Student Engagement

The success of any online learning is closely tied to the level of a student’s engagement with the course. Online learning offers amazing new tools that can enhance the pedagogical experience. However, humans are programmed for direct personal contact, so it’s very easy for us to become alienated from and tune out of online learning unless we feel genuinely engaged. This is why MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) have such poor completion rates. Hundreds of thousands may start the MOOC, but few will finish it, because they don’t feel connected to the course. Therefore, successful online educators invest a lot of time and thought into how to engage their students in fun and meaningful ways. Instructors also need to hold students accountable. In an in-person class on-campus, we frequently hold students accountable by taking attendance. Although attendance tells us virtually nothing about their level of engagement in a class, at least we know that they were there. During the COVID-19 global pandemic it became clear that traditional student attendance policies were unworkable, as not all students are able to access synchronous sessions online for a variety of valid reasons. Additionally, students frequently felt disconnected from the online class. It didn’t take long before many of them tuned out altogether. When students tune out, it’s not surprising that they don’t perform well in the class. We still need to hold students accountable, but just taking attendance is no longer a valid way to do that. Therefore, Habib has developed a new and frankly much better way to hold students accountable through what we call SEL (Student Engagement Level).

There are many different and appropriate ways to measure student engagement. As faculty are the most qualified to establish the appropriate measures of student engagement for their courses, faculty are expected to design measures of engagement appropriate to each class so that every student’s engagement can be fairly and accurately assessed. It is important to explain clearly to students through the course syllabus exactly how course engagement will be measured and assessed, and how frequently students will be notified of the sufficiency of their engagement in the course through the LMS.

In an exclusively on-campus context, students are able to check their attendance record daily. We obviously cannot give them a daily SEL rating, but we also cannot let them tune out so long that it becomes impossible for them to catch-up in a course. Therefore, students must be able to readily and regularly determine whether their level of engagement, which shall be expressed in the form of the “student engagement level” (SEL) in each course is satisfactory or not. At a minimum, students must be able to view an updated report of their engagement level in each class fortnightly. The engagement level may be expressed simply as “satisfactory” or “unsatisfactory,” or in any manner the instructor feels is appropriate to the course. The SEL may or may not factor into the final course grade as a dimension of participation, as the instructor. SEL can be part of assessment, if the faculty member feels it’s appropriate, but it’s not exactly the same as assessment. For example, if a student if faithfully attending all classes and engaging with asynchronous content, but does not score well on a quiz, it would be grossly unfair and inappropriate to rank their SEL as “unsatisfactory,” just as it would be unfair to mark them as not present in an in-person class just because they failed a quiz in that class.

There are many highly effective ways to measure SEL. For example, faculty can use breakout rooms and assign students to work on problem sets or discuss critical questions in synchronous classes. Short quizzes can be easily embedded in asynchronous videos to assess whether or not students are grasping key concepts. Discussion threads may be appropriate in some classes. Collaborative annotations tools, such as hypothesis can be an excellent way to judge whether students are engaging with course readings – and with each other. Faculty can insert questions into the readings and ask students to respond. Shared workspace using OneNote and other programs can also be very effective. Some faculty encourage students to use the chat function in Zoom and then preserve and post the chat transcript along with the recording of the Zoom session. Keeping track of how frequently and substantively students contribute to class discussions obviously remains a very useful measure of student engagement in a course. Some faculty use the Chat function in Canvas or ask students to comment on a film or reading. Creating in-class or online asynchronous debate topics can also be helpful. Faculty can also use their office hours to have one-on-one conversations with students to assess whether or not they are really participating in the class or not. Zoom, Canvas and Panopto also provide useful analytics that shed light on how much time a student spent on a reading or watching asynchronous content. Quick spontaneous pools can engage students. Some faculty also link their courses to social media and require students to make a given number of posts on an assigned topic. The possibilities for creative and thoughtful measures of student engagement are virtually limitless. What faculty should not do is come up with meaningless make-work assignments that are not really connected to the content of the course, as this just breeds resentment and cynicism among students.

Indicators of engagement in the online classroom can be monitored via three primary avenues: participation in asynchronous discussions, assignment activity, and course involvement. Examples of indicators are mentioned below: [[1]](#footnote-1)

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| Asynchronous Discussions | Assignment Activity | Course Involvement |
| • Student asks relevant questions that contributed to a more meaningful discussion.  • Student integrates diverse perspectives in response to discussion items.  • Student initiates assistance or support to facilitate classmates’ mastery of course material.  • Student applies theories and/or concepts to practical problems or new situations.  • Student actively participates in discussions beyond the minimum expectations for participation. | • Student voluntarily engages classmates for collaboration outside the scheduled course activities.  • Student synthesizes and/or organizes ideas, information, or experiences into new, more complicated interpretations and relationships.  • Student evaluates the value of information, arguments, or methods to assess the accuracy of his/her conclusions.  • Student utilizes feedback from assignments to improve his/her understanding and future performance. | • Student contacts you with course-related questions that extended the meaning of the course material.  • Student works effectively to identify, understand, and complete all given course assignments and tasks.  • Student logs in to class and participates on a regular basis.  • Student seeks out additional information or readings to complement course topics.  • Student completes all readings and studies on a regular basis.  •Student seeks out additional feedback or comments on his/her work. |

<https://www.facultyfocus.com/wp-content/uploads/images/FF-Online-Student-Engagement-Report.pdf>

**Useful Links:**

* [Online Education Policies, Habib University](https://habibuniversity-my.sharepoint.com/:w:/g/personal/anam_sophie_habib_edu_pk/ESkx5OhmxrxAld1-vmll8LIBsi_YBT4BGMmVJDjU8nCEew?e=wlnpFs)
* [Online Student Engagement Tools and Strategies (Faculty Focus)](https://www.facultyfocus.com/wp-content/uploads/images/FF-Online-Student-Engagement-Report.pdf)

1. “Online Student Engagement Tools and Strategies.” *Faculty Focus*, www.facultyfocus.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/FF-Online-Student-Engagement-Report.pdf. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)