

A top-down photograph of five students sitting on the floor in a circle. They are wearing casual clothing like jeans and t-shirts. Each student has a laptop or notebook open in front of them, and some are holding pens or pencils, suggesting a collaborative learning environment.

# Creating Connections Wherever ‘Class’ Is

Increasingly, instructors have to prepare for “hybrid” classes. Here are some tips for making sure you’re engaging all students when some are in the classroom while others are participating remotely.

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# Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic changed the learning landscape dramatically. After having to pivot to all virtual learning, students began to see they had options when it came to where they had to be for class. Even as schools reopened and in-person learning returned, it wasn't necessarily a full return. Hybrid learning may be here to stay, and your classroom may no longer be a physical space each and every one of your students walk into every day.

Student engagement becomes a key concern in this educational landscape. Keeping students with us as we teach will forever be the ultimate challenge regardless of class format. But, worrying about engagement, and seeing it as an obstacle to overcome, is actually a good thing. Giving it all this attention means you're more likely to take action, right at the start, to craft a course that works for all students.

To provide the best possible experience for both in-person and virtual learners, consider implementing some or all of these tips. Garnered from experience, these tips can help bring together a cohesive class even if everyone is still in their own room.



# Not all Resources Translate

Even when teaching a hybrid class, it's important to remember that not all of the resources that engage students in person will work online. Materials need to remain of the highest quality, and continue to teach the skills and techniques necessary to the discipline, but being able to switch out what those resources actually are is important.

Students working in person might feel most engaged during group projects or while you're doing a rapid fire Q&A standing in front of the room. Virtual students may need more reading assignments, extra videos, and some additional interactive tools to maintain the same level of engagement.

To make navigation through these unfamiliar resources and varying assignments easy, it's important to establish clear instructions and a plan for each week of learning. Students will then have a nice and neat path to follow and everything they need to get started.

Don't let this advice make you feel like you need to reinvent the wheel each week either. In fact, students may perform better if you establish patterns so they know what's expected of them each week.





# Student Feedback Is a Must

All educators are familiar with those student assessments that come in at the end of the semester, but in rating your class, most responses are emotional rather than formative. They can't always help you do something differently.

Upping the amount of formative assessment you have in class not only lets you check in with students on their knowledge, but it also provides you with feedback on how the class is going at the moment. Asking questions like, How long did last night's homework take you? can help you gauge how accessible that assignment was for all students.

You can even start out a class with questions related to the previous reading assignment to see how prepared all your students, regardless of being in person or virtual, are for that day's discussion.

One of the easiest ways to engage students to respond to questions like these is through iClicker. This interactive tool enables both in-person and virtual students to answer questions you pose in real time. You're then able to anonymously share responses and address any needs that may come up before students start to struggle.

iClicker offers physical clickers and can integrate via a mobile app so there's no student being left out of this interactive conversation even if they're not physically in the building.



# Diversify How You Engage

Having a solid tool to ask questions, like iClicker, is only as good as the questions themselves. When it works, you're able to use responses to transform a lecture into a two-way conversation, giving every learner a voice.

This act alone does a lot for engagement, but you also need to keep it interesting. iClicker helps with that in two ways. First, it provides a variety of question types for diversification. Second, you can create questions on-the-fly to adapt to the mood of your class.

Even a great interactive tool can get boring if students are always answering the same type of question. Putting up true/false questions each class is going to feel repetitive.

iClicker lets you change it up with questions types that include:

- **GPS attendance**
- **Target or heat spot questions**
- **Short answer questions**
- **Multiple choice questions**

You can use these questions to take a classroom poll, as quizzes, or even as part of an assignment. With answers coming in anonymously, you're able to share the results with the class and let it drive conversation onward.

The iClicker system also lets you add in or edit existing questions as you go, so even though you may have come into class with a plan, the system is flexible and can adapt to whatever changes you may make throughout the hour, week, or semester.



# Digitize Demonstrations

An important thing to think about when teaching students in a hybrid environment is visibility. If you're doing a demo for your class, those students sitting in front of you have a great view. They see you head-on in the front of the room. But, what about your virtual learners?

If you have a stationary camera set up to stream your lecture for your virtual students, and you move out of the frame, they miss out. If you're doing a demonstration where something obstructs the camera, those students are missing out.

Make sure your camera set-up encompasses as much of the view that your in-person students are seeing as possible. Consider linking an additional iPad to your stream so it's easy to move it around if necessary to give your virtual students a front row seat as well.





# Integrate the Chat Feature

Being able to see all students when they have a question is also an important feature of any classroom. In-person students can raise their hand and you can see it happen, but it's harder to keep an eye on your streaming students while you're teaching.

One potential solution is to open up the chat for your virtual students. They can type in a question when they have it, or even virtually raise their hand. From there, you can either set aside a Q&A segment of your class where you're checking the chat in addition to fielding questions from those actually in the room, or you can get a little help monitoring the virtual conversation.

Bringing in a TA to manage the chat, and address questions for you as you teach, means virtual students can feel validated as part of the class and get real-time help, and it's all without interrupting your flow during lecture. Any significant questions you should address can also get filtered up to you by the TA during an appropriate time. They can also flag struggling students for you to engage with after class.



# Build Mini-Communities

Class time may be disjointed as you can easily have a majority of your students in-person one day, and a small portion there the next. One way to help your students feel like they're part of a class is to create opportunities for peer-to-peer learning and instruction. Do this by encouraging small groups of students to meet outside of class.

Those who are learning virtually can stay virtual, but schedule time to connect with a small subsection of students outside of class. Those who are in-person, maybe living on campus, can meet as well.

Help facilitate these meetings by bringing students together and by setting group assignments they must complete. This could consist of peer-review of previously written essays, or even a series of iClicker questions they must discuss and answer as one.

Separating the 'group work' from class time ensures nobody feels left out because you've addressed the needs of all your students regardless of what format they're experiencing the class in. It also allows you to integrate group work no matter the format of the class.





# Keep Yourself Rejuvenated

While student engagement remains a prevalent concern for hybrid classrooms, it's also important to ensure that professors aren't overloading themselves. Working through multiple class formats, sometimes all at once, is a huge time investment. What are you doing to maintain your own interest in the class?

iClicker can certainly help, and the feedback it can provide can keep you excited about the class. The right questions will show you that what you've implemented is working, and that students are learning exactly what you want them to learn. They'll also highlight weak spots, in real time, so you can address them before they become a bigger issue.

Even if your students aren't in the room with you, you can see you're getting the message across. Student feedback is the great equalizer in participation, enabling even those who don't want to raise their hand or fire off a question, to engage.

iClicker also offers other benefits from the educator and administrator perspective that make it a tool that removes stress rather than adds more to your class.

iClicker is:

- **Affordable**
- **Flexible**
- **Robust**
- **Multi-functional**

There's plenty of support if needed, but what's really nice about the program is that it creates a low-stakes environment for students to invest in. There's no real consequence for trying and getting the answer 'wrong.' They just learn they need to keep learning.



# Keep Moving Forward

There's no telling how our perception of the classroom will continue to change. Classes may one day all be offered in a hybrid form, forever changing the way every subject gets taught. Although we may look ahead and try to guess, there's no way to know. All we can do is prepare for what's happening to the classroom right now, and that means readying instruction for both in-person and virtual learners to be in the "room" with us at the very same time. It's possible, with a lot of work, and a strategy that harnesses tools that engage everyone.





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**Matt Evans** has been teaching physics for over 20 years at the University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire, often exploring new techniques and technologies that can enhance the classroom experience for students, including online homework systems and pre and post lecture support videos. For the past 15 years he has been using iClicker systems in his classrooms, often beta-testing new instructor driven features to help make them serve instructors and students in their classrooms and beyond.



**Solina Lindahl** has been teaching Principles of Economics, Comparative Economic Systems and Poverty & Discrimination at California Polytechnic University since 1995 in large and small classes. She is happiest experimenting with new technologies and promising pedagogy. She has worked with the Chancellor's Office of the CSU as the Economics Lead Faculty for the Course Redesign with Technology Program and with her campus's CTLT (co-leading learning communities for instructors of large classes). She has found active learning to be a successful and stimulating strategy and is always looking for probing questions and good ideas for video tutorials.

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