

MODULE 1:

Re-imagining course engagement in person and online

Many students report that they learn the most in college through engagement with peers – whether in class discussions, working on projects, or socially. Our courses can be places where students learn to engage deeply with material and with each other; tackle challenging ideas; and practice perspective taking and listening. Speaking, listening, collaborating, asking great questions, and engagement with others are all college-level skills that we also recognize as essential to post-graduate education, careers, and civic engagement. But if we simply give a grade for “class participation” without explaining what that means, students often assume that mere hand-raising is all we want. And because class participation is generally a small part of the grade, it is not always a sufficient inducement even to do that.

There is a more effective way.

We can and should design our courses to encourage, recognize, assess, and reward engagement. In this module, we’ll explore new definitions of course engagement that work with course objectives, offer ways to build this work into assessments, and provide discussion guidelines to maximize student engagement.

Learning objectives

1. Re-define course engagement to engage more learners and tie to course objectives
2. Consider collaborative models of defining and assessing course engagement
3. Explore discussion practices and prompts (synchronous and asynchronous) that maximize course engagement

Re-define course engagement to engage more learners and tie to course objectives

Does this sound familiar? A student stays quiet in class throughout the semester, then writes a final paper that is sophisticated, thoughtful, passionate, and demonstrates deep engagement with the course materials—including ideas shared in class discussion. When this does happen, it’s natural to have mixed feelings—it’s good to know that students really are learning even if we’re not seeing it, but also feels like a

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missed opportunity for other students to learn from such a thoughtful peer. For many instructors, stories like this one join other powerful reasons not to assess so-called class participation or to weigh it very lightly.

Other reasons include:

- Concern that some eager students will dominate the discussion in pursuit of a good grade
- Anxiety created among shy students
- Unfairness toward students with language disabilities or language learners
- Recognition that other skills such as listening are just as important to the learning process.

Professors who have de-emphasized “class participation” out of recognition of these or other concerns, are already part of the way toward designing for greater engagement. Our next step is to re-embrace course engagement by replacing “class participation” with a definition of course engagement that harmonizes with the course learning objectives.

An alternative definition of course engagement might include any or all of the following actions:

- Attendance[1]
- Communicating with professor or TAs in office hours or by email
- Supporting peers, such as by helping them catch up on missed material, offering or accepting peer review of assignments[2]
- Researching course topics and doing additional readings (encourage students to share interesting readings on the course Learning Management System (LMS)[3]page or on a shareable document created for that purpose)
- Preparing for class every day
- Listening respectfully
- Setting and meeting individual goals for course engagement (see below)
- Contributing in small-group discussions and exercises (see below)
- Contributing to discussions on LMS discussion boards
- Applying course concepts and ideas to current events
- The *quality* of classroom contributions, for example:
 - Engaging thoughtfully with peers' contributions
 - Considering multiple perspectives on an issue
 - Asking thoughtful questions

Next steps

As faculty, we should first consider our course learning objectives – both content and skills. How can course engagement action items like those above (or others) align with our overall objectives? This will depend upon the type of course being taught. For example, “applying course concepts and ideas to current events” might be important in a political science course.

Second, for each content and skills learning objective, we should consider a mode of course engagement that would support that objective. For example, if the course objectives include developing research methods skills, finding and contributing additional readings could reinforce that objective.

We will now have a list of course engagement action items to add to the syllabus and discuss with students on the first day of class (or in the first recorded online lecture). It is often helpful to have a separate document of [class policies and procedures](#) that includes course engagement.[4] In the next section, we will explore how to add students’ individual engagement goals to these. After that, we will look at discussion prompts and class exercises that encourage these other forms of engagement.

Consider collaborative models of defining and assessing course engagement

Professors should introduce students to an expanded definition of course engagement both through the syllabus language and in the first class meeting. But it doesn’t end there. Course engagement goals can differ from student to student—and setting and meeting these goals can help students become more committed to the course in general.

LMS tools can help us turn course engagement planning and assessment into a collaborative process. One strategy is to use an online syllabus quiz at the beginning of the semester. For the first or second course meeting, the professor might assign the syllabus and the quiz. In the quiz, students might be asked to consider the syllabus language on course engagement and then have the opportunity to:

- Identify challenges and barriers they might have to course engagement (for example, students in other time zones might have a hard time with synchronous elements of an online course)
- Reaffirm they understand the course expectations and policies (for example, attendance, extensions) outlined in the syllabus (and if applicable, the class policies and procedures document)
- Introduce themselves and describe their interest in the course
- Identify a goal or goals for course engagement (from among a list or something original)
- Identify other goals—for example, improving their writing or time management.

We recommend that this quiz is a non-graded but mandatory assignment.

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Some LMS (such as Blackboard) also offer an anonymous survey option. It is easy to view and download answers in the aggregate and get a sense of the class as a whole and elicit information about, for example, whether students are concerned about expressing unpopular views. Professors could check in with students about their goals through additional quizzes or surveys; in office hours; or in class discussions.

A mid-semester discussion about course engagement and progress toward goals can be particularly useful for first-year students, who are also adjusting to the new expectations and practices of college. It is also helpful to informally evaluate students' course engagement at mid-semester and offer advice about how to continue to improve.

It is helpful to acknowledge when students are demonstrating great classroom engagement. This encourages others to do the same. Here are some suggested ways of communicating about student progress:

- Noting when a student asks an important question; letting students know that asking questions can raise the level of discourse in a classroom, and can be a sign of higher-order thinking—not ignorance
- Highlighting student contributions to online discussion boards in lessons (or recorded lectures)
- Directing students' attention to contributions on the suggested readings document
- Indicating when students have participated in great discussions during office hours, and encourage students to join in
- Pointing out when students have been thoughtful in navigating difference or acknowledging nuance

At the conclusion of the course, it is good practice to ask the students to suggest their own course engagement grades based upon the syllabus language and their personal goals. It might be helpful to use a quiz on your LMS to do so. Students should explain their reasoning, and if applicable, incorporate attendance and frequency of contributions to online discussion boards. This exercise not only enables us as professors to incorporate many modes of engagement into students' course grade; it provides useful feedback about how students pursue their goals; which elements of the course attracted most students; and how they perceive their own progress in the course. The professor retains the power to set the final grade, and we recommend providing written feedback on course engagement, just as if it were a paper or essay. This is an advantage of using an online quiz or assignment as well. Using a rubric is also an available option.

Next steps

First, plan to ask students about their individual goals. This can be done online or as a reflection during class time. Professors should plan to check in with students about their progress toward their goals, soliciting their feedback and offering their own. Students must know that course engagement is being assessed, what it consists of, and that they will need to suggest a grade and explain their reasoning. And finally, assign students a course engagement reflection that becomes the basis for their final grades.

In the next section, we will explore ways to maximize engagement across the course.

Explore discussion practices and prompts (synchronous and asynchronous) that maximize course engagement

When we define engagement broadly and collaborate with students in setting engagement goals, we set the stage for more robust conversations. Next, we look at ways to maximize engagement in each class session (or online discussion assignment). We recommend preparing students for class discussion in advance, frequently utilizing small groups, and encouraging students to engage directly with peers' contributions.

Class participation prep prompts

The typical syllabus entry tells students what they will read or write for a given class period. Some faculty add a descriptive title for each class session, week, or segment of the course. For many students, particularly first-year students unaccustomed to college-level discourse, it is challenging to see the connection between assigned readings and class discussion topics in advance. Students report that it can be hard to take notes without knowing what the instructor hopes they take away from the reading. Some students who comprehend the reading might still lack confidence about contributing in class without some sense of how to prepare. The syllabus can do some heavy lifting here and prepare students to contribute. In addition to assigned readings and writing prompts, consider adding a statement about what the class discussion will be.

Here are some examples of class participation preparation language from a government course on speech (each is from a different class session):

- Consider how the executive order on free speech could promote or inhibit the goals of higher education and the values of the campus free speech movement.
- Prepare to discuss the relationship (if any) between guest speakers and the university's mission. Prepare to discuss Ahmadinejad's speech at Columbia and how the university chose to respond.
- Prepare to discuss what it means to think historically. Consider what types of evidence we should consider in determining what the Confederate Flag means.
- Prepare to discuss whether and when a commercial transaction constitutes "speech."

These prompts can be quite useful for students who set a goal of speaking up more in class. In our classes, office hours, or mid-term check in, we as professors can encourage students to select a few topics to prepare for and plan to volunteer.

Small groups

In years of seeking and reading feedback from students about their course engagement experience, we have found that students enjoy small group discussions. For some instructors, the decision not to be at center stage feels like not doing the work. But just as students' course engagement is about more than speaking up, so is our teaching about more than taking center stage. Here are some ways to maximize the benefit of small group work.

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First, tie small group work to the day's learning objectives and class participation prep prompts. Preparation raises confidence and makes it less likely that only the bigger personalities will engage.

Second, give students time to reflect upon the question individually before moving to small groups (or pairs). Students might spend a few minutes writing their initial thoughts.

Third, it can be helpful to remind students to take the time to explore the threshold question, "what do we need to know in order to answer the question before us?" Which course readings apply? What additional research would we have to do to become experts on the topic at hand?

Engaging with peers' contributions

Even in classes where many students are enthusiastically and actively engaging, sometimes we can feel like the hub on a wheel—with each student attempting to talk to the professor rather than with one another. There are simple ways to make the course work more like a web, with connections from student to student.

For courses with synchronous class discussions, professors should explain to students that we do not call on anyone whose hand is up while another student is talking. Ask students to explain the purpose of that practice. Second, we should make clear that we would like people to engage with the points their peers make rather than wait their turn to engage with us.

Even in purely face-to-face class, LMS tools such as course reading journals and discussion boards can help direct students' attention to each other's perspectives and elevate the less forceful voices. For example, if we assign a course reading journal, we may choose a particularly thoughtful comment from a student and introduce it in our course discussion.[5] We recommend putting a quote on a slide and giving the students time to process it. Example:

David says:

"The expansiveness of Pinker's argument leaves it more vulnerable to criticism. Why, for example, if free speech is inseparable from education and the pursuit of knowledge, does authoritarian China lead the world in college graduates and contributions to scientific journals?"

The original student could have time to explain or expand upon their contribution before we open class discussion on the statement.

We can also prompt students to engage with one another's ideas after class discussions. The following exercise has yielded thoughtful reflections: provide small groups a problem to solve or question to answer. Ask one member of each small group to share that group's solution or answer on the LMS discussion board. Assign the students to select a solution or answer that they feel is better in some way than their own group's answer, and identify something in particular the other group did that or considered that would be an improvement on their own solution, and why.



1. For online or hybrid courses, attendance includes viewing recorded class sessions and posting on the relevant discussion forum for a given class session.
2. We recommend setting peer critique guidelines for students consistent with the institution's academic integrity code. For example, if you would like to offer credit for peer critique, we might offer several options for paper topics and have students review and critique papers on a different topic than their own.
3. For example: Blackboard or Canvas.
4. It is also possible to include language about free speech and expression in a document like this.
5. We suggest that professors let their students know at the beginning of the semester that they might want to share their contributions and tell them that if they do not want a particular journal entry shared, students should indicate that on the entry.