



Engaging With Diverse Learners

As the diversity among our students has grown over the last few years, so too now have the number of options for how we can connect with students and deliver our classes. This handout accompanies the video, “Engaging diverse learners,” which explores some of the barriers to engaging diverse learners and potential strategies to foster student engagement. The videos and this handout will support you in:

- identifying some of the challenges faced by diverse students in engaging in different learning formats
- Identifying strategies for engaging diverse students across delivery formats

Step 1 - Exploring diversity & Identifying Challenges

What does diversity mean to you? How is this visible in your classrooms?

- cultural background (national, geographical, linguistic, generational, gender identification, socio-economic)
- prior learning experiences relevant to the course / studying in general
- issues with reading levels, EAL
- learning disabilities in general (e.g., need help note taking, have to have material read to them)
- access to technology / interest / comfort with tech
- desire to/ comfort level with studying independently
- any way in which one human is different to another

Identifying potential challenges for both instructors and students

Some students may:

- not understand the ‘rules’ of the context
- feel isolated / feel like they don’t belong
- be unable to follow the discussion and/or quickly ‘get lost’
- cultural differences related to differences in educational experiences



Engaging across different delivery formats



Synchronous online

- if **no video**, can't see facial expressions / body language
- if **with video**, can't see non-verbal communication as easily / is limited
- harder to keep track of *how* everyone is engaging
- student fears associated with being on camera / writing in the chat
- technical challenges

Asynchronous online

- harder for some students to contribute due to fears associated with writing
- can be harder to create a sense of community / build relationships / technical challenges
- learning may require greater levels of independence

Blended, included face-to-face

- all of the challenges at some point associated with synchronous & asynchronous learning

Step 2 - Identifying Strategies for Fostering Engagement



In the context of your course, consider the following questions.

Community

What does community 'look' and 'feel' like? How can we create a sense of community in learning?

Possible ideas might include

- feeling connected to others
- demonstrated interaction with others
- feeling safe to contribute ideas / not afraid to 'be wrong'
- a sense of belonging
- feelings of being a 'co-creator' / opportunities to co-create
- seeing self as reflected in course content / approaches to teaching

Possible strategies

- spend time build relationships
- be transparent and flexible in expectations
- provide opportunities for co-creation (e.g., of 'classroom etiquette,' types of assessment, deadlines, ways of demonstrating how have met the learning outcomes)

Engagement

What is engagement? How can students demonstrate their engagement in learning?

Possible ideas might include

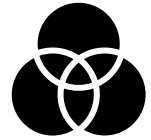
- students demonstrating that they feel connected to the content
- students responding to questions / discussion threads; emailing ideas and questions, attending office hours
- students contributing ideas / thoughts; asking questions
- students demonstrating what they have learnt through participation activities / reflections;
- demonstrations of deep learning (e.g., passion, creativity)

True *engagement* goes beyond whether a student attends class or responds to a discussion post. Real *engagement* is an opportunity for **deep learning**. According to Fullan & Langworthy, 2014, p.2:

The goals of deep learning are that students will gain the competencies and dispositions that will prepare them to be creative, connected, and collaborative life-long problem solvers and to be healthy, holistic human beings who not only contribute to but also create the common good in today's knowledge-based, creative, interdependent world.

Step 3 – Inclusive Pedagogy

Perhaps the most fundamental aspect of promoting engagement is ensuring our approaches to teaching and learning are as inclusive as possible.



Inclusive Pedagogy involves

- being flexible in how students engage in course content and are assessed
- providing access for all students (e.g., options to attend live sessions or to engage offline)
- the students as co-creators and participants
- acknowledging the importance of personalized approaches that support individual students (e.g., negotiated deadlines; welcoming students on their own terms)
- attending to the cultural nature of learning (e.g., monitors discussions for culturally sensitive language and behaviors, acknowledges which voices are present / not present in the course content etc.)
- supporting everyone in finding ways to communicate with compassion and empathy
- building community by providing multiple ways for people to engage in a safe and welcoming space

Ways of helping students connect with each other include activities / resources such as

- Two Truths & a Lie
- find someone who
- Circles of my multicultural self –([EdChange.org](https://www.edchange.org))
- pair / group tasks, e.g., story telling
- Kahoot / Padlet / Jam Board / Mentimeter / Google Docs
- interviewing each other / the instructor
- student led discussion boards / FAQ sites

Step 4 - Five Principles of Engagement



- I. Curation
- II. Connection
- III. Creativity
- IV. Contextualization
- V. Contemplation

Curation

The ability to collect resources and bring them together to create new knowledge.

Possible Activities
Students create a glossary of terms for the course
Students co-create exams / write questions
Students co-create grading rubrics for assessment

Connection

The ability to bridge what is known / prior experiences, to new learning / experiences.

Possible Activities
Engage in role-plays
Explain a concept / knowledge to an eight-year-old
Explain the connection between two ideas / events

Creativity

The ability to apply what has been learnt to create something new.

Possible Activities
Apply content knowledge (e.g., using new knowledge to solve a problem)
Use alternative assessments – does it have to be a research paper?
Meet the learning outcomes in authentic ways – let the imagination fly!

Assessment (informal and formal) is a great opportunity to offer opportunities for creative ways of demonstrating learning, by providing choice in the way students can meet learning outcomes, such as

- presentations or video recorded responses
- authentic tasks related to the course (e.g. role-playing a nurse / patient interaction; writing and presenting a marketing strategy; arguing a point of law related to a real court case)
- creating websites / wikis / blogs that demonstrate meeting the course learning outcomes

Contextualization

The ability to understand the literal meaning of a text / video / resource etc. and why it was composed that way.

Possible Activities
Research the resources – whose voices / knowledge are represented? (or not?)
Think critically – identify fake news
Understand influences – who paid for this study?

Thinking of context in a broader sense, it is important that everyone in the learning environment share a common understanding of what is expected. Being transparent in expectations and negotiating classroom etiquette (face-to-face and online) can be helpful in supporting students, especially those new to studying in Canada or who have been away from education for a long time. Giving students the chance to ‘co-create’ their learning environment can also help foster more active engagement, as students see tangible results of their active participation.

Contemplation

The ability to reflect on the learning / new knowledge, to understand why it is important and to identify one’s own reactions / beliefs about what has been learnt.

Possible Activities
Immediate anonymous response / reaction to a concept / idea / question (e.g., via Padlet)
2-minute talking-heads video response
One-page written response / field notes
Song / poem / picture to illustrate reflection / thoughts

Key take-ways:

- identify what you consider to be ‘community’ and ‘engagement’ in the context of your course
- consider concrete strategies you can use from the outset to foster community – you don’t have to do ‘everything’ – focus on what is feasible for you
- aim for authentic opportunities to apply knowledge and promote deep learning
- less is more – where possible, focus *less* on presenting content and *more* on what students can *do* with the content presented
- where possible, provide multiple opportunities and modalities for students to engage, bearing in mind different levels of access to / comfort with technology and / or the varying modes of course delivery
- be mindful of the ‘hidden curriculum.’ What expectations do we have as instructors that we assume our students will be aware of? Ensuring we are transparent about our expectations and flexible in the opportunities we offer students to demonstrate learning, helps students feel included and to want to engage

References & Resources

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Symonds, V. (n.d.). 21 Free fun icebreakers for online teaching, students and virtual and remote teams. Retrieved from <https://symondsresearch.com/icebreakers-for-online-teaching/>

Teaching in Higher Ed. This link provides access to numerous free Podcasts on a variety of topics - <https://teachinginhighered.com/podcast-category/online-learning/>

See episodes:

228 – How to create engaging online classes – Laurie Gibbs

240 – Small teaching online – Flower Darby

319 – Fostering inclusion in our classes – Marlo Goldstein Hode

293 – Inclusive practices through digital accessibility – Christina Moore

314 – Culturally responsive online teaching – Courtney Plotts