



**Community. Connection. Communication.** In our routine course planning, we often assume that the relationships at work in our classrooms will take shape organically, and our comfort in the traditional teaching environment often leads to positive results. Meaningful interactions and relationships often do take place in our courses, and they help both us and our students engage more effectively in both teaching and learning.

In the less familiar environments such as *hyflex* and *hybrid* models where students have significantly less face-to-face interaction with each other and with their instructors, it is important to intentionally incorporate strategies that contribute to establishing and maintaining connection with and among our students. This intentional fostering of connections with our students will help to create an environment conducive to learning, and will pay off by producing more positive and effective experiences for everyone involved.

Continue reading for a series of ideas to help you cultivate connections with and among your students, in the context of teaching hybrid or online courses at UGA!

### PERSONALIZE YOUR COURSE FROM DAY ONE

Here are some things that you and your students can do early in the semester to create a more personalized and connection-oriented space on eLC, Zoom, or Office365.

- **Profile pictures:** Upload profile photos in eLC, Zoom, and Office365. Encourage your students to add theirs as well. Your Classlist in eLC will then be populated with personalized images, and if you turn off your video on Zoom, a profile picture will appear.
- **User profiles:** By adding a few details about yourself to your user profile in eLC – and again, encouraging your students to do the same – everyone can learn a bit about one another. Here are some ideas using the profile format on eLC:
  - Write the name you prefer to be called and your pronouns in the “nickname” line.
  - Add UGA email addresses to facilitate communication and collaborative work.
  - Share interests and activities, degree programs, and/or course goals.
- **Banner images:** Choose a photo that represents your course or subject matter! You can select from among the themed images in eLC, or you can upload your own.
- **Welcome videos:** Create an introductory video to cultivate presence in the online space. Show your personality through photos, props, or anecdotes. Encourage students to make their own, too! Contributing a video and getting to know peers in the online space initiates the process of actively creating community together.

An added benefit of these personalizing activities is getting everyone oriented to eLC, Zoom, or Office 365 in a low-stakes way. Instructors and students can practice navigating course pages, using different features, creating and sharing media, and adding captions or alternative text.

## CHECK IN WITH STUDENTS

- **Announcements:** Post regularly and include encouragement! Communicate with students about how often you'll post announcements and what kind of information they'll find. Make sure students know how to adjust their notification settings so that they don't miss important announcements in eLC.
- **Virtual office hours:** Actively encourage everyone to stop in to say hello. Help students understand what kinds of conversations are best for this space. If your course has a participation component, you might offer this as an option to earn credit.
- **Student progress meetings:** Offer students the chance to set up a meeting to discuss their progress in the course. Distributing a spreadsheet of time slots will demonstrate your commitment to talk with students who want to meet.
  - Provide students with a few questions to think through before the meeting:  
When have you felt most successful in the course so far? What are you most proud of? What goal do you have going forward? Where do you want to grow? What do you think I can do as your instructor to help you?
  - Review students' progress on your own and write down what you see as their strengths and where you have suggestions.
- **Surveys:** Ask students to complete questionnaires or surveys at different points in the semester. Include a balanced set of questions that focus on their concerns *and* things that are going well for them, and course-related *and* well-being questions. Then, respond to students' questionnaires! This can be done individually, or you can address common topics collectively.
- **Interaction logs:** Create a list or spreadsheet with your students' names. Jot down the date when you talk with each student and how (email, office hours, etc.). Try to check in individually with a few students per week. In a larger class you might have your TAs help you with this task. The log will help you notice when you haven't heard from someone in a while, and it will remind you to reach out.
- **Intelligent agents:** These tools can send automated messages to you or to students when certain conditions are met (e.g. a student does not log into eLC for a certain number of days or does not complete a task).

## CONNECTING TOGETHER

- **Mingling:** For scheduled Zoom sessions, invite students to arrive 10-15 minutes before the class meeting starts so that they can talk informally. You can also remain in the meeting for 10-15 minutes after class ends for those who would like to stay!
- **Chat tools:** Try out a chat where students can talk with each other to ask and answer quick questions. You could use chat functions in eLC, Outlook, or MS Teams.
- **Student groups:** Organize students into small groups that they will check in with (informally) each week over Zoom. They can appoint a group member to report back with questions for you that might have come up in their conversations.
- **Social-emotional activities:** Ask students to share one high and one low since the previous course meeting, to represent their mood with an emoji, bitmoji, or selfie, or to fill out a quick (perhaps anonymous) poll about how they're doing.

- **Class photos:** Take a physically distanced selfie or screenshot of different course sessions that can be shared on your eLC page. This can help students feel connected to classmates even when they are attending on different days or in different ways. Be sure to ask your students if they are okay with having class photos shared on eLC!
- **Shared documents:** Have students collaborate on a shared Word document or Excel spreadsheet in Office365, to work together in real time and make comments to one another.
- **Openness:** While there are certain boundaries that must be maintained and respected when making connections, a little bit of openness in each interaction can go a long way. When talking with students, share simple things about your day or talk about a challenge you've faced recently. Highlight shared experiences while still acknowledging differences. Ask students questions that show that you are interested in their lives.

## DISCUSSION BOARDS ON ELC

- **Community boards:** Create ungraded discussions boards designed for checking in and chatting informally. For example, post a question or challenge each week that students can engage in, such as: "What's one thing that is making you happy this week?" or "Share your favorite tip for staying healthy!" or "Post a photo of something in nature." Post a first response (to your own question) to help students get started.
- **Creative ways of posting:** Allow students to respond to required discussion boards in a variety of ways that work for your course and topic. You might encourage submissions of photos, videos, or voice threads. Students might share a poem or piece of creative writing. They might share links to resources, articles, or YouTube videos.
- **Groups on eLC:** You can create smaller discussion boards for groups of four or five students using the "Groups" function. Navigating threads and posts can be more manageable in small groups, and students may be able to have more open and meaningful conversations.

## MEDIA TOOLS (KALTURA)

- **Kaltura Capture:** If you record lessons, use both "screen" and "camera" options so that students will be able to toggle between your slides or screen and the video of you!
- **Feedback videos:** If there are class-wide strengths and weaknesses to address for certain assignments or assessments, create a video where you review them. You might also allow students the option to receive individualized feedback in an audio format.
- **Audio feedback:** For work submitted online, ask students if they would prefer written comments or a voice recording of you talking about their work.

For help with eLC, reach out to your assigned eLC support team (<https://help.elc.uga.edu/contact/>). For help with Zoom or Kaltura, contact [helpdesk@eits.uga.edu](mailto:helpdesk@eits.uga.edu).