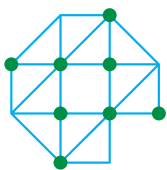


Blend your education

# Socialising in blended learning

Instruction



**Acceleration plan**  
Educational innovation  
with ICT



Facilitating professional  
development of lecturers

## Socialising in blended learning

<b>TARGET GROUP</b>	Lecturers
<b>FORM</b>	Infographics
<b>TIME NEEDED</b>	Variable
<b>LEVEL</b>	Course and programme

### Background

Social connectedness plays an essential role in education, and blended learning is no exception. It is correlated with wellbeing and study behaviour, among other things. This applies to connectedness between students as well as connectedness with the programme and its lecturers. When a student perceives the lecturer as understanding, guiding and helping, it is beneficial to the lecturer-student relationship. In addition to the relationship with the lecturer, group cohesion is also important for social connectedness. Learning is itself a social process; knowledge is difficult to construct in isolation (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978). Yet despite its potential to significantly improve the learning experience, the quality of blended learning can fall short if social connectedness is overlooked. On top of that, studying in a blended learning environment can be quite overwhelming for some students. Student onboarding from early on in the programme is therefore essential.

Online emergency education during the Covid-19 pandemic pushed the issue of social connectedness higher up the agenda. Although lecturers were able to transform their formal lessons to an online version very quickly, fostering social connectedness in online (and later blended) learning proved quite a challenge. Before long, lecturers and students felt socially isolated and lost their sense of community. Students reported in several surveys that they experienced feelings of demotivation, disorientation and stress (Arslan, 2021; Hehir et al., 2021; Pei et al., 2020). It is therefore vital to foster and support social connectedness between students as well as with the programme and its lecturers.

While social connectedness often develops naturally in education that takes place largely in physical environments, it is more challenging to achieve in blended learning. Especially in cases where face-to-face interaction opportunities are reduced – which is not necessarily the case with blended learning – the design requires explicit attention to social connectedness.



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Moreover, good student onboarding can reduce study delay or student dropout. Student onboarding is about the exchange of information between new students and the educational institution, ahead of the start and during the first 100 days of the programme. This product offers practical tools on social connectedness and student onboarding.

## Method

This product, which is aimed at lecturers, focuses on promoting socialising in blended learning. It applies to both course and programme level. Given that many materials are already available, this product has been designed as a route planner to find other sources. The product consists of four infographics with different perspectives and a set of working forms for connectedness and introduction/familiarisation. The infographics and working forms serve mainly as inspiration during the design process of blended learning.

In brief, the infographics cover the following:

1. **Design principles for social connectedness:** What is already known about factors that can contribute to social connectedness in online and blended learning communities was identified on the basis of a literature review. This literature review, conducted by the Acceleration Plan (Venema et al., 2021) led to the formulation of seven design principles that can be used to encourage social connectedness. Each design principle contains working forms and examples that can be directly applied in practice.
2. **Social presence in community learning:** Social presence is about students' ability to express themselves socially and emotionally in a safe environment and about giving them opportunities to develop interpersonal relationships. This social presence depends on and is in constant interplay with cognitive presence and lecturer presence. All this is encapsulated in the Community of Inquiry model, which focuses on learning in communities. This infographic provides tips to encourage these forms of presence.
3. **Student onboarding:** Student onboarding is about the exchange of information between new students and the educational institution, ahead of the start and during the first 100 days of the programme. This infographic features real-life examples of this and links to useful resources. Student onboarding lends itself perfectly to a blended approach. That said, blended learning can be quite overwhelming for some new students, so bear this in mind when undertaking onboarding activities.

4. **Getting to know each other:** And finally, the last infographic focuses specifically on concrete working forms for getting to know each other across different target groups, group sizes and modalities (F2F, synchronous online and asynchronous online). Accompanying this infographic are activity cards, which can be found in the annex.

## Example of an application

VU University Amsterdam's student population is highly diverse, and this is seen as adding value. But how do you harness this diversity in a way that truly enriches education? How do you ensure that every student feels welcome and feels psychologically safe? In response to these questions, VU developed the VU Mixed Classroom Educational Model (VU-MCEM).

The premise of this model is that group diversity can contribute to the learning process of all students. Research shows that group diversity leads to more creative solutions, sharper analyses and greater innovation. However, the degree of success depends on how well this process is guided (Nakui et al., 2011). Lecturers often feel ill-prepared in this area, which is why VU-MCEM gives lecturers tools to set up guidance properly. This creates an inclusive learning environment for students at institution, course and/or programme level.

The model describes three phases. In the first phase, Sensitising, the emphasis is on creating a safe learning environment. If the learning environment is perceived as safe, it has a positive impact on student engagement and thus motivation, academic engagement and student success (Zumbrunn et al., 2014). Engaging, the second phase, focuses on the interaction between different perspectives. In this phase, students also learn how to disagree constructively, even under time constraints or when emotions run high.

Students then build on the different perspectives in phase three, Optimising. Students learn how to reflect critically on their own perspective, approach complex problems from different angles and develop analytical skills. Learning objectives, teaching strategies and learning activities have been developed for each phase on the basis of a literature review and practical experience. Suggestions for assessment are also given.

Want to find out more about VUMCEM? See the [website](#) or [brochure](#) on the model, or this guide about VUMCEM in relation to blended learning.

### Want to read more?

- [Comprehensive publication by the Acceleration Plan on social connectedness in online and blended learning communities](#)
- [Informative overview article \(in Dutch\) by NRO on increasing student wellbeing and focus on connectedness and communication](#)
- [Article with many working forms for designing a Community of Inquiry in online learning environments](#)
- [Overview article \(in Dutch\) on social connectedness in online and blended education](#)

## Justification and sources

Information on the infographics was derived from various sources. The first is a recent research project by the Acceleration Plan entitled: '[Social connectedness in online and blended learning communities](#)' (Venema et al., 2021). This culminated in a prompting board and a guide on Social connectedness in online and blended learning communities. Practical design principles – accompanied by examples, working forms and (IT) tools – are presented in this guide. Based on insights gained in this project, the infographics present a number practical ways of using the different design principles.

The second is the Community of Inquiry model, which focuses on creating online learning communities (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000). This zooms in on the 'social presence' aspect in particular. Social presence is a theoretical concept that refers to people's ability to perceive others in an online environment as 'real' and to present themselves as 'real people' by using a medium of communication. Open communication, affective expression and group cohesion are key elements of social presence, in which the learner can share and mirror the learning process with peers and experts. To this end, [a research study by Holly Fiock](#) (2020) was used. This describes several practical working forms and strategies for fostering social presence.

Furthermore, input from an [exchange session with lecturers](#), organised by Radboud University Teaching and Learning Centre, supplemented by the lecturers' own knowledge and experiences, was used for the introductory workshops. [A source on student onboarding by Edumundo](#) (in Dutch) was also consulted. Edumundo is an educational publisher for higher and professional education.

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*The Acceleration Plan for Educational Innovation with ICT is a four-year programme focused on bringing initiatives, knowledge, and experiences for digitalisation together. The programme is an initiative of SURF, the Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences, and the Association of Universities, and is organised in eight acceleration zones. In the zone Facilitating professional development for lecturers, 16 institutions are working on improving the professional development of lecturers in Dutch higher education.*



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