

FUNDAMENTALS

Teaching Online Is Like Teaching After Lunch

How to pump up
low participation.

By Jennifer Hofmann

If you're an experienced synchronous trainer, you know the frustrations of having participants distributed across the country or world. Keeping them continuously engaged is like trying to teach a class right after lunch. You know what I mean: that situation in which the blood sugar has gone to people's toes and you need to practically tap dance—with a parasol—to get their attention.

Unfortunately, in the synchronous classroom, we lose all eye contact, body

language, and the opportunity to tap dance. Statistics tell us that body language accounts for as much as 70 to 80 percent of the communication in a traditional classroom. And it's that body language that keeps everyone energized.

So, how do we communicate in this new environment and keep our participants engaged? The answer is to speak a new language—one that is totally dependent on voice and cues from the technology we're using.

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Looking for cues

In the traditional classroom, we know to watch for participants falling asleep, fidgeting, or not coming back from the break. But online, we need to look for body language in the bandwidth. That means seeking out subtle signals that indicate the level of participant engagement and knowledge transfer. In the synchronous environment, cues may come from unexpected sources.

Response time. A slow response may mean that a participant is engaged in reflective thought, has stepped away from the class, or has no idea what you're talking about. It's up to you to determine what's going on and respond accordingly.

Chatting. If conversations are going on that have nothing to do with your content, that's a sign that the conversants have checked out of your class mentally.

Technology interference. If you haven't done a participant orientation, then class time may be wasted while participants figure out how to raise their hands, answer a poll, or write on the whiteboard.

Response quality. When the quality of response isn't what you hoped or expected, it's possible that participants haven't understood your directions or the content, or they've chosen not to participate for some reason.

Communicating effectively

Once you understand some of the signals to look for, you can use these techniques when you are facilitating live, online courses.

Use dynamic visuals. In a traditional classroom, participants' eyes are generally focused on the speaker. But online, the focus remains on the screen. To engage participants in your class, you need to use this medium effectively. Use light or white backgrounds and minimal text. That makes whiteboard tools more effective for facilitating activities, highlighting lecture points, and attracting attention. The more the screen changes,

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the more opportunity you have to recapture a wayward participant.

Speak up. In the synchronous environment, your voice is your most important tool. If you don't use a full range of inflection or express emotion, your participants will probably tune out. All of the bells and whistles of technology cannot keep that from happening.

Pay attention to your vocal delivery. Try to incorporate your audience's voice by encouraging verbal discussion, having participants read bulleted points, and asking for their opinions or illustrations of content.

Be exact. With the loss of physical cues, you need to make sure that your language is specific. Instead of asking, "Do you have any questions?" be more direct. Say, "If you have a question, raise your hand. If not, click 'no.'" That not only tells participants exactly what you want them to do, but also assures you that everyone is audibly engaged.

Call their names. By creating a protocol by which participants know that you may call on them at any time, you'll encourage them to stay occupied. Tell them ahead of time that you will call on them, and insist on some level of participation. Try to motivate those you haven't heard from in a while.

Create interaction. In order to keep participants focused on the program and ensure that they're still present, plan interactions every three to five minutes. These activities can involve people, technology, or exercises in participants' workbooks.

Learn to multitask. In the synchronous environment, trainers are doing many things at once. For example, they write on the whiteboard while discussing content, or answer chat questions while managing an exercise. To be successful in this environment, you need to be comfortable managing multiple activities simultaneously.

Plan for gaps. There are situations that require set-up time: launching an application to share, assigning participants to break-out rooms, or managing multimedia animation. Instead of making participants wait for the technology to catch up, give them something relevant to do. Have them read an article or answer questions in the chat area. Remember, any noticeable pause in classroom activity gives participants the opportunity to disengage.

Communicating in the synchronous environment is substantively different than in the traditional classroom. We need to learn to look for subtle cues, communicate effectively, and minimize the opportunities for participants to disengage. That's the new language of online learning.

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