

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.



1

Online Engagement is a Unique Challenge

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 fraction](#)¹ 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 snafus](#)² 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 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 practices](#)³, "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 study](#)⁴ 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 twice as likely not to have live access (via phone, video, or in-person) to their teachers this year.

To mitigate learning loss, McKinsey recommends focusing on engagement. "Along with access to both technology and live teaching, students need a daily schedule that builds in formal opportunities for engagement, collaboration, and feedback," the study reports. "System leaders should also empower teachers with new ways to share practices and receive professional development in an online format."

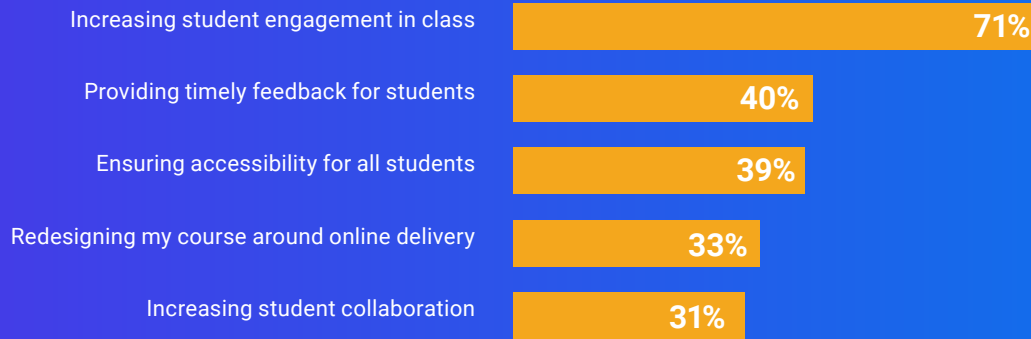
¹ "Improving Zoom for Remote Learning." Class for Zoom, 23 Sept. 2020, www.classedu.com/class-for-zoom-improving-zoom-for-remote-learning/.

² "How to Keep Students Engaged Through Technical Snafus." Class for Zoom, 17 Dec. 2020, www.classedu.com/how-to-keep-students-engaged-through-technical-snafus/.

³ Martin, Florence, and Doris U Bolliger. "Engagement Matters: Student Perceptions on the Importance of Engagement Strategies in the Online Learning Environment." *Online Learning Journal*, vol. 22, no. 1, Mar. 2018.

⁴ Dorn, Emma, et al. "COVID-19 and Learning Loss--Disparities Grow and Students Need Help." McKinsey & Company, McKinsey & Company, 8 Dec. 2020, www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/covid-19-and-learning-loss-disparities-grow-and-students-need-help.

Top Faculty Priorities in Planning for the Fall Term



The Virtual Schooling Divide

When students aren't engaging online, they are rapidly falling behind – and marginalized students experience that loss to a much greater extent.

The biggest complaint from students and faculty members alike about the remote learning that most experienced last spring was the **lack of engagement and interactivity** between students and instructors and among students themselves.





2

Supporting and Empowering Educators During the Online Transition

Engaging students online requires having the right tools and training – and that starts with making sure educators feel supported. Instructors need help during the online transition to improve their teaching practice, fully understand the new technologies, and create engaging lesson plans. Following are five best practices for administrators and academic tech to support teachers as they make the move online.



Prioritize communication.

As your institution makes a plan for online learning⁵, ensure that you are communicating that plan with teachers. Some of the most common stressors during periods of transition come from a lack of clear communication. If you want teachers to feel empowered, give them the knowledge they need to succeed.



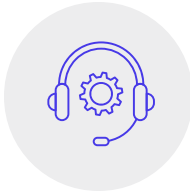
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Offer quick, asynchronous knowledge-sharing opportunities.


Educators need training to teach online, but they don't have much time on their hands. Offer quick training opportunities to empower teachers without adding more stress. Consider sending out weekly newsletters that share web conferencing features and best practices, offering video tutorials teachers can watch as needed, designing an easy-to-access resource page on virtual learning tools, and scheduling optional round-table discussions for teachers to share their tips with each other.

⁵ "How Administrators Can Help Adapt Hybrid School Schedules." Class for Zoom, 21 Dec. 2020, www.classedu.com/how-administrators-can-help-adapt-hybrid-school-schedules/.



Offer ongoing technical support.

Technical difficulties will happen, so have an emergency line in place that teachers can use to get support when they need it. It's also important to offer regular opportunities for instructors to discuss online learning tools with tech experts; for instance, organize weekly office hours with academic tech to support educators as they adopt new technology.

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Celebrate success.

This is one of the hardest experiences many teachers will go through in their careers – so make them feel valued by celebrating their successes. You can highlight success stories in a weekly newsletter or at staff meetings.



Ask teachers for their input.

It is sometimes necessary to make top-down decisions during a crisis, but remember that remote learning is not just a short-term emergency – it's our future. Make space for instructors to share needs and ideas around online learning, so they feel like their voice matters.

A strong administrative and tech infrastructure is critical to making sure teachers feel supported and confident as they transition to online teaching. But the real magic happens where it always does: between teacher and student. In the next section, we'll explore ways to improve student engagement inside of virtual classrooms.





3


Best Practices for Student Engagement on Zoom

Coming from years of teaching in-person, teachers can't be expected to automatically know how to engage students online. Thankfully, there are now some established best practices for engaging students on Zoom⁶ and other web-conferencing platforms, including focusing on giving students a voice and adding elements of interpersonal connection. Here are five important basics for teachers to take into their virtual classrooms.



Encourage students to have a say in their online learning experience.

One of the best ways to increase student buy-in is to give them a say in what, and how, they learn. For instance, teachers might ask students to vote on how they spend free time in class, what kinds of assessments or projects they want to complete, or what books they read together.

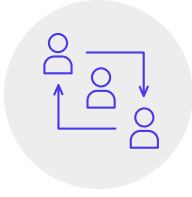
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Use break-out rooms to simulate small group discussion.

Break-out rooms are a great web-conferencing tool to get students talking. They can be used in lieu of small group discussions, with guiding questions shared via Google Docs, or in the chat to keep students focused. Similar to small group discussions, break-out rooms often encourage shy students to speak up in class and connect with their peers.

⁶ "Suddenly Synchronous: How to Create a Virtual Classroom." Class for Zoom, 16 Nov. 2020, www.classedu.com/suddenly-synchronous-how-to-create-a-virtual-classroom/.



Build relationships with casual conversation.

Often in the virtual classroom students lose the opportunity for community-building that happens during transitions or while they work on independent projects. While on Zoom, educators should make space for casual conversation during attendance, in break-out groups, or in fun live polls so students can learn about each other and build community.



Invite guest visitors to shake up the classroom.

Online learning opens up a world of possibilities for classroom visitors. With no commute time or travel expenses, it's easier and cheaper to find artists, authors, scientists, or researchers who will share their experience with students. Administrators can be on the lookout for speakers who might be willing to talk to multiple classrooms.



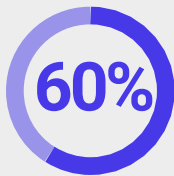
Turn learning into a game.

There are tons of learning platforms that embrace gamification to make conquering new subjects more exciting for students. Teachers can make content more interactive and exciting with live polls and prizes or digital badges that encourage students to participate.



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Gamification in Education

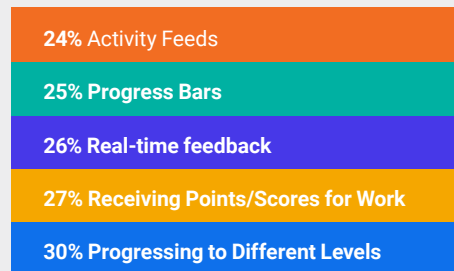


of learners said that **leaderboards and friendly competition** would motivate them.⁷



of teachers said they saw an **increase in student engagement** when using educational video games.⁸

Preferred Gamification Strategies Among Learners⁹



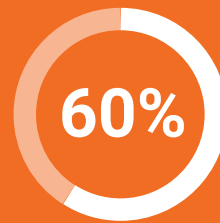
Perhaps the most important lesson for teachers is to remember that you can't replicate live instruction on Zoom. Web conferencing is a different platform with different capabilities, so your old lesson plans might need a reboot to keep students engaged. Don't get frustrated if old methods don't work – and reach out for help when you're stuck.

⁷ Apostolopoulos, Aris. "Gamification at Work: The 2019 Survey Results." TalentLMS, 19 Aug. 2019, www.talentlms.com/blog/gamification-survey-results/.

⁸ "Free Online Education Courses." Online Courses, Red Ventures, www.onlinecourses.com/education/.

⁹ Ferriman, Justin. "Gamification in Education Stats." LearnDash, 9 Jan. 2020, www.learnash.com/gamification-in-education-stats/.

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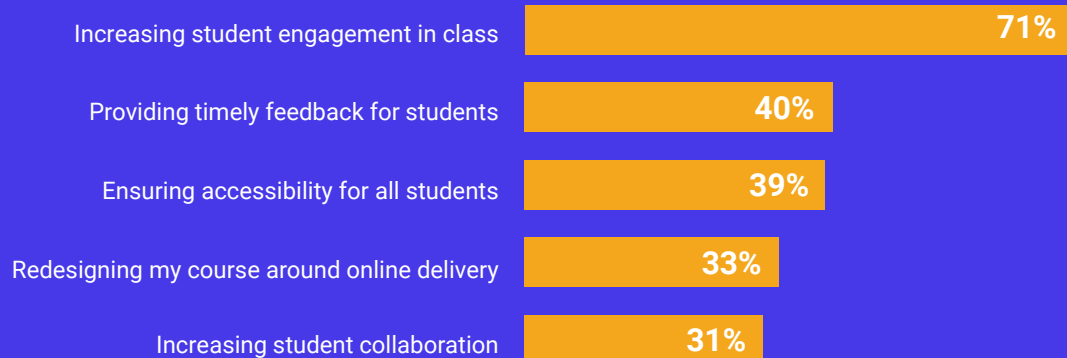


of K–12 students started the 2020–2021 school year **fully remote**.¹⁰



of instructors agreed that **“online courses can achieve student learning outcomes at least equivalent to in-person courses”** (from a pre-COVID survey)¹⁰

Top Faculty Priorities in Planning for the Fall Term¹⁰



¹⁰ Lederman, Doug. "Faculty Confidence in Online Learning Grows." Inside Higher Ed, 6 Oct. 2020. www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/article/2020/10/06/covid-era-experience-strengthens-faculty-belief-value-online.

Empowering Teachers, **Empowering Students**

Online learning is the future – and that means it's more important than ever to support educators and engage students in the virtual classroom. Empowering teachers to engage students during COVID isn't just about sharing information, it's about offering comprehensive support that reflects what teachers actually need and giving teachers space to share their knowledge and make a difference. At the end of the day, when instructors are empowered to support students, everyone wins.

As colleges and universities start to plan for a post-pandemic future, administrators can now update technologies that were a stopgap measure with the benefit of hindsight and time for reflection. At a foundational level, this starts with ensuring that your learning platform can fulfill the most important mission of all: educating your students. At the end of the day, your virtual classroom is a tool that allows you to take your mission online. If it doesn't serve your pedagogical goals, it's not the right platform for your institution.

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