

Center for Academic Excellence

APPALACHIAN STATE UNIVERSITY

Student Engagement

A crucial component of a successful course, regardless of delivery format, is student engagement. Students are more likely to be successful in courses that engage students in a variety of ways over the course of the semester, build a sense of community, and have a strong teacher presence. Here are some suggestions for intentionally designing your course with student engagement in mind.

1. Build community and establish a presence in your online or hybrid course.

Community building is essential for student success in any course, but can be more difficult to accomplish in an online course. Check out [this video](#) which will help you understand how to foster a supportive learning environment by setting the tone, diversifying the curriculum, and connecting with students in multiple ways. Adapt [effective f2f strategies](#) to intentionally build community in your online course. Establish presence early in your course by employing simple strategies such as [creating a welcoming video](#), [creating an orientation video](#), offering a [social forum](#) where students can interact with each other, and [establishing expectations for your availability](#). Don't forget, frequent but routine communication is crucial in online courses. Consider using tools such as [announcements forum](#), [quickmail](#), and [video capture](#) to post routine messages. [Personalize your Zoom room](#) and use it for office hours. Communicate what you expect from students and what students can expect from you.

2. Incorporate inclusive teaching and learning practices.

Inclusive teaching is good teaching! For students to be engaged, they must be included, represented, and feel a sense of belonging. There are a variety of [inclusive teaching strategies for online teaching](#) with synchronous or asynchronous platforms. Consider the number of [situational factors](#) that contribute to student engagement. For 2020, we are still teaching in the midst of a health pandemic and a racial epidemic- these factors ask instructors to consider [trauma-informed pedagogies](#) that respond to issues of equity and inclusion in considering [learning v. survival brain](#). Note that the resources offered in the rest of this document lend resources and tools for inclusive teaching. Consider how you might design your course to better meet all students needs using [Universal Design for Learning](#) principles. As you use tools, be cognizant of the many ways you can utilize them to be more effective. For example, you can employ simple techniques to make your many Zoom sessions [more inclusive](#) for all participants. For more resources, check out the Inclusive Excellence Team's [Inclusive Teaching Strategies](#) and the [Inclusive Excellence website](#)

3. Utilize instructional strategies that promote active learning.

Research indicates that students earn higher grades and experience lower failure rates in courses with significant [active learning components](#). All students seem to benefit from active learning courses, but the effects are particularly pronounced for students from historically [underrepresented groups](#). Although active learning takes on [a different form in hybrid and online classes](#), you can design classes that are highly interactive and engaging in the virtual space.

- **Lecture interactively:** While many instructors continue to use lecture as a cornerstone for teaching, combining lecture with interactive techniques is often more effective at promoting cognitive engagement but requires new approaches in an online or hybrid course. The foundation of a good lecture is the careful selection and effective presentation of content. Open Resources such as [MERLOT](#) which provides access to curated online learning materials and content creation tools and the [OER Commons](#), a dynamic digital library and network, provide powerful tools for selecting and designing content for all disciplines. Further, [OpenStax](#) provides access to free high-quality textbooks that can substitute for more expensive hard copy versions. Adapting [effective strategies](#) to engage students, scaffold new material, and deepen understanding requires the use of tools in an online course. Here are [simple strategies](#) for promoting deeper thinking about course readings in an online environment. Consider creating [micro-videos](#) using AsU Learn [tools for quality lecture capture](#) and [VoiceThread](#) for interactive lectures. Purposefully design [skeletal outlines](#) for students to demonstrate their understanding of course content. Utilize tools for pre, post, and during lecture engagement such as [choice tool](#), Discussion Forum, H5P, and Flipgrid. For synchronous lectures, the Zoom polling feature and breakout rooms are quite effective.

- **Facilitate discussion:** Facilitating effective discussions takes careful planning and technique. While all course [discussions](#) are based on basic skills such as framing the discussion, balancing and pacing, and responding to students, it can be more challenging to promote a [robust discussion in an online course](#). The best online discussions involve a lot of structure and support for how and when students should participate. [Clear instructions and appropriate feedback](#) will move students from superficial responses such as “I agree” to deeper, more cognitively-engaged reflections.

Discussions can happen in a variety of online spaces. One option involves the [discussion forum](#) option through AsU Learn. You can organize students into [virtual groups](#) of 4-6 students via AsU Learn and assign [discussion forums at the level of the group](#). With this approach, regardless of the size of the course, students can still have deep, engaging discussions with their classmates. Alternatively, consider [Flipgrid](#) as a video-enhanced alternative to AsU Learn discussion forums. You begin a discussion by recording a short video of yourself explaining the prompt, and then students are invited to provide their own videos in response. Lastly, if you would like to engage your students in discussion around a specific resource, you can invite students to annotate a document or video together, through either [mark-up tools](#) or [audio commentary](#).

- **Incorporate problem-based learning:** Learning by engaging with real-world problems is an effective way to help students apply course concepts and

demonstrate higher-level thinking. [Problem-based learning methods](#) such as case studies, simulation activities, and project-based learning can be adapted for online learning environments. To get started, you might consider the [power of case studies](#) and access the [numerous resources](#) available to you to create a relevant and challenging case for your discipline. Case studies or other problem-based activities can be assigned at the individual level or at the group level. When students participate in collaborative problem-solving around a compelling problem, engagement can skyrocket. Tools such as [group-level discussion forums](#), [collaborative Google Docs](#), and project management solutions like [Slack](#) can help students to organize their collaboration around meaningful problems.

4. Align activities with course assessments.

Aligning your learning activities with your [authentic assessments](#) provides coherence in your course and supports student success. To develop aligned assessments and learning strategies, “begin with the end in mind.” That is, ask yourself which types of assessments will allow students to demonstrate mastery of the content, skills, and/or dispositions you hope to cultivate in your course. Typically, instructors will select one or two culminating summative assignments for this purpose. Then, they will devise a series of [formative activities or assessments](#), such as those described above, that provide students with the experiences that will lead to eventual success on a culminating assignment. Let students participate in many activities that will help build their knowledge and skill set related to the assessment. Remember that you do not need to grade everything that students do. Find ways to keep students accountable while they participate in many of the activities and carefully select the assignments that will be graded. For those assignments, provide timely and effective feedback that can serve as a roadmap to success on formative activities and assignments. [Effective feedback](#) not only appraises student efforts on a current assessment, but also gives information on how to make changes for enhanced progress on subsequent assignments. If you have high numbers of students in your courses, you will need to devise a [feedback system](#) involving [well-designed rubrics](#), as it is often impossible to provide the maximum level of feedback to every student. Lastly, make sure that students are actually engaging with your feedback. To support your students in processing and acting on your feedback, you may want to employ the strategy of [metacognitive wrappers](#), which invite students to reflect on their performance on an assessment after receiving your feedback.