

# Student Engagement and Belonging in Online Classrooms

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In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic made classrooms all over the world instantly switch to an online environment. Although this was an extraordinary and impressive transformation, in many cases it negatively affected the quality of education. Many teachers and students struggled with reduced student engagement. In addition, problems accumulated – particularly for students who were socially disadvantaged or from vulnerable groups – and social gaps exacerbated (EECEA, 2022). Because engagement in diverse online classrooms is an understudied topic – as is inclusive higher education in general – (Beaton et al., 2021), and because the digitalization of higher education continues (Perera et al., 2020), it is important to better understand how we can provide inclusive education in online settings, in which every student feels engaged (Turnbull et al., 2021).

In this paper, we present the findings of our research on student engagement during the Covid pandemic to offer a better understanding of student engagement in online real-time (synchronous) classrooms. We formulate recommendations for higher education teachers on how to stimulate student engagement for every student and facilitate inclusive online learning environments.

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To get a better view of student engagement in online classrooms, we conducted a qualitative study on students' engagement in online synchronous classrooms in March-July 2021 at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. By then, the education at our university had been entirely online for over a year. By conducting in-depth interviews with students with minority identity dimensions from a Dutch university (n=27) we got an image of the barriers to engagement in online synchronous classrooms. We interviewed students with an ethnic minority background, LGBTQI+ identities, (learning) disabilities, and international students. From the findings, we distilled suggestions for teachers in higher education to create inclusive online classrooms in which every student feels engaged (see Korthals Altes, 2021).

## Three forms of engagement

Student engagement is an essential element of inclusive online education. Fredricks et al. (2004) distinguish three forms of engagement: emotional-, behavioural-, and cognitive engagement. *Emotional engagement* describes the connection students feel with their teachers, peers, course content, studies, and institution. *Behavioural engagement* refers to the behaviour of students in classrooms and their institution, often described as participation. *Cognitive engagement* is the

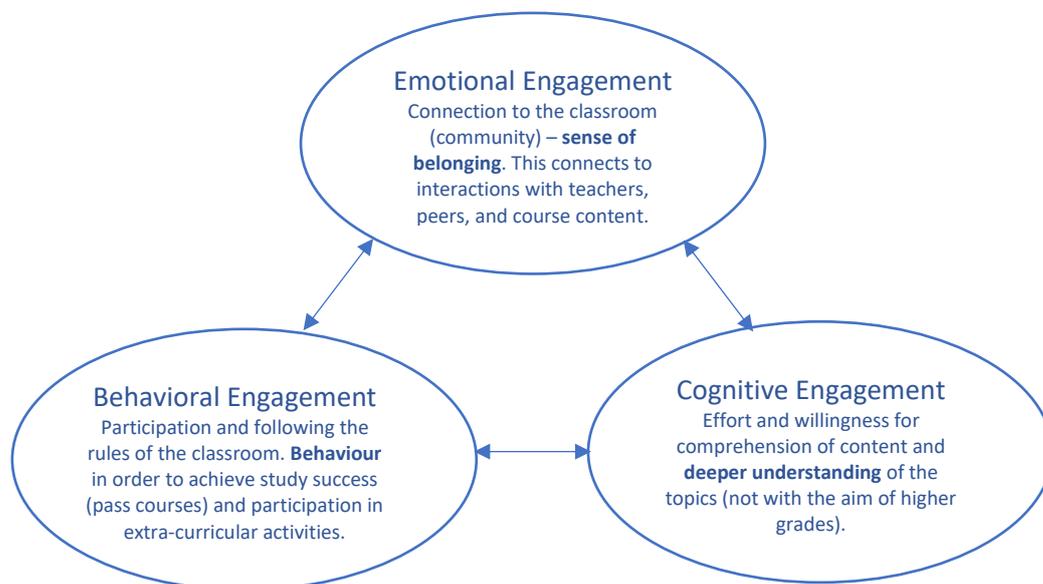
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willingness of students to put the effort into understanding the course content—not to gain study success (behavioural engagement) but a deeper understanding. These three forms of engagement are interdependent and influence one another (see figure 1). For example, to achieve cognitive engagement (deeper understanding and critical thinking) for every student in online higher education, it is important to create an inclusive learning environment in which students feel a connection with peers, the teacher, and the course content (emotional engagement) so that every student feels safe to participate (behavioural engagement) and can get the most out of their higher education.

Emotional engagement is related to having *a sense of belonging* (Pilotti et al., 2007). Belonging is an emotional attachment often referred to as ‘feeling at home’, but it goes beyond feeling at home. Having a high sense of belonging means that a student feels valued by others and feels treated with dignity and respect (Yuval-Davis, 2007). A sense of belonging contributes to study success (e.g., Freeman et al. 2007; Zumbrunn et al., 2014). Experiencing belonging is less self-evident for students with minority identity dimensions who experienced exclusion and stereotyping previously, in and outside educational settings (Harless, 2018; Callan, 2016). Students with experience of stereotyping are also inclined to act out as a defence mechanism (see stereotype threat in Spencer et al., 2007). In addition, for students with migrant or lower-class backgrounds, not only emotional engagement is more challenging than for native and middle-class backgrounds, but also behavioural engagement can be more challenging because they are less used to the codes and norms that are dominant in the educational setting.

Figure 1 Three forms of engagement in classrooms (Korthals Altes, 2021: 8)



## Student Engagement in Online Classrooms

During the pandemic, teachers struggled with online education. They struggled with the interaction with students and between students, both formal and informal interaction (Baber, 2020; Telles-Langdon, 2020). In interviews that were conducted in the context of the Erasmus+ project e-Inclusion (Slootman et al., 2022), teachers indicated that they suffered from a lack of interaction with students. The reasons they gave were that students had their cameras switched off, were not focused on the classroom but were doing other things during class, and did not feel inclined to answer. The teachers

often felt that they gave lectures ‘into nothing’: they were speaking to silent black squares (Slootman et al., 2022).

Our interviews show the student side. Students indeed described they often had a “laid back” attitude towards their online classrooms. They often had their cameras switched off, only actively contributed when it was mandatory, and at times were doing other activities while the lecture was playing in the background. The interviews exposed the various reasons behind the lack of (visible) engagement.

### 1. Lack of connection

The reasons given for this more passive attitude were the lack of connection students felt with their studies, course, and course participants in their online classrooms. Students felt they did not know their fellow students. After all, many social cues are invisible in online classrooms, there is no informal interaction before or after class, and they lacked 1-to-1 contact. They also felt they were anonymous to the teachers. They felt that the teacher did not know them and that they were just an anonymous crowd to the teacher. The lack of interaction negatively impacted their motivation to study and to actively contribute during class. A few students mentioned that they appreciated the anonymity because it made their minority identity dimension less visible, making them feel less othered. These students often did feel more engaged in their online classrooms.

The anonymity of online classrooms sometimes made students forget there were other students in the classroom. And the teacher felt more like a distant presenter than a teacher. To these students, online courses no longer felt like a classroom at all: the classroom community was absent. This lack of community adds to the individualized nature of online classrooms: every student is there to finish the course on their own and does not expect to interact with other students. They did not feel any responsibility for classroom dynamics.

*[B]ecause it's [online classrooms] like anonymous, it's not like you don't belong but you can never really... people can never know what you look like or who you are. You don't have to even say anything. It's not like I feel like I don't belong, [but] I also don't feel like I particularly belong, either. You just kind of feel like you're there to do what you have to do. But as a person, you don't matter much because you're not going to interact. (Interviewee 23 in Korthals Altes, 2021)*

### 2. Sense of insecurity

The second reason is a consequence of this lack of connection: insecurity. Students indicated that they refrained from active participation in class and kept their cameras switched off because they felt uneasy. The anonymity made it hard to anticipate how other students and the teacher would react to their participation, which makes students feel extra vulnerable creating a large barrier to actively participate and even more to share personal opinions and experiences.

*If you feel the security of the group, (...), then you know that when you say something and somebody doesn't agree with it that someone will help you with the argument. In online classes, you don't have that. Maybe a little from the people you already know, the people you trust, (...) But the decision to make an argument can only be made if you are confident enough about what you're saying. (Interviewee 26 in Korthals Altes, 2021)*

Furthermore, students sometimes did not know what was expected of them and were insecure about the ways how to contribute (Can you just interrupt the teacher? How do you raise a hand?). Some feared the hypervisibility that comes with an active contribution in web-conferencing tools, as camera

frames of speakers get marked and are sometimes placed in a central position. However, the lack of visible participation in class does not necessarily mean that students are not engaged. Students explained that they sometimes do actively attend class, listen and think along, while still refraining from visible contributions to the class.

### 3. Instrumental approach

The lack of engagement was facilitated by the fact that a passive attitude during classes sufficed to pass the course. Most students explained that they were very well capable of passing their courses without the sense of connection and active participation in class. They did not need to participate in the classroom to have study success, and emphasized the benefits of online education: it is more time- and energy-efficient, and offers larger place- and time-flexibility. These students employed 'strategic learning': learning to pass the course instead of deep learning with cognitive engagement (Entwistle and Waterston, 1988). It seems that online educational are more beneficial to these strategic attitudes even than physical, face-to-face education.

## Teaching for Engagement in Online Classrooms

Our findings show that the students interviewed during the online COVID education lacked emotional, behavioural and cognitive engagement. They often found it difficult to engage and feel belonging in online classrooms because of a lack of social connection and a sense of insecurity. This lack of engagement was strengthened by the fact that engagement appeared unimportant to pass the course.

Based on our findings, we formulated three suggestions for higher education teachers to facilitate more inclusive online classrooms, in which every student feels engaged.

### 1. Decrease anonymity

The first suggestion is to decrease anonymity. When anonymity in online synchronous classrooms is decreased, students will feel more inclined to participate and show an active attitude. Teachers can stimulate the formation of a classroom community by facilitating students getting to know each other. They can do this by letting students have classroom discussions in smaller groups. In the case of large classrooms, teachers can use breakout rooms and group assignments. In very large groups, it can be beneficial to have students regularly work in the same subgroups, who then get to know each other. Additionally, teachers can organize (mandatory) semi-informal contact moments between teacher and students in smaller groups. Informal contact makes students feel more connected in the online classroom because they know some of their fellow participants personally. This can also be achieved by having some informal time around online classes: by logging in early and staying for a while after class to chat with students. To reduce anonymity and for the teacher to get to know the needs, talents and ambitions of students, introduction assignments are important, in which students get the opportunity (but are not forced) to share personal details. It helps when teachers also share personal details or experiences. For more practical activities to reduce anonymity see Slotman et al. (2022) and Ramdas et al. (2022).

### 2. Set clear participation guidelines

The second suggestion is to set clear participation guidelines with your students. When participation guidelines are made explicit and discussed in classrooms, teachers and students are aware of each other's expectations. Teachers and students can also refer to the participation guidelines throughout the course in the case of lacking participation (for instance: 'While discussing the participation

guidelines, we agreed to actively participate in a classroom discussion/have our cameras on/participate via the microphone’).

Questions to discuss at the start of the course are: When do the teachers of the course want students to participate? How do students want to participate (with the microphone, chat, or raised-hand function)? What degree of participation do the teacher and fellow students expect from each other? And what does participation add to the classroom and course content? Setting clear participation guidelines important in new settings, such as new online learning environments. It is especially important for students who are less familiar with the norms of higher education institutions. For more information on the importance of clear communication on expectations and classroom rules, see Sloodman et al. (2022) and Ahenkorah (2016).

### 3. Create an inclusive atmosphere

The final suggestion is to work towards an inclusive learning atmosphere. In classrooms with an inclusive atmosphere, every student feels engaged and feels safe to engage and share insecurities, experiences, and insights, and make mistakes. Although the students shape the classroom environment together with the teacher, the teachers play an important role in creating classrooms with an inclusive atmosphere. In an inclusive atmosphere, diverging perspectives are invited and appreciated. There is room for ‘intellectual discomfort’ (disagreement) while ‘dignity safety’ (personal consideration and respect) is protected (Callan, 2016).

Teachers who explicitly state that they appreciate different opinions and insights in their classroom (both at the beginning of the course and during classroom discussions) stimulate student participation. It helps when teachers share personal experiences and reflect on their own capabilities and shortcomings regarding their knowledge and expertise. With this approach, teachers open up the classroom discussion by giving students more confidence to share their expertise or experience. Such explicit assistance is particularly important for students with identities, experiences and worldviews that diverge from the mainstream perspectives. For more information on how to create an inclusive climate in online classrooms see the interview with Alexandra Svedlovskaya (2021) and for approaches to turn moments of tension into moments of learning see Willner Brodsky et al. (2021). These approaches are also important in physical settings, but as we have seen, are even more urgent in online educational contexts.

## Conclusion

The students that we interviewed about their experiences in online classrooms during the COVID pandemic lack emotional, behavioural and cognitive engagement because (1) they experience anonymity and a lack of social connection, (2) they feel insecure about active classroom participation, and (3) high levels of engagement are not necessary conditions for study success.

In classrooms where students do not actively participate, students cannot learn from each other’s insights. In truly inclusive online classrooms, in which every student feels emotionally, behaviourally and cognitively engaged, a proactive attitude of every student should be stimulated. Teachers in online classrooms can help facilitate student engagement in online classrooms by creating an open atmosphere, setting clear participation guidelines, and minimizing anonymity by getting to know their students and they each other. Furthermore, it is important that the learning goals, teaching activities and assessment methods are aligned so that students are stimulated to deep learning (behavioural and cognitive engagement).

Although the students interviewed all had minority identity dimensions, most of the issues raised by them were unrelated to minority experiences. This suggests that most of the mechanisms described here apply to most students, no matter their identity characteristics. Nevertheless, the exclusion and gap with the educational codes that many minority students experience suggests that for them the challenges with regard to emotional and behavioural engagement are more intense and urgent.

As this study was conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic, the situation sketched is not representative of all online education. First of all, teachers who taught the online courses were not used to teaching fully online, and higher education institution was not yet optimally equipped to support teachers. Contrary to what is the online education in Open Universities that offer distance education, in our case, the courses were not designed as online courses but were moved to an online environment, often with little or no change in the course design. Furthermore, students in the online classrooms were not used to online classrooms and did not choose to follow their studies online. Additionally, the pandemic was a stressful experience for many, and the level of isolation extended to all social connections outside students' direct families or roommates. All these factors might have severely impacted the students' engagement. Nevertheless, the experiences show the importance of a course design that is well-attuned to the educational setting. For online courses, it is important to know the specificities of the online setting and to offset the challenges.

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