

The motivation to be proactive and engaged in learning, and to persist when 'the going gets tough' is highly influenced by students' social connections and feelings of belonging (Martin & Dowson, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Socially inclusive educational contexts have been found to increase retention, engagement and social capital for students from a wide range of backgrounds (Alderman, 2013).

Why

The benefits to education, achievement and academic success are many. Students who, of their own accord and without coercion, are motivated to apply themselves and master new skills have been found to show enhanced performance, persistence, creativity, self-esteem and general well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000).



How

You can successfully create a socially inclusive environment by actively connecting students to your class, to other students, and to the broader disciplinary and professional community.

Connect students to the class

Connect students to your class by developing a warm, supportive environment committed to learning and achievement. Make sure that it is 'worthwhile coming' by providing motivating and challenging tasks and activities, whether these be in the face-to-face or online environment. Create an environment and a positive presence that shows you care about the students' progress, and that you will provide them with the support or access to learning supports so they can 'get there' through their own efforts and application.

Students' commitment to your class and learning can be developed in a number of ways. Suggestions include:

- Organising the physical and online space in a way that facilitates efficient achievement of the work. Organise the Blackboard site logically so it is easy for students to find information
- Setting expectations and norms for both student and staff behaviour in class and online that:
 - Accepts individuality and difference
 - Engenders careful listening and respect for others
 - Encourages learning from mistakes
- Demonstrating purpose, meaningfulness and relevance of class activities and tasks
- Providing support mechanisms that ensures everyone keeps up with the work
- Focussing on developing student competence
- Ensuring fairness occurs, and is seen to occur, across the group in grading of work, support, access to classes (online and face to face), opportunities, and in any permissions or disciplinary proceedings.

Connect students with each other

Use the learning environment to connect students to each other both within and outside of the formal curricular setting.

1. Create meaningful social interaction through the processes of instruction

Create spaces and opportunities for meaningful social interactions through tutorials, laboratory sessions, discussion boards and the like. Online spaces which have opportunities and reasons to connect are particularly important for distance students. These spaces allow students to share and discuss ideas, and learn from each other.

To gain the most out of these interactions, use three key strategies:

- Ensure that the interactions are educationally purposeful and that doing them will progress learning
- Make sure that the students are effectively grouped, and
- Create an environment in which students are willing to help each other.

Here are some ideas on how to achieve this:

a. Progress learning by:

- Ensuring students have completed some independent study or a task prior to interacting with others so that they have something worthwhile to contribute, and
- There are meaningful exercises for groups to accomplish in class that build on this preparation.

b. Effectively group students for cooperative learning by:

- Developing a sense of shared responsibility
- Ensuring individual accountability
- Limiting the size of learning groups (3 to 4 students)
- Providing choice in the peers they work with initially
- Changing the group of peers every so often.

c. Foster a willingness for students to help each other learn by:

- Having an assessment structure that marks and grades individual achievement rather than group achievement, and
- Using rubric standards and criteria as a basis for awarding marks rather than a norm referenced or rank ordering system.

In this way, your environment ensures that learning together is of mutual academic benefit. Students are not competing with each other for grades, and hardworking students do not feel that others have 'made it' on the back of their efforts.

2. Create contacts for study group formation

Create opportunities for study groups to be formed for those who want and need them. These groups provide students with contacts outside of the more formal settings created through your curriculum. Such groups can be particularly useful for distance students who can feel quite isolated. This is where an initial meeting at the start of session can be helpful for study group formation. Allow student choice in whether or not to join a group, provide a safe means of making contact with others, and autonomy in determining how and when they meet, and how they function.

Connect students to the discipline and professional community

Connecting your students to the discipline and the professional community helps to foster deeper interest, understanding and commitment. There are many ways you can invite students in and further develop their social capital and future work opportunities. Suggestions include:

- Involving students in relevant community projects either through or in addition to the curriculum
- Involving students in research projects run in your school or discipline through both distance and face to face mediums
- Providing workplace experiences including workplace visits and practicums
- Providing talks by visiting speakers in both face to face and online spaces from the professional or disciplinary community
- Inviting students to attend school and faculty research seminars and presentations through either the online or face to face medium.

In summary

You can set up the learning environment in ways that support both achievement and the development of social contacts through connecting students to the class, to each other and to the broader community. Doing so can help foster a sense of belonging and commitment with positive impacts on individual motivation, application and achievement.

Find out more

Alderman, M. K. (2013). *Motivation for achievement : Possibilities for teaching and Learning* (3rd ed.). Hoboken: Taylor and Francis.

Martin, A. J., & Dowson, M. (2009). Interpersonal relationships, motivation, engagement, and achievement: Yields for theory, current issues, and educational practice. *Review of Educational Research*, 79(1), 327-365. doi: 10.3102/0034654308325583

Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist*, 55(5), 68 - 78. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org>.