

**Paw-sitive Connections: Innovative Approaches to Engaging Online Learners**

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Researchers have found that students are more motivated to engage in online learning when they feel connected with their instructors (Ong & Quek, 2023), which can also foster feelings of belonging in these online environments (Peacock et al., 2020). In an effort to support student engagement in online learning, I developed two semester-long class activities: (1) *Pets of the Week* and (2) *Connection Corner*. These specific activities were developed because researchers have found that images of pets can reduce learners' stress levels (Torres et al., 2016) and students are more motivated to learn when they feel like they know their instructor (Ong & Quek, 2023). The purpose of these activities was to increase student engagement in a 300-level online strategic communication class at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. This class counted toward general education requirements and had 54 students enrolled during spring of 2025.

### How it Works

The Canvas home page for the online class featured a large *Pets of the Week* section under the link to that week's content. The first week of the semester featured my pets with a short message welcoming students to the class and explaining they would have the opportunity to feature their

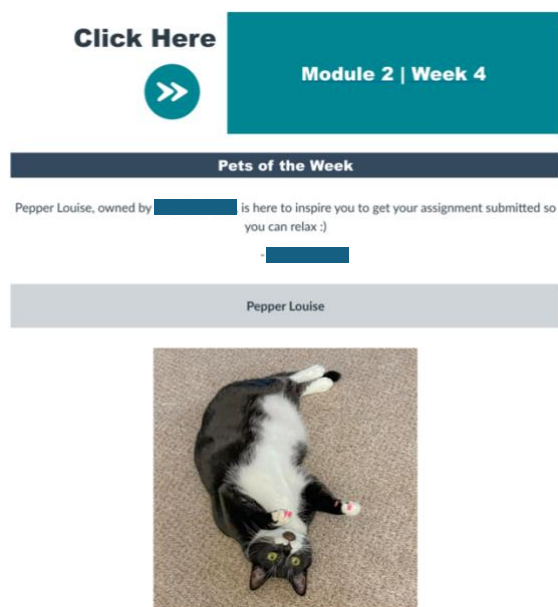


Figure 1. *Pets of the Week Example*

pets on the home page as well. To facilitate the submission of pet pictures, I added a zero-point question to the course syllabus quiz in the first week of class and asked students to upload a photo of their pet if they would like them to be featured. At the start of each week, I selected one to three pets to feature on the home page with a short message about them and their owners (Figure 1).

While the *Pets of the Week* activity was designed to make the students feel more included in the class and potentially give them something to look forward to at the start of each week, I also needed a way to build relationships with students. To do this, I created a *Conversation Corner* at the end of each module quiz, which happened about every two weeks. Students were told this question was optional and there were no points associated with answering the question. The prompt for this activity was as follows:

Each module I am going to have a question like this to check in on you to see how things are going! You can share any fun life updates, recommend a good book or show you recently finished, or use this space to vent about life if helpful. Feel free to use this space to bring up any concerns or questions you may have about this class as well.

For each *Conversation Corner*, I also included what might be my own response to the question for students to see. Rather than focus on my professional work, I mostly shared what TV I was watching, which reflected what I typically chatted about with students before in-person classes as well. I kept my own responses informal and authentic to reflect how I might post on social media or text a friend to help set the tone for this activity. My goal was to remove perceived barriers

between myself and students to help them feel comfortable to share with me. An example of what I shared with students is below:

If you like reality TV, drama, and fun, watch *The Traitors* on Peacock. It has *everything* - Real Housewives, Survivor players, Zach Efron's brother, and Tom Sandoval looking like he thinks Alan Cumming is actually murdering people. I have no one to talk to this about!

### **Results to Date**

Through the use of these two activities, I have felt more connected to my online students than I had originally anticipated. Twenty-eight of the 54 students submitted a pet to be featured on the home page, including cats, dogs, a horse, and a couple of cows. In the *Conversation Corner*, students have already shared they “really [are] enjoying the Pets of the Week!” indicating students appreciate this simple addition to the class. Additionally, even with the *Conversation Corner* being optional, at least 50% of the students responded to the question each time with a range of thoughts and answers. Some responses were more class focused, asking clarifying questions about assignments or letting me know they had been sick that week. Other students shared big life updates, like breaking up with a boyfriend or house hunting with their wife. Most students told me what TV shows they were watching and why they liked it. I quickly learned I had several fans of *The Bachelor* on ABC, so my next set of lessons used *The Bachelor* as a relevant example in the context of the course. Students also used the space to vent about feeling “overwhelmed” with school, giving me an opportunity to reach out to see if they were ok and if they needed support. Other students vented about topics I never would have guessed, like “I recently finished all of the Twilight movies, and I think they should've stopped after the first one.” Overall, students who responded appeared to appreciate the space saying, “Please, you are so funny! I enjoy reading your little note about *The Traitors* on Peacock!” and “This is super cool! Thank you for offering a space like this!”

### **Advice to Others**

I believe these activities are simple additions to online classes that can facilitate interactions between students and instructors, develop students’ sense of belonging, and improve overall student engagement (Ong & Quek, 2023; Peacock et al., 2020). *Pets of the Week* is an easy way to make students feel included in the class and to make the Canvas home page more inviting and less stressful (Torres et al., 2016). Instructors with smaller classes may consider switching to a *Pets of the Month* format if needed. However, to help build student rapport and provide opportunities for interaction, instructors should consider including a *Conversation Corner* activity. While giving a space to allow online students to ask questions or give updates is not necessarily a new idea in higher education, making that space more inviting to students by sharing our own responses in an informal tone could help to better facilitate student engagement. Additionally, responding to students’ answers is important to make them feel heard and should not be skipped. Instructors wanting to integrate these activities into their classes should do this in a way that is authentic to their own interests though. The *Conversation Corner* prompt can easily be adjusted to reflect different interests, but the point is to give students the opportunity to share who they are beyond the confines of the class. By getting to know them, instructors can better meet student’ needs and use examples in class that aligns with their interests as well.

### **Resources Needed**

No additional resources are needed for these engagement strategies beyond the class’s online learning management system. Additional time is needed to facilitate these activities; however, this time commitment is minimal each week for a class of 54 students.

## References

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