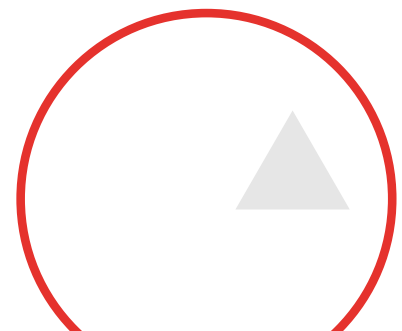




10 STRATEGIES TO KEEP STUDENTS MOTIVATED AND ENGAGED DURING THE CURRENT DISTANCE LEARNING

Students' motivation and engagement are always important and always require your attention, whether you are teaching at school, university, or a post-graduate course. New and unique problems compared to traditional offline classes may appear with online learning, in this so-called “new normal” situation – especially since educators often can't see their students and are unable to communicate with them in real time. Without personal communication, connections get lost, relationships weaken, and emotions that we usually rely on in the classroom are cut off. It's harder for us to make jokes and establish relationships of trust and respect. And most importantly, this interaction format imposes new requirements for organizing an effective educational process that stimulates thinking and creativity, supports initiative, and develops competence.

Many people think that getting students interested and motivated isn't difficult at all, you should just “do this and that”. Unfortunately, there is no such magic formula, because each group/course/faculty/university is special and has its own characteristics, including different student populations, learning rules (with or without a point-rating system, which, in turn, can have different formats), etc. Students' motivation and attitude toward their studies are influenced by many factors, including their basic cognitive motivation, motivation for achievement and personal development, self-confidence, and persistence. Moreover, educators can have a considerable impact on motivation through their treatment of the subject matter (which can be, for example, well-structured or chaotic), various active methods and forms of learning, as well as through feedback, the nature of their relationships with students, and their own enthusiasm.



Some students speak positively about the new format, saying that they have begun to read more sources, finally understood the subject, and that now the educator answers letters and can explain what is what. Students have started asking questions more often and feel interested in the subject. Many people say that they manage to do more now, have more opportunities for personal development and self-education, and they like it. This suggests that educators spontaneously use a variety of productive strategies that help keep students motivated. Of course, there are also those who “have gone off the grid” and have difficulties related to their lack of the willpower to regulate themselves. For such students, the new format turns out to be a great burden, not easy to cope with. It is difficult for them to get organized, not to see their friends' faces, to feel lonely, and not be included in face-to-face meetings and discussions.

Feedback is crucial for online learning. When the learning process occurs in a classroom, educators have many possibilities for feedback in real time, which allows them to simplify this process and pick up on misunderstandings and misconceptions. But when classes are held remotely, the delayed feedback can lead to a sense of isolation on the part of students and even to a breakdown of the educational process.

Educational psychologists distinguish two types of motivation: intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation originates from the will to learn something for self-development, to master a subject, or simply out of interest. Extrinsic motivation comes from a desire to succeed in order to achieve a result and demonstrate it to others to gain recognition, a reward, or to avoid problems. Students who are extrinsically motivated are generally focused on grades and on passing the course, while those who are intrinsically motivated are usually interested in the subject itself and enjoy the processes of learning, thinking, and researching in themselves. Each student has their own profile of intrinsic and of various types of extrinsic motivation, and the most productive strategy is to maintain intrinsic motivation, i.e., interest and enthusiasm.

Following are 10 strategies that might help an educator to maintain productive forms of motivation in online learning, to spark greater intellectual activity, a positive attitude towards the subject, and greater course mastery. It is worth remembering that by engaging students in productive learning activities, we also contribute to supporting their psychological well-being, which is also important at the present moment. If you are guided by your own intrinsic motivation and are interested in what you do, then you also contribute to improvement of your own mental health and reduce the possibility of burn-out.



1. ENCOURAGE ENGAGEMENT AND ACTIVE PARTICIPATION

Support those who are prepared for class. Ask questions that generate debate and problem solving during the lesson – questions that develop critical thinking and don't have a single correct answer, not those that only make students recall the material and definitions. Use online chat functions to maximize student engagement in the discussion (then you will be able to analyze their statements after the lecture and comment on the most original ideas). It is important not just to ask a good question, but also to give students an opportunity to think and speak out.

Here is a technique you can use during a lecture. Divide the lesson into several logical parts beforehand and clearly indicate the ending of each of them. Like: “We have examined the question of perception within the framework of such and such an approach”. And then ask: “Is everything clear? Are there any questions?” If there are no questions, have 2-3 questions (prepared in advance) to check whether the students have really understood the material. Like: “No questions? Then please answer this question: 'Which key arguments did ... use ... in the dispute with ... about the problem of ... ?' Do you agree with the first?” <pause>. You can address such a question to all the participants, but don't wait for a signal that someone wants to answer, such as a raised hand or a comment in the chat. It is more effective to give the floor to a particular student (“Dmitry, what do you think?”), and then to another. Call on to different students even though it may be tempting to listen to those who are always willing to answer. This technique will stir up students and they will start thinking in a more active way and attentively follow what is going on.

You can organize a brief poll at each lecture with the menti.com program for online polls or using the “polling” feature.

2. INTRINSIC MOTIVATION IS BASED ON A SENSE OF COMPETENCE

Let students feel effective by giving them tasks or asking questions that are in their zone of proximal development (Lev Vygotsky) and support the “I can do it!” feeling. Emphasize achievements, progress in understanding and mastering the topic. Note each student's progress whenever possible by providing written feedback on their papers, tests, reports, and essays. Ask comprehension questions at the end of each module and offer students various types of positive and informative feedback (“What should be done to improve the result?”).



When planning a lecture or a seminar, follow the “optimal level of complexity” principle, since solvable tasks (of medium complexity) have the maximum motivating potential. Try to maintain regular and structured work when students understand well what to do and how.

Be careful when criticizing. A negative evaluation of a student's work that is too harshly formulated, as that it is not of sufficient quality and does not meet the requirements, might be the last straw, after which the student will feel worn-out and lose self-confidence.

3. SUPPORT THE NEED FOR AUTONOMY AND FREEDOM

Offer the students a chance to choose which article to read and retell, which tasks to solve and exercises to do, which problem to analyze. Show that you respect this choice. Provide options and possible ways of task completion, as well as different working formats (in a group or individually). Make students feel that you understand them. Listen to what they think and feel in order to understand why they are making one choice or another. Try to understand how students see the situation before you change anything.

You can increase students' autonomy by creating a schedule of tasks and topics to be studied and sending them all the materials at once. This gives students the flexibility to plan their work without getting new course materials every week. It often makes sense to replace rigid instructions such as “you have to; you must; you should” with “try; you can (read a book); you are free to choose this or that; you've got such and such options, choices...”.



4. DON'T IGNORE STUDENTS' CURRENT NEEDS, THEIR STATE OF MIND AND MOOD

Support your students by warmly addressing them in your letters, wishing them health and well-being. Create an atmosphere of open and positive communication with your students (and among them). One of the best ways to maintain motivation is to establish virtual office hours when students can contact the educator (or an assistant). Give students access to a chat or a video conference at a certain time for informal communication on the course topics.

You can periodically record videos of your lectures and send them to students in a shared mailbox. This shows students that their educator is really involved in the course and cares about their needs. Do not ignore the questions asked; even a short answer may be important.

All this is intended to track comprehension of the material. Introducing short quizzes in the course of a lesson is an efficient method. Use the “polling” feature. You ask a question (or give a task) on the content of the course to check understanding and mastery of the material. You provide alternative answers, so that the students have to choose the correct answer. After getting the replies, you can quickly show the poll results, specifying the percentage of those who answered correctly and telling the right answer. Depending on the percentage of students who have successfully completed the task, move forward or go back to a more detailed and substantiated presentation of the material. Regular use of such a strategy allows students to feel that the educator is interested in whether they understand the material and that he/she orients flexibly to their needs.

5. PROVIDE TIMELY FEEDBACK

Answer questions and send promised materials to students within 24 hours, as this gives them a sense that you care about them. Ideally, a student should receive feedback on at least one individual task. This gives the educator an opportunity to establish contact with the student, thus encouraging and motivating them to gradually move towards becoming an independent subject of their own learning activity.

6. GIVE CONSTRUCTIVE AND PERSONALIZED FEEDBACK ABOUT TASKS COMPLETED

Specific comments on the student's work, even if they are brief, confirm that their work matters. Constructive and supportive feedback from the educator is very important, even if the grade given is bad.

In discussion forums, comment on the most interesting statements, pointing out the most insightful or notable comments made by students. Give recommendations of what students can read on the subject, how to apply their knowledge, and so on. You will gradually find out that they become more and more confident in the content of the course, getting used to the new learning format. You will see that their need for support at the relationship level is decreasing. Step by step, students will learn new strategies and educational resources and become less and less dependent on the educator and the institution itself.



7. CAREFULLY PLAN AND ORGANIZE YOUR LESSONS

Classroom instruction allows for many improvisations, due to the many types of activities that can be organized with a group (or subgroups). However, in online learning, good planning and organization are key to effective learning and maintaining student interest. If it takes the educator 10-15 minutes to set up a microphone or if he/she provides invalid links to websites and homework, it is unlikely that students will be satisfied with the learning format and the course. Having a plan and being technically prepared will help educators make the learning process smooth and ensure greater student engagement.

Develop clear strategies for dealing with latecomers. Unfortunately, it isn't uncommon that those appear throughout the lesson. They hang out in a virtual waiting room asking you to let them enter the "conference", interrupting your class and distracting other students. You could warn students in advance that those who are more than 5 minutes late will be considered absent, since this prevents you from giving a coherent lecture.

8. PROVIDE EASY ACCESS TO EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES

Online courses have great advantages when it comes to the availability and abundance of educational materials on the Internet. Download texts to read for the course, textbooks, presentations, and videos, upload them to a cloud storage site (Yandex.Disk, DropBox, GoogleDrive), and provide the students with a link with viewing rights. Your task as an educator is to provide guidance on further reading and study of the topic, by giving links to free (or prepaid by your university), easily accessible resources.

You may also recommend a Coursera course that corresponds to your course topic (there are courses in both English and Russian).

9. SUPPORT YOUR STUDENTS' I CAN FEELING

Let students know that you are confident in their ability to handle the subject. Provide them with opportunities to feel competent. From time to time, let each student know how well he/she is doing with your subject. This gives a sense of competence and a desire to continue putting effort into studying the subject. You can also tell the students that you did not immediately understand this topic yourself and admit its real complexity.

If a particular week is really difficult, provide more support and offer additional resources that may be useful for students.

10. KEEP UP YOUR OWN ENTHUSIASM. ENTHUSIASM IS CONTAGIOUS

Although it's a well-known fact, it should never be neglected: Only inspired educators can inspire students. Even the most motivated and interested students lose their interest if they don't see the same interest on the part of their educators and research supervisors. An educator's key role is to be a living example of a passionate attitude towards the subject. Let yourself focus on the topics you find particularly interesting. Admit that certain topics are really boring, but they serve this or that purpose.

Prepare interesting lectures, organize emotional and exciting discussions (at least once during a term), relate the course material to real life, and you will see that more and more students will be involved in the learning process, not giving up if they confront difficulties. This will definitely be a useful experience!

NB. TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

Online learning has certain problems. You can feel distanced from your students' learning and find yourself answering their letters 24 hours a day.

Sometimes it will seem that you just can't do everything well enough. But get rid of self-doubt, keep on being an educator who shares, listens, guides, and supports. If you have been preparing and doing your best, it is absolutely enough.

Think of several strategies to maintain your own well-being. This can be doing what you like: listening to your favorite music, watching a movie, talking to your friends and family, exercising, or taking a relaxing bath.

Good luck!

