

Strategies for Building Connection with Students in Online ESL Classrooms

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Summary: This article illustrated the importance and benefits of building virtual connection between teachers and students in online classrooms. The idea “The Four Connections” was introduced in the article: 1) Interact with Students by Name, 2) Check-In Regularly, 3) Schedule One-on-One Meetings, 4) Practice Paradox. Detailed examples of how to utilize “The Four Connections” in the online ESL classrooms in Higher Education are provided.

Keywords: virtual connection, online classrooms, ESL, Higher Education

Introduction

After the Pandemic, the demand for online and hybrid courses is rising in Higher Education in the United States, as contrasted to the stagnant overall enrollment numbers in traditional courses (Garrett et al., 2023). However, low retention rates come with the rising demand for online courses. Historically, the failing retention rate in online courses is 10% to 20% higher than traditional courses (Bawa, 2016). Researchers discovered the five common themes leading to low retention rates and one of the themes included faculty-student relationships. Five common themes for retention solutions were also found by the researchers and one of the themes addressed the benefits of faculty-student interaction brings to student success (Seery et al., 2021).

Working as an ESL instructor at Spokane Community College, I switched from in-person classes to online classes last year. I love the experience; however, I noticed the challenge of building connections with my ESL students since there were a lot of factors lacking in the online classes, such as physical presence, nonverbal cues, social presence, feedback mechanisms, spontaneous interaction, to name a few. Therefore, I started to search for effective strategies to nurture virtual connection within online classrooms.

The idea of “The Four Connections” is a research-based equity producing framework which I adapted and used in my ESL online class. “The Four Connections” was created for the Drop Rate Improvement Program at Odessa College.

Odessa College discovered that teachers who had lower drop rates possessed “a common thread of connectivity with their students.” (Kistner, 2011). Four foundational principles were identified from this common thread:

- Interact with Students by Name
- Check-In Regularly

- Schedule One-on-One Meetings
- Practice Paradox

I adapted these strategies with the guidance from [Lake Washington Institute Of Technology \(LWTech\)](#) since LW-Tech offers specific approaches to implement “4 Connections” in all modalities. And I eventually tried these out in my own online ESL classes.

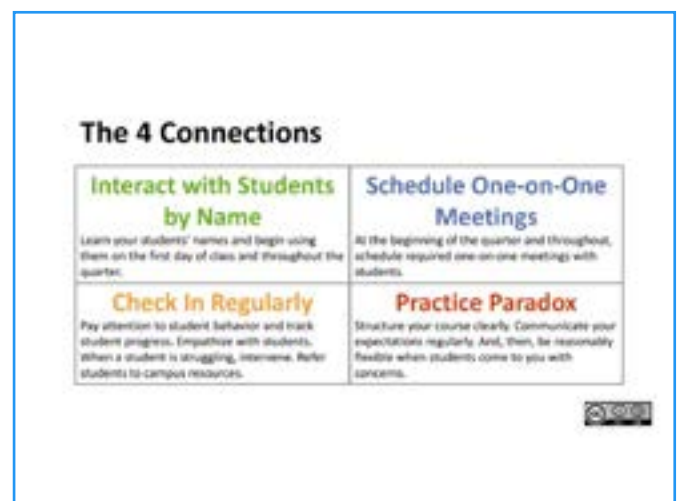


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The introduction and usage of “The Four Connections”

The First Connection: Interact with Students by Name

The First Connection might sound simple, however, applying it in the online classroom is different compared to the traditional classroom. I incorporated the first connection into

mainly three platforms: Canvas, Zoom, and WhatsApp.

Canvas:

Various Learning Management Systems (LMS) are widely used in Higher Education, and “Canvas” is one of them. In my class, I encouraged students to add a short personal description as a bio on their [Canvas profiles](#) and referred students to the [people area](#) as part of their assignment so we could learn and review each other’s names and bio. LMS like Canvas offers interactive features (e.g., [leave individualized comments](#), [provide personalized feedback with media](#)) which gave me chances to use students’ names in it. Besides, including students’ names in comments or feedback by using different media (e.g., video, audio) created a more personal connection between us since students could hear my voice, see my face, and feel my tone.

Zoom:

Zoom is possibly the world’s most popular online video meeting platform. This tool is also widely used for remote learning. In my class, students were encouraged to include their [names](#) as a part of the [Zoom profile](#) when participating in Zoom. Some of the students didn’t feel comfortable turning on their cameras because of various reasons, therefore, I encouraged them to include a selfie as a [portrait photo](#) in Zoom (or any photo they feel comfortable sharing) since it’s helpful for name and face familiarization within the online class. Just like Canvas, Zoom offers plenty of features. For example, greeting each student by name at the beginning of the online class by using the [Waiting Room](#) (since admitting students one by one into the main session can be helpful for a more personalized greeting and interaction between the instructor and the student compared to dealing with a large influx of students all at once with less chances to demonstrate attentiveness and establish personal connections); pairing students up and guiding them to learn each other’s names by using the [Breakout Room](#); or including students’ names while interacting with them by using the [Chat Box](#). These are great interactive features teachers can use to connect and support students in Zoom.

WhatsApp:

Social media platforms (e.g., X, YouTube) are getting popular nowadays since they have brought substantial benefits to society, such as facilitating connectivity, information sharing, community building, and real-time interaction. Therefore, I used social media platforms for connection-building in my online class. For example, WhatsApp was one of the tools I used for [instant communication](#) since it helped me improve immediacy, and eventually form a closer relationship in my online classroom by providing prompt responses, personalization, instant feedback, etc.

The Second Connection: Check-In Regularly

Checking in regularly and monitoring students’ progress are essential for building up closer relationships with students in the online classroom. [LWTech](#) introduced various specific strategies to implement The Second Connection. Here are some connected strategies below I adopted to help support

my students in my online class.

Formative Assessment:

One way to check in regularly is using formative assessment because it’s extremely helpful since it could be used to monitor students’ learning and provide ongoing feedback. There are substantial types of formative assessments which can be used in the online classroom. For example, I used game-based learning platforms (e.g., [Kahoot](#), [Quizizz](#)) to give quizzes, and digital surveys (especially the one which was translated into students’ first language) to collect feedback.

Class Meeting Greeting:

Greeting each student by saying their names and sentences like, “How are you doing?”, “Nice to meet you today,” or “Thank you for posting your video on Canvas (LMS)” as they joined the online classroom meeting was useful to not only check-in but also share a strong sense of caring and affirmation with them.

Available Resources:

Each school usually has various resources to support distance learning. Therefore, being able to know what resources your school offers in advance and connect students in need with the available resources is crucial for teachers to possess since students might reach out to you for help when they are either excelling or struggling. One of the things I did for my students in the online classroom was to collect all the available resources both inside and outside school and turn these resources into a [webpage](#) which my students have access to all the time.

The Third Connection: Schedule One-on-One Meetings

At first, I was confused by how similar The Second Connection and The Third Connection sounded. Fortunately, [LWTech](#) differentiated these two connections. [LWTech](#) defined One-on-One Meeting is “*scheduled with a specific topic or guiding question/agenda*”, on the other hand, Checking-In Regularly “*happens more organically and consistently as you interact with students, and it is enhanced by the use of regular assessment and feedback*”. Specific guidance is offered by [LWTech](#) on how to implement The Third Connection into online classrooms. Here are the main points of The Third Connection I learned and adapted. And I found the following approaches helpful for me to connect with my students.

When did I schedule One-on-One meetings?

[LWTech](#) illustrated that a brief One-on-One meeting should be scheduled at the beginning of the quarter and throughout the quarter. However, it’s hard to meet this expectation in reality since meeting all students is time-consuming, particularly in a large class. Therefore, I ensured myself to meet each student at least twice every quarter. The initial meeting allowed me to get to know each student in a personal level and understand their individual goals and aspirations. The follow-up meeting served as a checkpoint to monitor each student’s progress and enabled me to tailor my teaching approaches accordingly.

Where did One-on-One meetings take place?

In the online classroom setting, teachers can use various media (e.g., Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Google Meet) to schedule a One-on-One meeting. I mainly used Zoom to schedule a One-on-One meeting with my students during my online office hours since office hours make space for such positive student-faculty interactions (Smith et al., 2017).

How to conduct a One-on-One meeting?

[LWTech](#) illustrated three guidelines which can help teachers plan and implement the One-on-One meeting. I followed and found these guidelines helpful for my students. First, the instructor should give students undivided attention as an individual. Second, the meeting should never be punitive. Third, an efficient meeting should be as brief as 10 minutes or less with a clear focus. Having efficient one-on-one meetings can be achieved in various ways, such as setting clear objectives for the meeting (so both teachers and students can stay focused and use time effectively), preparing an agenda (so teachers can guide the conversation without getting off track and students can come prepared with topics they want to discuss), and collecting feedback from students (so teachers can assess how effective the meeting is).

What are the topics of a One-on-One meeting?

One-on-One meetings allow teachers to discuss different topics that are much more difficult to cover in large groups so students can better receive individualized feedback and support from teachers. [LWTech](#) listed various topics which can be discussed during the One-on-One meetings, such as Q&A section, post-exam review, project progress, personal challenges, and so on.

The Fourth Connection: Practice Paradox

The Fourth Connection emphasizes maintaining a balance between structure and flexibility; therefore, it can be challenging for us. There are substantial teaching approaches instructors can adapt to achieve The Fourth Connection. In my online class, I chose Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as an approach to structure my course and convey the content clearly. Universal Design (UD) is a concept that originated in architecture and focuses on designing a building that, in the best way possible, any individual, in any condition, can utilize. UDL takes the same principles of UD and applies them to learning. Here are two examples of me applying UDL principles in my online class to achieve The Fourth Connection.

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Applying UDL principles to convey content clearly:

While teaching content in online classrooms, I tried to use various teaching strategies to cater to different learning styles (e.g., verbal learners, visual learners, and auditory learners). I recorded a video of me teaching English vocabulary in my online class. In this [video](#), I taught vocabulary by incorporating multimedia resources (e.g., videos, pictures, audio, markers for PowerPoint, and online texts). By appealing to different senses and learning styles, the learning process was more engaging, accessible, and authentic, therefore, the content was conveyed clearly.

Applying UDL principles to communicate my expectations clearly:

Another approach I used was transforming my course syllabus into something that my students want to look into and engage with, as opposed to something they need to read only because instructors require them to do so. This idea is called “Liquid Syllabus” which was created by Michelle Paccansky-Brock (2023). The idea of “Liquid Syllabus” is a brief reference to UDL and it’s a wonderful practice to humanize online learning and build a closer relationship with my students. Sending my [liquid syllabus](#) to my students before the first day of the class helped them understand what the class looks like, comprehend my expectations, and connect with me and the class on a personal level. I strongly encourage readers to search for more details and examples about this idea from this journal or the internet since it’s difficult for me to introduce and praise the idea of “Liquid Syllabus” in just a few sentences.

Conclusion

After implementing The Four Connections in my online class, I could sense a stronger sense of connection between me and my students. However, most of the results I mentioned above were relatively subjective. Therefore, I was trying to look for at least one quantitative data to verify if the strategies I used were working. I looked at the retention rate between the ESL classes I taught at Spokane Community College during Winter quarter 2024 and Spring quarter 2024. And the retention rate in Spring quarter 2024 increased by 11% compared to Winter quarter 2024. The increased percentage suggested that the strategies I used in my class helped students be more engaged, satisfied, and committed to my online class. Thus, The Four Connections have a positive effect on building

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