

# Building community in large classes

## Instructor presence

*This document builds upon the [“Student to instructor interactions”](#) section of our six-part [Adapting Your Course](#) guide, which itself was prepared at the onset of the shift to remote teaching in Winter 2020.*

*For information on how students can build community amongst themselves, read our resource on [social presence in large classes](#).*

Regular and personable communication is important in facilitating learning and intervening when students are struggling to achieve learning outcomes. While it is difficult to achieve this to scale in large online classes, you can still find ways to remind students that you are there to help them learn.

## Introduce yourself to students before the course begins

Prior to the first week of class, post a welcome message to your students. To add more of a personal touch, consider recording a video message hosted in a [shared Google Drive class folder](#) and [embedded in D2L Brightspace](#) via an announcement in the [Announcements tool](#); this will ensure it is the first thing students see when they visit your course shell at the start of term.

Here are some tips for your welcome message:

- Introduce yourself in a cordial way that conveys your personality
- Express your enthusiasm for the course and the learning experiences to come
- Set expectations about communication, as indicated in your course outline. For example:
  - when and how students can reach you directly
  - what kind of turnaround time they should expect for a response from you and your TA/GAs
  - which situations students should communicate with their TA/GA first
- Direct students on how to navigate your course shell, highlighting any key tools and components of the course that they should familiarize themselves with
- Provide a link to the course outline

## Post regular updates to your class

At regular intervals (e.g. the beginning of each week), post an update message to your class. We recommend brief, informal videos of yourself speaking to the camera, which you can embed into the body of an announcement or at the beginning of a weekly content module. Use this as an opportunity to bring a more personal touch to your instructional presence, as well as to guide students through the content of the course.

Here are some ideas of what to include in your regular announcements:

- Briefly touch upon current events, whether in your life, the course, or the world at large. Think of the sorts of things you might be comfortable sharing at the start of a face-to-face class to break the ice, convey a more conversational tone, and build rapport.
- Review some of the key takeaways from the previous week's content and assessments, and include your own insights on student contributions in synchronous and asynchronous portions of your course (e.g. reference a few student posts from the Discussions tool). This gives students reassurance that you are being attentive to their learning and may help encourage them to keep participating.
- Tie the previous week's learning to a preview of the current week's course content. This helps to weave a narrative or learning path that flows through the entire semester, giving students a sense of continuity.
- Remind students of any upcoming assessments to help them stay on track.

## Hold virtual office hours

To provide students an opportunity to speak with you one-on-one away from campus, here is how you can offer virtual office hours by appointment:

1. Set aside blocks of time each week that you will avail yourself for office hours. Try to build-in some variety to anticipate different student schedules (e.g. offer some times on Monday morning and some on Thursday evening).
2. Use the [appointment slot feature in Google Calendar](#) to create shorter appointments within these blocks of time for students to sign up for.
3. Share the appointment signup page link with students through your D2L course shell. Once a student has signed up for an appointment, a unique Google Calendar event will appear for you and the student.
4. Edit the resulting Google Calendar event and either:

- a. Paste a link to a Zoom meeting room into the location field. If you plan to use the same room for multiple appointments, be sure to enable the [waiting room feature in Zoom](#) to give your students privacy during their appointment time; **OR**
- b. [Add a Google Meet webconference](#); **OR**
- c. Propose any other medium that works best for you and the student (e.g. email, personal chat in the [D2L chat tool](#), etc.)

If you have asked your TA/GAs to hold their own office hours, they can use the same instructions above to meet with students.

You might also consider using the same steps to allow student groups to meet with you to discuss their group projects. In such cases, one student from the group should be responsible for making the appointment on their group's behalf, inform you that their group members will be in attendance, and share the meeting details with their group members.

Finally, you might also consider having office hours on a more casual drop-in basis rather than the appointment workflow described above. If doing so, holding these hours at the same time each week will help students remember when they are offered. Keep in mind that a drop-in approach may have inconsistent attendance: some weeks nobody will show up, and others you might have a large influx.

## Create a course Q&A discussion topic and document

To help mitigate repetitive emails from students about the course, consider creating a "Course Q&A" resource. Here's one way it could work:

1. Create a Google Doc called "Class Q&A" in a [shared class folder in Google Drive](#). Give you and your TAs editing privileges and your students viewing privileges.
2. Create a D2L discussion topic called "General course questions" to invite students to ask questions about the course. In the topic description, include a link to the Google Doc that students should check first before asking a question and reiterate that they should save personal questions for more private channels like email.
3. Over the course of the semester, you and your TAs can monitor the discussion topic, respond to student concerns, curate answers to popular questions, and include them in the Q&A document so students can find them quicker.

Some of the additional benefits of this approach is that students can be encouraged to help each other if they happen to know the answer to their classmates' question, and you can use the Q&A document the next time you teach the course.

Alternatively, you could create a Google Form for students to submit anonymous questions and then use its [corresponding Google Sheet of responses](#) to provide answers. This approach may help if you sense many students are too shy to pose questions in the course shell. [Here is a template you can copy](#) if you wish to pursue this workflow.

## Send automated emails to new or at-risk students

The [Intelligent Agents tool in D2L Brightspace](#) can send automated emails to students (and to yourself) based on a variety of customized criteria.

It is perhaps most useful for identifying students who might be falling behind. For instance, you could use the Intelligent Agents tool to identify students who have not interacted with the course content for over 7 days. In the agent settings, you can compose a boilerplate email personalized to the student that gently reminds them of their inactivity and offer resources or support in the event that they need help.

You can also configure this tool to notify yourself of changes in the classlist. For instance, you could [use the Intelligent Agents tool to notify yourself of any late enrollments](#) in your course and provide the new students with a quick set of links to orient and help them get up to speed.

## Invite feedback from students

There is a misconception that online courses can be run on a “set it and forget it” basis. On the contrary, it is crucial to check-in with your students to see what is working well and what could be improved on.

Around the midpoint of the semester, consider inviting constructive feedback from your students. This process can be devised in a variety of ways. Some questions to consider:

- Will the student submissions be anonymous or not? Will they be identified by section number?
- Will students submit individually to you and your TAs (through a survey tool like [Google Forms](#) or [D2L Surveys tool](#)), or will students be able to see and comment on each other's

feedback (through a collaborative tool like the [D2L Discussions tool](#), [Google Docs](#), or [Padlet](#))?

- What kinds of questions will you ask students? Will they be quantitative (e.g. likert scale questions) and/or qualitative (e.g. “[I like, I wish, what if](#)” or “[Start, stop, continue](#)”)?

As an example, we have prepared a template of a Student Check-in survey, which you can copy, adapt, and deploy in your course. [Read more about the check-in survey in this companion guide](#).

Once you have received your students’ feedback, have a discussion with your TAs to explore how you can best address student concerns and incorporate their ideas for the remainder of the course.



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