



Building Student-Student Relationships

While it's important for instructors to build rapport with their students, it can be just as valuable for students to become comfortable with one another: when students feel at ease with one another, it can lead to increased classroom engagement and academic success. Survey data collected during the pandemic tells us that students are feeling isolated, unmotivated and frustrated about the lack of connection with their peers. The following list is intended to support teaching faculty to create a learning environment that is warm and communal; strong student-student relationships can reduce feelings of isolation and increase motivation to learn.

1. Icebreaker activities

Two minute talks ~ Ask students to write down questions they'd like to discuss as a group in the chat window or on a Google Doc. These can be prompts like "Which restaurant serves the best pizza in town?" or "Would you rather _____ or _____?" You can set aside two minutes at the beginning or end of class for individual students to lead these discussions twice a week.

Student introductions ~ Ask students to introduce themselves at the beginning of a session using the "rename" function in Zoom. Encourage students to add identifiers such as how to pronounce their name phonetically or what pronouns they use, or add a word sharing a current interest (movie, book, show, etc.). You can also do five-minute "fast chat" breakout rooms in small groups with introduction discussion-starters such as: What are three interesting things about yourself that you'd like to share? Locate and share three to five images (photos, drawings, etc.) that reflect who you are. What is one thing that you love to do and would like to be able to do better?

Class playlist ~ Have students write their favorite music artists or song titles in the Zoom chat, on a separate Google Doc, or explore Google's Jamboard, using the recommendations to make a playlist for their class period. This brainstorming session can start conversations between students as they share their tastes and suggest music for others. It can be a fun bonding activity for the group to create and name the playlist together and it can be assembled using apps like Spotify Premium, Amazon Music, or YouTube.

2. Content-related activities

Assigning roles in groups ~ When designing a group activity, you can assign roles to each student to encourage full participation in breakout rooms. [This template](#) has guidelines for assigning roles using a classroom Google Doc. You can let students connect with each other while monitoring their progress on the Google Doc. For large classes, create separate Google Docs for groups of up to 50, as the interface slows when more than 50 students are working simultaneously in one document.

Think-Pair-Share ~ Design a multiple choice question that might promote dialogue between different views on a topic, or that might surface misconceptions. Have students *think* about the question and vote for their answer with a Zoom poll or iClicker Reef. Then, put students in breakout room *pairs* to discuss and debate. After the breakout room debate, give the class another chance to vote on the question. Then, allow everyone to *share* ideas in a large group discussion, which can be very fruitful after the small discussions and debate.



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Jigsaw ~ Divide the class into several teams using breakout rooms, with each team preparing separate but related assignments. When all team members are prepared, the class is then re-divided into mixed groups, with one member from each team in each group. Each person in the group teaches the rest of the group what they know, and the group then tackles an assignment together that pulls all of the pieces of the “puzzle” together to form the full picture.

3. Creating peer-peer support

Study groups ~ Consider assigning students to a study group for the first few weeks of the semester to help them feel supported on a project or homework assignment. In partnership with ice breaker activities, assigned study groups can allow students to connect and get to know each other. These informal relationships that instructors facilitate initially can lead to friendships and self-organized study groups later in the semester.

Classroom assistance ~ Faculty can engage [Learning Assistants](#) or [Technology Copilots](#) to help build relationships between the students. Some students may be more willing to work with a peer than reach out to the professor. These assistants can use Slack, GroupMe or a Google Doc to manage a side channel of communication, which serves to network students for study groups and can facilitate connection with students who are unresponsive in class or falling behind in coursework.