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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Four Ways to Build, Maintain, and Deepen Classroom Community during Distance Learning

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So many of us are struggling to connect meaningfully with our students during this period of unexpected distance. When we don't get in-person connection time, it's critical for us to build social and spiritual connection with our students within the online learning space. Giving our students numerical feedback and written feedback on submitted assignments is not enough.

While some of my students have a strong network of relationships and resources to sustain them during this time, some do not. I see it as my responsibility to provide some opportunities for students to maintain and deepen connections with each other, themselves, and God.

Live check-ins

In my live, online classes, we check in with simple questions to start the session. I lean toward the veiled spiritual direction during these times—directing my students' attention toward where God *is* present, rather than where God isn't present. For example:

- • What is working for you in this time of isolation?
- • For what are you grateful right now?

- • Where are you finding light within so much darkness?

It is my hope that students will take inspiration from each other's answers. To be clear, this is not to approach the pandemic with a 'Pollyanna' point of view, but rather to illuminate that God is still at work, even when we are confronted with challenging circumstances.

Student-led prayer on live meetings

At the start of each live meeting, there is a student responsible for leading prayer. I instruct my students to choose a video, piece of art, or poem to share with us. We follow it with a minute or two of silent reflection and close with "words directed at God"—in other words, prayer. I provide them with links to prayers and examples of "words directed at God." We do this in the classroom as well, and I find it to be a nice piece of continuity with the online learning environment.

Collect evidence of fun or frivolous "accomplishments"

I had my students check in one day with "What's something fun or frivolous you've 'accomplished' during the shelter-in-place?" I found it important to clarify the idea of 'accomplishment' for this exercise. I explained the capitalistic assumption that we can still produce during this quarantine. This is not that. Rather, what are they doing for fun? Which hobbies are they picking up—either from a while ago or for the first time? We collected video and photographic evidence of their 'accomplishments' on a Padlet, a handy, potentially private, online board where students can creatively post their work. Students posted audio clips of music they composed, videos of themselves walking in the woods, and photos of knitting creations or plates of cookies, to name a few. It's important for us to demonstrate to our students that having fun, letting loose, and being creative are critical parts of being a full human being, especially when we might feel like our usual outlets are cut off for these activities. It is my hope—again—that students might be inspired by others and offer support and encouragement to their classmates' endeavors.

Community building on FlipGrid

I like the online learning platform of FlipGrid because it allows me to connect asynchronously with my students face-to-face and voice-to-voice. This is especially helpful for students who face challenges making it to the live online meetings. I recently posted a prompt for a simple game of two truths and a lie for my students. It was a fun, simple way to connect and communicate while getting to know each other better. Here's a great article with even more ideas for ways to connect with students.

All in all, it seems more important than ever to be attentive to the social aspect of our classroom learning environments, especially in the field of Religious Studies and Theology. I hope these steps will be helpful for you in nourishing this facet of your students' academic lives!

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