

# 8 Strategies to Improve Participation in Your Virtual Classroom

Educators share their best synchronous and asynchronous strategies to boost student participation during online learning.

[Emelina Minero](#) August 21, 2020



## Teaching Strategies

In every classroom, there are students who always have

their hand raised to participate, and those who are hesitant to engage. Whether they're introverted, tend to think awhile before they contribute, or are just having a bad day, it can be hard to bring kids into discussions who are reluctant to add their voices.

The challenges of getting students to participate have intensified during remote learning, we've heard from many teachers. Digital platforms can create added communication barriers by making it hard to know when to talk, for example, or how to read subtle but important elements of discourse like a person's body language and facial expressions. Additionally, online discussions are often hindered by variability in students' access to technology and by privacy concerns, and consequently many teachers have had to rely on students' submitting work over isolated channels like email, which can leave back-and-forth between peers (and between students and the teacher) by the wayside.

Getting kids to contribute in virtual classrooms takes some work, it turns out. "We keep calling this generation digital natives as if they are simply whizzes at everything computerized. They aren't," wrote Tim O'Brien on Facebook. "They need personal support, scaffolding, and reassurance that technology does not provide. It is simply a tool, not a teacher."

To find out how to improve student discussions and participation in online learning, we culled through hundreds of comments on social media and followed up with more than 20 educators to see how they tackled the challenge last spring. Teachers offered a range of smart strategies, both synchronous and asynchronous, to integrate the values and the voices of all kids—even the quietest or those with disrupted schedules—into their classes this fall.

## **Synchronous Strategies**

For synchronous learning, some teachers said they translated traditional discussion strategies from the classroom to live video chats, while others found that digital tools helped boost classroom participation.

**1. Spider web discussion:** During remote learning this spring, students in Shai Klima's high school class led their own discussions over Google Meet. Before the live class, students answered questions independently, and then shared their responses at the start of the meeting as a jumping-off point for a broader class discussion.

While students conversed on video, Klima listened and drew lines on a sheet of paper tracking the flow of the conversation, resulting in a spider web. At the end of the discussion, Klima shared the drawing over video, and then asked students to reflect on the experience and what they

learned about who talked, who listened, and who built on the ideas of others.

“It has been successful as a means to get kids to credit their peers with helping them come up with new ideas, which helps build rapport,” said Klima, who let students struggling with bandwidth call in to the meetings.

**2. Using chat to check for understanding:** After giving lessons last spring, [Paul France](#) had his third-grade students use the Google Chat feature to ask and answer questions or type in emojis, like a thumbs-up or thumbs-down, to show whether they understood a concept. To create structure around the responses, he guided his students in [creating norms](#) around using the chat feature—they decided as a group to use only one emoji at a time, for example. France said the practice helped him check for student understanding and pushed students to engage more with the content.

Kindergarten teacher Ruth Calkins, meanwhile, used Zoom chat when holding live lessons with her kindergarten students. She said they enjoyed typing “T” or “F” for true and false questions while answering math problems in the chat box, and some even attempted to write sentences in response to her questions. Typing responses also provided a lot of keyboard practice for her young students.

### **3. Flip your classroom to stimulate deeper discussion:**

Forrest Hinton, a high school math teacher, says he found that a blend of asynchronous and synchronous instruction worked well to stimulate student discussion during remote learning.

First, he taught new content asynchronously through recorded videos and online activities. At the start of his live class, students briefly summarized the concepts they had learned together and then divided into breakout rooms to solve related problems in small groups. Flipping his classroom allowed Hinton to spend less class time in direct instruction—and listening to students at the start of class and in small groups helped him identify, and then address, where his students were struggling. “This has allowed me to clarify concepts in a more targeted way and better assist students,” said Hinton.

**4. Adapting think-pair-share to Zoom:** Ryan Tahmaseb, director of library services, says he found that giving more project-based learning activities to his elementary and middle school students—and allowing them more autonomy over assignments—naturally encouraged richer discussions in virtual learning. “If we give students as much freedom as possible to experiment, research, and pursue interests within our content area, then they inevitably have a lot more to say,” said Tahmaseb.

When it came to class discussions, Tahmaseb adapted think-pair-share to Zoom. Students were given a prompt, broken into groups, and then placed into breakout rooms to discuss and record their answers on a shared Google doc, which allowed students to share their thinking in writing or read aloud. Since Tahmaseb wasn't in each breakout room to listen to the conversations, the Google doc kept students accountable. Once they returned to the whole class, volunteers from each group shared their answers with everyone.

**5. A new twist on show-and-tell:** To get students comfortable with online participation, Brittany Collins, the teaching and learning coordinator at [Write the World](#), a global online writing community for middle and high school students, converted the familiar show-and-tell activity into "think, write, share."

In one activity, Collins asked middle and high school students to find a photo, painting, or drawing that represented intergenerational connection and independently respond by writing to the following questions from the [Making Thinking Visible Framework](#) before discussing them over video as a class: What are we looking at? What makes you say that? What do you notice (see, feel, know)? What more can we uncover? What do you wonder? "It helps to break the ice in a virtual learning setting where

unplanned participation can prove challenging for some students," said Collins.

## **Asynchronous Strategies**

Although some teachers—and students—said that synchronous discussions were more engaging because they resembled a traditional classroom, many educators found that asynchronous discussions were more equitable because they opened up participation to students with low bandwidth, who had schedule limitations, or who were uncomfortable engaging with the full class.

### **6. Online forums create back-and-forth dialogue:**

Angelina Murphy, a high school English teacher, said she used Google Classroom's question feature to get her class to respond to readings and discussion prompts during remote learning this past spring. When each student commented, Murphy replied with clarifying questions to create a back-and-forth dialogue and also asked every student to respond to at least two of their peers' comments to create a broader base of discussion.

Fifth-grade teacher Raquel Linares said she used [Nearpod Collaborate](#) (Apple, Android), a virtual collaboration board, to get students to share images or write a response to show what they had learned about an article they read. To inspire connection and reflection among classmates, Linares also

used [Flipgrid](#) (Apple, Android), so that students could hear their peers' voices even though they were remote.

**7. Seeing and critiquing peer work through virtual gallery walks:** Virtual “gallery walks” give students an opportunity to view their classmates' projects while learning from each other, according to Joe Marangell, a high school social studies teacher. After his students presented their own projects through five-minute screencasts, they were then required to give feedback to at least two other students on theirs.

Using Google Sheets, students provided feedback to their peers by answering the following prompts: What's something new I learned about this topic?; What's something that surprised me about this topic?; What's something I liked about this presentation? The online format gave every student the opportunity to see their peers' work and their assessment on theirs for deeper reflection, Marangell said.

**8. Moving station brainstorming online:** When carousel or station brainstorming activities are conducted in traditional classroom environments, small groups of students rotate around the room to different stations to answer prompts—and view and add to each groups' responses.

To translate this online, Marangell divided his students into



groups online and created shared Google docs—or a series of Google slides—for the prompts/questions. Each group left their thoughts under the questions by the assigned date and then followed up by commenting on the other groups' responses the next day. "The strategy still allows them to maintain a sense of classroom community [in a virtual setting]," said Marangell.