# Fostering Student Engagement

Whether your supervising professor asks you to guest lecture occasionally or you are the instructor of record for the entire semester, being given responsibility to plan class meetings can feel daunting. As a teaching assistant in this situation, you may worry that students will disengage from learning and won't get much out of their time in class. You want students to be engaged in your class and to stay focused on the work at hand, but you may be wondering how to structure class meetings to make sure that happens. Let's take a look at how one new instructor handles this challenge.

> *Georgia is a new teaching assistant for the Sociology Department and is teaching a section of Introduction to Sociology. The department chair has kindly given her a great deal of guidance, supplying a model syllabus, PowerPoint slides, and tests and quizzes. The lectures look pretty interesting, but Georgia also wants students to be engaged during class and not simply sit back and listen. She develops a set of ideas that she thinks will keep students focused and engaged:*
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> - *Start every class by sharing a meme that relates to the big ideas for the day, helping students see where the class is going.*
> - *Pause every 15 minutes or so and throw out questions to students, making sure to call on different students each class meeting.*
> - *Make sure to give concrete examples of the concepts.*
> - *Embed video and images in the slides to illustrate concepts.*
> - *Ask students to come up with examples of concepts in groups at least once each week.*
> - *Remind students when information from the lectures will be on quizzes or exams.*
>
> *"I'm sure this will keep students engaged, keep them focused, and make the class more fun for them," thinks Georgia.*

Take a moment to consider Georgia's plan. Will her plan engage and focus students as she hopes? What do you think is effective in her plan? Do you have any concerns about her plan?

### What is student engagement?

Often instructors say they want their students to stay engaged during class, but it isn't always clear *with what* they hope students engage. Sometimes what instructors mean is that they want students to stay focused during class. In this case, instructors put their energy into peppering class meetings and lectures with moments that refocus student attention; in effect, these moments function a bit like tapping someone on the shoulder—they alert students whose minds might have drifted a bit and get them to reorient themselves to the lecture or the topic at hand. This kind of engagement involves the teacher engaging the attention of the learner. And while paying attention is an important first step in learning, attention itself is not enough for learning to occur. Learning occurs when *students* engage with course concepts, principles, or processes; we can call this engagement to learn. It's helpful to underscore these two different approaches to

engagement: one involves the teacher working to orient student attention; the other involves the student working with the big ideas of the course.

When we contrast these two approaches to engagement, we can see that Georgia, in the opening scenario, has a plan that focuses more on engaging students' attention and less on getting students working in ways that will ensure they engage to learn. Georgia's jokes, illustrations, examples, and reminders will bring students back from daydreaming or checking their phones; these efforts, however, won't help students make connections with the lecture or make their own connections to the course concepts. Georgia does plan to ask students questions and have them come up with examples of concepts, and these aspects of her plan are ones she should develop. The most effective and powerful way to engage students to learn during a class meeting is to regularly have them do meaningful and sustained work with course concepts by structuring opportunities for that work at the beginning of class, during class, and at the close of class.

**Engage students at key moments during class meetings**

Student engagement for learning is best thought of as a process by which we ensure that students work their way through a class meeting, connecting to course content and connecting the pieces of the class meeting together to get the most out of their class time. Student engagement also requires that students track their own thinking, taking time to consider what they do or don't understand and what questions they have or new realizations they are developing. This kind of engagement for learning involves pausing during class and requiring students to think, write, talk, or ask questions. The research suggests that if we want students to stay connected to and develop their learning during class meetings, we need to engage them at the beginning, throughout, and at the end of class (Ambrose et al., 2010). Why is this so important? Let's explore these key moments a bit more closely.

- Engaging students in work at the beginning of class helps them activate their current understanding so they can use what they know and the gaps in their current understanding to learn more. This kind of engagement gives students a reason to actively listen to or participate in the lecture, activity, or discussion that is coming next and helps them make connections across ideas and concepts as they emerge.
- Engaging students in work during class helps them integrate new ways of thinking into their current understanding. This kind of engagement prompts students to reflect on how their thinking is changing, to put new ideas to use right away, to make connections between what has come before and what will come next, or to anticipate what will come next.
- Engaging students in work at the end of class helps them begin to place what they've learned into a broader context. This kind of engagement can help solidify what they've been learning. It also helps them connect big ideas and plan for how they will use those ideas in upcoming course work.

**Ways to engage students throughout the class meeting**

Now that we understand student engagement as a process more fully, it's time to explore some reliable teaching strategies that engage students in meaningful work at key moments during class time.

*Muddiest point*[1]

This teaching strategy engages students by requiring them to articulate initial points of confusion and then trace their thinking as their understanding changes.

1. At the beginning of class, give students two to three minutes to write in response to one of the following prompts:

- What are the three muddiest (i.e., most confusing) points from the reading or homework you completed for today's class?
- What are three questions from the reading or homework that you would like to have answered in today's class?

Ask them to share some of their ideas with a partner or small group, and then ask groups to share some of their questions or confusions and write those on the board.

2. During class, pause at least once (though you might pause two or three times) and give students a minute to make notes on the same paper about what points are becoming clearer for them, what questions are being answered, and what confusions still remain. Have students share their ideas with a partner or small groups and then ask groups to share their thoughts and make notes on the board that show where confusions are beginning to clear.

3. At the end of class, ask students to reflect back on their muddiest points or questions and write what they understand now that they didn't understand before and also to note if any of these points are still "muddy" or confusing. You might have students turn in these papers so that you can see what they are beginning to understand more clearly and also note any ongoing points of confusion so that you can address those in upcoming classes.

*Directed paraphrase*[2]

This teaching strategy engages students by requiring them to consider how they would communicate complex course concepts to an outside audience.

1. At the beginning of class, have students write a brief summary of their current understanding of the main concept that will be the subject of the class meeting. They might draw from the reading they completed before class, a homework assignment they completed, the lecture from the previous class, or any other class resources.

2. During class, pause at least once (though you might pause two or three times) and give students a minute to re-read their initial summaries and write any modifications based on what

[1] Adapted from Angelo and Cross, 1992.
[2] Adapted from Angelo and Cross, 1992.

they've learned in the class so far. Have students share their ideas with a partner or small group and then ask groups to share any insights about how their understanding of the concept is becoming clearer or easier to articulate.

3. At the end of class, have students imagine that their aunt is going to call them after class and will be very interested in what they learned today. (She isn't going to let them get off the phone until they are able to clearly explain the concept in language that she can understand!) Have them write a one-sentence paraphrase of what they learned today that takes the ideas from their summary and what they've learned in lecture and puts them in plain language without any disciplinary jargon. After students have written their paraphrases, ask them to share them in pairs or small groups. Ask the groups to share out the best paraphrases they heard.

*K-W-L*[3]

This teaching strategy engages students by requiring them to assess their current understanding of the topics or content that will be covered in a class meeting, determine what they want to know, and reflect on what they learn during the lecture.

1. At the beginning of class, students either receive a copy of or make their own K-W-L chart that looks like this:

| **Topic/Concept** | **K:**<br>**What you *Know*** | **W:**<br>**What you *Want to know*** | **L:**<br>**What you *Learned*** |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | |
| | | | |

Give students the list of topics or concepts that will be presented and give them two to three minutes to create a row for each concept and also fill out the K and W columns for each concept, noting what they know and what they want to know.

2. During class, pause at least once (though you might pause two or three times) and give students two to three minutes to begin making notes in the L column (what they have learned). Have students share their new insights with a partner or small group and then report back to you so that you can informally assess what students are learning.

3. At the end of class, give students two to three minutes to finish making notes in the L column. You might have students turn in their charts so that you can assess the changes they have reported in their thinking and note any ongoing points of confusion so that you can address those in upcoming classes.

[3] Adapted from Rice, 2018.

*Prediction*[4]

This teaching strategy engages students by requiring them to actively listen to, use, and integrate new information as they are learning it.

1. At the beginning of class, give students a mini-case (three to five sentences) describing a problem that experts in your field would use the key concepts in the lecture to solve. You can find these kinds of mini-cases in textbooks and on the web. Have them write down their prediction of how they think the problem will be resolved. Have them share some of their ideas with a partner or small group, and then ask groups to share some of their predictions with you so you can write them on the board.

2. During your lecture, pause at least once (though you might pause two or three times) and give students a minute to re-read their initial predictions and make notes on the same paper about how their thinking is changing by having them answer questions like these:

- Given what you are learning in the lecture, would you still make the same prediction about the case, or would you revise it?
- Where was your initial thinking correct?
- Where was your initial thinking wrong or confused?

Have students share their ideas with a partner or small group and then have groups share their thoughts and make some more notes on the board about how their thinking is changing.

3. At the end of the lecture, have students reflect back on the mini-case and write a couple of sentences to sum up their current thinking about the problem and the solution. You might have students turn in these papers so that you can see how they are beginning to integrate concepts from the lecture into their thinking and where they are still struggling.

**Resources for fostering student engagement**

Ambrose, S. A., Bridges, M. W., DiPietro, M., Lovett, M. C., & Norman, M. K. (2010). *How learning works.* John Wiley & Sons.

Angelo, T.A., & Cross, K.P. (1992). *Classroom assessment techniques: A handbook for college teachers.* 2nd ed. Jossey-Bass.

Lang, J. (2016). *Small Teaching: Everyday lessons from the science of learning.* Jossey-Bass.

Rice, G.T. (2018). *Hitting pause: 65 lecture breaks to refresh and reinforce learning*. Stylus.

If you would like to learn more about fostering student engagement for learning in your courses, please feel free to request a consultation with ITLAL.

[4] Adapted from Lang, 2016.