In the Classroom 133
12 Strategies for Increasing Engagement in Online Courses

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Stan Skrabut: Well, thanks, everyone, so much for taking time to listen to this podcast. It certainly means a lot. I know you could be doing other things, perhaps you are, but you're still hanging out with me and I really do appreciate it. Well, first of all, I have to apologize for not putting out an episode last week. I was prepping for my fall course and it took a lot longer than I expected. Doesn't it always? I just ran out of time and I couldn't squeeze this episode in, so I really do apologize, and well, I'm here this week. Are you teaching online and you want to increase engagement, but your students are finding what you are currently doing to be a little lackluster?

Therefore, you need to check out this week's episode where we dive into increasing online engagement. Increasing online engagement in an online course actually is not so hard. There's a lot of research out there about how to do this and believe it or not, students actually find a number of activities to be engaging. The problem is we're not using them. Some of these activities include things that you're applying the learning that they're doing. They're reading stuff in a textbook, but if you're not going out and applying it, then you're really stuck in passive learning mode. They want to be able to apply these things. They want to apply the concepts to case studies or do problem-solving with this.

Also with discussion forums. They want to talk about the concepts. They want to use discussion forums in support of lab and group projects, doing peer reviews, looking at what other people are writing as far as papers and being able to critique those papers, and tapping into current assignments. There are lots of different ways that we can increase engagement in a classroom and naturally active learning activities are well-suited for online classrooms and are highly engaging. If you're not using these methods, you really should check them out. What I want to do today is focus on 12 strategies or 12 activities that you can weave into your classroom to increase this engagement, and really just talking about what the research is saying that will help do these types of things, make it more engaging.

One of the first things I guess to talk about is the fact that assignment types should vary, and this makes it immediately more interesting. If you overdo one type of activity, you have discussion, discussion, discussion and that's the only activity you have, engagement's going to go down. If you're doing quiz, quiz, quiz, engagement's going down. If all you do is assign an essay to write, the engagement is going to go down. So you need to vary it. You need to give different opportunities, different ways to demonstrate learning. In addition, you should also vary your communication methods.

We'll talk about a little bit of those kinds of things as we're going through this, but these type of things help to make the class more interesting and more engaging. The first place to start is getting students to engage with each other. Include assignments that not only engage with the course content but also with fellow students. These can be group projects, they could be peer reviews of papers, they could be discussion forums. I have used all these methods one way or another in my classes. For group projects, one of the classes was dealing with instructional technology. They had to work with a real client as a group and build a product for that particular client.

They had to meet deadlines, they had to communicate among themselves. They learned a lot about group dynamics and it was really about the process that I was really focused on, but it was a group project and they found it highly, highly engaging and interesting. The current course that I'm working on right now is dealing-- they have to write a project proposal, and so we're doing this in multiple drafts. During those drafts, we're doing peer reviews. Other students will look at their papers and provide them with feedback and they also take that feedback, they improve their papers, but they're learning things from reading other students' papers that they can use to improve their papers. They're finding that to be a sometimes scary activity, but rewarding activity.

Discussion forums. I use discussion forums all the time. Every week, we have a discussion over the content and I'm really tapping into what students have learned. With a lot of things that I'm talking about here, I definitely go check out the show notes because I've put links to resources that you could further explore and learn more about where I got my inspiration for this particular episode. Not only do students need to interact with each other, but instructors also need multiple ways to interact with students, multiple ways. If you use multiple channels for frequently interacting with the students, you will increase engagement.

Different channels that you can use, announcements on the homepage, for example. Putting announcements, we're using a platform called Canvas. It allows us to create rich media posts or announcements posts, which allows me to post video and audio, put imagery in there, all kinds of things just to spruce it up, but also increase the learning capacity of that object. Email. You can send email to the entire group or to just specific individuals. Discussion forums where the instructor interacts. I talk about discussion forums in-depth in ITC 29 and 30, but you definitely want to interact in the discussions as an instructor and there's a balance.

If you interact too early and too heavy, students will shut down, but they definitely want to hear from you. It's important to go in and provide content and help guide students forward. In the introductions, make sure that you introduce yourself. Actually, you should be the very first one that introduces yourself so you can set the model for the different posts that you want to come after that, but also it's an opportunity to humanize the course and students want to know a little bit about you as an instructor and as a human being. You can insert online lectures. Now, naturally, you can go to YouTube and grab material but it's your course, so I would encourage you to go out and do online lectures and insert them into your class.

Now, I know this is a heavy lift and so you don't have to do it all at once. If you are teaching the same course over, say, three terms, by the end of the third term, you should at least have all the videos talking about the introduction or talking a little bit about that course material. You can also use other tools like chats and online sessions in order to engage with your students. Virtual office hours. One of the things that came out of this whole COVID thing is how easy it is and how effective virtual office hours are. To have office hours in the middle of the day when students are showing up and you're confused why students are not coming to visit you, maybe you're offering the office hours at the wrong time.

I talked about this in ITC 53, so go check that out. But virtual office hours, I turn on virtual office hours when I'm grading at night. I'm an adjunct instructor and I grade at night. I turn my virtual office hours off on the side and let it run the whole time that I'm grading and students will pop in and say hi. Part of this instructor response or interaction with the students include a discussion for frequently asked questions and try to share questions and answers in a more public manner through these frequently asked questions, and that way everybody benefits. For your students, ask for regular feedback. A couple of times a term, ask them how the course is going, how you can improve the course, things like that. If they know they have buy-in to the course or being able to help shape the course, they'll have more buy-in.

Certainly, reach out to students who are dropping off the radar. Every once in a while in my class, I notice some students that they're not engaged. It could be for whatever reason. I don't know why, but I always ask. Sometimes they're sick, sometimes they were traveling, sometimes they just got overwhelmed by their other job, lots of different reasons. Just having the opportunity that you're touching base and you still care, they'll get back into the course. When responding to your students, make sure that you are prompt with your responses. If a student has a question, get back to the student as soon as possible and try to make it as easy as possible for a student to connect with you and for you to get that reply back.

Another way that you can interact with your students is to create perhaps a weekly podcast or a screencast. That way students can listen to you when they're away from the computer. That was interacting with students among themselves, you interacting with the students. Another good place to start or prepare your students for engagement is to set and announce your expectations. In your course, go ahead and outline your expectations. Make them crystal clear. Let them know how many hours they're expected to participate in a course. How long an assignment is, what your expectations for those assignments. Use multiple ways to get that information out to your students.

If possible, open your courses early and start communicating with your students prior to the start date of your course. My course has already opened. My course starts tomorrow, but it's been open for the past week and it gives students that opportunity. When I looked at my course roster, I could see that well over half of my students had already checked in and were kicking the tires on the course. That was refreshing to see. Now, some are waiting till tomorrow or sometime this week to check-in. Another place where you can increase engagement is introducing your weekly content. Provide students with an introduction to that content and make sure that your

assignments are also crystal clear with clear due dates. Go through your assignments like you have never heard this assignment before and make sure everything is addressed.

If you want them to respond in a certain way, you need to make sure that you communicate that to them. Another place to look at is in terms of active learning. In a study about MOOCs, researchers studied thousands of different MOOCs and discovered that students found weekly mini-projects to be motivating. In the courses that I offer, I create these quests that allow students to learn content and skills and they've reacted favorably to these types of activities. Gamification is also a powerful tool that you can use to impart knowledge and help develop skills and there's an offshoot to this called alternate reality games.

Alternate reality gaming is an interactive drama played out in realtime and real-world spaces, taking place over several weeks or months in which dozens or hundreds of thousands of players come together to form collaborative social networks and work together to solve a mystery or a problem. You can weave this into a class; that you make your class this mystery or this adventure game that students can play through, and along the way, they learn and solve problems and puzzles in order to get to the final solution. They're challenging to make, so if you make one, let me know. I'd love to see it and hear about it. They're challenging to do, but highly engaging.

In Episode ITC 40, I talked about frequent low-stakes quizzes. These are a way that you can increase engagement and interest in the content. It is also an active learning strategy. Active learning seems to be at the heart of this, and just providing these quizzes, you can use them as gatekeepers before they get to the next piece of content or you can use them just to test their knowledge, and maybe you only give points when they aced the test, which means you would have massive test banks, pooling of test questions, and randomly pull from those questions and let students take those quizzes. Once they've aced it, then you give them the points for that, so different ways that you can do that.

Tied to this is information recall. You can use information recall strategies throughout your course. Maybe you use these as learning prompts before or after videos that you're presenting or before and after content, a couple of one question, two question quizzes that you pop into your course just to see where they're at and opportunity. Low-stakes quizzing which I just talked about, this mastery quizzing, it is also that those are all tied together. Just getting them to keep on thinking about the course content. You can learn more about information recall in ITC 81. Another way to make learning engaging is to make it real. When you create your assignments, can you make them not only challenging but also relevant and tied to the real world?

This could be having them focus on something that's happening currently in the news, or for my example, I had students working with real clients. They were actually engaging with real clients, asking them questions, getting their feedback, and they were very much involved in these activities. They did not want to let their clients down and they didn't want to let the rest of their team down. My students, they were really motivated because they had to deliver for a real client. Now, they were

exhausted and sometimes frustrated and nervous and all those things, but that helped make that learning real to them, and they still talk to me about that.

You can also connect these assignments to maybe campus activities, getting students involved in working those activities. It really depends upon your course or maybe a community event that's happening around you. Another place that you can increase engagement or raise a level of engagement is actually through reflection. Have students reflect on their learning throughout the course. Getting them to think about their learning of the learning of that content. I do it at least twice a term. In this course that I'm currently teaching, I have two reflection discussions. Those discussions are reflections.

One is right after they do their first draft because it's messy, and that's also right after they've done a peer review. I want them to think about that whole process and think about what their strategies were to get them to that point. Then I also do it after they've done their final submission of their project or their program plan. They do it at that point really to assess the whole course, things that they took away. It could be strategies we used in the course, it could be about course content, it could be about the activities, but I want them to reflect across the whole course. Another place that you can increase course engagement is by keeping your course current.

You can use tools like Google Alerts and Feedly to alert you to new content relevant to your course, and then you can share that new content if it's relevant out to your course, out to your students. In some learning management systems, you can actually subscribe to different feeds and have it report out. These would be normally the same RSS feeds that you would use for something like Feedly. That way, depending on your discipline if you're teaching cybersecurity, what's the latest and greatest about cybersecurity that's coming out of-- pick an agency. You can have that brought into the class and use that as a part of discussions or have students subscribe to these different feeds maybe through Feedly and report out things that they're finding and they want to discuss in the class.

Then the last piece that I have is provide supporting resources. When you're creating content for your course, use varying modalities: video, audio, text, webpages, interactive materials, it could be like Google Sheets or Excel or something like that. Most importantly, make sure that these resources are relevant and useful. If they're not relevant and useful, students will tune them out. They will just not go look at them, so you have to make that they're useful. If you're creating videos, be short and to the point. Break up things. I talk about this idea of thin-slicing where you're focused on one objective at a time.

Rather than create a 45-minute video that drones on and on, get to the point. When you're creating this content, provide different examples and from different perspectives. Not always be the lecturer, if you have somebody else that explain it, include that option and give students choices and support which is very much in line with universal design for learning. Those are our 12 different areas. Let me rehash real quick. One is getting students to interact with each other, that instructors need multiple ways to interact with the students. Set up and announce your course

expectations, introduce weekly content, provide mechanisms for students to ask questions, and provide timely responses.

Use active learning strategies, low stakes quizzing, information recall, great ways of doing this, make learning real in your classroom. Tie it to real stuff. Get real examples. If you're talking about entrepreneurship, talking about megacompanies is not real and relevant. Talk about local businesses that have become tremendously successful and how they did it. Reflections. Have students reflect upon their learning, how they got to the place that they are. Keep your course content current. You can do this through automation. Different ways of doing that to at least keep you abreast of new things that are happening. Finally, provide relevant and useful supporting resources. Well, that's it. That's 12 strategies that I think you can weave into your classroom to just help make it more engaging. Time to go. But before I let you go, here's a quick plug from my book.