The Ultimate Guide to Engaging Students in the Virtual Classroom

In March 2020, educators and students embarked on an unexpected experiment in online learning as COVID-19 shuttered schools around the world. But the rapid transition to virtual education left many teachers struggling to engage students the way they did in the classroom.

Instructors want to connect with their students online. But often, they don't know how – and they don't have time to retrain themselves on the best practices for online learning as they revise years' worth of lesson plans for the virtual classroom. The move online has shown us that virtual learning is the way of the future – but only if we can provide educators the tools they need to boost student engagement and embrace the capabilities of their web-conferencing platforms. In this whitepaper, we'll explain why online engagement is so important, lay out best practices for educators across disciplines, and offer key considerations for administrators and IT professionals as they empower teachers to thrive in the world of online education.

Paradoxically, a major obstacle to engaging students virtually is technology. Although web conferencing technology has been a lifeline this year, making virtual schooling a possibility, technology has also limited many teachers to a fraction1 of the activities they once did in the classroom. Tried-and-true teaching techniques – like one-on-one discussion, group presentations, and assessments – are more challenging to facilitate in the virtual classroom. With so many tools missing from their toolkit, educators are struggling to find ways to engage their students. In an online environment, it's also challenging to

make time for the casual community-building that happens naturally in a physical classroom. It can be difficult to center student voices and make space for differentiated instruction. And to make matters worse, technical snafus2 that once threw a wrench into a single lesson plan can now completely isolate instructors from their students. The difficulty of staying connected – both technologically and socially – means that teachers in 2020 are facing unprecedented.

In an online environment, it's also challenging to make time for the casual community-building that happens naturally in a physical classroom challenges when it comes to student engagement. But why does engagement even matter? Why can't educators just lecture to the screen? According to a recent study on online learning best practices3, "student engagement increases student satisfaction, enhances student motivation to learn, reduces the sense of isolation, and improves student performance in online courses." In short, when students are engaged online, they learn more. Meanwhile, when students aren't engaging online, they are rapidly falling behind – and marginalized students experience that loss to a much greater extent. A 2020 McKinsey study4 on learning loss highlights the growing racial and economic disparities that can occur online when students and teachers aren't given the tools they need to thrive. According to the McKinsey study, more students are falling behind this year in math, with schools serving primarily students of color falling behind at a much higher rate. On top of that, Black and Hispanic students are more than student satisfaction, enhances student motivation to learn, reduces the sense of isolation, and improves student performance in online courses." In short, when students are engaged online, they learn more.

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