



Nottingham Trent
University

CADQ

Creating a welcoming digital community: Teaching online with personality, compassion and with real interaction

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Introduction

"No significant learning occurs without a significant relationship." - James Comer, professor of Child Psychiatry, Yale University.

Moving to online or blended learning can prove challenging for even the most experienced lecturer, teacher or tutor. Many issues are understandably centred around logistics and IT, but addressing the missing 'human element', particularly the lack of personal connection is perhaps as an important but less tangible consideration. [Research by WONKHE](#) conducted in October 2020 reveals that loneliness and an absence of sense of community are both strongly related to an increase in the numbers of students considering withdrawing from their current course. Alarming, the findings concluded that it would be "hard to overstate how often feelings of isolation or loneliness came up" regarding students who consider "dropping out" on a regular basis. Many responses to the survey linked the lack of sense of community to the increase in online learning as response to the COVID 19 pandemic. Whilst those that are happy with their online learning experience "praise the individual support they get from academic staff or interaction with peers". These findings are corroborated by the suggestions made by students on how to improve their current experience being largely focussed on "simple ideas centred around human connection". Encouragingly, there has recently been more [positive findings from Unite](#) but these findings still reveal concerns regarding lack of new social bonds. The [Community of enquiry framework](#) supports the idea that social presence plays an equal role in educational development as teaching and cognitive presence.

This post breaks down the 'human-element' into three categories; interaction, personality and compassion and then suggests ways to inject a little of each back into your online sessions (particularly focussing on notoriously 'cold' asynchronous activities). Investing time in these areas has the potential to nurture a community spirit between you and your students, breathe life into your course or module, improve relationships with your students and between your students, support mental health, increase engagement and assist retention.

Interaction – building relationships

The WONKHE research reveals that students are feeling increasingly lonely due to the lack of social engagement at university brought on by the pandemic. Furthermore, the research shows that a feeling of loneliness is closely linked to an increased desire to "drop-out". Early feedback from our students correlates with the WONKE findings and suggests that "community and a sense of belonging" are high on their list of desires for their online learning experience. The suggestions below should help bring back points of contact with your students that have the potential to build relationships, support their sense of belonging and mental health while bolstering your retention.

Personality - individual teaching style

Many lecturers have expressed concerns that the individual 'X-factor' they bring to their traditional sessions is difficult to capture in a video lecture. Although this may potentially seem trivial, it would be short-sighted to dismiss this *Je ne sais quoi* as insignificant (I'm sure we can all very quickly recall

a teacher from our own educational history who's special 'something' made their lessons stand out from the crowd). Similarly, the moments of warmth we share with students that can help create lasting bonds and those smaller, less formal interactions that can bring a session to life, softening the edges of a formal education setting, can be lost when moving teaching to the online environment. However, there is hope! In his paper "[E-Personality: The Fusion of IT and Pedagogical Technique](#)", Peter Chepya, Professor of Instructional Design at Post University in Waterbury, Connecticut suggests that whatever makes a professor successful in a traditional classroom can be migrated to the online classroom; "With vital IT input, each and every trick of the trade used in front of a physically present class can be used "in front of" an online asynchronous class."

Compassion - kindness and understanding

[Doug Parkin](#), the Principal Advisor for Leadership & Management at [Advanced HE](#) has spoken on how "key moments of humanity and kindness *really* make a difference" in improving retention (a more significant concern than ever) and the value of using technology to achieve this (although Doug acknowledges, "the challenge is about putting people first, not technology"). Something as simple as a brief email or phone call to check in with a student who is absent due to a positive Covid-19 test, just to ask how they are coping and explaining how they can keep on track with their university work, can help to build trust and a sense that both their academic success *and* their physical/mental wellbeing, matter.

Suggestions

The following suggestions are designed as practical solutions to help put a bit of "you" into your asynchronous content and provide moments of interaction between your students and you and your students, making everyone's experience a little more human while hopefully creating a little of the all-important student community spirit. We shouldn't kid ourselves into thinking these efforts will fully replicate the traditional student experience, but they can certainly help. No single suggestion is likely to work on its own, instead a holistic approach is required. Embedding as many ideas into your learning design as possible will be the best way to put your personality and that human element back into your online teaching. Not all suggestions will work for all cohorts and some may require repeated or adapted implementation (see Geoff Petty's '[Supported Experiments](#)') before results are seen. However, by adding "you" and other points of human interaction back into the teaching and learning equation you start to recreate some of the less discussed but hugely valuable benefits of traditional classroom teaching. As Peter Chepya puts it; "When Internet communication works, the medium becomes a place, as a physical classroom is a place. The shared experiences of the lectures and the discussion forums create a shared memory of incidents and events. The space is shared."

Be yourself. This is probably the simplest tip of all but also the easiest to forget and sometimes the most difficult to implement. When talking with your students online, typing your asynchronous lessons guidance and module information or creating a video lecture it can be all too easy to slip into a cold, instructional tone. While it's important to be clear in your explanations etc, a relaxed, conversational tone is the best way to address your students (where appropriate) and allows them to get a feel for the person behind the

keyboard. Use direct language to set a personal and engaging tone, using first and second person where possible. Don't be afraid to use humour and let your personality shine through. Similarly, your video lectures should be delivered in the same style you would deliver an on-campus lecture. There is no need to become a stern-newsreader. In '[E-Learning and the Science of Instruction](#)' Clark and Mayer use cognitive theory and research to argue that e-learning courses should include at least some spoken or printed text that is conversational rather than formal. They suggest that the use of second-person and informal language (where appropriate) lead to a conversational lesson tone and a more user-friendly experience. While to some it may feel counter-intuitive to adopt a less formal mode of address Clark and Mayer argue it can aid understanding of your learning material.

According to cognitive theories of learning, humans strive to make sense of presented material by applying appropriate cognitive processes. Thus, instruction should not only present information but also prime the appropriate cognitive processing in the learner. Research on discourse processing shows that people work harder to understand material when they feel they are in a conversation with a partner, rather than simply receiving information (Beck, McKeown, Sandora, Kucan, & Worthy, 1996). Therefore, using conversational style in a multimedia presentation conveys to the learners the idea that they should work hard to understand what their conversational partner (in this case, the course narrator) is saying to them. In short, expressing information in conversational style can be a way to prime appropriate cognitive processing in the learner.

Clark, Ruth C., and Richard E. Mayer. *E-Learning and the Science of Instruction: Proven Guidelines for Consumers and Designers of Multimedia Learning*, Centre for Creative Leadership, 2011. *ProQuest Ebook Central*,

<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ntuuk/detail.action?docID=697625>.

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Tame the elephant. Your students will be well aware of the missing personal interaction caused by the pandemic and move to online/blended learning (the WONKE research comments that it would be hard to overstate how often feelings of isolation or loneliness came up in regard to students who consider "dropping out" on a regular basis). Addressing this directly with your students, explaining that you know that they may feel they are missing this important element of university life and you are going to try some new ideas to help recreate the missing element will show them you don't just understand the importance of the issue but that you also care enough to try to do something about it. Similarly...

Be transparent. While it's important students are confident in your subject knowledge, there are positives to letting them know that you are as new to this way of working as they are and including them in the design of your new teaching and learning experiments. Your students can be part of the solution to new challenges. For example, you have decided to try using NOW self-assessments for the first time but are nervous how this will be received so decide to include your students in the evaluation process. In your Learning Room, just before the self-assessment you add a couple of sentences explaining you are about to try something new with them and would appreciate their thoughts and input.

Then, after the self-assessment you embed a short [Microsoft Forms questionnaire](#) to gather their comments. You can then use these comments to help decide if you wish to continue with self-assessments and your students feel valued and included.

It's good to talk. Try to find some time within your Teams sessions (the first ten minutes would potentially work well for most) to talk informally with your students about a topic unrelated to your subject (an interesting or topical news story can work well). Encourage your students to contribute to the discussion to keep it from being a lecture. If students are reluctant to talk on camera, ask them to post in the chat window. A [Mentimeter](#) poll is another excellent way to get all students to contribute to the discussion whilst avoiding the spotlight. If you find you have a few minutes remaining at the end of your session, consider using this time for casual conversation with your students. If you don't have time to stay and chat, encourage your students to spend the remainder of the session time in the video call talking with each other. These less-formal interactions that would perhaps more naturally occur in a traditional classroom setting can help build important bonds.

Social channels. Creating a social channel within your course Microsoft Teams team gives your students a space to chat outside of class time about their work, the weather or whatever else they may wish. This is unlikely to be a place that you will visit (it's probably more conducive to the channel's success that you don't); offering a 'safe' space for your students to mix can help to recreate a little of the all-important social element currently missing from a lot of university life. Microsoft offer [this straightforward guide](#) on creating a new channel within an existing Team. If you decide to try this suggestion, please be sure to inform your students, via a pinned post in the channel, that it is governed by the University's [computer use regulations](#) and any reports of misuse will be dealt with in accordance with the policy. It would be a good idea to include a copy of the policy in the 'Files' tab of the channel and/or post the link proved in the previous sentence and set a general code of conduct. At the 'Improving Student Retention 2020' conference Dr Harrier Dunbar-Morris, Dean of Learning and Teaching at the University of Portsmouth spoke on the merits of providing this type of outlet for students and suggested [Discord](#) as the platform. You may find your students have beat you to this idea!

Promote peer-to-peer learning. There is [plenty of evidence](#) to suggest that peer-to-peer learning is one of the best, if not *the* best way for students to learn and has the added benefit of allowing students to interact with each other safe in the knowledge that they have at least an interest in the subject in common. The new [breakout room](#) feature in MS Teams is a great way to separate your class into smaller workgroups. Working in smaller groups can help your less confident students share their ideas more easily and create bonds with their peers. [Whiteboard](#) for Microsoft Teams can help them collaborate in a more tactile way than through discussion alone. It can also be beneficial to teach your students how to set up video calls for group work projects. It's possible to convert the SCALE-UP model to the online

arena. We have [comprehensive guidance](#) on the process for those who wish to introduce flipped and collaborative learning into their modules.

A video speaks a thousand words. Where time allows, consider using video or audio recordings to present information in your Learning Room. The first piece of content in your Learning Room is the “Module Introduction” page. Here you are asked to briefly explain a little bit about yourself and the module to your students. Recording this introduction as short video (rather than simply entering a few paragraphs of text) lets your students see the person behind the module, gently helping to build a connection better than a wall of text ever could. The new splash screen that greets a user the first time they enter your Learning Room pulls its content from the Module Introduction page, making it a doubly good idea to put a friendly face at the front end of your Learning Room. Here’s a short video guide on [adding a welcome video](#). There are plenty of other areas where a video could be used instead of text, such as: your weekly news item updates on the homepage of your Learning Room, when posing questions in your formative assessments or when providing assignment feedback. You may find this [speeds up your marking turnaround!](#)

When creating a video lecture consider [this key MIT research](#) that explores how video production effects engagement. Researchers found that videos containing an instructor’s talking head are more engaging than slides alone. This short video contains guidance on how to include a talking head when [producing a video lecture in PowerPoint](#).

A glimpse behind the curtain. If you’re comfortable to do so, use a little space within your weekly updates to give a bit of the “you” that exists outside the classroom. This could be something as simple as a note on the Netflix series you’re currently binging, an update on how your piano lessons are going, or a ‘cat photo of the week’ post. This helps to add a little human warmth back into the mix.

Game on. While the [jury is still out](#) for some on the long-lasting pedagogical impact of gamification, adding game-like elements to some areas of your teaching is a good way to encourage interaction between students and soften a few edges. The success of gamification features such as awarding achievement medals for hitting specific milestones can be seen in the success of apps such as [Duolingo](#) and [Strava](#). D2L recently [provided guidance](#) on how to enable and implement similar achievement awards within NOW. Well known platforms such as [Kahoot!](#) can be used to create a fun but revealing plenary and introduces a little friendly competition into the teaching equation. A [Mentimeter](#) poll could be used to allow students to rate their understanding of a topic at the start of a session then again at the end.

1:1 time. If your schedule allows it, offering the opportunity for 1:1 tutorials is a great opportunity to build relationships with your students while providing them with crucial

academic support. The [WONKHE research](#) mentioned above revealed that students who were most satisfied with their online learning experiences praised the individual support offered by the module staff. Adding a [Microsoft Bookings](#) link to your Learning Room provides students with the opportunity to schedule time with you. The booking will appear in your Outlook calendar and allows students to give a little info on what they'd like to discuss. Crucially, you are able to define your availability so a student can't book an appointment with you before you've had the first coffee of the day or after your final session on a Friday afternoon!

Give them a nudge. Professor Peter Francis, the Deputy Vice-Chancellor at Northumbria University has demonstrated clear improvement in student outcomes when students were given what he calls "nudges". A 'nudge' is simply a very short message to a student to let them know that you have noticed their efforts (or lack of). For example, a nudge could be a short email to let them know that you have noticed they haven't accessed their asynchronous materials recently or to individually praise those who met a submission deadline. If your students can see that you notice them and the input in these smaller areas, as you would in a more traditional classroom setting, you should see improved buy-in for larger tasks and assignments. The good news is you can use 'Intelligent Agents' inside NOW to 'nudge' your students for you. To get started with Intelligent Agents you can [follow this quick guide](#). Further [comprehensive intelligent agents instructions can be found here](#). Don't forget, nudges aren't only there for the nasty things in life, don't forget to create agents for those who are doing well.

Discussion forums. Consider adding a discussion forum underneath your blocks of asynchronous content and encourage your students to use the space to ask questions to their peers based on the content covered. This is an excellent opportunity for student-to-student interaction and peer-to-peer learning. Anecdotal feedback from academics suggests there have been mixed reactions to discussion forums in the past; some courses have great success with them whilst others have found it's only the same two or three extra-keen students who engage with them. Depending on which camp your students fall you may need to give them a gentle push in the right direction. Using a discussion forum as an icebreaker (see below) in the first instance may be a good way to encourage buy-in.

Icebreakers. An introductory 'soft-start' task is a tried and tested method of warming up a class of students and a way of getting to know your students (and vice-versa) before getting into the real content of the session. There are plenty of [web sites offering suggestions](#) for digital icebreakers within Teams meetings ([MindTools](#) and [Symo Training](#) are great starting points) but how about using icebreakers at the start of your asynchronous session content?

[Mentimeter](#) (again!) has pre-built polls on light-hearted topics along the lines of "what superpower would you most like to have?", "Which are better, dogs or cats?" etc. You could post the poll at the start of your week's content and explain the results will be published at

the start of next week. If none of the pre-made polls do it for you, you can easily make your own.

[Whiteboard](#) or Microsoft Teams can be used for a quick game of noughts and crosses (just start and see who joins in) or Pictionary, hangman etc. If you use the desktop app version, you could add an unlabelled map to the whiteboard and ask students to place a mark nearest to a country/city/landmark of your choosing (“Where is Kazakhstan?”)

[Discussion forums](#) can be used to get your students interacting with each other. Start by posing a question that is likely to spark debate as this will encourage your students to engage with one another. Here’s a few suggestions to get you started:

- What would be your Mastermind specialist subject?
- What three words best describe you?
- What is your idea of the perfect day?
- What are the top three things on your bucket list?
- What is the biggest risk you’ve ever taken?
- Who has been the most influential person in your life and why?
- What book had a big influence on you?
- What does success mean to you?

Creative use of [H5P](#) can be used to produce digital icebreakers. H5P content such “fill in the blanks” and “Image hotspots” could be particularly useful in this context. [This short video shows](#) how to access H5P content and [this guide](#) explains how to use it.

Pitching an icebreaker at the correct level for a particular group is a fine art. You know your students and should be able to determine if these suggestions will work for you and your learners, or not. If you feel they don't quite tick the correct boxes, they hopefully provide at least *some* inspiration for your own lesson starters.

Timeout. The benefits to learning offered by taking short breaks are well documented. So, after a chunk of asynchronous content consider sharing a link to an interesting/light-hearted/fun web site or web experiment. Adding these moments of light-relief will be appreciated by your students and again help to build connections by showing there is a real person behind their Learning Room. Here’s a long list of excellent links to get you started:

[Can a neural network learn to recognize doodling?](#)

[Explore Europe's highest mountain in the largest resolution photograph ever taken](#)

[Explore the tomb of Pharaoh Ramesses VI](#)

[Awareness Test: Whodunnit?](#)

[Awareness Test: Count the number of basketball passes](#)

[Create virtual sand art](#)

[Explore an online museum of obsolete sounds](#)

[Play along with classical piano compositions using your computer keyboard](#)

[This website will self-destruct if it doesn't receive at least one message every day](#)

[An interactive music video that simultaneously uses your computer and mobile phone screens](#)

[How close to perfect are you able to draw a circle?](#)

[Learn photography then test your skills with a virtual DSLR camera](#)

[Interactive fluid simulator](#)

[8-bit interactive world building](#)

[ASCII Camera](#)

[Create your own immersive audio-visual nature experience](#)