Building Online Class Community Through Photos and Storytelling

Morgan B. Ritacco

In this chapter, I describe an activity in which students have the opportunity to volunteer to share photos of themself or family members and use short 1-2 minute presentations at the beginning of each class to share about themselves. The goal of this activity is to build class community, empower student participation, and deepen awareness of class diversity.

Teaching and Leearning Goal

- Fostering connectedness
- Connecting to the material in class and also to the final paper that is being written throughout the course of the class
- Increasing student and instructor presence in class
- Assisting the instructor with getting to know students on a deeper level
- Developing awareness of the diversity of classmates (age, gender, ethnicity, family upbringing, etc.)
- Building class community
- Empowering student participation
- Perspective-taking (understanding a concept or idea from someone else's point of view)
- Increasing student comfort with coming on mic and webcam

Activity and Results

How it started: In preparing to teach a Master's level social work course on human behavior in the social environment, I wanted to find ways to make sure that I could build community in the virtual classroom. As a clinician, I often sit with clients and ask them if they would like to share pictures with me of people whom they talk about in their sessions. This sparked my thinking that as a way of getting students to know me throughout the developmental life course perspective (starting at infancy and all the way through death), sharing photographs of my family and myself would help foster that connectedness. And then I thought, why don't I also ask students if they would like to share photographs and stories about their lives and build connectedness within the entire class?

Sharing photographs and stories about their lives is directly connected to the developmental life course perspective, which considers individual behavior throughout one's life as impacted by larger socio-historical forces. This is a theory that my course is rooted in, and it

is woven throughout the course. It is important that students understand the concept, and we spend each week talking about the specific aspects of this theory.

For readers from other disciplines, this activity does not need to be tied to this theory in particular. This activity can be applied to many different course topics, such as education, sociology, psychology, or even a biology class (when looking at genetics). The students can use photos in breakout groups or at the beginning of class like I discuss below.

Issues: Not all people come from families where they want to share photos with classmates who are strangers right away, or someone may not have photographs from childhood for many reasons (for example adoption, not living near family to access the photos for class, house fires, lack of access to traditional cameras with film). I acknowledge and give this caveat at the beginning of the course, which also opens up the conversation about why clients or families need time to build rapport to share.

How it is going: For the most part I have about 5-6 students who will share photographs with me each week and we will spend the first 5-6 minutes of class sharing who is in the photo and anything else they would like to share about that photo or memory in the photo. As the class progresses and students start to form bonds, I will have more students share photos. Some will share a photo every week or some will opt to share a photo on a particular week that they feel connected to. So far I have had one student who has expressed sadness that they didn't have photographs to share.

One of the beautiful things that has come out of this is that the stories that are shared also mirror some of the other topics that are covered each week. Students are able to place themselves into the material and make the theoretical models more concrete. The students have loved having this icebreaker conversation each week and, at the end of the semester, have noted that they feel connected to each other.

Technical Details and Steps

In our first class, I share a slide about myself and my journey to becoming a social worker (**Image 1**). I model for my students the arc of storytelling and highlight life trajectories and events that have led me to where I currently am in my life. Many students come to the social work field because of traumatic life experiences, and so I ask the students to only share what they feel comfortable sharing. The bulk of our class is learning about different stages of life and ways that different groups of people go through those stages of life. I let the students know that they will have opportunities to share photos of themselves as we progress throughout the semester by sharing a photo that matches the stages of life that we are exploring (**Image 2**). This can also be tailored to a class that does not use this theoretical model as a way of getting to know a few students each week by asking them if they would like to share a photo that matches the topic of that week.

As the course continues, I send an announcement each week as I am creating my slide deck, for students to share photos with me at least one day in advance of our class. I then add the pictures and students' names to the slide. When we come to class, I go over the agenda and remind the students that we will be sharing our photos for the class. I ask students to come on mic and camera (if they feel comfortable) and take a minute to share who is in the photo and what is the context of the photo. This highlights an added bonus of this activity: especially since this is a first semester course, these short presentations are low-stake opportunities for students to practice presenting on mic and webcam. Because the students are usually nervous the first couple of weeks, they never go over time to present. If they start to go over time, I add a timer for the students, to let them know how long they have to present.

Students have shown their grandparents, parents, siblings, themselves and their own children. This helps show the diversity of age ranges of students in your class, as well as highlights different parts of the country/world that students have lived in.

What this looked like in Adobe Connect

Image 1: Screengrab of my introduction slide in the Adobe Connect classroom. This is a slide I shared during the first class. I included images that visually show my journey to becoming a social worker, including a photo of my family. Adobe product screenshot(s) reprinted with permission from Adobe.

Image 1 Alt-text: This is a screengrab of an Adobe Connect layout, with the instructor (the chapter author) on webcam in the upper left hand corner and the attendees pod below. In the center of the screen there is a PowerPoint slide with images that show the instructor's journey to becoming a social worker. The first image is the state flag of Colorado, where the instructor was born. The second image is the state flag of Alaska. The third image is a map of the state of Florida with the abbreviation of FL on top. The fourth image is the crest for Florida State University. The fifth image is the DC statehood flag. The sixth image is the logo for the Lab School of Washington. The seventh image is a picture of the instructor with her husband and two kids on a beach. The eighth image is the logo for the NYC

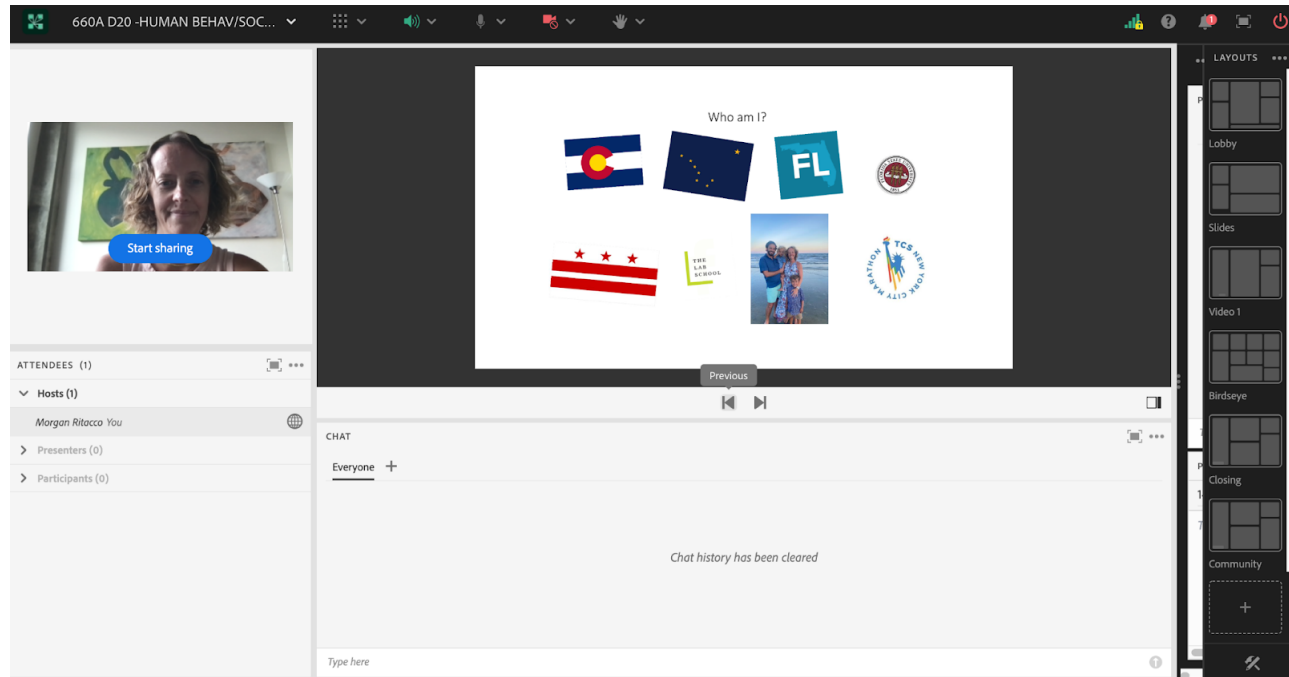Marathon. Below the slide is the chat box.

Image 2: In this screengrab I have included a slide that shows some of the pictures I have shared with students aligning with different developmental stages of my own children and of myself. Adobe product screenshot(s) reprinted with permission from Adobe.

Image 2 Alt-text: This is a screengrab of the same Adobe Connect layout as in Image 1. The difference is that the slide in the middle of the screen is different. The slide's title says "Self-Reflections of Developmental Stages of Life." On the slide are 6 photographs. The first set of photos are of two babies (the instructors' kids when they were born), labeled with the words "Infancy." In the next set of photos there is one photograph of two boys and a photo of the instructor as a child holding a baby doll with a toy stroller. These two photos are labeled "Early Childhood." The next photo is of the instructor with long hair labeled "Adolescence." The last photo on the slide is a photo of the instructor smiling next to her husband labeled "Early Adulthood."
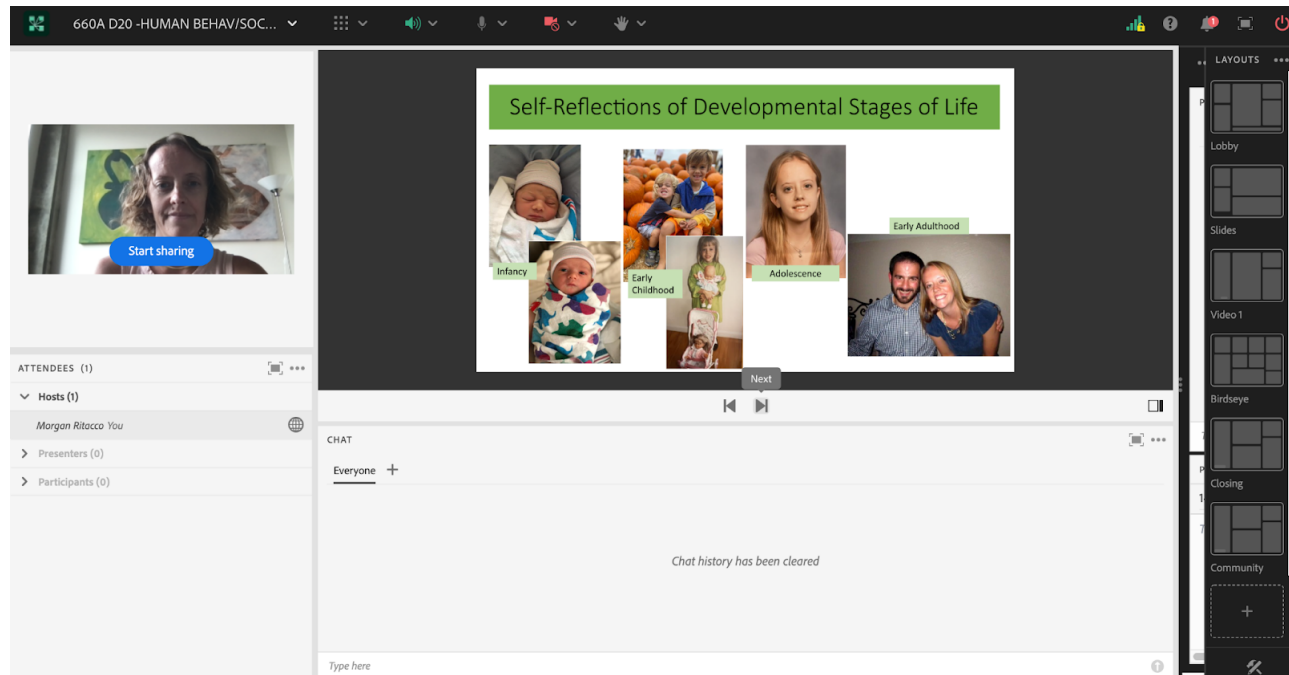
Morgan B. Ritacco

Morgan Ritacco, LICSW, LCSW has been a school based social worker in Washington, DC since 2012 providing therapeutic services to students and families on an individual and group level. She earned her BSW and MSW from Florida State University with a focus in Child Welfare. Morgan has been an online instructor with Columbia School of Social Work since 2019 and has also taught online with Wilmington University since 2016. Throughout her clinical work Morgan has created spaces for individuals to dig into therapeutic work that embraces the whole person and allows for growth at all stages of life. Morgan specializes in working with students with learning differences and is passionate about advocating for students within school systems. Morgan has integrated her experience and expertise into direct practice with children and families, MSW students, and online instruction classes.