Strategies for Promoting Student Collaboration in a Distance Learning Environment

The new question-of-the-week is:

What are specific strategies, lessons, and tools that you have used to encourage students to work collaboratively in a socially distanced physical classroom, hybrid, or remote learning environment?

This post is the latest in a collection of over 60 columns, videos, and infographics providing support to teachers doing distance learning. You can see all of them at School Closures & the Coronavirus Crisis.

I believe that collaborative learning is at the core of a successful distance learning environment.

"Relatedness"—will what I'm being asked to do bring me in closer connection with others who I respect and like—is a key element in creating the conditions of intrinsic student motivation (see Four Ways to Help Students Feel Intrinsically Motivated to Do Distance Learning).

Through the use of breakout rooms to have students work on presentations, videos, and slideshow, I think I have done a relatively decent job encouraging student motivation (knock on wood—it's early in the year!).

Check out [The Best Online Tools Students Can Use Collaboratively To Create Projects](#) to see some of the web tools that students use in these efforts.

Today, Jenifer Hitchcock shares her additional thoughts on student collaboration in this year's school environment.

Student collaboration

[Jenifer Hitchcock](#) teaches 12th grade AP Government at Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology in Alexandria, Va. She has been a member of the [iCivics](#) Educator Network since 2017:

It takes the work of many hands to redevelop virtual spaces into places of brave discussions of vulnerability, of curiosity, and of mutual value. Here are some strategies that I have found to be successful in encouraging student collaboration in my virtual classroom:

- **Empower students to create their own norms**. This exercise is built upon identifying what students need from their peers and from me as their teacher. We will publish the norms. We will reflect on the norms. We will use norms to hold each other accountable. I also teach students how to discuss their emotional reaction to the classroom. [Social Emotional Learning](#) is critical here; students need to be able to identify how they feel, reflect upon why they feel that way, and determine if they wish to stay in the intersection of learning and emotion. I love the [Ruler Method from Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence](#) as a foundation of common language.

- **Emphasize student-to-student discussion that connects the individual to the learning.** I highly recommend several resources to refocus the virtual space toward student learning and engagement:

- Use rituals emphasizing active listening, house talk, and affirmations to boost student investment. Students need to be seen as a part of the community. Author and educator Matthew Kay gives great advice on how to reorient the class around the whole person through daily activities like five-minute informal conversations he calls "house talk" about students' lives at the top of the class or taking time to complement each other as humans. This is important as it allows students to bring their culture and identity into the classroom in ways that do not trigger learning-killing anxiety. It also allows me to model my own humanity and to be vulnerable.

- Provide a variety of engagement over large-group discussion to enrich learning. Traditional large-group instruction where I teach and then ask students to respond on my schedule can cause anxiety for some students. This may also cause more vocal students to feel like their ability to engage quickly is penalized. I try a variety of activities including small-group discussion, station rotations, student choice in learning environments, dialogic teaching, PBAs from C3teachers or Generation Citizen, game play via iCivics and visible-thinking routines from places like Project Zero or Agency by Design to boost student engagement and build community. When I am stuck, I may turn to resources like The Discussion

[Book](#) or [They Say, I Say](#) to help with stalled conversations.

- Consider how routine practices may be punitive. We can agree that attendance and engagement are important to success. However, sometimes the way we incentivize these student behaviors can be punitive. For instance, asking students to turn on cameras is a lot harder than it looks. I find myself distracted or self-conscious, the same is true of students. I think of ways to encourage behaviors without penalizing. Like asking students to show us their pets, make a self-portrait out of materials in their room, allow for passing-time informal chat, or ice breakers from games like [Chat Pack](#). I give kids grace periods for making up synchronous and asynchronous assessments of learning. Students want to be successful, but once they feel like they cannot be successful, any desire to be a part of the community is squandered.

- **Read the room.** Teachers are great at reading the room. Behaviors usually tell us something is wrong, like when a student is not engaged, is stiff during discussion, is not turning in work, or is not attending class. I seek them out personally to ask if they are OK, if there is anything I can do to help them be successful, and to be a [“warm demander.”](#) I have earned the students' trust,and I continue to tell them I believe in them. I show them what they need to get back on track and promise to help the student. I embrace failure as a learning opportunity and challenge a student to grow. Sometimes we need to

initiate that conversation because a student does not feel comfortable confiding in anyone. Some key behaviors I look out for:

- I use emojis to gauge students. When students consistently do not use them, I may back chat them (seek them out on a private chat to ask if everything is OK).
- I move through the various breakout rooms. While cameras are not mandatory, I do look to see that students are engaging.
- I ask students to give me feedback. There are intentional moments to ask questions, I give three times more wait time.
- I ask students, "What are your questions?" instead of, "Do you have any questions?" Students always have questions, it's a matter of finding them. They may be more comfortable writing them in the back chat instead of saying them out loud.

While challenging, learning in a virtual environment still allows educators to construct intentional spaces of deep learning and vulnerable growth. While we swap out desk tables for breakout rooms and wait time, the important work of building community and engagement can be done.

I know that now more than ever my students need spaces of refuge to unpack what they have learned, to find their voice, and to acquire knowledge and skills to engage with their peers and with their communities outside of school. I know they need to talk more than ever, and I can provide

space to listen and be heard as the individual and the many. Instead of chairs and desks, we shall use bytes! If you're looking for more support in teaching online and best practices. I encourage you to explore the free professional learning videos that iCivics created in partnership with Makematic, Adobe, Participate, and ClickView. The videos offer more bite-sized strategies for online pedagogy, designing curriculum online, and building virtual classroom communities.