

Five Ways to Make Your Online Classrooms More Interactive

facultyfocus.com/articles/online-education/five-ways-make-online-classrooms-interactive/

By Amy Peterson

12/12/2016



The convenience and flexibility of the online learning environment allows learners to develop new skills and further their education, regardless of where they live. However, for all of its benefits, online learning can sometimes feel isolating for students and faculty. The question is: how do you build a sense of community in your online courses? One approach involves cultivating more interaction—between you and your students and among the students themselves. Here are five practical tips for increasing the human connection in your online classrooms.

1. Integrate real-time interaction

When online courses are completely asynchronous, there is often limited interaction between you and your students and class members with each other. Consider, for example, that real-time conversations don't occur during a video lecture, when you post announcements, or when students post on a discussion board. That lag in response time kills the momentum of a back-and-forth discussion and can sometimes lead to misunderstandings.

Integrating opportunities for real-time interaction into your online course can help change that and develop a sense of community in a course. Consider how impromptu conversations outside the traditional classroom forge relationships, clarify ideas, and spark new insights. You can facilitate these interactions by setting up opportunities for class members to meet online synchronously both formally and informally. Using webconferencing applications, you can create a variety of synchronous interaction opportunities, such as office hours, small group discussions, whole class discussions, and study groups.

2. Get creative with discussion boards

Discussion boards have long been the communication staple for online courses, but there are ways you can make this experience more interactive for much wider and deeper participation. In a traditional classroom, it's common for only a small percentage of students to participate in discussion. In an online environment, you can structure your discussions so that everyone contributes, plus they'll have more time to consider what they want to say before

responding. Class size helps determine how you organize discussions. In a larger class of, say, 100 students, you can set up smaller discussion groups of 20 or so people so that students can get to know their fellow classmates. You can also create even smaller groups (5-7 people) for more intimate interaction, and rotate these groups to expand interactions. This approach also works with smaller class sizes.

One technique that fosters richer dialogue is creating discussion prompts that are open ended, such as requiring students to provide examples or asking them to interpret a concept from a variety of perspectives. You could also set up student-facilitated discussion opportunities where students craft the discussion prompt and guide the ensuing dialogue.

3. Maximize engagement with non-task interaction

Non-task interactions are those exchanges that are not part of the direct learning, but help create a supportive learning community. You can facilitate these types of interactions by leveraging the social networking capabilities that are available in many learning management systems, such as chat and webconferencing. Using the group functionality, students can create special interest groups or study groups. If your LMS doesn't have the functionality to support a social network, you can still create one with a private Facebook page or one of the many group messaging apps available, such as Telegram and Slack.

Of important note, academic social networks require planning and ongoing maintenance. The value of the social network needs to be explicit before it will become a common destination. Many schools begin by asking students to create bios and add profile pictures, but these activities alone will not encourage students to keep coming back to the network. Techniques for transforming the social network into a destination include frequently updating content (on a weekly or if possible daily basis) and incorporating contributions to the social network into classes (e.g. using the social network tools for group work; asking students to post their discussion contributions into their social network feed).

4. Use multiple communication tools

You're not alone in wanting to increase and enhance student engagement and interaction. For example, schools can create a program-wide social network that allows students to continue their relationships with other students from course to course. Within this private social network, the administrators and support staff can use direct messages, announcements, and live events to enhance student engagement in the program.

This sort of institutional support is not necessary, however, for your class to be interactive. In addition to external social networking tools, such as Facebook, Telegram, Slack, and WhatsApp, students can meet each other in real time on Skype and Google Hangouts. Preprogrammed communication, such as introductory videos, content presentation, and email, are still important components of online learning, but student interaction can take the learning further, faster.

5. Have a plan around the tool

A tech tool is only as good as you the way you use it from a pedagogical perspective. When you move a face-to-face course online, or create an online course from scratch, consider how interaction will support the learning goals in your course. By enhancing the opportunities for interaction in your online classrooms, you can take an already powerful learning opportunity to the next level for all of your students.

Amy Peterson is senior vice president of course design, development and academic research at [Pearson](#). She has more than 15 years of experience developing online and hybrid courses and learning experiences for dozens of universities and colleges

- 1
- 2
- 3