



Photos by Fox

'Learning Online Can Feel Cold and Lonely': Fostering Student Engagement in Online Classes

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Introduction

This poster is a visual study of ways to engage students in online classes. No matter the technological tools or platforms that deliver our online classes, the one constant that connects our teaching endeavors, from the first schools of the sophists and Isocrates to now, is our relationship with our students. But students often feel remote and alienated in online settings. The key practice in this inquiry is the weekly discussion forum, both classic and innovative, that invites both students and teacher to engage in "interesting and human ways" (from writing student Darla) with one another.

Materials and Methods

A productive method of data analysis is grounded theory, which allows study participants to "speak" without imposing a pre-existing theoretical stance. My site of investigation is a rhetoric class in a large urban public university. Material consists of student comment and descriptive research. I focus on two discrete weekly forums – classic and innovative – that define this pedagogy as together we create it.



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Data: How To Foster Engagement in Students? Ask Them.

Monica *A big reason I enjoyed this class is because it's much more interactive than others I took. Learning online can feel cold and lonely.*

Yessi *There's comfort in knowing the person behind the screen is human like you.*

Sam *In this world I could express exactly what I feel.*

Xavier *Interacting with students makes the class fun, and they'll love the class more.*

Mikitha *We have all learned a lot from each other during these trying times, the COVID pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement.*

Comments used by permission from Spring/Summer Rhetoric Classes at the University of West Florida. Names are changed.

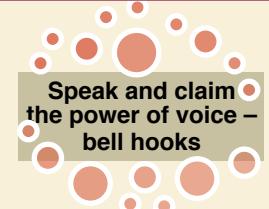
Academic Forum: Classic

Weekly academic forums are an opportunity to teach writing as an art and craft, or use writing to teach across the curriculum. Questions can be framed by the teacher, students, or student groups, based on an issue in reading, writing, or class topic. Example: My "Dream America" course forum asks students to choose their own topics within that theme and create a graphic essay in which they piece together a story or argument to see how texts are physically constructed. Forum discussion of graphic essays promotes academic and courteous engagement.

Quarantine Forum

A semester-long forum can constitute, and be constituted by, the story of a given course or, in this case, a shared community experience. Example: The optional quarantine forum in Spring – Autumn 2020 asks students to tell the story of their experiences. In a companion forum they create together a playlist that expresses their feelings and ideas about the quarantine. Students are asked to post their stories, texts, and links to songs, and respond supportively to one another. Rate of participation: 60 – 84%

Conclusion: Online writing class needs us to welcome each student, listen, read, respond. Online classes need us to be there.



Theoretical inspirations

We ought, therefore, to think of the art of discourse (as) the source of most of our blessings. ...We have come together and founded cities and made laws and invented arts; and generally speaking, there is no institution devised by man (sic) which the power of speech has not helped us to establish. -Isocrates

Classrooms have the potential to become transformative sites in which students' representational resources can be used productively and critically.
– Pippa Stein

Teaching is an act of generosity. – Mrs. Maisel

I feel like this is the beginning to a new normal, and we will begin to take more and more classes online, even post quarantine. What I love about taking online classes is, it gives everyone a voice. – Peyton (Fox student)

My favorite thing is being able to interact. – Heather (Fox student)