The importance of whanaungatanga: Building relationships with first-year online students

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"I had a hard semester and may have given up entirely if it wasn't for the sense of community created through participation and inclusiveness in the course. It is the first paper I have felt a sense of belonging as a distance student."

COVID-19 forced many universities to shift, at least temporarily, to fully online delivery. As teaching staff will have realised, keeping students engaged is harder when not meeting in a physical classroom. I have been teaching large first-year online courses for many years and this emerging initiative outlines the strategies I use to build relationships and create a sense of belonging for my students. First-year distance students at Massey University have particular challenges – they are more likely to be first in family, lower socioeconomic status students who are coming to study after time out from education and, as such, they tend to have a higher lifeload and less developed academic skills. They choose online learning because the flexibility allows them to fit study into their full and complex lives, but online learning is a steep learning curve and it can be isolating and lonely for students. As a result of these factors, attrition in first-year distance courses tends to be higher than equivalent campus based courses.

Discussions on improving online learning often centre on technology with calls for digital innovation. However, in teaching, people and relationships matter more than tools. Student belonging has long been recognised as critical in higher education (Astin, 1984), impacting on well-being as well as facilitating behavioural, cognitive, and emotional engagement with learning (Kahu et al., 2020). In online learning, where students don't meet in classrooms, learner-teacher interactions are often more valued by students than learner-learner interactions (Martin & Bolliger, 2018). A strong teacher presence is therefore critical to creating a sense of community and belonging for online students (Stone, 2017).

My teaching is underpinned by a commitment to the Māori value of whanaungatanga: "a relationship through shared experiences and working together which provides people with a sense of belonging" (Moorfield, 2005, p. 257). I teach a first-year online course with around 300 students. It is an interdisciplinary course on identity and citizenship, covering challenging topics such as colonisation and privilege. The nature of the course and student cohort means creating a positive and supportive learning environment is vital. Over time I have developed a range of communication strategies explicitly to build whanaungatanga. Individually these strategies are not particularly innovative but feedback from students suggest that, collectively, they are effective. Importantly, in all my communications, I strive to balance being informative and 'academic' with being friendly and approachable. The specific strategies include:

Weekly videos: Each week I record a 20-25 minute mini lecture. These are not pre-recorded or professionally made; it is me, smiling, sitting at my desk, chatting to the student about the upcoming week. I start with NZ music relevant to the topic, I guide them through the week's learning materials, and I make links with conversations from the forums or events in the media. These are downloadable as podcasts and transcripts are also made available.

Tū News: This colourful one page PDF is emailed to the student each week. It has no course content but resources such as a to-do list, timely details of student support services (e.g. pre-reading service before the essay is due), motivational quotes, and study tips such as "how to apply feedback". It is informative but the tone and format is informal and friendly.

Tū Live: Every second week, I host an evening tutorial using Adobe Connect which is recorded for those who can't attend. My senior tutor, Helen, and I are present by video and students participate in chat boxes. Attendance is high – up to a third of enrolled students. While the central focus of these is supporting students with assessments, there is also time for chat.

Talk About It forums: Setting the right tone at the start in the discussion forums is critical as we discuss difficult topics such as racism. I start with a thread: "Who am I? Who are you?" My introduction is personal: "I am female, mother, academic, straight, cisgender, coeliac, chocaholic, atheist, Pākehā…" Helen and I ensure every student who posts their own introduction gets a personal reply from us. This establishes the forums as a supportive space.

Personal emails: Using LMS data and word-processing mail merge facilities, I send personalised emails at key points in the semester. For example: "Kia ora Dave, Great to see you submitted the first assignment – ka rawe!" Or "Kia ora Sally, I'm worried you haven't been online for a few weeks – is everything okay?" While most students realise I haven't actually emailed them individually, they appreciate the personal content and message. Many students respond, even just to say thanks, and this opens an individual communication channel.

Comments in course surveys and unsolicited feedback highlight the efficacy of my approach: "Ella creates a sense of community and belonging for students which counters the isolation sometimes experienced in extramural study". They experience the course as personal which, with such a large class, feels like an achievement: "Thank you for the personalised support – it really has made all the difference to me and I know it will for other Māori and Pasifika students like me". However, while the vast majority of students value my deliberately informal and relaxed manner, the occasional student does not: "The course could be more formal, even the Tū Live could be more academically structured instead of a social gathering…The general chat was very distracting and irrelevant". You can't please all of the people all of the time!

References

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