
At Issue

Using Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Practices, Post-COVID, to Close the Gap in Distance Learning in the Community College

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Physical and geographical distance have long existed as factors that may impact student success in online learning. Now, in the age of a global pandemic, these factors have coalesced with social distance to intensify feelings of isolation that online students may experience. The deliberate use of social and emotional learning (SEL) strategies post-COVID-19 aligns with the humanistic perspective of teaching espoused by learning-centered community colleges. Incorporating SEL practices in the instructional delivery of the online curriculum provides viable strategies for mitigating the specific problem of social distance. This article proffers the case for embracing SEL practices and provides concrete, practical ways instructors can build a supportive online learning environment.

Since the founding of Joliet Junior College in 1901, community colleges have been recognized as safe havens of learning for diverse student populations. Bers and Calhoun (2002) identify primary functions that these institutions of higher education provide: (a) transfer education, (b) vocational education, (c) remedial education, and (d) education to limited English proficient (LEP) or English as a Second Language learner. In today's American community college, low-income and nontraditional learners—including women, adult learners, racial and ethnic minorities, and students with disabilities—seek and find educational access that is unparalleled in any other institution of higher education. Through a humanistic perspective (Hanley et al., 2020)—which tends to be pro-active in supporting the emotional well-being of learners—the community college has increased access to these nontraditional student cohorts and subpopulations.

The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2021) highlights an undeniable disruption in higher education, the learning environment, and the process of teaching and learning: “Beginning in mid-March 2020, many colleges across the U.S. shifted to online-only learning almost overnight.” For those faculty and learners who had already established a preference for online teaching and learning, the disruption was less traumatic; for others whose preference was the human interaction most notably found in the face-to-face classroom, the shift was abrupt and debilitating.

Distance—both physical and geographical—has long existed as a variable that may impact student success in online learning. Now, in the age of a global pandemic, social distance has emerged and is yet another important variable. In fact, the latter distance may well exist as a confounding variable—one which confuses the relationship between instruction and academic success in online coursework—as it intensifies feelings of isolation (Phirangee & Malec, 2017), which students experience.

Even before the onset of the coronavirus (COVID-19), over 50% of students at the community college were taking online courses (Batts et al., 2010, p. 21). However, post-COVID, the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (NSCRC) (Sedmak, 2020) reports that undergraduate enrollment is down at all types of institutions, except for private, for-profit, four-year colleges. Additionally, NSCRC identified community colleges as those institutions of higher education which have suffered the most dramatic enrollment decline, reportedly now nearly nine times their pre-pandemic loss rate. As a result of a worsening enrollment picture, innovative ways of connecting with community college learners reign supreme. Post-COVID and with declining enrollments in the community college, postsecondary faculty who teach lower-division courses must be especially attentive to those variables, such as social distance, that may erect barriers to student persistence.

Conceptual Framework

Learning theorists such as Vygotsky (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004) embraced the philosophy that students do not learn in isolation but rather through interaction. According to Vygotsky, the learning environment is crucial and best presented as a supportive ecosystem to optimize student achievement. Further, learning—no matter the medium—is a fundamentally social phenomenon (Allmendinger, 2010). In that regard, Ritzer and Miles (2019) highlight how our current technological age and the seemingly ubiquitous nature of social media continue to change the nature of

consumption and the way that we interact in an era of networked individualism. We are closer than ever before due to the digital networks that connect the world, yet we are paradoxically disconnected as our emotions have seemingly been obscured by cyberspace.

Sociological theories enable us to understand how society works and aim to provide a conceptual framework to help us examine the conflict and struggles in society. These theories map out the spaces and places that we occupy, travel within, and explore (Sears & Cairns, 2015, p. 85). In this digital age of teaching and learning, the virtual classroom presents a learning environment that faculty and students must navigate and explore; accordingly, it is not exempt from sociological examination.

As a sociologist, Emile Durkheim touted structural functionalism as a macro-sociological theory for examining society. He was concerned with the wellness of the whole society, and as a structural functionalist, he examined society through social integration. Moreover, he proposed that sociology could be understood from a scientific view, almost like a living, breathing organism made up of different parts that must fit together for society to work well and be healthy.

From his sociological perspective, Durkheim stated that the social bond between humans has the power to promote the social good (Lemert, 2007, p. 79). He characterized an individual as being lost without a community (Lemert, 2007, p. 80), which provided the moral and ethical tethers—necessary elements of society—that coalesced to make individuals humanistic in their approach to interaction with and learning from one another. Finally, Durkheim suggested that specific rules of society work together to establish a certain order—certain norms, ways of acting, thinking, and behaving.

Additionally, from a feminist standpoint, Dorothy Smith (2004) claimed that sociological examination should consist of separate, yet paradoxically, overlapping pieces—society itself and the dominant way in which it is perceived and exists, and the way that women experience the society from within. Smith's standpoint placed emphasis on the sociologist's actual situation and suggested that both the individuals being observed and the direct experiences of the observer (especially the woman) are important.

Smith's idea of a bifurcated consciousness was a byproduct of her feminist perspective on sociology, signaling that what researchers bring to the table of the sociological examination truly matters, not just what they find when they get there. Smith's feminist theory established that the sociological world exists in two different realms—one as it is expe-

rienced as a woman, and one as the way it is and the setting to which women must conform and fit into that world. They must experience the environment, but they must also bring their experiences to examine the environment as it is.

Specifically, women need to examine the sociological environment through the subjective lens of their own experiences and interactions within it. Resting on decades of action research in the community college classroom, the author of this article merges Vygotsky's learning theory (social interaction) alongside two sociological perspectives (structural functionalism and feminist theory) as a framework for examining virtual learning environments, and using social and emotional learning (SEL) practices to mitigate the specific problem of social distance within this setting.

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in Digital Environments

The research literature identifies the role of the faculty, the quality of the learning environment, and the incorporation of SEL strategies as vital components in the achievement of student learning outcomes. For example, Batts et al. (2010) signal that the abilities of online faculty to connect with learners are key to the success of the students, programs, and ultimately, the institution. Virtual faculty must establish and sustain an environment that supports students in knowledge construction, active engagement, and collaborative learning with meaning negotiated from multiple perspectives (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004, p. 5).

Moreover, empirical research findings (Shafait et al., 2021) support the notion that faculty and students need interaction within a safe and friendly environment to support optimal outcomes in course retention, completion, and passing rates. As important, participants in a three-day conference and international collaborative exploring the importance of SEL in higher education identified "social and emotional learning as one of the most significant developments in education in recent history, with the potential to become an integral part of higher education internationally as it gains momentum" (Jones, 2018).

In "Prioritizing the Social and Emotional Learning in Students' Digital Lives During the Pandemic," Kelly Mendoza asserts that "educators recognize the importance of supporting students' social and emotional well-being, understanding that it's fundamental to academic success." While Mendoza refers to secondary education, the need to address SEL spans the K-20 learning environment. Regardless of age and educational

level, the social and the emotional well-being of students are key factors that interface with and may interfere with their success. Given the influx of nontraditional learners within the community college, these faculty must proactively seek to support students' SEL needs.

Jones et al. (2017) define SEL as “the process through which individuals learn and apply a set of social, emotional, behavioral, and character skills required to succeed in schooling, the workplace, relationships, and citizenship.” SEL has emerged as an umbrella term for several concepts including noncognitive development, character education, 21st century skills, and trauma-informed learning. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) writes, “SEL offers a powerful means to support one another during these challenging times by developing crucial competencies relating to empathy, resilience, and relationship-building that students and adults need” (CASEL, 2021).

Because in-person communities and groups are now limited in the age of COVID-19, people continue to seek online communities and groups. The online learning environment is no exception. Students want to belong to a group. Student perception of barriers, which may further exacerbate social distance, include:

- atypical connections and socialization
- isolation heightened with the pandemic and COVID-19
- issues with communication
- lack of a community of learners

The addition of myriad social differences—gender, race, ethnicity, age, class, sexual orientation, sexual identity, political party, religion, culture—to our digitally enhanced learning environment creates a setting that is rife with barriers to learning. Stewart and Lowenthal (2021) identify themes of isolation and loneliness and little to no social interaction as inhibitors of learning in online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Applying SEL Practices to the Virtual Learning Environment

Community college faculty and learners alike have been forced to move away from our once normal, seemingly unencumbered existence of free-spirited living and learning. The old way of living and learning was to belong to one's work community (now often working from home), church community (now meeting by Zoom), educational community (now traumatized by an invisible virus, masked faces, and the fear of closed spaces), and the like. Reconnecting as individuals and/or useful groups in society

will likely continue to be difficult. Many students, who are adapting to changing technologies, feel a loss of the human connection.

Higgins and Bushel (2018), as cited in Shafait et al. (2021), explain the importance of incorporating SEL practices in virtual instruction as follows:

Therefore, when teachers are warm and emotionally supportive, they provide students with a sense of trust, connectedness with the institutional environment, sense of security to explore new ideas and take risks, increased motivation, academic achievement, better retention, satisfaction from studies, and a positive climate in the learning environment, all of which are fundamental to student learning outcomes (SLOs).

Without question then, the online instructor will continue to serve as a linchpin in supporting the success of the virtual learner. Examination of how to create and apply general SEL practices to the virtual learning environment may help address the specific problem of how to narrow social distance among our diverse learners within an online course. Using SEL practices to close the gap in distance learning in the community college fuses with the view of community colleges as institutions that exhibit a “willingness to try new ideas” (Lorenzo, 2002, p. 9).

SEL Strategies—At Course Beginning

Community college faculty may incorporate SEL strategies at the beginning, middle, and end of an online course. For best effect, these should be seamlessly interwoven into instruction before course onset and as soon as students have access to the virtual classroom, from day one through the last day. As beginning course strategies, faculty may consider the ABCs for creating a climate of achievement, espoused by Beverly Daniel Tatum, former president of Spelman College:

- **Affirm the identity of learners.**
 - Be encouraging as well as motivating, and consider the use of a chief fan (#1 cheerleader) team approach.
 - Be positive, polite, and professional.
 - Be sure to respond to all incoming communication (e.g., discussion board posts and email) so that each student knows you READ his or her post.
 - Be there for students by establishing a clear and visible presence.

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- **Build a community of learners.**
 - Include a week one *Discussion Board* audio or video introduction.
 - Schedule a week one *Live Chat* as early as possible once the course begins.
 - Send a welcome message using available communication technologies provided by the institution (observe FERPA).
 - Share office hour availability by phone, email, and/or video announcement.
 - Offer a virtual office hour where students can simply drop in for informal dialogue.
 - **Cultivate leadership.**
 - Adopt an *In Your Corner, On Your Team* mantra.
 - Model thoughtful and supportive communication on online discussion boards.

Consider suggesting a clear description for student communication, such as:

Hello, all. Here is one technique that works wonders, and I am encouraging you to try it when forming your interactive replies to your peers on the Discussion Board. When replying to posts from other learners, seek to structure your interactive reply using the following five-part typology:

1. *Salutation to respective peer learner*
2. *Statement of your position (agree, disagree, neutral, and simply adding information or additional perspective)*
3. *Excerpted “quote” from peer (you need not cut/paste/repeat the entire message but give enough of peer’s post to set the context for your reply)*
4. *Your interactive commentary/reply, inclusive of a summary statement, AND a leading question to prompt a continued response from your peer. Adding a question at the end helps to minimize the tendency for the discussion to drop/close and suggests respect to your peer for his/her reaction to your comments*
5. *Your closing signature/name*

SEL Strategies—During and/or Middle of the Course

Synchronous meetings (live chats) represent one of the best venues for incorporating SEL practices. Depending on the course, the discus-

sion board and live chats may exist as a weekly course strategy, offered throughout the duration of the class, not just in the first week.

Table 1. *Middle/During Course Strategies, Part 1*

Communicate	Communicate with students on a frequent and repeated basis.
Do	Do a gut-check with each student – what is working, what is not.
Offer	Offer empathetic and supportive communication.
Offer	Offer timely and relevant feedback.
Offer	Offer virtual office hours and attend those.
Note	Note students who are not actively engaged and reach out to them.

Start the chat by making a connection. Do not ignore what is going on in the world, namely reality—e.g., natural disasters, including hurricanes, flash floods, wildfires, and other life circumstances, such as the deployment of military families.

State the relevance of a topic to daily life. Tell a personal story. Share an inspiring or course relevant quote as an icebreaker to begin the live chat. As an example, here are two quotes that may be used to encourage and motivate students to chime in with comments:

If you don't like something, change it. If you can't change it, change your attitude.

—Maya Angelou

Step out of the history that is holding you back. Step into the new story you are willing to create.

—Oprah Winfrey

Use of a content-specific quote is also helpful as an icebreaker in synchronous live chats. As an example, when teaching an introductory statistics course, the following quote could be used:

Statistical thinking will one day be as necessary for efficient citizenship as the ability to read and write!

—H. G. Wells

Involve students in the learning process (Chickering & Gamson, 1987). Share the microphone with students at intermittent points in the live chat. To be sure, invite students to pick up and drop the microphone during the live chat. Allow the students to reflect and to interact in a nonthreatening manner. Encourage students to connect—socially and emotionally. Laugh with your students and show empathy.

Table 2. *Middle/During Course Strategies, Part 2*

Praise	Praise students who are firing on all cylinders to keep their momentum going.
Provide	Provide mini-lessons as supplemental instruction (Files, Texts, Videos, Multi-media presentations.)
Refer	Refer students to institutional resources (e.g., online tutoring, library services, career center.)
Send	Send friendly reminders on a weekly basis.
Show	Show commitment to student success.
Track	Track interventions (weekly or biweekly, depending on course duration) per student and note response or lack thereof.

Model critical thinking, think out loud, provide examples, and explain. Repeat an excellent response from a student. Tell students what you are going to do, do it, and tell them what you did in the live chat—*redundancy* can be a beautiful thing. Above all, refrain from conducting your synchronous sessions as a talking head. Encourage students to actively engage through communication—to talk to you, to talk with you, and to talk to each other.

SEL Strategies—End of the Course

Computer-mediated nonverbal signals in instructional situations can affect the communication of emotions (Allmendinger, 2010). Communicate with students using all available modes, as allowed. Remember to observe rules of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) when communicating. From day one of student access to a class, cultivate a positive atmosphere. Set the tone, i.e., be welcoming. Show kindness and grace.

Finally, there are multiple avenues for faculty to incorporate end-of-course SEL strategies in online course instruction, specifically through email:

- congratulate course completers
- congratulate graduates
- congratulate high-performing students
- congratulate those students who you really didn't think would finish, but they did!
- refer students to the community college's alumni association and/or social media page
- remind students of the college's career services and resources center

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- stay engaged with all students until the *last day of class*
 - stay engaged with students who received an incomplete grade, until the extension period has expired

Summary

Again, to quote Allmendinger, “learning, no matter the medium, is a fundamentally social phenomenon. To mitigate isolation and a sense of disconnectedness, it is crucial to look for ways to address SEL in digital learning environments using a sociological lens. Online teaching faculty need to take a proactive approach in supporting the learning success of students, and this effort should be sustained throughout the duration of the course. Regardless of years of teaching experience—on ground or online—and degree of attainment, avoid self-identification as a *KIA* (know it all). Instead, reach out to faculty peers and/or the institution’s teaching and learning center (also known as faculty development center) for suggestions and/or guidance on how to incorporate SEL strategies and best practices in instruction. Examine and use the institution’s resources that support faculty scholarship. Establish a growth mindset and be a faculty learner and a scholar practitioner.

SEL is not just another buzzword and/or catchphrase. Social distancing and social distance truly have the potential to enact adverse impact on student success in online learning. To incorporate SEL practices to close the gap in distance learning, community college faculty exemplars personify a humanistic perspective at the beginning, middle, and end of a course. They exhibit a consistent presence in the online classroom, practice engagement with learners, share the relevance of course content to students’ daily lives, and carry out innovation in the classroom to enhance student success.

As we continue to operate in an increasingly digital age of trauma-informed teaching, faculty are encouraged to use SEL practices to close the gap in distance learning and better connect with students for their academic success. Embedding SEL strategies through computer-mediated communication in digital learning environments offers an additional area of research, ripe for exploration, as it relates to faculty serving as change agents to mitigate social distance and isolation while enhancing the likelihood of student academic success.

Ogburn (1947) points out that inventions influence society. Thus, the new digital technologies that we are adopting in our lives have long-term consequences in how we can exist as a society. We are both connected and separated by the medium of technology. The invention of digital

technology is serving as both a blessing and a curse, and society is struggling with adaptation to talking, to listening, and to interacting with others in a pseudo-live environment.

As Adam-Turner and Burnett (2018) state, “postsecondary leaders need digitally literate personnel to manage constant, rapid changes in technology designed to support administration and teaching” (p. 22). While institutions may develop their own individualized best practices to apply SEL to the virtual learning environment, this article draws upon decades of practical experience and offers several examples of how this work can be broadly accomplished.

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