

# Online Learning Practices for Student Engagement



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# 1. Introduction

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many countries implemented restrictive measures to reduce the effects of the virus. Worldwide closure of universities was among one of the precautionary measures implemented by countries. In order to support the continuity of education, higher education has taken on e-learning where teaching is undertaken remotely and on digital platforms. The complete use of digital content was relatively uncommon before the crisis in many countries, however the rapid efforts of educational institutions ensured the continuity of teaching and learning.

Once the shift towards online teaching and learning is made, there existed challenges associated with engaging students in an online setting. Students have gone from classrooms designed for learning to living room tables with so many distractions. Lack of motivation, technical issues, feeling isolated, time management and lack of social interactions are among some of the challenges faced by students.

At ACK, instructors have also faced challenges in keeping students engaged while teaching online. Inability to ensure students' comprehension, difficulties in motivating students, limits on body language and facial expressions, inability to monitor students' presence, loss of bond between student and teacher, and no face to face interactions were among instructors' concerns.

This report focuses on the online practices undertaken by different universities worldwide and strategies that can be implemented to enhance the online teaching experience.

## 2. Online Learning Practices

Researches on the online learning practices of universities have concluded some measures that help to have a more engaging and effective online teaching experience. Below are some practices based on research of practices of different universities worldwide which include Peking University of China, University of Florida, Harvard University, Stanford University, and University of IOWA.

### 2.1 Course Content

Since some students might find online learning challenging and difficult, it is recommended that instructors break down the content of the traditional setting lectures into several small modules where each can be delivered in a reasonable period of time. This method enables faculty to focus on one topic while engaging students with different examples, details and elaborations. Also, it is more likely to ensure students' comprehension in learning.

### 2.2 'Voice' in Online Teaching

Traditional classrooms take advantage of physical presence of instructors and students by enabling the use of body language, facial expressions and voice. However, in an online setting,

body language and facial expressions are limited, therefore it is very important that instructors fully master the function of voice to allow students to capture the key points.

### 2.3 Teaching Assistants Support

Since online teaching is new to many faculty members and they may face technical difficulties in organization and delivery of the content, effective support of teaching assistant is recommended as they help instructors to solve issues and develop new methods of online teaching. Teaching assistants can also provide consultations and feedback sessions for underperforming students.

### 2.4 Students' Active Learning

Students are more likely to skip classes on an online setting compared to the traditional setting, or they may be doing other stuff while showing presence in class. Therefore, to keep students engaged and ensure their comprehension of the course material, faculty should ensure that students have high level of active learning outside of the class time. This can be achieved by having various methods to moderately modify students' homework and out of class activities.

Also, to increase students' engagement and participation, it is recommended to ask students for an 'offline self-learning' which requires students to read about the course content and submit papers/ assignments on the course relevant topic which is followed by instructors' feedback. This method will enhance the cognitive skill of students, increase discussions and participations and leads to deep learning. Flipped classrooms may be alternative in online learning.

### 2.5 Support to Students, Faculty and Staff

Universities in United States have provided support beyond academic services to their students, faculty and staff. Mental health support specifically for COVID-19, raising students' necessity/ emergency funds, arranging internet services and hardware loans, health insurance support and food supplies are among some services provided by the universities.

### 2.6 Breakout Rooms

Breakout Rooms are designed for small virtual group-work where discussions or problem-solving activities are driven by students without the instructor being the center of the classroom. Breakout Rooms are unlike the multi-video screens where all students and the instructor is present in the same room. This strategy will enable students to socialize virtually and discuss the course material with each other in a professional manner.

### 2.7 Presentation Slides

Instructors use PowerPoint slides as a mean to guide students on the content and activities of the course. Online classrooms can present students with so much information on the screen and due to the limits and restrictions of the online teaching setting (body language, facial expression), it is very important that instructors redesign their presentation slides and ensure the amount of

information that each slide will convey and how that will affect the pacing of the class. This way of redesigning is necessary not to overwhelm the student with text and data.

## 2.8 Pre-recording

Based on the nature of the course, prerecording lectures can be as engaging as the live lectures. Instructors can edit the videos, integrate graphics and animations, use reflections questions, polls or any other interactive element and it is less vulnerable from unanticipated issues that might happen during live sessions. Prerecorded videos should be followed by live sessions. Prerecorded lectures and live sessions complete each other powerfully.

## 2.9 Online Labs

Although lab activities require physical presence of students, but there are other parts of lab experience that can be undertaken online such as video demonstrations, online simulations, pre-lab tasks and post-lab tasks. If labs require data collection and analysis, students can work on some raw data for analysis to keep them engaged with the lab experience until they are able to get back and work on their own set of data.

## 2.10 Communication

Instructors should share their expectations in a specific way, communicate the course plan and office hours, and proactively let the students know how quickly they can receive their response from the instructor. Also, the platform that the instructors can be accessed for any inquiries should be very clear to students.

Early feedback surveys and informal discussions with students are very effective in order to find out what is working out in the course, what improvements can be implemented and what are students' suggestions. Also, instructors can ask students to create a list of expectations for class activities which will help enhance students' learning. Although there are evaluation surveys distributed among students at the end of each semester, but the changes are done afterwards and nothing can be changed while the same semester is running.

## 2.11 Discussion Board Forum

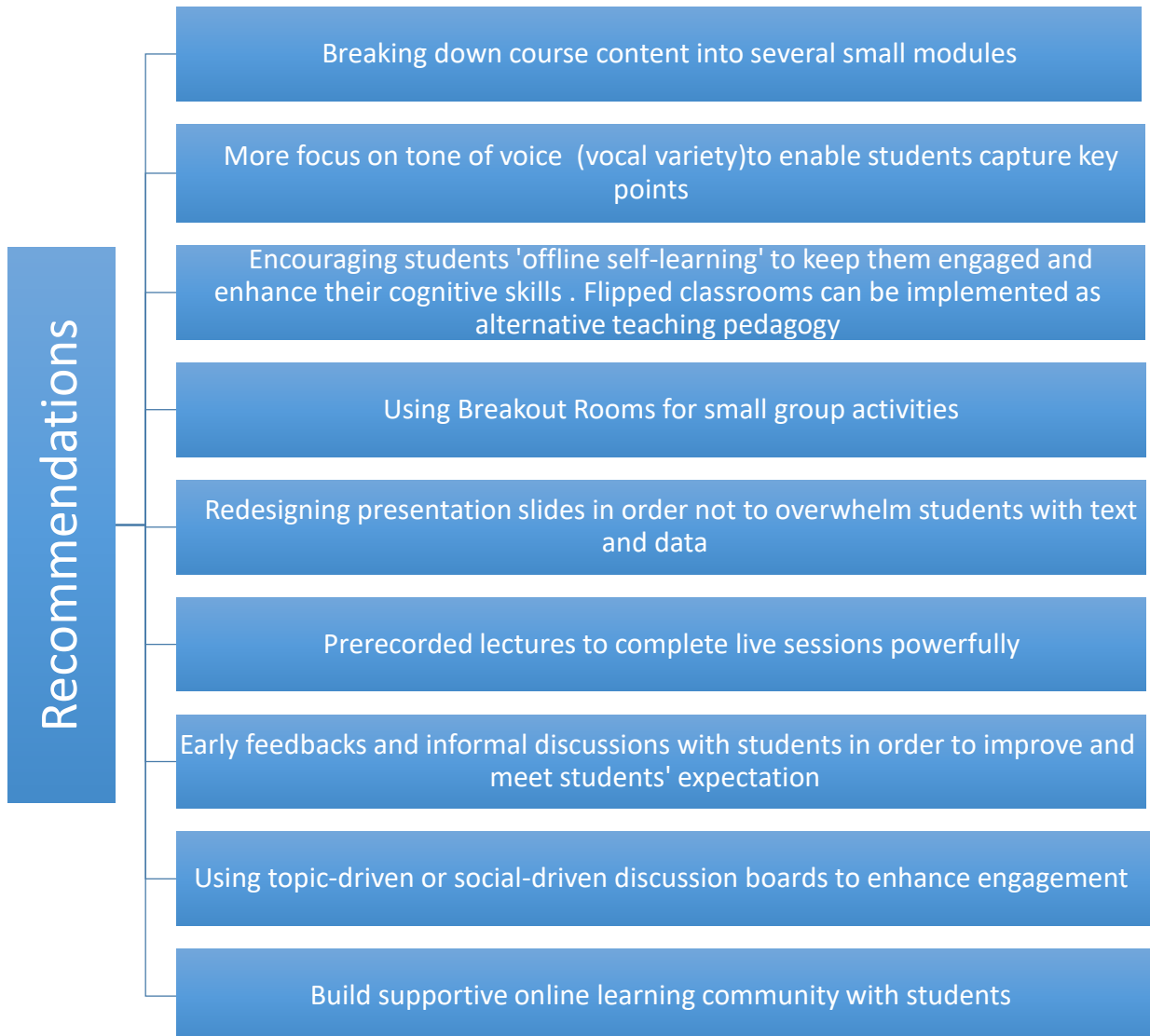
Discussion Board is a feature that can be added to the online teaching platforms which engages students in debates and teaches them critical thinking skills. Discussions can be topic-driven or social-driven. Topic-driven discussions help students focus on key parts of the course content. Social-driven discussions enable students to connect the course with current events and their own project and work. Also, instructor can ask students to post about more general topics such as topic of the week. The type of discussion will depend on what is most beneficial to the course and how the instructor evaluates students' responses.

## 2.12 Encourage Community

One of the challenges faced by instructors while teaching online is the inability to ensure and monitor students' presence. Instructors can enhance the sense of presence by asking everyone to have their webcams on. Seeing everyone's face makes it easier to engage with the class and students are more likely to pay attention. Also, it is harder to maintain attention and focus on screens for long period of time than in classrooms. Therefore, it is recommended to have 'stretch times' every 20-30 minutes for 30 seconds only.

Building supportive online learning community is as important as being significantly present. Having a balanced supportive online community means the dialogue of faculty to learner, learner to learner, and learner to resources are almost equal. This can be accomplished by having a combination of announcements, discussion postings, mini lectures, or audio/ video podcasts.

## 3. Recommendations



## 4. Conclusion

Keeping students engaged while teaching online is a challenge faced by universities worldwide. Therefore, there are various practices put in place for supporting smooth and engaging delivery of course content. It is helpful to provide ongoing support for students both academically and technically in order to develop expertise in teaching online. The aim is to keep students active in discussions and class activities. In teaching, one strategy will not be effective for all students, therefore a set of different practices enables instructors to pull out the appropriate one for each student based on their interest. Some methods work better than the other; instructors need to learn about their class and implement the appropriate strategy.

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