

Incorporating Networking into Online Courses:

A Roundtable Discussion

Abstract

Networking is an essential skill for business students' job search and career success. For campus-based students, networking with peers occurs naturally in their day-to-day lives; however, online students may be limited in their peer networking opportunities due to the online modality and the asynchronous nature of most online courses. In this roundtable, we draw attention to this issue by discussing our experiences with incorporating networking into our online courses, share our lessons learned, and offer tips for how participants can build networking into their online courses. Via discussion questions, participants will reflect on the need to incorporate networking into online courses, explore and share ways that they can and have utilized networking in their online courses, and discuss the benefits and drawbacks of a networking component in an online course.

Keywords: networking, online learning, virtual teaching

INTRODUCTION

Networking is defined as “individuals’ attempts to develop and maintain relationships with others who have the potential to assist them in their work or career” (Forret & Dougherty, 2001, p. 284). Previous research has documented many benefits of networking including job search success (e.g., Wolff & Moser, 2009), promotional opportunities (Forret & Dougherty, 2004; Wolff & Moser, 2009), and career advancement (Burt & Ronchi, 2007). Because of its many benefits, networking is an essential skill for business students’ job search and career success (de Janasz & Forret, 2008).

Networking generally occurs via natural face-to-face interactions or through spontaneous and serendipitous encounters when individuals interact in the same social circle, have similar interests, or are in a shared organizational unit (Cullen-Lester, Woehler, & Willburn, 2016). Peer networking occurs naturally for on-campus students through class meetings, campus organizations, in dorms and dining halls, and on-campus events and seminars. These experiences give on-campus students opportunities to practice networking with their peers prior to networking professionally in their first corporate setting.

For online students, these same naturally occurring, built-in peer networking opportunities do not exist and/or do not operate in a similar fashion. Instead, online students may be limited in their networking opportunities to email exchanges, asynchronous online discussion boards within the university learning management system, messaging apps such as GroupMe or WhatsApp, or online social networking sites like LinkedIn. Clearly, these forms of online interactions among students are different than those that occur naturally on-campus. Thus, online students may be at a disadvantage when it comes to peer-to-peer networking, as they may not have as many opportunities to organically practice peer networking before heading into their

careers. Because networking is essential for building social capital, gaining access to information, and enhancing career success (de Janasz & Forret, 2008), networking is a critical part of the college experience that online students may be missing, thereby highlighting the need for the inclusion of online networking in web-based courses.

A significant benefit of pursuing a college degree is meeting peers and developing connections with them. For online students, networking with peers occurs differently due to the online modality and the asynchronous nature of most online courses. We think this not only requires recognition by educators, but it also necessitates efforts from educators to offer online students opportunities to network similarly as campus-based students do. Research has not yet been published on the differences in students' networking experiences due to course delivery modality, but initial research on offline and online networking among working persons suggests that online networking may achieve similar benefits as offline networking does (Baumann & Utz, 2021). Thus, regardless of course delivery modality, networking is an important element in obtaining a college degree and should be effectively pursued in both campus-based and online settings.

TEACHING IMPLICATIONS

With the purpose of replicating the networking opportunities that on-campus students experience within the asynchronous online environment, we incorporate a required networking component into our online courses. More specifically, we have online students participate in 20-minute Zoom networking sessions with their classmates every other week during the semester. During these networking sessions, students are randomly assigned to Zoom breakout rooms consisting of 4 students. Four students per breakout room is large enough for students to not have

complete pressure on them to carry to conversation and small enough that students can get to know each other some within the 20-minute required networking session.

Our instructions for the Zoom networking sessions are shown in Appendix A. In these instructions, we provide icebreaker questions that students can use to guide their conversations. These broad questions are not related to the course material, but are simply suggestions to help the students feel more comfortable communicating with their peers.

We offer networking sessions on three different days of the week (e.g., including on the weekend) and at different times to allow for varying student schedules. While the numerous days and times of these Zoom networking sessions accommodate most students, we recognize that, due to work schedules and prior commitments, some online students are not able to attend these sessions. Hence, we offer an alternative assignment (shown in Appendix B) for these students, which is comprised of 20-minute networking sessions with different individuals in their work and personal lives as well as a written submission detailing their experience.

Lessons Learned From Incorporating Networking into Our Online Courses

We have assigned the Zoom networking sessions in 6 courses to-date. As this assignment/exercise is relatively new to our courses, we collected student experiences, opinions, perceptions, and feedback on the networking portion of our online classes. We found that there were some challenges worth noting and some areas that can be improved. First, due to the limitations of our university's license with Zoom, the sessions required a moderator to start the meetings and to put students into appropriately sized break-out groups. To ensure this was not an issue, we hired a student worker to run these sessions. The student worker did not participate in the networking, but was simply present to start the Zoom sessions, assign students to breakout rooms, record student attendance, and end the Zoom sessions. Second, while many students

provided positive feedback about this element of the course (e.g., “The networking exercise created a better community feel to the semester. I felt like I was more a part of the college.”; “My communication skills and interpersonal skills have evolved by just knowing [*sic*] how important it is to network, and as a financial advisor networking will be how I get clients and thrive in my career.”), some students did not like deviating from the established norms of online courses (e.g., “I feel that required message boards has been more beneficial.”; “I don't understand the importance of this exercise as this is an online class that is meant to not have this kind of assignments.”). While we understand that adding a synchronous component to an online class deviates from the established norms (at least at our university), we do not find this feedback to be discouraging. Rather, we are encouraged to know that students found this course to be different than others. We will work to emphasize the importance of networking and clarify the instructions in the future, which will include the importance of embracing changes in technology and networking in new ways.

While these limitations and challenges are noteworthy, we are encouraged by our first attempts at incorporating networking into an online setting. The feedback provided by our students was overwhelmingly positive, showed the many benefits of this exercise, and highlighted their own personal growth (ex. “I went from really shy and introverted into more engaging in virtual communications. I also become more open, accepting, and tolerant to other people's lack of virtual social networking skills.”; “I feel more comfortable starting conversations with people I don't know or don't know well.”; “Overall in the networking experiences [*sic*] I have been able to work on my communication skills with individuals I have spoke [*sic*] with minimal times or none. Repetition [*sic*] in things like this can never hurt and usually end up benefiting individuals allowing for them to become comfortable with speaking to strangers.”).

Tips For Incorporating Networking into Online Courses

For those who would like to incorporate online networking into their classes, we offer the following tips from our experiences with incorporating Zoom networking into our asynchronous online courses:

1. *Consider offering different icebreaker/discussion questions each week.*

As one of our goals was to replicate the in-class experience (where we do not typically provide structured or mandatory networking topics for our students), we wanted to provide our online students with a level of freedom to discuss and network without restrictions. From this feedback, however, we recognize that some students may benefit from a more structured session. One student noted that “the suggestion ice breakers [*sic*] helped a lot” regarding the evolution of their communication and interpersonal skills as a result of this exercise. Another student noted they “would like to see different set[s] of questions for each week”.

2. *Recruit other instructors to incorporate online networking into their courses or offer online networking in several of your classes in order to get a critical mass of students for each online networking day/time.*

Unless an instructor teaches really large classes, it will be necessary to collaborate with instructors of other classes so that there are a sufficient number of students participating in the networking sessions at the various days/times.

3. *Hire a student assistant to assist with the Zoom networking sessions.*

The student can assist with starting the Zoom sessions, assigning students to breakout rooms, taking attendance during the Zoom sessions, and monitoring the various breakout rooms.

4. *Emphasize the importance of networking throughout the course.*

Include a module or lesson about networking in the course so that students more fully understand the importance of networking along with why it is included in the course.

Alternatively, the instructor can share brief articles, links, and tidbits about networking at various points in the semester as a reminder of the necessity of developing networking skills via online networking.

SESSION DESCRIPTION

The outline for the session is as follows:

- I. An overview of the need to incorporate networking into online courses with a brief review of the literature (10 minutes)
- II. Open discussion of our approach to using networking in our online courses, how it differs from our on-campus courses, and how others in the session incorporate networking/asynchronous activities in their online courses (15 minutes)
- III. Open discussion of the benefits and drawbacks to our approach to networking in online courses (15 minutes)
- IV. Open discussion of our lessons learned/tips for incorporating networking and other asynchronous/community building exercises into online courses (20 minutes)

Sample discussion questions include:

Do you see a need to incorporate networking into your online classes? Or is this not an issue in your opinion?

What are you currently doing to incorporate networking into your online teaching?

How successful have your efforts been with incorporating networking into your online teaching?

What tips do you have for integrating networking into your online teaching?

If you do not incorporate networking into your online teaching, what could you do to get your students to network more in your course?

What are the benefits and drawbacks of including a networking component into your online course?

What other types of asynchronous/community building exercises have you used in your online courses that help students network? Please share!

Note: We understand that the required time length for roundtable discussions is one hour, and we planned the session accordingly. However, we can easily adjust this session to a 30-minute allotment, if that works better for scheduling purposes.

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Appendix A

Instructions for Virtual Networking

To earn points for your semester long participation/networking grade, every other week you will log on to a Zoom session and network with your peers for 20 minutes. These sessions will be held on “odd numbered” weeks (i.e., weeks 3, 5, 7, etc.).

To earn full credit, you must attend 5 out of 7 weeks. The sessions will be held on Tuesdays at 6:00pm, Thursdays at 7:00pm, and Saturdays at 3:00pm every other week. You only need to attend one session per week (and will only receive credit for attending one session per week). If you foresee a scheduling issue that prevents you from regularly participating, please let the instructor know so that you can complete the alternative networking assignment.

The purpose of these sessions is to enhance your virtual communication skills (which are becoming increasingly important in today’s workplace) and to network with your peers (check out this article to learn more about why networking is important for you and your career:

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/biancamillercole/2019/03/20/why-networking-should-be-at-the-core-of-your-career/?sh=571686b01300>).

Students from your section as well as other sections/classes may be present in your breakout room. Thus, you will need to talk about topics other than the course in your networking sessions. Please note that these sessions will be recorded so they can be graded later.

Instructions:

1. Log on to Zoom via the university’s learning management system at the appropriate time.
 - Make sure your name on Zoom appears as it does in the gradebook; if you would like to be address by a different name, please put it in parentheses.
 - Log on a few minutes early; if you are not logged on by 5 minutes past the start time, you will not receive credit for that session.

2. Turn on your camera and unmute yourself.
 - This is required, as the purpose of these assignments is to practice virtual communication and networking.
3. Spend 20 minutes networking with your peers.
 - Start by introducing yourself and mentioning which course you are taking.
 - You can talk about your jobs, courses, or other matters--see below the networking icebreaker questions for optional topics.
 - You are welcome to stay in your breakout rooms longer; however, if you leave early you will not receive credit for that session.

Networking icebreaker questions:

1. What are your goals after you graduate?
2. What is your go-to coffee order?
3. What is your current job?
4. What was your best/worst quarantine purchase?
5. What is your dream job?
6. If an “introduction song” played every time you walked into a room, what would it be?
7. What is one outdated or funny item on your resume?
8. What is your most used emoji/meme?
9. What is your favorite thing about this university?
10. What is the weirdest thing in the room with you right now?

These are just suggestions! This is your time to practice your networking skills. You can talk about anything from your favorite holiday tradition to your favorite aspect of the course so far.

You can also use this time to make real connections to help you in your careers.

Appendix B

Instructions for Alternative Networking Assignment

The purpose of this assignment is to earn credit for the Networking/Participation component of your grade if you are unable to attend the Zoom Networking sessions due to your schedule (check out this article to learn more about why networking is important for you and your career: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/biancamillercole/2019/03/20/why-networking-should-be-at-the-core-of-your-career/?sh=571686b01300>).

You must turn in five written assignments (in place of the five Zoom Networking sessions) to earn full credit. Spend 20 minutes networking. This can be with an individual you know or someone you are getting to know. It can be face-to-face or through Zoom (you must be able to see and hear the individual). You can incorporate information from the class, your life, your job, or any other topic into these networking sessions. Each assignment must be with a different individual (e.g., five different individuals total throughout the semester).

- You may find it helpful to write down some questions or an outline of topics to talk about with each individual.
- After networking, complete the writing assignment.

Writing assignment:

1. Start with an introduction paragraph. Note when the details about your networking session (date, time, length of networking with a minimum of 20 minutes, face-to-face or Zoom, etc.). State how you know this individual. Give some background information.
2. Write at least one paragraph for each of the following questions:
 - a. What was this networking experience like? Did you enjoy it? Was it difficult?
 - b. What will you do differently for the next networking session?

- c. What did you learn in this networking session that can help you in your daily life?
 - d. What did you learn in this networking session that can help you in your career?
3. End with a conclusion. Reflect on this experience.