

Fostering Student Engagement in Virtual Learning Environment

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COVID-19 pandemic has led to a technological shift in delivery of curriculum from the traditional face-to-face to online delivery using various virtual platforms for teaching learning.¹ Virtual classrooms are now being considered the new normal way of imparting education. Although online teaching learning offers a lot of flexibilities, it also comes with many challenges, viz. student engagement and faculty training for virtual teaching learning, with maintaining student engagement being one of the most important challenges.²

Student engagement is defined as meaningful student involvement throughout the learning environment. It is the extent of interest, attention, and curiosity shown by the students while learning in order to succeed in achieving their educational goals. It is considered to be a benchmark for assessing the quality of student experience.³ Engagement of students assumes a greater importance in online learning environment as the opportunities offered in the virtual world are fewer compared to the traditional classroom learning. Student engagement is multifaceted involving cognitive engagement, viz. critical thinking and metacognition; emotional, viz. motivation and positive attitude; behavioral engagement, viz. active participation and developing academic skills; social engagement, viz. establishing rapport and building relationships; and collaborative engagement, viz. peer learning and networking.⁴ The aim of the teaching, learning or instructional strategy is to work up through no commitment and diverted attention among students at the stage of rebellion to the stage where students exert high attention and high commitment at the final stage of engagement.⁵ Student engagement is said to be directly proportional to achieving higher success and higher achievement.

STRATEGIES TO ENHANCE STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

One of the most important ways to boost student engagement is to use blended method of teaching learning, i. e., a combination of synchronous and asynchronous methods by means of live streaming of classes for synchronous teaching learning using various available virtual platforms, like Zoom, Google Classrooms, Microsoft Teams, Cisco Webex Meetings, and BigBlueButton, and giving assignments, project work, and worksheets, with completion timelines for asynchronous mode of teaching learning using other available online platforms, like learning management systems (LMSs), such as Moodle and Canvas, and Microsoft Teams. Real-time communication along with additional features, like use of chat box, hand raise, Q and A, breakout rooms, and polls, provides better opportunity for active involvement and participation of students

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along with peer interaction as well as interaction with faculty in synchronous methods.⁶

Another strategy to improve student engagement in teaching/ learning is the use of user-friendly interactive software apps, like Poll Everywhere, Pear Deck, Quizizz, Kahoot, and Soapbox. These apps can be used to add element of question and answer, quiz, etc., to improve student concentration and grasping and avoid monotony in the online class sessions. In addition, use of educational videos, simulation, etc., can also enhance students' focus in learning process.

Enhancing student engagement in the process of assessment in virtual environment is a challenge as there is lack of faculty supervision and lack of seriousness from the students' perspective. Gamification apps, like Kahoot and Quizizz, can be used for objective assessment purpose. These apps add a fun as well as a competitive element in assessment as they give live scores in real time keeping them engaged throughout the process. Use of proctoring software, like Mettl, for subjective examination can also keep the students focused on examination and avoid unnecessary distractions as well as eliminate unfair practices. LMS platform also can be used for formative assessments with dedicated timelines.

Provision of timely, periodic, specific, and constructive feedback provides the students an opportunity to identify where they are lacking and develop appropriate steps to improve their performance.⁶ It also helps to motivate the students and not to get disengaged from their educational goals. The role of a teacher as a mentor assumes a great importance here. Mentoring the students on a regular basis encourages them to keep track of their educational objectives and helps to negate the feeling of isolation by providing the necessary psychological support.

Assessment of students' engagement needs to be carried out periodically to get an insight about the effectiveness of the

instructional strategy used. As student engagement involves multiple domains, even assessment needs to be done in multiple ways using both informal and formal methods. Various means to be employed for assessing student engagement can be student self-rating scale, interviews, faculty rating for students, direct observation, use of structured checklists, work sample analysis, etc.⁷

In conclusion, although maintaining student engagement in virtual learning environment is challenging, recent technological advances in Information and Communication Technology have enabled us to use multiple methods in teaching/learning and assessment in order to tackle this challenge. It is believed that this would facilitate transformational change in learning experiences of the students in the long run.

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