

Link to Life and Learning: Integrating Quick Assignments to Encourage Belonging

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Abstract: At an institution which serves mostly commuting students who are first generation and often balancing life responsibilities, online learning is enticing and presents challenges. Students can struggle with the required skills of self-regulation, effective time-management, communication, and balancing needs. In the spring of 2022, an innovative teaching practice was added to an online first-year seminar course called Link to Life and Learning. Each week, students completed a low-stakes assignment which addressed a variety of factors related to belonging in college including: a reflection about the purpose of a college education, reading to comprehend, health and wellness, diversity and inclusion, procrastination, healthy relationships, involvement on campus, school-life balance, and individualized meetings with the instructor. These assignments were created in a personalized manner that fit the needs of the students and the campus, while encouraging students to develop a connection to their purpose, passion, and sense of belonging.

Keywords: Online learning, student belonging, technology.

The rise of online learning has promoted a culture of access and flexibility; yet, it has also challenged connection and student belonging. A cultivated sense of belonging can lead to persistence and success (Gopalan & Brady, 2019). Developing a personal, caring relationship with students through an online learning platform can be challenging (Thomas et al., 2014). Yet, we know that professors are integral to establishing a productive and motivational learning environment which fosters students' belonging and life-long learning, regardless of the teaching mode.

First-Year Seminar (FYS) courses help students create social connections, develop life skills, and establish a foundation of acclimatization (Jajairam, 2016). FYS courses are particularly helpful for first-generation students, who reportedly have a lower sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012; Walton & Cohen, 2007). Our institution is a regional, comprehensive public institution with a population of diverse students, a high number of first-generation students, and primarily serves commuting students. FYS courses are traditionally taught face-to-face; however, the course described here was one of the first to be offered in an asynchronous online format in spring 2022 for 24 students. The course, HSC-B190: Flint Water Crisis, served several purposes: fulfilling the general education requirement of Human Behavior and Social Institutions, serving as a FYS, and executing a personal passion project for the author on this topic. The course deconstructed the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, through a public health lens with examination of *What the Eyes Don't See: A Story of Crisis Resistance and Hope in an American City* by Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha.

I believe it is the professor's responsibility to try to humanize an online course and create a space that encourages engagement, albeit this can be a difficult task. As a FYS course, the magnitude of purposeful human connection was crucial to supporting student success. In the learning management system, students completed a weekly assignment called Link to Life and Learning (L2LL), which is a unique assignment to this course. These assignments reflected innovative integration of the campus objectives of a FYS course through a reflective and personal five-point

assignment which amassed to 15% of the overall grade. One paid Peer Mentor was assigned to this course to provide engagement, support, and mentorship to other students. The Peer Mentor had experience mentoring in a face-to-face course, but not online. In fall 2021, I met with the Peer Mentor to discuss the vision of the course and to brainstorm relevant success-related topics knowing the likely student population. The next sections will discuss the integration of some of the creative technological strategies that the Peer Mentor and I designed and implemented to increase caring, belonging, and reflection for enrolled students.

The introductory module included a recorded video of me explaining the syllabus in detail and reading the diversity and acceptance statement, which I include in all syllabi. In this module, students complete the following: upload a picture for profile personalization; complete the name pronunciation tool (i.e. NameCoach¹), add preferred pronouns (if desired), provide video introductions to the class, and complete brief assessments (i.e. QuickChecks²) to acknowledge reviewing the syllabus and course expectations. These low-point value assignments are valuable in connecting with students personally and creating an inclusive teaching and learning environment (Sathy & Hogan, K.A. (2019). I want to know the humans behind the assignments as much as I want them to know I am an engaged human, too. I commit to weekly check-in emails, prompt grading, frequent video comments in assignments, and always personalize comments to the student addressing their submission.

One may assume that students of this generation, in a FYS course, have had enough online learning experience to be comfortable with a myriad of technology, especially as we have transitioned away from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, the variation in pedagogies, experience, and learning management systems can lead to a difficult transition in higher education, particularly for the aforementioned student population. The first L2LL assignment was called “Success in Online Classes.” In this assignment, students are introduced to a variety of accessible *free* tools including printable calendars, links to how to use electronic calendars for college students, and podcasts focused on time-management strategies. Each section also involves a video and transcription of strategies used by the Peer Mentor and me. The Peer Mentor included the following advice for students:

I have a whiteboard calendar in my room as well to show me due dates and upcoming events. I use sticky note reminders, for things I don't want to forget as well. I put them on my front door so when I leave the next morning I won't forget, on my desk, or on my bedside table. Instead of using a planner, I recently started using to-do notebooks instead.

I shared pictures of my campus, home workspaces, and my notebooks and electronic calendar which encourages personal and human connection (Sathy & Hogan, 2019). For assessment of this assignment, students uploaded a picture of what organizational system they will use and a reflection on previous strategies that have been successful, effective, and unsuccessful.

Another L2LL assignment explored the notion of “Why College?” This module is designed to help students reflect and share the root of *why* they are at an institution of higher education. Although I share my college journey with students, my professional experience at this institution has taught me that my journey is not very similar to that of my students. This assignment included TedTalks about the topic, information about the structure of their institution, the history of higher education, and a connection to the campus career services office. The connection to the career services office included a link to get monthly email updates, information on the once-per-semester career fair, and a time-lapse

¹ NameCoach is an integrated tool in Canvas which allows students to record pronunciation of their names, provide phonetic spelling, and store pronouns.

² QuickChecks are embedded assignments into Canvas with provide low-stakes assessments which provide immediate feedback and allow the instructor to track analytics.

video of how to get from the main parking lot to the career services office. In their assignment, one student shared, “I really liked how she explained everything in the video. It made things make a lot more sense in my head and made me start strategically thinking. So, I just wanted to say thank you for that video. I enjoyed it!”

Some other academically-focused L2LL assignments include “Reading to Comprehend,” “Involvement on Campus,” “Honesty and Plagiarism,” and “Procrastination.” These assignments were strategically placed during weeks in the semester where a dip in performance is typically experienced. These topics include a compilation video of me reading the class book in a variety of places (kitchen table, school pick-up line, curled up on the couch, at kid’s sporting activities, etc.) with a recorded explanation of how highlighting and note-taking helps me to comprehend what I read, a skill I learned when I was an undergraduate student. One student shared, “I think I know plenty of skills and strategies to be successful, but it is just dependent on whether or not I implement them.” To encourage use of campus resources, we provided time-lapse videos traveling to great study places on campus, tutoring and writing centers on campus, the Titan Student Success Center, and questionnaires to help students evaluate, reflect, and integrate campus-level supports.

To provide additional supportive connections, the L2LL assignments address “Health and Wellness,” “Equity and Diversity,” “Balance,” and “Healthy Relationships.” These topics were selected as this course is based in the Division of Health Sciences and my previous experience teaching first-year students. Additionally, these topics connected well to the required reading. The assignments encouraged students to learn about additional campus resources such as the Student Activity Center, Health and Wellness Center, the Civil Rights Heritage Center, and Counseling Center. These are resources not historically known on a campus comprised of mostly commuting students. The assignments also highlighted programs and workshops through the university’s health and wellness and recreation programs. One topic of particular importance for college-aged students is healthy relationships. While students were not required to provide examples of their personal experiences or stories, several did, and one shared this: “I watched all the videos and looked into the websites [from the OneLove Foundation]. It’s really great to see all of these resources in our communities.”

As an experienced online instructor, I can share that integrating these components into an online course was challenging, but incredibly rewarding. One student provided this comment on the course evaluation:

I’ve never had a professor do this before, so this is really amazing to see that you opened not only my eyes but so many other students’ eyes to live a healthier life! So, on behalf of everyone thank you! We need more professors out there like you who truly care and want to see students succeed. It makes me want to do even better and improve even more when I feel like I have someone who cares like that, so thank you very much!

The development of the Link to Life and Learning assignments required a great deal of creativity and authenticity and were intentional for a supportive and inclusive asynchronous learning environment. The reflections provided in this article demonstrate that the course provided care and support in an online course; however, the strategies can also be implemented in face-to-face courses. The hope is that by providing access to opportunities, students are more likely to feel a sense of belonging and seek out and utilize campus resources, which furthers success and belonging (Strayhorn, 2012; Yeager et al., 2016).

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