

# Strategies for emotionally connecting with students

As we face the uncertainty of COVID-19 together and explore the impact of systemic racism on higher education, we are challenged to build engaging learning environments that support not only the academic development of our students but also their emotional well-being. [Emotions play a critical role in student learning](#), underscoring the need for the strategic development of emotional connection within our learning communities.

## WHAT DO WE KNOW?

- Perceived emotional intelligence (EI) of faculty impacts trust, relationship development, and level of engagement within the context of the learning environment (1, 2).
- Instructional design and facilitation strategies can be incorporated at all three levels of engagement — instructor, course content and peers — to help promote emotional connection and perceived EI (1, 2).

## WHAT STRATEGIES CAN WE USE TO PROMOTE PERCEIVED EI AND POSITIVELY IMPACT STUDENT ENGAGEMENT (2)?

### Emotionally connecting with course content

- 1 Share your enthusiasm. If students perceive your passion for the subject, they are more likely to connect with you and the discipline.
- 2 Connect students with big ideas from the discipline by tying in historical or current events.
- 3 Discuss scholars in the field as real people with whom students can interact and connect with in meaningful ways. Include a diverse sample of relevant scholars to help students identify with the lived experience of individuals who shaped and defined the discipline.
- 4 Involve students in authentic inquiry. Virtually connect students to the field, a historical place, or have students explore relevant locations within their local communities (a historical site, museum, library, etc.) and share their experiences with the learning community.
- 5 Situate your identity and how it influences your approach to the discipline to help students understand your worldview and approach to framing the course content.

### Emotionally connecting with the professor

- 1 Enhance engagement by validating the student as a whole person (mind/body/spirit), and communicate in ways that promote immediacy, such as learning and using students' names and preferred pronouns in each email, posting to the discussion board, or synchronous connection.
- 2 Seek student feedback, such as through midterm evaluations, showing that you care about the effect of the teaching on them and that you want to meet their needs.

- 3 Be positive and demonstrate enthusiasm and commitment to students.
- 4 When using technology to record videos or synchronously connect with your students, use nonverbal communication to enhance the personal connection, such as smiling, varying your tone of voice, gesturing, moving around the room, etc.
- 5 Based on your level of comfort, consider communicating your personhood by relating relevant personal experiences, occasional self-deprecatory humor, or expressing feelings about the subject or what is happening in the class. Invite students to do the same to the extent they are comfortable.
- 6 Increase accessibility and offer multiple channels for students to connect; moreover, recognize that approaching a teacher outside of class, via email or student office hours, takes courage for some students.

### Emotionally connecting with peers

- 1 Model the interactions you want to promote and develop within the context of the learning environment, providing a framework for peer-to-peer engagement.
- 2 Encourage students to briefly introduce themselves and share their lived experiences in a discussion thread. Encourage students to use each other's names and preferred pronouns to connect on a personal level.
- 3 Create group assignments that require that students work together in smaller groups. If connecting synchronously using Zoom, consider using breakout rooms to facilitate peer-to-peer interactions.
- 4 Design learning activities that include a bit of fun and whimsy to promote laughter. Laughter reduces the activation energy required to promote relationship development.
- 5 Invite students to collaborate and contribute to [community guidelines](#) to promote respectful, meaningful interactions.

### References

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2. Quinlan, K.M. (2016). How emotion matters in four key relationships in teaching and learning in higher education. *College Teaching*, 64(3),101-111. doi: [10.1080/87567555.2015.1088818](https://doi.org/10.1080/87567555.2015.1088818)
3. Anderson, T., and Garrison, D.R. (1998). Learning in a networked world: New roles and responsibilities. In C. Gibson (Ed.), *Distance Learners in Higher Education*. (p. 97-112). Madison, WI.: Atwood Publishing.