

Stimulating Engagement in Flipped Learning Environments

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Student engagement has always been one of the teachers' major preoccupations whether in classroom activities or, as more recently attempted, in online or hybrid ones. Facilitating the effectiveness of the instructional approach, technology has played a significant role over the course of the last decade in providing valuable tools and resources to enhance flipped learning and stimulate engagement in various ways, some of which being presented in this article. The teaching techniques used in traditional classrooms (as our survey conducted on the students studying at The Technical University of Cluj-Napoca shows), as well as the attention and interest teachers invest in their students' future in order to craft space for values, do not differ too much in virtual learning environments. We have identified the need to embrace innovative approaches and adapt or evolve to effectively support students' engagement and promote interactive learning experiences, highly beneficial to their future careers.

Student engagement; class activity; values; instructional technologies; flipped learning.

Student engagement-an overview

Thanks to the recent boom of information and communication technologies, students have experienced a radical change of their lives, not only in their day-to-day activities, but also in the educational field.

If educators design learning experiences based solely on their own vision, goals and circumstances, they may be merely imposing their set of values upon their students; engaged learning is unlikely to happen in such an environment. (...) It is only when students are empowered to take charge of their own learning by co-designing their learning experiences with teachers and other students that they are more likely to engage in their learning process. (Lim, 2008, p.1002)

Since providing a universal recipe for engagement is not only difficult, but also impossible, as it takes into account factors such as age, subject, and individual student needs, we have tried to put forward some components that contribute to creating an engaging classroom environment. Based on the survey carried out on a group of more than 100 students who study at The Technical University of Cluj-Napoca as well as on our own experience as teachers in the period including that of the pandemic, we were able to perceive new dimensions to teaching that also incorporate technology tools and multimedia applications that students nowadays are so happy to use. Admitting the fact that we cannot ask learners to leave aside technology and gain knowledge through alternative means, probably less enticing ones, such as those we used in the past, we have attempted to suggest ways to create engagement in a model which favors technology but does not neglect face-to-face interaction and which is commonly known as flipped learning.

What can teachers do to stimulate students' engagement? Getting to know them better, their interests, strengths and weaknesses, frights and worries, and attempting to lend a helping hand by exposing similar situations or multimedia materials that would stir their curiosity to the extent that they would like to find out more about the specific issues. Working on a psychological level with each student is a daunting task for a teacher and unfortunately, the present day educational system at a large level in our country does not offer this possibility. It would imply a one-to-one interaction with the teacher acting as both facilitator and mentor, and the student being the determined and engaged partner in the learning journey who persists in the face of difficulties and associates the tasks with outcomes that have meaning and value for him.

A learner may have the ability to take charge of his learning without necessarily utilizing this ability to the full when he decides to learn. Different degrees of self-direction in learning may result either from different degrees of autonomy or from different degrees of exercise of autonomy. (Holec, 1981, p. 4)

Teachers' guidance here is essential in enabling learners to take ownership of their learning. In doing so, they appeal to their metacognitive skills and develop the abilities "to independently use the course materials, diverse resources or learning contexts." (Rusu & Muresan, 2022, p.57)

Fostering a supportive and personalized learning in our present-day classes can, nevertheless, be adjusted to fit the actual conditions where one-to-one interaction can make room for a group of students having similar interests to be encouraged to actively participate in their learning. The teacher's role is crucial in identifying and pairing or grouping students whose preoccupations could resemble and then addressing their needs by providing instructional resources, clarifying concepts, and offering specific guidance. Basically, they should start with what students need to talk about, or read or write about or simply listen to, then they should create the necessary conditions so that they are exposed to input of the vocabulary and grammar that they would need to finally be able to appropriate it through communication. As a facilitator, the teacher has to ensure that students feel valued, heard, and encouraged to create a sense of ownership and empowerment which can definitely lead to increased student engagement. As a mentor, the teacher goes beyond academic instruction and takes a vested interest in each student's growth and development. Through this mentorship role, a strong connection is established with students so that they should be guided to navigate challenges, set goals, and develop important life skills.

Additionally, the teacher can provide timely and targeted feedback, recognizing students' efforts and progress. Understanding each learner's strengths and weaknesses allows the teacher to design educational experiences that resonate with students and tap into their intrinsic motivation. As for learners, being engaged equals the fact that they are safe, they know where they are and where they have to go and they make a simple equation in two questions: *How much effort is it going to take me to get there?* and *What chances of success do I have?* If both are balanced, then students are motivated and consequently aware, so what teachers need to harness is exactly that awareness so that learners can literally succeed. By incorporating student interests and perspectives into the instructional design, the teacher can enhance student engagement and foster a sense of relevance and meaning in the learning process.

1.1. It all starts with rules

Commonly agreeing that a world without rules is a world of chaos, we embrace the idea that establishing clear guidelines and expectations, whether collaboratively made or simply agreed upon before the instructional process, is something that will provide structure, set boundaries, and establish a sense of order and respect among students. When rules are explicitly outlined, students understand what is expected of them and can make informed choices about their actions. Involving students in the rule-making process can increase their sense of ownership and investment in maintaining a positive learning environment. Teachers can facilitate class discussions to gather students' input and ideas for classroom rules. This collaborative approach helps students understand the rationale behind the rules and fosters a sense of shared responsibility for maintaining a respectful and engaged classroom community.

Although the saying goes that *rules are made to be broken*, the urge is for both the teachers and the students to respect them. By consistently applying the rules, teachers promote a sense of fairness and encourage students to actively engage without fear of inconsistency or favoritism. At the same time, they offer students a model to follow and enable them to educate themselves into accepting rules and not rejecting them, but assimilating them to finally considering them their own and even growing to enjoy what they are 'obliged' to do (by means of these rules). Teenagers nowadays expect to get the maximum result with the minimum effort, so by teaching them to accept regulations they will be more willing to accept learning and acknowledge its usefulness in preparation for adult life which is definitely burdened with rules and laws they cannot avoid. By adhering to rules, they develop self-discipline and self-regulation skills which will contribute to their personal growth, autonomy, and success in academic and professional settings. This is how students educate themselves to accept rules: by being self-disciplined, by setting goals and targets and even rewards after completing something they have imposed on themselves, they acquire good results and are satisfied, which definitely stimulates more engagement. This engagement will then be nurtured by themselves as a consequence of their being used to accepting rules. First, the rules come from others, then learners assimilate them and make external rules be their own rules, and finally they make more personal rules to accomplish their own goals, as they notice that by self-discipline they start enjoying what they have to do. The satisfaction students get by self-discipline is somehow guaranteed and it definitely generates engagement.

1.2. Turning rules into practice

Teachers and especially EFL teachers are aware of the fact that they stand in front of their group of students teaching them more than English, teaching them values, through their own words and deeds. As a teacher, the most important thing is to lead by example. Teachers play a vital role in modeling the behaviors they expect from their students. Being kind, patient and fair is something most of the teachers naturally do because there was someone else, years ago, who taught them to be so. By consistently demonstrating active listening, respectful communication, and a positive attitude towards learning, teachers provide a powerful example for students to follow. Modeling expected behaviors helps create a classroom culture that values engagement and sets the tone for student participation.

Simply walking into the classroom at the beginning of a school year and telling learners that they should behave in accordance with a certain set of values, will not work. Instead, teachers can, however, set specific small goals and ask students to try to stick to them. These include setting expectations for an active learning environment which relies on active listening, asking questions, contributing to class discussions, collaboration and respectful communication, positive reinforcement, completing assignments, and participating in group activities. During the pandemic, we could all notice that virtual learning environments required

explicit instruction and modeling. We had to explicitly discuss and reinforce issues and values such as honesty, integrity, responsibility, and empathy whether we incorporated them in discussions, case studies, or depicted real-life examples to facilitate students' understanding and application of these values in their online interactions.

Dialogue is another value which students should learn in terms of conducting and achieving consensus on sensitive issues, so that when they disagree, they should be able to use alternatives and make sound judgment. This is especially important in a world where social media sometimes fosters aggression, as there are people who do not seem to know what polite disagreement is. In this way, teachers can be the ones to implement strategies that students can use to politely counterattack aggressiveness. They can guide students in developing good digital habits, such as respectful online communication, responsible use of social media, and awareness of digital footprints. By promoting digital citizenship, educators help students cultivate values of digital ethics, integrity, and responsible behavior in the online world.

Media can be used in a beneficial way to provide examples of stories or message-based input that contain values and engage students into thinking about relevant or important issues to them. The selected input can bring different cultures to their attention so as to enable them to develop awareness and respect for those cultures. It is important that students should be exposed to the true complexity of the world, to its diversity, and in diverse ways. The opportunities that our fast-changing globalized world offers teenagers are enormous, and so are the challenges. Therefore, teachers need to make sure that every generation learns what it means to know to succeed in the world. By integrating multimedia and interactive resources that align with values-based themes, teachers can facilitate meaningful learning experiences. Virtual learning provides access to a wide range of multimedia resources, such as videos, interactive presentations, virtual tours, and educational games. Teachers can incorporate these resources to make lessons more dynamic and engaging, allowing students to actively explore and interact with the content. They can also design virtual games, quizzes, or challenges that revolve around values-related topics meant to support students' holistic development.

By providing students with a clear understanding of what is expected of them, teachers can promote active engagement and hold students accountable for their learning. There are several means to encourage continued engagement such as verbal praise, class rewards, even certificates or other forms of recognition that acknowledge and celebrate students' efforts and positive contributions.

Why flipped learning?

Because there is so much information that we have been continuously bombarded with in the last few years, because young generations are used to informative multimedia input that comes and goes equally fast and their brains have become accustomed to retaining less information (as there is always a chance to retrieve it), the teacher's mission

is that of stirring learners' curiosity in making logical and meaningful connections. This mission goes beyond simply imparting knowledge and encompasses the broader goal of fostering a love for learning and empowering students to become independent thinkers and lifelong learners. Besides the activities that can be done in place-based settings and which should largely be focused on communication, we consider that incorporating technology and multimedia resources can capture students' interest and enhance their learning experience both in the flipped or blended learning styles.

In flipped learning, the traditional order of instruction is *flipped*. Students engage with instructional content, such as pre-recorded videos or online resources, outside of class time, typically as homework. The experiment of using recorded lectures that Bergmann and Sams (2012, p.4) discussed in their book proved the fact that "students who missed class were able to learn what they had missed. Some students who were in class and heard the live lecture began to rewatch the videos. Some would watch them when reviewing for exams." The efficiency of this model was clearly demonstrated to be better than that of lecturing and assigning homework, as students "were completing all their work with 20 minutes left in class." (Bergmann & Sams, 2012, p.5) Therefore, class time is then utilized for active and interactive learning experiences, such as discussions, group activities, problem-solving, and individualized support from the teacher. Although the term was "popularized by various media outlets and seems to have stuck, there is no such thing as *the* flipped classroom" (Bergmann & Sams, 2012, p.6), the framework it establishes definitely suggests a personalization of education tailored to students' individual needs. The focus of flipped learning is on moving direct instruction out of the classroom and using in-person time for more engaging and interactive activities that deepen understanding and promote student collaboration.

As for blended learning where the online and face-to-face components are integrated and complement each other, the key is to balance in-class and out-of-class work so that the teacher should identify which activities can be taught digitally and which personally. While traditional learning strategies introduce students to the course materials and offer them the benefit of hands-on skills and practice, the digital aspect of the blended learning style focuses on additional content which reinforces the concepts in students' minds. This multifaceted approach enables them to learn and remember lessons and engage most fully with the course materials.

In virtual learning environments, teachers must consider the unique challenges and opportunities presented by the digital space. Although the underlying principles of teaching and fostering values remain the same, educators need to employ strategies that are specifically tailored to the online context. They must also make sure that each technological element is aligned with the classroom goals and that it facilitates learning and boosts engagement.

A highly effective way to foster engagement especially at the beginning of a class is to use a bell-ringer activity. This can be in the form of a warm-up question of the day that is not really easy but requires critical thinking - usually about material from previous classes - and is designed to invite various responses and opinions or it can be a preview question meant to introduce content to be taught during the upcoming period. Alternatively, a recent news headline can be displayed on the screen so that students could take a few minutes to discuss it or its implications. In our case, it is usually related to technology so they can refer to its potential impact on society, industry, or daily life. In doing so, students are encouraged to share their insights and opinions. Examples are numerous and can point out, in the context of a web research, for instance, how trustworthy it is, how some people may use lies when posting on social media platforms or they can simply ask students to identify the ways in which they think the internet can cause people harm. This will definitely grab students' attention, engage their critical thinking skills and also get them to expand on their existing knowledge.

Digital tools can be used to capture ideas, both by students and by teachers. We have identified that computer work poses no problems for the students who responded to our survey as the figure below shows:

4. How difficult was it for you to use digital technology (platforms, tools, applications, etc.)?

[More Details](#)

● Extremely difficult	0
● Somewhat difficult	5
● Neutral	15
● Somewhat not difficult	46
● Extremely not difficult	67

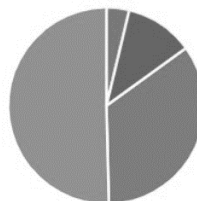


Figure 1. Digital competences as indicated by students

Therefore, playing with technology in both flipped and on-site classes will definitely oblige students to think quickly and critically and will stimulate engagement in an exciting way. Digital educational games such as Kahoot! can be used with laptops and interactive screens to start a class on any topic and keep learners engaged and interested irrespective of their age knowing that the first thing they get to do at the beginning of a lesson is hop on something as attractive as a game. When gauging students' knowledge before a lesson on a specific topic, it is equally all right if the students' responses are correct - as this will increase their enthusiasm and enhance their understanding - or if they

are wrong, as this will give them more room to discover and learn about the topic. In both ways, they will feel encouraged about their knowledge and if they respond either written, digitally, or verbally, their answers - or at least some of them - can be used to spring into the topic for the day.

At the same time, a short survey can help teachers gather baseline information on what the students know about a topic before being introduced so that they can evaluate the instructional methodology and plan accordingly based on the students' performance. These warm-up surveys can also be used to monitor students' progress half way through the unit especially when they do not remember what has already been taught and the teaching can be adjusted so as to review critical material.

However well technology may provide opportunities for collaboration, critical thinking, and practical application of concepts, we have noticed the need to accommodate these within the format of flipped learning so that students could benefit of classroom time for active learning, interactive discussions, group activities, and individualized support. More than half of our respondents to the survey carried out in The Technical University of Cluj-Napoca agreed with the fact that technology is a useful tool for connecting people at a distance (figure 2), but when it comes to appreciating the quality of communication, it is both less expressive and reduced as compared to the one in place-based settings (figures 2 & 3).

6. When I think of online communication I feel that:

[More Details](#)

● it gives me extra time for thinki...	50
● it is less time-consuming	36
● it is less expressive than F 2 F co...	64
● it is as efficient as F 2 F comun...	13
● it connects the people at a dista...	70
● Other	1

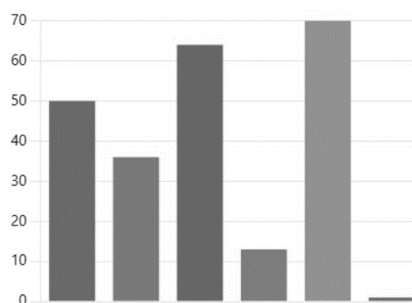


Figure 2. Assessment of online communication

Surprisingly, although technology has allowed for real-time interactions through instant messaging, video calls or social media, and although virtual communication platforms allow regular interactions and updates, fostering a sense of closeness and support, our students have appreciated the quality of relationships as being reduced (figure3). We attribute this to the lack of non-verbal cues and the reduced emotional

connection due to the absence of physical presence in virtual interactions. To somehow balance on the one hand the reduced opportunities for meaningful in-person interactions and social bonding and on the other hand the constant influx of messages and notifications from various virtual platforms which are both consequences of the technology we have embraced, the most appropriate solution we find for the instructional process to be successful is to blend the two learning environments. Digital resources like Google Apps and any other new tools can add variety to the flipped learning environments and help students transform into focused and engaged learners. However, striking a balance between virtual and in-person communication is essential to maintain the richness and depth of relationships in an increasingly digital world.

10. If people met online more often, the quality of the following aspects will be

[More Details](#)

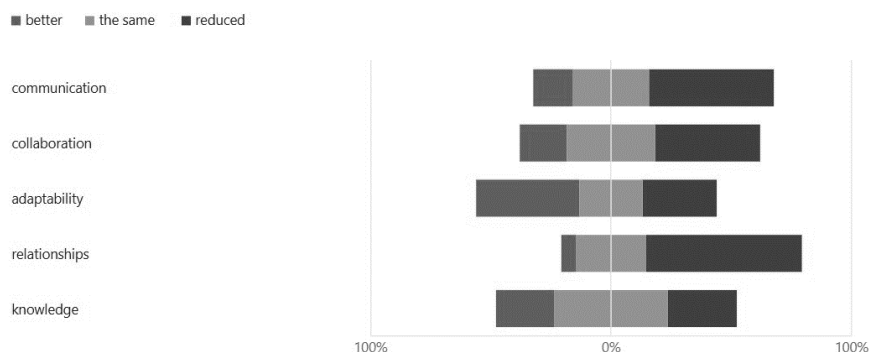


Figure 3. The quality of aspects under discussion in the online environment

To support student engagement by means of real social interaction, Figure 4 highlights the necessity of student–teacher interaction and student–peer interaction in real classroom settings. Both of them are essential components of the learning process that significantly influence the quality of education and students' overall academic and social development.

If you could not attend on-site classes, what would you miss the most about them?



Figure 4. Students' considerations of on-site classes

Positive interactions with teachers can motivate students to engage actively in the learning process as their encouragement and belief in students' abilities can boost learners' confidence and self-esteem. At the same time, student-peer interaction plays a vital role in shaping students' social skills, communication abilities, and teamwork. The emotional support we mentioned above and which creates a sense of belonging within the classroom community would not be possible in a virtual environment solely. A supportive peer network can positively impact students' well-being and mental health. So, working together and moving forward with a project or any other group activity, in or outside class, contributes to stimulating collaboration and building communication skills.

There are countless examples of practical and effective ways to support student engagement and create a positive and productive learning environment. We have endeavored to mention but a few that we found to contribute to helping students understand the material better and improving their learning outcomes.

Conclusions

Being a multidimensional concept that encompasses cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects, engagement refers to the level of interest, attention, and involvement that students demonstrate in their learning process. We have attempted to analyze this concept in relation to a learning environment that incorporates digital tools so much employed by students and teachers alike in recent years, namely flipped learning. Establishing clear learning goals, rules, expectations, and feedback, teachers connect the learning material to real-world contexts and students' interests, add relevance and meaningfulness and enhance learners' motivation and engagement. The teaching techniques used in traditional classrooms are further on supported by access to digital content, online learning platforms which flipped learning often utilizes, video-based instruction and personalized learning which allows for differentiation and targeted support, ensuring that each student's learning needs are addressed effectively. Both teacher roles of facilitator and mentor are described in the instructional environment which empowers educators, in the context of flipped learning, to design, deliver, and manage experiences more efficiently and effectively.

Values are explicitly taught and modeled by means of discussions, case studies, and real-life examples to help students develop a deeper understanding of their values and how they impact their online interactions. In virtual learning environments, teachers have the opportunity to leverage technology and explore new teaching strategies that enhance students' engagement and promote the development of values, among which we have mentioned digital ethics, integrity, and responsible behavior. Multimedia resources, such as videos, interactive presentations, virtual tours, and educational games can be

incorporated so as to encourage students to apply their knowledge, engage in critical thinking, and develop teamwork skills.

Considering that students' motivation and engagement must be triggered once they enter the classroom, we have provided some examples of bell-ringer activities and their benefits to both teachers and learners. We have also taken into account the results of our survey conducted on students in their first year at The Technical University of Cluj-Napoca and which led us to favor a hybrid instructional model which connects authentic and real-world contexts to equally real but virtual ones. By embracing multimodal approaches, teachers enable students to make logical and meaningful connections between theory and practice.

We dare say that the future belongs not to those that have the information, but to those that are able to apply it in a visionary way. This is something we need to develop in our students' minds; to cultivate a growth mindset in the classroom, emphasizing that intelligence and abilities can be developed through effort and perseverance. By encouraging them to embrace challenges, view mistakes as opportunities for learning, and adopt a positive attitude towards overcoming obstacles, we nurture their curiosity by promoting a sense of wonder, resilience, and a desire for continuous improvement.

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