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Adding Technology to the Six-Word Memoir to Foster Belonging in Online Classes

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Abstract: Belonging, or the feeling of being a valued member of a community, has been linked to numerous positive outcomes in higher education. Although creating a sense of belonging at the campus level is important, equally important is fostering belonging in the classroom. Research has shown that belonging is more likely to occur in classes where students connect with one another, feel as if their voices are heard, and engage in repeated positive interactions with their instructor. Meeting these standards can be particularly challenging in online classrooms, but with the strategic use of digital technology, it can be done. In this Quick Hit, I describe how I integrated technology into a classic assignment, the six-word memoir, redesigning and transforming it into a learning activity that can help build a climate of connectedness and belonging in both synchronous and asynchronous online classrooms.

Keywords: classroom community, belonging, online teaching, six-word memoir, learning activity

Framework

Belonging has been linked to positive outcomes in higher education, including academic success (Kirby & Thomas, 2022), retention (Morrow & Ackermann, 2012), self-efficacy (Freeman et al., 2007), and engagement (Wilson et al., 2015). Although creating a sense of campus-level belonging is important, Wilson et al. (2015) argued that classroom-level belongingness has an even stronger impact on academic success, making it particularly important for classroom teachers to implement pedagogical practices that help students feel as if they are valued and respected members of the community.

Research suggests that belonging is more likely to occur if students (1) feel as if their voices are "heard and honored" (Thiers, 2022, p. 13), (2) connect with one another, and (3) engage in repeated positive interactions with their instructor (Johnson et al., 2007). Meeting these standards in online classes can be challenging, but with carefully designed and implemented learning activities that make strategic use of digital technology, it can be done. This Quick Hit describes how I integrated technology into a classic assignment, the six-word memoir (SWM), redesigning it with a focus on helping to build a climate of connectedness in synchronous and asynchronous online classrooms.

Assignment Description

The SWM, an initiative started by *Smith Magazin*e in 2006, invites individuals to share their story in just six words. Legend traces the idea back to Ernest Hemingway, who allegedly responded to a similar challenge with this poignant six-word story: "For sale: baby shoes, never worn" (Six Word Memoirs, n.d., para. 1).

Using the SWM as a learning activity is nothing new. In fact, it is used in many types of classrooms, at all age levels, and in support of a wide range of learning outcomes. Adding technology to the activity is also not that original. Indeed, *Smith Magazine*'s initiative has evolved into a robust

multimedia platform with contributions from over 1.5 million users (Six Word Memoirs, n.d.). What is unique about the approach I describe in this Quick Hit is the combination of this relatively common learning activity with technology for the purpose of intentionally fostering a sense of belonging in a classroom. I have successfully used this learning activity in a variety of contexts, ranging from introductory classes in communication studies to the capstone course for graduating seniors to graduate-level seminars.

The steps involved in implementation are:

1. Instructor creates a prompt that invites a story.
2. Learners write their story in six words.
3. Learners share their SWMs using appropriate technologies.
4. Learners converse with classmates about their SWMs.

Making It Work

This section provides details about implementation and explains how each step is designed to facilitate connection and belonging.

Designing an Appropriate Prompt

The key to designing an appropriate prompt is to invite sharing a story. Stories are recognized as an "effective strategy to promote and expose the common connections that lead to positive relationships" (Rhodes, 2019, para. 1). In introductory classes, I use the prompt "Tell the story of who you are in just six words." In the capstone course, the prompt is "Write a six-word professional identity memoir that tells the story of who you are as an emerging communication professional." I have also invited students to generate six-word stories that relate personal examples of course-related topics. In a group communication class, for instance, the prompt might be "Think of a specific group encounter that did not go well. Now tell that story in just six words."

Inviting Learners to Write Their Memoir

The next step is to prime students to write their SWM. After introducing the concept, providing some examples, and talking briefly about the components of a story, I give students time to think of the story they want to tell and to distill it to just six words. In graduate-level classes, I sometimes supplement the assignment with a reading (i.e., Simmons & Chen, 2014) that provides a meta-level understanding of the task. I always remind them that they will be asked to share their memoir, so they should write only about things they are willing to disclose.

Sharing SWMs Using Appropriate Technologies

When I first started using the SWM in face-to-face classes, students would simply read their memoirs in small groups or to the class. As I moved to online teaching, I modified the assignment by integrating technology into sharing and discussing the memoirs. In asynchronous online classes, students use digital technologies of their choosing to turn their SWM into an "e-postcard" they can "send" to their classmates. Although I let students select the technology they want to use, I recommend tools such as Adobe Express that are available at no cost to students at my university. In the assignment details, I provide links to tutorials demonstrating how to use the tools.

In synchronous online classes, I generally use a "chat blast" to share the memoirs. Students are given time in the session to generate their SWM. They are asked to type it into chat but not press send until instructed to do so. When the writing time is up, I ask everyone to press send, and the chat box explodes with six-word stories that students can scroll through and read on their own computers. This activity supports the goal of fostering a sense of belonging because it allows students to tell their own stories and be heard. According to Barron and Kinney (cited in Thiers, 2022, p. 13), "When students feel their voices are heard and honored, it has a significant impact on their willingness to engage, participate, accept and include others' voices, put forth effort, and improve their own outcomes."

Connecting Learners With Each Other

The final step is providing opportunities for learners to connect with each other. Belonging is, after all, relational, "the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group" (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 3). Kirby and Thomas (2022) suggested that essential to building cohesiveness is forming a united whole and helping students get to know each other. The SWM is a robust tool for meeting these goals. Because the text form forces a person to tell a story so concisely, much of the story is implied, opening the door to further conversation. In a recent capstone class, for example, a student shared the SWM "Turning my weakness into a career," which aroused interest but left classmates with questions. The student explained that as a child, she was reprimanded for talking so much, and her major lets her take that "weakness" and put it to good use. Another student's SWM, "I'm feeling lost at the crossroads," gave students a chance to discuss the uncertainties many of them were feeling about graduating.

The stories told through the SWMs provide clear connection points, but in online courses, learners need virtual spaces for those conversations. The technologies are adapted to the delivery format of the class. In synchronous online classes in which I use the chat blast described above, I use the chat as a conversation space. If the class is small enough, I invite students to unmute themselves and interact directly with one another. If the class is large, I create breakout rooms for conversation in smaller groups. In asynchronous online classrooms, I use discussion spaces to facilitate learner-to-learner interaction. Because the e-postcards are visually interesting and include only six words of text, students can easily scan through their classmates' stories and move more quickly to interaction.

The conversations that typically take place around the SWMs create a climate that builds community and fosters a sense of belonging. They allow students to identify points of connection, encourage perspective taking, and provide a site for interaction. Although I have not formally assessed the relationship between this activity and students' sense of belonging, feedback from students has been positive. On course evaluations, students have identified this assignment as one of the most valuable aspects of the class. One student noted, "I really enjoyed creating my introduction postcard." Another wrote on an in-class feedback form:

> When we were asked to introduce ourselves by writing a story in just six words, I thought, no way! But in the end, I was pleased with what I came up with. It actually helped me think through how I see myself as a communication professional. I liked hearing how others see themselves and it was nice to learn that I'm not the only one who still doesn't know what I want to do when I graduate!

This activity also provides opportunities for repeated, positive interaction between learner and instructor, another key to creating a sense of belonging in a classroom (Johnson et al., 2007). I build this into the SWM learning activity in two ways. First, I complete the assignment myself and

post my SWM in chat or in the discussion space. This allows me, as the instructor, to become part of the community that is being created. Second, I create a spreadsheet of my students' SWMs and refer to them as I interact with learners throughout the semester.

Future Implications

I have found the SWM to be a highly adaptable learning activity that can be modified to serve a wide variety of course delivery formats, topics, and learning outcomes. It is particularly well suited to creating a sense of belonging because it honors students' voices, contributes to building a sense of community within the classroom, and provides a foundation for meaningful learner–instructor interaction.

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