

Fostering Connections

Teaching Remotely: Shared Experiences

Summary of virtual panel event held on October 22nd, 2020
[\[Link to video\]](#)



This session was about exploring strategies and opportunities to build connections and create feelings of community within the online learning environment. Our panel of guests shared their experiences, both failures and successes as they worked to test and implement new ways of engaging with their students.

Panelists:

Peter Cockett, Associate Professor, School of the Arts

Krista Howarth, Assistant Professor, Kinesiology

Mostafa Soliman, Assistant Professor, Booth School of Engineering Practice & Technology

Teal McAteer, Associate Professor, Human Resources & Management

Panel Questions:

How have you changed your course design or teaching approach to foster connections between you and your students and/or between students?

What strategies are you using to engage students in the learning process through interdisciplinary, diverse and inclusive perspectives or experience-based learning?

How has experimentation and innovation played a role in your teaching practices this past year? How can we continue to foster teaching as a professional and innovative practice at McMaster?

What connection building practices are working now that you would want to keep or adapt when we return to in-person? How can we continue to build active and flexible learning spaces at McMaster?

4 Key Takeaways from the panel

1. It is important to ground the students in their connection with one another. Sharing your story and hearing others' stories creates a deeper connection and is the foundation for a more productive, open, and inclusive discussion regarding the complex issues discussed in class [19:52 – 20:50].
2. Multiple panelists have sent students at-home lab kits [33:31 – 34:33]. Offering a "lab-in-a-box" kit allows students to participate in experiential learning by performing lab experiments at home [50:00 – 51:00].
3. Virtual office hours that also invite more casual conversations are encouraged. Students have been missing out on the connections with their peers, TAs and instructors, so providing the opportunity to connect in this way has been very well-received.
4. Encouraging group work and learning teams can also effectively foster connections. In a remote environment, it can be difficult for students to stay connected on their own, so implementing this into the course makes it easier to connect with peers.

Some key takeaways from each panelist

Peter Cockett, Associate Professor, School of the Arts

- Acknowledging positionality and identifying blind spots are important in decentering authority in relation to key issues of race, class, colonialism, gender, sexuality, etc. that we take up in the class in order to create a space that students can speak confidently in. Peter has included positionality modules in his THTRFLM 1T03 course to encourage students to reflect on their own positionality [10:55 – 15:15].
- Peter has introduced various activities including a story telling exercise to encourage students to connect and learn more about one another. Students are asked to take a photograph of a significant object and share the story behind it. Students in tutorial groups then respond and participation in this activity allows students to be more connected [16:25 – 19:50].

Krista Howarth, Assistant Professor, Kinesiology

- Krista has decided to follow an asynchronous lecture style and noticed that the connection with students was missing. She has implemented a blended style of lecture where she spends some time on video, and other times using voice overs. For courses that are less content-heavy, she has developed a greenscreen model, where she superimposes herself over a lecture room to help make the content more interactive. Allowing her personality to come through in this way has been very well-received by students [23:31 – 29:10].
- In addition to synchronous lectures, Krista holds live office hours and encourages students to chat about anything. She also offers content review sessions which are very interactive and help further foster connections [29:17 – 29:54].
- It is also important to build connections with TAs and among students. Students are assigned to lab sections where they meet regularly with TAs. Bi-weekly “coffee shops” are also held where students can engage in ice breakers and more casual conversations [29:58 – 32:17].

Mostafa Soliman, Assistant Professor, Booth School of Engineering Practice & Technology

- One challenge that Mostafa has identified is that students have been missing out on the peer learning opportunities that were present during in-class lectures. Another challenge is finding an effective way to offer engaging experiential learning when labs on campus are closed [38:20 – 39:43].
- Mostafa has introduced learning groups to his class, where students are required to find a team of 3-4 students to work closely with over the term. This offers students the opportunity to collaborate and connect with one another [40:08 – 42:15].
- Mostafa uses “Socrative,” a website where students work in teams to solve a quiz. The website tracks the progress of each team and creates a sort of competition that motivates them to collaborate effectively [42:21- 43:59]. He also uses a factory simulator using a 3D gaming engine. Students can interact with the 3D simulation and solve real problems [47:36 – 49:57].

Teal McAteer, Associate Professor, Human Resources & Management

- It is important to know your strengths and gifts. Determine how you can continue that gift giving in a new environment and not to allow the environment to define the circumstance [57:58 - 58:15].
- Teal follows the “form follows function” principal by identifying a “compass” and understanding what exactly she hopes students will get out of the course. After this is determined, she finds the best methods to implement that will achieve this end goal [59:40 – 1:00:12].
- Teal has opted for completely synchronous lectures, as she has found that attendance and engagement is higher when students do not rely on lecture recordings. She has hired a co-host (TA) to help run lectures, which has created a lively and dynamic energy in class. [1:00:17 – 1:01:55]
- Virtual office hours called “coaching corners” are held twice a week where students are encouraged to talk about anything and connect with one another [1:03:00 – 1:03:18].

Referenced Resources:

- [Socrative](#)
- [McMaster's Inclusive Teaching and Learning Guide](#)
- [3D Factory Simulation](#)
- [Course Feedback](#)
- [Getting Started with OneNote](#)