

Boosting Study Ability Through a Sense of Community Workshop

More information for the facilitator



What is the workshop about?

The workshop is designed to make it easier to discuss the concept of a sense of community with students by reflecting on the meaning of the topic specifically through the students' own study life and by providing space and opportunities for the students to express their personal reflections on the topic. The aim of the workshop is:

1. To encourage students to reflect on their relationship with their fellow students.
2. To increase students' understanding of why and how the subject is relevant to everyone's day-to-day studies.
3. To increase the number of places for students to share ideas and experiences with other students and possibly also help them to get to know their fellow students better.
4. To give practical tips that every student can use to promote a sense of community in their university.
5. To motivate students to act in a way that fosters a sense of community in their day-to-day studies.

As a result of the workshop, the students' understanding of the impact of a sense of community on their own study ability and wellbeing, as well as the study ability and wellbeing of others, increases; their means and motivation to act in a way that promotes a sense of community in their studies grows; and students are given the opportunity to share with other students in a peer-to-peer environment.

Who is the workshop for?

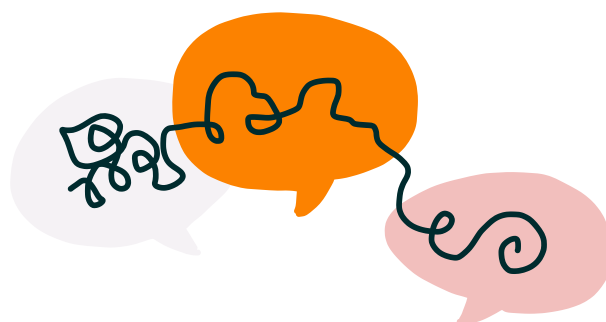
A group of university students who more or less know each other, such as a tutor group, a PSP group, or a homegroup. The workshop can also be suitable for a larger, more fragmented group as a starting point for reflecting on the importance of fellow students as part of one's studies. The optimum number of people for a workshop is 10 to 20.

Who is this guidance for?

For anyone working with students in higher education who wants to address the theme of community with a group of students. Those who can benefit from the material may include tutors, PSP advisers, teacher tutors, student organisation operators, welfare operators, etc.

Why take advantage of the workshop?

Are you concerned about the culture of coping alone among students? Or the lack of peer support, or the situation of lonely students? Perhaps you have the feeling that many students are burdened by the same issues, but each of them feels alone with their concerns? Perhaps your job description involves grouping students, promoting equality, or supporting student wellbeing in general?



This workshop is like winning the lottery because the time-consuming planning work has already been done for you! The workshop will reduce your workload, save you time and make your work easier, as you will be able to utilise this ready-to-use package either as it is or adapted to your own needs. The workshop will allow you to address with students the core issues of students' sense of community.

By investing in students' sense of community, you are investing in everyone's future, as peer support helps students to better manage their studies and grow together as experts for the future. In other words, you are also contributing to the core mission of higher education.

This workshop can easily be used at any point during the academic year and with any group of students. What's more, there is a great need for this workshop at this time, as more and more students have experienced loneliness and disconnection from their communities in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic and its aftermath.

What does the instructor need to know about the subject?

No prior knowledge of the subject area is required; all the information you need to run the workshop can be found in this document and the PowerPoint presentation itself. Your background can be almost anything; more important than your skills are your genuine motivation and concern for the overall wellbeing of your students and how they are coping with their studies.

What's more, you are very likely to have some experience of what it's like to be a student in a student community, or what it's like to be in an environment where you hardly know anyone. You can use these experiences to facilitate the workshop if you wish: first-hand experiences are often very interesting for students to hear.

Everyone has their own personal way of leading a group, and you can run this workshop in a way that suits you and your group of students.

How long will the workshop take?



As a rule, allow about one hour. The duration, however, depends on how much discussion is generated and how you carry out the exercises. You can also choose to leave out some exercises or theoretical points if you feel that the workshop works better for your group without them. If you have 1,5 to 2 hours to work on the topic – great! The more time you have, the more in-depth the discussion will be.

The important thing is not the length of the workshop and going through each slide, but that you have taken the time to do something important. The more discussion between students, the better! Often, students benefit most from hearing that others have the same concerns as them, and they can also reflect together on the solutions to the challenges that they feel are best suited to them.

What do I need for the workshop?

Depending on how you decide to implement the workshop exercises (there are alternative ways, see below for more details). Possibly pens and paper/notes or links to virtual platforms. The workshop can be run face-to-face, online, or in a hybrid format (simultaneously face-to-face and remotely).

The workshop is divided into instructor-led content (fact and content-based slides) and exercise slides.

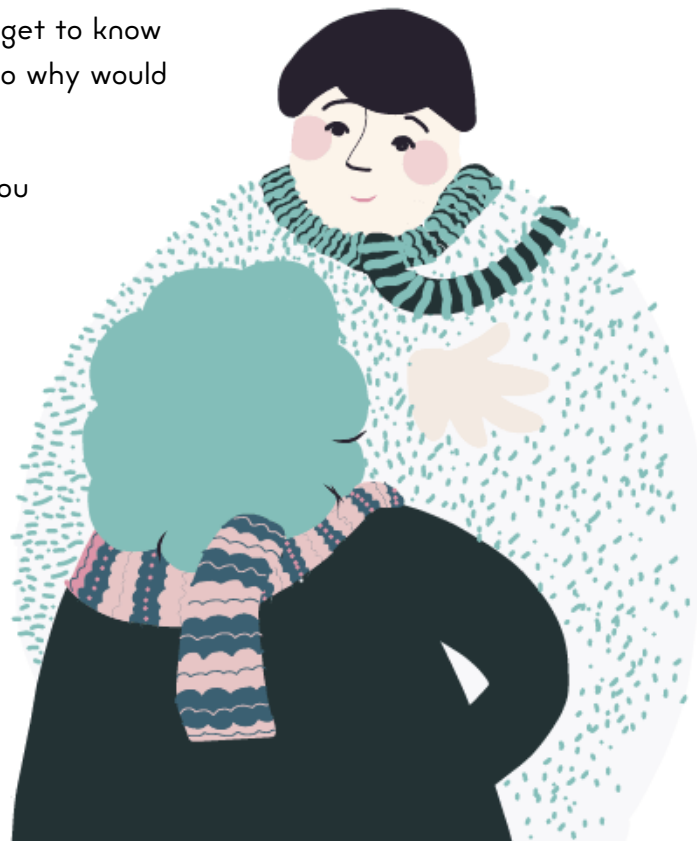
You can identify **the exercise slides** by this symbol in front of the title.

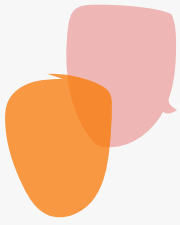
As a facilitator, you can have a lot of influence on how, for example, the fact-based slides are handled: together with the students or purely under the guidance of the facilitator. In addition, some of the fact-based slides are accompanied by examples of bonus exercises that you may wish to use at that point in the group. So, tailor a package that best suits you and your group!

A tip for small groups in exercises

It is important to remember that if/when working in small groups, grouping should be done through randomisation. This has been a top concern for students experiencing loneliness and is strongly linked to the fact that grouping situations are perceived as humiliating and publicly stigmatising if the students can choose the groups and some of them don't know any of their fellow students. In addition, many students have said that randomising groups is the number one way to get to know others and reduce feelings of being left out. So why would you not use this tool?

The traditional "split to three/four" works, or you can also use more fun ways such as who has the same-coloured shoes or the same favourite food.





Different ways of carrying out the exercises

1. Implementation through collaborative discussion

The exercises should preferably be discussed in small groups of about three people, with the groups sharing out to the whole group as much as they want at the end. The time allocated for discussions is about 8 to 10 minutes per task.

2. Collaborate creative implementation

The exercises are carried out in written or drawn form, preferably in groups of three and presented briefly at the end according to the wishes of the group. Pens and paper are needed. The time allowed for the implementation is about 8 to 10 minutes per task.

3. Independent creative implementation

From the exercises, the participants create notes or drawings which are then displayed on the wall like an art exhibition. No need to put names on the work. You will need pens and paper and the possibility to attach the works on a board or wall at the end. The time allocated for the implementation is 5 to 8 minutes per task.

4. Anonymous independent implementation

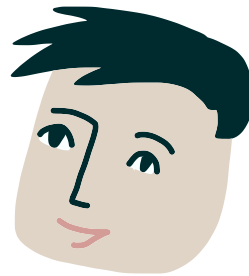
Choose a familiar online platform for anonymous writing (e.g. Padlet or Flinga) or use a physical note wall. If you are using an online platform, create a separate section for each task and instruct students on how to use the platform while providing them with links to the platform. If you use a physical note wall, you will need space on the wall, notes, and pens. Allow 3 to 5 minutes per task.

5. An online workshop

Even if the implementation is entirely online, you can also use any of the above methods. Discussions can take place in small groups (breakout rooms in Zoom), where the outcome of the discussions can be shared either by telling everyone or by writing on an anonymous platform, depending on the wishes of the group members.

When choosing how to carry out the exercises, it is worth considering at least:

- How easy/difficult it is for participants to talk openly with others about a topic.
- How sensitive the matter is.
- How personally the participants are asked to discuss the topics.



More information about the workshop?

Questions about the workshop?
You can contact Annina Lindberg,
a specialist at Nyyti:

annina.lindberg@nyyti.fi
tel. +358 50 341 7473



Feedback

We would love to hear your feedback on the workshop! So, please share your experiences, thoughts, and comments on how the workshop was run and/or how it worked. All feedback is valuable! We will use the feedback to develop the workshop materials. Thank you in advance for your feedback!

[Click here for the feedback form!](#)

How the workshop progresses

If you use the PPT version of the presentation, you will find these same instructions in the notes under the slides.

If you are using the PDF version, please follow these instructions:



1. Getting started

Workshop: Boosting Study Ability Through a Sense of Community

Tell students that you are using ready-made materials to help them recognise the importance of a sense of community during their studies and reflect on what it means for their wellbeing, their studies, and the process of becoming an expert. The material has been prepared with the knowledge of both professionals and experts by experience on the topics.

Background information

Nyyti on opiskelijoiden mielenterveyttä edistävä valtakunnallinen yhdistys.

Nyyti is a national association promoting mental health among students.

The purpose and mission of its activities is to strengthen students' mental wellbeing and study ability. More information about Nyyti's activities can be found on the website www.nyyti.fi and on its social media channels (FB, IG TW).

The project Yhdessä yhteisöksi is Nyyti's STEA-funded project for the period between 2018 and 2021, and this material package was produced by the project. More information about the project and other materials produced by the project on students' sense of community can be found on the website www.yhdessayhteisoksi.fi

2. Introduction slide: What is this all about?

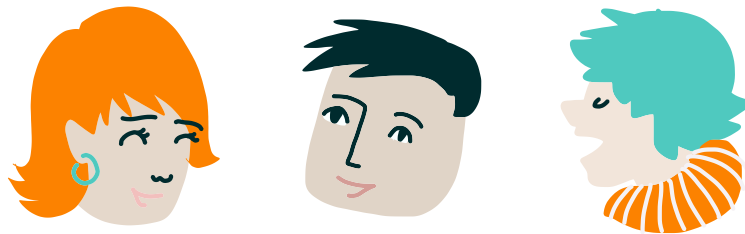
You can use this slide to go through the contents and approach of this workshop with your students. Then to the point via the next slide! :)



3. Practice slide: What do you already know about the sense of community during one's studies?

Exercise

Starting with an orientation exercise, ask students to reflect on the questions in the slide, either by writing, drawing, or anonymously on an online platform. Allow 5 minutes for independent work. Then go through the reflections produced by the students together in discussion (5 to 10 minutes). It's great if you can share your own experiences and insights at the same time; shared first-hand experiences always work well!



More information to help guide the discussion

You can say that there are no right or wrong answers to these questions, but that in general, a sense of community means a feeling of belonging and that the members of a group feel good and safe together. At the heart of a sense of community is the need for every student to feel accepted and valued for who they are.

We are all different in how much interaction with others we crave and need – and that's more than okay! Everyone still has the right to feel like part of something bigger than themselves in their studies, to feel as important as others, and to share experiences and ideas with others in the same situation when they feel the need. This theme is, therefore, very much about experiencing and securing equality.

The experience of a sense of community does not happen automatically, so it is worth paying special attention to it, and the earlier, the better. Many people are left out of groups at the start of their studies, and it is not easy to get to know fellow students later on. If you've already managed to get to know your fellow students, it's also important to keep an open mind to the fact that not everyone is as lucky. So, you might wonder, what can I do to make life easier for at least one of my fellow students?

4. Motivation slide: And hey, you...

This slide is a wake-up call for the student who thinks this content is not for them. You can say that getting to know others is like investing in your future: studies show that the process of becoming an expert in one's field is more successful for students who have managed to make connections with others during their studies. A sense of community also affects one's ability to study: you will be more motivated, as well as more able to complete your studies and get support for your studies, if you feel a sense of community. Social relationships are also an important source of wellbeing and support, which we all need and crave. In addition, as human beings, we have fundamental needs to feel seen and accepted for who we are and to feel that we are part of a group larger than ourselves.

If you are in a fortunate enough position to have already established relationships with other students and feel that you have found your place in the study community, it is important to be respectful and considerate of others. One of the best ways to support your own wellbeing, according to research, is to do good for others. In other words, while helping others to feel valued and showing an interest in them, you are also supporting your own wellbeing and energy levels! Every encounter on campus is important: maybe your little "How are you?" question is the first friendly gesture the other person has had from another student in weeks? It's the little things that matter.

5. Fact slide: What does everyone go through in some way during their studies?

Here you can say that the things on the slide are things that your students have in common. You can go through these things by yourself or by discussing them with the students. For example, you could ask whether students recognise these phenomena and how the phenomena are reflected in the students' daily lives.



6. Fact slide: How are other students involved in these processes?

A continuation of the previous dialogue. It explains how you need people around you with whom to share experiences and, through learning together, grow into experts in your field.

Bonus exercise

You can also carry out an exercise in this context if you wish: What do we have in common as students? The aim is for the group to come up with as many things as possible that connect them in, say, three minutes. This can be done by first reflecting on the question in groups of a few people and then extending the reflection to the whole group. An alternative way is to make this into a playful competition where the group is divided in two, and the goal is to see which group can come up with more unifying elements amongst them.

After the exercise, you can also reflect together on how we can choose, even in our everyday lives, whether to focus on the things that separate us as people/students or rather on the things that unite us: there are certainly both, but it is the perspective that counts. If we focus on the things that unite us, we are more likely to be positive and accepting of others than if we focus on the things that divide us.



7. Experience slide: What if you don't feel a sense of community?

In this section, be particularly mindful that no participant has to share their ideas with others if they don't want to. Be sensitive to the fact that for some students, this can be a very topical and sensitive subject that can cause a range of emotions. Don't force anything, be gentle, sensitive, and calm.

The questions raised in the dialogue can be addressed through the following video (2min 35sec), which is compiled of real student experiences of loneliness:

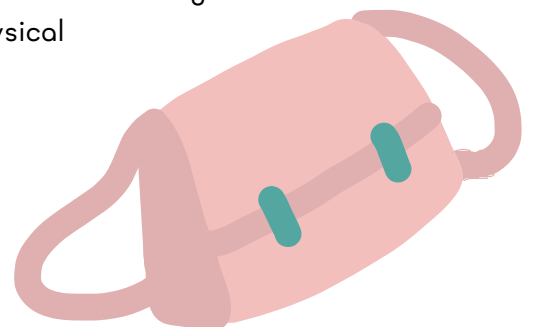
[Video: Student loneliness – what does it feel like?](#)

After the video, you can discuss together the thoughts or feelings it evoked. If you wish, you can also ask students to reflect independently on what they saw, for example by writing or drawing. However, sharing with others can be useful for many, as it allows them to hear how other students feel about loneliness, even if they are not actively involved in the discussion.

More information to help facilitate the discussion

At this point, you can point out that there are tens of thousands of students in Finland who experience loneliness. (Even before the coronavirus pandemic, about 10% of all students, and occasionally about 40% of all students, had experienced loneliness. Since the pandemic, more than 60% of students have experienced loneliness.) So, it is quite common. You can state that there are students in your institution who experience loneliness – and a lot of them – and it is everyone's shared responsibility to be mindful of how we treat each other during our studies.

If you want, you can talk more about what loneliness really is and how it differs from being alone. We all need some time alone and can find it wonderful and empowering. But loneliness is a condition that no one wishes or chooses for themselves. If a person experiences loneliness, this is a situation where their need to connect with other people, to feel accepted and valued, and to share things with others is not being met. Loneliness is a huge burden on a person's physical and mental wellbeing.



We differ greatly from each other in how much we crave solitude or the company of others: someone who spends a lot of time alone may not experience loneliness, while someone who spends a lot of time with others may experience loneliness if, for example, they feel they are not truly seen and accepted as themselves. Loneliness is not something you see on the surface but a personal experience.

To sum up: being alone is not harmful; it can be very positive and empowering. Loneliness is always a negative state that affects our overall wellbeing and our ability to study.



8. Quote slide: What challenges do students face when they cannot find their place in a study community?

Students' real experiences of being left out (experiences collected by the Project Yhdessä yhteisöksi from 2019 to 2021). Most common reasons for not socialising / not getting to know your fellow students:

- Personality, temperament: e.g., shyness, introversion, sensory processing sensitivity, "slower to warm up" (as described by the students themselves) → Difficult to get to know others during the first few weeks, as your own endurance and resources are tested by the initial hustle and bustle, the flood of information, and getting used to all the new things. By the time you feel you have the energy/ability to put more effort into getting to know others, the others have already done this; they've formed groups and do not make contact with students outside the group.
- A different life situation: e.g., family, older age → The timing and content of the activities do not match your needs; your interests and attitude to life are perceived as different from others.
- Perceived difference → Feeling that your interests or values are different from others, feeling that there are no like-minded students in your field.
- Personal background: e.g., bullying at school, loneliness since childhood, childhood experiences → Past experiences are strongly reflected in current behaviour and make interaction situations seem more like a threat than an opportunity.
- Other stress factors take resources away from getting to know others: e.g., personal or family illnesses, mental health problems, learning difficulties → A student's overall life stress situation can be high in a situation such as the beginning of studies, so there are not enough resources to get to know others at that moment. Later, when it feels possible to get to know others, they seem to have already found their groups and gotten to know each other.
- Moving to a new place → Everything is new and requires adaptation, support networks are far away, coping is tested.
- Financial situation → Participation in an organised activity requires a financial contribution that you cannot afford.



You can ask students about their thoughts on these experiences. Together, you can discuss whether it is really the case that there is no space in higher education for students' diverse needs and ways of being in this world, but that everyone should fit into "one mould"? Why is or isn't this the case?

Bonus exercise

You can also take an anonymous poll to see how many people have had challenges in finding their place in a study community or feel nervous about getting to know others. You can use online tools (e.g. Kahoot or another familiar survey tool), or post-it notes in face-to-face implementation. If the anonymous response distributions of the group can be shared, that in itself can be a relief for many: there are likely to be others in the group who have had challenges or feel nervous about getting to know others. Knowing this can already make things easier.

9. Quote slide: Could we all be outsiders together?

Real student experiences of how feeling lost together can act as a team-builder. You can ask if the group members identify with these experiences. You can also reflect on why finding, focusing on, or highlighting commonalities can be crucial for connecting with fellow students. It is crucial to have opportunities for shared experiences and the courage to speak out and thereby find other students who are experiencing the same issues.

Bonus exercise

If you wish, you can use the exercise already presented in slide 4, What unites us as students?, if you have not already used it by this point.





10. Exercise: What are you completely lost with today?

10

Allow time for individual reflection, starting with what each person is more or less lost on at the moment. You can tell the group that an issue someone feels all alone with and "the only one who feels this way" may actually be one that affects hundreds of students - you are just not aware of it. We need opportunities to share things and lower the threshold to talk about things in honest terms.

At this point, choose an appropriate method, but stress that it is, of course, up to everyone to choose how much to share. Allow about 5 to 15 minutes depending on the method. The easiest and most discreet way is an anonymous online platform (e.g. Padlet) or, for example, notes on the wall.

It is also important to stress to the students that they should not feel discouraged if others in the group do not mention the same reflections: it may be that not all reflections have come up today, but that does not mean that they do not exist. Moreover, this is a relatively small group of students; surely, the larger the group, the more likely it is that similar reflections would emerge.



Hey, facilitator! Do you have a story of your own about how by opening your mouth, you were able to receive peer support from others who just hadn't shared their reflections? Tell others about it if you want to!

11. Quote slide: What can you really do in your day-to-day studies?

11

Now we are getting into the practicalities of getting to know each other, starting with an argument for the importance of learning names and getting to know each other even just a little better. Let's open with a real student experience of what it feels like to be invisible to fellow students. This serves as an introduction to the next slide.

12. Exercise: How could we learn each other's names / get to know each other better?

Now, let's start looking for and choosing a suitable introductory exercise. Ask students to reflect on an introductory / name learning exercise that they have enjoyed over the years. Everyone can reflect on the topic, either individually or in small groups, and then list the different exercises that have come to mind. Next, have a discussion/vote to choose the introductory exercise to be used at this point: then, perform the chosen exercise within the group. You can allow 8 minutes for independent work and 5 minutes for sharing the results.

If you feel that for some reason, students cannot think of suitable exercises, you can use one of these exercises

- Everyone tells their name and says something meaningful to them, starting with the same letter as their name. Here, you can share something about yourself, and the same initial letter helps others to remember your name. For example, "I'm Matti, and I like maths."
- Each person gives their name and a specific skill, knowledge, or area of expertise that they bring to the group. For example, "I'm Aino, and I can name all the presidents of the United States to date." or "I'm Felix, and I'm pretty good at Clash of Clans." or "I'm Steven, and I know the secrets of Excel." The point is that this "specific knowledge" does not have to be academic (although it can be if you want it to be) and no one has to worry about whether it is academically valued or sounds valid to others; it is better if it is informal, fun, or unexpected. As the facilitator, you can start by sharing your funny area of expertise.





13. Exercise: Know yourself also as an interactor 1/2

The introductions continue – this slide introduces you as an interactor. As a recommendation, we suggest an independent implementation for this. In this case, students can reflect on their own and, if they wish, write down answers to the questions on the slide. You can allow about 5 minutes for independent work.

Further information for the facilitator to support the exercise

Everyone has their own strengths as interactors: it is important to recognise and be aware of your own strengths and good traits. You can always strengthen them even further and start by relying on the areas of interaction that are already going well. It's also important to realise that you actually already know things – you're not starting from "level zero". At this point, it may also be useful to discuss what successful interaction looks like. Students often feel that you have to be a master of small talk, always finding something witty and funny to say to anyone, taking to any social situation like a duck to water, to feel you are good at interacting. This is not the case, and it is important to normalise the students' personal expectations and demands.

You, the facilitator, can share your personal experiences if you wish, but otherwise, the results of this exercise do not need to be shared.

14. Exercise: Know yourself also as an interactor 2/2

The introductions continue – this slide introduces you as an interactor. As a recommendation, we suggest an independent implementation for this. In this case, students can reflect on their own and, if they wish, write down answers to the questions on the slide. You can allow about 5 minutes for independent work.

Additional information for the facilitator to support the exercise

At this point, at the very latest, it is worth pointing out that no one has perfect interaction skills – nor do they need to! In these skills, development is a lifelong project, and certainly, no one is ever completely finished. What is important, however, is that these skills can also be practised. If you want to improve your fitness, it is important to exercise regularly, and gradually



your fitness level will start to improve. It's the same here: to get better at interacting, you need repetition and active practice – and that's where the skills start to develop.

When thinking about the social skills that could use more practice, it might be a good idea to suggest that everyone set themselves as concrete (and small) a goal as possible to practise the skill, e.g., I want to become more courageous in speaking my mind. → Next week, I'll tell a group/another person what I think of the day's weather. You can then start thinking of more similar situations so that you can practise speaking your mind. Gradually, you can also start to increase the difficulty level, but there's no rush: the main thing is to do something that would otherwise have a high threshold.

You, the facilitator, can share your personal experiences if you wish, but otherwise, the results of this exercise do not need to be shared. After the independent part, you can, of course, reflect on the topic in general and on the general benefits of interaction skills for study ability and during studies.

15. Exercise: What else could I do?

You can start this exercise by saying that each of us has had different group experiences in our lives since childhood (at school, at work, in hobbies, etc.), and now you can think of a particularly good experience where you had a fun, easy time and others treated you nicely. What particular factors contributed to a positive experience? Ask the group to think about the specific things that mattered to them.

Let the students think about things independently first, and then discuss the findings and how to bring them into the group's own learning. You can allow about 5 minutes for independent work and 10 minutes for collective work.

16. Fact slide: Important things to pay attention to 1/3

Here are some examples of what you can and should pay attention to in your activities. When students experiencing loneliness have been asked what they would like their fellow students to do, the number one wish is to be able to join groups that have already been formed, even if others have already gotten to know each other. You can get people talking: Do you think this is too much to hope for? What do you think?

17.-18. Fact slides: Important things to pay attention to 2-3/3

The examples go on.

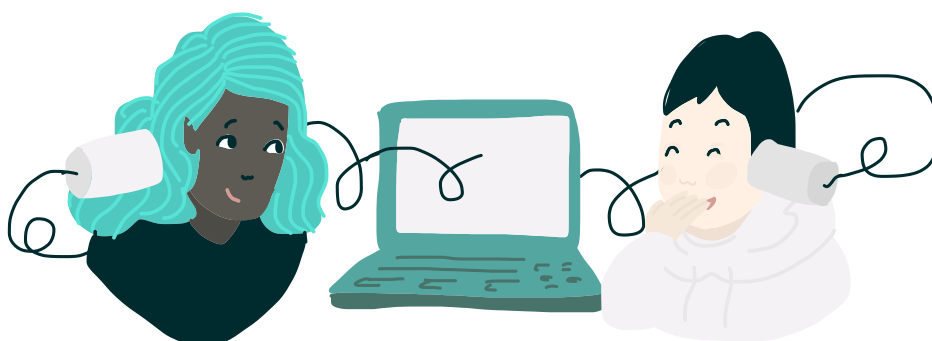
You can ask the group if they can think of other similar issues that everyone could take into account in their own work.

19. Exercise: What can you remember from this?

Now, let's reflect on the workshop together or separately! Again, choose the most appropriate way to do this, but we recommend a more conversational approach. You can allow 10 minutes for working together and 5 minutes for sharing the results.

Go through the reflection in a way you choose, and you can also share your personal experiences if you wish.

You can also ask for feedback on the workshop itself. It is particularly useful to ask for feedback if you intend to use the workshop more than once, so that you can adapt the workshop, if necessary, based on the feedback you receive. It is best to ask for feedback anonymously: this will give you a more honest assessment from your students. Anonymous feedback can be collected, for example, on blank pieces of paper or post-it notes (in face-to-face implementation), or via a short questionnaire using your preferred survey software or an anonymous response platform (e.g. Padlet, Flinga).





20. More information: What else can you do? Where to find more information?

If you want, you can have a look at the [500 ideas together](#), as there are some good ideas there for anyone to use. More information on the topics can be found at the project's addresses.

21. More information: Life skills, peer support, and volunteering for student wellbeing

These are good things for the students to take down in case they need help in the future or want to help others.

22. Executors and collaborators

Executors and collaborators of this work.

23. More information: Material producer and CC licence

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license. View the licence at www.creativecommons.org

24.-26. Sources

**Thank you, facilitator, for your time
on an important issue!**

The work you do is hugely important, and even
a small investment in promoting a sense of
community can later pay off many times over.

