Teaching Commons

FOSTERING ENGAGEMENT ONLINE: ACTIVITIES FOR REMOTE TEACHING

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Version 1.0
21 September 2022

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INTRODUCTION

This guide introduces seven activities for fostering engagement in remote teaching contexts. The strategies are divided into two groups: those that primarily target building community and those that are aimed at increasing student participation. Each activity includes a brief description as well as a discussion of benefits, challenges (including potential solutions), and further resources. Whenever appropriate, activities are illustrated with examples. Some activities use Zoom, a videoconferencing platform that is commonly used at York for online synchronous teaching. Please note that many other platforms, such as Microsoft Teams, have similar features, so you can easily adapt these activities to different platforms if you would like.

To facilitate instruction, each activity is prefaced with an overview of how much preparation it requires, what class size it is appropriate for, and when it can be used. These are guidelines that were developed to give you a quick idea of how and when you could use an activity. We encourage you to get creative, try out these suggestions, and adapt them to your teaching context as necessary.

If you have any feedback on this guide, please do not hesitate to reach out to Katharina Pabst, Educational Developer at the Teaching Commons and Liaison Developer for the Faculty of Science, at kpabst@yorku.ca.

Please note that the ideas presented here have been adapted from the Barringer, Ferguson, Pavlakis & Richards (2021), Luckens (2021), Shanouda, Tran & Freeman (2020), Stallard (2021) and Truan (2020).

BUILDING COMMUNITY

CHATTERFALL OR EMOJI WATERFALL

Adapted from [Luckens (2021)](#), [Stallard (2021)](#)

Prep time:	Class size:	When to use it:
Low	0-50 students	Before class

Description

Chatterfalls (also known as emoji waterfalls) are a quick and easy way to check in on students and show them that you care about their well-being. At the beginning of class, ask everyone to choose an emoji that reflects their current mood, put it in the chat, but hold off on pushing enter until you say "3-2-1 go!". Once everyone has posted their emojis, describe what you see in the chat and use it to engage students in a brief conversation. For example, you could point out if several students chose the same emoji or if you can relate to their choice. If you are not familiar with a particular emoji, encourage students to elaborate on their choice, either using the microphone or the chat.

Practical tips

- This type of activity can become unwieldy with large groups. Consider using a [feelings wheel](#) for students to annotate instead.

- During class, encourage students to react to the material using the [non-verbal feedback and interactions (also known as meeting reactions)](#). This allows them to indicate if they have questions or comments, would like you to speed up or slow down, etc. Students may not be familiar with how to use these reactions or what they mean, so make sure you walk them through the process at the beginning of your course.

Resources

- Learn more about the meaning and common usage of emojis [here](#).

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PRE-CLASS MUSIC, PROMPTS, OR PUZZLES

Adapted from Luckens (2021), Stallard (2021), Truan (2020)

Prep time:	Class size:	When to use it:
Medium	0-1000 students	Before class, during breaks

Description

One way to create rapport with your students is to fill the time before class starts with fun activities that encourage informal conversations. For example, you could play a song that you like or that suits the topic of your course. You could also solicit song recommendations from students. Alternatively, you could ask students to respond to a prompt or pre-class poll. These do not necessarily have to relate to the course material – in fact, it can be helpful to pick unrelated questions that allow students to get to know each other better. If you opt for a poll question, make sure it is culturally appropriate for everyone. For example, avoid asking how students are going to celebrate religious holidays since some of your students may not be celebrating these. Of course, this can also happen with other types of questions. To avoid this, offer options for students who do not identify with any of the answer choices and encourage learners to discuss the questions further in the chat.

Practical tips

- Before you choose a song, a prompt, or a puzzle, think about whether it is accessible and culturally appropriate for all of the students in your class.

- If you use a prompt or a puzzle, make sure everyone knows that they are expected to do. Display the instructions on a slide and repeat them several times for students who are joining you closer to the start of class.

Resources

- Access royalty-free music you can play here.
- Access royalty-free images you can use to create your own prompts here.
- You can create your own "Which one are you" meme here.

Examples
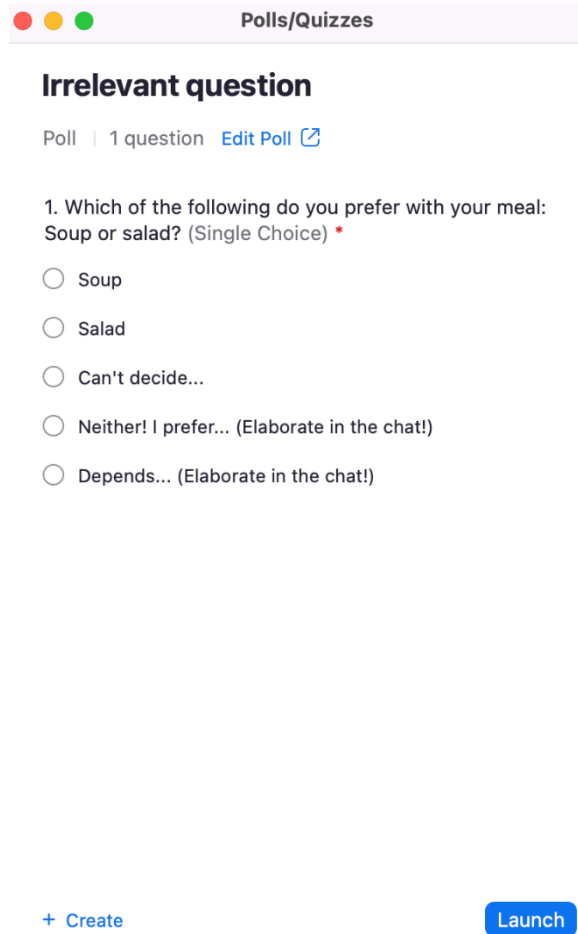- Pre-class prompts
- Pre-class puzzle

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Pre-class prompts

Source: Facebook, Wool for Every Day, August 10, 2020

Source: Katharina Pabst (Summer 2021), adapted from Truan (2020)

Pre-class puzzle

Consider linking to existing puzzles such as the New York Times Spelling Bee. Instructions can be found below. New puzzles go live every day at 3am Eastern Time. Answers are released a day later.

Instructions

How to Play Spelling Bee
Create words using letters from the hive.

- Words must contain at least 4 letters.
- Words must include the center letter.
- Our word list does not include words that are obscure, hyphenated, or proper nouns.
- No cussing either, sorry.
- Letters can be used more than once.

Score points to increase your rating.
- 4-letter words are worth 1 point each.
- Longer words earn 1 point per letter.
- Each puzzle includes at least one "pangram" which uses every letter. These are worth 7 extra points!
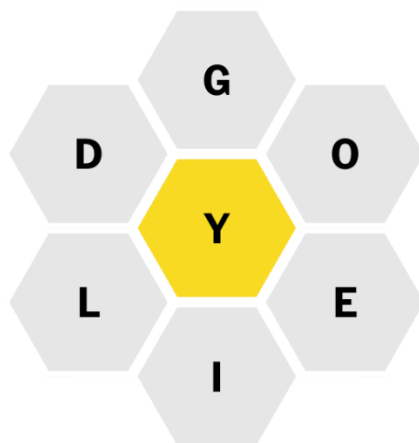
Need more solving tips? This article can help.

New puzzles are released daily at 3 a.m. ET.

Think we missed a word? Email us at buzzwords@nytimes.com.

Have feedback? Email us at nytgames@nytimes.com.

What to display

Key (to be made available to students after the activity)

Y D E G I L O

Ideology	Eyelid	Illy
Diddly	Geology	Leggy
Dilly	Giddily	Lily
Dodgy	Giddy	Logy
Doggedly	Giggly	Oddly
Doggy	Godly	Oily
Doily	Goggly	Yell
Dolly	Golly	Yelled
Dyed	Goodly	Yield
Eddy	Goody	Yielded
Edgy	Gooey	Yodel
Eely	Googly	Yodeled
Eggy	Idly	Yogi
Elegy	Idyl	
Eyed	Idyll	

Source: [New York Times Games > Puzzles > Spelling Bee](#), June 8, 2022 (puzzle) and June 9, 2022 (key); puzzle choice inspired by Alexandra Logue, University of Toronto

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VIRTUAL BACKGROUNDS AND FILTERS

Adapted from Luckens (2021)

Prep time:	Class size:	When to use it:
Low	0-1000 students	Before class, during class

Description

Zoom and many other videoconferencing platforms allow users to change their background pictures. Asking students to choose a virtual background image of their choice is a conversation starter. For example, you could ask students to upload a picture of an important person from your field of study and briefly introduce them to the rest of the class (either in a whole-class discussion or in smaller groups). If you want to keep things more informal, you could also ask students to pick a picture of their favorite animal or their favorite place in the world instead.

Practical tips

- Some older devices may not meet the technical requirements for using virtual backgrounds. Some students may also be hesitant or unable to turn on their cameras. Respect their choices and offer alternatives. For example, you could ask them to share pictures in the chat instead or to change their profile picture on Zoom.

- If you find that having backgrounds becomes distracting, consider limiting the activity to the first ten minutes of class.

- Encourage students to avoid wearing the same color as their background so it's easier to see them.

- Provide students with guidelines as to what kind of backgrounds are considered appropriate for the occasion.

- Before the activity, model how to change your background and post detailed written instructions that students can follow.

Resources

- Find more information about how to chance your virtual background (including technical requirements, information on how to set up green screens, and solutions to common problems) on Zoom here.

- You can access a wide variety of free Zoom backgrounds here.

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INCREASING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

ANNOTATION TOOL

Adapted from [Luckens (2021)](#)

Prep time:	Class size:	When to use it:
Low	0-100 students	During class

Description

The annotation tool on Zoom is a fantastic way to encourage active participation. For example, you could display slides with some missing information (e.g., a graph without axis labels) and ask students to fill in the missing information. You could also ask them to brainstorm ideas or add everything they know about a particular topic to a slide. If they agree with someone else's post, they could use a stamp to indicate this. To use the annotation tool, click on "[Annotate](#)" in the navigation bar and choose one of the [functions](#) ("Text", "Draw", "Stamp", etc.). You can erase annotations using the "Clear" function.

Practical tips

- Tell students how much time they have to annotate the slide so they can plan their contributions accordingly.

- Summarize and consolidate student contributions as a baseline for further discussion.

- If you would like to return to learner responses at a later time, you can take a screenshot of the annotated slide before you delete the annotations. Give students a heads up if you plan on doing this so they know that whatever they share may be re-used within the class.
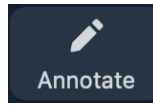
Resources

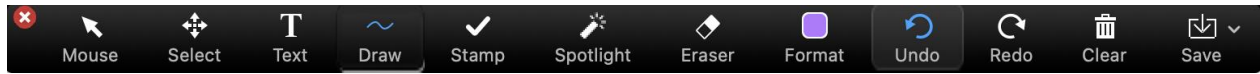- An overview of annotation functions on Zoom can be found [here](#).

Example

- [Annotated slide](#)

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Annotate button

Functions

Annotated slide

Citations

- Feak & Swales (2009:7-8) list nine ideas about why we need to cite other researchers' work.
    - Were any of these theories unfamiliar to you? Which ones?
    - Use the chat to elaborate on your answer!

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |

Source: Katharina Pabst (Summer 2021), adapted from Feak, C. B. & Swales, J. M. (2009). *Telling a research story: Writing a literature review*. Volume 2 of the revised and expanded edition of *English in Todays' Research World*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

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NON-VERBAL FEEDBACK AND INTERACTIONS

Adapted from Luckens (2021), Stallard (2021)

Prep time:	Class size:	When to use it:
Low	0-1000 students	During class

Description

Most videoconferencing platforms allow participants to use non-verbal reactions to indicate how they are feeling and give feedback to the presenter. There are various ways to integrate these into your teaching. For example, you can do a check-in at the beginning of class to get a better sense of how people in the room are feeling (this is also known as a chatterfall or emoji waterfall). You can either use the chat window or the on-screen reactions for this. After you introduce a new concept or skill, you can pause and ask students to indicate their level of understanding. In this context, they can indicate whether they feel comfortable with the new material or not.

Possible reactions:

- Yes ✅
- No ❌
- Thumbs up 👍

During the lesson, they can also indicate if the pace of the lesson is working for them.

Possible reactions:

- Slow down ⏪
- Speed up ⏩

To use meeting reactions, click on 'Reactions' in the navigation bar and choose one of the standard meeting reactions. You can also click on the three white dots in the right-hand corner for more options.

Practical tips

- Not everyone may be familiar with Zoom. At the beginning of the course, make sure to show students how to use meeting reactions and agree, if/when they should use them, and how you will interpret the standard meeting reactions (Will you interpret encouragement to slow down as an ask to repeat yourself as ell? What will you do if some learners ask you to slow down while others encourage you to speed up?)

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- Students may not feel comfortable using the yellow skin tone that is the default in Zoom. Let them know there is an easy way to adjust it. To do so, go to settings (on a Mac, this may be called "Preferences"). Then, go to "General" and choose the reaction skin tone that you want.

- Zoom recently started translating certain hand gestures into Zoom reactions (see this link for more info). Let students know about this feature, which can be a helpful and fun alternative to traditional reactions.

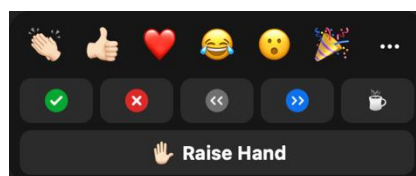## Resources

- Learn more about the meaning of the most common meeting reactions here.

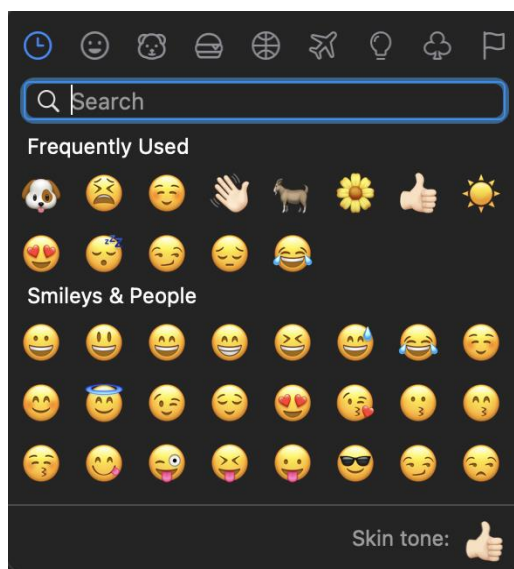### Reactions button
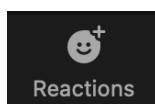
Standard meeting reactions

More options

TEXT WATERFALL

Adapted from Barringer, Ferguson, Pavlakis & Richards (2021), Luckens (2021), Stallard (2021)

Prep time:	Class size:	When to use it:
Low	0-50 students	During class

Description

Text waterfalls are a great way to ensure that everyone has an equal chance to participate. Pose a question to the class, orally and/or in writing, and ask everyone to type out their answer, but hold off on pushing enter until you say "3-2-1 go!". Once everyone has posted their answer, read out students' contributions and summarize common themes. Depending on the group dynamics, you can ask select students to elaborate on their answers and/or use them as a starting point for further discussion.

Practical tips

- This activity can be inaccessible to students with visual processing issues, especially in large groups. Consider using annotations instead. If that is not an option, make sure you summarize and consolidate answers for everyone. It also helps to make the chat available to everyone after class (see Resources for more information).

- It is easy to accidentally miss options when summarizing answers. Remind students that this is not intentional and encourage them to bring aspects you may have missed to your attention.

Resources

- Instructions for saving an in-meeting Zoom chat can be found here.

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ZOOM POLLS

Adapted from [Barringer, Ferguson, Pavlakis & Richards (2021)](#), [Luckens (2021)](#), [Stallard (2021)](#)

Prep time:	Class size:	When to use it:
Low	0-1000 students	During class

Description

Polls are not just a good way to [build community](#) – they are also a fantastic tool to keep learners engaged and check their understanding of course material. If you are the host of a Zoom meeting, you can create polls before or during a meeting. You can choose between creating a simple poll ("Poll") with real-time results and a more advanced option ("Advanced Polls and Quizzes"), which allows you to choose different question types and add images.

To create a poll before a meeting:

Step 1: Go to yorku.zoom.us.
Step 2: Select "My Meetings" in the navigation bar on the left.
Step 3: Pick the meeting you want to create a poll for. If you have not created one yet, you will have to do that first.
Step 4: Navigate to "Polls/Quizzes" at the bottom and hit the blue "Create" button.
Step 5: Save your poll question(s).

To create a poll during a meeting:

Step 1: Start the meeting.
Step 2: Click on "Polls/Quizzes" in the navigation bar.
Step 3: A window will pop up. Navigate to the bottom and click "+Create". This will lead you to yorku.zoom.us.
Step 4: Follow steps 2-5 above.

To display a poll during a meeting:

Step 1: Start the meeting.
Step 2: Click on "Polls/Quizzes" in the navigation bar.
Step 3: A window will pop up. Navigate to the bottom and click the blue "Launch" button.
Step 4: Once everyone has had a chance to participate, hit the red "End Poll" button at the bottom.
Step 5: To share the results of the poll with students, hit the blue "Share Results" button.
Step 6: To stop sharing the results, click the red "Stop Sharing" button and close the pop-up window.

Practical tips

- Consider preparing polls before class to save time and avoid technical difficulties.
- To facilitate discussion, encourage learners to elaborate on their answers in the chat.

- If many learners answer a comprehension question wrong, make sure to review the relevant lecture content.
- Many learners cherish variety. Consider switching up question types and use various ways of encouraging participation.

Resources

- To learn more about different options for polling, click here.

Examples

For an example of a poll question, see the irrelevant question under pre-class prompts.

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