10 Engaging Strategies to Consider for your Remote Courses

These are some of the many instructional strategies that encourage student engagement and active learning. For further ideas, see the Additional Resources section on page 3.

Motivating and orienting

1. BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE PROBES

Why? Instructor determines effective starting points. Students focus their attention on important material.
How? A background knowledge probe asks for brief responses (short answers, show of hands, multiple choice) from students who are about to begin a session or study a new concept.
Example: In an introductory geology course, ask students "What words come to mind when you hear "plate tectonics"?

2. STUDENT-GENERATED QUESTIONS

Why? Students ask and answer questions emerging from course materials, thus providing motivation to complete readings and allowing students to reflect on the materials.
How? Ask students to create questions based on the course materials and then answer their own questions. Questions and responses can be exchanged with other students in small groups for peer feedback, or even be used on exams. Variation: students can generate questions based on peers' presentations.
Example: In an introductory law course, students engage with the course readings and articulate their questions about courts that emerge from those readings.

Informing

3. TEN-TWO STRATEGY

Why? Students process information presented. Instructor and students fill in any gaps or correct misunderstandings. Students build upon peers' knowledge.
How? (1) Instructor shares information with students (e.g., through lecture, presentation) for ten minutes. (2) Students take two minutes to summarize / recap the content or address a question the instructor has posed. This can be individual or students can work in pairs. (3) Instructor asks what questions arose. (4) Repeat the procedure.
Example: Following a 10-minute lecture on Newton's laws of motion in a physics course, students are asked to summarize the laws.

Practice and feedback

4. THINK / PAIR / SHARE

Why? Students organize knowledge and summarize, apply, or integrate new information. Students build individual accountability and contribute to class discussion.
How? (1) The instructor poses a question and asks students to think about the question on their own (1-2 min.) (2) Students pair up and share responses / thoughts, or they may work together to synthesize ideas or come to a consensus. (3) Regroup as a whole class; the instructor then calls for volunteers or chooses a few pairs to share their responses.

Example: In an education course that addresses classroom management, students describe how they would respond to a student's disruptive behavior. Students propose a solution individually, discuss their solutions in pairs, and share their ideas with the whole class.

5. BUZZ GROUPS

Why? Students develop teamwork and cooperative learning skills.
How? (1) Instructor divides the class into small groups to discuss an assigned topic or solve a problem. (2) Students have a set amount of time to engage with the topic or problem. Enforce the time limit to keep students focused. (3) Students briefly present their findings to the whole class; the instructor can respond to comments and encourage discussion.
Example: In a microeconomics course, students are asked to calculate the likely change in cost of a widget further to a supply shortage, but with stable demand.

6. PICTURE PROMPT

Why? Generate discussion by promoting students' ability to think creatively and make connections between an image and course topics / concepts.
How? Show students an image and ask them to relate it to course content. Ask them to either (1) identify / explain it and justify their answers, (2) write about it using terms from your lecture, or (3) name the processes and concepts shown. Do not provide "answers" but rather allow students to explore meaningful associations with the image.

Yee, K. (n.d.). Interactive techniques. Retrieved from http://www.usf.edu/atle/teaching/handout-interactive-techniques.pdf. Creative Commons BY-NC-SA.

Example: In a literary theory course, students are asked: How does this image relate to a deconstructionist theoretical approach to interpretation? Justify your response.


Image by edith lüthi from Pixabay

7. WRITTEN RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS

Why? Students are actively involved in class as they apply concepts and content learned. Instructor determines student comprehension.
How? (1) The instructor poses engaging, challenging questions or asks for guidance during class time. Questions should relate to learning outcomes and be thoughtful and reflective – simple yes / no or basic factual questions are not enough. (2) Students then have sufficient time to develop answers either working individually, with a partner, or in a small group. (3) Students share their answers.
Example: In a course on North American economic history, the instructor asks students to compare and contrast circumstances leading to the Great Depression (1929-1939), the Great Recession (2007-2009), and the current (2020) recession.

Closing and reflection

8. ONE MINUTE PAPER / FREE WRITE

Why? Students explore ideas before discussing them. This can also bring closure to a session.
How? Assign a topic or pose a question pertinent to the content of a given class period. Ask students to respond in writing for 1-5 minutes.
Examples: (1) In a Canadian Studies course: "Based on Sheila Watt-Cloutier's book *The Right to be Cold*, what are some of the ways in which climate change is affecting the Arctic and the communities living there?" (2) "The concept I am struggling with as I prepare for the exam is…"

9. CLOSING SUMMARY (LIST KEY CONCEPTS OR IDEAS)

Why? Students summarize what they understood to be the key points of the class period; instructor determines if students grasped key topics.
How? (1) Students write a closing summary individually or in pairs, listing or summarizing the main ideas about the topic presented during the session. (2) Students can compare and contrast their summaries in pairs to build upon one another's understanding of the material. (3) Students submit their written responses.
Examples: In any course: (1) "What were three key points or "take-aways" from today's class?" (2) "What is a question you have about what we discussed today?" (3) "Create a quiz question based on today's discussion."

10. HARVESTING

Why? Students summarize what they have understood further to a class experience or activity, promoting synthesis and retention.
How? After an experience or activity in class, the instructors asks students to reflect on and then respond in writing to the following prompts: (1) *what* they learned; (2) *so what*: why it is important and what the implications are; and (3) *now what*: how the learning can be applied. Have students share their responses in small groups or with the whole class.

Yee, K. (n.d.). Interactive techniques. Retrieved from http://www.usf.edu/atle/teaching/handout-interactive-techniques.pdf. Creative Commons BY-NC-SA.

Example: In any course, after a class debate, students respond to the "what", "so what", and "now what" prompts.

Additional resources for remote teaching

- Tools Tables describe how tools for teaching and assessing remotely, such as myCourses and Zoom, can support student learning.
- Remote Teaching Strategies offer ways to promote engagement, implement discussions and other strategies, move in-class activities online, and plan fixed (Zoom) classes.
- The Instructional Strategies webpages describe many strategies. See especially the "discussion generation," "problem-solving," and "synthesis and reflection" web pages.