# "ZOOMING" INTO ENGAGEMENT: INCREASING ENGAGEMENT IN THE ONLINE CLASSROOM

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## ABSTRACT

*Engagement strategies for classroom instruction are now more important than ever because many schools utilize remote learning options. Classroom engagement allows teachers to keep students focused on the lesson, create a classroom community, and monitor students' progress. However, many teachers have struggled with incorporating engagement strategies into the online platform. Several traditional classroom engagement strategies can be modified to fit the online learning modality. In this article, we describe several classroom engagement strategies, including Quick, Draw!, One Word Splash, Think-Pair-Share, Secret Answer, and Response Cards, and discuss our personal experience with incorporating these strategies into the online modality. Some modifications for the online classroom include utilizing features in Zoom or other video conferencing websites, including breakout rooms, chat features, emojis, and whiteboards. These strategies can increase engagement for students of all grade levels, kindergarten through collegiate. Incorporating these strategies can assist teachers in increasing student engagement and therefore increasing student self-efficacy and success rates.*

*Keywords: engagement strategies, Zoom, technology, online learning*

## INTRODUCTION

Virtual learning has replaced many face-to-face classrooms in recent months, and this move to the remote learning modality highlights the importance of student engagement. Whether you are teaching in the K–12 or collegiate classroom, simple changes to traditional engagement strategies will help you capture the attention and increase the learning of your students. In this article, we share several technology tools and strategies for creating an engaging classroom regardless of modality.

## IMPORTANCE OF ENGAGEMENT

Classroom engagement is a crucial element of instruction. Research shows that engagement increases student understanding, allows for students to interact with each other, increases teacher presence, and creates a sense of community in the classroom (Nagro et al., 2018). This sense of community and positive student interactions are extremely important for the mental health of students, especially in remote settings where students are typically more isolated. This is especially true for vulnerable student populations and at-risk students (Chu, 2020). Keeping students engaged both in a physical classroom and during remote learning decreases behavior issues by keeping students focused on learning and the class content (Nagro et al., 2018). It is important that educators consider how they will engage their students while planning lessons and creating assessments.

Using engagement strategies in the classroom allows the teacher to connect to student learning in multiple areas. Researchers Tsai et al., (2021) explained that there are four dimensions to student

engagement. Skills engagement activities center on cognitive development and learning strategies, and emotional engagement involves affective growth and motivation. The final two dimensions are participation and performance engagement, which focus on active learning and assessment outcomes (Tsai et al., 2021). Together, these four dimensions promote positive student-to-student interactions as well as student-teacher interactions.

Building engagement in the classroom requires intentional thought and planning. One theoretical model that helps to explain the interactions that must take place in an effective classroom environment is the Community of Inquiry framework (Garrison et al., 1999). While developed to address needs in the distance learning classroom, the framework has been widely used to optimize learning in online, blended, and face-to-face environments (Arbaugh et al., 2008; Bowers & Kumar, 2015; Ma et al., 2017). Effective learning, according to the Community of Inquiry framework, requires interactions between students and the teacher in three interrelated elements, which are referred to as presences—cognitive, social, and teaching presence (Garrison et al., 1999). A classroom environment with these three presences increases student engagement, critical thinking, and collaboration (Belcher et al., 2015). In addition to its student benefits, engagement helps inform teacher practice.

Student engagement is a great way for teachers to collect data and assess their students' knowledge and understanding. Engagement strategies can be used as formative assessments to drive instruction and monitor progress (Nagro et al., 2018). Students and teachers can use the data from formative assessments and engagement strategies to practice self-reflection and set goals. These activities lead to higher self-efficacy and accomplishment and using engagement strategies in the classroom improves learning outcomes (Chu, 2020). Keeping students involved by using engagement strategies is a crucial component of both in-person and remote teaching. This article addresses two research questions:

RQ1: What are some current practices for engagement?

RQ2: How can these practices be adjusted for an online, remote, or blended classroom?

## TOOLS TO FACILITATE ENGAGEMENT

Engagement in the classroom, whether in person or online, requires tools to assist the educator. A few key tools that can be used to provide greater opportunity and desire for students to interact in either modality are Mentimeter, Padlet, and Zoom.

### *Mentimeter*

Mentimeter (http://mentimeter.com) is an interactive software for presentations that incorporates live polls, quizzes, and word clouds, as well as a question-and-answer format in real time to gather data on student progress while engaging them with the lesson through the feedback they provide. Mentimeter is free with limitless presentations for an unlimited audience. Once you register for an account, you can create up to two question slides and up to five quiz slides (https://www.mentimeter.com/plans). Additional features and pricing plans can be seen on the Mentimeter pricing page.

### *Padlet*

Padlet (http://Padlet.com) is another interactive software that is easy and intuitive to use. It allows for students to respond in a variety of ways, including pictures and words, with a simple click, cut and paste, and drag and drop format. Padlet has a free option that offers three online bulletin boards, which is a great way to try Padlet without paying a monthly fee. If you decide you love the tool, unlimited bulletin boards are available for $8 per month (Staake, 2021). Both Mentimeter and Padlet engage students in instant collaboration with one another and encourage increased response levels through the novelty of the software and piquing the students' interest.

### *Zoom*

Finally, Zoom (http://Zoom.com) is an online platform that provides video communications and online chat services for distance learning. Zoom is free for unlimited one-on-one meetings and 40-minute group meetings for up to 100 participants (https://zoom.us/pricing). Using this valuable software as a tool of engagement, teachers and students can see and speak to one another in real time when not in the same location. Additionally, Zoom provides other engagement components within its application such as the chat, whiteboard, and emoji features.

## STRATEGIES TO ENCOURAGE ENGAGEMENT

There are many strategies that educators can use to increase and encourage engagement in the classroom. It is important to keep students engaged in both in-person and remote learning settings (Chu, 2020). Many strategies initially developed for in-person learning can be adapted to use over Zoom or other remote learning platforms. This section discusses engagement strategies and presents methods for adapting them for remote learning.

### *Quick, Draw!*

Quick, Draw! (https://quickdraw.withgoogle.com/) is a fun and engaging way to get students motivated for a lesson or to assess their learning during and at the end of a lesson. This strategy can be done either in person or by using an online application, such as Zoom. With a quick draw, the teacher will come up with the main idea of the learning and then have the students share their understanding through drawing it. This can often be timed, hence the word "quick" in the title.

Students drawing pictures about their learning has many benefits. To start, it can be fun for the students to be able to demonstrate their learning in a new way. For students who are kinesthetic learners, this strategy gives them an opportunity to sketch and use gross muscle movement. For these learners, their attention is in their hands (Child1st Publications LLC, 2016), making this strategy a great choice for kinesthetic learners, and drawing can benefit all learners. Even more than just reading and writing, drawing helps a student process information ". . . visually, kinesthetically, and semantically" (Terada, 2019, para. 1). Processing information in multiple ways helps with recall and memory. As educators know, students need to be exposed to a concept multiple times to retain it. When a student draws their learning, this creates a more synaptic connection, which means the information is less likely to be forgotten (Terada, 2019).

In the traditional classroom, a teacher could have students use paper or whiteboards at their desks to draw their learning, or even have them come up to the whiteboard and draw for the entire class to see. In the virtual classroom, teachers can use the whiteboard feature in Zoom or through other online collaborative whiteboards. The students can share a quick draw of their learning on the collaborative whiteboard or even on their own whiteboards at home or on paper and hold them up. In a virtual setting, the students could also take a screenshot or photo of their drawing and send it to the teacher for a more private viewing. This could help students who are not as comfortable with publicly sharing their work.

### *One-word splash*

One-word splash is an engaging strategy that helps students with comprehension. According to Cox (2014), students, especially reluctant readers, tend to do better in reading when they have a purpose because it helps to motivate them. This strategy is a great way to give students a purpose for reading and can be used before a lesson to help get the students excited for the lesson and after a lesson for assessment.

When a teacher uses this strategy, they preview their material before the lesson, whether it is a story or video, and identify important vocabulary words. Then the teacher makes cards with the vocabulary words on them or writes them on the board. From there the teacher has the students predict what the words mean or how the words relate together to predict what the lesson will be about. This can be done individually, in pairs, or as a group activity. As an assessment strategy, a teacher could have the students sum up their learning about the lesson in one word or try to identify an important word from the lesson.

In a virtual classroom, teachers can still expose the students to the words from the lesson by having them write them down on their own flash cards at home. The teacher can also use the words to make a game that the students can play by having them hold up a paper with their one-word splash on it or they can use the whiteboard feature during a Zoom meeting to write or draw their word. Students can also use the private chat feature in the virtual classroom to share their one-word splash with the teacher to help keep their answers private. Some additional technologies that could be used for this engagement technique are Mentimeter, Padlet, or Poll Everywhere (https://www.PollEverywhere.com). With these technologies, the teacher can set up a prompt, share the link to the site, and the students can type in their one word. Each of these technologies have free versions that can be used with success and discounted versions specific for educators.

*Think-Pair-Share*

One set of instructional strategies that many preservice teachers in the United States learn about are Kagan structures. Defined as small groups of students working together where students are responsible for their own learning as well as that of their teammates, these simple strategies are high impact engagement tools (Davoudi & Mahinpo, 2012). Think-Pair-Share is one of the Kagan structures.

In the face-to-face classroom, teachers regularly pose questions for students to consider and respond. Think-Pair-Share brings the question to a pair of students or a small group. The teacher first poses a question and gives students time to think about the ideas individually. After the individual "Think" time, students partner with another student or two to discuss their thoughts and ideas. The subsequent "Share" time allows students to develop social skills and cooperation.

In an online or remote setting, Zoom can help to facilitate this engaging strategy. The teacher still begins with posting a question, but this may be in the chat feature of Zoom or through a shared screen where the question is displayed. The teacher intentionally asks students to think about the ideas or response to the question individually. While students are engaged in the individual "Think" time, the teacher can use the Breakout Room feature in Zoom to place students in small groups of two to three. The Breakout Room feature includes a timer that can be set so that students are automatically given a warning before the end of the activity and they are brought back into the main room. During the breakout time, the teacher can pop into individual Rooms to converse with students on their progress.

*Secret Answer*

Secret Answer is an excellent strategy for building engagement while allowing instructors the benefit of individual feedback from each student. According to Clark (2015), this method describes any form of response where students are given the opportunity to answer individually, and those answers are kept hidden from other students. This can be done by using assigned letters, numbers, or symbols for the responses, and then the students can share the one that corresponds with what they believe is the correct answer. A simple example of this would be giving multiple choice questions when reviewing for a test, then having the students put up the number of fingers that represents what they believe is the correct answer, but they hold their fingers close into the body so the teacher can view the responses from the front of the room and other students around them cannot easily see the answer they selected.

Secret Answer has strengths as an engagement strategy for both teachers and students.

For a teacher it:

- Allows assessment for the whole class in real time.
- Holds students accountable for engaging in the lesson.
- Provides individual feedback on each student's understanding and progress.

For a student it:

- Offers a chance to engage individually and take ownership of their learning.
- Provides the opportunity to answer without the pressure of being right/wrong or peers knowing your answers.
- Removes the discomfort of performing in front of others, especially for students who are introverts.

Of course, in the classroom this strategy can easily be done through multiple methods, including using whiteboards, small colored cubes, or even technology. One application for this is called Plickers (https://www.plickers.com), which allows you to create questions and answers online and then you can print answer cards with QR codes for each student. You can quickly check the classroom answers by scanning the cards with a device such as a phone or tablet, which gives instant feedback. These are just a few ideas, but the options are endless. The key for selecting a response method when using the Secret Answer strategy is that the response be unique to the student and it cannot be readily seen during whole-class engagement.

If we consider this engagement method in the online modality, it too has several options. This method can only be used when teaching synchronously as you are viewing students' answers in real time for immediate feedback and keeping them engaged in the lesson. To apply

Secret Answer online, use the private chat option, available with various online presentation formats, like Zoom. Additionally, the use of a Google form shared with students, where they can submit answers during the lesson, is an option. Finally, you could implement additional technology by presenting lessons in an online application like Peardeck (https://www.Peardeck.com) or Nearpod (https://www.Nearpod.com). Both options allow students to respond individually and secretly in real time during the lesson. Again, these are only a few ideas, while others may be available with further investigation.

This strategy is comprehensive with what it provides, while being simple and effective to implement. In the classroom, traditional or online, opportunities for each student to interact and respond is generally limited during whole-group instruction because most of the prompting techniques teachers currently rely on only allow for individual student responses (Nagro et al., 2019). However, with the use of Secret Answer, your students who might never raise their hands to share can confidently participate during your presentation, while still allowing those who always get involved to continue to be a part of the action. You get students engaged in the lesson in fun and creative ways through active participation and can check for understanding to direct your teaching. According to Nagro et al. (2019), research supports that engaging students by implementing whole-group response systems, such as Secret Answer, improves academic outcomes. "Overall, the goal of this type of proactive strategy is to create a positive learning environment where all students, including hard-to-reach students, have frequent opportunities to respond and actively learn" (para. 6).

*Response cards*

Response cards are a great way to encourage engagement and allow students to express themselves at the same time. In the original strategy, students create response cards such as true/false, emotions, agree/disagree, etc. (Clark, 2015). Then as you are completing an activity, such as reading as a class, you can stop and ask a question and students can show the card from their stack as their response. For example, if a teacher asked, "How do you think this character is feeling right now?" the students could hold up an emotion card as a response. This could then lead to an engaging conversation, especially if students choose different emotions.

To update this idea for a Zoom classroom, a great strategy is to allow students to use emojis as a replacement for the response cards. Not only does this give students many options to choose from, but emojis are something that many students are already familiar with. Using strategies that are relevant to students can encourage participation and motivation (Nagro et al., 2018). Before you begin the lesson, choose some stopping points where you will ask engagement questions. Make sure your questions are open ended and do not have right or wrong answers. Next, explain the ground rules. Students should refrain from using any inappropriate or offensive emojis. Show students how to find the emojis in Zoom. In the chat feature, if using a PC, students can access emojis by pressing the Windows logo key (usually between the Alt and Ctrl buttons) and the period key. As a shortcut, let students know that they can usually search for an emoji by typing a word. So, if a student wanted to respond with "worried" they could type that word and have a few emojis options from which to choose. Start your lesson. At your chosen stopping points, ask your open-ended questions. Give students time to choose an emoji and place it in the Zoom chat. Then ask for volunteers to explain their chosen emoji.

This strategy not only increases engagement, but it makes a connection to a communication system that many students are familiar with—emojis. Students enjoy getting to bring this information style of talking into their classroom. This is also a great chance to help students learn empathy and how to recognize other points of view.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, we addressed two research questions: RQ1: What are some current practices for engagement? and RQ2: How can these practices be adjusted for an online, remote, or blended classroom? First, we discussed some of the current engagement strategies and technology tools that can be used to facilitate engagement in the classroom. Regardless of the grade level, from K-12 through postsecondary, engagement strategies increase student cognitive development, emotional skills, participation, and performance.

Second, engagement strategies are not curriculum or content specific nor are they bound by modality. With a bit of intentional planning, any or all the strategies shared here can be used in any content area or modality. With simple adjustments, teachers can transition these engagement strategies from online to face-to-face or in person to remote.

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