Student Engagement And Community-Building Online

Student engagement is essential in a remote classroom, where it is especially important to cultivate the socio-emotional bonds among students and with their instructors that support student motivation and success. Synchronous teaching affords opportunities for class community-building that more closely resemble the dynamics of face-to-face instruction. There are also many asynchronous teaching strategies that promote equity in learning conditions for students. A blend of synchronous and asynchronous course delivery methods is often optimal for student experience. The first step toward building a remote class environment for student engagement is to examine your curriculum and identify what content should be delivered synchronously, if relevant, and what can be planned as asynchronous instructional delivery.

Below is a list of engagement strategies that address both teaching scenarios to consider in the planning and delivery of a remote course.

Planning an Engaged Remote Classroom

- Assign roles during each class discussion. For example, assign a student to initiate the class's discussion with a question, quotation or example; assign a student to wrap up discussion, identifying key ideas, themes or additional questions; or, ask a student (or TA if appropriate) to monitor the Zoom chat for questions or comments and share them with the class.
- Design activities or assessments that require student interaction throughout the semester. An instructor can use group work or projects, peer review and/or peer instruction, student presentations, class debates, and discussion forums in online courses. Students can present, discuss, or debate using Zoom during live sessions or record presentations and responses that students can watch asynchronously.
- Provide multiple means to contribute to class discussion in the remote teaching interface, including speaking, hand raising and/or emoji use in Zoom, chatting privately, publicly and/or anonymously, and via written or recorded work.
- Partner in-class students with remote students for discussion or group work in a HyFlex classroom. N.B. This option may require headsets for in-class students to minimize feedback.
- Facilitate an open-ended, informal discussion or live office hour for students to talk and ask questions before class, during class or as an extra session. Record this meeting to share with students who could not attend.

Student Input and Feedback

- Exit interviews: ask students to provide brief feedback, which can be anonymous, about the lesson in the last five minutes of class.
- Generate a word cloud using a site like https://www.polleverywhere.com/word-cloud to brainstorm, pool and visualize existing knowledge about a particular topic or concept in the class in real time.
- Use polling, administered with the polling feature within Zoom or via MS Forms, to conduct a quick comprehension check for important concepts or during lecture-heavy classes.
- Use audio or video recordings to provide feedback on assessments, study guides for exams, and other content such as announcements, as some students report finding these media more accessible.
- Conduct a mid-course survey to collect feedback on student experience of the course's content and delivery. MS Forms, for example, includes an option to set up anonymous responses.

Asynchronous Engagement Strategies

- Create a "water cooler" for students, using a discussion board or course page to host a space for students to post questions anytime, to make class announcements that highlight the questions or contributions of particular students each week, and to schedule optional "sync session" meetings that are also recorded for students not in attendance.
- Require student contributions to a class discussion board that are incentivized by a participation grade and a weekly calendar for posting and responding to others' posts to generate a routine of engagement. Consider providing a rubric for online participation, allowing audio or video posts instead of text, and responding to discussion posts as well. Discussion prompts that support the course's learning goals but are open-ended can also help to sustain engagement, such as asking students to relate a course concept to a current event.
- Conduct a structured, asynchronous class debate by dividing the class into small groups who will each offer their team's arguments or respond with counterarguments in an online document or presentation, with deadlines scheduled to sustain the debate's progression.
- Plan a virtual gallery walk for students to present independent research and for peer evaluation. Using MS PowerPoint to embed videos, an MS Doc containing links to video or slide presentations, or a series of recorded screencasts hosted in Canvas, students view the presentations of classmates and provide written or recorded feedback.
- Set up a "carousel" activity, also called station brainstorming, using MS Docs or PowerPoint: develop a set of questions, problems, or prompts to distribute to each "station" or web document, then assign students to rotate among this series in small groups, along with a deadline to then respond to the answers developed by other groups.

Active Learning During Class

- In a Zoom or MS Teams classroom, use breakout rooms for peer instruction and group activities. For example, this works well with the active learning strategy "think-pair-share": provide a prompt requiring reflection, critical thinking or analysis for students to respond to individually, then set up pairings or small groups in breakout rooms to discuss their responses, before returning everyone to the main meeting and opening up to a class discussion on the topic. Or, use the

"minute paper," a shorter version of this strategy, that requires students to write an individual response to a prompt for one minute before sharing with a peer, and then concludes in a class discussion of student responses.

- Organize an interactive activity during class using breakout rooms and support documents set up in advance. This could include synchronous versions of the class debate, virtual gallery walk and carousel activities described above, adapted using breakout rooms to group students, as well as role-playing activities or fishbowl discussions that assign select students to participate in a class discussion or application of concepts and progressively rotate out participants so that all students participate during the class meeting.
- Use student-generated questions to guide class discussion. Students could submit these live during class via the chat feature or a discussion board, or in advance as assigned or voluntarily.
- Collaborative note-taking: Set up a space for students to write alongside the course's lectures in synchronous meetings, using a shared [Microsoft document](#) in tandem with Zoom, or [Piazza](#) via Canvas which also allows students to post anonymously.

Building in Reflective Discussion

- Ask students to free-write about a class topic or a general reflection at the start of class, and invite them to share via chat or reading their reflections to the group.
- Discussion pause: Give students time to think and reflect on the discussion so far, encouraging them to write down new insights, unanswered questions, summaries of main points, etc.
- Start class or a section of a lesson with a "silent meeting," as students sit alone with course materials, followed by small group discussion on their work via breakout rooms.