

"A Great Way to Connect": Using Flip to Promote Connection and a Sense of Belonging in Online Courses

Tara Kingsley

IU Kokomo
tkingsle@iu.edu

Alina Mihai

IU Kokomo
amachei@iu.edu

Abstract: The growth in online education has prompted a focus on ensuring students are engaged, persistent, and successful in their studies. A recognized challenge with online learning is developing a community of learners, where students feel connected to their peers and instructor and experience a sense of belonging. In this article, we highlight using the platform Flip to engage students in video-based discussions. We describe our use of Flip in two online asynchronous courses and provide recommendations for instructors seeking to embed this tool in the learning experiences they develop for their students. In addition, we present our students' perspectives on belonging within the course and their use of Flip, collected using an anonymous survey. Last, we examine the advantages and challenges of using this tool and discuss the implications for promoting connection and belonging in online courses.

Keywords: sense of belonging, distance learning, online learning, college student, video-based discussions, discussion forums, self-determination theory, Flip

Framework

Higher education was experiencing a growing trend in distance education even before the COVID-19 pandemic (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). With this growth comes the urgency of ensuring student success. A challenge with online learning is developing a community of learners where students feel connected to their peers and instructor (Oberne, 2017). Further, replicating the dynamics of the face-to-face classroom is challenging, since owing to the nature of distance education, students and faculty are separated by time and location (Draus et al., 2014). Attempting to address this challenge is important, with implications for student persistence and success in postsecondary education (Moore, 2014).

According to self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), relatedness or belonging is a basic psychological need. In the university context, students need to develop a sense of belonging and perceive themselves as a member of a community (Ryan & Deci, 2000, Tinto, 2017) where they feel valued and included. Relatedness or belonging might come from feeling connected to peers, instructors, or various groups. Students who perceive themselves as members of a group are more motivated to learn (Gurjar, 2020) and more likely to persevere (Tinto, 2017). However, in the absence of face-to-face interactions, instructors in online environments must seek ways for students to develop a sense of community, participate in conversations, and engage in exchanges that validate their experiences (Cherney et al., 2018; Moore, 2014).

Making It Work

Students' sense of belonging in online courses can be shaped in many ways; here we focus on the use of video-based discussions. As a medium for communication, video is richer than audio or text because it provides access to nonverbal cues (e.g., gestures, facial expressions, voice inflection), leading to an increased social presence and deepening learning (Cherney et al., 2018). In this article, we highlight the platform Flip (see info.flip.com) for video-based discussions. Flip is a free, asynchronous video-based online discussion tool that allows students to interact with others in a fun and engaging way. The use of Flip for video-based discussion presents multiple advantages, such as increasing student satisfaction with the online learning experience (e.g., Bayram, 2013). Research has also shown that Flip improves social presence (Lowenthal & Moore, 2020), deepens reflective skills (Isidori et al., 2021), and helps create a sense of community in online courses (Delmas & Moore, 2019). Instructors can use Flip to transform text-based discussions into dynamic conversations that can build a community of learners. In Flip, instructors can create groups and unlimited topics within groups to pose questions that facilitate discussion. This format gives students time to craft a thoughtful response, minimizing discomfort for students who might struggle with fast-paced, synchronous discussions. Furthermore, the option to add text, emojis, drawings, and cover image selfies promotes creativity and provides a familiar social-media presence for students, but in a private space. Flip is intuitive to use from any internet-connected device. Feature articles and guides for using Flip can be found at help.flip.com.

We each opted to use Flip in an online asynchronous, undergraduate spring 2023 course (37 students total) at a small, regional campus as an alternative to text-based discussion forums. To make it work, our experience has led us to recommend the following:

- First, create your course group and topic boards for each discussion. Flip provides a join code link that instructors can share with students, allowing them to securely join using Microsoft or Google accounts.
- Second, begin with an introductory forum to start building community and belonging. For example, in Kingsley's children's literature course, students first completed a low-stakes assignment to try out the platform while engaging in peer-to-peer interaction. After introducing themselves, they shared their course goals and favorite children's book (see Figure 1). Model expectations by posting an instructor introduction. Add camera effects such as text and stickers to showcase ways to make a video informative and fun.
- Third, maintain the rigorous expectations of text-based discussions in this new format. In our courses, we wanted students to show evidence of learning through synthesis and critical thinking. Therefore, Flip discussion prompts and the assessment rubric paralleled our former text-based discussion assignments. This required students to ask questions, make connections, share opinions, and reference the module's readings within their video posts. Additionally, students were required to reply to two or more classmates. We provided several prompts to springboard student thinking, rather than to serve as a checklist for responses. We asked students to craft a personalized reflection based on the key ideas they were interested in discussing. We encouraged a "come as you are" approach, emphasizing progress over perfection and normalizing stumbles in narration. A sample student Flip response from one participating course can be found at <https://tinyurl.com/mwzschbk>.¹

¹ Shared with student permission.

- Last, allow student interactions to flourish first before jumping in. As course instructors, we focused on being a "guide on the side." We engaged in conversations to demonstrate an interest in student contributions, pose questions, or suggest additional areas to explore, such as current events or high-interest news articles that aligned with the topic. Students appreciate knowing the instructor is present and viewing their work. As a time-saving tip, save instructor responses in a Word document or as videos to reuse. We found that students each semester tended to share similar responses, and a few minor tweaks to a saved post will save a great deal of time!

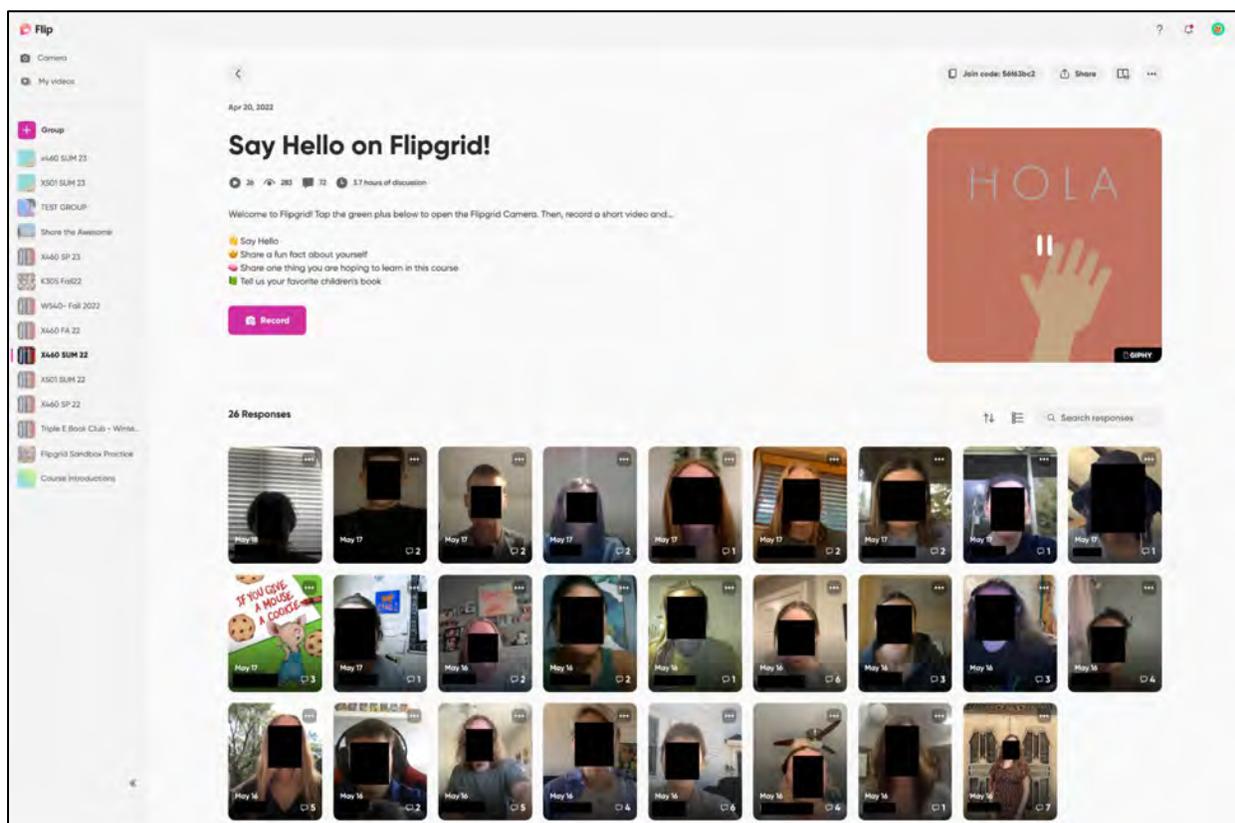


Figure 1. Print screen of Flip introductory discussion forum.

We were interested in assessing our students' perceptions of belonging within these courses; therefore, we sought approval from our Institutional Review Board to anonymously survey students at the end of the semester. We used the Brief Course Belonging Scale (BCBS; Lingat et al., 2022), which is informed by Tinto's model of retention (Tinto, 2017) and consists of 11 Likert-scale questions. We added two additional open-ended questions to better understand student perspectives on using Flip. The questions asked students to describe the benefits and challenges of learning in this format.

Results

On the BCBS, the mean average for all questions was 3.56/4.0, indicating students felt a sense of belonging between the *agree* and *strongly agree* levels (see Table 1²). In the open-ended responses, 86%

² Shared with permission; Lingat et al. (2022).

of students reported the greatest benefit of Flip being a feeling of social presence. Comments such as "It [Flip] allows for emotion to be known and connects everyone better than written discussions," "I like hearing how people feel," and "I feel like we are having more heartfelt conversations" demonstrate that students felt connected, thus promoting a sense of belonging when engaging with peers and instructors in this platform.

Table 1. Means for Brief Course Belonging Scale responses (N = 36).

Question	Mean
I feel like my contributions during class activities matter to other students in the course.	3.42
I feel appreciated by other students in the course.	3.56
I want to keep in touch with other students after this course is over.	3.39
I feel like other students in this course encourage me to do well.	3.44
I feel respected by other students in this course.	3.67
I feel like other students in this course accept me for who I really am.	3.64
I can be myself with other students in this course.	3.64
I feel like other students in this course understand my ideas when I share what I am thinking.	3.64
I feel supported by other students in this course.	3.69
If I face academic challenges in this course, I feel comfortable asking other students for help.	3.53
I feel included by other students in this course.	3.50

Note. Responses were given on a scale of 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*).

Flip also presented some challenges for students, including time restraints and meeting deadlines; however, the biggest challenge for students was feeling comfortable with recording themselves, with 39% of students sharing hesitation with the process (e.g., "I think the hardest part of the Flip discussion is getting comfortable with recording"). Nonetheless, for some students, being on camera became easier with practice. Survey comments such as "To be candid, it took some practice to just stop caring about my recordings" and "It was awkward at first, but I got used to it" show student growth in this area. In fact, for some, the practice of recording promoted self-confidence, with one student sharing, "This experience expanded my own horizons; before, I was not very comfortable with recording videos of myself. I am still not, however, Flip was a step in the door to being more accepting of myself oddly enough." Last, it is noteworthy to share that only one student reported on the survey a preference for text-based discussion over the video-based format.

Implications

Video-based discussions may be one way to promote quality interactions and contribute to developing a sense of community and belonging in the absence of face-to-face classes. An increased social presence is particularly relevant when attempting to create a sense of community and belonging. In our courses, survey data indicated that Flip is a promising tool for facilitating video-based discussions and establishing a social presence, which aligns with previously identified benefits (Lowenthal &

Moore, 2020). The features of Flip allow for active student engagement and reflection on learning. However, instructors must consider students' challenges with using this tool and plan to address these. Strategies such as setting clear expectations for posting videos and modeling authentic over infallible video posts encourage genuine reflection and humanize the online space. In addition, instructors can change up the use of Flip and adapt tasks as relevant. Varied uses might include topic debates, exit tickets, activating prior knowledge, creating screencasts using Flip's recording features, or small-group cooperative learning tasks. Flip can additionally be used in nonacademic ways to build community. Students might introduce a friend, share what they are reading, complete a challenge, solve a riddle, or share pet photos. We found that pet photos are always a win!

Instructors wishing to use video-based discussion should view Flip as an opportunity to foster student connections and develop a sense of belonging in the online classroom. Flip provides students a platform with which to engage with peers, build confidence, and share their voice, or in one student's words, "Online classes can be really boring and isolating, but this offers a more genuine expression of self and is a *great way to connect*."

References

- Bayram L. (2013). Enhancing an online distance education course with video. *Procedia—Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 83, 463–467. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2013.06.091>
- Cherney, M. R., Fetherston, M., & Johnsen, L. J. (2018). Online course student collaboration literature: A review and critique. *Small Group Research*, 49(1), 98–128. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1046496417721627>
- Delmas, P., & Moore, P. (2019, November). Student perceptions of video-based discussions in online and blended learning. In S. Carliner (Ed.), *Proceedings of E-learn: World conference on E-learning in corporate, government, healthcare, and higher education* (pp. 1280–1286). Association for the Advancement of Computing in Education.
- Draus, P. J., Curran, M. J., & Trempus, M. S. (2014). The influence of instructor-generated video content on student satisfaction with and engagement in asynchronous online classes. *Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, 10(2), 240–254.
- Gurjar, N. (2020). Reducing transactional distance with synchronous and asynchronous video-based discussions in distance learning. In D. Schmidt-Crawford (Ed.), *Proceedings of SITE 2020: Society for Information Technology & Teacher Education international conference* (pp. 268–272). Association for the Advancement of Computing in Education.
- Isidori, E., Magnanini, A., Fazio, A., Leonova, I., De Martino, M., & Sandor, I. (2021). Developing reflective skills in e-learning: A case study based on the Flipgrid platform. In *The International Scientific Conference eLearning and Software for Education* (Vol. 1, pp. 423–429). Carol I National Defence University.
- Lingat, J. E. M., Toland, M. D., & Dueber, D. M. (2022). The Brief Course Belonging Scale: Developing a measure of postsecondary students' course-level sense of belonging across online and face-to-face modalities. *Journal of School and Educational Psychology*, 2(2), 78–91. <https://doi.org/10.47602/josep.v2i2.18>
- Lowenthal, P., & Moore, R. (2020). Exploring student perceptions of Flipgrid in online courses. *Online Learning*, 24(4), 28–41. <https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v24i4.2335>
- Moore, R. L. (2014). Importance of developing community in distance education courses. *TechTrends*, 58(2), 20–24.
- Oberne, A. (2017). I can see you! Using videos in online courses to promote student engagement. *Journal of Teaching and Learning With Technology*, 6(1), 85–90. <https://doi.org/10.14434/jotlt.v6.n1.20662>

- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 68–78. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.68>
- Tinto, V. (2017). Through the eyes of students. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 19(3), 254–269. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025115621917>
- U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (n.d.). *IPEDS, spring 2020, fall enrollment component (provisional data)*. Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/search/ViewTable?tableId=28442>