

Professors as the Architect of the Social Fabric in the Virtual Classroom

Abstract

In this session we will share and explore ways to incorporate social interaction in the virtual synchronous classroom which ultimately leads to accomplishing learning goals and provides students with an environment to express themselves and fulfill social needs. This session is intended to help management and organizational behavior faculty get more social interaction in their remote classes that ultimately helps meet their learning objectives. We will also present some successful designs that faculty and students have created and presented.

Three Keywords: Engagement, Relationships, Communication

Session Format: Activity / Exercise

Introduction:

This conference session came about through discussion between a professor and student/learning assistant concerning the social environment in various classes and the experience of both teacher and student during the pandemic. The student had the opportunity to be a learning assistant for a virtual course, in addition to taking her own courses online for three semesters due to the pandemic. As a learning assistant, she had the chance to watch other students in action from a different lens as they navigated the unique Zoom environment. Through these experiences, observations and discussions we have been curious about what students find meaningful in the online classroom. Behavior or tangents that we would often consider to be evasive or distracting, we realized were energizing and enriching for some. This led us to think about the different needs that students have in the classroom, particularly in an online setting during a pandemic where their only social outlet may be over Zoom. As both professor and student, we have been a part of several learning communities where students co-create and co-design sessions, and have witnessed various designs that weave social interaction into the classroom setting in a way that is productive, achieves learning goals, and personal social needs. We are studying what students want through social interaction in their courses, and whether it results in enhanced learning as compared with other traditional classroom formats.

In preparation for this session, we are studying some of the various designs of classroom sessions that have been effective, and will be sharing some of them in this conference session. We are also inquiring into why some methods enable better social interaction than others, and ultimately want to help and guide other professors to successfully incorporate these various styles into their teaching.

The pandemic has drastically changed education, and online learning is being embraced and utilized in ways like never before. The target audience for this exercise is management and organizational behavior faculty, but can be incorporated into various disciplines. The exercise is designed for undergraduate courses. The need for this type of session is because we are aware that many faculty are trying to create effective social interaction on Zoom, and are having mixed results. We are excited about the results we have been experiencing on Zoom and are eager to share them in addition to learning from others what has been successful and challenging in their educational environment.

Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications:

The importance of social interaction as a vehicle for the classroom to become an active place has been explored by Hurst, Wallace and Nixon (2013). They posit that “We [should look] not for what students can repeat, but for what they can generate, demonstrate, and exhibit.” Members of the *MOBTS* are long familiar with the benefits of experiential learning, but transferring it to the online medium has its own challenges, especially in regard to virtual social interaction vs in-person social interaction. Tawnell D. Hobbs and Lee Hawkins of the Wall Street Journal discuss all the ways in which remote learning does not work from either a student or faculty perspective. Teachers have reported remote learning to be “hectic” and “stressful” due to the fact that they cannot look around and pick up on the body language of their students. Kozuh, Jeremic, Sarjas, Bele, Devedzic, and Debyc explored the concept of social presence and interaction in learning environments, and mention that “Despite the growing interest in using social interaction and social presence in education, no appropriate methodology was found on how they should effectively adopted into online learning” (2015). We are offering this session as

there is more to be discussed and learned from one another, as we are all innovating in challenging times. This is worth exploring as a group as it is a common prevalent issue of our time and we need to make sense of it together. We want to create a space to share experiences, experimentation, and best practices.

Learning Objectives:

Our learning objective is to explore collective efforts in inspiring social interaction in our online classrooms to share best practices and spread learning about the qualities of social interaction that are possible and attainable in the online classroom from the perspective of both teachers and students towards making our classrooms more vibrant learning spaces. We are exploring different qualities of social interaction, and when it actually leads to meeting course objectives. Additionally, we hope to explore the instructors' needs for social interaction and how it both creates a source of meaning in the teaching process, and increases the effectiveness of courses. Benefits of this process include more engaged students, an active learning environment, and increased confidence and initiative. Overall, the primary objective of this exercise is to acknowledge and embrace the need for social interaction in the classroom and that it is beneficial for both students and faculty. Any topic in a management related course is potentially relevant to this session.

Exercise Overview:

We will have discussions about the social fabric in virtual education, a metaphor exercise to describe the current state of relationships and will share and demonstrate exercises that students and professors have designed. We want participants to share their efforts to integrate

social interaction in the online synchronous classroom and get ideas from each other. Our discussion will address several topics, such as when does social interaction actually meet our goals vs just being fun, what is the relationship of students to each other, what is the relationship between students? What does the professor want it to be? Furthermore, we will workshop and share attempts to get social interaction and learn how to get more. Breakout rooms are a widely used element of Zoom, however it is not always used successfully. We will discuss what students say about breakout rooms, how they can be successful, and strategies to make the most out of them. We will also share results from a study and present an exercise that provides a context for professors and students to co-design class sessions.

Session Description

1. Discuss the landscape of relationships we are observing and experiencing in our online class environments. How have they changed from when we taught in person? In this discussion/exercise we'll use metaphor to describe and also to imagine aspirational metaphors.
 - a. Student to student during class
 - b. Students in breakout sessions
 - c. Meeting with students outside of class
 - d. Our experience being with students in class
 - e. Students in group projects
 - f. Students teaching other students
2. Discussion of the social fabric of the classroom.
 - a. How is it related to our learning objectives? What supports and what detracts?

- b. We'll all tell stories of when the social fabric is at its best. What are practices we have developed to build this social fabric? We'll each share what has worked best for us to share best practices.
3. Presentation of results from our study.
 - a. What do students want in the social fabric of the classroom?
 - b. When do they find relationships related to our classes to be meaningful?
 - c. When do professors find those relationships to be most meaningful?
4. Emerging Designs
 - a. We will share specific exercises and classes co-designed by Professor and student that students have identified as having been meaningful. Some will be demonstrated so participants can experience how they create interaction and the basis for meaningful relationships.
 - b. We will also share a pedagogical design for these collaborations in the Co-Created Classroom, (London & Van Buskirk, 2017).

Bibliography:

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