



# Sense of Belonging and Online Learning<sup>1</sup>

**UDL 3.0 Consideration 8.4:** Foster belonging and community — Cultivate spaces where learners are wanted and where learners want to be.

## What is it?

Belonging and community are fundamental human needs that shape learners' motivation, persistence, and success. Fostering a sense of belonging in online environments involves proactively creating opportunities for building productive relationships among learners and between learners and instructors. The learning spaces should communicate that all learners are valued, welcomed, and essential to the learning community. This is especially true for learners who have been historically excluded or marginalized, including adult learners and underrepresented students.

## Why do it?

Online learners often face unique challenges related to social isolation, limited opportunities to build relationships, and the use of technology. Adult learners balancing multiple roles, such as work and caregiving, may experience stress and isolation, which may negatively affect their academic perseverance. Minoritized and underrepresented students may encounter microaggressions and systemic barriers beyond what they might experience in on-campus learning.

Intentionally fostering a sense of belonging and community online can improve academic outcomes, increase retention, and promote learner well-being. For example, activities designed to build productive relationships among learners may reduce learning barriers by providing emotional support, academic assistance, and the motivation to persist.

## How to do it

Here are some ways to facilitate a sense of belonging and community in your courses.

### Create multiple pathways for connection

- Design formal and informal opportunities for learners to interact and collaborate, such as peer review and low-stakes, small-group work.
- Facilitate discussion forums and spaces for both academic and personal sharing.

### Acknowledge and honor diverse identities

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- Create activities for learners to share their unique knowledge and assets.
- Design assignments that provide opportunities for learners to incorporate their experiences and perspectives.
- Provide assessments that validate different ways of knowing and learning.
- Ensure course materials reflect diverse voices and experiences.

### **Build social presence in online environments**

- Provide synchronous sessions to foster real-time connections and opportunities for learners to support one another.
- Design assignments that involve video usage, such as introductions and reflections, to humanize the online experience.
- Create collaborative assignments that require interaction and interdependence.

### **Support role identity and life integration**

- Acknowledge learners' multiple roles and responsibilities outside of school.
- Provide flexibility that allows learners to balance competing priorities.
- Direct learners to support systems that address the unique stressors they may face.

### **Implement inclusive design practices**

- Examine your assumptions and biases, which may create barriers to belonging for different learner groups.
- Use asset-based approaches that build on learners' existing knowledge and skills.
- Create multiple ways for learners to participate and contribute.
- Continuously assess and adapt based on learner feedback about their sense of belonging.

## **Key Factors for Fostering a Sense of Belonging**

While the UDL 3.0 Guidelines emphasize the importance of fostering belonging and community, achieving this requires careful attention to several key factors.

- **Be intentional:** Start community-building activities from the very first class session and keep the focus throughout the learning experience. A sense of belonging cannot be assumed to develop naturally, particularly in online environments.
- **Prioritize quality over quantity:** Focus on creating meaningful connections rather than increasing interaction frequency. Authentic relationships that extend beyond coursework provide the strongest support for academic persistence.

- **Address systemic barriers:** Recognize that some learners may need additional support to feel they belong due to historical exclusion or current systemic barriers. Proactively address these challenges rather than expecting learners to adapt to existing structures.
- **Monitor and adjust:** Regularly assess learners' sense of belonging and community through surveys, discussions, and observation. Be prepared to modify approaches based on learner needs and feedback.

## Resources

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