Reducing Social Distance in the Online Classroom

The term "social distance" generally refers to how well a person feels they know other people and how well they are known in return. When social distance is low, students feel engaged and are motivated to participate in classroom activities. When social distance is high, students tend to be less engaged and may struggle to stay involved with the course. In traditional classrooms, instructors typically reduce social distance by getting to know students by using nonverbal communication, small talk, or icebreaker activities. Reducing social distance in the online classroom can be difficult because of an inability to interact in person. However, there are several strategies online instructors can use to reduce social distance and improve student engagement in the virtual learning environment.

Communications Schedule

First, instructors should send students messages on a regular basis. Most online instructors have probably heard of sending a "Welcome! Here's how to get started…" email, but what is less emphasized is the need for instructors to set up a regular announcement schedule. By setting up a communications schedule, students become used to receiving and start anticipating emails or posts from their instructor. The content of the messages can vary—assignment reminders, links to relevant current events, personal anecdotes, and motivational messages are just a few examples of community-building content. By posting messages on a regular basis, students get a chance to know their professors through written communication. Overall, messages promote engagement in the course and help students humanize instructors and deter them from viewing instructors as faceless people who only grade assignments.

Open-Inbox Policy

Next, let students know you care. Many traditional courses have statements on the syllabus that communicate the instructor's open-door policy. Online instructors should include similar statements about having an "open-inbox" policy for students. Unless reassured that communicating with an online instructor is exactly the same as with an in-person instructor, students may wonder that if too many emails or too many questions will annoy their instructor or negatively impact their grades. By communicating a genuine interest in students' success and a willingness to offer help, students will feel more comfortable reaching out to instructors with questions.

Dedicated Space for Questions

Instructors should provide space for students to ask questions. Many learning management systems have a "hallway" or can support a general "Questions?" discussion board for students to post their questions about course content. Instructors can also add a hallway discussion board to individual assignments for students who need more support on specific tasks. An open-inbox policy can certainly help with answering questions, and instructors should also explore the feasibility of offering virtual office hours for students to contact them via video chat or telephone. Even if students never use the discussion boards or virtual office hours, an instructor can positively influence students' attitudes by creating an online culture of support and lowering the social distance simply by offering these types of availability.

Response Time

Instructors need to be generous with feedback and timely with returning grades. When a student enters your class, they have no idea what type of grader you are or what you are expecting. Including one or two small assignments in the first two weeks of class, and then grading them immediately, offers students insights into what you value in assignments. Though it requires some extra work on your part, assigning a few small reflection papers, summaries of current course readings, or one-page responses to course themes gives you and your students an opportunity to get to know each other in an academic capacity. Additionally, when an instructor doesn't provide timely feedback, especially if grades are not returned before the next assignment is due, students face unnecessary anxiety and are left guessing what their professor expects for completed course assignments. Grading rubrics and assignment descriptions can help demonstrate where and how students have completed assignments well or fallen short. However, they are no substitute for personalized instructor feedback. Many learning management software platforms allow instructors to leave voice recordings when grading student assignments. On top of making it easier to offer praise and personalized feedback for student improvement, this feature can further reduce social distance.

Interacting and Tracking

While keeping lines of communication open is important, online instructors should make it a goal to interact with

every student in their virtual classroom at least once. This can be difficult in large classes, but if the goal is to reduce social distance, then it is imperative for students to feel like they are a valued member of the group. I track contacts with students using a spreadsheet with a names column, a date column, and a grade column. I make it a regular practice to review students' grades after major assignments and reach out to students who missed assignments or did poorly. I note this contact on the spreadsheet and include an adjacent column to record any correspondence received from students. I also record other emails received from students and note my responses. The spreadsheet tracking method does take a little bit more time, but it enables instructors to quickly identify students who are performing poorly and who have not responded to communication attempts. Often these students are in danger of failing or not completing the course. Consequently, this level of data tracking can help instructors improve completion rates and improve student performance in the course.

Discussion Boards

Finally, instructors should be active on the course's discussion boards. Discussion boards are a staple of the online classroom and provide a space equivalent to the discussions that take place in a face-to-face classroom. During a traditional discussion, the instructor usually poses a guiding question and then facilitates the discussion by asking contributors follow up questions that allow for even more critical thinking on the part of the students. Although in online classrooms instructors may feel that they are "talking over" students or that their participation might limit discussion, instructors can serve to stimulate critical thinking and more deeply involve students in the issues being discussed by becoming an active discussion contributor. Participating in the classroom conversation also helps to reduce social distance and keeps students engaged because they know their posts are being read and taken seriously by their teacher.

Overall, there are many small changes instructors can implement to improve the quality of the connections with their students. By intentionally connecting with students through regular messages and email, communicating a willingness to help, providing adequate opportunities to ask questions, and forging connections by interacting with your students, instructors can reduce social distance in online classrooms and positively influence student success.

Emily McConnell, *Adjunct Instructor, English*

For more information, contact the author at Pitt Community College, 1986 Pitt Tech Road, Winterville, NC 28590. Email: elmcconnell296@my.pittcc.edu