroz, Harvey, & Carlson, 2022, p. 34).

Also worth the effort is the classroom research, trial-and-error, and the sharing of ideas that has provided a better understanding of what is effective. The most significant finding is that online sessions are more productive in creating social presence when they are designed with purpose and accountability. Even the element of *time* is spent differently online than face-to-face; for example, moving students to groups online is the click of a button vs. physically moving when in-person. These are considerations that the synchronous online teacher must take into account.

With accountability and purpose in mind, instructors are encouraged to create online synchronous courses with a focus on creating community, allowing students to put a face with a name and make genuine connections with one another in the context of learning. Establishing this space and creating these connections helps students take an interest in each other’s work. It also has the potential to build long-term collegial relationships. Well-designed synchronous meetings help students feel less “anonymous” and the immediate feedback from their peers makes them “feel like a real person” (Moroz, Harvey, & Carlson, 2022, p. 41). An advantage of including synchronous sessions is the ability to *see* other students and better understand tone and context. When students are able to hear someone else’s thoughts verbalized, it helps strengthen their understanding of the content. And online synchronous meetings allow for real-life interruptions by pets, family members, or others, which increases the sense of “feeling real”.

In this paper, the researchers identify how social presence impacts student learning and describe pedagogical strategies for designing online synchronous spaces that create, cultivate and sustain social presence. Authentic examples and tools to use in synchronous online teaching environments to increase social presence are shared. Additionally, a framework is shared that depicts what to consider when intentionally creating spaces that foster social presence in online classes.

## **Literature Review**

The definition of social presence comes from the work of Gunawardena and Zittle (1997), who established that when people connect with others in new social situations, they create social presence or a degree of interpersonal contact. Classrooms provide the context for new social situations between learners.

Garrison et al. (1999) connected this idea to learning and identified social presence as the ability of learners to project themselves socially and emotionally as real people in a learning community. “Real” in this context denotes authenticity, vulnerability and connectivity. Aragon (2003) argued that social presence was “to create a level of comfort” (p. 60) between people and/or between students.

Garrison (1997) asserted that social presence is measured in “the degree to which participants are able to project themselves affectively within the medium” (p. 6). Therefore, the medium of the online synchronous environment needs to establish the conditions for students to be authentic, vulnerable and connected.

Alanazi (2013) reminded us that “...involvement is crucial to students’ success, whether it is through a feeling of ease with the instructor or classmates...students also need to be invested in the course content. These educational processes occur through an emotional connection” (p. 32). This emotional connection contributes to the sense of community which then contributes to emotional connection. The result is strengthened social presence, engagement, feeling real, and increased learning.

## Methods

The Social Presence Framework (Moroz, Harvey & Carlson, 2022) (see Figure 1) identifies the effective and affective factors within the learning environment which influence the degree of social presence. *Course Design* includes the work that faculty put into planning, creating and teaching in the synchronous environment. The instructor's role is paramount in establishing social presence. Intentional actions, for example, making presentation slides available to students prior to class, is a practice that can help students feel organized and more focused. The instructor should also set the precedent early in the synchronous class of joining the synchronous group meetings, if only for a quick 30-second “pop-in”. This is similar to how an instructor circulates in an in-person classroom and is recommended to strengthen that sense of instructor presence and building community.

*Course Community Members* are the participants, including instructors and students. These are the actors at play; everyone has a role in establishing the sense of community. In this framework, *Social Presence* is measured by three factors: the social climate of the course, the level of membership students feel in the learning community, and the degree to which students feel “real”.

Based on the data the researchers collected related to social presence, the researchers developed six approaches with connected learning activities that, when implemented, boost social presence.

- effective discussions
- intentional interactions and transactions within all assignments
- enhanced personalization
- professional and personal reflection
- varied assessments

- humanizing the experience

In Figure 2, the researchers illustrate the important interplay that must exist among the varied aspects of an online course, an interplay that does not follow a linear process. Rather, each aspect impacts the other in fluid reciprocal ways as students, for example, interact with course resources in preparation for a discussion and then continue to deepen individual understandings as they co-construct meaning with instructors, peers, and other students.

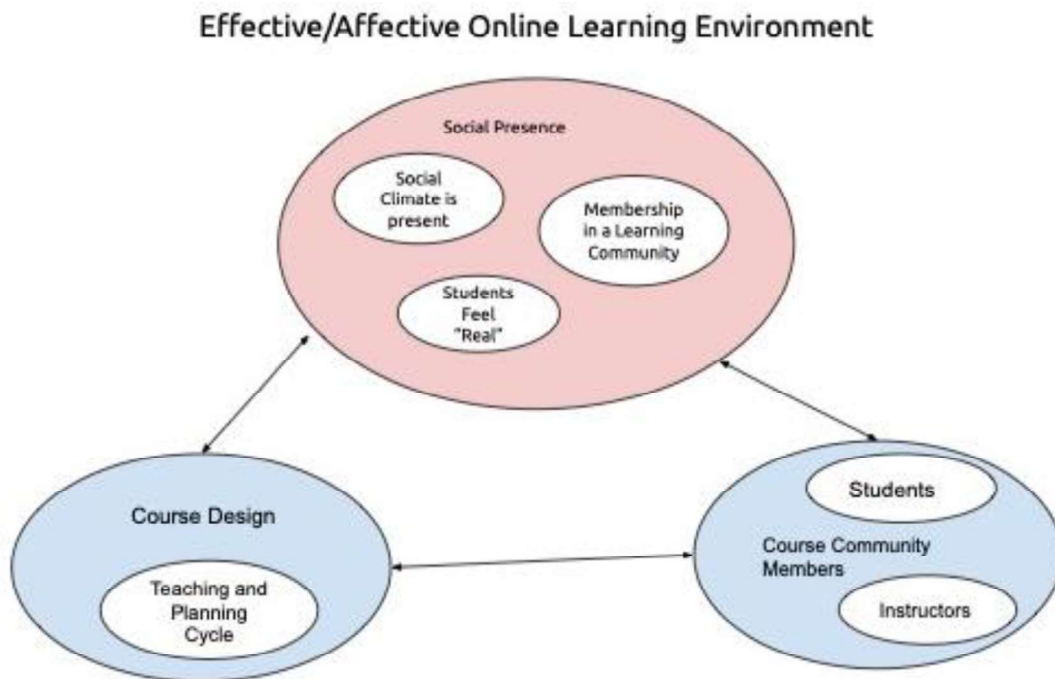


Figure 1. Social Presence Framework

(Reprinted with permission, Moroz, Harvey & Carlson, 2022).

Note that the activities are the link between the course resources/content to peers, course resources/content to the instructor, the instructor to student, and student to peer. Well-selected activities taught skillfully advance a “reciprocal association where each has the ability to influence the construction of knowledge, influence the environment for which it occurs, and thus, impact the personal experience of the student” (Moroz, Harvey & Carlson, 2022, pp. 26-27).

The personal experiences are comprised of three essential factors for an engaged learning environment: cognitive, social, and emotional. Course design for a synchronous learning environment integrates the three factors and includes activities that combine finite elements of each. As shown in Figure 3, the factors overlap and intersect showing the relationship between them.

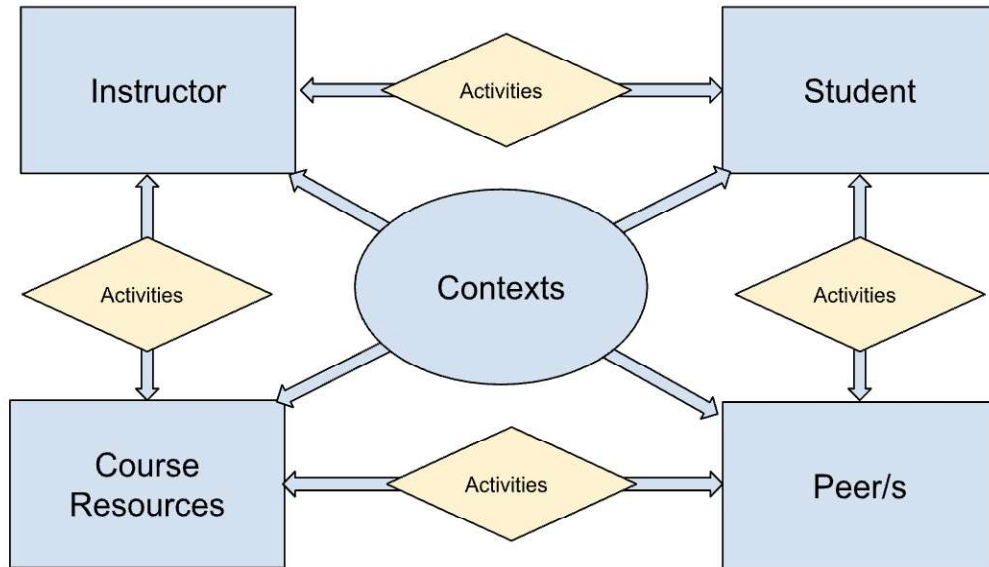


Figure 2. Interplay in Online Learning

The next section provides activities and examples for developing social presence and community in a synchronous online learning environment.

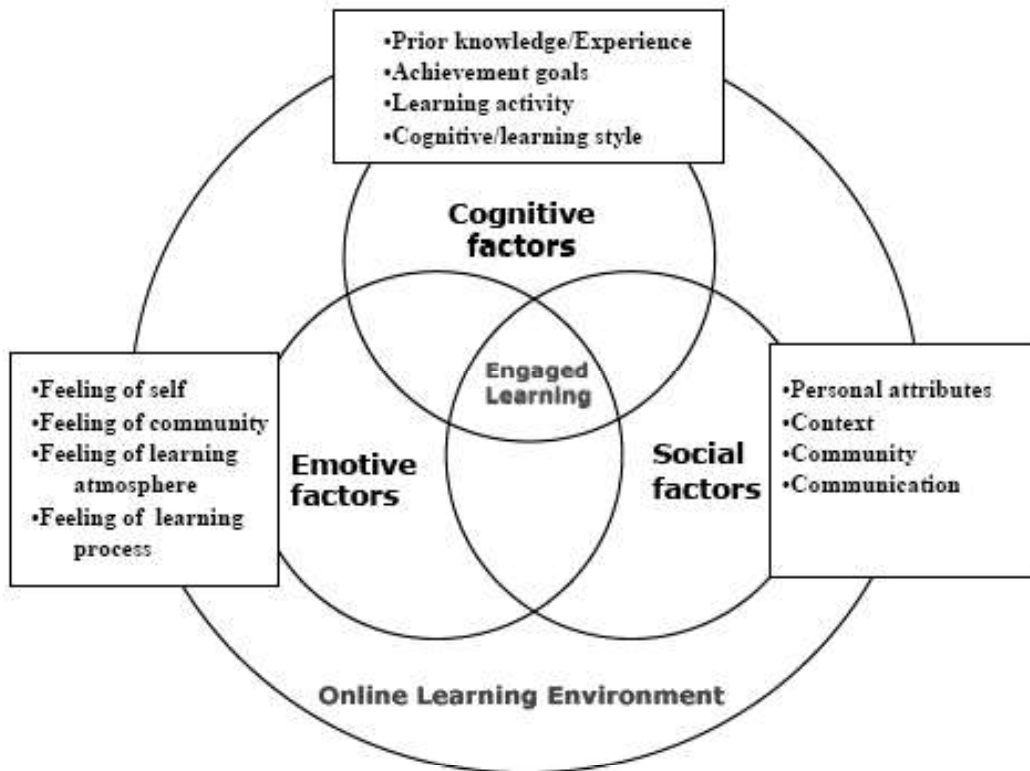


Figure 3. Framework for Course Design.



The focus of these examples are related to how to: open/close online synchronous classes, manage and maximize classroom discussions, increase accountability and productivity of small group work time, schedule and time classroom breaks, heighten engagement and content understanding, and clarify student and instructor roles. Throughout these examples, specific digital tools are identified for use during online synchronous classes.

### Word Game

The strategy, Word Game (Gallagher, 2009), is an activity that enhances personalization, reflection, and humanizes the learning experience. It can be used synchronously or asynchronously. Using Padlet, Google Doc, or slide feature, select a word or very short phrase that connects to the topic. The word can be selected from the assigned reading, film, or audio that the students have read/viewed or will read/view.

Once the word is identified, instructors need to direct students to individually, for 1-2 minutes, brainstorm what they think, know, or something they have to say about the word. Students then share ideas and/or selected quotes that resonate with them. This idea exchange provides an opportunity to connect content and develop a connection to others' thinking or experiences simultaneously. It can also served as an effective formative assessment to gauge students' prior knowledge or understanding of the content.

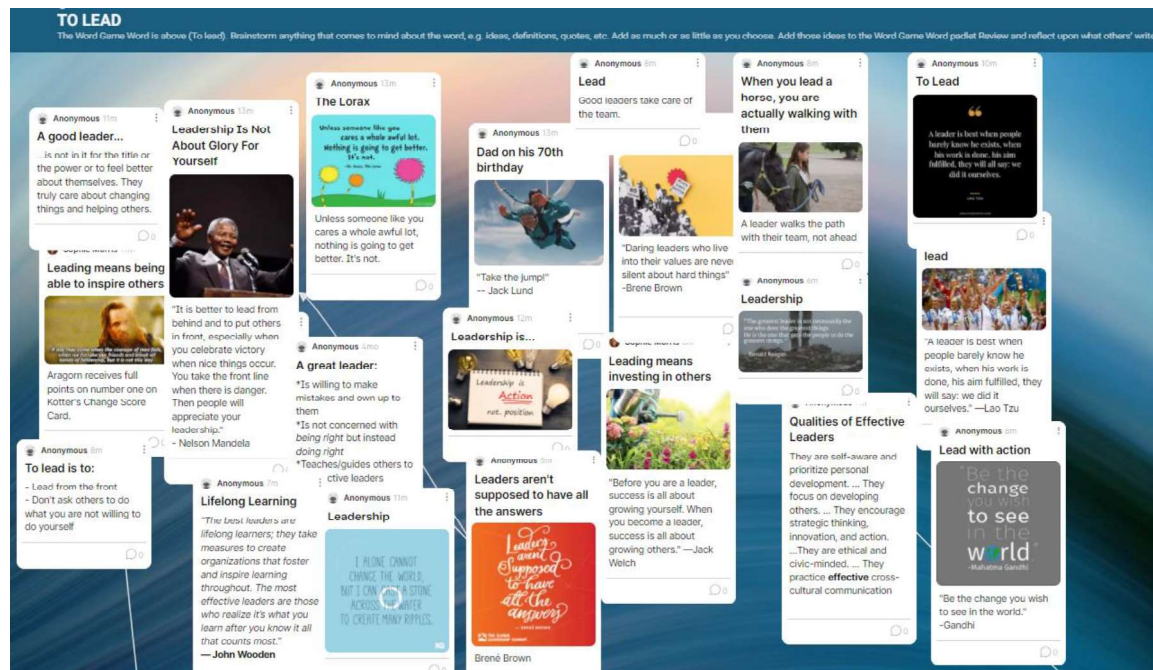


Figure 4. Word Game Using Padlet Example

### Comprehension Mind Map

An activity that prompts individual reflection and thinking about content, collaboration, and community

building is the Comprehension Mind Map. In this three-step activity, students make connections, show what they know, build upon their own knowledge, and extend thinking. A Padlet or Google Slides will need to be prepared for this activity. The instructor needs to select a concept that the students have been exploring and studying. The concept is positioned in the center of the mind map.

Step 1: Students document their thoughts, ideas, questions, or phrases and add it to the mind map slide using a “drawing” or “line” feature (in Google Slides under “Insert”) to create a textbox on the desired slide.

Step 2: Prompt students to make connections between their ideas and others’ ideas using a line or arrow to show that connection.

Step 3: Have students select a shape and place it on the idea/s that most resonate with them.

In Figure 5, the students had been studying the concept of critical literacy for two weeks. They had read, written, listened to, and discussed this topic in a previous synchronous session and then shared their understanding and connections in the second session after building on their knowledge of the topic in small group discussions and further readings.

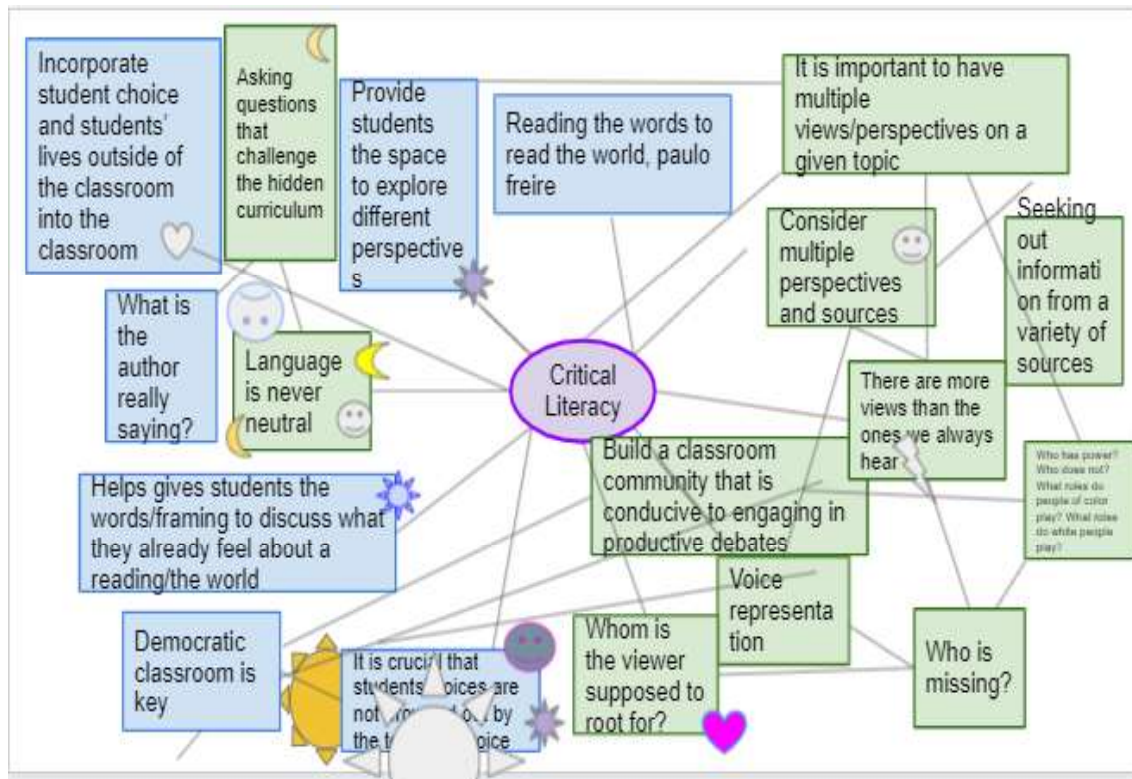


Figure 5. Comprehension Mind Map Example

### Making Connections/Visual Concept Map: Small Group Discussion Activity

In this activity, students are given 10 terms/phrases from a course reading, lecture, video or another content source. In small groups, they discuss and define each term. Then, they create a visual concept map that shows the relationship/connection between terms. Students can add additional terms to the concept map, if needed to demonstrate these connections.

**Lagemann - Chp 7**  
In groups, please use the following ten terms/items to make a concept map:

Francis Keppel  
Standardized testing  
Coleman Report  
Politics  
Education research

NAEP (Nat'l Assessment of Educ Progress)  
Title I evaluation studies  
NIE (Nat'l Institute of Education)  
Accountability  
School funding

**Slide 1**

**Lagemann - Chp 7**

1. Use the map to show how these items are connected.
2. You can add terms.
3. Discuss what lessons can be gleaned from this chapter.
4. Please select a spokesperson to share (screen share) and explain your map/discussion.

(35 minutes)

**Team 1**  
Alleia  
Amanda  
Katie R.  
Mark  
Salma  
Valeria

**Team 2**  
Curtis  
Kristina  
Natalie  
Nadia  
Tracy

**Team 3**  
Alyssa  
Angela  
Maggie  
Myriam  
Sarah

**Team 4**  
Katie C.  
Danielle  
Emily  
Jeremy  
Katie K.

**Team 5**  
Changying  
Jake  
Kathy  
Said  
Verlena

Figure 6. Making Connections/Visual Concept Map Activity - Instructor Directions

Figure 7. Making Connections/Visual Concept Map Activity - Student Examples



The small group is asked to select a spokesperson to share their map with the large group. These intentional and focused group discussions increase understanding of the content and create shared learning. The examples in Figure 7 show how five different groups used different tools to depict how the terms were related.

### Making Personal Connections

The beginning of a synchronous class can be an ideal time to work on building community with learners. One strategy to help students make connections with one another is to have them share something about themselves using a virtual wall application. As students join the synchronous meeting, the instructor poses an opening question with a link to a virtual wall (see Figure 8). The prompt asks them to share something about themselves.

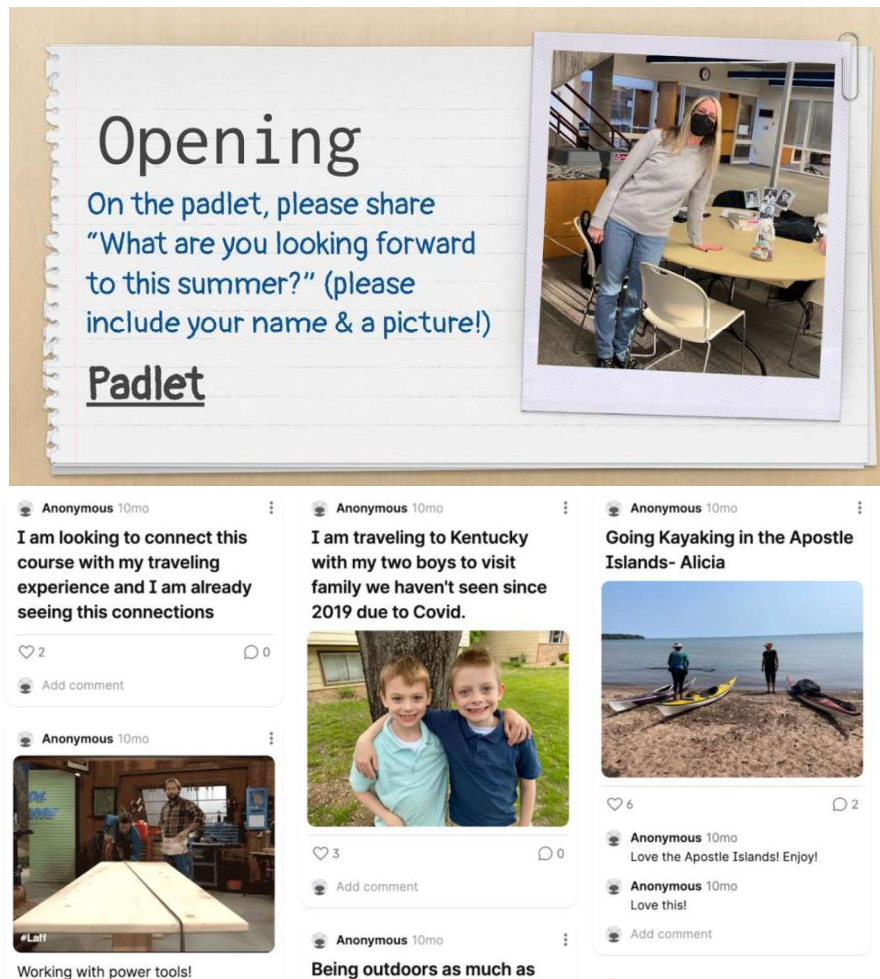


Figure 8. Making Personal Connections: Opening Activity/Padlet Sharing Example

In this example, students were asked to share what they were looking forward to in the summer. The Padlet link

allows students to post pictures and comment on each other's posts, which serves as a way to get to know one another. In the example (see Figure 8), students shared pictures of their families and explained upcoming trips. This type of sharing builds a sense of community among learners.

### **Snapshot Team Builder**

The activity, Snapshot Team Builder, is similar. As students come back from a break during the synchronous session, they are asked to post a picture from their phones to a Padlet board, Jamboard or Google Slide/Document. This type of sharing helps learners to get to know each other beyond the classroom, and it typically adds some light-hearted humor to the class as well.

**Prepare during BREAK... "Share the 5th most recent photo on your phone..."**



Figure 9. Snapshot Team Builder Example

### **Choose a Visual: Reflect and Connect**

Creating a sense of fun and purposefully carving out time for students to reflect on personal and professional well-being is important. It connects students through similar experiences and opens up another avenue for getting to know each other. The strategy, Choose a Visual: Reflect and Connect, is used to either open class or as a regrouping activity after break; it can be connected to specific content or to a more generalized look at life.

To complete this activity, when students return to the synchronous session after a break the prompts are on the screen along with a note to think about their last week personally and professionally, to decide which statement

best describes it, and to be ready to share why they chose that statement. After an allotted time, the instructor gives students the option to share which statement they chose and why they chose it. It is not necessary that all students share, but many may feel compelled to as they make connections to their peers who either chose the same statement as they did or share something about their last week that resonates with them because of similar experiences. This sharing is an opportunity for students to see the human side of their fellow classmates and to support one another. It creates a space where all students are engaged, because even if they do not share their selected statement and rationale publicly, they have been given concentrated time to think about their choices prior to the question prompt being asked in the full group. The final step is for the instructor to share the visuals that coincide with each statement.

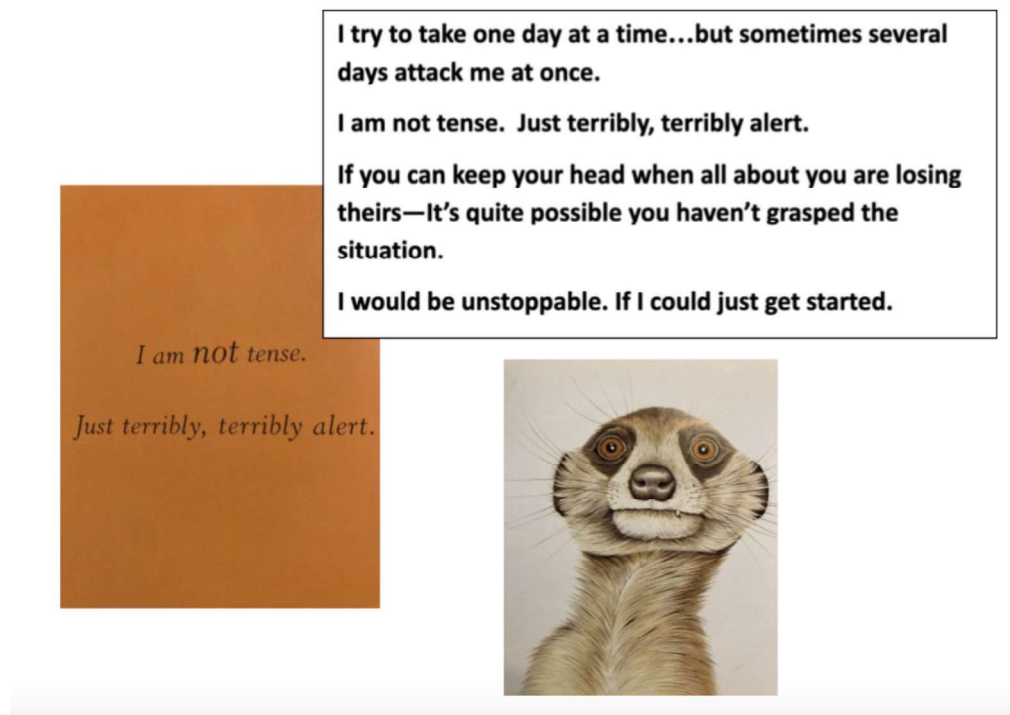


Figure 10. Choose a Visual: Reflect and Connect Example

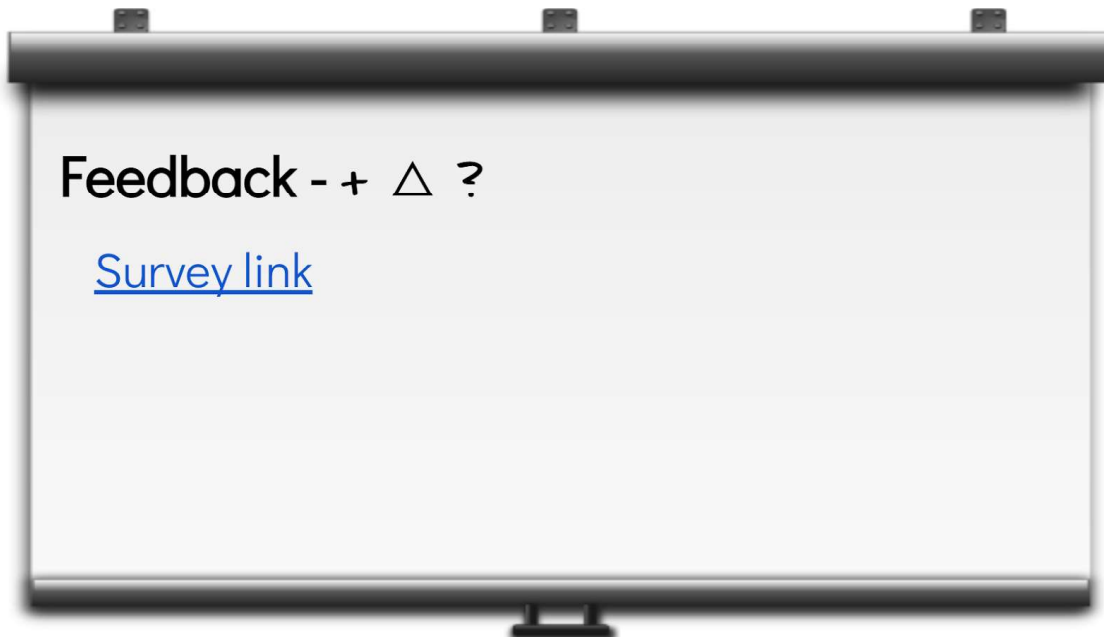
The visuals used in this example are from a small coffee table book entitled *Furry Logic* (2014), but other statements with connected visuals could also be used. As visuals are shared the humorous nature of them inevitably results in laughter and statements such as, “OH, that is TOTALLY me.” It is a fun yet meaningful way for all students to reflect on their personal and professional experiences, to learn about others, and to enjoy laughter with other members of the learning community.

#### **Plus, Delta and Question Student Feedback**

Asking students to provide feedback can also create a sense of shared community. In this example (see Figure

11), students are given a link to a form that collects Plus, Delta, and Question data. The Plus data refers to things that went well during class, the Delta data refers to opportunities for improvement, and the Question data provides students with a chance to ask any question(s) they may have about the course.

The most important part of this activity is addressing, responding to, and sharing the data that is collected. Sharing the raw data or sharing themes from the data with the students has the potential of opening up powerful classroom conversations. Instructors build a sense of community by demonstrating responsiveness and openness to this student feedback.



**Figure 11.** Plus, Delta and Question Student Feedback Example

### **Walk and Talk**

Synchronous teaching and learning do not have to be sedentary endeavors. Providing opportunities for movement can invigorate discussion and build community. The walk and talk activity during a synchronous class meeting can break up the time and provide a way to cultivate stronger relationships between students.

To begin, the instructor creates groups with two students per group, and then asks students to share phone numbers in a safe way or encourage them to use a google voice phone number. Next the instructor provides the students with a prompt/question to discuss during this walk & talk activity. Instructors should encourage students to go outside or walk in their home, or wherever they are attending class. The instructor is responsible for providing a substantive amount of time and a discussion prompt that is engaging. The prompt can be content-based and/or something to promote community building (see the example in Figure 12).

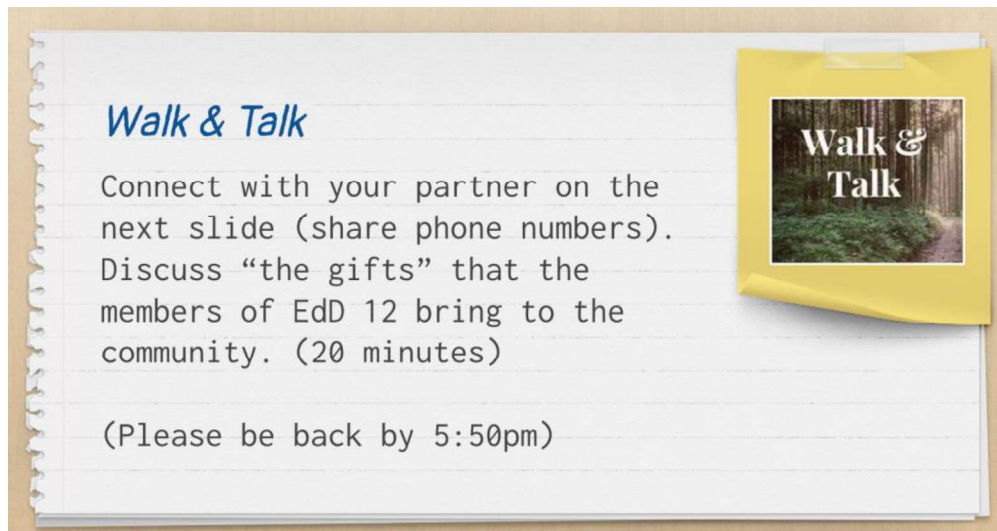


Figure 12. Walk and Talk Example

### Memes and Timers Strategic Breaks

One strategy for managing breaks during a synchronous session is to post a YouTube video with a timer; this can help students make sure they are back in class at the appropriate time. To build community, instructors can post questions or prompts for students to answer in the chat upon their return. Another option (see Figure 13) is to post pictures of memes with “pick your favorite” choices for students. Students post responses in the chat. This quick sharing of likes and preferences is a light-hearted way to build a sense of community.

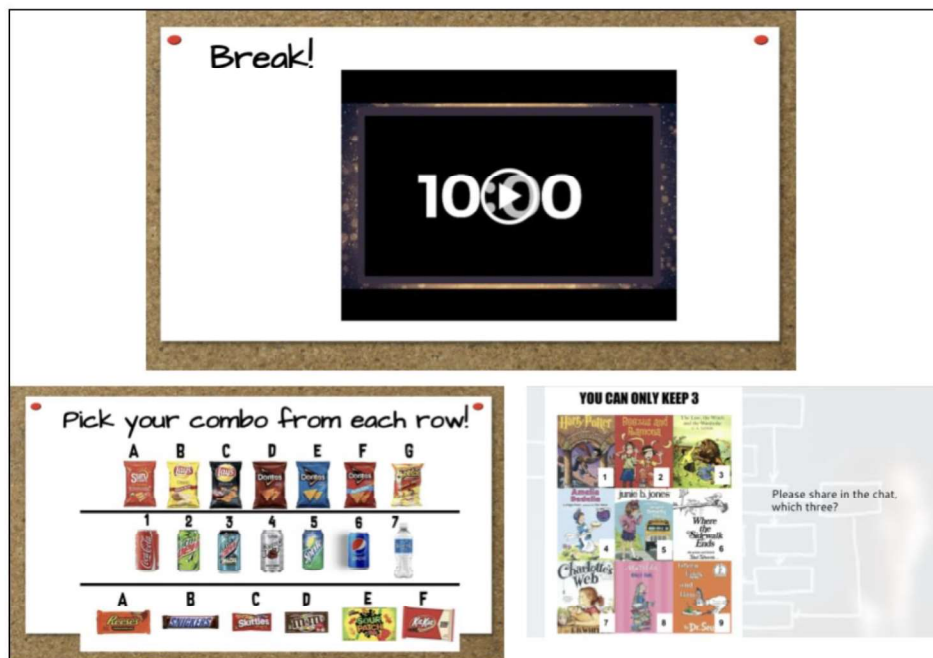


Figure 13. Managing Breaks Examples



## Class Opening



**Opening - Gender and Org Culture**

From the Mill's reading, please share one "aha" and/or new learning.

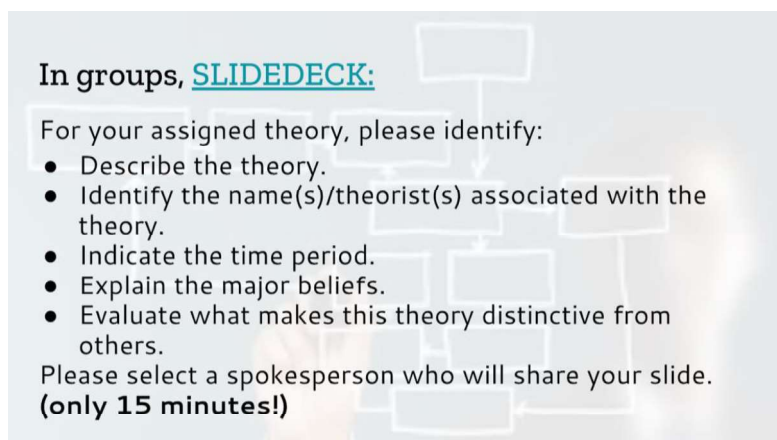
Alyssa	Tracey
Emily	Maggie
Kristine	Jeremy
Nubia	Jake
Myriam	Katie C.
Salma	Alicia
Sarah	Danielle
Kathy	Changying
Curtis	Verlena
Mark	Amanda
Said	Natalie
Angela	Valerie
Katie R.	Katie B.

Figure 14. Class Opening: Large Group Sharing Example

Instructors can use the beginning of class to build community while also making strong connections with the course content. In Figure 14, students are asked to share an "aha" or new learning from a course reading. The instructor posts a list of students' names with the opening question (on the slides and in the chat). In this activity, everyone has a chance to share (without pauses or raising hands virtually). The instructor also has an easy way to take class attendance. [TeamShake](#) (Rhine-O Enterprises, 2020) is a great application for creating groups and lists of students, because everyone has an opportunity to share and everyone's voice is represented in the discussion.

## Assigning Tasks to Group Discussion Time

When students are moved into small groups during synchronous sessions, one way to make sure the discussion stays focused on the task is to assign a way to report what is discussed. For example, in Figure 15, students are given a task to complete and a link to a slidedeck to capture their work.



**In groups, [SLIDEDECK](#):**

For your assigned theory, please identify:

- Describe the theory.
- Identify the name(s)/theorist(s) associated with the theory.
- Indicate the time period.
- Explain the major beliefs.
- Evaluate what makes this theory distinctive from others.

Please select a spokesperson who will share your slide.  
**(only 15 minutes!)**

Figure 15. Assigning Tasks to Groups Example

The more specificity that the instructor assigns with the tasks and products, the more effective this group time can be. If students do not have to share a product, it is still recommended to ask each group to select a spokesperson to share highlights of the conversation.

### Individual Centering

Providing students time to transition, reconnect with the readings and discussions they were part of prior to the synchronous session is important. Individual Centering does both (see Figure 16). When students return to class after a break a writing prompt is on the screen. The prompt immediately creates focus and an intentional interaction with the content. After providing several silent minutes to individually respond to the prompt, the instructor welcomes students back to the synchronous session and asks that they have their list next to them as they listen to and view an excerpt from a children's book or other text.



On a sheet of paper-or electronically-please record 5 words or short phrases you associate with the constructivist theory.

<https://voicethread.com/share/20273779/>

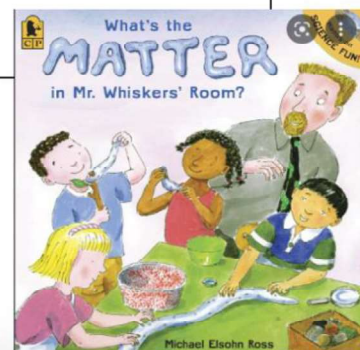


Figure 16. Individual Centering

Once the excerpt is finished the instructor asks students to share which of their words/ideas were present in the book and what else they noticed connected to the initial prompt that perhaps they had not written down. This

approach leads to effective discussions because all members of the learning community had time to think about the concept in the initial prompt on their own, to expand on that initial thinking through a common read, and to then extend that understanding even further as they listen to classmates' interpretation of the text's connection to course content. The images shared here have students centering their thoughts about the educational theory of constructivism. They then listen for their terms/short phrases as they listen to a picture book that illustrates many examples of the theory. After hearing the story, students participate in a large group discussion about the theory, with their initial list and specific examples from the book anchoring their contributions to the discussion.

### Light Bulb Reflection

The Light Bulb Reflection is an opportunity for students to individually access and share a major learning moment. When asking students to identify this the instructor should share the guiding questions before they begin reading/viewing/listening to a content resource. This activates and focuses student attention and gives them purpose for the assignment. Note that in Figure 17, the question "What is/was my light bulb moment?" is presented third in the list of question prompts. Its placement is purposeful in that the previous two questions are scaffolded from "we" as a whole in "Why did we conduct this analysis?" and does not require the students to have read the passage. It relies on the student's background and inference skills. The second question, "What does this exercise tell me about myself?" does rely on accessing the resource/s and propels the student to self assess their interests, understanding, and purpose. Finally, the light bulb question transitions the thinking to realization and inspiration often in connection to the student's personal, academic, and professional interests.



**Assignment:**

- After reading or viewing, consider
  - Why did we conduct this analysis?
  - What does this exercise tell me about myself?
  - What is/was my light bulb moment?
- Post and Respond to at least two group mates' responses.
  - Be sure each member of the group has a response from a groupmate.
  - The bigger question: What's the message?

Figure 17. Light Bulb Reflection Example

### Photo Connection

Another way to create a light bulb moment is to use metaphor. In Figure 18 students were asked to find and post a picture that represented their individual "aha" or major learning from the course readings. The use of metaphor is a higher level thinking skill that requires the learner to show their understanding and then provide a rationale

for their photo selection. For example, Figure 18 shows three different examples, including a photo of the Pando Forest in Utah which is the largest organism on earth which is comprised of thousands of trees all connected through one root system. The student explained why they chose the image, how it connected to their content learning, and its representation of broader ideas. They shared, “I think if we as human beings saw one another as interconnected like this grove of aspens are, we would treat each other with a lot more generosity and compassion” (Moroz, Harvey & Carlson, 2022, p. 78).



**Figure 18.** Photo Connection Example

## Conclusion

Good synchronous online class sessions are intentionally designed. The strategies shared here integrate the cognitive, social, and emotional elements and provide space to cultivate and sustain a sense of community. Such strategies are active, meaningful, heighten content learning and its application, and deepen critical thinking. It is our hope that facilitators of online learning, with a strong growth mindset in place “reflect and analyze their own online planning and teaching through these new or differently understood lenses and that this analysis can continue to propel thoughtful, engaged and meaningful instruction and learning” (Moroz, Harvey, & Carlson, 2022, p. 110).

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