

Enhancing Student Engagement in the Remote Classroom



- Lighten the Mood
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- Limit Tech Tools
- Don't Force It

Keeping students focused during a lecture or riveted to a project has always been a challenge for college educators. But the compounded struggles of 2020 have raised the bar, forcing faculty members to change how they work to keep students engaged in coursework that is now done mostly online.

As they wait for a coronavirus vaccine to make its way around the nation, colleges will continue to offer many more courses online this spring. Once again,

faculty members will work to translate live-teaching situations into the new language of remote teaching. The faculty now must continually reinvent how they approach students in order to keep their attention, maintain equality in learning opportunities, and make sure they are safe and thriving.

To achieve all that, today's college educators must fight several uphill battles, including helping students overcome the boredom they often feel as they learn remotely and fostering a

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classroom dynamic that replaces, in some shape or form, the sense of community a physical classroom can offer.

Making the switch to online has presented some student-engagement challenges. In a survey conducted last spring by the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators, 76 percent of 22,500 undergrads said they lacked motivation for online learning. At the same time, nearly two in three of those surveyed said that a lack of interaction with other students was a major obstacle to learning.

What's more, creating a remote space where people feel both comfortable enough to learn and invigorated enough to work with each other is something most educators have had little experience doing.

In their quest to engage students in online classes, faculty members are faced with several other issues: Which tech options

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fit their needs and are most accessible to students? How can they convert a technologized experience into an emotional connection? And how much material should they expect students — who must spread their attention thinly these days to handle many issues not related to education — to learn?

Fortunately, after having spent nearly a year focusing on remote teaching, many college leaders and teaching and learning experts say that the picture for improving online student engagement is becoming clearer. This Trends Snapshot offers several key tips to foster engagement during these extraordinary times.

Lighten the Mood

More professors now try to set a relaxed and informal tone right from the start of a course — an antidote to anxious times. Many greet students by playing recorded music. Certain songs might put a lesson in focus or allude to that session's material, such as when a Purdue University math professor opens his linear functions class by playing a recording of Johnny Cash's "I Walk the Line." Others offer selections designed merely to put students at ease or make them laugh (think "Tiptoe Through the Tulips"), while some faculty members allow students to select a song for each class.

In-class games and contests have also become a part of the pedagogical repertoire for educators who want to replace stress with fun. Viji Sathy, a professor of practice in psychology and neuroscience at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, puts students together in groups to answer poll questions, frequently pitting students against others by class year (frosh vs. sophs, etc.). Then she has them compete to see who can get the most correct answers. She also will select a reporter from a study group by asking students in the group questions unrelated to their studies, such as, Which of you was the last to eat pizza? The idea is to give them a mental break from coursework so that they can engage more fully — and comfortably — later.

Start Early

Poll questions have also become a favorite method for faculty members who want to engage students as soon as they enter the remote classroom. Questions that have nothing to do with the course — What food are you looking forward to eating? Do you prefer a thunderstorm or just plain rain? — can get students talking virtually while putting them at ease, says Sarah Rose Cavanagh, associate director of the D'Amour Center for Teaching Excellence at Assumption University.

Some faculty members start their classes by placing groups of students in online breakout rooms where they can meet and study on their own, often after undergoing

some team-building exercises that might include games. Such exercises can compel students to listen and help them develop a collaborative plan for a project. Students frequently formulate interesting questions and other talking points during breakout sessions, ones that faculty members can later discuss with the entire class. By requiring breakout groups to create a piece of work together — annotating a document or a slide, for example — faculty members can foster deeper learning, Cavanagh advises.

Encouraging collaborative student work early in a semester, and then keeping groups together until the end of it, can result in a course with high engagement, says Joshua Eyler, director of faculty development at the University of Mississippi. And faculty members should remind students why their engagement and teamwork are so important — and reward them for taking part.

Emphasize Well-Being

During Covid-19, Azusa Pacific University has placed more focus on what it calls “whole-person education,” which includes checking in during class with students more often to see how they are handling stress, whether they are finding time and places to study, and if they are getting enough exercise and rest. Azusa Pacific faculty members have also built in more breaks in during class sessions and worked to get students working collaboratively away from the computer.

The university also emails or texts students regularly to see how they are doing.

Elsewhere, more educators are placing a greater emphasis on building a strong emotional bond with students. One professor uses an app to share text messages or videos with students of what she calls “silly things.” A video on how she spent a day with her pets or painting her nails can help a faculty member make a human connection with students, as well as get them to respond to her or talk with each other on an open-discussion board.


A major part of a focus on student well-being includes being available to them — and listening closely to their concerns. Students who are having issues with stress

can be referred to a college’s mental-health resources. Many faculty members now keep longer office hours, holding meetings via videoconferencing, thereby increasing the number of hours students can discuss any issues they might be having with a course.

Change Up Your Teaching

Faculty members should accept that many students are distracted. Teaching and learning experts advise instructors and professors to think of constructing their online lessons using short, five- to 10-minute “chunks.” By avoiding long videos, giving a full lecture, or using any particular tech tool for most of a session, faculty members can instead relay focused bits of information and then test or poll students afterward to see if they have grasped them.

Studies show that students prefer a blend of real-time teaching and recorded lectures



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(also known as asynchronous-learning opportunities). By offering students chances to learn and collaborate outside of class and on their own time, faculty members can keep them engaged.

Experts offer another piece of advice for those open to changing their classroom practices: Keep the videoconferenced classroom open for longer. Doing so gives students a chance to chat and get to know each other, and the faculty member another opportunity to connect with students who might be having a harder time grasping a lesson.

Limit Tech Tools

Faculty members shouldn't allow themselves to feel overwhelmed by the myriad tech options that can be used for college teaching, says Michael Truong, executive director of the Office of Innovative Teaching and Technology at Azusa Pacific. At the same time, they shouldn't shun ones that can help them run a connected and engaged classroom. Fortunately, many of the most effective tools are also easy to use.

Especially in recorded-lecture classes, many faculty members are finding ways to use their phones to connect with students, who can then use their own devices to talk about lessons with other students, ask questions, or start discussion topics when they have time. Some messaging apps are also now being put to use by faculty members teaching in real time who want students to discuss a lesson as it is being presented.

Other educators are tapping the websites and video-sharing platforms to include panel discussions and other presentations made by others that are relevant to their lessons, says Penelope Adams Moon, director of digital learning and engagement at the University of Washington at Bothell.

Don't Force It

Some faculty members have strongly encouraged students to switch on their cameras during videoconferenced classes. But educators should worry about the harm such a request might inflict on the trust between teacher and student, especially when students might not have the proper connectivity or technology to

be visually present in class, says Michelle Pacansky-Brock, an educational researcher and faculty member at Foothill-De Anza Community College. Instead of offering students an ultimatum, faculty members might do better to put them in small discussion or project groups, where such students are more likely to speak.

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Students forced to learn remotely may not feel like they have control over their circumstances. Offering them flexibility, such as by giving them a mix of asynchronous and real-time learning opportunities, can go a long way toward keeping them trusting and engaged.

Most importantly, faculty members should continue to find new methods for connecting with students who make engagement a challenge. Finding more ways to reach students will be of value to faculty members long after Covid-19 is a memory.

"Enhancing Student Engagement in the Remote Classroom" was produced by Chronicle Intelligence. Please contact CI@chronicle.com with questions or comments.