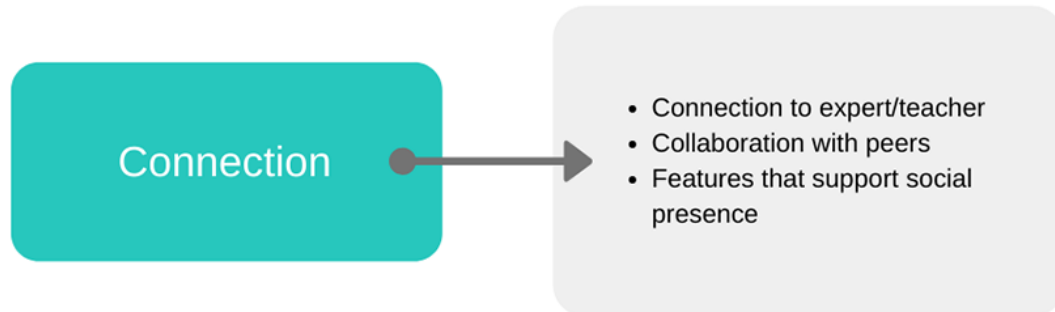


# Connection



The term “asynchronous platform” doesn’t bring to mind a vision of social interaction. After all, one of the selling points of these platforms is the opportunity to learn when and where a learner wants, regardless of whether peers are present.

But the designers of these “anytime, anywhere” platforms are increasingly recognizing the need to build connections between peers, teachers, mentors, coaches and experts. This makes perfect sense. A learning experience that includes the opportunity for a learner to connect with peers to discuss content or navigate challenges sounds more promising than one where a learner flies solo. Or consider a learning experience that allows learners to ask questions of experts, rather than one where learners are stuck searching the web for answers. These types of social connections have the ability to engage learners who might hit the brakes on an otherwise lonely learning experience.

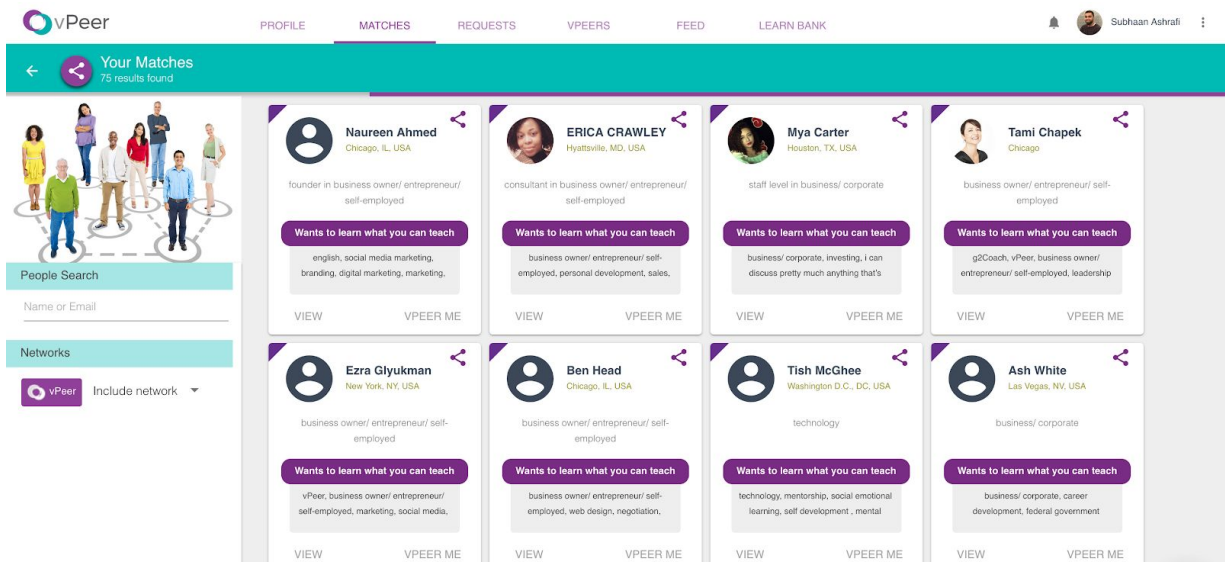
Platforms that provide opportunities for connection empower learners to interact with peers and experts. These interactions might be formal or informal, include one or many conversations, or occur one-on-one or in a group setting. The format of these connections can vary from email correspondence to video conferencing. Even light-touch approaches to connection—such as an upvote from a peer on a discussion board—can have a huge payoff when it comes to engaging and motivating learners. Instances of social presence—large and small—can foster a sense of community and spur learners to forge ahead, even during challenging points in their learning journey.

Most learners need some dose of human connection, though the degree and format will be determined by the learner’s unique goals and their preferred approach to learning. A learner who is required to skill up for a job, for example, may not have a ton of enthusiasm for learning; it might be beneficial to seek out a platform where a coach holds each learner accountable on progress toward a goal or to find a platform that helps learners partner with experts who know the material inside and out.



What does this deeper form of connection with a coach or expert look like in practice? Some platforms, such as LINCspring, provide online coaches to support learners in ongoing, one-on-one meetings and in small groups. Learners can also message coaches who are available on a one-off basis to answer questions as they arise. The idea is that the coaches help keep learners on track.

But what if a learner's goal is to learn something specific from an individual with expertise in that area? An increasing number of platforms are taking asynchronous learning to a new level, facilitating real-time connections between experts and learners. One such platform is vPeer, which allows learners to filter and select their own mentors and offers video conferencing integration to facilitate mentor-mentee meetings. A college student seeking advice about coursework, for example, could select an upperclassman mentor from a database of verified experts—say a senior at her college who has the same major.



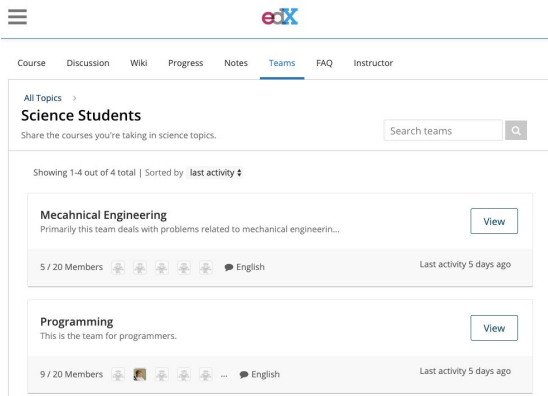
vPeer allows learners to apply filters to find mentor matches. (Source: vPeer)

What if a learner wants to engage with peers, not coaches? Peer connections and collaboration can keep learners motivated allowing learners to build a powerful network that advances opportunity.

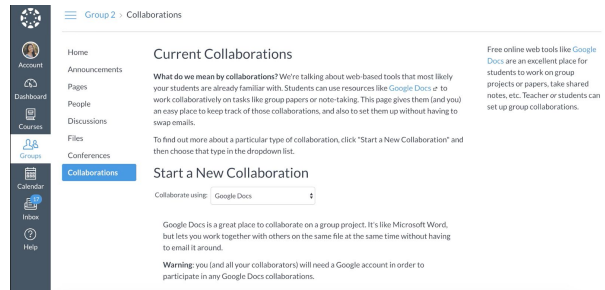
What do peer connections and collaboration look like in practice? Instructors using edX can create team project pages, which are designated areas for peer collaboration. Instructors using



Canvas can put learners in project groups with discussion boards or access to a shared workspace in Google Docs or other formats.



Team pages on the edX platform (Source: edX)



Collaboration formats for groups of learners on Canvas (Source: Canvas website)

Whether connecting with peers or experts, and whether the connection is deep and ongoing or light and finite, one thing is clear: connection can deepen engagement and motivate learners. And those elements are both key to learner success.

