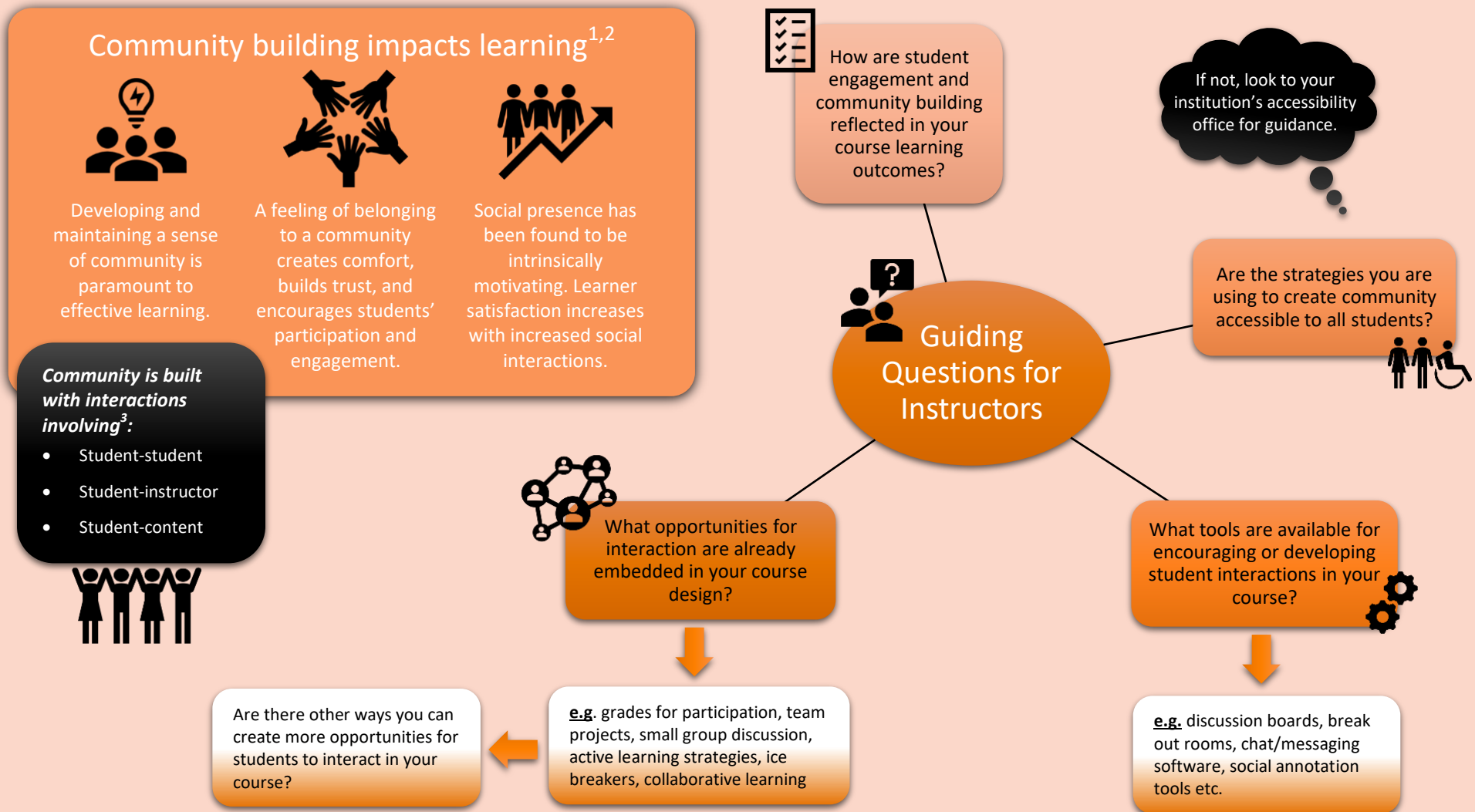An **E-CORE** **Quick Guide to**

Building an Inclusive Virtual Community

This guide provides guiding questions and support for thinking about how to engage students and build an inclusive community within online learning environments. To continue the conversation on this topic, visit the Building an Inclusive Virtual Community Discussion Forum.

Community building impacts learning[1,2]

Developing and maintaining a sense of community is paramount to effective learning.

A feeling of belonging to a community creates comfort, builds trust, and encourages students' participation and engagement.

Social presence has been found to be intrinsically motivating. Learner satisfaction increases with increased social interactions.

Community is built with interactions involving[3]:
- Student-student
- Student-instructor
- Student-content

How are student engagement and community building reflected in your course learning outcomes?

If not, look to your institution's accessibility office for guidance.

Guiding Questions for Instructors

Are the strategies you are using to create community accessible to all students?

What opportunities for interaction are already embedded in your course design?

What tools are available for encouraging or developing student interactions in your course?

Are there other ways you can create more opportunities for students to interact in your course?

e.g. grades for participation, team projects, small group discussion, active learning strategies, ice breakers, collaborative learning

e.g. discussion boards, break out rooms, chat/messaging software, social annotation tools etc.

1. Bickle, M. C., & Rucker, R. (2018). Student-to-student interaction: Humanizing the online classroom using technology and group assignments. *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, 19(1), 1-56.
2. Dixon, J., Crooks, H., & Henry, K. (2006). Breaking the ice: Supporting collaboration and the development of community online. *Canadian Journal of Learning and Technology/La revue canadienne de l'apprentissage et de la technologie*, 32(2).
3. Vaughan, N. D., Garrison, D. R., & Cleveland-Innes, M. (2013). Teaching in Blended Learning Environments : Creating and Sustaining Communities of Inquiry. AU Press.

Setting and Maintaining an Inclusive Tone

- **Be available** to your students in the course and model the ways you expect them to engage.
- Build engagement and community **guidelines** with your class.
- **Celebrate** milestones completed in the course (e.g. using gifs).[6]
- **Thank students** for their role in the course or for a specific thing they did. Also encourage students to be thankful to each other.[6]

Students prefer <u>small online discussion</u> up to 7 students with 5 being an optimum number.[4]

Discussion Board and Chat Engagement and Moderation

- Model regular posting participation & ensure **timely replies**.
- **Provide space** for informal discussions as well as course related discussions.
- Consider involving teaching assistants to **monitor chats** during lectures and discussion boards if you have a large class.

Teacher & Student Presence: Engaged leadership is needed. Communicate your expectations for engagement clearly. Encourage students to develop an online presence and support belonging.

Accessibility: Give students choices on how to engage by supporting asynchronous & syncronous interactions throughout the course (e.g. live chats, discussion boards, breakout rooms).

Recommendations for Building Community

Check In Often: At intervals give students a chance to reflect on the learning experience so far and provide instructor, peer, or self feedback (e.g. muddiest point, monthly team reflection).

Utilize Active Learning: Design activities throughout the course that require students to engage with the content, each other, and the teaching team (e.g. icebreakers, group work).

Consider using **live response tools** to check-in with students, prompt reflection, and gain feedback such as:

- Zoom annotation stamping, hand-raising and thumbs up
- Group responses on a <u>Miro</u> board
- Anonymous responses on a <u>Padlet</u>
- Polls on <u>Mentimeter</u>

Feedback provides students with a <u>valuable learning opportunity</u>, so don't hesitate to discuss openly

Well Designed Icebreakers Should Be… [2]

1. *Brief*
2. *Relatively low-risk input*
3. *Partaken by all students*
4. *Interesting and engaging*

Engagement Warm-ups: Critical for Building Online Community

To improve facilitation, is to focus on the engagement of the learner as part of an online community. Engagement can be shaped via activities such as icebreakers – either related to course concepts or not.[5]

Employing Online Icebreakers Will… [2]

1. *Help mitigate the lack of connection between learners*
2. *Help learners connect and develop communities at an accelerated rate*
3. *Support effective collaborative activities (i.e. group work)*

See <u>this document</u> for E-CORE recommended icebreakers

4. Cherney, M. R., Fetherston, M., & Johnsen, L. J. (2018). Online course student collaboration literature: a review and critique. Small Group Research, 49(1), 98-128.
5. McGrath, N., Gregory, S., Farley, H., & Roberts, P. (2014). Tools of the trade: breaking the ice with virtual tools in online learning. In Proceedings of the 31st Australasian Society for Computers in Learning in Tertiary Education Conference (ASCILITE 2014) (pp. 470-474). Macquarie University.
6. Ndubuisi, A. (2020, July 9). Supporting Social Interactions in Online Courses. OISE Online. https://wordpress.oise.utoronto.ca/teachingonline/2020/07/09/supporting-social-interactions-in-online-courses/

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