

# Classroom Dynamics and Engagement

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The Centre for Teaching Excellence

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# Learning outcomes

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By the end of this workshop, you should be able to:

- Identify issues in classroom dynamics and student engagement
- Devise strategies to handle these issues and engage or re-engage learners
- Consider the implications of these strategies
- Know where to locate relevant Waterloo policies

# Preliminary discussion

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## **Engagement**

In general terms, how do you foster student engagement in the classroom or in the LMS?

## **Classroom Dynamics**

In general terms, how do you respond to situations in the classroom or in the LMS that are awkward, uncomfortable, or problematic – situations that could disrupt the group dynamic of a classroom, or the learning experience of one or more students?

# Engaging students

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# How do you know if your students are engaged?

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[www.clipartkid.com](http://www.clipartkid.com)

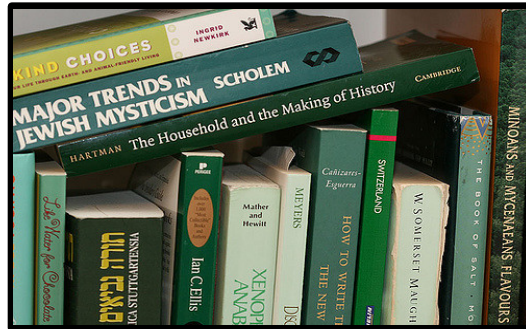
# The 3 Key Players in Learning

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Students

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Content

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Instructor

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“ ‘To teach is to engage students in learning.’...the real challenge in college teaching is not covering the material for the students, it’s uncovering the material with the students” (Smith, *et al.*, 2005, p.88)







# Increase social presence and reduce anonymity by

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- Smiling
- Using humour
- Vocal variety
- Personalizing examples
- Addressing students by name
- Questioning
- Praising
- Greeting at least some students as they enter
- Initiating discussion
- Encouraging feedback
- Avoiding tense body positions
- Being aware of your facial expression
- Varying the direction of your gaze
- Being aware of your posture and nonverbal cues
- Moving around the room

# Link the course to students' future goals

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Prompt your students to think of themselves as future professionals

- Ask them what they want to do after university
- Relate course material to their future professions



Flickr. NTNU, Department of Chemical Engineering. Taken Oct. 2015



# Frame assignments in professional terms

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“You have been hired by the City of Kitchener to evaluate y”

“You are advising teens who are considering x”  
Based on this week’s readings, what would you say and why?

“A professional association has asked you to demonstrate the need for x in y...”

Consider giving a “**legacy assignment**”  
(example: [electronic edition of \*Gorboduc\*](#))



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E.g., If Lev Vygotsky and Jean Piaget were chatting about the appropriate age for a child to have an iPad, what would they say? Why would they say that? With a partner, compose an email exchange between these two.

E.g. If Fritz Heider, author of attribution theory, were writing a blog about the effects of Facebook on a person's ability to make attributions about others, what would he say?

# Use questions to motivate students to stay attentive in class

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- Prompt metacognitive thinking
- Push the boundaries of their current knowledge
- Have students use clickers to facilitate peer instruction
- Have students first discuss a question in pairs or small groups before exploring it as a class

*“If we conducted Solomon Asch’s classic study today, do you think participants would respond any differently?”*



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# Make learning interesting to the learner

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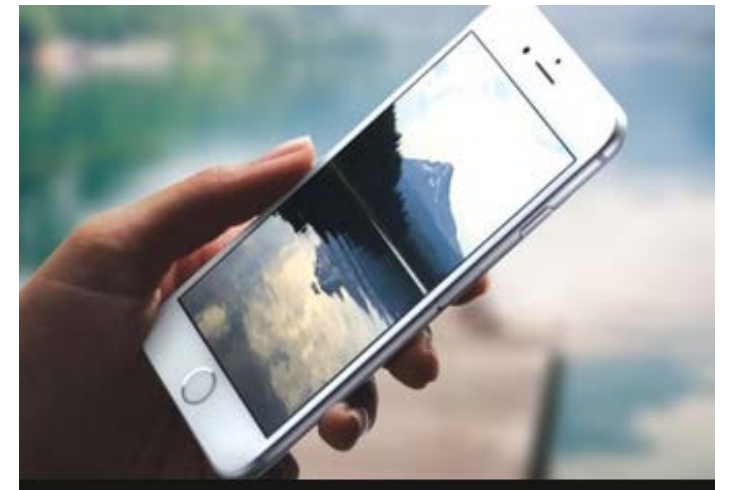
**Paradoxical:** “Why does a mirror appear to flip an image left-right but not top-bottom?”

**Counter-intuitive:** “Why did Shakespeare call *The Merchant of Venice* a comedy?”

**Surprising:** “Does 0.9999.... equal 1? Why or why not?”

**Contentious:** “In light of recent elections, is democracy the best form of government?”

**Relevance:** “Apply Harold Kelley’s Covariation Model to answer the question “*Why didn’t Nupur text me back?*””



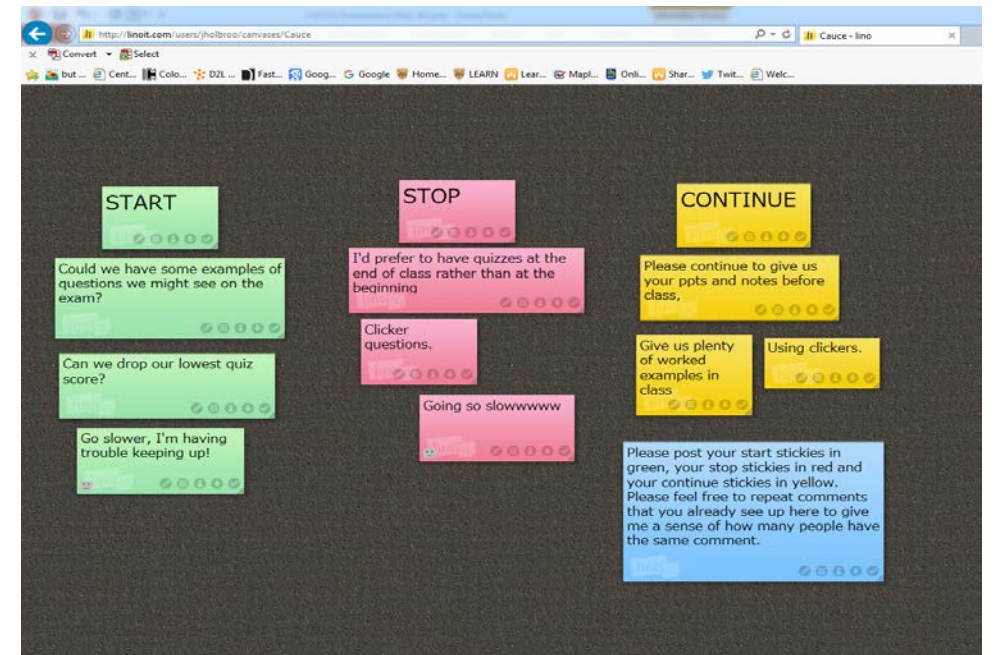
# Ask students for their feedback

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Give an anonymous survey early in the term (e.g., “Start, Stop, Continue”, what students need more help with, etc.)

Summarize and present students’ comments in class

Explain what you will change and what you won’t change (and why some things won’t/ can’t be changed)





# Classroom Dynamics

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How would you describe the climate and classroom dynamics that you would like to foster in your classroom?

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## Accommodation and exemption issues

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After class, Jessica asks you if she can write the midterm a week after it is scheduled for one of the following reasons:

- Her parents are taking her family on a once-in-a-lifetime trip.
- Her grandmother has died and the funeral is in Belgium.
- Her brother in British Columbia was in a motorcycle accident and is in critical condition.
- She is feeling stressed out for reasons she doesn't specify.
- She is on the Waterloo volleyball team and they are attending a tournament in Alberta.

## Small Group Discussions

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We are now going to form three groups and each group will be assigned a different scenario. You'll have 12 to 15 minutes to discuss it. As you do so:

- Identify appropriate strategies for dealing with the scenario
- Be ready to explain a few of the strategies
- Time permitting, locate relevant policies or resources on the Waterloo website

## Indifference and Disruption issues

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- Andrew and Laika consistently arrive 15 minutes late for class.
- Ahmed tells you he can't focus in class because other students are typing loudly on their keyboards.
- You know that many of your students are on Facebook or Instagram during class. Other students are not complaining.
- Matt dominates class discussions – he is eager and enthusiastic, not overbearing.
- In an LMS discussion forum, Cecelia is often sarcastic and rudely dismissive of other students' contributions.

## Workload and assessment issues

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- A group of ten students comes to your office to complain that the course workload is too much.
- In an LMS discussion forum, Zhang complains that the grades in your course are much lower than in another instructor's section of the same course. He says that lots of other students in your course feel the same way.
- Trevor complains that the TA for your course isn't providing useful feedback on assignments.
- After you return her test, Hima disputes most of the answers for which you gave her less than full marks.

## Boundary issues

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- Near the end of the course, Gina -- one of your Teaching Assistants -- asks to be friends with you on Facebook.
- Noah repeatedly comes to your office to ask you questions, usually about things that were clearly covered in class or in the textbook.
- After class, Kelly stands very close to you while asking questions.
- In class and in emails, your students call you by your first name.
- After the course is over, Nizar – who did not do well in the course – asks if you will write a letter of reference for him.



# Concluding Thoughts

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At the beginning of a term, invite your students to help establish the ground rules for the class.

Model the behaviour you want to encourage: be respectful, thoughtful, attentive, fair.

Instructors and students have different perspectives and levels of experience: a complaint or request that seems unfounded, trivial, or silly to you can seem completely reasonable and valid to a student.

# Concluding Thoughts cont.

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Forestall issues by articulating clear policies in your syllabus.

Reflect on how flexible you want to be and then be consistent with all students.

Reflect on which of these you value most: equality or equity.

Remember that things sometimes happen in students' lives that they can't control.

# University of Waterloo policies and Ontario provincial legislation

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Policy 33 [Ethical Behaviour](#)

Policy 70 [Student Petitions and Grievances](#)

[University of Waterloo Conflict Management and Human Rights Office](#) (CMAHRO)

[Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act](#) (AODA)

See Faculty Handbook posted on [AccessAbility Services](#) website

[Ontario Human Rights Commission](#) (OHRC)

# CTE Resources: Engagement

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[Using writing as a learning tool](#)

[Low-stakes writing assignments](#)

[Responding to writing assignments: managing the paper load](#)

[Promoting and assessing critical thinking](#)

[Rubrics: useful assessment tools](#)

[Assignment design: checklist](#)

[Assignment design: sequencing assignments](#)

[Building Community in Large Classes](#)

# CTE Resources: Classroom Dynamics

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[Conflict Management for Instructors](#)

[Large Classes: Limiting the Chaos](#)

[Laptops in the Classroom: A Virtue or Vice?](#)

[Motivating Our Students](#)

[Teaching Metacognitive Skills](#)

[Classroom Dynamics and Engagement](#)