reconnect

Reconnecting relationships through technology

In the business of connecting: Nudging students

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We have long been leveraging the use of technologies to help build and sustain connections in the online environment. The pandemic opened our eyes to the value of these connections and the ability to better use technologies to facilitate them. Now we must question what more we can do. Creating communities through safe environments, building trust, showing students our 'human' sides through rapport building and teacher presence which may have previously been hidden in plain sight when operating in a face-to-face mode are a good start. By breaking down traditional barriers brought about through power relationships, the foundations of a quality learning experience are both created and maintained.

Using case scenarios and personal narrative from two metropolitan university business schools, we explore techniques that have been used to build connections during lockdowns and begin to reconnect as we emerge from the pandemic. We found that nudging our students through initial uncomfortableness really helped them feel part of a community of learners, one which we also belonged.

Keywords: connections; reconnecting; nudge theory; social networks; teacher presence

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and resultant lockdowns meant that for most of 2020 and 2021 teaching and learning was conducted online. While 2022 has seen borders reopen across Australia, other countries, particularly in Asia including China, Hong Kong and Japan have remained closed to tourists and their residents have remained limited in their ability to leave (Marlow, 2021; Shad, 2022). These lockdowns have also meant that students may be physically and socially disconnected in their private and learning lives leading to a range of issues from motivation to crises of confidence (McEwen, 2019).

In business, connections matter. Learning to social network and making connections during studies often opens opportunities not previously possible. Hence as students continue or commence their studies it is our role as educators, to find ways to nurture and create connections for our students both with each other and us (Bryant, 2022). Further, as a result of the past 2+ pandemic years we need to focus on the facilitation of effective ways to reconnect them to each other, to faculty and to the university. In the process of teaching business students, the classroom activities and interactions seek to replicate business behaviours and model to students the benefits of connecting with each other and also inviting them to connect with us. The buildings provide a physical reminder of the connection to the Institution and the Alma Mata they will join. Just as when working in a business, people make connections with each other, the managers, and the company as part of their daily occurrences, sometimes planned and often opportune. From the corridor chat, the morning coffee rituals, the meetings that linger, the 'face time' with your manager, all these informal and formal opportunities align to create and support the development of connections that tie us to each other. Some ties will be strong and others weak, but these ties are noted to support communication and form relational support for the organisation as well. Even weak ties are important (McMillan, 2022), and we therefore looked to create these ties to both connect and reconnect our students.

Background - Connecting and reconnecting

Connections matter. Strong ties with family, friends and the community **provide us with happiness, security, support and a sense of purpose**. Being connected to others is important for our mental and physical wellbeing and can be a protective factor against anxiety and depression (Connections matter, 2022).

Connection is important as it creates belonging. Furthermore, as social beings, connections help us to regulate our emotions, and can lead to higher self-esteem and empathy. Creating a sense of belonging can support student success (Strayhorn, 2019) and supports teachers to remain in the field while increasing work satisfaction (Benson, 2021).

The last 2.5 years of learning and teaching in an online or blended mode has reduced the opportunities for teachers to incidentally connect with their students before and after class, in the corridors or over seemingly unrelated to class matters. The chats that make a student feel seen and heard. The moment of shared experience that connect us in a way that is experienced often through visual cues and clues as well as other heuristic measures have been at best nuanced and often lost during fully online learning.

However, seeing our students as a whole person with interests beyond our class supports their learning (Gonzales, 2016). The move to fully or even partial online learning was often undertaken in a panic-gogy manner (Baker, 2020) focused more on delivery of material than the teacher- and student-student connection that until then had often occurred organically or at least particularly so. Connection occurs through a meeting of minds, purpose, intentions, and experiences.

Technology is the spark

Technology provided a solid basis to connect with students during the pandemic, from delivery of materials to enabling voice and pictures and to some cases, virtual field trips, technology was the 'Knight in Shining Armour' as the world closed its borders and its classrooms. However, access to technology is not equal and complexities such as internet speed, hardware, software, and digital literacies all had and have a place for consideration when looking at connection (Selwyn, 2016).

Beyond the technology, finding ways to create and maintain 'people' connection was now delegated to the educators. Two disciplines Organisational Behaviour (self-efficacy) and Behavioural Economics (Nudge Theory) serve as a solid foundation upon which to build and support connection becoming a framework to engage our students in 'connecting' behaviour. Given the recognised impact on both teacher satisfaction and student outcomes our work has focused on how connection could be built and / or maintained for our students.

Teacher presence – hiding in plain sight

The community of inquiry model (Garrison & Vaughn, 2008) is well validated and underpins quality online learning. Figure 1 is a reproduction of the model and demonstrates that each presence (social, cognitive and teacher) must be enacted to ensure a good educational experience. Studies have shown that learners' academic performance can be improved by higher levels of social presence (Joksimovic et al., 2105). The majority of academics have excellent teacher presence, particularly in their day-to-day communications with students. As students and staff moved rapidly into the online space during the pandemic, we could no longer rely on these automatic foundational actions and needed to make our interactions more deliberate. Setting the right climate became imperative for strengthening the learning community.

Figure 1: Community of Inquiry model with 'Setting Climate' highlighted – adapted from Garrison & Vaughn, (2008)

Our Context and Methodology

By way of exploring our work in this context, we use two reflective narratives to consider how we 'set the climate' by connecting and reconnecting to our students and they to each other in the wake of the pandemic experience. Reflective narratives are sense making activities that also consider what was done and seek evidence of impact (Andersen, Ravn, & Thomson, 2020). This was developed using previous and subsequent observations that organic connections occur before class, after class, in the hallways waiting for class, in the rush to get to another class and in pubs and cafes as students see familiar faces, hear familiar stories and strike up conversations about shared interest, likes and dislikes. These were all now absent.

Scenario 1

A large compulsory core program "ethics and sustainability". As students studied online two words were a constant on the screen "disconnected, reconnecting". At a deeper level these words tell us much about the students and their experiences. Their struggles to connect, reconnect and stay connected over this time have been evident. Quite simply, the digital literacy needed to learn fully online, along with access to internet and good computing materials (i.e. a computer mouse, microphone and webcam) were being managed and supported by the universities and their IT departments, yet it was the educators in the classrooms that had a more difficult and less visible problem - how to connect students to each other, us and the university.

Small talk that is not so small
Over that time, pets became teaching assistants and each lesson turned into a 'study in the wild' (Bruun & Stentoft, 2019) to innovate both materials and delivery to ensure each student had a transformative educational experience and made connections. With online learning there are potentially fewer organic moments to capitalise upon. Therefore, connection had to be a deliberate and focused strategy deployed and built upon over the teaching period. Our role was to nudge (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008) students towards each other and ensure they had the efficacy to make a connection once presented with the opportunity.

In deploying a 'moments to connect' model, the process was to nudge (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008) students to undertake certain actions. Commencing with a class song each day provided an upbeat signal learning was about to commence but the song 'nudged' students to talk and say hello rather than sit in silence with screens blank and cameras turned off. The start of class provided an informal connection point, but it also provided a digital connection point as I checked both signal strength and was able to undertake any 'trouble shooting' for technical problems for us all during this time. The small talk was not so small, instead this became a time to connect and reconnect each week, with each other and what was happening around us. Students talked about the weather and life and posted emojis and talked to my dancing cat (who now has a TikTok Account and has shared her study Spotify playlist!). Weak, but important ties were forming. Social presence was building.

The next nudge was one to the connection of campus. With many of our students now never planning to attend, I started to share stories of the campus too, of our Indigenous heritage and land and how I missed the moments of reflection on who had walked there before us, this story telling connected our students to the campus in a meaningful manner and reminded them of the importance of Indigenous considerations when conducting business. This was about tying students to the 'grounds'.

One more nudge provided a 'blessing' to connect via social media. We knew students have been using social media to connect beyond the classroom for years, but it was time to make this organic process explicit. The nudge to be part of one of these informal groups has seen WeChat groups grow to over 400 members (of a 700-person class). As these are student lead and co-created, it seems these ties are stronger but less visible to us.

Scenario 2

An elective unit on leadership from a large postgraduate program undertaken by students from across 10 business disciplines. It was relatively small (in comparison to other compulsory business units) with students all studying 'remotely' in the second half of 2021.

We began with some well-known activities to help students build trust and connections such as playing music on entry and using that as a conversation starter. Inviting students to share their favourite piece of music for example and being able to search and play it was responsive and highly appreciated. As students entered the online classroom, we also had them 'check-in' using a QR code (a very familiar activity in their lives during the pandemic) which took them to a simple 3 question survey: How are you feeling today (great; average; not so

good); tell us about your engagement with this week's content (not much; some; all); how can we help? (open). Then after class we followed up with students whose answers concerned us or those who had not checked in at all. Again, students told us how much they appreciated this small nudge.

The importance of preparation
Since our unit was very much a blended style whereby 'lecture content' had been chunked (Humphries & Clark, 2021) and delivered predominantly by short videos along with interactive online activities, we were keen to ensure students engaged with the weekly content before attending the online (live) class. We made a point of naming and thanking students who had done this pre-work, further adding to the social presence (Koszalka et al., 2021).

There has been an ongoing debate over whether we should insist on students turning on their cameras in Zoom or allowing them their choice (Terada, 2021). We never mandated it in our class but suggested that if students were not comfortable then they use their favourite leader as their Zoom profile picture (or their cat or anything they liked rather than having a black box). We engaged in small talk at the start of class with those who did this by commenting on their chosen leader and asking them follow-up questions.

We recapped weekly content through Kahoot quizzes which added an element of immediacy and fun. We made a big deal of cheering the winners and tried to encourage everyone to take part. We noticed (and I am sure the students did too) that it was familiar names who were winning the Kahoots as to those whom we had just mentioned as having engaged in the pre-work.

Reducing cognitive load
Rather than introduce new technologies we focused on making use of what they knew. For example, the simple Zoom tools such as asking students to add their ideas and answers in the chat – then saving that and sharing back with the class afterwards for their notes. This allowed many students to answer, not only one who was confident enough to speak out. Similarly, use of the 'reactions' in Zoom was a way of students being able to connect with us through a 'text style' language they are very comfortable with.

And finally, to make up for those missed corridor conversations with the teacher, we stayed online for 10 minutes after every online workshop/tutorial to answer questions. Just as we might 'hang around' in the corridor, we were 'hanging around' online. By giving students some space to speak out (when most students had left the room) we found the quieter ones would often make good use of that time and appreciated this final nudge.

Discussion and Implications

The human desire to connect is strong and despite the disruptions the pandemic has presented, our students, given opportunities will connect organically online just as they did face to face. However, without the visual cues and clues our students need purposeful moments to connect, make small talk and build trust in our online classes too. Finding times and opportunities to nudge them together and build the efficacy to do so becomes an important part of the teaching role.

Blended learning approaches have been around for decades but more recently the online component of the 'blend' has become more predominant. It will likely remain so for some time to come thus opportunities to connect organically need to become purposeful and directed. By deliberate designing of connection points, students are facilitated to 'discover' opportunities to connect. It is our role to support the lurkers, and those hidden by 'the cloak of invisibility' to join the enthusiasts and make connections as they will need to in their future careers. Offering students opportunities to build their social presence, combined with our purposeful teacher presence provides the ultimate climate setting for a successful learning experience (Garrison & Vaughn, 2008).

Students were clear by their interactions that they enjoyed and appreciated what we were doing. From building their own WeChat channels, finding us when on campus, and comments such as '*I am feeling positive about your use of technology—other teachers are more passive about online learning ... I'm feeling optimistic.*' (Student from scenario 1) as early as mid 2020 told us we were making a difference. '*Love the way of teaching! It is really interactive.*' and '*Good use of online learning platforms. Great Zoom discussion*' (students from scenario 2).

The implications for technologists, learning designers and educators are clear. We must prepare our students for our learning environments by ensuring students have the technical capability to be connected i.e. the computers internet and digital literacy (Huber & Shalavin, 2018; Selwyn, 2016). But it is more than the technical availability that is required. The knowledge and skills to leverage the technology to replicate the interactions that in turn become the connecting pieces enable us to connect and reconnect our students, to build networks with both strong and weak ties. In their future working environments, it is highly likely they will be doing more remote working than ever before and having the skills embedded to operate and be comfortable doing so is only setting them up for success (Abe et al., 2021). As educators our role is to foster connections to us, each other, our institutions, and nudge (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008) our students to connect and reconnect in any means they have available to them.

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