

## **Engaging students in online classes**

When we teach online, we can discover that elements of our teaching which seemed to work well face-to-face don't engage our students in the online environment. When we meet our students in a real classroom, we establish a give and take with students that we shape over time so that students know when to contribute, when to ask questions, and when to work with their peers. Under those circumstances we feel that students are engaged because they learn what we expect of them and they do their part in the give and take of the classroom routine. When we move classes to an online environment, that give and take may start to feel one-sided. When we hold synchronous online classes, students may become passive as we lecture or while other students speak. When we hold asynchronous online classes, student discussions can fall flat and student contributions feel forced. And when we provide feedback to students on their work, students may largely ignore our comments in a sea of online assignments and our responses to those assignments. These frustrations can drain the excitement out of learning and we fear that we can't engage students online.

The positive news is that we can engage our students in online classes by using new structures that guarantee engagement. These strategies can also be used in face-to-face courses and will increase student participation and focus in that environment as well.

### ***Engage students in lectures***

Instructors typically engage students during face-to-face lectures by pausing to ask questions every fifteen minutes and by "reading the room" to look for signals from students that they are distracted or confused. In an online synchronous environment, instructors can't read student faces the same way and the lecture does not feel dynamic. Even breaking online lectures up into 15 minute segments doesn't seem to work. This is to be expected, however, as recent research attention lapses during a lecture begin almost immediately for about 40% of students and this continues until minute 5 of a lecture when about 70% of students report their attention has lapsed. The research suggests that students struggle to pay attention to even very short lectures because they rarely see the value or purpose of engaging with a lecture. When students don't know why or how they will need to integrate new information into their minds, the lecture has no connection to anything they know or need to know and is difficult to process cognitively. Students need a reason to listen to a lecture.

The remedy for this problem is to structure your online lecture differently by beginning your online lecture with a challenging problem or realistic mini-case that requires students to draw on disciplinary thinking and that can't be answered with simple memorization. Tell students they must write down their response to this challenge. It's helpful to present this challenge as a choice between options so that students don't have the option of responding with "I don't know." The Poll function on Zoom presents a handy way to ensure that all students make a choice. Now that students have done some thinking, you can then call on a couple of students and ask them to describe why or how they reached their choice. Don't tell students the answer yet. At this point, students want to know the answer, and your lecture can be what leads them to that answer by revealing the correct response to the challenge and reinforcing the key principles or processes needed to the problem or analyze the case they've just worked with. When we structure lectures

this way, students have a reason to listen to the lecture because it addresses concerns questions and confusions that students have and thus guarantees deeper engagement. This strategy can also be used in face-to-face lectures.

### ***Engage students in discussions***

Instructors typically engage students during face-to-face discussions by posing questions to prompt thinking, such as “What did you feel was the most interesting part of the reading?” In a synchronous online discussion, students may feel less “on the spot” and not feel pressure to respond, so discussions can fall flat. Alternately, such questions can silence the majority of students because they don’t know what the instructor is “looking for” and they don’t want to appear foolish. In an asynchronous online discussion, students may respond to such a question by simply writing down “I like X part” or “I agree with others have said” and without our presence to probe deeper, the discussion falls flat. It’s easy to forget that without guidance as to how to respond to a discussion prompt, students feel uncertain of the thinking they should do in response to that prompt and don’t want to look foolish. The result is short and uninteresting attempts to appear engaged.

The remedy for this problem is to structure discussions so that students know how and why to engage. Rather than asking students “What did you feel was the most interesting part of the reading?” which requires a one word answer, ask a question like “What theory discussed in the reading do you think is most applicable to this scenario?” which requires students to use the readings to do thinking we’ve specified. In synchronous online discussions, give students time to jot down an answer and a justification for that answer. In asynchronous online discussions, give students guidance as to how long their posts should be, such as “Write a two paragraph response to the question in which you explain the theory in your own words and use two concrete examples to show how it applies to the scenario. Be sure you explain the tenets of the theory as the theories in this chapter are complex. Post your response by Wednesday at 11:59 pm.” Set up the discussion board so that students can’t see others’ responses until they’ve posted their own. To ensure that students discuss one another’s ideas, structure that aspect of the discussion as well by requiring students elaborate on, critique, contrast, or combine one or two of their classmates’ posts. Be sure to clarify the thinking students are to do and the form that thinking should take when they work with a peer’s initial discussion post. For example, “By Friday at 11:59 pm, you will respond to a classmates post by finding an answer that differed from your own. In a one paragraph response, persuade your classmate that your answer is better. Use at least one detail from the readings and one detail from the scenario in your response.

This strategy of structuring and focusing student thinking more fully can be used in face-to-face discussions.

### ***Engage students during peer presentations***

Instructors typically engage students during face-to-face student presentations by telling students who are listening to pay attention and be ready to ask questions after their classmates’ presentations. In an online environment, it is not possible to monitor how peers are attending to their classmate and it unsettling to simply listen to a student or students present in what feels like a vacuum. The reality is that students aren’t presenting simply don’t know what they are

supposed to do during their peers' presentations. They know they are supposed to listen, but they do so out of politeness, staying quiet because their peers are demonstrating their work to the instructor. In other words, students who are listening to presentations don't know what kind of work they can do as they listen. The result is that they lose track of the presentation and disengage.

The remedy for this is to structure work for listeners that gives them a purpose during presentations. Student presentations usually resemble the kind of disciplinary thinking we want our students to do and tend to focus on a specific problem or situation using some level of analysis. Require students to write down key elements in the presenter's talk (such as the central thesis and evidence for the thesis), a weakness in the presenter's argument, and a genuine question that will extend either the listener's or the presenter's thinking. A short worksheet that lists these required notes with a blank for the name of the presenter(s) and the name of the listener at the top of the worksheet makes this work clear to listeners and asks them to be accountable for it. This worksheet can be given to the presenters if they are practicing their presentations to provide helpful feedback and can be used again during the final presentations. This approach is most successful when the work you give listeners to do during presentations is aligned with your course goals and practices of your discipline.

This strategy of structuring student listening during student presentations can be used in a face-to-face student presentations.

### ***Engage students with your feedback***

Instructors typically engage students with feedback on their work in a face-to-face class by mentioning key areas where students struggled and encouraging students to read and reflect on instructor comments on papers or assignments. In that context, students may spontaneously ask questions about revisions and next steps, so that the instructor has a sense that feedback is being received and being solicited. In an online course, students receive feedback electronically and not in the instructor's presence, so the instructor may feel they've lost the ability to engage students with the feedback that they need to improve their learning and be successful. There are two key reasons why students may not engage with the feedback they receive in an online course. One reason students don't fully engage with feedback is that they may be receiving too much and they don't know how to use it all. In this case, they focus on the corrections that are easiest to respond to, which are usually the least important, such as punctuation errors or minor calculation errors. The second reason students don't engage fully with feedback is that they have no structure to help apply that feedback systematically to their next drafts or work.

The remedy for this is to focus your feedback and maximize student use of that feedback. Two tools can help you minimize the amount of feedback you give to students: rubrics and response banks. A well written rubric has comments that describe different levels of student performance in key areas, so when you use it, you simply circle or identify comments that apply to the students paper. Response banks can be created as you start to read through the first few papers or assignments: write and save key responses to student work so that you need to simply cut and paste feedback and not generate the same ideas multiple times on multiple papers. These time-saving tools allow us to spend more time on what is really important: focusing feedback on the most important aspects of students' work—their thinking—and identifying one or two key areas

they need to improve. Give feedback in these areas that is actionable and operational. For example, writing “No evidence for this!” on a paper each time you see that problem is too much of the wrong information. Instead provide feedback that directs student efforts, such as “I’ve marked places where you did not provide evidence for your claims on the paper. I’d like you to make providing evidence a focus for your next short paper. You can review the folder titled ‘Defending an argument’ in our Writing tab in Blackboard to get new ideas.” You can ensure that students use this feedback by requiring them to add an addendum to their next assignment that articulates: a) what aspect of your feedback they focused on in their revision/draft/new assignment; b) the steps they took to make improvements in that area; c) the impact they think these steps will make on their work; and d) where they are still struggling. Reading their ideas in this addendum will also allow you to focus your reading of their work efficiently on the area that they’ve worked to improve.

These strategies for structuring deeper student engagement with our feedback can be used in face-to-face classes.