

How are you keeping your students engaged in the online classes?

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Introduction

Neighbors and Bridges Day (N&B Day) is a professional development day where the ELI faculty share their ideas & resources, learn about professional development opportunities available and inspire each other through different presentations and collaborative activities. Our mandate is to “explore, identify and organize activities for teachers’ development to keep abreast of the latest in the field”.

This year the Professional Development committee sought the expertise of the whole department by presenting their ideas in a different way. Instead of giving individual or joint presentations, the ELI faculty collaborated in addressing pressing issues that would have a direct impact on teaching and learning, especially online teaching and learning.

Our group composed of Alex Lewko, Amira Abdallah, Amira Rashad, Hagar Seddiek, Iman Baza, Laila Kamal, Mona El Saady and Noha Khafagi addressed the question: “How are you keeping your students engaged in the online classes?”

One thing we all have in common is that we want our students to know that we are there for them and we want to build trust, invest in their abilities, and engage them in online learning.

Alex Lewko, Senior Instructor and Chair, ELI

Since I have been teaching listening and speaking skills while online, I have found the most success with student engagement when finding ways for students to just talk to each other. I might start a class with students in breakout rooms, no more than 2 or 3 in each room, and I ask them something seemingly “silly”, such as to describe their favorite item of clothing or jewelry, or what a favorite vacation spot is. However, when we get back together in the whole class, students can educate their colleagues about the small group conversations they had, and we might analyze individual conversations further, such as how engaged students were with the topic, whether their conversations shifted in unexpected ways, and if so, how and why. This is to encourage students to be more thoughtful about their conversations as well as to engage with each other.

Asynchronous video technologies, particularly FlipGrid and VoiceThread, have been very helpful with student engagement. FlipGrid is simple to use, and its format encourages more casual conversation. I ask students to upload videos early in the semester to introduce themselves, and the following week I will ask their colleagues to post one response video to anyone they want where they can react to what was said and make connections to their own experiences. On the other hand, VoiceThread is more appropriate for formal academic work as it allows students to record audio and video of themselves with visuals such as slide presentations. Their colleagues can then go into the presentations and record reactions, probing questions, or even disagreements. Both technologies allow students to get to know each other and their interests more and even to assess one another. I plan to continue to use these technologies, even in the face-to-face modality.

Amira Abdallah, Instructor, Rhetoric and Composition Department, Academic English for Graduates Program Director

To engage my students in online learning, I make sure to first, create a safe environment for them to interact and share ideas comfortably. Creating online learning communities enhances students’ participation and sense of belonging. I have been practicing social media detox for years; thus, I prefer to use Google applications, particularly Google Currents as a closed social media platform as opposed to Facebook groups or WhatsApp. I encourage

students to share academic and non-academic thoughts, post educational and entertaining videos, and actively comment on posts. When students feel they belong to a learning community, this fosters trust and empathy. Eventually, students feel more comfortable sharing ideas, collaborating in group work, interacting with one another, and seeking help when they are confused. My freshman students enjoy sharing posts, thoughts and videos on Google Currents; this helps them connect with their classmates and triggers several interesting discussions.

Another strategy I use in my online CORE classes is to ask students to lead class discussions on theme-related topics of interest. When students select topics to discuss, they feel empowered, and this boosts their confidence encouraging them to actively participate in classes. When I grade such student-led discussions, I dedicate a good portion of the grade to the Q & A session to motivate students to be active listeners.

An authentic learning activity that I used in my online CORE classes was engaging students in a collaborative problem-based task where students worked in groups to research global or local environmental problems trying to find potential solutions.

I ask the groups to select a team leader and then I share progress report questions that the team leaders should answer after each meeting ([see this example](#)). Also, I ask students working on such problem-solving projects to deliver informal progress presentations where they share the challenges they faced, the work they finished, questions they have, etc. I realized that students want specific questions/instructions to work on or specific bite-sized tasks, activities to finish.

According to students' reflections, this task was by far the most enjoyable because it allowed them to meet regularly as a group, share ideas, assign tasks, brainstorm together, and become closely attached. Team members created strong relationships online that helped them support their learning; they scheduled frequent Zoom meetings that kept them connected. Many of them enjoyed the problem-solution challenge, explored multiple perspectives, and received the support they needed from their fellow team members.

Other ideas that I found successful in engaging students are using Zoom polls as entry or exit tickets, creating interactive quizzes using Google Forms, using visual prompts to initiate discussions and trigger critical thinking skills, inviting guest speakers to add variety to the classroom routine, and encouraging students to type in the Zoom chat box if they feel shy to speak up.

Amira Rashad, Visiting Instructor, ELI

Shifting to online learning, a mode that is characterized by many of the students as a curse, required more than just the implementation of technology in the classrooms. This drove me to opt for more creative approaches when looking for ways to engage my students in online learning. One method that worked marvelously is perceiving students as active participants in teaching and learning, also known as “**Students as Partners**”. This approach entails involving the students in planning for curriculum and assessment, evaluating course materials and teaching. Challenging as it may seem, students loved the experience and described it as highly interactive.

To apply this approach, I started by introducing the concept to my students and explained its benefits. The first activity that the students engaged in included working in groups with the aim of creating mini lessons relevant to English 0210 themes. Each group had to select a topic and design a relevant activity that they would share with their peers throughout the semester. Activities that students designed, shared and taught included the following:

- Organizing an online event showcasing a number of start-up businesses, similar in design to the one held in the AUC Venture Lab
- Moderating a debate on the issue of gender pay gap in Egypt
- Analyzing the movie Snowden, that talks about the ethicality of the act of whistleblowing in public places, and designing a reflective worksheet on it
- Organizing an MUN (Model of United Nations) event on the topic of Nuclear Weapons Non-proliferation

Engaging students in a series of “**Show and Tell**” activities is also very essential in creating a friendly communicative environment for students. In these activities, my students talked about their families, shared personal childhood images, and talked about their travel experiences. This helped the students interact and realize that they have a lot in common.

Hagar Seddiek, Visiting Instructor, ELI

Inviting a Guest Speaker

Online classes are a golden opportunity to invite guest speakers from any country in the world. It is very engaging for the students as it enriches their experience and globalizes their learning. To have a successful visit, I divide it into three stages. A week prior to the visit, I prepare the students on the topic by assigning different relevant readings followed by Zoom discussions. After the discussions, they prepare questions they have about the topic. During the visit, I introduce the guest speaker, and then the guest starts by eliciting what they know and what they want to know about the topic before giving the talk. At this stage, students are expected to interact with the guest and take notes, and then ask questions when the talk is over. Next class after the visit, students reflect on the experience which allows them to recognize what they have learnt. Finally, they write an essay about a relevant topic. This activity is very engaging for the students because it gives them the opportunity to ask real-time questions. It also gives them ample ideas to use in their writing. This experience gives them a different insight and perspective.

Experiential learning activity.

One of the very engaging online strategies is actively engaging students with authentic community issues within their academic courses. Students are divided into groups, and they select a social problem in Egypt. Each group selects the articles to read about the problem, and they hold a group discussion in breakout rooms after reading. Then they prepare questions to conduct online interviews with different people about the problem. Following that, they present their findings in class or using Flipgrid. Finally, each group writes a collaborative essay which proposes two solutions for the problem.

This activity integrates students’ learning with community engagement which fosters their understanding of the issues in their community. Integrating skills through an active learning activity succeeds to engage students while performing academic tasks.

Iman Baza, PhD, Senior Instructor, ELI

“**You Are the Teacher**” activity helps the students play the role of the teacher with an objective in mind. I ask them to “teach” us something new; they can talk to us about some breathing exercises, recipes, or languages. The most important thing is that we “learn” from each other. Since they are the teachers now, they can bring videos or pictures or simply talk to us about what they want. They can also give us a quiz at the end of their mini lesson.

“**Storytelling**” is also very interesting and can also be used in different ways:

- a. Writing stories: Students work together to write their own stories with a message in mind. Tip: Students can make use of StoryJumper (a website for writing and publishing stories) since they can collaborate online.
- b. Biographies: Students can share the biographies of different scientists and politicians highlighting their accomplishments throughout the years. I always use this when we talk about Nobel Peace Prize winners; every student/group chooses a date and tells me about the people who won the prize in that particular year.

“**Brainstorming/Writing Outlines in Groups**” is another successful activity. Students are divided into groups and each group chooses a prompt. Students then go to their breakout rooms, discuss the prompt, and write an outline. They later present their outlines to the other groups.

Laila Kamal, Senior Instructor II, ELI

Since the most difficult factor in online instruction is grasping the students’ attention and keeping them engaged, this was my major goal in class. I achieved this goal through a variety of activities.

1. **Story Thread:** One student begins a story which would be continued by a second student, then a third one and so forth. One sentence should begin with the word: “fortunately”, the next with: “unfortunately” and so on. The teacher can begin the first sentence. This activity enables students to remain alert, think and speak.
2. **Random Letter:** The students are divided into groups and placed in Breakout Rooms. After preparing a number of random scrambled letters, the teacher asks the students in each group to create as many words as they can using those letters. The teacher can give bonus points for the winning group.
3. **Probing:** Probing questions allow the teacher to assess the students’ learning comprehension. Expertly planned probing questions can reinforce learning, develop analytical and reflective thinking, and clarify concepts.
4. **Redirecting questions or comments:** The teacher redirects queries to the class instead of answering them, eliciting the information from the students themselves. The teacher then offers more input and clarification.
5. **Bridging and referring back:** The teacher encourages the students to connect previous class discussions to the current discussion to demonstrate how ideas, theories, and frameworks are connected.
6. **Shifting perspective:** If the class gets stuck at some point in the discussion, the teacher tries to change the discussion by bringing up a different perspective and looking at the problem from a different angle.
7. **Summarizing:** In the middle and toward the end of the class, the teacher summarizes what has been discussed so far. This helps students retain the information and build upon the conclusions they have already made.
8. **Collage and Images:** Showing students a group of images/pictures and eliciting their reactions towards those images. A very successful topic was Capital Punishment, where students were shown images of actual criminals. They were then divided into Breakout Rooms and each group was required to use the internet to write a short paragraph about one of those figures. They then presented the information to the rest of the class, generating feedback and very interesting discussions. This addressed their reading, writing and speaking skills, and involved some research.

Mona El Saady, Senior Instructor II and Director of ENGL 0210 (Academic English for the Liberal Arts), ELI

Podcasts are a flexible and effective classroom resource. Podcasts are authentic, diverse, convenient, and can lead to student independence. They increase student engagement: This is HUGE! When students love what they are doing in the classroom, they are instantly engaged.

Here are some ideas about utilizing podcasts in the classroom:

In-class Listening Activities: Like any listening activity, students practice listening for main ideas and significant supporting details, but here, you are using the podcast to open discussion.

1. Play the podcast once or more than once, as many times as needed, for the students to fully understand the podcast.
2. Put questions that you want to engage with on the Blackboard discussion board or share the questions with the students using a share screen.

Some examples are:

- Who is speaking?
 - What is the topic of the podcast? What are they discussing?
 - What is the overall mood of the conversation?
3. Students can discuss answers to questions in pairs, in breakout rooms, or as a class. They can summarize and write a response to the ideas.

Creating a Class Podcast: The goal is to do a class project where students make their own podcasts as individuals or small group activities. Each student or group creates a podcast episode on one of the topics covered in class. Students can put them together into an e-portfolio.

1. Ask students to research the topic. They should find enough information to make an episode. You determine the length of each episode, depending on the level of the students.
2. Students then work on writing a script for their episodes. You can review the scripts and correct the language if you like.
3. You may need to teach students how to use the technology. You should ensure they know how to edit the audio. Audacity (for Windows) and Garageband (for Macs) are the two most popular programs for recording and editing audio.
4. Have students record their scripts and encourage them to get creative and add music and sounds.
5. Students then play their podcasts in class to enjoy their work and get additional listening practice.

You should keep some points to keep in mind when using podcasts for in-class activities. Pre-teach anything required for the podcast. Choose suitable length; shorter podcasts are more suited for in-class activities. You can still use longer podcasts, but you may need to break them up into segments. Most importantly, have a purpose; confirm that the students know why they are listening and what they are listening for.

Podcasts are fantastic teaching tools. Research suggests they are effective at promoting listening skills and speaking skills. You can use them to teach vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. They promote reflective thinking when you take it a step further and ask students to reflect on what they listened to, which involves thinking, writing, and summarizing. They are accessible and inexpensive, making them excellent resources for use in the classroom. I encourage you to experiment with incorporating podcasts in your teaching; you will not regret it.

Noha Khafagi, Senior Instructor II, ELI

“Photo Summary” is a great way to engage the students in summary writing. Students are presented with 6-8 digital photos that reflect the ideas in a text that should be summarized. The students predict what the text is going to be about. After a short discussion, the students read the text and compare what they predicted with what they found. In the prediction phase, any answer would be correct. This is a non-threatening and motivating way for the shy students. Additionally, the photo summary simplifies complex and abstract ideas, sticks in long-term memory, transmits the message faster, improves comprehension and motivates the learners.

“Have Your Say” is an idea I got from the BBC News. Blackboard discussion board is the students’ platform to discuss key stories in the news or current events. We start the conversation in our Zoom session and the students continue on “Have Your Say” on Blackboard, adding opinions they have not expressed in our Zoom meeting. Until now, my students like to talk about the pandemic, or anything related to it. Sometimes, the discussions start in breakout rooms and then the whole class interacts in the main session. Topics that generated lots of discussions were: “Lockdown diaries: what am I achieving?”, “What are some ways families and schools can do to support teenagers in the pandemic?”, and “What are the pros and cons of face-to-face and online learning?” I tried gearing the discussion to the positive sides; students were engaged and gave very insightful and well-thought-out answers and comments.

Creating videos for the online classes

Welcome video: I record a 5-minute welcome video to introduce myself and get the students engaged in online learning. This welcome video is a key part of connecting with students. They get to see their instructor live, which helps build a more personal relationship with them and encourages them to perform better in the course.

Course navigation instructions and recording of instructions: I record a short video to walk the students through the ins and outs of Blackboard. I explain in the video how students could access the syllabus and the materials, how they could submit assignments and how to use the discussion board. This helps minimize confusion and allows students to feel that they are receiving more personalized instructions. It builds trust, gives students’ confidence in their abilities, and makes them more engaged in online learning.

I also record a short video with instructions of the students' major assignments, so they can watch and rewatch. These instructions are presented via Google slides. In this way, the students get the benefit of both the visual and auditory directions and do not feel that they have missed an important part of the lesson, especially if they have poor or unstable internet connection.

Unprompted videos: These are spontaneous videos recorded outside the classroom and home to create teachable moments and stimulate the students' interest. The video could be about a relevant topic covered in class or could also serve as a model for the students' final oral presentations.

From experience, these video recordings facilitated understanding, built trust, removed confusion and led to more student engagement.

Additional Tips and Tricks from ELI faculty:

- Using Zoom polls as entry or exit tickets
- Creating interactive quizzes using Google Forms
- Using visual prompts to initiate discussions and trigger critical thinking skills
- Encouraging students to type in the Zoom chat box if they feel shy to speak up.
- Making sure they are following what you say by asking yes/no questions and letting them press on thumbs up sign (emoji)
- Using Padlet and Jamboards to record class thoughts to save for later
- Live discussions of reading texts on Zoom
- Any speaking activities that might have built in "exaggeration", like a sales pitch, which can entertain and engage students while giving students some different ways to enhance their oral communication skills
- Creating digital jeopardy games or using ready-made ones for group competitions is a fun educational activity which can be held through Zoom. Through this site: <https://jeopardylabs.com/>
- Word Cloud can be used to make students visualize their collaborative brainstorming. This visual representation of ideas generates students' interest and stimulates more ideas.
- Interviewing family members on issues presented in the class and coming back with their answers
- Asking students a question and letting them answer one by one. For example, what is one thing you plan to accomplish today?

What are your tips and tricks for engaging students, especially ones that also work in-person?