Tips for Engaging Students Online

During this difficult semester for teaching and learning, we recognize the challenges everyone is facing. Fostering connections can help students and faculty, as we are all in this together. Creating an environment that supports engagement in the first few weeks is crucial.

During fall 2020 online instruction, UMBC students reported a need for more support in making meaningful connections with their faculty and peers during online learning (UMBC Division of Student Affairs Survey, 2020). Developing a sense of "belonging predicts better persistence, engagement, and mental health" among four-year college students (Gopalan and Brady, 2020).

Here are some easy-to-implement steps to increase student engagement. These tips synthesize ideas and suggestions from the Faculty Development Center, FOLIO, PIVOT, Undergraduate Student Success Committee and fall faculty gatherings.

1. **STRUCTURE**
   Reliable structure helps. Set a schedule/pattern at the beginning of the semester for which class days are synchronous/asynchronous and when recurring assignments are due.

2. **LIVE ATTENDANCE**
   Require attendance to help students collaborate with each other during class time, and also offer flexibility for students who can't attend by recording lectures and providing those recordings online, using the Panopto platform to add captions for accessibility.

3. **COMMUNICATION**
   Communicate with students regularly:
   a. Send a weekly update of class plans, with assignments and due dates. **Set clear expectations.**
   b. Be prompt with feedback, including positive feedback and tips for how to improve. Offer virtual office hours.
   c. Check in periodically and ask your students how they are doing.

4. **ACTIVE LEARNING TECHNIQUES**
Plan some synchronous sessions when possible (once a week) and use Active Learning Techniques in most of your synchronous class meetings.
Suggestions from fellow faculty on Active Learning:
    a. Use Google Docs/Forms to elicit responses
    b. Use polls in Blackboard Collaborate/Webex
    c. Encourage students to ask and answer in the chat
    d. Embed questions in lectures
    e. Assign group projects and give them time during class to meet

5. **ASYNCHRONOUS ACTIVITIES**
Plan for asynchronous ways to engage students:
    a. Create spaces in your course where students can reflect on synchronous activities. (Discussion Boards, VoiceThreads, Google Docs/Jamboards)
    b. Build peer-to-peer feedback into writing and problem-solving activities so that students can collaborate on the academic experience.
    c. Support authentic discussion by providing guidelines for analysis and evaluation and by participating in the discussion yourself.

6. **STUDY GROUPS**
Direct students to online spaces to create study groups. Blackboard shells come pre-set with:
    a. A Collaborate Course Room. If you don't disable it, it be accessed by students at any time. Help coordinate open study times in that space for students to learn together.
    b. A Discussion Board called "Cyber Café." Direct students to ask questions of other students, and encourage students to find study partners.
    c. An email tool allowing you and students to email each other.

7. **COMMUNITY BUILDING**
Consider how you, and perhaps your undergraduate/graduate teaching assistants, can support building community in the classroom.
    a. Lead icebreaker activities during a discussion time early in the semester.
    b. Hold open office hours to allow students to meet each other.
    c. Consider hosting an online space on a platform familiar to you/your students.

8. **HUMAN CONNECTION**
Share your humanity with students. Dr. Kate Drabinski (Gender, Women's + Sexuality Studies) hosts a "show your pet" moment on Fridays; Dr. Jamie Gurganus (Mechanical Engineering) plays music at the start of class; and Dr. Eileen O'Brien (Psychology) shares Carpool Karaoke videos with music before class. Consider how you might give students a window into your life and how they can share their own experiences with each other.

9. **CAMERAS/PARTICIPATION**
Students may not be comfortable turning their camera on (or may have internet connection limitations or be logging in from a public setting), but there are other ways you can encourage participation even without requiring that cameras be turned on.
    a. Ask students to post a meme or avatar that is meaningful to them in place of their face.
    b. Encourage them to participate either verbally or in "chat."
    c. Offer polling opportunities that foster participation (in Collaborate, WebEx or using platforms like Kahoot).

Gopalan M, Brady ST. College Students' Sense of Belonging: A National Perspective. *Educational Researcher*. 2020;49(2):134-137. doi:10.3102/0013189X19897622