

Moving My University Class Online | How Do I Engage My Students in Synchronous Learning Sessions

Synchronous learning is powerful because it enables students from various locations to participate in a virtual learning environment *at the same time*. While this format is highly effective, creating engaging sessions is one of its challenges. Here are a few tips to engage your students:

1. **Make space to check in, personally.** Increasingly students feel overwhelmed and worried about their classes, education and the world around them. They need spaces to share these feelings with friends and classmates. Here are a few ideas:
 - a. Start the class by asking, “In the chat box, share how you are feeling about [idea].”
 - b. End the class with this invitation, “If you wish, you are welcome to stay online for another 30 minutes to chat freely and connect with each other.”
2. **Use a short PowerPoint presentation with engaging visuals.** The old adage “a picture is worth a thousand words” is true, even in your online courses. Visual images demonstrate the meaning of the content and appeal to learners who benefit more from visual learning. Include great images to deepen the depth of dialogue. Don’t know where to get them from? Refer to these posts from Nancy Hardcastle of *Stand Up Be Great*. She gives [sources](#) for where to find images and advice for not making [mistakes](#) when creating slides.
3. **Invite pre-work and thinking to deepen the dialogue and learning.** Preparation is critical in the virtual environment. Invite students to prepare for an activity, lecture or discussion by asking them to complete an assignment that determines their level of understanding about the subject that you teach. Google Forms is a good tool to collect data.

For example, if you are teaching *Introduction to Sociology 101* and conducting a session on social inequality, you can send out a survey using Google Forms asking students to respond to the following question: *How does the impact of COVID-19 highlight existing social inequalities between developed and under-developed countries?*

4. **Use the Comment box.** This is often an undervalued tool but can be extremely helpful. Use it to share thoughts about the content being taught, questions that are coming to mind, and personal meaning-making. Tip: it is best if you ask someone to manage the Comment box for you.
5. **Include moments for solo thought.** Silence can be helpful for both introverts and extroverts, and we need not fear it in virtual learning. Offering students 1-2 minutes to consider what they think about a theory *before* moving into virtual chat rooms to share their thoughts can ensure all voices are invited into the dialogue you are hoping for. Whether engagement is invited in small groups or the full group, in the Comment box or aloud, on a whiteboard in words or a drawing, giving a few minutes to think about what I think can be helpful.