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Creating Community in the Classroom

by *María Paredes Fernández*

Relationships take work to cultivate and in the online environment it is no different. With the very nature of a language class, students need to feel comfortable in the classroom space in order to make the most out of their experience. This involves managing the discomfort of feeling vulnerable and expressing themselves in a language that they are actively trying to learn. Because of the risks that they are encouraged to take, classrooms need to cultivate a feeling of a safe space, and in order to do so, trust needs to be built. This doesn't just mean trust between teacher and student, but trust between individual students as well. Pre-COVID, we took for granted the opportunities students had to build upon this trust. This coming fall, most students will not have the chance to get to know each other and bond in the way that they typically do: on their way to class, before class begins, between and during activities, or once the class is finished. Some would take advantage of visiting instructors during office hours. Now that most of us are encouraged to teach remotely, in order to build community in the synchronous virtual environment, it is important to create affordances for students to get to know one another.

After having taught in two seven-week sessions and also getting the advice of a colleague who observed my class, I have listed below some of the strategies that I use to cultivate a sense of community in my synchronous classes. Something that I have learned is that unlike my in-person classes which were more spontaneous, interactions on web-conferencing tools like Zoom involve more curation. In other words, activities should be planned and intentional.

- Set a clear goal that the classroom space is designed as a safe space for students to take risks, to learn from one another, and to make connections. I have this written on their class page in their course management system for students to read even before our first meeting takes place. I also explicitly say this and will remind students of this from time to time, especially towards the beginning of the seven-week session.
- Schedule a 15 minutes buffer before class officially begins. If your class begins at 10am, allow students to enter the meeting at 9:45. This can give some students the opportunity to socialize before class officially begins.
- Icebreakers are not just for the first day of class. With the beginning of class, be purposeful with setting the tone. Devote the first ten-fifteen minutes getting to know your students. During the first few weeks, I model what it is like to facilitate a conversation and provide sentence stems for the students. In addition, it was also encouraged that the students elaborate on their answers and to probe one another for depth. I eventually asked them to facilitate the beginning-of-class conversations and would only chime in if I had a question or comment to add.
 - On the first day, ask them about their goals. Constantly remind them to reexamine their goals once a week. Remind them of their purpose especially when things get inevitably more difficult as time continues in the remote classroom.
 - Ask them on a weekly basis to change their avatar picture on Zoom and talk about why they chose it (Thank you to my colleague Kristina Lewis for this suggestion).
 - Ask them about their plans, or something that made them smile that day/week (another great suggestion by Kristina Lewis), what their hobbies are, a television series or book they're reading, etc.
- Plan for more time in the breakrooms: A general rule of thumb is that I add 3-5 extra minutes per activity students do in their breakrooms so they can socialize. Before putting them in these rooms, I deliberately tell them that they have some time to "chit-chat" and say hi to one another before beginning an activity.

- Encourage active listening: Have students do something as they listen to their classmates share their responses from a breakout room activity. Zoom offers a poll feature, but other low-tech options could be to use the chat or the whiteboard feature on Zoom. I especially like this latter option as this gives me some of the spontaneity of face to face instruction. Students can annotate as well by using highlight if they would like their name attached to their response or can anonymously use the stamps, text, or draw feature. Additionally, much like the beginning of class, I encourage students to facilitate the discussion.
- Take one class day (say every two weeks) to have individual or partner (if the number is too big) conferences. This is my time to get to know the students and for them to get to know me. These conferences could be informal check-ins or to review an assignment with them. If the purpose is for the latter, then in the time that I meet with them, I try to budget a few extra minutes to allow for small talk to happen.

There will be groups of students where this may click and then there will be groups that may take more time to warm-up to one another. Besides providing opportunities for them to flourish, relationships also take time to build. Enjoy this process with them. Although the modality of instruction is different, it can be possible for students to make meaningful connections to one another and with their instructors in the classroom if this is made intentional. In turn, this will make the remote teaching experience much more enjoyable for all.

María Paredes Fernández is a Language Specialist at Penn English Language Programs at the University of Pennsylvania. A multiple award-winning instructor, she has taught, designed curriculum, and coordinated programs for English Language Learners. Additionally, she is pursuing her Ed.D in Educational Linguistics at Penn's Graduate School of Education.

