

Social Presence in Large Classes



How to establish Social Presence in large online classes?

When your online student cohort is larger than about 30 students the best advice is to have more than one tutor to respond to the students online and to help manage the chat and other features during your live online classrooms. However, if that facility is unavailable, there are a number of things you can do to establish your social presence and to help engage students.

A few best practice tips on how to establish Social Presence in Large Online Classes.



Getting social presence off the ground in large classes

Post a short welcoming introduction video, audio or text that includes a brief bio and a snippet of personal information. If using text or audio, post a picture of yourself.

Ask students to post a similar message about themselves and their desires/expectations of the course. Give them a deadline.

Randomly allocate each student with two others and ask them to respond to each others posts. Give them a deadline. Then, if possible, respond yourself to students who haven't received a response yet.

Run an icebreaker activity between groups. For example, group your class into groups of 5 to 6 students and ask them to each post an image, meme or gif that best describes how much they like this particular subject. Group members are then required to guess the particular emotion or feeling invoked.

Explicitly inform your students of the value of social presence and engagement with learning, refer to the difficulties of supporting large class engagement. Ask your students, via a poll, for their experiences with peer mentoring/support, Use this, and other resources, to develop a best practice guide on how you plan to implement a peer support network for your course.

Maintaining Social presence in large classes

Set up three or four themed query forums, based on your past experience of this or other similar courses. For example, you may have one for Assignments and another for Referencing. Put FAQ's into each forum. Allow students query in here, but only respond to those that fall outside your FAQ, and then add this query/response into the FAQ. Inform students of the process and the expected response time. Stick to your guns!

Group students into groups of 5 or 6 and ask them to become mentors for each other during the course. Suggest initial postings such as 'when is the first assignment due?'. You may wish to allow them self-select the groups. Ask them to allocate a chair who can then come to you with queries that they are unable to answer. Incentivise this by allocating a percentage of their grade towards continuous participation in this forum.

Get to know the names of the students who most frequently and positively engage in the forums and reference their queries/responses when posting a general message to the class (or in the online class).

Use online polls to ask your students relevant questions on the course materials. Careful wording of questions should allow students select different, but valid, responses. Open up a comparison/critique of the possible answers to the students who have partaken in the poll.

For a few excellent ideas for large classes see the Edsurge column in higher education on [How to Engage Students and Support Learning in Large Classes](#). While these are not all specifically for online teaching many of them can be suitably adapted.