

Tips on building greater community cohesion in your classroom

Research shows that students perform better when they feel a sense of community and cohesion in a class. These suggestions can provide a first step for you to begin building such a classroom environment, whether in online or virtual classes.

- **Introductions on first day of class**
 1. **Online Format:** Add your pronouns to your Zoom profile (“Mai (she/her/hers)”). Invite the students to indicate the name they would like to be called and if they would like to share their pronouns over Zoom, making it clear that this is optional. Briefly introduce why indicating preferred names/pronouns is useful (“calling each other by the right names and pronouns is important/ helps everyone feel included.”) Provide a link to the students describing how to change their name over [Zoom profile](#)
 2. **In-person classes or tutorials:** Ensure that you and the students know each other’s names and can [pronounce each other’s names](#). Provide name tags. Names are an extension of one’s identity, and are often rooted in religion, culture, or familial history. Encourage the students to say each other’s names “As Minouka said...” or “Ismaël had an interesting point when he said...”
- **Short [ice-breaker](#) activities** during the start of classes.
 1. **Online Format:** Create a live poll (using a tool like [Slido](#) or Poll Everywhere) with a simple question for the class (eg. Are you more of a cat person or a dog person?).
 2. **In person classes or tutorials:** Simple questions (“What is your favourite kitchen tool?”) make good ice breakers. Be sure your question doesn’t end up marginalizing students (eg. Where did you go to on holiday? Is not a great ice-breaker because it presumes a certain level of affluence).
- **Consider mini-presentations** by students at the start of class that allow students to connect the course content to their own community, identity, work-life, or past academic pursuits/courses. This type of exercise not only provides students to showcase strengths that they may otherwise not be able to demonstrate but can also help to promote interdisciplinary thinking and support student [learning and motivation](#).
- **Create opportunities for students to talk with each other** by using [break-out rooms](#) (On-line), [think-pair-share](#) (Online or in-person), or small discussion groups (in-person) to enhance community and engagement.
 1. In small groups, students work together to discuss tricky topics or apply learnings to novel situation. Provide a set of questions or prompts that help to scaffold learning.
 2. **Visit the small groups** yourselves and/or ask TA’s to circulate between them. In addition to creating more opportunities for students to speak to each other, these groups provide opportunities for students to talk to TA’s and instructors in a small group setting. Circulating across the groups and checking in on how the discussion is going can also help to assess the

effectiveness of the learning activity and also ensure that there is effective feedback about areas of confusion amongst the students.

- **Provide a bio of yourself** or a short presentation about yourself that includes information about your [own identities](#) and [positionality](#) and scientific journey and how you ended up where you are. What are the big picture questions that you ponder? This humanizing activity can build a greater sense of identity and belonging, and can enable students (especially who are First-generation university goers and part of other historically under-represented groups) to gain some insight into possible career trajectories for themselves. In addition, presenting on these topics may help to cultivate a greater self-awareness of your [own perspectives and values](#).
- **Include individual or small group meetings** with the instructor or TA as part of an assessment. For larger classes, explain the value of attending office hours either in the syllabus or repeatedly before each major assignment. For the benefit of First-generation university students and others who may not be familiar with university “unwritten rules” and expectations it also may be helpful to briefly explain the reasons for using office hours and what types of topics students are welcome to approach you with during these hours.
- **Consider co-creating [classroom guidelines on the first day](#)**. One of the ways to help foster a more [inclusive and equitable virtual classroom environment](#) is to create a set of classroom guidelines, or an agreed-upon list of expectations for students and the instructor. Include examples where incivility intersects with concerns about equity and inclusion (e.g., a racist assumption or sexist joke) so students know that you will pay close attention and not tolerate this type of behavior. You can also use this process to decide upon technical considerations such as whether to keep cameras on or off and keeping microphones muted when not speaking, and so on. The process of creating such a document can also have the effect of sending a signal to students that you care about their diverse needs and experiences and are willing to incorporate these in a manner that directly involves them.