

Some Reflections about Building Community Online

By Jan Abushakrah

These are “Jan’s Guidelines,” developed through a long process over a number of terms and courses. Certainly, we all need to adapt to the particular subject matter and course outcomes. Since I teach sociology courses, the outcome of creating a sense of community and collaborative learning is built into the course content and outcomes.

1. **Model** community building through your Course Orientation, Course Units, and communications with students in email and on the discussion boards. Be open and encouraging, and set the tone throughout.
2. **Highlight** community building, collaboration, and interaction with other students as a course outcome. Make a point of it in the Course Orientation, and provide incentives (credit) for positive contributions and participation.
3. **Model a discovery approach to learning, based on collaboration and consultation with human and research resources.** In the Course Units (online lectures), raise questions, highlight controversies, and address challenges in the field.
 - **Draw from “real life” examples** in public policy or professional practice, and everyday life as well.
 - **Link** to articles, websites and other online resources to provide direction and encourage students to explore further.
 - **Provide “optional” guided pathways** for learning and grappling with issues that most interest the students. **Question: Why not require that all students learn the same curriculum?**
4. **Provide Discussion Options** so that students can choose what they want to talk about and learn more about. Post Discussion Options in the Course Units and Repost Discussion Guidelines as the first message in each Discussion Option. **Question: Why not assign students to groups?**
5. **For a major project, set up collaborative working groups.**
6. **Don’t post detailed rules and regulations** on the parameters and etiquette of discussion posts. **Why? (ask me☺)**
7. **Use a Student Lounge** for off-topic exchanges, announcements and student interaction.
8. Encourage students to draw from the course resources, experiences, and service learning. **Question: Should students share their personal experiences?**
9. **Consider a “blended” course arrangement** (Online + Hybrid with a weekly meeting)