

Alverno College: Social-Emotional Learning in a Virtual Environment

Randa Suleiman, Alverno College; Desiree H. Pointer Mace, Alverno College; Cathy Yun, Learning Policy Institute

About the Educator Preparation Laboratory

Alverno College is among the 24 network partners of the Educator Preparation Laboratory (EdPrepLab), an initiative of the Learning Policy Institute and Bank Street Graduate School of Education. EdPrepLab supports preparation programs that are equity-focused, student-centered, and grounded in the science of learning and development, and it seeks to expand these approaches systemwide through research, the dissemination of high-leverage practices, and policy. This practice brief describes efforts to focus on the social and emotional aspects of teaching and learning and their relation to identity, cultural competence, and equity at Alverno College.

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Introduction

Since the pandemic closed U.S. schools in March 2020, educators have needed to learn how to manage virtual learning and to do so in ways that attend to the acute challenges of isolation and trauma many students have experienced. Social and emotional learning (SEL) has emerged as a critical aspect of education, and educator preparation programs have sought to incorporate SEL strategies for their teacher candidates; those teacher candidates can in turn use these strategies with their own students, online or in person. This brief describes multimodal SEL strategies that can be used in a traditional classroom or virtual learning environment (VLE) to support learning for diverse audiences, including students of all ages, teacher and leader candidates, and k-12 or higher education faculty. The strategies can be seen in an interactive presentation available [here](#). In this brief, we:

- contextualize our approach to SEL in a VLE by describing Alverno College's culture of learning;
- explain the importance of SEL for individuals and groups in VLE-based learning experiences; and
- describe the concrete SEL strategies "Check In" and "Meet and Greet."

Alverno's Ability-Based Approach to Teaching, Learning, and Assessment

Alverno College is a Catholic liberal arts college located in Milwaukee, WI. In the early 1970s, the Alverno faculty and community leaders reinvented the key teaching and learning

approach of the college and built a framework of “abilities” (see Figure 1) connected to course and program outcomes, student assessment, and faculty mentoring and feedback. These eight abilities are measured through multiple performance assessments at different developmental levels during teacher candidates’ program coursework and are viewed as integral to the cycle of teaching (i.e., planning, instruction, assessment, and reflection). This framework has since been hailed as innovative and exemplary in the field of higher education assessment.¹ In 2021, Alverno College itself was the first institute of higher education to receive the Banta Institute Lifetime Achievement in Assessment Award.²

Figure 1
Alverno College Eight Abilities, 2021



Source: Provided by Alverno College. Used with permission.

Because of the critical role of faculty in modeling the abilities-based orientation of the college, faculty incorporate SEL into their work with students, and faculty also engage in ongoing development of their own SEL skills. Alverno College has written [several guides](#) that are used to develop new faculty as well as to explain the model to interested higher education audiences.

Why SEL?

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines social and emotional learning (SEL) as:

an integral part of education and human development ... through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.

CASEL identifies five components of SEL: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. These SEL competencies resonate with several of the Alverno abilities—particularly social interaction, valuing others, and communication. In this brief, we describe strategies for engaging participants³ in **self-awareness** and **social awareness** development.

In educational settings, research shows that SEL development can have positive impacts on academic achievement.⁴ At the same time, SEL improves student attitudes toward education and reduces depression and stress among students. In particular, during VLE experiences, some participants might feel a sense of isolation, boredom, and social disconnect from the lack of physical proximity to others. Therefore, the need for SEL is essential in VLE to create an inclusive learning space where students feel safe to express their emotions, connect with others, and reduce stress.

In the context of a teacher preparation program, an additional goal is to encourage teacher candidates to incorporate SEL into their own teaching practice by observing faculty members model how to support SEL and by experiencing those supports as students in their preparation program.

Strategy 1: Check-In

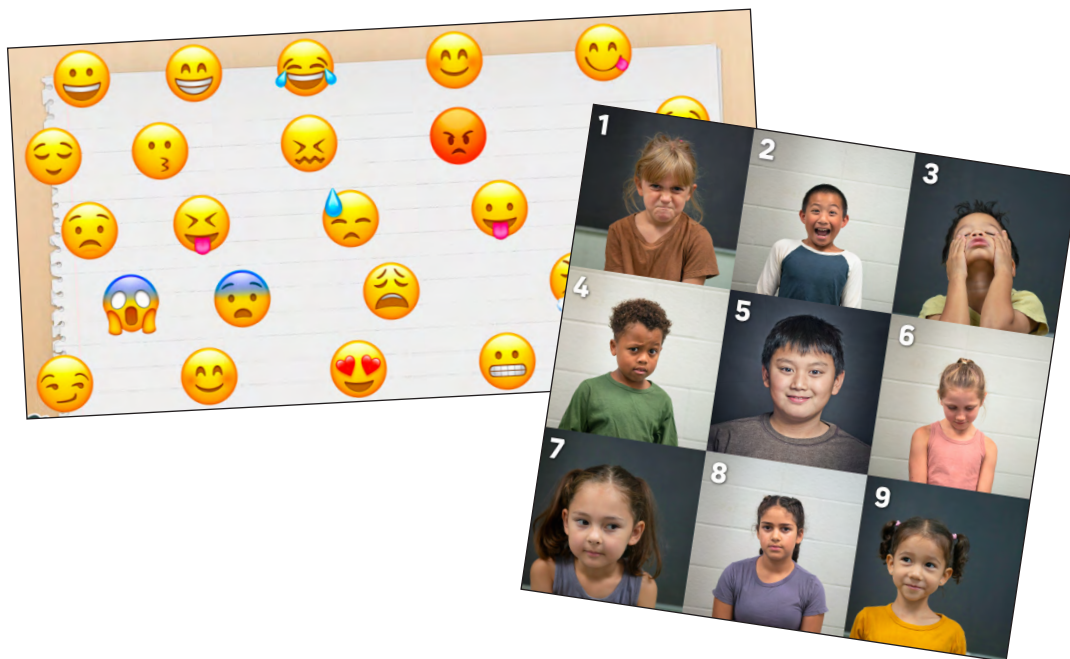
The check-in strategy aligns with the individual capacity to “identify one’s emotions” and helps build self-awareness. Self-awareness is defined as understanding one’s own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior across contexts.⁵ Self-awareness is considered the foundation of SEL. To create social connection, build relationships, and make decisions, participants should start from within before attempting to connect with others. The teaching and deep integration of self-assessment intertwined with the social interaction and communication abilities at Alverno enhance and deepen self-awareness.

Check-in allows participants to self-check and share how they are doing. We use it regularly at the beginning of classes or meetings. It allows us to acknowledge how participants feel and to address some of the identified emotions before starting a learning experience so that participants can better cope with emotional stress, solve problems, develop self-efficacy, and be engaged in the learning. In an Alverno student survey we conducted in summer 2021, 85% of respondents agreed that the check-in activity used in class supported their learning and their social and emotional development. Check-in is a versatile strategy, and we use many different approaches, some of which are described below.

Scale Check-In: One approach is to use a 1-10 scale to identify how participants are doing. In a face-to-face setting, participants can show how they are doing on a scale of 1-10 using their fingers. In VLE, participants can enter the number in the chat, verbally share the number, or use other technologies, such as [Annotate](#), [Pear Deck](#), [Nearpod](#), or [polling](#).

Emoji Check-In: Using emojis or images allow participants to express more nuance in how they are feeling than with a scale check-in. You can use the technology tools described for scale check-ins to allow participants to indicate which emojis represent how they are doing. You can also use visuals or pictures; for example, we like to use visuals of young children to soften the tone with older participants. (See Figure 2.)

Figure 2
Using Emojis and Other Visuals to Check In



Source: Provided by Randa Suleiman and Desiree H. Pointer Mace. Used with permission.

Color Check-In: You can assign colors different meanings and moods for color check-ins. (See Figure 3.) Participants can then select the color that represents how they are feeling. You can ask participants to annotate, show an item with that color, or use the chat feature to share their color. We follow up by asking participants to share why they selected that color.

Figure 3
Using Colors to Check In

Select the color that expresses your feelings		
Yellow	Blue	Red
Yellow is the color of gold, butter, and ripe lemons. In the spectrum of visible light, yellow is found between orange and green.	Blue is the color of the clear sky and the deep sea. It is located between green and violet on the optical spectrum.	Red is the color of blood, and because of this, it has historically been associated with sacrifice, danger, and courage. It is located between violet and orange on the optical spectrum.

Source: Adapted from artifacts provided by Randa Suleiman and Desiree H. Pointer Mace.

Games and Other Approaches: VLE offers other unique options for check-in. For example, video settings in virtual meeting platforms might allow access to features like virtual backgrounds, video filters, and studio effects. Participants can modify their appearance on video by using these features to represent how they are doing. Sometimes we play virtual games to express how we are doing. You can align the check-in approach to the tone of the meeting and be creative with coming up with new ways to check in to keep the activity fresh and engaging.

Mindful Breathing: Deep breathing can help reduce stress, prepare you to handle difficult situations, and allow you to be a better listener.⁶ We usually start by taking deep inhales and exhales, then we add mobility movement focusing on the shoulders, arms, and wrists. Teaching online and working in VLE can lead to longer hours on our computers, and prolonged computer use can lead to muscle and tendon pain, swelling, joint stiffness, weakness, and numbness.⁷

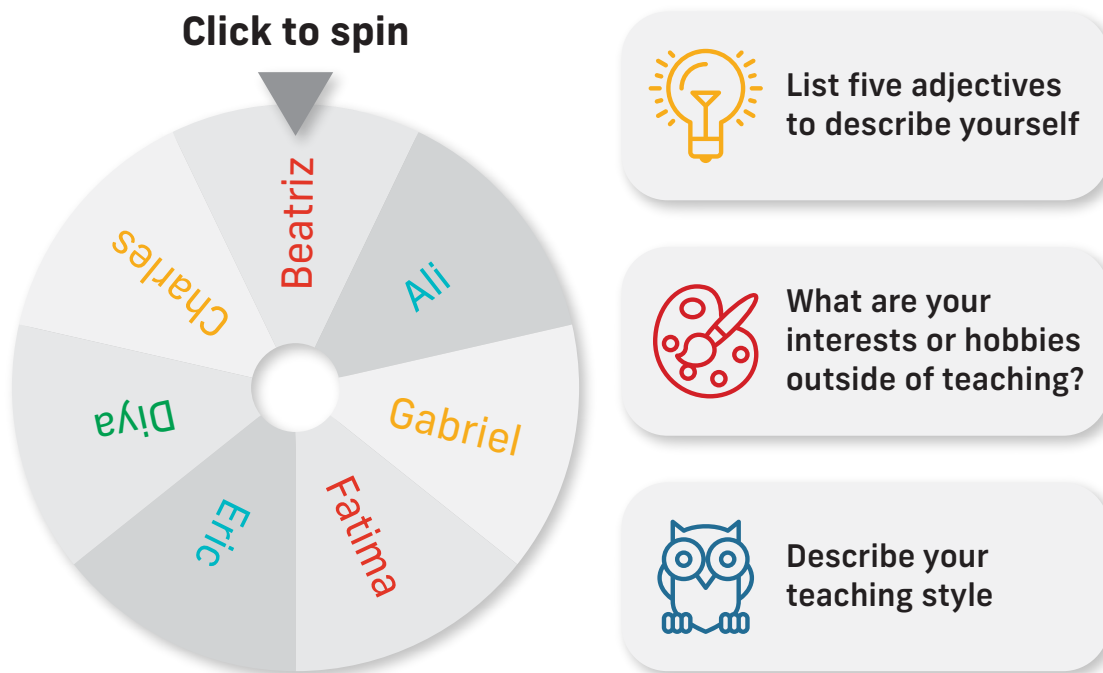
Strategy 2: Meet and Greet

The meet and greet strategy helps extend awareness outside the self in developing social awareness. Social awareness builds on self-awareness and is defined as understanding the perspectives of and empathizing with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and contexts.⁸ Social awareness is necessary for building relationships, communication, empathy, sharing, and teamwork. Effectively building relationships leads to less stress, better healing, healthier behaviors, and a heightened sense of purpose, and can be particularly important in VLE, which can leave some participants feeling isolated, alone, afraid, and disconnected.

Meet and greet helps us connect with others through a focused activity. This strategy aligns well with multiple CASEL capacities and Alverno abilities. We use the meet and greet strategy immediately following check-in to help build a sense of community among participants. Using the meet and greet strategy allows participants to interact with each other in a safe environment to build relationships, find connections, and get to know each other. Starting a class or meeting with a check-in and a meet and greet creates a fertile environment for learning and deepening understanding of the learning intention. In our 2021 student survey, 90% of respondents agreed that the meet-and-greet activities used in class supported their learning, created a learning community, and supported their relationships with other participants in class. Below, we describe some of the approaches we use for a meet and greet.

Ice Breaker: We use Ice Breaker to build community and allow participants to interact with each other. We use various activities to keep ice breakers fresh and engaging. In one ice breaker activity, we use [Quizlet](#) flashcards and an [online spin wheel](#) with participants' names. Each participant spins the wheel to select a peer and chooses a random Quizlet card that contains a question to prompt the peer to share about themselves. Figure 4 depicts a sample spin wheel and Quizlet flashcards.

Figure 4
Example of a Spin Wheel and Quizlet Flashcards to Use During Meet and Greet



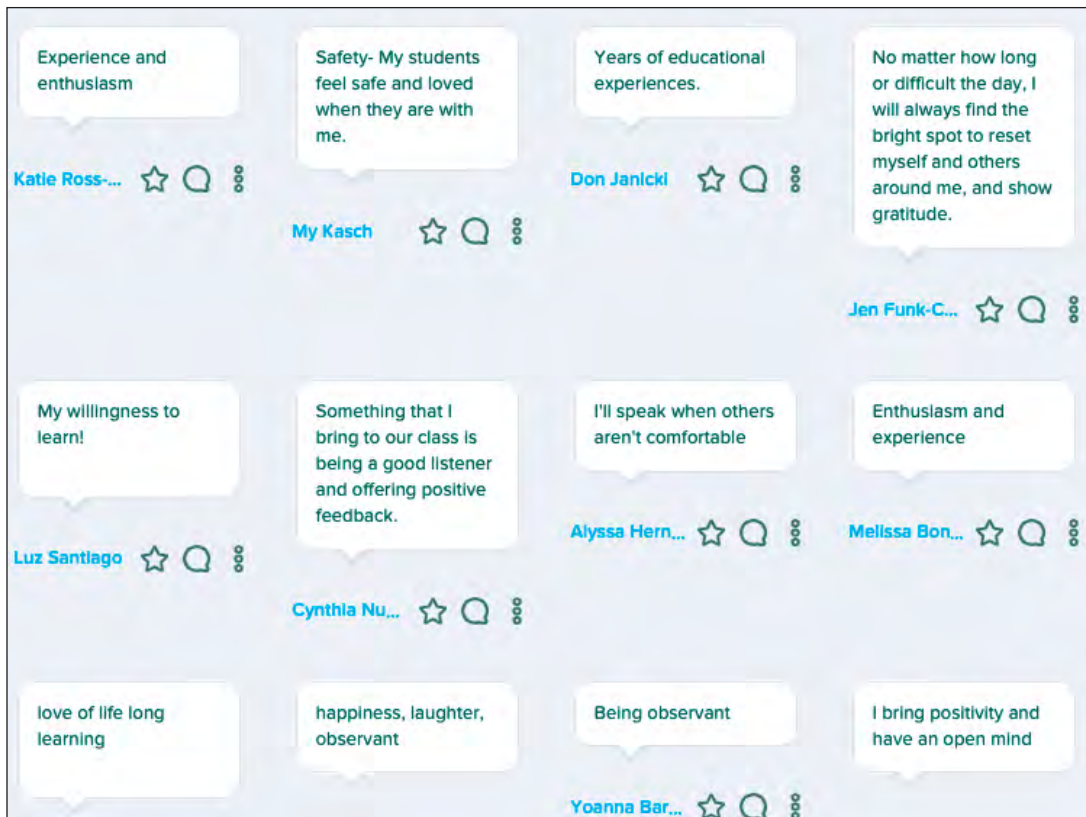
Source: Adapted from artifacts provided by Randa Suleiman and Desiree H. Pointer Mace.

Games: In contrast to check-in games, which focus on participants getting to know themselves, meet and greet games provide opportunities for participants to get to know others and experience positive social interactions. For example, in Never Have I Ever–5 Fingers, participants start by holding five fingers up in front of the camera. As each participant takes a turn sharing something they’ve never done, everyone who has done that thing lowers one finger. The person with the most fingers remaining up at the end of the game wins.

Another game we play is a modified version of I Spy. Participants take turns saying “I spy ...” and naming an item they see in someone’s background. Then they call on a peer to identify the person with that item in their background. This game encourages participants to pay extra attention to other participants and get to know each other better. Making Words is a collaborative activity in which participants work together to create positive words out of a set of letters and then use the words in a sentence expressing positive thoughts.

Assets: To have participants learn about their peers' individual strengths, you can ask them to share their assets verbally or by using [Padlet](#), [Wordwall](#), chat, or other technology tool. Another take on Assets is to ask participants to select two or three self-affirmations and share them in small groups. (See Figure 5.) Using affirmations as part of the meet and greet strategy supports the development of agency and identity.⁹ Enabling participants to recognize their strengths while building their self-confidence and efficacy as they are sharing and justifying their affirmations in small groups supports their SEL development.

Figure 5
Examples of Assets Shared During Meet and Greet



Source: Provided by Randa Suleiman and Desiree H. Pointer Mace. Used with permission.

Other Meet and Greet Activities: Other engaging activities might involve asking participants to share a place that they visited or wish to visit and three reasons why, describe how they engage in self-care, or show a picture of their pets. One way to use breakout rooms is to play Charades. We give participants a prompt such as, "If you could have an extra hour of free

time every day, how would you use it?” and then sort them into small groups. They share their individual responses by acting them out without using words. Charades allows participants to have a good time, laugh a little, and relax as they learn more about each other’s interests.

Impact and Closing Reflection

In the Alverno student survey we conducted in summer 2021, more than 80% of respondents agreed that SEL activities supported their learning, relationships with classmates, and mental health, as well as modeled new ways to integrate SEL and technology that they can implement in their own teaching. One student commented that they valued “the check-ins, the very supportive language [the instructor] uses in and out of class, the connection, and time to talk.” Another student said, “I enjoy the check-ins and appreciate how that time has evolved into specific meet and greet activities.” And another responded, “it was nice to reconnect with my classmates, even virtually. We had a sense of community in class, which was really beneficial to my mental health during the pandemic.”

In addition to helping candidates feel supported, the impact of these SEL strategies extends beyond the campus experience. Teacher candidates are applying these strategies in their own practice to connect with their k-12 students during their clinical placements as well as in the classroom once they are employed. For example, one survey respondent reported that “the incorporation of various technology tools was helpful for my own teaching during virtual learning.” When we asked teacher candidates to share specific examples of how they implemented these strategies in their teaching, many reported using check-in and meet-and-greet activities. One teacher candidate shared that she uses the emoji check-in activity with students to find out if they are happy, angry, sad, tired, sleepy, or not feeling well. Using student emoji responses as data, the teacher candidate makes it a point to connect with students either right away or at the end of the day to allow them to share more about their feelings. Another teacher candidate shared that she regularly checks in with students during community circle and follows up with individual students by writing and placing notes in their personal mailboxes.

Attention to participants’ SEL needs and experiences is more crucial than ever, with increased use of VLE and pandemic-related loneliness, isolation, anxiety, and depression. The strategies we have outlined in this brief can help develop participants’ self-awareness and social awareness while also addressing a very real need for connection, which can lead to increased participant engagement and sense of belonging. In addition, for teacher candidates in particular, experiencing these strategies themselves prepares them to use these SEL strategies with their own students in their clinical placements and classrooms.

Endnotes

- 1 See, for example: Banta, T. W., & Palomba, C. A. (2015). *Assessment Essentials: Planning, Implementing, and Improving Assessment in Higher Education* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass; Darling-Hammond, L., & Oakes, J. (2019). *Preparing Teachers for Deeper Learning*. Harvard Education Press; Ewell, P. (1984). *The self-regarding institution: Information for excellence* [NCHEMS executive overview]. National Center for Higher Education Management Systems. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED256266>; Felten, P., Gardner, J., Schroeder, C., Lambert, L., Barefoot, B., & Hrabowski, F. (2016). *The Undergraduate Experience: Focusing Institutions on What Matters Most*. Jossey-Bass; Hakel, M. D. (1997). What we must learn from Alverno. *About Campus*, 2(3), 16-21. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F108648229700200305>.
- 2 To learn more about Alverno, please see the Learning Policy Institute brief on Alverno College: Podolsky, A., & Hylar, M. E. (2020). *Preparing teachers for deeper learning at Alverno College*. Learning Policy Institute. https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Preparing_Teachers_Deeper_Learning_CS_Alverno_BRIEF.pdf.
- 3 Given the range of contexts in which one might use these strategies, we use “participants” instead of “students” or “candidates” to refer to anyone joining the class, workshop, meeting, or other event in which one implements the strategies.
- 4 Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., & Schellinger, K. B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students’ social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development*, 82, 405-432. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01564.x>.
- 5 Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. (n.d.). What is the CASEL Framework? <https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/what-is-the-casel-framework/> (accessed 10/21/21).
- 6 McCarthy, J. (2018). *Getting mindful about breathing*. Edutopia. <https://www.edutopia.org/article/getting-mindful-about-breathing> (accessed 09/16/21).
- 7 Princeton University Health Services. (n.d.). Ergonomics and computer use. <https://uhs.princeton.edu/health-resources/ergonomics-computer-use> (accessed 09/16/21).
- 8 Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. (n.d.). What is the CASEL Framework? <https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/what-is-the-casel-framework/> (accessed 10/20/21).
- 9 Frey, N., Fisher, D., & Smith, D. (2021). *All Learning Is Social and Emotional: Helping Students Develop Essential Skills for the Classroom and Beyond*. ASCD.