

Strategies for Engaging Students in Synchronous Online Classes Without Requiring Cameras On

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PURPOSE

This job aid explores strategies and videoconferencing features that can be used to engage students in the virtual classroom even without “cameras on.”

BACKGROUND

There are sensitive reasons why a student may need to have their camera off during a synchronous online class, including:

- Poor internet access
- Privacy concerns
- Cultural, religious, or familial reasons
- Lack of trust or belonging
- Concerns about appearance
- Shyness or discomfort
- Group norms
- Zoom fatigue

Even with cameras off, there are strategies that instructors can use to engage students in the virtual classroom without “cameras on.” Learner engagement can be categorized as emotional, cognitive, and behavioural:

- Emotional: "a student's involvement in and enthusiasm for school" (Walden University, 2021).
- Cognitive: "the psychological investment students make towards learning—which ranges from memorization to the use of self-regulatory strategies to facilitate deep understanding" (Fredricks et al., 2004).
- Behavioral: "Behavioral engagement is the observable act of students being involved in learning; it refers to students' participation in academic activities and efforts to perform academic tasks" (Fredricks et al. 2004).

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HOW TO

1. Co-construct synchronous online class expectations

For this strategy, the instructor and students work together to construct the expectations for the synchronous class. This strategy is recommended because “negotiating the what, how, when, and where of a course gives students great ownership of their learning experience, increases student motivation, and fosters heightened engagement in the learning process” (Hunzicker, n.d.). Some prompts to guide discussion include:

- What does it look like to be prepared for class?
- How do we demonstrate respect to ourselves and each other?
- How do we communicate with each other (e.g., chat, audio)?
- How do we participate and demonstrate our engagement in the synchronous class?
- How do we handle late arrivals or departures from class?

You may want to include these prompts in a shared Word document that learners can type their thoughts and ideas into. Once expectations have been created, post a copy in your Moodle course page. Review regularly with students and refer to the expectations as needed.

2. Use icebreakers

Icebreakers are short activities which can be used to encourage connection between students and with the instructor. Icebreakers can be used for various goals including learning students names, discovering student interests, connecting students together, helps students feel comfortable in an online environment, and developing a positive learning environment (Banna et al., 2015; Chen et al., n.d.; Deering, 2011). Because icebreakers promote interactions, they can support student engagement with course content (Icebreakers for Online Classes, 2020). In a study, over 90% of students rated icebreakers as important or very important to their course engagement (Bolliger & Halupa, 2018). Students may be seeking connection with their classmates and their instructors. It may seem trivial but giving everyone a chance to connect could make a huge positive impact.

3. Use non-verbal feedback and meeting reactions

In most videoconferencing tools, participants can:

- Raise a virtual hand
- React with emojis (e.g., clap, heart, smile)
- Type in the chat
- Vote yes or no

All of these options can be used to engage learners, without a camera. Here are some examples of non-verbal feedback and meeting reactions in practice:

- Emojis: Before we get started today, I want to check-in. Please select the emoji that best represents how you are feeling today.

- Raise hand: Today we are going to be using breakout rooms. Raise your hand if you have used breakout rooms before.
- Yes or No: Before we move onto step 2, I want to check in and make sure you are ready. Select the “yes” or “no” to indicate if you have completed step 1.

4. Use collaborative documents

Collaborative documents allow two or more people to edit the same document, at the same time. This strategy allows learners to collaborate, without the use of camera or audio. Some ideas for implementation include:

- Crowdsourced notes: Provide an outline of the class in the collaborative document. Encourage learners to add their own notes to the document.
- Breakout Rooms: While working in groups, learners take notes in a collaborative document. This also allows the instructor to monitor the work that is happening.
- Practice Questions: Assign practice questions to be completed individually or in groups. Give time to complete the answers and then review as a class.
- Brainstorm: Use the collaborative document as a space for learners to brainstorm.
- Research Notes: Groups can work together to gather information and research for a class project.

5. Use participation cues

Participation cues emphasize how learners are expected to participate. Use them often to increase engagement and make it clear to learners what you expect. Example participation cues (Sebastian, 2020):

- Please add your response to the chat
- Give me a thumbs up if you are ready to start
- Raise your hand when you are ready to share, and then I will call on you
- To ask a question, unmute yourself or add to the chat

6. Use polls to check for understanding

You can launch polls inside most videoconferencing tools. Options include single choice, multiple choice, short answer, and rank order polls. You can also use polling tools external to the videoconferencing software and share the link to access with students. Launch a poll to check that learners are understanding what you are teaching. With most polling tools, you can create the polls in advance of the class.

7. Flip the Class

A flipped classroom is “pedagogical approach in which direct instruction moves from the group learning space to the individual learning space, and the resulting group space is transformed into a dynamic, interactive learning environment where the educator guides students as they apply concepts and engage creatively in the subject matter” (The Flipped Learning Network, 2014). If you are

using the synchronous class time to lecture, consider how you might shift that to asynchronous pre-work that is completed before class. For example, learners can watch a video lecture before class. Then, when they come together as a class synchronously, the focus is actively applying what they learned.

8. Incorporate Social Emotional Learning

Social emotional learning is “the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions” (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, n.d.). Incorporating social emotional learning can support community building, relationship building, and well-being. It can also be a way to show students you care. All of these factors can help students feel comfortable engaging in the class.

Examples of social emotional learning (Sebastian, 2020):

- Check-in with learners before starting the lesson
- Provide water and stretch breaks
- Incorporate breathing or mindfulness exercises
- End class with an exit card (e.g., poll, one minute paper) that provides an opportunity for reflection and feedback

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