An engaged student is one who is active in the learning process. An active learner is likely a successful learner. If true learning is to occur, students have to be at the very least participants in the process, and not merely passive recipients. Student engagement involves factors that relate to motivation (e.g. energy, attention), attitude (course content regarded significant and worthwhile) and cognition (e.g. deep learning, questioning, analyzing, problem solving).

The following is a summary of some tips that instructors can use to generate what is commonly referred to as “student engagement,” beginning with the syllabus and the first class and continuing throughout the course. While this list is not exhaustive, applying these tips is likely to lead to having students who can be characterized as engaged. Many of these tips can be elaborated upon by the authors, if this is of interest. Often, large-class situations provide the greatest challenge. Small classes undoubtedly allow greater opportunities and flexibility for generating student engagement, particularly since you will know your students individually and by name.

### Starting the process of student engagement (1): The course syllabus

The course syllabus is often the first contact a student will have with the course and therefore creates a vital first impression. Rather than being merely a legal document that lays out such items as the course topics, schedule, assignments, and texts, the syllabus should be an enticing invitation to students to participate in an enriching course experience that will involve their active engagement in a learning process to achieve attractive goals. Following are some of the most important features of the course syllabus that foster such initial engagement:

- The instructor should avoid conveying a distant, authoritarian tone, and where possible use “I,” “we,” and “you” instead of “student” and “instructor” and use the active rather than passive voice (e.g., “I will assess you …” rather than “students will be assessed…”).

  Engagement with you is further facilitated by including information about yourself: relevant background, research interests, teaching interests, or other characteristics that serve to personalize you. In particular, what excites you about the course?

- In addition to coverage of, or exposure to, course topics, the instructor should specify explicit behavioural learning outcomes of the course that students will achieve upon successful completion. Wherever possible learning outcomes should be written from a student perspective i.e. be about what students would like to learn or find relevant rather than what you want to teach them.

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1 In the literature, “engagement” is often most often addressed in areas of “motivational theory” but its common usage can be highly varied.

2 Most are elaborated upon on the Learning and Teaching Centre website or through our workshops and resources http://www.ltc.uvic.ca/index.php
• Where possible, the instructor should present the course positively, *i.e.*, as a series of positive opportunities to achieve desirable learning outcomes rather than a series of punitively based hurdles that serve to dampen enthusiasm.

• Tell students on the syllabus about resources available to them that are relevant to their success in the course or beyond. For example, as applicable, you might provide URLs for the Writing Centre, Math and Stats Centre, Career Advising, Academic Advising and so on; add an accessibility statement that supports students with disabilities [http://www.ltc.uvic.ca/servicesprograms/support/index.php](http://www.ltc.uvic.ca/servicesprograms/support/index.php) (second item in list); and point to useful careers in the field. All these items, and others, can show you care about students as individuals. This will encourage further engagement with you.

• It often helps to have an interested but non-specialist colleague read the syllabus from a student perspective and ask questions that help clarify certain aspects or terms, as well as checking for tone.

### Starting the process of student engagement (2): The first meeting of the course

The first class is a singular opportunity for an instructor to create a positive connection with the students and to generate enthusiasm for participating actively in the course. It begins with a personal introduction that allows the instructor to demonstrate his or her own excitement and enthusiasm about the course and to set the tone for how the course will progress and what students will gain from their participation. Note that the traditional tactic of spending the major portion of the class time going over the syllabus (which is likely posted, or will be posted, and should be continually referred to) is not itself conducive to generating student engagement.

• The first 15 minutes are critical for projecting your personal first impression and should be carefully planned. The class should begin on time, and the instructor should project a personable and enthusiastic demeanor: smile, eye contact, appropriate gestures and movement, and a voice that speaks to everyone in the room.

• Instructors should personalize themselves by providing a welcome and introduction that includes expectations and means of communication. The introduction might include something about your educational background, research interests, and particular interest in the course.

• There could then follow:
  a. a short description of the course content in non-technical, ordinary language indicating to the students its relevance and importance to their overall program, to other courses in the discipline, to a range of possible future goals they may have and perhaps to broader aspects such as global citizenship;
  b. the depicting of a graphic syllabus or course concept map to show the overall structure of the course, and the relationship of its component parts, that is otherwise not revealed by the linear sequence of course topics;
  c. an emphasis on the learning outcomes of the course, the descriptions of which can have positive attitudinal and motivational effects, as positive opportunities for learning in the course, together with the assessment procedures as they relate to those learning outcomes.
d. advice to students to enhance their involvement and performance in the course e.g.,
the importance of preparation, attendance, working with other students in the course,
online participation, and the availability of helpful university resources (e.g., The
Writing Centre, Math and Stats Help Centre, Counselling Services).

- An instructor has available a variety of icebreakers or opportunities for drama, surprise, and
  motivation that can be used to sustain student interest, involvement, and engagement. Using a “getting to know you” questionnaire helps enormously in setting expectations on both sides. This can provide you with hooks for future learning in terms of knowing your students’ interests and thereby allowing you to tailor future examples [http://www.ltc.uvic.ca/servicesprograms/support/index.php](http://www.ltc.uvic.ca/servicesprograms/support/index.php).

- In addition to mutual introductions, the students could be set a task relevant to the course that would get them to work together in pairs or small groups (even in a large class). You should always start as you mean to go on. So, if you expect them to talk and discuss, you should do that on the first day.

- The instructor should use the full class time. If there is time left, the instructor should begin focusing on the actual course material, which signals to the students that course time is valuable and not to be wasted.

### Sustaining the process of student engagement throughout the course:

- A variety of instructional strategies and activities are essential for maintaining interest. Always decide on the desired learning outcome first, and then ask yourself, “What instructional activity or method most successfully achieves this goal?” Make a point of talking to colleagues and sharing ideas for alternative methods for teaching students key concepts.

- If lecturing is the method being used, the instructor should behave as an extrovert rather than an introvert, conveying social energy that is infectious. In order to sustain interest and involvement, the teaching approach, when lecturing, should be interrogative rather than strictly declarative. For example, it helps to introduce a session with the main question (not statement) being addressed in that session. In addition, a provocative question can provoke discussion and ideas from students to explore or build upon. A variety of techniques can be used to make the lecture situation an opportunity for active learning beyond the passive reception of transmitted information. For example, students could be asked questions or presented with problems that would involve their breaking up into pairs or small groups for discussion, articulation of arguments, and summary of points. (Note that in the increasing popular “flipped classroom” approach, such activities constitute the dominant class activity, with the traditional lecture relegated to out-of-class, online accessibility.)

- One of the strongest tips for maintaining student engagement is to be well-prepared and have a really clear structure. In addition to the syllabus tips above, instructors should have weekly/section outlines that nest from the syllabus (please see templates for individual class outlines at [http://www.ltc.uvic.ca/servicesprograms/support/generating.php](http://www.ltc.uvic.ca/servicesprograms/support/generating.php).)

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3 Some instructors also use humour to great effect but this is certainly not a requirement!
goals for each section of the course and identifying the core concepts for each section etc. provides a clear sense of structure. For weaker students this is reassuring and allows them to learn much more effectively. For instructors this keeps you on track and forces you to be explicit about your outcomes. This method also helps students who have English as an additional language, students who are shy and some students with learning disabilities. The “questions to guide student learning ahead of time” allow all these students to prepare and participate much more confidently and effectively. The technique also assists enormously in generating deeper more thoughtful responses from a greater diversity of students and hence supports classroom management as well.

- Presentation technology is helpful in sustaining student engagement when used appropriately. For example, there is a set of skills involved in the pedagogical use of PowerPoint that can be effective in maintaining rather than inhibiting student engagement.\(^\text{4}\) Clickers are potentially an effective tool for sustaining individual student attention and participation in what otherwise could be a passive experience. Several instructors now use social media to engage their students and generate discussion or achieve key learning goals.

- Any time that students can be co-creators of class knowledge this assists in engaging them, since this helps to invest them in the course. In any sized class students can be asked to look for examples of concepts discussed last class and to bring them to the following class. These might be applications or examples in the newspaper or problem sets in another field that they have seen in another course. Students who bring examples forward can be rewarded for contributing simply by putting up what they have brought on the projector. Pretty soon you will have more students doing this and lots of examples to use.

- Motivate students to study in groups outside of class—show them where the study spaces are they can meet in. Tweeting can produce an instant study group in the Learning Commons.

- Keep checking in—a simple mid-semester feedback questionnaire can help you keep connected to your students’ progress. Just make sure you respond the very next class. [http://www.ltc.uvic.ca/servicesprograms/support/index.php](http://www.ltc.uvic.ca/servicesprograms/support/index.php).

Following these tips is by no means a guarantee for generating a high and consistent degree of student engagement, nor do they represent an exhaustive list of possible strategies. Each instructor tends to have his/her own favourites and their efficacy is partly dependent on a number of factors over which the instructor may have little or no control, including the level and size of the class and the instructor’s personality, experience, and teaching style. However the judicious application of a few ideas that feel appropriate should make a noticeable difference in the learning climate of the classroom and the degree of student participation in course activities. It is indeed possible to enhance student engagement and we applaud any instructor who is curious as to how this may be better achieved. Please do not hesitate to contact us for more ideas, or with questions.\(^\text{5}\)

\(^4\) Note, however, that when not used well, such technology can dampen involvement and reduce engagement.

5 For many more ideas, and lots of good advice, please see *McKeachie’s Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers*. Now in its 13th edition, we find this is still the best desktop resource for teachers at all career stages.