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How Can Educators Tap Into Research To Increase Engagement During Remote Learning?

By Kerry Rice and Kristin Kipp May 6, 2020



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As university professors and researchers who work closely with K-12 online teachers and learners, we've heard from many newly remote educators who are struggling. Recent class discussions have focused on the difficulties of getting through to students without in-person contact, especially during a time of enormous stress. Some teachers report that their students lack interest and in the worst cases, that students are dropping from classes entirely.

From our experience both in the online classroom and in training teachers to teach online, this is familiar territory and typically happens about six weeks into a new school session. The newness has worn off, the excitement around technology wanes and teachers often struggle finding ways to engage with their students.

The crucial question that has emerged is: how do we engage learners when we are not together physically? It's a complicated question, even in the best of times—one that has been at the forefront of our daily online teaching practice and our research into the online behaviors and interactions that can have the greatest impact on successful learner outcomes. Thankfully, research into online learning can provide us with a starting point to make sure our students continue to be engaged in the process of learning.

There isn't one solution for increasing learner engagement and motivation. Online teachers need to combine multiple strategies to reach learners, such as strengthening relationships with learners, engaging families and helping learners connect with their peers. But building strong relationships online is difficult.

What Is Engagement and Why Is It So Important to the Learning Process?

In its simplest form, engagement is a measure of how much we are attending to a purpose, task or activity. When it comes to learning, engagement is influenced by a learner's level of motivation, focus and cognitive ability as well as online course design and a teacher's decisions regarding facilitation style.

Grounded in the learning sciences, **engagement** is deepest in environments that support fostering relationships, productive instructional strategies, and social and emotional development. Engaged learners demonstrate **stronger satisfaction with learning experiences, stronger achievement in courses and increased graduation rates**.

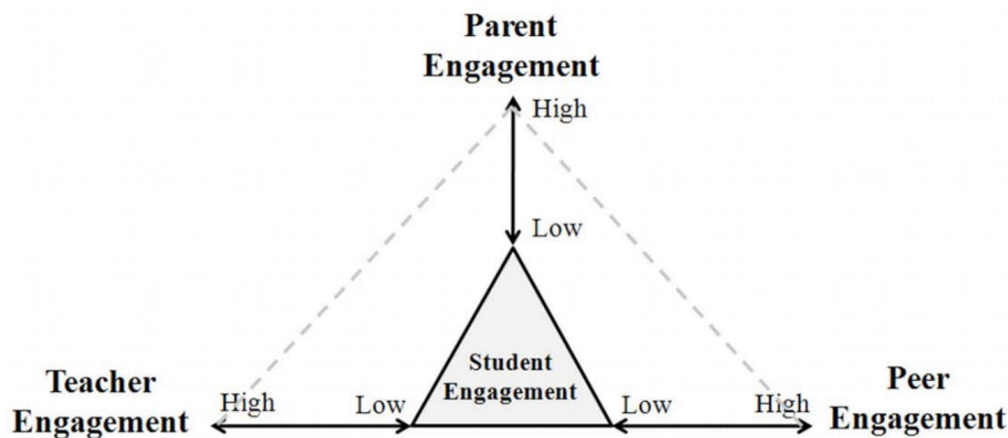
Researchers identify three primary components of learner engagement for in-person and online settings: behavioral, cognitive and emotional. In other words, we know that learners are engaged if they exhibit behaviors, thinking processes or emotions that indicate they are connecting with course materials, with the teacher and with each other.

Measuring these types of engagement is easier said than done, though **researchers have settled on some common approaches** in traditional classrooms that can easily be translated to the online classroom, where research isn't as far along. Some of these measures will be more difficult for teachers to assess, and some may require teachers to understand and use the analytics capabilities of online tools. Teachers needn't collect data on every single measure, but having familiarity with the following common measurements will allow teachers to determine which factors they can reasonably assess according to the type of engagement they hope to spur.

Type of Engagement	Definition	Common Measurement That Teachers Can Use in Virtual Settings
Behavioral	How often and for how long learners engage with course materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Amount of time a student spends on a virtual learning module Number of logins to a course site Consistency of interactions with course materials Assignments completed Level of participation in online discussion forums
Cognitive	How learners think about and make connections with what they are learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Performance on assignments Interactions within threaded discussions Quality of interactions within a synchronous session Word usage in online discussion forums
Emotional	Level of connectedness and caring that learners feel in their learning community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Student satisfaction with the course and instructor How students communicate and interact with the teacher and with peers The quality and quantity of parental involvement Emotional reaction to school and whether students feel valued

Types of engagement with common measurements for virtual settings

How can we make the leap from this research to practical application in the remote classroom? The [Adolescent Community of Engagement Framework](#) proposed by Jered Borup, Richard West, Charles Graham and Randall Davies gives us one approach. These researchers argue that student engagement is created and enhanced by the involvement of three key players in any K-12 online learning experience: teachers, parents and peers.



[Adolescent Community of Engagement Framework: A Lens for Research in K-12 Online Learning Environments](#) hypothesizes that as parent, teacher, and peer engagement increase, student engagement will likely increase until it fills the area indicated by the dotted line. Image credit: Jered Borup, Richard West, Charles Graham and Randall Davies. Used with permission.

How Teachers Can Increase Learner Engagement in a Remote Classroom

One of the most consistent findings in [engagement research](#) is that a teacher has an enormous impact on the student's experience, influencing everything from students' perceived learning and self efficacy to their motivation. Being an engaged teacher online means being visible in the class, whether that's through discussion posts, announcements or assignment feedback. Teachers can emphasize their visibility and overall engagement in a remote classroom by implementing these practices:

- **Post regular announcements:** A funny video or meme along with a hello and a weekly reminder of due dates can go a long way in reconnecting learners.
- **Reply early and often:** Students need to feel that teachers are immediately available to help and may feel isolated when educators take a full business day to respond to a request for help. Quick communication builds connection.
- **Vary communication tools:** Teachers should consider the communication preferences of individual students and make sure that their tools are best positioned to respond to students' questions. Phone calls, synchronous video tools, instant messaging or texting are all good options to use in combination, depending on the district's communication policies and student preferences.
- **Use feedback to build relationships:** Providing personalized feedback to let students know their work has been reviewed can strengthen relations. [Video feedback](#) is also effective in building a connection with learners.
- **Physical connections under social distancing:** [Teacher parades](#) and [chalk messages](#) on students' sidewalks are a great example of recent efforts teachers have taken to demonstrate their level of commitment to maintain high levels of engagement with their students. Similar online approaches such as recorded or live book readings and virtual office hours can be just as effective.

How Teachers Can Increase Parent

Engagement in a Remote Classroom

Research has shown that the involvement of a responsible adult, typically a parent, is critical to the success of online learners. K-12 learners need the support of a caring adult to build executive functioning, manage their workload and maintain motivation. Teachers can support parents in this role by implementing a few key practices:

- **Connect with parents:** Phone calls, texts and friendly emails help parents feel connected, realizing that the teacher is there to support the entire family.
- **Provide a schedule:** Parents can use a schedule that shows the days and times of synchronous classes and includes what activities students should be working on each day to help keep students on task.
- **Offer tech support:** Teachers can create short videos to help parents understand how to access their online content.
- **Less is more:** Parents can quickly become inundated with well-intentioned emails from various teachers. Keeping emails short and focused is best.
- **Survey parents:** Periodic, brief surveys can help teachers understand what support parents need.

How Teachers Can Facilitate Connections Between Students in a Remote Classroom

Research shows that students who feel connected to other learners are more engaged. In connecting with other learners, students feel that they are part of a classroom community. When motivation for the content itself is lacking, the desire to socialize with other learners can keep a student coming back to the work of a remote classroom. Teachers can improve peer engagement in a virtual setting by implementing these practices:

- **Use prompts to spark discussion:** Discussion boards can be a great space for conversations, especially when teachers use prompts that are open-ended, stir debate or force deeper learning. Prompts can also be used to generate video discussions using a social learning tool like [Flipgrid](#)

or an online debate tool such as [Tricider](#).

- **Student talk during synchronous learning:** Lectures and focused learning can happen through recorded videos but synchronous sessions offer an opportunity to share and talk to each other as a community. Sessions hosted through Zoom or Google Meet can incorporate traditional classroom activities like jigsaws, small group activities in breakout rooms or discussion protocols.
- **Group assignments:** Learners can create collaborative group projects through a shared Google doc or Google site. For instance, students can collaborate on the creation of an Editor's Toolbox website with grammar tips by assigning groups of students to each page within the site.
- **Student-led tech support:** Students who are exceptionally gifted in technology might troubleshoot or a teacher can create a "Tech Help" forum that students can moderate. Teachers should take care to set up structured guidelines for classroom use.
- **Carving out time to share:** Teachers can allow time and space for students to showcase their expertise, hobbies or projects using a Padlet or Pinterest board.

Figuring out how to effectively engage learners has always been a complex challenge for educators like the ones that we instruct. Identifying ways to motivate students, help them maintain focus and get the most out of learning was difficult when we had physical classrooms and it remains a challenge now that our learning environments are entirely virtual. A savvy educator will employ a variety of strategies to build engagement. By recognizing the critical importance of engaging learners, parents and peers, and selecting the strategies that work for them and their contexts, educators can move toward deeper engagement in online environments.

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Kristin Kipp is the chair of education at Rocky Mountain College of Art + Design (RMCAD).

Kerry Rice is a Fulbright Scholar and professor in the department of educational technology at Boise State University.

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