Make Every ^VIRTUAL Moment Count

Author

Christina Quarelli
K–8 Curriculum Specialist
McGraw Hill

Christina, a former K–8 teacher of 18 years, specializes in gifted education. She holds a Master of Education degree in Educational Counseling and has worked as both a teacher mentor and instructional coach focusing on best practices for engagement and maximizing learner potential. Christina is currently a K–8 curriculum specialist for McGraw Hill and resides in Phoenix, Arizona. Most recently, Christina has created teacher supports and resources for those transitioning to teaching their core content remotely.

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Introduction

Let me share my screen.

Remember that you are on camera!

Eye contact please!

Sit up straight.

Unmute yourself.

Please mute yourself.

Drop it in the chat box.

The list of our new remote learning "mantras" goes on—and they don't seem to be going away any time soon.

As teachers and students across the globe have had their agility, patience, and emotions tested and retested, there has been a consistent challenge: how to make the most of their time together. In addition to the technical logistics, student access, and a whole host of other obstacles that have come with abrupt and revisited distance learning, the challenging feat of how to make every minute of instructional time more interesting, relevant, and engaging has been one of the more difficult hurdles for teachers.

Any educator can tell you that engagement is the first door students must walk through to access the learning goal, so using various strategies is key and can be easily incorporated throughout the normal school day. However, with our NEW normal, every teacher can also tell you that there has been a cloud looming over them daily; a secret lock of sorts that they've been desperate to unlock in order to motivate students to be invested and active participants in their remote learning.

Although there isn't a single answer or combination to that lock—with the obvious and never-ending list of environmental variables that are simply out of the teacher's control—there are still things teachers CAN control, such as the learning climate that is fostered and the strategies that are employed.

There are various ways teachers can be creative and give their remote teaching a bit of a "refresh", and it's not just by creating cute Google slides or virtual backgrounds. Those are great, but ultimately, that's not what students will remember. Students retain experiences and what we do WITH them. As mentioned in a prior article in this series, it's never too late to pause, reflect, pivot, and evolve. Being agile, taking a detour, and experimenting with some of the following practices will not only help transform the motivation and participation in your remote classroom—they can also dramatically impact the class culture, and they're fun! Many of these strategies work beautifully together and work in any learning model (whether that's in-class, hybrid, or 100% remote). And the best part? None of these will require much, if any, additional planning time!

1. ESTABLISH A SAFE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Drawing from Maslow's Theory of Human Motivation, active participation cannot meet its true potential if a safe learning environment with positive rapport isn't initially established and consistently maintained. Students will not engage if they don't feel safe, even remotely. Although it seems like a no-brainer, it should always be at the forefront of our minds, especially since there's been a significant uptick recently in school-age children experiencing anxiety and depression. Assigning tasks that embed social emotional principles and require metacognitive application can not only create a consistent and positive atmosphere in your virtual classroom, but also break down common mental or emotional obstacles students face when approaching their learning goals. Regardless of the content or topic, it can be as easy as the type of questions teachers ask when both introducing topics and concluding lessons.

Self-Actualization

Self-Esteem Needs

Love/Belonging

Safety Needs

Physiological Needs
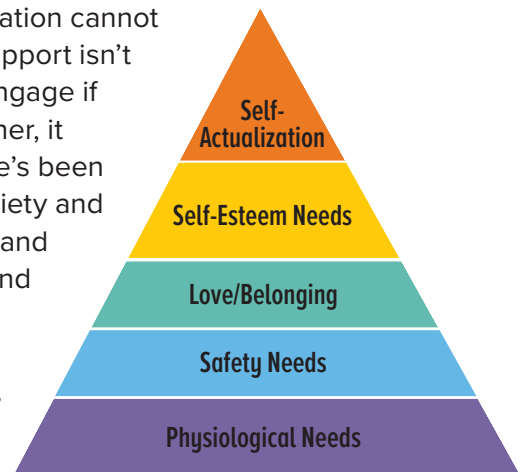
Teachers often feel that they need permission when it comes to changing up the steps of a lesson because they believe that they aren't teaching the content with fidelity if they aren't asking EVERY question in the order it was printed in the teacher's edition. This might be because they are linear thinkers or perhaps don't feel as savvy with particular content areas (a common feeling for elementary teachers who are asked to be an expert in all content areas). Thankfully, there are some easy ways any teacher can safely invite students into any new task that don't require any extra planning time or sacrifice best instructional practices.

When introducing any new topic, all students, regardless of level, need permission to "not know" so they feel safe in their learning community. Try starting a vocabulary lesson, for example, with a self-analysis by your students. Ask, "Which words do you know, don't know, or have heard of?" A number can be assigned to each response with students answering by holding up their finger or typing their answer in a chat box as you list the words. There are plenty of anonymous digital surveys you can use for this as well. This metacognitive practice can be applied to other skills by simply asking "How confident are you in your answer?" and giving them options such as "I definitely know it", "I think I know it", or "I have no clue!"

The more a student feels they are your learning partner and teammate, the more they will engage and be an active participant in the "game."

In addition, ask students to digitally highlight words that are unfamiliar outside of the prescribed list. This can be a game-changer, especially in content areas such as social studies or science, where the complexity of the informational text may be substantially higher than what they are normally reading. Non-verbally giving students permission to not know things up front creates a normalcy and organic precursor to instruction. Showing that this as a natural progression in the learning process will deescalate anxious and striving learners, because a common misconception of these students is that they are alone in not knowing. Besides their confidence in seeing their own learning unfold, students can also increase their chances for mastery if they know their starting point up front and can visibly see their own growth.

Another example of setting the stage in a safe way is during English Language Arts time when a new reading is introduced. After students have listened to it (maybe using a digital audio feature), have them use their virtual tools to answer open-ended questions in addition to the recommended ones from your teacher's edition. Posing questions such as, "What do you wonder, notice, or what questions do you have?" not only drive better classroom discussions, but they offer students a voice in the learning trajectory and invite them in as your learning partner. Students will feel valued as class community members when you return to their initial question throughout the process and as they dig deeper and uncover more within the text or lesson. By circling back, you've established their wonderings as a priority, simultaneously creating more "buy-in" the next time you launch a new unit in the same manner. They will feel heard and that their thoughts matter. The more a student feels they are your learning partner and teammate, the more they will engage and be an active participant in the "game."

Just as important as how lessons are introduced is how we end them. The last thing we do when concluding a lesson may very well be what sticks with our students. Wrapping up with "What questions do you still have?", can show students that not having all the answers is okay and that learning is a process that's more of a marathon than a sprint.

If this topic interests you, you can check out more tips on how to integrate social-emotional learning into everyday instruction.

2. USE PARTICIPATION POINTS AS CURRENCY

It's no secret that motivation has a direct effect on all levels of student engagement. If your virtual classroom is built on a safe space and motivates your student, then their growth, mastery, and retention will have something to stand upon firmly. We must have solid ground before we can gain momentum. However, now more than ever, one of the most challenging tasks teachers face is how to instill intrinsic motivation in their learners from a distance.

Consider using participation points as currency for your remote classroom. Establish a set amount of minimum points for the grading period; maybe it's 10 points for the first quarter/semester that gradually increases throughout the school year as you get to know your students. This will also provide ample time for the more inhibited students to find their voices as the year progresses. Make it realistic for all students; even conferring with students to establish their own goals is a safe way to set the stage for what may perceived, initially, as a punitive system. Bear in mind that students will always be harsher on themselves! This goal should be dynamic and have the ability change throughout the term, if both you and the student agree, when deemed appropriate and give certain situations. Maybe they need to amp it up, or maybe they need to scale it back.

Next, establish ground rules on earning participation points, such as always providing evidence/reasoning to support their answer. Consider different point values by creating a point menu for various types of engagement: summarizing a peer's thought might be 1 point, extending a thought might be two points, respectfully disagreeing with another student might be three, citing another source that is relevant could be worth 5, etc. When assigning a range of point values, consider the depth and complexity of what they've shared.

Also, think about allowing students the opportunity to "bank" a certain number of points above their total for themselves. Why? Maybe they had a bad day earlier in the semester and just couldn't get it together on a prior assignment. Allowing a limited number to go towards other assignments could very well alter the entire experience for that student, because second chances are a natural occurrence in life. They will one day be able to retake their driver's test if necessary, or an entry exam for a specific school program, maybe even the bar exam! When students know that nothing is carved in stone, they will naturally relax. For the remaining points, allow students to practice generosity and donate them to other students who maybe didn't reach their goal due to their shy nature. To make this anonymous, you could have a class point bank; students can write a persuasive essay explaining why they believe they should be chosen to use some of the donated points and using evidence to support their argument.

Some teachers may think this is rescuing students and taking away accountability or ownership over mistakes or mediocre effort. However, students will quickly learn that choose this route involves more work and more effort than simply fulfilling the requirement in the first place. Using participation points as class currency can be a profound and non-punitive way to make students the center of their learning and participation. It can boost motivation, work ethic, and the overall supportive nature of your class community.

3. CREATE RELEVANCE: LEVERAGE POP CULTURE/SOCIAL MEDIA

Teachers can keep their class attentive by experimenting with both the mode and medium of their attention grabbers, instruction of various skills, as well as how students show evidence of their learning back to the teacher. Students easily grow tired of the overused call/responses such as, "1,2,3 Eyes on Me!", "Class, Class" or clapping patterns in the elementary setting. Of course, this will depend greatly on the age of your students, but using current taglines, top 40 music, theme songs, quotes from THEIR favorite movies or commercials for them to complete will surely get their attention.

Here are some fun examples to try. There are several online, but have fun coming up with your own, and consider having students create some as well to generate enthusiasm and ownership.

Teacher

Ba da ba ba ba (McDonald's)
Who lives in a pineapple under the sea?
Nationwide is...
Baby Shark...
Chicken Wing Chicken Wing
Savage love...
We will, we will, we will
Lion, tigers, and bears...

Students

I'm lovin' it
Sponge Bob Squarepants
On your side
Do do do do do
Hot Dog and Bologna
Did somebody, did somebody break your heart
Rock You!
Oh my!

Varying how you grab the attention of your whole class will create relevance and be a fun brain break and recalibration for everyone. If you decide to diversify your attention-grabbing portfolio, remember to continue to add to it and keep it updated, adding new ones throughout the year and class to class. What worked just a couple of years ago may not speak to your current roster of students.

In addition to establishing relevance to refocus students, another sure-fire way to invite students into a new concept is to introduce it using multimedia from their everyday lives. Using familiar movie clips or lyrics from songs will surely pull them in. All movies started as scripts and songs are in verse form (poetry), so ELA skills and strategies are a perfect fit here, especially when it comes to figurative language or symbolism. For example, symbolism can be easily introduced with a short clip of an animation. Watch this 4-minute clip about the story of Carl and Ellie from Disney/Pixar's movie *UP* and think about what the symbolism is or how characters grow/change over time. Current television commercials can also highlight various propaganda techniques and well-known songs or speeches are a fantastic way to introduce, teach, or even assess various forms of figurative language. Try listening to Martin Luther King Jr.'s *I Have a Dream* speech and see if you can identify all of the metaphors! These could also be fun activities to use as formative assessment.

High engagement and buy-in can be ignited by what teachers ask students to do to show their learning. Ask yourself, "How are students showcasing their knowledge?" Think about what students are using or creating to provide evidence of their learning. What products can be assessed and/or inform instruction? Other than assessments and daily classwork, what other projects are students working on and what do those look like? Are you relying more on worksheets for students to complete asynchronously? Ask yourself how engaging these items are.

A very powerful way for students to engage in project-based learning is by giving them choice in their products. Choice boards or menus are nothing new but consider what choices you offer. Simulating a current medium from their world—such as the latest and greatest social media platform that many of your students are using daily—might just empower them to put their best foot forward and be invested in the work they are producing. Whether that's creating hashtags with a single image (Instagram), creating a 1-minute video (Tik Tok), or writing a concise 140 character synthesis (Twitter), allowing students to utilize their "language" to communicate their learning will put them in a familiar environment which they will appreciate and enjoy.

A powerful way for students to engage in project-based learning is by giving them choice in their products.

When studying a famous person or reading a biography, for example, creating a social media page for that person with required attributes will not only be fun for students who engage in social media, but will help them organize their thoughts around it. The same could be done for the setting of a story or representing certain time periods. If students were studying Nellie Bly, for example, what would her status say? Who would her friends be? What pages would she follow? With some guidelines and clear expectations, your students might just surprise you in what they produce!

Whatever you decide to implement, you'll need to know your students well to do it well. Make the back-to-school inventory/survey at the beginning of the year specific and intentional. You can create a second one for after Winter Break. Stay current by asking questions during class in-between/transition time. Favorite cartoons, songs, YouTube stars, bloggers, well-known commercials, or preferred social media platforms will allow you to speak their language, resulting in improved student engagement. It will also start shifting the tone of your class, because students will feel more valued, heard, and respected simply by your effort to stay relevant.

4. FOSTER HIGH-QUALITY DISCUSSIONS

As with writing, sometimes students just need a little nudge to dive into those whole class, small group, or peer-to-peer exchanges. Students, regardless of age, often struggle with focused and productive conversations. The good news is if you are already incorporating #1 and #2 from this article, this goal will be much more attainable. In addition to teaching strategies, providing tools to add to their student toolbelt that they can use as needed is going to foster ownership of their contributions to collaborative conversations.

The Gift of Preparation

There is no doubt that one form of risk-taking is speaking in front of a group. Traditionally, it has widely been considered the biggest fear of adults. With the risk level ranging widely within our classroom, any opportunity to properly equip our students so that they feel less vulnerable upfront will vastly improve participation. First and foremost, whatever questions are posed during class, small group or during breakout sessions, will be more thoughtfully answered if students are given the gift of time. "Flipping" the activity or giving students ample time to preview and process the meaning of the question and even plan out their talking points before the lesson will act as a "springboard" for your students who regularly struggle with participation, especially when asked to provide an answer on-the-spot.

Icebreakers

Launching the discussion with fun icebreaker questions that are trivial of nature and unrelated to content can help create that safe talking space and take minimal time. Some ideas for non-academic discussion starters:

- Chat Packs
- Their weekend's high/low
- A quick game of Catch Phrase or Password
- How do you feel? (post five emojis and let them choose)

How do you feel?
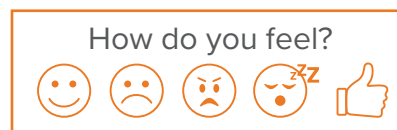
There are also several websites such as Conversation Starters World that offer various questions on a wide array of topics. Have students submit questions that they created as well! Again, any opportunity for students to have ownership of the lesson flow will be a win for you.

Fat vs. Skinny Questions

The type of questions we ask are just as important as the time we give them to prepare their answer. The more thought-provoking the question, the more deep and powerful the following discussion will be. When choosing the questions you will ask, be extremely selective and intentional. With hybrid and remote learning models, teachers must give themselves permission to not ask every question in their teaching guide and do the dreaded "page turn."

Frequently, teachers feel that if they move quickly, they will cover more—but they ultimately cover less. To achieve not only mastery but actual retention of a skill or concept, we must slow down and uncover more. Ask yourself, "Am I covering more or am I uncovering more?" Surface level or "skinny" questions focus on the minutia. In Question-Answer Relationship terms, these are Right There. They often ask for retelling, who, what, where, when, naming, describing, agreeing/disagreeing, etc. Not much quality discussion will derive from these, if any.

When selecting discussion questions, consider asking more "fat" questions that require students to think more deeply and relate to the overarching idea. In Question-Answer Relationship terms, these are Think & Search. These meatier questions require schema, deep thinking, text-to-self connections, feelings, and often have a variety of answers (which makes them contribute to that safe learning environment as well!)

Consider the following items when selecting discussion questions:

- Is this a new or spiraling skill?
- Is it a tested skill or review?
- Is schema required?
- What is its depth/complexity?
- Does it require students to infer?
- Are there many possible answers?
- Is the answer right there in the text?

Some possible "fat" discussion starters are:

- What might have happened if...
- What's your opinion on...
- When have you experienced something similar?
- What if _____ didn't happen?
- What choice would you have made?
- How could you improve _____?

Higher-level DOK questions result in more powerful and meaningful discussion. Students will more strongly gravitate to these discussions as well because they leverage thoughts, feelings, background knowledge, and are safe since there is no single correct answer.

Listening and Speaking Checklists

Listening and Speaking Checklists are a great tool to help students have focused discussions, but also to be active and engaged listeners. Consider providing a checklist for speaking and listening to your students at the beginning of the semester or year. These will help them learn how to focus in ways that they should be able to use during any conversation. They are also a great tool for teachers to use when calling on students. Some items on your checklist might be:

Listening:
- ☐ Make eye contact
- ☐ Use reaction buttons on webinar
- ☐ Identify three key details
- ☐ Summarize another's statements
- ☐ Restate directions
- ☐ Draw or expand upon a peer's statement

Speaking:
- ☐ Raise your virtual hand before speaking
- ☐ Make eye contact
- ☐ Speak clearly, slowly, and enunciate
- ☐ Project with appropriate volume and expression
- ☐ Respectfully disagree with others (see sentence starters below)
- ☐ Answer thoughtfully and providing details/evidence
- ☐ Stay on topic
- ☐ Streamline your thoughts and remain concise

Sentence Starters

Try offering your students sentence starters to help them remain focused and connected in their dialogue while providing a springboard for your less enthusiastic participants. These can be used anytime: whole group, small group, jigsaws, partner work, or even in the chat window of your webinar. Eventually, these will create a habit of mind for your students, and they will no longer be needed. Introduce them by modeling first, and you will start hearing some impressive academic discourse. Also, if you hear a good one from a student, add it to the class list! Here are some ideas to get started:

Positive Peer Feedback
- Your main character is interesting, but I'd like to know more about him.
- It really held my interest; however, I think it would be a little better if...
- I noticed you did _____. Can you explain your thinking of why you chose to do it that way?
- I understand what you are trying to say, what if you tried this?
- I enjoyed _____ because _____.
- Another thought you might add is _____.

Respectfully Disagree
- I discovered some additional evidence that says...
- I like your thinking, but have you thought about...
- I see things a little differently because...
- I'm not sure I agree, and here's why...
- I like where you are going, however I also think...

Extend a Thought
- I agree with _____, in that...
- I'd like to piggy-back on what _____ said...
- To take it a step further...
- In addition to what _____ said...

Seek Clarification
- Okay, so what you're saying is...
- Did you mean...?
- I'm not sure what you mean when you say...
- Can you give another example of...?

Self-Evaluation Rubric/Ticket-Out-the-Door

Allow students to self-reflect or fill out a self-evaluation form. When we give students the opportunity to practice and apply those metacognitive skills, they will be more aware of their action or inaction, and you have increased the chance for higher engagement for those less enthusiastic participants during the next go-around. Also, students who tend to monopolize the conversation daily may discover that they may be creating an obstacle or roadblock for a fluid and wide class discussion. A short online survey can deliver immediate insight and clarity. Some example items for this might be:

1. What is one thing you did well?
2. Rate your participation level (if they didn't/it's low...why?)
3. How was your eye contact?
4. What content-related clarification do you still need, if any?
5. Do you still have something to say or a question to ask?
6. Name one area for improvement.
7. Something you learned from a classmate.

5. NEXT SEMESTER IS A NEW SEMESTER

These no-plan strategies are just some ideas that I hope will spark new ones of your own. When shifting practices in the classroom, regardless of the instructional setting, the key is to implement gradually. Try introducing one new strategy every week or two next grading period.

Although the enthusiasm and willingness to experiment in your class is commendable, you can also lose the focus of your learners if you go all-in and try to completely flip the entire process at once. Students still need structure. So, without sacrificing that, try slowly weaving in some engaging new practices. Positive shifts in student work and attitude stem from a safe, motivating, and relevant learning environment.

You CAN do this, and your students will notice and thank you for it.