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# A Quick Guide to Student Engagement with Sample Activities

It really is a tale as old as time — a room full of students staring blankly at a lecturer who has just posed a question to them. Some students are even nodding off in the back of the classroom. It's not necessarily a story of disinterested students but it might be one of *disengaged* students.

If you've ever struggled to keep your students engaged, **you're not alone**. Engaging students has always been a pain point for educators. Whether you're trying to engage university students during lectures or get small group activities to thrive (or anything in between), you've likely come up against some hurdles.

**An engaged student is one who is curious about, interested in, and attentive to what they're learning.** Engaged students feel a positive emotional connection to their learning experience. Without engagement, students might end up detached or focused entirely on memorization.

Sometimes engagement comes easily. A student might be so deeply interested in a subject that they're on the edge of their seats during every class. It's more often the case that educators have to help foster a positive connection between students' lives and what they're learning.

Supporting student engagement is possible if you know what barriers stand in the way and what strategies and activities to incorporate to drive engagement. As an educator, you can take the driver's seat with a few simple considerations and steps.

## What stands in the way of student engagement?

There are countless barriers to student engagement but a few stand out as exceedingly common. Often, students who want to engage in classes actively lack the confidence to speak up. **Many students struggle to see how concepts and topics relate to their own lives.** Some students even feel so disconnected from their lecturers and peers that they don't realize an opportunity to engage with them.

Beyond those common barriers to student engagement, one of these factors could be why you've noticed low engagement among your students:

- **Life outside of the classroom is distracting your students.** Like all of us, students have lives outside of their (school)work. The stress they experience isn't always about getting good grades and getting to class on time. Home life, finances, extracurricular activities, friends, and social and political events can create stress that makes it difficult to focus in class.
- **Your lectures cater to one learning style, and it's not theirs.** Whether you've been teaching for decades or are just getting started this term, it's easy to fall into a rhythm. You have so much content to cover in such a short amount of time and routine can help. It's important, however, to keep different learning styles in mind when mapping out your course design.
- **Students don't know how to ask for help.** For a lot of university students, office hours can be an intimidating, if not totally foreign concept. When students don't know that they can connect with their lecturers they can begin to feel isolated. They may even distance themselves from the course slowly over time without realizing it.
- **Mistakes aren't encouraged.** Nothing zaps confidence more than the fear of being wrong. If in-classroom engagement feels too high stakes for students, they may be so fearful of providing the wrong answer or working through a problem incorrectly that they miss out on the opportunity to engage.
- **Students don't know where they stand in a course.** A lack of clarity into their progress in the course can impact their engagement. Maybe you have an incredibly shy student who answered a question in class one time. For that student, that one act of engagement might have felt monumental but to you, you may be concerned that they aren't engaged enough.
- **Expectations aren't clear.** If students don't know that they're expected to actively participate in class, they may seem disengaged even when they aren't. It sounds simple, but not every student knows that they're expected to actively engage and participate in their courses.



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## 5 simple tips to break through student engagement barriers

An effective student engagement strategy starts on day one of class and doesn't stop when students leave the classroom. Here are five ideas to help you break through the barriers throughout the term:

- 1 Break the ice with your students.** Allot some time for students to get to know you and their classmates on the first day.
- 2 Provide an informal meeting place.** Encourage your students to share questions, comments, and ideas with one another through a discussion board in your LMS/VLE or via a class social media page.
- 3 Clearly and repeatedly share information about how students can communicate with you.** This includes sharing your office hours schedule and setting realistic expectations on your response time to emails.
- 4 Don't ignore what's happening outside of the classroom.** Many of the stressors that distract students during class can become teachable moments. If you find that your students seem concerned by current events, consider how you can incorporate them into lectures, assignments, and group discussions.
- 5 Make it okay to make mistakes.** Whether it's fostering supportive class discussions wherein students feel comfortable being wrong or providing more low-stakes assessments, give students opportunities to make mistakes without fear.

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## Activities that drive student engagement

Active learning is arguably the foundation of student engagement. We define active learning and outline an extensive list of strategies that you can use before, during, and after class in our Educator's Guide to Student Engagement. As a quick overview, active learning is when students learn by doing because their instructor involved them in the lesson directly. This is opposed to passive learning where students learn by receiving information that is presented to them by an instructor.

At some point or another, everyone has to learn by doing. You can read every book in the world about knitting but until you actually pick up the needles and yarn, you won't be able to apply that knowledge. Bringing active learning strategies into your classroom gives students the opportunity to acquire knowledge and apply it in the same space. In this article, we'll recommend a few sample activities all of which are based on active learning principles.

### 3 sample activities for better student engagement

#### 1 Metacognition

Metacognition-focused activities allow students to reflect on and realize how they learn best. Knowing whether they're strong visual, auditory, read/write, or kinesthetic (VARK) learners can be a helpful tool for engaging students and helping them build personalized study plans.

You can turn any small group activity into a metacognitive one with a few simple steps. Ask students to think about whether they are visual, auditory, read/write, or kinesthetic learners (or have them take the VARK Questionnaire if you have time). Then, group students by their preferred learning styles and have them complete the activity. Ask them to reflect at the end of the activity on what it was like to work with other learners like them. Then, divide students into groups with mixed learning styles to complete another activity. Ask them to reflect on what they gained from working with students who learn differently.

Read the [Metacognition for Digital Learning](#) whitepaper for more information and ideas.



## 2 Gamify Your Classroom Experience

Everyone loves a good game and there's no reason you can't bring the benefits of games into your courses.

### Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?

Using a free website like [superteachertools.us/millionaire](https://superteachertools.us/millionaire) and an in-class engagement tool like iClicker, you create a modified version of this popular game Who Wants to Be a Millionaire. Keep everyone involved by having one contestant submit their final answer on the SuperTeacherTools site, while the rest of the class weighs in via iClicker. For each question, the contestant can review the results of the iClicker classroom poll and answer using that information or venture a guess on their own.

For more ways to engage your students by turning class time into game time, check out this resource—

**[Playing to Learn: Hosting Online Games with iClicker.](#)**

## 3 Case Studies

Case studies can be the basis of great active learning activities. They can easily foster collaboration among students and help contextualize course content.

One activity you can try with your students using a case study is to investigate a mystery. Who doesn't love a good mystery story? While your students probably won't walk away with definitive answers to questions that leading experts in your field haven't solved, this exercise can engage your students by getting them to think outside the box. Here's an example:

### Did Joseph Merrick have Proteus syndrome?

Joseph Merrick also called the Elephant Man, died in 1890. He was known and exhibited as a “freak” for his deformities. Joseph was a patient at London Hospital. Many now believe that he had a rare condition known as Proteus syndrome. This is an example of a case study that can be used to teach the scientific method or cell signaling. Provide students with a description of Joseph Merrick and his life. Walk them through how to determine whether or not he had Proteus syndrome. Finally, provide guidance to help keep them on track.

You can watch the recording of a webinar we hosted that is full of **[tips for incorporating case studies into STEM courses.](#)**

## 6 steps to creating your own engaging activities

Active learning activities aren't just an opportunity to play a game or get your students talking, they should always tie back to the course material and help students better understand topics and concepts. Once you know which aspects of the course content you want to create an engaging activity for, try these steps to get started.

- 1 Reflect on how you became interested in a new topic or issue.** How was the information presented to you? How did you engage with it? Can you try something similar with your students?
- 2 Co-create the course with your students.** Poll your students to find out how they'd like to learn and what kind of activities they'd be likely to participate in.
- 3 Try and try again.** Once you've tested the activity, you'll have a strong sense of what worked well for you and what you'd like to do differently moving forward. Always let your students know when you're trying something new so they know to be patient and attentive.
- 4 Create a routine.** Once you've got a handle on the activities you'll incorporate in your course, make it a part of your routine. It'll help students know to focus and be prepared for any break in the lecture for an activity.
- 5 Keep them accountable.** Using a system like iClicker that allows you to track responses will help you know who is participating and who isn't.
- 6 Remember to follow through and follow up.** Give yourself and your students time to discuss activities. Highlight correct answers and explain why other responses were incorrect.

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Student engagement is a bit like a puzzle. Addressing the specific barriers you and your students face is one piece of the puzzle. Having the best resources and tools that allow all of your students to participate equally is another piece. With the right puzzle pieces, you can pull together an engaging course for your students.

At Macmillan we've developed Achieve with Student Engagement in mind.

[Learn more about our solutions](#)