

Engaging Students in a Virtual Classroom

Teaching during a pandemic has brought a whole new list of concerns to my classroom. Specifically, it has demanded I learn an entirely new set of skills to manage technology and facilitate student engagement. In a typical semester, preparing for in-person classes involves creating group activities, crafting productive discussions, and planning a variety of assessments. But during the pandemic, my preparation changed. Maintaining a safe classroom environment has always been a concern, but in the fall of 2020, I was singularly focused on providing a safe and healthy classroom environment. What was my role in keeping students well?

I decided quickly that I needed to provide my in-person students with the option to participate in class in-person or remotely. “Stay home when you’re sick.” Easy enough, right? But what if a student feels just a little off and has a big test the next week? With the support of my college, I began offering all my in-person students the option to attend class remotely for any reason. On any given day, students could choose to come to campus or attend class via Zoom, and many of my students chose the Zoom option for a variety of reasons. I worked hard to find ways to distribute notes and collect assignments remotely. But even as I congratulated myself on my successfully blended modality, I started to notice something unexpected and problematic. Students on Zoom quickly became ghosts—unresponsive, muted black boxes. I never heard from them or saw them, and when they did come to the physical classroom, I barely recognized them. Most concerning was that many of these students were not doing well academically.

Engagement in a Virtual Environment

Instructors recognize the connection between student engagement and student achievement. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) wrote what most instructors know intuitively: “Simply put, the greater the student’s involvement or engagement in academic work...the greater his or her level of knowledge acquisition and general cognitive development” (p. 848). Engagement is critical, but engagement in the virtual environment can be tricky.

Have you ever “ghosted” a virtual meeting? Logged into a meeting, muted yourself, turned off your camera, and began working on something else? I am certainly guilty. Many times, I intend to pay attention, but it is just too easy to get distracted by something else. Virtual

engagement is difficult, even for those who want to be engaged. As I prepared for the spring 2021 term, I carefully considered how I could involve my remote students. I was committed to letting them come to class remotely, but I was equally committed to beginning the semester with an expectation of engagement.

In my experience, engagement cannot be mandated. A simple thing like requiring students to turn on web cameras is fraught with problems. What if a student doesn’t have the technology or it’s not working properly? What if there’s something the student simply doesn’t want the class to see? I have had one-on-one virtual meetings with students in environments that have broken my heart. So, I chose to place the burden of engagement on myself. What could I do differently to improve student engagement?

Mastering the Details

First, I needed to improve the virtual environment for my students. I braved the agony, recorded several of my lectures, and reviewed them. In doing so, I learned where to stand, where I could get away with writing on the whiteboard (not the greatest option), and how my shared screen appeared to students. I learned to be conscious about items like tissue boxes getting placed in front of the camera, and I discovered what adjustments needed to be made to the settings of my document camera (beware of auto-focus). I verified that students could hear me clearly, and I learned I needed to repeat students’ questions to ensure everyone could follow along. In short, I learned to be mindful of a large number of small details that impacted the experiences of my remote students.

Second, I learned how to teach my students to use the technology for themselves. Virtual backgrounds made some students more comfortable with turning on their webcams. Other students were more likely to unmute when they learned to do so by simply holding down the spacebar in Zoom. I trained all students, in-person and remote, to use the app Canvas Student to take pictures of handwritten assignments and upload them to Canvas. The key was to help all students use and develop familiarity with the technology available to them.

Setting the Expectation of Engagement

At the beginning of the spring 2021 term, I worked to set the expectation of engagement. Students could Zoom into class for any reason, but I expected every student

to contribute to the class. Every day, I took the time to chat with every student in-person and on Zoom. I began these conversations before class started and continued until I had spoken with every student. I had a silly question ready such as, “Are you a dog or cat person?” or “If you could get paid for doing anything, what would it be?” I waited for students to unmute and respond. Sometimes students had audio issues, and we worked through the issues using the chat box. We played a bit with zoom filters for no other reason than to have a little fun together. This was such a simple and enjoyable tactic, and its impact was tremendous. Students became more comfortable speaking, and many turned on their cameras.

I began to conduct frequent check-ins. I asked every student how they were doing and waited for an audio response. The wait time required to involve remote students is significantly longer than the wait time required to involve in-person students. Sometimes I asked for a thumbs up or some other visual signal that students were doing okay. Again, I waited for a response from every single student. I trained myself to use polling to check for understanding. My typical approach was to give a multiple-choice question with five answers. Then students in the classroom or on Zoom could answer with a show of fingers. Later, I learned to use polls in Zoom. I waited for a response from every student, and I called out students by name if they did not respond, asking if they needed any help. If a student did not answer after a long period of time, I would move on, but then I would message them after class. I would note that we missed their response, ask them if they had any technical issues, and offer to help. “Gotcha” moments were never the point.

I scheduled one-on-one Zoom meetings with each of my students— all 85 of them. It was time intensive, but it allowed me to help them with individual technology issues and understand their challenges and anxieties. Many had never used Zoom before, and the meetings seemed to make them more likely to seek out help in the future.

I found the Remind app to be very useful with remote students. Remind is a texting app that keeps all cell phone numbers private, but allows for fast and easy communication with most students. If a student disappeared from a breakout room, I texted them and asked if they needed help. Usually, I could get students right back into their rooms. I also kept Remind open and available during class so students could contact me easily if something went wrong.

Finally, I frequently asked students about their experiences in the online classroom. Could they hear? Could they see? Were they able to find the notes and turn in assignments easily? I encouraged students who did not turn in assignments on time to try again. I had to be patient and flexible, but it was worth it. In every case, we were able to find a way for students to participate in every activity.

Conclusion

The pandemic has made good instruction more challenging than ever. It’s a tricky task to be mindful of all students’ experiences across multiple modalities. It’s an even more difficult undertaking to engage remote and in-person students simultaneously. Yet, engage we must. I will be the first to admit that no technology can replace the simple effectiveness of sitting down with another human being, but students can still know and be known by their teachers and classmates. I cannot tell you for certain if students in my spring courses will be more successful than the students in the fall—only time will tell. I can say my students are more engaged in the content, and class is more enjoyable for all of us.

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Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (1991). *How college affects students: Findings and insights from twenty years of research*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.