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Engagement to Autonomy: Four Strategies for Face-to-Face or Online Learning in First-Year Experience Courses

ALTHOUGH TEACHING first-time freshmen across all content areas presents challenges, first-year experience (FYE) courses also have unique obstacles which must be overcome, especially with the shift to online learning. Often, there is no traditional content such as math or history, so students may ask, "What will I get out of this class?" As instructors and professors, we need to get creative in challenging and engaging students so they feel motivated to learn. This semester, we surveyed students in both face-to-face and online FYE courses and found four active learning strategies that helped students become more engaged.

So, what counts as "active learning?" According to *Speaking of Teaching* (1993), the Stanford University Newsletter on Teaching, "Active learning is...having students engage in some activity that forces them to think about and comment on the information presented." Put another way, active learning is "any learning activity engaged in by students in a classroom other than listening passively to an instructor's lecture" (Faust and Paulson 1998, 4). Transitioning from passive listeners to active participants encourages students to generate ideas and use them.

Given that our students are coming from an environment in which passive learning is the norm, what can we expect their classroom preferences to be? In our survey, 68% of students looked forward to going to classes that offered both lecture and learning activities, and 64% felt they learned best in this same setting. Eighty percent of students either agreed or strongly agreed that they preferred to be involved in class. These results suggest students want to be more engaged in their learning.

As a result of actively participating in class, most students (84%) felt they knew themselves better as learners at the end of their first semester in college, while 95% responded that they now think about their own thinking and learning. In terms of instructional approaches, classes that offer

learning activities may help students become more metacognitive and autonomous. In other words, active learning serves "as a method of engaging students in their learning and as a way to encourage metacognition and reflection" (Riggs and Linder 2016, 1). Fortunately, instructors can design remote learning environments that promote active learning.

Our students responded favorably to all the active learning strategies we used in both settings, but the four listed below stood out as being the most helpful in contributing to their learning. We've included examples and how you can use them.

1. Working in small groups

Ex. LMS Breakout Groups: Use the "Interact" or similar feature in your LMS to assign groups and have students meet in their virtual Breakout Groups to tackle certain tasks or assignments.

2. Participating in small group discussions

Ex. Silent conversation: Post an image or quote on a virtual whiteboard or tape to a legal-sized sheet of paper, if face-to-face. Each group gets a different image or quote. Using different colored ink, each person in the group writes a reaction to the image or quote. In the second round, students respond to what others wrote so that the conversation occurs "silently."

3. Solving problems in class

Ex. Mystery bag: Add an image of a mystery bag/box on a PowerPoint slide and use animation to make the mystery item appear. If F2F, groups receive bags (or grab an object out of a bag). Instruct students to think about how the object connects to a given course topic. Each group then reports to the class how the object relates to the course topic. For example, an image or piece of plastic fruit might stand for food shortages due

to climate change (course topic).

4. Working on projects

Ex. I-Search Project: Invite students to explore topics they're interested in as a group by engaging in research to prepare a multimedia project that includes their search story, results, and reflections.

Providing students an opportunity to actively engage with each other as they engage with the curriculum may lead to a deeper understanding of both the content and themselves as learners, enhancing self-efficacy. Vincent Tinto (2017, 260-61) examines students' perceptions about persistence and cites studies which find that "Regarding pedagogy, those that require students to actively engage with each other in the pursuit of learning... have been shown to enhance motivation and improve classroom performance."

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Center for Effective
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Carnel Learning Center, Suite 106.
Phone: 388-8426

Fostering Fun: Engaging Students with Asynchronous Online Learning

TODAY, FACULTY ARE BEING asked to abruptly expand their teaching practices in ways many of us would never have imagined. For many, teaching online is something they've never done and for some, it's something they never desired to do. I have some experience with digital pedagogy but for me personally, asynchronous online teaching holds the highest level of difficulty because my style of teaching induces and relies on a sense of community, connection, and interaction within the classroom. I've been playing around with making my own online teaching more fun and playful to create an engaging student experience, because I believe engaged students are more eager and active in their learning and assume more responsibility for their learning. I have experimented with incorporating fun, play, and games in both synchronous and asynchronous formats and have found it really matters to students. The narrative that follows demonstrates some ways I have attempted to make the asynchronous portion of my online class more fun.

This is Me! Welcome Videos

The typical online course introductions generally focus on a student's name, major, career goals, and maybe a fun fact. This approach is common for in-person classes, but I think for asynchronous learning, it feels a bit like a 10-second first date—highly ineffective at building rapport or a connection. Therefore, my first step to making an engaging online class was to beef up the introductions. For my class, I created a three-minute video of myself using iMovie. The video is not about who I am as a faculty member or a professional, it has more to do with who I am as a human. It has information about my family, my interests, my passions, my approach to life and teaching, and in the background, you can hear my favorite Mumford and Sons songs. After showing a few of my colleagues the video, they encouragingly said it was “vulnerable.” This let me know the video was right on track to create a connection with my students and a sense of community. I had students watch my video and create their own video that represented who they were (this could even consist of just pictures and text). I then had them share their own introductions to the

group.

Not Your Typical Module

If you are already creating modules that make up your course, just change the modules to something fun—something outside the typical pedagogical-language box. So, instead of “Module 1, Module 2, etc.,” you might change the wording to fit some type of theme. Maybe you change them to reflect video game levels or maybe it's superhero themed, or for all the baseball fans, you could change the module names to “1st inning, 2nd inning, etc.” It doesn't matter what theme you choose, but being creative and unique can add to the fun element and spark students' engagement. For my class, I used “missions,” where the “missions” were like any other module but the wording was changed, so as students completed the work for each mission, they felt like a secret agent completing challenging tasks to complete their assigned mission. Once they completed a mission, the next one would open.

Virtual Escape Rooms to Exit the Module

If you already include an end-of-module quiz, you can simply present the quiz in a different format—virtual escape room format! You can go to YouTube and view step-by-step instructions on designing these, as there are certain settings that prohibit students from passing to the next “lock” until they have used clues to disable a previous lock. You could set it up that if students escape the virtual escape room, it unlocks their next mission! Or, if they escape, they might be given a secret code word in order to enter into the next synchronous class session. Hint: be sure to send the escape room link to a playful colleague prior to students trying it. There may be some operator-error glitches that need to be worked out before it runs smoothly for students.

Hidden “Easter Eggs”

An “Easter egg” is some type of hidden clue or hidden prompt that you place within your recorded lecture or other documents that students must view/read for their asynchronous work. Let students know ahead of time that these Easter eggs will

be scattered throughout the course and they should keep an eye out. Maybe there's a reward or prize for finding them. So, for example, within one of your recorded lectures, you could provide some type of hint or action students need to complete. It can be as simple as a hint to a question to an upcoming quiz or it can be a message that provides an answer to one of the upcoming escape rooms. One of my colleagues puts Easter eggs in her syllabus. It instructs her students to email her the funniest meme they can find—if they make her laugh out loud, they get an extra credit point. These Easter eggs don't have to be anything extensive, or even all that frequent throughout the course, but just the fact that students know there are hidden messages and surprises makes learning more fun and engaging.

Games for Prizes

Including fun and play in your courses is easier than you think. You can take your existing lesson plans, discussions, or activities and simply add elements of game design to make them more fun. For example, I have students create “Five Golden Rules” for therapists that guide them in their decision-making about when and how to use therapeutic self-disclosure with clients. To make it a game, I tell students that with their Five Golden Rules for self-disclosure it should also be written as an acrostic (either the first letters of each word or random letters within each Golden Rule have to spell out a word). The groups share their Five Golden Rules, as well as their acrostic, and the group with the most creative or funniest acrostic wins a prize. This type of game did not take a ton of time to create and did not drastically alter the previously designed learning experience.

Alternatives to Recorded Lectures

I started making recorded lectures for content that I wanted students to learn in their asynchronous time. But, I started to get tired of listening to myself talk, so I knew my students were most likely getting tired

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Overall, at the end of the semester, students overwhelmingly reported that they became more metacognitive and autonomous learners. Furthermore, 95% believed they were responsible for their learning while only 38% felt the instructor was responsible for their learning. When actively engaged, students are more likely to feel ownership over their education and become more self-directed learners, critical to college success and an important distinction between high school and college.

As FYE instructors in a Minority Serving Institution, we want our students to persist, and we want them to know they have the skills to do so. It's essential that they feel motivated to learn and empowered because they can make sense of the way they learn. When we invite students to embrace active learning in our face-to-face and remote learning environments, we also encourage them to see themselves as strong, capable learners.

Paty Cantu, MA, is an instructor at Texas A&M International University. She is QM certified and is currently teaching First-Year Experience classes online. She was featured in TAMIU's Technology Spotlight, and she was a leader in the University's Gold Seal Award winning Excellence in Student Voter Engagement program.

Hayley Kazen, PhD, is an assistant professional at Texas A&M International University. She is QM certified and teaches both face-to-face and online FYE course. She has earned the Excellence in Instructional Technology award at her institution as well as Excellence in Teaching First-Year Seminars award presented by National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience.

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Paty Cantu, MA, and Hayley Kazen, PhD; Engagement to Autonomy: Four Strategies for Face-to-Face or Online Learning in First-Year Experience Courses; Faculty Focus; June 15, 2020; [https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-teaching-strategies/engagement-to-autonomy-four-strategies-for-face-to-face-or-online-learning-in-first-year-experience-courses/] June 30, 2020.

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of recorded lectures, too. Now, I provide alternative ways to convey information rather than solely recording lectures. I think asynchronous learning (all learning at that) needs to be dynamic and unpredictable, or you lose students' attention and focus. Instead of a lecture, I prompt students to research a certain idea to bring back to our synchronous class time. I have found that making students responsible for finding content that guides the discussion makes them highly invested. They come back eager to share what they've learned instead of me lecturing and providing them with the information. This way, they also tend to have little buy-in or interest in the learning. Additionally, I have also used YouTube as a resource for the topic of counseling. I found an approved, recorded counseling session on the internet and recorded myself introducing the video, played 10 minutes of it, and then discussed how I thought the counselor did regarding exploring the problem. This real life and applied example was much more engaging than a dry lecture of me

theoretically describing the process. Another idea I tried instead of a recorded lecture was through Adobe Spark. I made my own web page that progressed through a topic with graphics and thought-provoking questions. I provided students with the URL to my web page and they dug deeper into the topic in a more engaging way.

As a mental health counselor, I believe you can't demand a client's openness, respect, and vulnerability just because they are in counseling; you have to establish a strong enough therapeutic alliance to earn it. I believe the same goes for teaching. You can't demand engagement, vulnerability, and passion from students—we can hope for it, but you can't demand it. By making my classes more fun and playful, I've found it cultivates the very things we want from students to create a learning community that's engaged and passionate and fosters deeper learning.

***I recently started a faculty listserv called*

"Professors at Play." If you are interested in sharing your ideas about fun and play and/or getting inspiration from others on the listserv, please email me so I can add you! Lisa.forbes@ucdenver.edu

Lisa Forbes, PhD is an assistant clinical professor in the counseling program at the University of Colorado Denver. Lisa is a licensed professional counselor and is currently training to become a registered play therapist. Her research focuses on motherhood and mental health (#themotheringproject) and also incorporating fun, play, and games in teaching and learning for higher education.

Dr. Lisa Forbes; Fostering Fun: Engaging Students with Asynchronous Online Learning; Faculty Focus; June 17, 2020 [https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/online-education/fostering-fun-engaging-students-with-asynchronous-online-learning/] June 29, 2020.