

Off-Topic Discussion Boards to Develop Student Connection and Course Success

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Abstract

While online education's popularity is growing, it has unique challenges. Among them is the increased likelihood of students dropping, failing, or withdrawing from the courses due to a perceived lack of connection with their classmates and their instructor. The goal of this study is to offer a specific small way in which instructors can increase that sense of connection and potentially trigger the emotions and qualities of resilience that are associated with academic success. Through the use of off-topic discussion boards with deliberate use of emotionally resonant prompts, instructors can create an online environment in which students feel increased rates of connection with the instructor and their peers.

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Problem: Online Connection

Online education is surging across the US. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2021), 61% of students took an online class in 2021, compared to 36% in 2019 (*Fast Facts, Distance Learning, 2021*). While one might be tempted to chalk up that increase in online education to the pandemic, demand for distance learning has remained high even as COVID rates decreased. According to the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) of the US Department of Education, as of fall 2022 the percentage of students enrolled in distance learning education was 53.3% (*IPEDS Data Explorer, 2022-2023*).

Nevertheless, online education has problems that differ from in-person instruction. In particular, online education's greatest asset—its flexibility and ability to be implemented at a physical distance—is also its greatest weakness, resulting in an increased tendency for students to feel disconnected from the course, instructor, and classmates. From the initial review of Carolyn Hart (2012) is an identified problem within the United States and internationally. Terminology has wavered between persistence and success, where each has been interchangeably used to characterize a student that completes a course and continues to program completion. Separate searches were conducted in Academic Search Premier, CINAHL Plus, the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ to today's post-COVID students, studies have repeatedly found that online students indicate a lower sense of connection to their classmates than their in-person peers do, and as a result, are more likely to have persistence issues (Dong, 2024). While studies have found an array of reasons for lower student success rates in online courses, they have also shown that a sense of connection to the course is essential for student success (Shah & Cheng, 2019). Scholars have demonstrated that the more students connect to their classmates, the more likely they are to succeed in a course (Bettinger, Liu, & Loeb, 2016). In addition, as students feel more connected to their courses, they are more likely to create a halo effect on lesser-engaged students in the course, increasing their rates of connection, and

success, as well (Bettinger et al., 2016).

While this is of concern for educators, it is of particular concern in open access/ lower income settings, where students, due to financial, family, and time considerations, might be attracted to online courses (Qayyum et al., 2019). These students, frequently nontraditional, often from a more academically vulnerable background, are therefore drawn into an academic Venus flytrap: while employment and family needs might make online education a compelling option, a lack of sense of connection to their peers and instructor contributes to a scenario that is more likely to discourage course success and completion. For instructors of these students, building a sense of connection is therefore essential in increasing rates of student success in courses (Shatila, 2024).

This is a significant problem, and one beyond the reaches of a single instructor or a single study. However, as suggested by Darby and Lang (2019) in *Small Teaching Online: Applying Learning Science in Online Classes*, we as instructors still have the power to make smaller shifts in our teaching to assist our students. Instructors have suggested some ways to address this, such as the use of audio lecture (Mandernach et al., 2018). The goal of this study is to offer a specific small way in which instructors can increase a sense of connection and potentially trigger the emotions and qualities of resilience that are associated with academic success (Duckworth, 2016).

Solution(s): The Watercooler

In spring 2017, I began teaching online in an open access two-year college. At the time, I dove headfirst into best practices and Quality Matters training to offer my students their best chance in the online space. One aspect of my initial course (World History II, the second half of the year-long World History course) was to offer learner-learner engagement via a forum, which I referred to as “the watercooler.” In my first course, I left the forum open and suggested students converse there about their favorite shows, life in college, and so forth. This attempt failed. No students took me up on what national best practices recommended, an opportunity for learner-learner engagement.

In my next revision of the course, I restructured the watercooler. I made it credit-bearing (although in total never above 5% of the course grade) and I provided prompts each week, which I also answered. The prompts were meant to mix peer education opportunities (how students recommended learning online, for example) with general knowledge (best suggestions for cheap recipes) and prompts encouraging an overall sense of connection (sharing pet pictures). Alongside these prompts, I attempted to weave into the questions strategic prompts at high-stress moments of the semester. These strategic prompts were intended to generate memories, feelings, and thoughts that could potentially lead a student to a) find comfort in their classmates, thus reducing the likelihood of emotional isolation and feeling as if difficulties in academia were unique to the student, and b) trigger the students' sense of motivation, encouraging them to continue to push on in the course. Examples included asking students near the end of a term for whom they were putting themselves through the grind of education, or how they saw their lives in 10 years and what role this course, and their education, would play in that goal.

While I anticipated student complaints about these small assignments, instead, I found students regularly made positive comments about them. In addition, while many assignments saw lower levels of completion (like formal essays), the watercoolers' level of completion was high and included students who clearly had no numerical ability to pass the course. This prompted an IRB-approved study through my institution, in which I sought to answer the following questions:

1. Did the watercoolers raise the students' overall sense of connection to the class and the instructor?
2. Did they have an impact on course completion rates?
3. Was there a preferred watercooler? Did the "strategic" prompts influence students more than the general questions?

Method

As of January 2022, I began implementation of the study. I conducted it across my three main online courses: two sections of approximately 30 students for World History I in fall; and in spring, one section of World History II and the History of Russia, both approximately 30 students each. I received additional IRB approval to use comparative data

on student performance in my online classes before the study began (2017-onwards). The students in my online classes came from my home college within the university, an open-access, 2-year urban public institution with a population of about 4,446 students. My college's student body is nearly 50% first-generation college students, and is highly diverse, with 36.1% underrepresented minorities. In addition, my classes included students from the selective admission fellow colleges in our university, such as Arts & Sciences.

For the World History I and II courses, students were required to submit a response to a weekly watercooler topic; in addition to my own public responses to the prompt, I replied privately to the students' submissions. For my History of Russia course, I widened the timeline—the watercoolers were almost every two weeks, and they combined a requirement for students to submit and comment on a news article from an aggregator of independent (i.e., not state-influenced/owned) Russian news media. While the questions were not entirely identical across all courses (to avoid turning off students who followed me across courses), the more emotionally engaging watercoolers (such as asking students their motivation for pursuing higher education) were repeated, again at presumed high points of stress (e.g., midterms, or in the final weeks of class). A list of the watercooler prompts for the three courses used follows this article.

For all three courses, I offered a survey at the start of the course; this survey focused on establishing an understanding of what student experience in online vs. in-person courses had been, and to what extent they felt a sense of connection to those types of courses. At the end of the course, I offered another survey asking students to rate this course in the same fashion and exploring their attitudes to the watercoolers. Ultimately, about 150 students participated in these surveys. In addition to these surveys, students had opportunities to comment on the watercooler experiment in midpoint course surveys in which I asked students open-ended questions about what in the class was working well for them or not, as well as final evaluations. The surveys, final evaluation, and midpoint check-in were all anonymous and optional for the students.

Results

Quantitative Data

Did the watercoolers raise the students' overall sense of connection to the class and the instructor? In the preliminary survey, students indicated they had had some experience with online courses. The majority (89%) had had at least one online course at the college level, with the largest group selecting one to three online classes as their background. However, they did not report a strong bond with their online classmates. On average, using the 5-point Likert scale, they rated their connection to online courses as 1.87, in comparison to the 2.96 they rated face-to-face classes.

The end of semester survey for the class showed that students experienced something different in our online class together. They rated their sense of connection to their classmates as 2.73—much closer to an in-person course. In fact, the mode for this question was a 3, exactly where the mode sat for the original question of how they rated their typical connection to their in-person courses. Their sense of connection to the instructor was very high as well. When asked about their sense of connection to the instructor, they placed it as 4.08 on the 5-point Likert scale.

The students explicitly attributed these ratings to the watercoolers. When asked to what extent they felt the watercoolers influenced their sense of connection to the class, the average response was a 3.91, and for the instructor, the average was 4.29. For both, the mode was 5; student responses were clearly clustering around the top of the Likert scale.

The results showed students expressed a strong positive connection to the course and the instructor, and they felt the watercoolers contributed to that. When asked about their connection to the course in comparison to other current classes they had, they indicated they felt less (46.51%) or equally (39.53%) connected to them. A minority (13.95%) indicated they felt more connected to their other online courses. In hindsight, I would have refined that question to better clarify the students' response to this question.

Did the watercoolers have an impact on course completion? It is difficult to say that the watercoolers had an impact on students staying in and succeeding in the course. As we know, students drop or fail courses for reasons that go beyond one assignment, and we have little way of knowing for sure what their rationale might be. To begin to engage this subject, however, I compared my first online course, which was without this water-cooler system, to my later ones. In comparison to my 2017 World History II course, where my DWF rate was 37.5% (and the DWF rate for all sections of the same course across the University was 27%), I found my rates of DWF have fallen and have remained well beneath that number (for World History II, 21.6% in 2022, 14.8% in 2023, 13% in 2024). This could, however, be the result of many factors other than the watercoolers. For example, scholars have shown that students who have had prior experience in online courses are less likely to drop, and majority of the students surveyed in this study indicated they had had online classes at the college level (Sawsen, Hager, & Joséphine, 2021). Given that online course popularity was lower in 2017, it is likely that the 2017 students did not have that background. In addition, we cannot rule out that my efforts to improve as an online instructor beyond the use of the watercoolers might have helped my students as well. As a result, without a comparative study of a non-watercooler class taught in the same term as my current watercooler courses, I cannot satisfactorily answer the question of whether the watercoolers had an impact on course completion.

Did shifting to a bimonthly schedule of watercoolers change the response pattern?

In my History of Russia course, I used the watercoolers approximately every other week vs. the weekly system I had in the World History courses. While I ultimately had less students in this course (teaching a single section once per year) than the World History courses, I studied their responses in order to determine if spacing out the watercoolers had a similar impact. The Russia students were nearly identical to the World History students in their estimation of connection to their course classmates (2.71 for World, 2.77 for Russia), but rated the instructor connection higher (2.77 vs. 4 for Russia). Given the smaller number of students in the Russia course vs. the Worlds, at this point the higher number for Russia might be an outlier based on a smaller data pool. While that difference

might not have been significant, I did see one area in which the History of Russia students were clearly distinct from the World History ones. Most critique of the watercoolers seemed to come from the History of Russia course, where students felt the way the assignment was packaged—combining the watercooler commentary with the submission of a Russian news story—was ineffective. As one student wrote, “I really don’t think mixing them with the Meduza threads [“Meduza” is an online news aggregator for Russia] was super beneficial. They were both interesting and valuable in their own right, but I don’t know if there was really any purpose to putting them together besides convenience (which is valid).”

Qualitative Data

Although the Likert scale data from the surveys made clear that students felt the watercoolers helped their connection with the course and instructor, the comments the students offered up were even more revealing. Students had the chance to discuss the watercoolers in the surveys before and at the end of the term, in the mid-point check previously mentioned, and in the final evaluations. In addition, students frequently mentioned the watercooler assignments in the actual assignments themselves. Five themes emerged from these spontaneous comments: a) the belief the watercoolers showed a professor who cared; b) the sense the watercoolers helped the student connect with their peers; c) ways in which the watercoolers had another, unexpected, positive impact on the student; d) minor criticism of the watercooler assignment design; and e) a clear preference for the “strategic” prompts intended to have an emotional impact on the students.

The Watercoolers Showed the Instructor Cared. Students frequently packaged their comments on the watercoolers with comments on the instructor. For example, from a course evaluation, one student wrote: “[The instructor] is an amazing teacher who actually cares about her students and their well-being. She is probably one of the most understanding and caring teachers I have had to be honest...I think the watercoolers really helped and it would be cool if other professors would do something like that in their courses.” Language in these comments repeatedly interwove references to the watercoolers with the belief that the instructor was caring. For example, a student wrote the following:

“Instructor provided clear and straight forward instructions and expectations, watercoolers really showed that the prof did ‘t [sic] just care about the course work but how we were doing, the assignments were not stupid and actually were aligned with the course.” As one student summed it up, the watercoolers signaled a sense of caring in the instructor: “I loved the watercoolers! I felt like you were really trying to get to know us, which is very cool since this is an online class and even some of my in-person class professors don’t try!!”

For some students in their comments, the chief value of the watercooler was that engagement with the instructor. Survey comments linked the students’ engagement with their specific engagement with the instructor: “I preferred them to connect with you rather the other students, but to each their own!” Students repeatedly mentioned the instructor’s comments: “I did love how you gave a personalized message after every response I did in the watercoolers, it made me happy that you took the time to respond and validate me through those answers. “

The Watercoolers Helped Students See Their Classmates as Human Beings, and Therefore Created a More Engaging Course. In addition to the comments linking the watercoolers with an instructor who cared, students praised the watercoolers as creating a link with their classmates. One student wrote in an evaluation that the most helpful element in the course was the watercoolers for this reason: “The watercooler assignments helped me connects [sic] and see what the other students are like despite being in an online setting.” Students in the surveys regularly mentioned the watercoolers helped them connect with classmates: “Even classes with regular discussion posts tend to only be about the topics of the class itself, but the watercoolers at least give you some idea of the kind of people your classmates are.” Using words like “connect,” “engage,” “personal,” and even “human,” students described the watercoolers as giving them a stronger sense of their classmates.

In Addition to a Sense of Connection, Students Found Watercoolers Helpful as a Tool for Mental Health. In one assignment in which I asked students what they had learned over the course of the term (in any course), a student wrote:

I have learned a lot of new material this semester, but I think the one thing that will stick with me is something we've been doing in this class all semester. These watercoolers are something that I have used to reflect. They are very easy to do and they're fun. I enjoy reading other classmates [sic] comments (especially the self-care) and I like to apply some of those comments to myself. These watercoolers remind me to take some time for myself in every class and reflect a little bit.

Similar wording emerged from the course evaluations: "the watercooler activities were a laid-back way of making me think," one student wrote. Students expressed that the watercoolers were beneficial as a tool for reflection: "They were awesome. I loved just expressing myself amidst the chaos and pain of the school semester. They often pulled me out of funks and reminded me of better times. They were encouraging." Another student described the benefit as explicitly one of mental health: "They helped me think about my feelings as the weeks went on and made me feel heard about my mental state." It is notable that these comments are in spite of the fact only two of the watercoolers directly referenced mental health: 1) one in which students were asked to show their state of being near midterms by way of a funny image/meme and 2) one in which students were asked to describe/suggest best ways to beat stress.

Students found other positives to the watercoolers as well. They pointed to the fact the assignments were "easy" as a stress break from high-demand courses and as a result created a kind of momentum for diving into course work: "The watercoolers were also something that helped me ease into the weeks learning materials," one student wrote. Students echoed this sentiment with language of distraction or a break, such as "They were a good addition to the course because they served as a distraction from other assignments and were easy points." Another student wrote:

I didn't really feel any sense of connection to the other students, but I looked forward to doing them every week because they were easy assignments that let me feel productive without having to work too hard. They were something easy to check off, and I know that makes me sound lazy, but...actually I don't have a follow-up, I just know that it makes me sound lazy. My bad.

While the student seemed to doubt the validity of their comments, in fact the idea that the watercooler was a way of "priming the pump" for homework is consistent with the other comments suggesting the assignments were a good break from normal work and a positive experience. And despite the emphasis on "easy points," in every course with a watercooler, the total points a student could achieve from these assignments was 5% of the course—not enough to tilt the balance of a student's success. Even so, students still appreciated them as low-stakes assignments.

Students Were Not Entirely Without Criticism of the Watercoolers. When I originally set up the watercoolers, I anticipated student push-back and accusations of busywork. That irritation for the most part did not emerge from any of the ways in which students could offer up their voices, but there was some criticism. As noted before, in the History of Russia course, some students disliked the specific assignment structure, mixing contemporary Russian news updates with the personal prompts. Across all the student course evaluations, I did find two students who answered a standard university question about the least useful part of the course with a reference to the watercoolers. Beyond the evaluations, some students expressed a sense that the benefit of the watercoolers depended on the learner: "I think they are a neat idea but not useful if the individual does not really care about the purpose of them."

Students felt the watercooler system would be stronger with additional requirements. A theme in the responses was that students suggested requiring posters to respond to someone else in the watercoolers. "I think they're a good idea, but I feel there would be more of a connection between students if there were a comment requirement."

Even students who were strongly in favor of the watercoolers urged a requirement for a response. While I saw this trend emerging early in my surveys, I chose not to implement this requirement for the sake of consistency across the study.

The Watercoolers Students Most Appreciated Were Those with Higher Emotional Impact. In World History I, students repeatedly indicated watercoolers on self-care, how they were doing (a thread of memes), the “happy thought” (aka a moment or source of joy in one’s life), and where they would be in 10 years were the most beneficial to them. “The How Are We Doing watercolor let me laugh during the time I was struggling, and I could relate because I was able to get ideas of how I can [sic] relax and take care of myself after being stressed with school and life. It was also a good reminder that it is important to take of myself and give myself a break.” Students described the watercoolers almost as a confessional: “I was able to completely dump out everything that I needed to without feeling scared to come clean.”

In World History II, the students focused heavily again on the more emotionally resonant watercoolers, e.g., motivation, or the prompt about how they were doing: “At that point in the semester, I was so exhausted, burnt out, and just done with everything. It was nice to just take a step back and think about things which brought me joy.” “[The motivation watercooler] gave me a reminder as to why i’m doing this in a time that i forgot [sic].”

In the History of Russia course, once again, students tended to pick the more emotionally laden watercoolers as the ones of most importance to them, such as the motivation prompt: “It was nice to reflect on what motivates me and see what motivates my classmates. Especially at that portion of the semester. This semester was one of the hardest I have dealt with, so thinking consciously about why I am pursuing higher education was a helpful exercise.”

Across the three courses, students identified the watercoolers most valuable to them. While I have described them here as more emotionally laden, for the students, the

wording they chose centered on authenticity. These were topics of value and emotional intimacy, and students verbalized that in the surveys: “These two topics ...were the most memorable to me because of the responses that my classmates gave, which seemed more authentic than the other discussions.” Relatability seemed to be the most critical factor here: “I liked the How Are We Doing watercooler because the memes were funny and allowed me to understand my peers and instructor in a relatable way.”

Discussion

The data, both quantitative and qualitative, suggests the strategic use of off-top-ic discussion boards has had a positive impact on my students. While I cannot say they have been solely responsible for an overall decline in the DWF rate in my online courses, student voices, as seen through surveys and evaluations, indicate they felt the watercoolers contributed to a more connected, more supportive online environment. Students interpreted this as a sign of the professor’s caring, to which they reacted positively, and as a reminder to take a moment of relaxation/reflection for the sake of their mental health. While a few students voiced concern about one way in which these assignments were presented (the History of Russia), the vast majority were positive about the assignments and advocated only tweaks to create more inter-student communication.

The depth of written positive responses to the watercoolers, as well as the survey data, tells us that students value connection to their peers and their instructor in on-line courses. This agrees with the body of scholarship showing a relationship between sense of connection and success rates in online courses (Bettinger et al., 2016). While one cannot say that the watercoolers definitively changed the DWF rates in these courses, the data suggests that the watercoolers have achieved what Darby and Lang (2019) advocated in *Small Teaching Online: Applying Learning Science in Online Classes*—a small, deliberate tweak to an online course that has benefitted the students.

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Appendix A

Watercooler questions. Italics signify the strategic prompts mentioned in the text.

World History I	World History II	History of Russia (approx. every other week)
1. Introductions 2. Best Tips for Being an Online Student 3. Our Pets/Favorite Things 4. What Makes for a Good Class? 5. <i>Overcoming Challenges</i> 6. Good News & Life Hacks 7. Recommend a Class 8. <i>How Are We Doing?</i> (GIFs/memes) 9. Halloween Smackdown! 10. <i>Self-Care</i> 11. <i>Who's Your Motivation?</i> 12. <i>What Have You Done & Where Will You Go?</i> (How this course fits into your degree/future plans)	1. Introductions 2. Amazing Places you've been (moments or actual places) 3. Saving Money as a College Student 4. Class Recommendations 5. Issues of the Past vs. Issues of the Present 6. <i>Self-Care</i> 7. Entertainment Recommendations 8. <i>How Are We Doing?</i> (memes/GIFs) 9. Our Summer/Fall Plans 10. No Such Thing as a Fish (interesting factoids we shared) 11. <i>Your Motivation (for college)</i> 12. <i>Your Happy Thought</i> (what brings you joy/makes you smile) 13. <i>Where Will We Be in 10 Years?</i>	1) Introduction 2) <i>Pandemic Thoughts</i> (Something we learned from living in a pandemic) 3) Air Your Grievances (group griping session) 4) Life Tricks & Tips 5) <i>Rest & Relaxation</i> (your best tips for these) 6) <i>How Are We Doing?</i> (Meme/GIF thread) 7) <i>Our Moments of Triumph</i> 8) <i>Your Motivation</i> 9) <i>Words of Wisdom</i> (best pieces of advice you have heard/have for others)