Strategies for successfully engaging all students in live synchronous online classes

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The Challenge:
Engaging students in online classes:
When students attend class on computers, which come with built-in distractions, the instant a student disengages, they can focus their attention elsewhere with one click.

The Online Course:
Macro Community Practice:
Core course for final-year Master's of Science in Social Work students in Social Enterprise Administration

The Online Program Context:
Columbia's fully online MSSW program:
The program involves weekly live synchronous classes in Adobe Connect. Classes are led by the instructor and supported by an associate and live support specialist.

Guiding Principle: Use the tools in the virtual classroom to create opportunities for students to actively engage with the course material every 3-5 minutes.

"Learning results from what the student does and thinks and only from what the student does and thinks. The teacher can advance learning only by influencing what the student does to learn." -- Herbert Simon
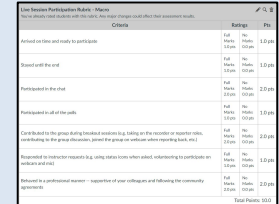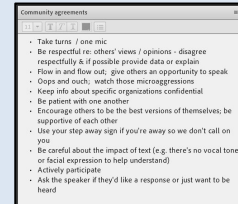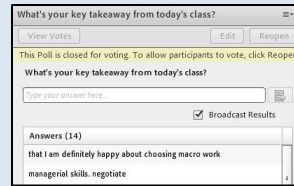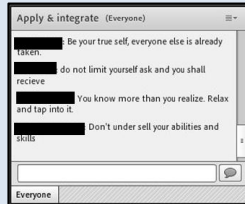
Build connections with webcam & mic:
- Encourage students' use of webcam, individually and in groups
- Set the stage – consider your lighting & background

Create class conversations with chat:
- Use multiple chat pods for different purposes, e.g. check-ins, brainstorms, comprehension checks, positive feedback

Assess student learning & opinions with polls:
- Conduct low-stakes comprehension checks
- Activate prior knowledge
- Allow students to reflect by asking for key takeaways

Collaborate in real time with live note taking:
- Copy students' words from the chat area to create a shared document
- Generate community agreements together

Allow every student to talk in small groups:
- Create opportunities to apply course content in group activities
- Assess comprehension by monitoring groups

Provide feedback & accountability by grading each session:
- Create a clear rubric with your expectations
- Provide timely feedback, both positive & corrective

"Using webcams really builds my connection with the students….the connection builds week by week….By the end of the semester, I am as connected to my students as I am in a face-to-face classroom setting." -- Prof John Robertson (Social Welfare Policy)

"It gives all students an equal chance to participate. It is especially important for the involvement of usually shy and non-participating students. This group often involves international students." -- Prof Mashura Akilova (Advocacy in Social Work Practice)

"By regularly polling my students, I can take the pulse of the class at multiple stages throughout a live teaching session. Students comment favorably on polls. I find them invaluable to gauge the pace and direction of my teaching, and they provide a ready measure for quantifying student participation." -- Prof Steven Schinke (Intro to Statistics; Research Methods)

"I use a notepad to have students collaboratively build and edit a living document that represents the group's values and commitments to each other. We can create Community Agreements and revisit these each week by placing the notepad in the classroom space as a reminder and tool for group accountability." – Prof Amelia Ortega (Human Behavior in the Social Environment)

"Breakout groups are a great way for students to really collaborate in a smaller group and practice material covered in class. In my practice class, students have practiced using CBT techniques in dyad role-plays and in a macro class they worked on balancing a budget in a smaller group. Breakout groups can be instrumental." -- Prof Johanna Baez (Social Work Practice)

"It's very important to define clear parameters for live session participation. For my classroom, because the classes are a more intimate size of 12-24, I emphasize quality over quantity. Students are encouraged to be supportive of one another during presentations and panel discussions, without counting it towards participation. True participation, especially in chat, reflects critical analysis and integration of theories." – Prof Beth Counselman-Carpenter (Social Work Practice; Gender & Sexuality)

References:
Ambrose, S. A., Bridges, M. W., DiPietro, M., Lovett, M. C., & Norman, M. K. (2010). *How learning works: Seven research-based principles for smart teaching*. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons.
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