CourseNetworking: How a Social Media Platform Can Connect Us in a Crisis

Lamia Scherzinger
Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI)
lnuseibe@iupui.edu

Abstract: "This is very scary. Everybody be safe, social distance, and wash hands please."
"This has definitely been an odd semester. I'm very nervous for how the rest of the semester is going to go!" "I am trying to not to be too afraid. I work in the medical field. It can be so scary." These are statements taken directly from my students this semester. How was I able to have my students open up so intimately and honestly? I use CourseNetworking, an academic social networking platform that can be integrated into Canvas, and have done so for years. I first started using it as a chance to get to know my students more since I never get to meet them face-to-face, often posting what we did over the weekend, our favorite TV shows and books, and discuss topics from the classroom that have popped up in everyday life. Then the pandemic hit and my students' lives were turned upside down. Some were forced to move out of their campus housing, many lost their jobs, and all them had their classes go completely online. Campus leadership constantly worries how this pandemic might be affecting our students. We are told to reach out and let the students know we are here for them. We are encouraged to have frequent communication with them. And with CourseNetworking, this was already in place in my classes at the beginning of the semester. I have been able to reach out to my students each week and ask them how they are doing, and they are able to share with others how much their lives have changed. And thanks to a social media platform, my students and I are scared together, we are overwhelmed together, and we are alone together. But we are together.

Introduction

These are the real, unprompted, honest feelings of students in different sections of my basic level nutrition course from the spring 2020 semester:

> **Post:** "This has definitely been an odd semester. I'm very nervous for how the rest of the semester is going to go!"
> **Post:** "I am trying to not be too afraid. I work in the medical field. It can be so scary."
> **Post:** "This is very scary. Everybody be safe, social distance, and wash hands please."

These declarations were not said in the classroom, as we didn't meet in person a single time. In fact, none of my classes meet face-to-face at all, and yet, I was still able to garner these raw, candid feelings from my students. In fact, there are many more statements listed below that give us a glimpse into the thought process of a sampling of students during the 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic in 2020. How was I able to have my students share so intimately and honestly? And how can this online classroom atmosphere be replicated so that students always feel welcome to share their thoughts?

CourseNetworking

The first answer is the easier one; I used CourseNetworking, an academic social networking platform that is integrated into my learning management system. I am a full-time, completely online lecturer

and have been since 2011 after having taught in a physical classroom for five years. When I first began teaching online, I soon found myself missing the student interaction I had in the classroom and was not satisfied with the traditional ways to get to know my students. When I first saw CourseNetworking and what it could do, I knew this could be the solution I was looking for. Its interface is very similar to Facebook, something my students and I were comfortable with, so there was very little 'onboarding' to do with them. While initially proposed as a way to post course discussions and connect students in groups for projects, I chose to use CourseNetworking as an extra credit assignment in which the students and I posted about what we did over the weekend, our favorite TV shows and books, and how topics from the course popped up in their everyday lives.

This worked out well and was openly welcomed by my students. Then the pandemic hit, and my students' lives were turned upside down. Some were forced to move out of their campus housing, many lost their jobs, and all of them had their classes go completely online. Their posts went from lighthearted and trivial to ones full of uncertainty, worry, and honest pleas for everyone to stay safe.

> **Post:** "How did everyone's first week of online school go? I experienced a lot of confusion!"
>> **Reply:** "I have taken online courses every semester since I started college; however, it's been difficult for me because my workload has increased greatly from the courses that were originally in person."
> **Post:** "I'm in shock with how quickly the overall climate of this virus changed in just a span of a week. I will not be going back [to work] until [at least] May 1st. I hope that this has not been the case for anyone here- I hope that everyone is safe."
> **Post:** "I think in situations like these, it is important to stay hopeful! Remain positive in all the chaos going on around you!"
> **Post:** "If you can wish for anything right now, what will that wish be and why?"
>> **Reply:** "I wish that we [find] a vaccine for COVID so that everyone [can] be safe."

Campus leadership constantly worried about how this pandemic might be affecting our students. We were told to reach out and let the students know we were there for them. We were encouraged to have frequent communication with them. With CourseNetworking, this was already in place in my classes at the beginning of the semester. I had been able to reach out to my students each week and ask them how they were doing, and they were able to share with others how much their lives had changed.

> **Post:** "This whole pandemic thing has thrown my whole life off course; I am sure it has done the same to a lot of you as well. I just never thought in my lifetime I would live through something like this."
> **Post:** "My cousin's father tested positive for it and he unfortunately didn't make it."
> **Post:** "Hello everyone, I hope everyone is doing well. I hope that we are staying home. I tested positive for [COVID-19], and I am fighting. I work at the hospital; I don't know if I have it from there because we had some cases."

Replicating the Open Classroom Atmosphere

The second question I posed as to how to replicate this open classroom atmosphere of sharing and support is not a one-size-fits-all answer. I found that I was able to use CourseNetworking to facilitate this, though other social academic sites may work, as well. The important components to this, however, include the following: 1) I was consistent in my own posts, sharing with them my pandemic experiences, fears, and worries; 2) I responded to many of their posts in encouraging and supportive

ways to let them know I was there for them, whether that was in a more formal way of directing them to school resources or less formally through reassurance and hope; 3) Since I used CourseNetworking as extra credit, it was a low-stakes assignment that allowed them to take the 'assignment' where they needed to, such as getting through a global crisis. These factors all led to students feeling safe when posting how they were truly feeling. Knowing that they can share their fears, worries, and support for each other and that be met with encouragement and not judgement created the perfect class atmosphere for my students and myself to help us get through the unprecedented semester together.

> **Post:** "I am feeling better. I did almost die, but your prayers help a lot. Thank you again!"
> **Post:** "Hello, everyone! I hope everyone is staying safe, staying inside, and staying healthy! As long we stay united this will pass :)."
> **Post:** "For those who are working right now during this crisis, thank you so much! Your sacrifice is extraordinary and is not going unnoticed. I hope everyone is staying safe."

Conclusion

No one will soon forget the spring semester of 2020. It taught me that my job that particular semester was more than just teaching students about nutrition. It was also about giving them a platform to speak their anxieties and find comfort. Without CourseNetworking, I never would have heard these words from my students. I might never have realized that what I was going through was something we were all going through. My students and I were scared together, we were overwhelmed together, and we were alone together. Thanks to a social media platform, however, we were at least together.

> **Post:** "I am thankful my professors have all been extremely helpful and adjusting with us and giving/receiving advice in grateful ways. I really think a lot of people have confided in each other to get through the end of the semester together."
> **Post:** "Life is short; love who you love, be yourself, be open, be spontaneous, and stay alive. [I] hope everyone has a better summer than ever before. Be safe."
> **Post:** "Have a blessed summer! Everyone- stay safe! Keep social distancing and see you when this is over."