

Connecting with your students remotely

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Teaching & Learning

teach.cbs.dk / tel. +45 3815 2756

Photo: Blake MacLarlin

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You can find technical guides for the software mentioned in this guide in [T&L Guides](#) in Canvas.

It can be difficult to establish and maintain social connections with your students when teaching remotely – especially for first-year students or a new class that you haven't met before. Below are a few examples of activities you can initiate with your students in order to help foster a connectedness and relationship with your students. These are meant as ideas or inspiration for your cohort of students – you know best what fits into your course and what could work well, so moderate and use the activities as you see fit for you and your students.

Overall tips and inspiration for your online classroom

Ask the students to add a profile picture in Canvas (and do it yourself).

Ask the students to re-name themselves if they are not shown by their name, but their e-mail (in Zoom/Teams). Then it's easier for you to call on specific students – and calling them by name if they're raising their hand.

Enter the live online session 5-10 minutes early to greet students and start up an informal chat. Think of it as the physical classroom, where students turn up one-by-one and slowly transition into the learning environment.

Include a space in Canvas where students can ask questions about the course material, teaching method, exam, etc. This could be a chat or a discussion board – by making the questions public (and not via e-mail), you decrease the chances of getting the same questions several times.

For large classes

In the first class/session, share professional and personal information about yourself – i.e. research interests, where you are from, your relation to this course, why/how you got into this field of research, etc. This could also be done in an introductory video and uploaded to Canvas.

Ask students to find their favorite virtual background in Zoom and add it – you could do the same. This creates a more playful and informal learning space, which might not work well with the course content you are going to introduce but view as a quick fun-time activity and if necessary, ask the students to turn it off again if it feels distracting in the rest of the session.

Use anonymous polls or the chat to ask non-teaching related questions (*“What is your favourite TV-show, Where are you located right now, How are you feeling today...”*). This could be done in Zoom’s polling feature, but also via TurningPoint, Kahoot or sli.do. Remember that the chat is not anonymous, so you might consider asking more ‘generic’ questions here, where students do not feel embarrassed or shy about their answers.

Use the Discussion board in Canvas to ask students questions about themselves, for example *“What has motivated you to take this course/study program, Are you familiar with anything from the curriculum already or What are you looking most forward to being covered in this course.* It does not have to be course-related questions – just be mindful that the questions you ask are easy for the students to answer and are not prompting any private/offensive answers.

Use the Discussion board in Canvas to ask students to post a picture of a trip or an experience that meant a lot to them and ask them to explain it with a few sentences.

For smaller classrooms

In the first class/session, share professional and personal information about yourself – i.e. research interests, where you are from, your relation to this course, why/how you got into this field of research. This could also be done in an introductory video and uploaded to Canvas.

Do a short introduction round where students tell their name and where they are located (that could be either within the house or the city/region).

Ask students to find something in their room or house that explains something about their background/interests/hobbies.

Use the Discussion board in Canvas to ask students to post a picture of a trip or an experience that meant a lot to them and ask them to explain it with a few sentences.

Play some music for your students and see how can first answer the name/artist of the song.

Ask icebreaker questions and have the students respond either via a poll, the chat or the Discussion board in Canvas. See more inspiration for icebreaker questions below.

Academy of Arts University (2009). *Icebreakers: Onsite and Online*:
http://faculty.academyart.edu/dam/faculty/assets/pdf/planning-your-class/first-day/3_IceBreakersOnlineOnsite.pdf.

Bagley, D. (2020). *65 icebreaker questions* (Michigan State University):
<https://www.canr.msu.edu/news/65-icebreaker-questions-for-online-meetings>.

University of Waterloo (NA): *Communicating with Students*: <https://uwaterloo.ca/centre-for-teaching-excellence/teaching-resources/teaching-tips/teaching-tips-creating-positive-learning-environment/communicating-students#social-presence>.