Building and maintaining relationships in online courses – 10 ideas

This short guide provides some suggestions and includes links to relevant resources.

1. **Show some of yourself as a person**, maybe an image, biography with interests, Blackboard [profile picture](https://help.blackboard.com/Learn/Instructor/Getting_Started/Profile), short video or [audio clip](https://www.ole.bris.ac.uk/bbcswebdav/xid-13991014_4) at the start of the course.
2. **Establish and maintain your teaching presence**, eg responding in discussion forums or [Padlets](https://www.bristol.ac.uk/digital-education/tools/padlet/) to ask or answer questions, nudge a discussion onwards, provide feedback or simply to show encouragement. Agree with students what “being active and present” means - both for you and them. Make sure you manage student expectations about your routine, the timing and frequency of your responses, clearly communicating this. Think of ways to create a personal touch which are sustainable for you, eg you could make a single regular short podcast or video clip with feedback for the whole cohort, addressesing common questions.
3. **Give opportunities for students to share something of themselves,** eg encourage students to upload profile pictures in Blackboard, create a short video about themselves, or write something about their favourite book, film, music, or the etymology/significance of their name in icebreaker activities. [Examples of warm up activities from OneHE](https://onehe.org/equity-unbound/).
4. **Build peer to peer interaction into your course:** scaffold group activity eg requiring groups to assign roles, and providing a team-building activity at the start. Make sure students know why building online relationships, interacting with each other and with you, is important to their learning. Consider the most appropriate group membership, perhaps persistent groups at the beginning to help students connect, then later mixing them up. Allow plenty of time for students to build relationships in their groups as connecting online can take longer than in person. [Study skills group work resource.](https://www.ole.bris.ac.uk/bbcswebdav/courses/Study_Skills/group-work/index.html)
5. **Reinforce a virtual home**, your Blackboard space should be the hub where students know they can always go to access content, discussions, and other activities. [Blackboard course design.](https://www.ole.bris.ac.uk/bbcswebdav/institution/TEL/TEL%20guides/Published%20TEL%20guides/WebGuides/BlackboardCourseDesign/index.html)
6. **Provide informal spaces for chat**, eg edge times at the beginning and end of live sessions, social forums, virtual study lounges.
7. **Check in with your students regularly,** ask them how things are going eg in informal meetups or via quick polls, find out what is working well, what could be improved, acknowledge their feedback and adapt things if possible.
8. **Provide choice in activities**, allowing students to connect with others who may have similar interests in personal learning networks, eg via self-enrol [Blackboard groups](https://help.blackboard.com/Learn/Instructor/Interact/Course_Groups/Create_Groups) which they can choose to join.
9. **Set engaging tasks**, which can relate to students’ lives or interests, eg relating to real world problems or applications. Maybe these can be individual or group challenges
10. **Empathise**, try to show that you care, and to make everyone feel welcome and included, for example including [low bandwidth](https://www.bristol.ac.uk/digital-education/guides/low-bandwidth/) ways to join in with discussions, such as text chat.

## Useful links

Community building ideas: <https://onehe.org/equity-unbound/>