

TA Tip: Promoting student-student and student-instructor interactions virtually

Introduction

As a result of the recent COVID-19 pandemic, educators have had to completely change the methods of teaching in an effort to effectively relay the information necessary to educate their students yet somehow maintain their student's attention through a screen. As an undergraduate TA myself, I observed that the students' ability to learn was greatly influenced by the extent that they felt comfortable with their peers and the educators. Though this is to be expected and a welcoming environment is always important, the impact of a lack of comfort on student participation and attention is only exemplified as a result of the COVID-19 virtual learning format. That being said, my experience as a TA during this strange semester brought forth a few methods to increase the productivity of a synchronous lab and ensure that students are engaged and interested in the content of their class.

Procedure

Trust in student-student interactions during breakout groups

The effective integration of cooperative learning in small groups is essential to foster the building of student relationships in a virtual setting. Students are able to converse with each other without the shadow of a teacher resulting in awkward silence and simply avoiding the un-comfortability that students inevitably have around their teachers. With only the necessary amount of monitoring of the individual breakout groups to keep the group on track, students' interaction with their peers aids in introducing each other as well as improving comfortability in sharing opinions/answering questions. That being said, it is important to emphasize the standards of a separated group education method. The students must stay focused on the material and emulate an educational environment. Minimal monitoring of the groups is required, but only as much as is necessary to maintain a beneficial learning environment.

Use variety to hold engagement

Asking questions or posing a scenario is only so effective if used too frequently. Introducing occasional games, competitions, or other activities in place of a presentation with questions ensures the students remain engaged with the material. Staring at a screen for a period of time will steadily lose student interest as the lab progresses, thus using an entertaining educational activity preserves the attention of the class. Some suggestions are Kahoot, using polls, and simply varying the format in which questions are delivered in each lab. Introducing the lab, presenting a brief introduction into the topics to be covered, then presenting a one of the given options effectively displaces the monotony of lecturing directly off of a slide by integrating an entertaining method of education.

Build rapport during synchronous classes

Acting professionally informal when appropriate often helped connect to the students and developed strong relationships over time. The misconception that teachers are not “real people” causes students to only associate their teachers with formal, education related characteristics which creates a gap between student and teacher in terms of relationships. Students are more inclined to speak up and ask questions if they feel as if their teacher is personable and relatable. Adding a personality to the computer screen can make crucial differences in how students perceive their educators.

Offer personalized feedback outside of class

Furthermore, offering impressionable and beneficial feedback to students not only improves the quality of their work, but also personalizes the name on a screen and increases the comfortability between students and teachers. Reliable feedback ensures the students know that their educators care enough to not only do their “job” and grade, but also offer their opinions to provide a better understanding of what was done right and what was done wrong for the better of the student.

Conclusions

For all intents and purposes, the ability to build relationships between students and educators, maintain attention in an efficient and educational manner, as well as impose a “person behind the screen” mentality when an educator’s name appears on an assignment were all equally and unequivocally essential to the success of an effective educational environment during the COVID-19 virtual learning period. Future virtual learning must ensure that each of said aspects are focused upon and emphasized for the sake of our student’s educational success.

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