Ten Tips for Promoting Student Engagement During Online Sessions
(No Matter the Platform)
Heather Clayton

"When designing synchronous learning sessions, plan on using that time for the construction of meaning. Avoid lecturing about information that can be obtained during asynchronous learning, and save precious online sessions as a time for students to engage in discussion and interact with you and each other. Make them a time when students apply their learning and gain clarity."

– Heather Clayton

When our students are with us face-to-face in the classroom, we have access to a number of ways to monitor their engagement during lessons and discussions. We're able to make observations and move around the room, noticing our students' body language and facial expressions, as well as how students are participating and interacting with the content. When engagement wanes, we are able to move in close proximity to a student, provide a non-verbal cue, and use our face-to face-connection with that student to intervene.

Moving our instruction into an online space changes how we are able to encourage and support student engagement. We lose control over some of the things we can manage in the traditional classroom and are faced with different challenges. Our students may not be used to engaging with others online and they may lack the confidence necessary to be a part of discussions. Students are faced with additional distractions when working from home and these distractions are much harder to monitor.

What is a teacher to do? If we have students who didn't feel present in our actual classrooms, how will they feel in a virtual classroom? How can we hold students to the same high expectations we have for them during our face to face instruction? What are the best ways to promote student engagement during

online, synchronous discussions? No matter which online platform you are using for synchronous learning (ie. **Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet**) there are several transferable strategies you can use to bolster student engagement.

1. **Set Clear Expectations**

   At the onset of online learning, it is important to work with your students to create a set of shared norms and expectations, just as you would in a face to face learning environment. Due to some of the unique challenges with online learning, you may choose to get the conversation started by sharing some of your expectations with students first. It is important for your students to know that your expectations protect everyone's right to learn in a virtual space. Possibilities you might start with include:

   - Keep your camera on so we may see your smiling face! This helps us to feel connected.
   - Keep your microphone on mute until it is time to speak. If we hear dogs barking or siblings talking it can be distracting to our learning.
   - Use the chat only when your teacher has asked you to or has given you permission. Chatting off topic is like passing notes in class and that can be distracting!
   - Come to class discussions prepared. You may be asked to bring a whiteboard, notebook, class materials, or other resources. This will help you to do your best learning.
   - Demonstrate you are ready to learn by being up, out of bed, and dressed to impress (or at least out of your PJs)

2. **Make Your Online Environment Mirror Your Classroom Environment**

   When your students enter your online environment, you want them to experience the same level of predictability and comfort that they experience in your face to face classroom. Some ideas to make your virtual environment inviting:

   - Make eye contact and speak to your students as you would in the classroom.
   - Have an organized and visually appealing back drop for your lessons and discussions.
   - Display an agenda or schedule and flip back to it throughout class discussions.
   - Make office hours available for your students so that they may have one on one, or small group time with you.
   - While your students are engaged virtually in small group or independent work, remain present and provide feedback as needed.
   - Personalize your messages to students and always let them know how much you look forward to seeing them during virtual discussions.

3. Ensure Student Accessibility

Before we can count on our students to show up and engage in classroom discussions, we need to ensure students have access to the appropriate technology and the tools required for their participation and response. If students are experiencing limitations, work with them to make changes so you can be sure they have accessibility. For instance, the student may need a device for home, options for a different time for instruction, or alternative ways to participate and respond to classroom requirements. Students may need to see content presented in a variety of formats including visuals, audio, and video. By presenting content in multiple mediums, you can be sure the learning is accessible for all students. Lastly, make sure all of your students understand class expectations and task directions and that they have the materials and resources necessary to be successful.

4. Plan for Shorter Sessions and Small Groups

Student engagement is much higher in lessons and discussions of a shorter duration. In lieu of a 60 minute session, consider breaking content into three 20 minute sessions. Even within shorter sessions, be cognizant of not going more than five minutes without a chance for students to make meaning of the content being discussed.

If you begin the class as one large group, utilize "breakout rooms" where students can have discussions or work on shared assignments. You may choose your student groups or have them automatically assigned through the platform you are using. As the facilitator, you are able to go in and out of breakout rooms to monitor students' discussions. Additionally, having students work on a shared document gives you the ability to check for student understanding. At the end of small group work, bring all of the students back together as a large group to conclude the lesson.

5. Hold Students Accountable

Students need to feel a sense of accountability for their participation during synchronous lessons and discussions. It is important to take attendance at each session and let your students know that their presence matters. Consider combining your attendance taking with either a private "check-in" of how the student is doing, or some other personalized approach.

There also needs to be a sense of shared responsibility for the success of discussions during synchronous learning. Ensure that each participant has a purpose and a role to play in partner, small group, and large group discussions. Finally, end with a brief self-assessment that asks students to reflect on their understanding of what was discussed during the class session. The reflection could include questions such as:
- What did you learn in today's class?
- What is still confusing to you?

- What lingering questions do you have?
- What is one thing you heard today that helped you to understand?

6. **Keep It Interesting**

   Prior to an online class, provide your students with a sneak preview of what they will be learning and discussing. Invite each student to bring a "burning question" or something they are hoping to learn as a result of the session. Most importantly, let your students know how much you are looking forward to hearing from them.

   During instruction, embed interesting anecdotes, questions, short videos, photographs, visuals, or artifacts. Our students are more likely to remember information and see relevance when they can connect their learning to authentic stories and to the real world. Try using different virtual backgrounds that align with the topic of study and consider hosting theme days to get your students excited about their learning.

7. **Make It Interactive**

   There are a number of ways to make learning interactive when using online platforms.
   - **Share your screen**
     When you share your screen you can share anything on your computer including documents, videos, websites, interactive games, etc.
     In screen share you can also annotate documents. For example, you can highlight key words, code text, or bring attention to important information.
   - **Use the whiteboard**
     Use the whiteboard feature to screen share a whiteboard where you, and if you choose, your participants can draw on it. You can control who has access to the whiteboard in the settings. As the host you have the ability to save the whiteboard, or save portions of the whiteboard. It is an invaluable tool for modeling problems and tasks.
   - **Gather student feedback in polls**
     Many platforms have polling features where you can pose a question and then see student responses. You can then use those responses to inform further instruction
   - **Use the chat feature**
     After posing a question, ask your students to respond using the chat feature. The chat allows students to share their thinking publicly, as well as reading the thinking of their classmates.

8. **Build Bridges**

   Even in the virtual setting, it is critical to build strong relationships between you and your students, as well as strengthening the relationships students have with each other. Every member of your classroom needs to feel seen and

heard. One way to do this is to greet each student by name as they join your online sessions, then say goodbye as they leave the class.

Begin each class session with a non-academic warm-up or ice breaker in order to get your students talking. For instance, pose a fun question for students to debate (such as a "Would you rather…?" question), present a logic problem to solve, or share a unique piece of art for students to critique. Try hosting a "show and tell" or use music to get your students excited about being together.

During class sessions, use every opportunity to engage students in dialogue with one another. This can occur during breakout sessions with small groups or partners. It is important to get our students excited about seeing their peers and feeling the importance of their presence in the conversations.

9. **Make Learning Relevant**

In order to engage students in distance learning, they need to see the relevance of what they are learning. One way to bridge connections between students' learning and the real world is to use primary sources. For example, invite your students to review news headlines, listen to interviews, analyze authentic documents, or look at museum artifacts. Think about ways to get your students away from the screen and interacting with family members or the outside world.

Embed student choice and let your students take ownership of how they demonstrate their learning. For example, to conclude a unit of study students may choose create posters or artwork, videos, digital stories, or slides. When we provide our students with choice, their investment and engagement in learning increases dramatically.

10. **Emphasize Meaning Making**

Allowing your students time to construct meaning is just as important in a virtual space as it is in our actual classrooms. When presenting new content be sure to pause so students can open documents, review information, or reflect on questions that have been asked. Provide simple visuals whenever possible and solicit students' comments and questions. Be sure to build in time for student reflection and use simple checks for understanding to inform further instruction.

> Student engagement is at the heart of our instruction and essential to student learning. Even in face-to-face learning settings, student engagement can be challenging to identify. This makes our facilitation of online learning that much more challenging. However, through careful planning and purposeful learning experiences, we can ensure our students are actively constructing meaning, even if from afar.

Resources and References

https://catlintucker.com/2020/05/7-strategies-to-engage-students-in-synchronous-online-discussions/
This article by Caitlin Tucker includes 7 strategies designed to engage students in online discussions.

https://zoom.us/docs/doc/Tips%20and%20Tricks%20for%20Teachers%20Educating%20on%20Zoom.pdf
This PDF includes links for student engagement tools built into Zoom.

www.edutopia.org/article/3-lessons-online-learning-take-back-classroom
Includes sample protocol for online discussions; includes student jobs that aid discussions

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