

Teaching online:

Best practices for student engagement

What is different in online teaching?

There are three core questions that we should consider in our everyday teaching:

- What is the core knowledge base that we want our students to learn in a lesson, module and course? (The content)
- What is the most effective way to get our students engaged with the learning material? (The pedagogy)
- How can we assess their understanding of the material most effectively? (Assessment)

The basis of teaching remains the same both in the classroom and online. Careful planning on these three factors drives successful teaching whether online or in the classroom.

Student engagement: Why is it so important?

Often, we use 'interaction' and 'engagement' interchangeably, however, in education, student engagement refers to the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism and passion that students show when they are learning or being taught, which extends to the level of motivation they have to learn and progress in their education.

It's worth remembering that our audience is made up of 'adult learners', hence the method and practice are different and unique compared to educating young learners. They learn best when the outcome is relevant; adult learning is voluntary and involves choice.

Research has demonstrated that engaging students in the learning process increase their attention and focus, motivates them to practice higher-level critical thinking skills and promotes meaningful learning experiences. All these are vital for our students to maximise learning and pass their CIMA examinations.

Top 5 hints and tips for student engagement in online teaching

Although the online medium precludes in-person interaction, it also creates opportunities for new ways to teach and learn. Well-planned, intentional uses of online technologies can encourage and facilitate even more lean-forward behaviors and more interaction with and among students. Here are **five hints and tips** for you to consider.

Hint No. 1

Begin the course with clear norms and expectations

Set classroom norms clearly, adhere to norms consistently and circulate clear expectations for student participation. For instance, let your students know in advance:

- When we will be available and how quickly we can respond
- Schemes of work, timetables, etc., so students can plan ahead
- Norms for student behaviour and interaction
- Your explicit instructions and unique and specific expectations

Hint No. 2

Be present actively online

You need to model the behavior you wish to see your learners display. To achieve this, I recommend you:

- Film at a desk, not at the whiteboard, invest in a USB mic, as professional audio creates more authority. Intersperse talking heads with handwriting or slides.
- Free handwriting is more engaging than pre-prepared slides
- Be active in discussion boards (at least announcements) and announce weekly virtual office hours for the students to contact you.

Hint No. 3

Build and support online community

‘Learning in the digital age relies on the connected learning that occurs through interactions with various sources of knowledge and participation in the communities of common interest, social networks and group tasks’.

– Siemens (2005)

Therefore, try to be:

- Positive and have a motivational tone
- Actively present in discussion boards and ‘wrap-up’ each week
- Innovative with tactics for students to get to know each other

Hint No. 4

Acknowledge and respect diversity

‘Students are different from one another. In different ways, each of them needs the opportunity to show their talents and learn in ways that work for them’.

– Chickering and Gamson (1987)

According to the theory of multiple intelligence, our students are diverse in intelligence – visual, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, linguistic, mathematical, etc. Therefore, be considerate in designing instructional design and content; you may use a variety of resources such as recorded lectures, notes, videos, etc.

You may increase learner engagement by various innovative means such as identifying learners’ questions about the material; using online polls to get a sense of students’ experience; inviting specific students’ answers (cold calling); having students engage in small group conversations via breakout rooms, etc.

Focus more on effective pedagogy than tools

I recommend you spend more time grounding your course in good pedagogy than mastering technology (online tools). Be familiar with several important features and focus more on the capabilities you need to deliver an effective online experience.

Today, experts are one click away, so get their help to complement your knowledge and wisdom in helpful ways for your students.

As an educator of adult learners, your role is moderating conversations. So, avoid lecture formats. Also, consider making assessment a part of the overall learning experience. For instance, you should frequently use zero-stake assessments during, at the end or after (as homework) the lesson.

In your endeavours to have an engaged cohort of students, ask yourself these three useful questions in your course or lesson planning:

1. How can I provoke my students to get them engaged?
2. How can I get them to discover the key ideas by themselves?
3. How can I get them to generalise beyond immediate application?

In conclusion, simply focus on your pedagogy, not the medium. The principles of pedagogy that are effective for online teaching are similar to those that are effective in the classroom. They allow students to engage with material dynamically and across multiple learning styles.



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