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Students Crave Connection

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When we suddenly made the transition online, I wanted to try to maintain as much normalcy for my students (and myself) as possible. I teach a small, honors section of our introductory Religions of the World course. There are only 11 students enrolled this semester—a real luxury. I thought we might be able to continue synchronously, if they all were able. So, I asked: Did they have the technology to make it happen? Did they have the availability? Did they have the space? Did they have the desire? They did.

After our first synchronous class session, the Monday after an extended Spring Break, I asked my class, anonymously, how it worked using Zoom for our class that day, in a PollEverywhere poll (which they were used to doing face-to-face). This is the kind of check in, a form of formative assessment, that I love. If I want to know what students think or how a class activity is going for them, I *ask*. Among their replies: “I really liked how we could all see each other” and “It will be a good way to keep the community feel.”

We made it to the end of the first week, during which time I led whole-group discussions among all students, offered mini lectures, used Zoom’s breakout rooms to set up pair and group work, asked them to do quick writes and type their thoughts in the chat box, showed videos, and even had them share drawings on the computer screens. In their weekly

reflections, which I've written about elsewhere, I asked them to respond to one additional question: "How did it go having our class online this first week?" As expected, students were struggling with motivation and time management, known challenges in any online learning environment. But they also shared: "This is the only class I use Zoom for and it also feels the most normal because of the level of interaction;" "I think having class online this week went well, especially since we are using Zoom, which I think helps preserve the community feel of our class;" I like the fact that we are able to break out into smaller groups and still have discussions with each other;" "I am really happy we are able to maintain the personal contact and the feeling that our class is a community."

What my students have reminded me, in this moment of social distancing, working remotely, and self-imposed isolation, is just how much they crave connection, how much they benefit from learning in place and among people. I work hard, in a variety of ways, to create this community in my face-to-face classes—and I have worked hard to maintain that communal feeling, even though we are now all separated, flung across the corners of the United States, with our cats crawling across the video feed and our classroom attire now consisting of grungy sweatshirts and bed covers. What this COVID-19 crisis has underscored for me is just how much students knowingly appreciate and crave those connections too.

There are lots of ways to stay engaged and connected with your classroom community without all meeting at the regular class time as I'm doing. I recognize that what I'm doing may not be possible, or even advisable, for all religion instructors, given class sizes, content, personal comfort with technology, instructor and student availability, and so forth. Perhaps it's as simple as creating an announcement on your LMS just to ask students how they're doing—not academically, but *as people*. Perhaps it's creating a Google Voice Number so that you can give students a way to text you, without giving out your private contact information. Perhaps it's holding online office hours, through Zoom, WebEx, or Google Hangouts, so students can see you if they're in need of a friendly face. Perhaps it's calling all of your advisees, as one of my colleagues did, or reaching out to former students with a mass email. Perhaps it's creating opportunities for pair or group work, for instance, through an online discussion board. Perhaps it's simply sharing with students that you're feeling anxious or stressed or worried or discombobulated too.

On our campus, we are hearing from students (and sometimes from their concerned parents) just how disconnected, discouraged, and dissatisfied they are now that the human dimension of learning has largely been taken from them. Students do not simply want to read a textbook and submit a short essay in response. They want to talk to their peers; they want to hear from a real, live instructor; they want to sit in the same space; they want to learn in the context of others. A student once asked me, a few semesters back, if I thought learning always takes place among others. I said yes. Another student disagreed. By way of evidence, he said that he taught himself how to play guitar. I asked how he did that. He said he watched YouTube videos. Okay, I said, but who created those videos? There was a long pause. Learning is communal. Never has there been, paradoxically, a moment when this has been more clear—to me and to my students.

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