

How to Keep Students' Attention in a Virtual Classroom

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Online Learning

Teachers worried about students zoning out during distance learning can lean on these programs for help.

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We've all been there: We ask our class a question and no one responds. Awkward silence. Students start to look at the ceiling or flip through their notebook to avoid eye contact. Eventually, someone volunteers an answer, someone is called on, or worse, we simply move on without any participation.

Getting your students to participate is hard enough when you're in your classroom. Getting them to participate in a virtual classroom is a whole different ball game. The social pressure of uncomfortable eye contact just isn't the same on a videoconference call. In fact, it's nearly nonexistent with current technology.

Luckily, the technology exists to help provide supplemental strategies to get your students responding—you may even want to bring some of these strategies back to your classroom once schools open up again.

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Ways to Boost Online Participation

Video chat polling features: Many video chat platforms come with polling features where the students see a question pop up on their screen. This is a great feature for a few reasons.

It helps you gauge what your class understands and what they may need you to review again. If you just spent five minutes reviewing a concept and end with “OK, any questions?” what do you usually hear back? Crickets.

Instead, ask a comprehension question using the poll feature. If only 35 percent of the class answers the question correctly, maybe it’s worth spending a little extra time reviewing.

Check out how to use these features in individual apps:

- [Zoom](#)
- [Microsoft Teams](#)
- [GoToMeeting](#)
- [WebEx Teams](#)

Discussion breakout rooms: Polling is great for helping break up concepts in a lecture, but what if your class is discussion based and you want your students to break out into small groups to work on a shared assignment?

There is technology for that, too. First, start out with all students on the same video call, and then, with a click of a button, split your students up into small groups to work on an assignment using a collaborative tool like Google Docs.

They will be on a call with only their group mates. You as the host can hop among all the groups to check in and facilitate. Once the time is up, end the breakouts and bring everyone together again. Call on each group to share their work.

Some of the videoconferencing platforms have this impressive feature built in already. See the list below to learn more about each one:

- **Zoom:** You can have up to 50 breakout sessions at once and can hop between them as you’d like. [Check out Zoom’s support page](#) to learn exactly how to set it up for your class.
- **GoToMeeting:** This platform has shared documents built in and will store them for you to review once the meeting ends. [More info here.](#)

- **Microsoft Teams:** This feature is reportedly coming soon.

This is a great feature to use if you have access to it. Not only does it get students working together on shared assignments, but also it helps students get used to talking to each other through a computer.

Chat feature: Simply ask a question and have your students answer through the chat feature. This is not ideal, since all students will see the answers of other students, so you may not see an accurate representation of their understanding. But you will have a record of each student's participation.

External quiz apps: You can also use external quiz tools like Kahoot or Quizizz. Simply set up the quizzes ahead of time, and prompt your students to go take the quiz during your meeting by sharing the quiz code. Students can take a few minutes to navigate to the quiz website and answer a question or two before moving on. The best part about these platforms is that they're free for both teachers and students.

Here are links to some student-approved quiz platforms:

- [Kahoot!](#): The base platform is free and fun to use. If you're interested in more advanced features, such as advanced reporting, individualized quizzes, additional question formats, and more, Kahoot offers paid plans starting at just \$3 per month.
- [Quizizz](#): This platform is 100 percent free and connects to Google Classroom. It has engaging gamification built in and an entire place to store your favorite teaching memes.
- [Quizlet](#): The free version of this platform is excellent. If you're interested in tracking student progress over time, removing ads, and adding personalized content, the paid version starts at just \$3 per month with additional savings for schoolwide plans.
- [Mentimeter](#): This platform's free version is limited to only a couple of questions, but the integration with online interaction is definitely worth your time to explore. The paid version starts at \$10 per month, or you can reach out to your school's admin to explore a schoolwide payment option to make it cheaper per instructor.

Expectations and Accountability

The above tools are great—but now let’s explore how to implement these and set your students up for success. Clear expectations set the stage for student participation.

Let your students know what good participation looks like. Is logging in to the video call enough to count as participation? That may be all that your administrators are looking for, but what does good look like, according to your standards?

Counting each time a student talks or adds to a discussion can be time-consuming. So let technology work for you.

A great way to measure participation is by requiring a permanent product—this is something your student leaves behind after they leave the call. It can be anything from an answer to an online discussion prompt to their quiz score, a response left in the chat, or the shared product from a group assignment.

Whatever your definition of *good* is, be sure it is measurable and achievable.

- **Be present:** Join the call and stay for the duration of class time.
- **Comprehension checks:** Answer each quiz question that pops up, perhaps with extra points for answering 100 percent correct.
- **Discussion assignment:** Work with your team to complete the assignment.

Regardless of which online tool you use, it is clear that we cannot rely on in-person tactics to encourage virtual class participation. Luckily, the tools and tactics here can help enhance your online teaching. You may even find yourself bringing these back to your classroom when schools reopen.