Strengthening social presence and connectedness in 100% online courses through CONNECT

Tracey Ahern, Tracey Gooding
College of Healthcare Sciences, James Cook University

Over recent years, higher education has seen a significant shift toward online courses. Factors driving this change include digital technology ubiquity, diverse student populations, workforce demands, and the increasing need for more flexible learning environments (Serrano et al., 2019). However, while online course enrolments are rising faster than on-campus courses, retention rates remain lower (Australian Government, 2021). Evidence suggests that online education can negatively impact students' sense of connection, leading to feelings of isolation and disempowerment (Roddy et al., 2017). This is also reflected in the Australian University Mental Health framework (Orygen, 2020) which emphasises creating supportive online learning environments that promote student well-being. The Australian Universities Accord (Australian Government, 2024) calls for universities to embrace TEL. However, given that research has shown the need for more professional development (PD) and support for online educators (Ahern and Biedermann, 2022; 2023), innovative, evidence-based strategies are needed for organisations to build capacity in online teaching. Drawing on a comprehensive review of literature, the authors developed CONNECT: a framework to enhance social presence and connectedness in online learning (Ahern et al., 2024).

Grounded in research underpinned by Garrison et al.'s (2000) Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework, the principles of Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2018) and leveraging TEL, this framework offers educators a roadmap for nurturing a sense of community that positively influences student well-being, engagement, and overall success. Key components of the CONNECT framework are:

- C - Communication is responsive and supportive
- O - Optimal online presence
- N - Nurture educational and professional growth
- N - Networking opportunities fostered
- E - Engaging communities of learning
- C - Contemporary and authentic content
- T - Timely and effective feedback for learning (Ahern et al., 2024).

The study follows a quasi-experimental design to evaluate the effectiveness of CONNECT in guiding teaching staff to use evidence-based strategies to promote belonging and connectedness in online education. In phase one, CONNECT was implemented within a 100% online postgraduate (PG) subject. This presentation will showcase online teaching strategies used to apply all elements of CONNECT as implemented in phase one. Phase two, also showcased, involved creating and releasing an online short course as professional development for teaching staff across two PG online courses at the authors' university: Master of Nursing (MN) and Graduate Certificate of Diabetes Education (GCDE). After these implementation phases, the third phase will measure the effectiveness of CONNECT across the two PG courses. Data will be collected via (i) a student survey and (ii) a staff survey. Data analysis will compare the experimental group (participants enrolled or teaching in MN or GCDE) against the control group (participants not enrolled or teaching in MN or GCDE). Data will be collected from students and teachers across Australian universities offering 100% online courses. We hypothesise that by implementing CONNECT, the study will (1) Show improved student satisfaction in the experimental group and (2) Add to the body of evidence to inform and support teaching staff to develop strategies that can help build connectedness and social presence in online learning.

Keywords: higher education, online teaching, online learning, student belonging

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