



Making a Virtual Environment Seem Like a Coffee Shop

As the academic term draws to a close, instructors may be wondering how to maintain high levels of motivation and engagement in the virtual classroom. It has been eight months for most of us since educational life felt normal, and students and faculty alike may feel frustrated, lonely, and burned out. The approach of the holiday season presents another motivational hurdle. What can instructors do to maintain their engagement, as well as their students' engagement, in these final weeks of the term?

To answer this question in my own virtual classroom, I decided to model my classes after a coffee shop. When you walk into your favorite coffee shop, what do you notice? It may have a welcoming environment, soft music playing in the background, small tables for intimate groups of people, as well as solitary nooks for individuals who may want to work in isolation. Coffee shops appeal to many different senses, including hearing, smell, and touch. While we may not be able to enjoy the ambiance of our favorite coffee shops right now, we can adapt the same welcoming atmosphere to our online classes.

The Sounds Inviting You In

Music can lift spirits. Playing music as students join the classroom is an excellent way to create a welcoming environment and provide opportunities for connection and engagement. Instructors can change the style of music each class to match the lesson, or simply to keep students engaged as they wonder what kind of music will be played that day. Instructors may also play motivational videos or meditation videos at the beginning of class to set the mood for the lesson. I ask my students to share their favorite song and motivational video on a discussion board, and I play them throughout the semester. Students are excited because they never know when their favorite song or video will be played! I make sure to thank each student by name when his or her song or video is played, and this often opens up further conversations in the chat that allow students to connect over shared music interests. These connections help to develop relationships within the class.

The Smells Waking You Up and Keeping You Alert

Instructors can ask students to light a candle, make a cup of coffee, put on their favorite lotion, or eat their favorite snack to create a more welcoming atmosphere in their home space. It is amazing how smells and foods can boost our mood and bring people together as a community. This is why we have wonderful smells and foods during all of our major holiday celebrations. Having students prepare for class by creating a space that smells good to them helps to keep students motivated and engaged.

The Right Environment

Coffee shop owners spend a great deal of time designing their space. They may provide couches or cozy chairs, incorporate a variety of colors, and set up interesting displays that are pleasing to the eyes. Instructors can invite their students to do the same in their work environment. It's important for all of us to get out of bed and have a separate workspace that creates a more conducive learning environment.

Instructors can do this kind of interior design within their own online classroom as well. During virtual meetings, I create what I call engagement teams, small groups of students who meet up and digest the material being taught. Engagement teams allow students to practice critical thought while connecting with one another in a more intimate setting. I send out portions of the lesson to the engagement teams, and ultimately have the engagement teams share their information with one another, which provides students with the opportunity to become the instructor. Finally, we all come back together and discuss the information.

The bottom line for all of us is to keep it simple, keep it fresh, and always keep an open mind!

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