Tools to stimulate students engagement and feedback in distance learning

Backchannel Chat   slido   Poll Everywhere   tweedback
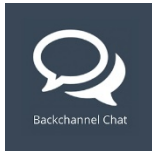
Distance learning, interaction, engagment, participation, feedback

What is this?

This resource presents four useful apps to engage with the students in a distance learning context. All four apps have free versions, and can also be used in in-person classes.

They are recommended in a recent article by Columbia University Prof. Stephen D. Brookfield, who consistently uses them in his classes. Although Prof. Brookfield describes their application in higher education, these apps can also be used effectively with high school students.

Why is this important?

A critical element of effective in-person classroom management, student engagement is more difficult to achieve in a distance learning context. Remote teaching also makes it harder to "read" the classroom and to get feedback and check in on students' understanding of the subject matter, both through verbal interaction and non-verbal cues.

Current online classroom platforms like Zoom and Teams offer basic interaction tools such as hands raised, live chat, Q&As and polls, but they lack some important functions like controlling students' access, filtering and removing inputs, saving and archiving records, using search capabilities, etc. Besides, these other tools provide a unique advantage since the students' inputs can be anonymous. This is instrumental for making sure that the teacher gets a more reliable and nuanced feedback, as it gives a voice to the quieter, shyer students who tend to remain silent and leave the floor to the extroverts and the more intrepid types.

What can I use it for?

Each app's specific features are described further on.

Notwithstanding each one's diifferent possibilities,

- When teaching online, using these tools doesn't have to interfere with the functions already embedded in Zoom or Teams; the teacher may continue to rely on hands raised or the chat function, for instance, to lead conversation, and simultaneously use any of the former for a specific purpose like polling or checking in on a particular point.

- These tools may also be used in in-person classes to get students in the habit of responding or posing a question—regardless of how comfortable they feel to speak up.

How can I use it?

Backchannel chat

Backchannel Chat is a class discussion tool that was designed from the ground up to support teachers. Backchannels are great for increasing participation in classroom discussions and for informally assessing students' knowledge.

The teacher can control all aspects of the discussion, such as removing messages, preventing chattier students from posting in order to make room to the more reserved ones, or even locking the room if the pace of the discussion becomes overwhelming and key messages are lost.

Backchannel opens in a web page visibile to everyone in class and can be accessed by any student with no need for enrollment. Participation remains anonymous throughout.

The live stream can be left open for the duration of the class, and anytime students have questions or don't understand something, they can post a comment or a query in the chat.

The teacher can also use the feed to check if the subject being taught is properly understood, for instance asking for concrete examples, possible outcomes, pros and cons, opinions, suggestions on how to solve a problem, etc.

In either case, the teacher must commit to check the feed at regular intervals and react to its content. This works best when the lesson is planned in chunks, with any one topic covered in 10-15 minutes and closed with the review and discussion of the comments posted in the chat.

Slido

Slido is a polling tool that can be used to poll and quiz the class in real time to sustain engagement and to check if the subject is properly understood, or to hold Q&A sessions. In addition to live polling, it can also be used before the class to gauge knowledge gaps, as well as afterwards to assess learning.

Again, participation may be anonymous. In Q&As, the teacher has the possibility to review ncoming questions before students can see them.

Interesting features include a leaderboard to display top responders and their scores, a timer to set a time limit to answer a question, and basic analytics to identify the hardest questions, discover which topics resonate with the audience and present them in a 'word cloud'. All engagement statistics can be downloaded into Excel files for further analysis and archiving.

Slido is easy to integrate with streaming video, presentation tools like PowerPoint and online classroom platforms like Zoom or Teams, delivering a seamless experience.

Poll Everywhere

Poll Everywhere is also a polling and quizzing software, similar to Slido and offering comparable functions. Interesting features include showing the correct answers to multiple choice questions when responding, as well as asynchronous feedback that extends anwering questions and receiving feedback beyond live classes.

Tweedback

Tweedback is another anonymous feedback tool in many respects similar to Slido and Poll Everywhere and serving essentially the same purpose, with some minor differences in scope and usability.

A useful addition is a "panic panel" that displays several buttons through which students can discretely warn the teacher to slow down, speed up, repeat an explanation or provide an example.