Improving student engagement in virtual and face-to-face classrooms

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ABSTRACT

Recognizing student engagement as a fundamental factor for student success in college, an instructor describes her challenges in actively engaging her students in a virtual classroom. Her students felt comfortable being silent and remained inactive because they were separated by a computer screen, and that left the instructor to second guess if the students were engaged in learning. To turn things around, she strategically created activities to significantly improve student engagement that are applicable to both the virtual and face-to-face classrooms.

Keywords: student engagement, focused activity, community building, ownership of learning

INTRODUCTION

Each academic year brings its own set of challenges and pedagogical lessons to learn, and this was more so during the COVID-19 pandemic. One major pedagogical and persistent challenge in the wake of the pandemic in the higher education setting was student engagement. In fact, in any learning environment, student engagement is fundamental for academic success and teaching excellence (Fredin et al., 2015). During the pre-pandemic period, it was feasible to provide hands-on activities that stimulated students' curiosity and creativity. Students could optimize their learning experience by seamlessly interacting with the instructor. However, this was not the case when instruction shifted to a virtual classroom during the pandemic. Instructors were now faced with a critical challenge to develop ways to foster real human connections in the virtual classroom. It appears that student engagement needed a makeover.

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Student engagement can be measured through observable behaviors such as attendance rate, classroom participation, academic achievement, and student behavior in the learning environment (Bond & Bedenlier, 2019). Essentially, these observable behaviors should also be evident in the virtual classroom. One lesson I learned this year as an instructor to pre-service teachers is not to expect student engagement to be a near clone of its predecessor. In face-to-face classrooms, there is an inherent setup for student engagement because students are in proximity and have round tables, movable chairs, and tableside whiteboards to interact with each other (Cotner et al., 2013). Students naturally showed interdependence and bonded with each other when given collaborative tasks. Moreover, the instructor could easily facilitate group activities by physically circulating and monitoring each group, and also paying attention to students' body language and eye contact as indicators of student engagement, all in one space.

In my virtual classroom, I realized student engagement had shifted to a whole other level. I could not tell if my students were cognitively and socially engaged. Despite communicating my expectations clearly regarding student participation, there was a pin-drop silence whenever I posed questions to check for understanding. I thought I had connectivity issues and asked follow-up questions like, "Can you hear me?" or "Are we connected?" Occasionally, I would get a response in the chat box. Over time, I learned that it was the same few students who volunteered their answers, asked questions, and contributed to the discussions. Lack of student engagement led me to believe that I was not setting up my students for success. I noted there was also a lack of community building because my students did not interact with one another in group activities in the breakout rooms. I received feedback via email from my students that they did not enjoy being placed randomly in breakout rooms because their peers did not participate in any of the discussions. Most times, the students worked independently without interacting with each other.

To turn things around, I incorporated some creative techniques into my lessons to promote more effective student engagement. I am aware that not all students participate the same way or at the same rate, but I have learned that creating an equitable environment in which all students have a fair opportunity to explore ideas and issues is crucial to optimize student experience and learning. I needed to engage every student in my virtual classroom and make them accountable for their learning. Ownership of learning is important to get students to be invested, motivated, self-directed, and engaged throughout each lesson.

RECOMMENDATIONS

I used the following strategies in my virtual classroom, which could also be applied in a face-to-face classroom.

Community Building

In a virtual or face-to-face classroom, allow at least five minutes of interaction time with the instructor and peers at the beginning of the class using a focused activity to make sure everyone is on the same page. Focused activities allow the instructor to check-in with students on their well-being and mental health. In the virtual classroom, I activated the whiteboard on blackboard collaborate and wrote one or two academic or non-academic questions that encouraged students to share their thoughts. For example, I used questions like, "What is one miracle you are hoping for right now?" or "What is one thing you learned in your fieldwork placement this week?" Both generated discussion and encouraged students to compare ideas. In some instances, students shared the difficulties they had experienced that week in their fieldwork placement, and, very quickly, other students shared their experiences or provided suggestions as well to support their peers.

Another method I used to enhance community building was to provide an enlarged picture of classroom scenarios and asked students, "What is going on here?" to spark conversations when students logged in to class. Having a focused activity at the start of each lesson enables interaction between students and naturally creates a bond between them.

Ownership of Learning

To encourage quiet or reflective students to share their thoughts and ideas, I assigned reading tasks together with several broad discussion questions in advance. I allowed my students to select the questions they would respond to in class discussions. Giving the questions ahead of time provided the students an opportunity to learn at their own pace and to have more control over the information they would like to share with their peers. I found an increased level of engagement from my students later in the semester, even when questions were not assigned to them. Assigning meaningful choices for each class not only builds students' confidence but also gets them to take ownership of their own learning.

Google Docs

For group discussions, I created a more defined breakout session using Google Docs. The document contained a scenario, a problem-solving

question, or resources such as websites, pictures, and videos for students to source the information. Each student was assigned a role (e.g., group discussion manager, note-taker, fact checker, presenter) to hold them accountable and to make sure their success is also dependent on other members in the group. As I circulated virtually from one group to another, I noticed my students participated actively to complete the task. I received feedback from my students that the assigned roles and Google Docs made them feel responsible and important in the virtual learning process. One indirect outcome using Google Docs was that students were more invested in their learning and read their weekly assigned materials to actively participate in the classroom.

Online Polls

Using poll questions in the virtual classroom turned out to be a real lifesaver. For my students, the poll questions helped them to clarify their thinking and to process the information they learned in class. As the instructor, I used the poll questions to formatively assess my students' understanding on the content that was taught. Additionally, the poll questions broke the monotony of my lessons. The change in pace provided my students a mind break, a crucial feature in a virtual classroom. I was able to draw my students' attention again via polls, and that increased student engagement. Moreover, I found my students to be highly motivated to respond to poll questions because the focus was on what was said rather than who said it, and there was no risk due to anonymity. This would also work well in a face-to-face classroom because students would feel comfortable responding to anonymous questions.

Online Interactive Activities

Incorporating fun online interactive activities in the lessons was another attention grabber that encouraged student engagement. In the interactive activities, students were expected to provide answers, and they received a score on how well they performed. Students felt incentivized because their scores were anonymous, and they were able to correct their errors by repeating the activity until they got them right. The students claimed that these activities helped them to better understand the content and remember the information.

Another interactive collaborative activity I used was SpatialChat. Using SpatialChat, students could mingle freely in the virtual classroom and talk to a few students as they moved from one virtual table to another to gather information. Similar to the rotation station group activity in the face-to-face classroom, each student would have an assigned question to discuss or information to share. The student then interacted with other students at a

virtual table by sharing their ideas or asking for opinions before breaking away and moving to another virtual table. Once students returned to the whole class discussion, they shared their views and had a larger discussion on the topic.

Emailing Passive Students

Putting students in charge of learning is the best way to get them engaged in the classroom. However, it is common to have a few students who remain passive despite the numerous attempts the instructor makes to create an inclusive environment. If the students remain passive, one effective method is to approach them via email. In the email communication, I explained to my students that being attentive in class is a good quality, but it was also important that they shared their ideas and perspectives with their peers to construct knowledge. I also informed the students that I would provide the support they needed to engage effectively in the classroom. My students responded positively and acknowledged that they should contribute to class discussions. The email exchange approach worked well in my class because students who otherwise never spoke up before felt very comfortable afterwards engaging in discussions and responding to questions during class.

CONCLUSION

During this unprecedented period of transformation and disruption, it cannot be overstated that students needed a higher and more strategically focused level of support and guidance to be engaged in the classroom. The biggest takeaway from my experiences during the pandemic is that students can be actively engaged in the classroom when provided with appropriate activities, tools, and motivation. Redefining my instructional practices to meet students' needs during the pandemic has transformed how I will view student engagement in all the future courses I teach.

References

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