Magna 20 Minute Mentor

Transcript

How Can I Gauge Online Learning Through Engaging Activities and Assignments?

Presented by:

Jeremy Caplan

Director, Newmark Graduate School of Journalism, The City University of New York

Jeremy Caplan is director of teaching and learning at Newmark Graduate School of Journalism. He teaches classes, workshops, and webinars on entrepreneurial and digital journalism. Caplan serves as adjunct coordinator, implements new faculty development programs, strengthens the outcomes and assessment process, and develops new learning opportunities for students.

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Editor's Note:
This is a written transcript of an audio recording. Our policy is to edit only the occasional unintelligible phrase. Everything else appears as it was spoken.

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Hi, I'm Jeremy Caplan, director of teaching and learning for the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism at The City University of New York. And I'm here to talk about gauging student online learning with engaging exercises and assignments.

When we're teaching online, we don't have the same opportunity to get nonverbal signals from students. Or to have those informal in the hallway conversations with students to check how they're doing and see how much they're understanding in our class. And that's all the more reason why we have to incorporate periodic and consistent checks for understanding in our online teaching.

Checks for understanding and gauging online understanding is particularly helpful in two ways. One, it actually helps students improve their attention and their learning. A lot of research shows that retrieval practice and practice questions often helps students retain information and ideas in online courses.

And it also helps us get information about what we need to do to adjust our explanations, or our assessments, our assignments, our exercises, to make sure students are understanding. We want to do this kind of assessment on a regular basis. In each class there should be some moment at which we stop and check for understanding in one of multiple ways, which I'll talk about.

And then periodically as the course progresses, we need to check, before we move onto new material, that the material we've covered thus far is understood by the students, so that they have the foundational understanding to move onto more advanced concepts.

What we want to avoid are two things really. One, we want to avoid asking students simply, do you get it? Do you understand? That really isn't going to yield the kind of information and subtle understanding of their comprehension that we really need.

And we also want to avoid what sometimes happens, which is that we get into week six or week seven of a course, and we find that the foundational understanding from the first couple of units just isn't there. And we then have to backtrack, and we are in a difficult position, because we're halfway through the semester, or even beyond that. So, that's why checking for understanding, and gauging understanding in online courses, should happen much more regularly even than in in-person classes.

Here are a number of tactics and activities you can employ to gauge student understanding in an online class session. You can ask students to summarize key points that you've covered in a recent section of class, or in a prior class session. Where you can ask them to summarize the key ideas from an important figure you've been studying. Or to summarize the primary reasons for something that you've been studying in the class.

And in asking for a summary, you can do this in a variety of different ways. And I'll give you a few suggestions. First, you can have students work in their own Google Doc or Microsoft Word doc, and independently jot down some ideas, jot down their own summary, before then pasting in a key section of that into your online meeting software tool, into the chat section. And you can ask everyone to wait until you set a particular moment, and then submit all together.

And that has the advantage of no one being influenced by what everyone else has been typing, but everyone having the benefit in the online class session of seeing the summaries that other people have created. And you can then comment on some differences you notice or ask students to observe differences that they notice.

This is a great way to get students thinking about what they've learned, to assess whether they've summarized the material in a way that shows their understanding, and to get them to look at each other's work and learn from one another. So, it has multiple benefits.

You can ask students to summarize material in other ways as well. For example, you could have students create a collective Google slide deck, and each student could be responsible for creating one of the slides focused on a particular topic. You could also have students use another kind of online collaborative tool, like Notion or Coda, to build a document together online, each responsible for a section of the document.

In addition to having students summarize material, you can ask them to answer a question that reveals whether or not they really understand what it is that you've been talking about. So, let's say, for example, you're teaching a music history course, and you've been discussing the influence of Beethoven on Brahms. And you may ask a question, something along the lines of simply, what are some examples of ways in which Beethoven influenced Brahms? Or to what extent do you think Brahms was influenced by composers before him?

And inviting students to volunteer to participate in that discussion or asking them to work in breakout rooms online in your online meeting software, to discuss that, and then come back together and provide their summary answer. Give students a chance to convey that they have, in fact, grasped some of the concepts that you've been talking about.

Or to come back and say, we're really not sure. Can you explain that again? Or we really don't know. At which point you can decide that you can go over some of that material again, or maybe present it in a slightly different way.

Another tactic you can use is to ask students, either individually, or in groups, or sequentially in order of students that you want to address, to summarize the main points of a particular topic. So, what are the three main causes that you think really resulted in this change in economic policy? Or whatever the topic is. And asking students to

address the main points forces them to kind of break down the ideas in their heads into multiple parts.

And, again, when you're doing this online you can use multiple different kinds of approaches. From simply using the chat box in your online meeting software, to having students share a collective Google Doc, where you can see all of the work that they're doing and they can then be asked to annotate one another's work as they're going.

Now if students don't have access to some of those online tools, you can also simply use a discussion mode. And periodically move around to different students to make sure that they're each having a chance to summarize the main points, or to share their thoughts.

Another technique you can use is to make a mistake occasionally and invite students to take a look at that and see what's wrong with it. So, for example, if you're working in a history context, you might put a timeline on-screen that has a little error in it or has a blank, has something without a date, or has something without a detail. And ask students, what seems to be missing here?

And just see if they kind of grasp that the detail is missing or see that something has been put in the wrong place. It's a way of making sure that they're understanding enough to identify when something is missing. Another tool is to ask for an analogy. So, we could tell, if we're in the music history context, we could say that Miró or Monet were important figures in the art world in this period, who would be the analogous figures in the world of classical music?

Or if we're in the world of journalism and we're talking about historical editorial writers, we could say who is the Nick Kristof of that particular era? Referencing a current journalist that they may know, based on your study, and seeing if they can draw an analogy to a prior era.

Another way to check for understanding is to ask for real life examples. So, if you've been talking about the labor movement of a particular era, you can ask them if they can relate to the existence of a labor movement today? And what does that tell them about the development of the labor movement over time?

And another thing you can do is ask them to rephrase something. So, if you've presented a summary of a topic, or you've summarized something, you can ask them to rephrase that in their own words. And, again, in terms of how we do this, this can be in a Google Doc, this could be in their online chat software. It could be in your learning management system, so that they're submitting that.

And in any of those cases, you can then see the work that they've done and gauge whether they are, in fact, understanding the material. So, these are all ways of using simple exercises and activities in class to gauge whether students are actually understanding the concepts that you're teaching.

Retrieval exercises can be particularly helpful for gauging student understanding and online classes. And I'll give you some examples of how you can employ these types of retrieval practices. You can use online survey tools, like Typeform, Google Forms, or even Kahoot!, to invite students to some formative assessments that basically aren't used for grading, but just to give them a chance to recall and practice some concepts that they've been learning about.

So, you can ask students, for example, to define three core concepts, or to explain three core concepts in their own terms in one of these survey tools. Or you can use those survey tools, like Typeform, or Kahoot!, or Google Forms, to offer them some self-graded quizzes, essentially. That they can take either in class, in a live online class, or between sessions in an asynchronous way.

The advantage of using these kinds of tools for gauging student understanding is that, number one, they're self-graded, so it's an efficient method. Number two is you can incorporate explanations for each of the answers. So, if they don't get the correct answer, they immediately get a response explaining what the correct answer actually is, and giving them some insight, so they have an immediate feedback, which is quite powerful and useful.

You can also, with these kinds of tools, invite students to try multiple times. So, again, because it's not graded, it's really to invite them to learn the material. And you can still take a look and see which of the questions are proving most challenging for people. And that can be helpful in identifying topics that you might need to go over again or re-emphasize in your next class session.

Some other approaches include using the KWL methodology, what I know, what I want to know more about, and what I learned, to let students express in their own words what they actually feel confident that they know. What they still want to know more about. What they're curious about. And what they learned in the current class session.

So, that's a nice way to end an online class session, to allow students to tell you what they feel they know, and what they feel that they've learned, and what they still want to know more about. And you can use those to judge where there might be an opportunity for delving further into something.

You can also ask students to put together a hierarchy of something. So, a hierarchy of concepts allows students to show that they understand a priority of importance, or how certain figures relate to other figures, or how certain concepts connect to other concepts. And that can be a useful way to check if they understand how things in your course relate to other things.

You can also ask students to draw and create a visual connection, a visual concept map, or explain a concept through arrows and kind of pointing keywords to other words. And they can submit this simply by taking a little snapshot with their phone, if they have

a phone, and adding that to your learning management system, or to your online meeting software.

So, there are simple ways for them to actually practice using visuals, even just on paper. You can also use the online whiteboard tool in your online meeting software to allow students to visually draw something out. Or you can use other tools, like witeboard.com, which has free whiteboard software, or even Google Drawing tools, which are also free.

Another way of allowing students to incorporate online exercises to check for understanding and to show their understanding, is to invite them to record FlipGrid videos about a particular concept. The great thing about FlipGrid is that people can have a dialogue with one another. Students can explain the concept in their own words, and another student can say, oh, I liked the way you explain that, and made me think of this, or it made me think of that.

So, these are some ways that you can use online tools to gauge understanding, to see if students are actually understanding, while giving them interesting and engaging activities to use to develop their online learning further.

Another approach you can use is to allow students to annotate material online. So, you can give them some text, in a Google Doc for example, and Google Docs allows anyone to highlight some section of the text and then add a comment. And they can then respond to others' comments, or others can annotate other parts of the document.

So, that's a way of seeing if students really understand and if you ask them to comment on the key parts that address a certain topic or a certain issue, you can see what they think of as important on that issue, and you can see if they understand the concepts and the ideas based on the annotations that they include.

You can also use a tool like hypothes.is for this, where students go on to other texts online on the web, and add their own comments, and respond to one another's comments. So, there are multiple ways that you can use online tools to gauge understanding through interacting actively with text.

When it comes to assignments, many in-person classes have one or two major assignments. Whereas for me, I find it helpful to have multiple assignments in online courses, because it gives students a chance to demonstrate their understanding even earlier in the class.

And it gives me a chance to adjust along the way, and identify concepts that may need further explication, or where students might need some additional help along the way. It also gives students a chance to redo something if they have multiple assignments early in the class, there's a longer period thereafter in the semester where students can redo something.

For me, in an online class, providing feedback for assignments, as well as exercises, is really important, because that's where students can identify the things that they're doing well, and the things they really need extra help with. And, I think, feedback to be effective has to have several qualities for online classes. First, it has to be soon after the student has done something.

In an online class, oftentimes there's less contact that you have with the student, and they can lose track of where things are at, or they can lose a sense of what they've done if they don't hear back from you, the instructor, soon after they've submitted something. So, feedback should be provided soon after the material is submitted.

It should also be delivered in small chunks. So, sometimes I remember as a student getting material back with a sea of red ink and being overwhelmed with all of the different comments on many different topics. I think feedback is most effective when it's delivered in concise bits that are manageable for students to act on.

The next thing that's important about feedback is that it is separated from grades. So, if a student receives a grade at the same time as they receive the feedback, it's natural to focus on the grade and to be distracted by it, whether it's a good grade or one that's less than desirable. So, it's better to provide feedback that's separated from the grade.

And finally, feedback should include specific guidance for improvement. It shouldn't just be about what isn't there, it should be about where to move forward, and how to make an adjustment, or what strengths to build on. In delivering feedback in online courses, I find it effective to use multimedia, in particular tools like Vocaroo, or FlipGrid, or even an Evernote notebook. I've kept an Evernote notebook for students in the past and found that that's a good way to record audio messages to students.

And there's research that shows that students tend to find feedback more meaningful when it's delivered through voice or video. So, that's something you might experiment with in your online class. And in an online class, it's kind of a natural method, because students are already encountering material through a learning management system, or some other online platform. So, it's a good idea to give that a try.

When you gauge student learning and online classes through activities, assignments, and exercises, you can act on what you find out in a few distinct ways. First, you can repeat certain material selectively that students seem to have difficulty understanding by explaining it in a different way, with different analogies, with different examples. Or by offering students more opportunities to practice that material on their own.

You can also present the material in multi-modal form, or in different formats. So, if you've presented it as text in the first occasion, you could then try sharing students a video on that topic. Or if you've given them a reading about a certain point, you could offer them a slide presentation, or a Ted Talk, or even an editorial cartoon. Giving students different ways to access the same kinds of concepts can give them different

entry points that may work well for some students who haven't understood the concept in its first presentation form.

And finally, when you get a sense of how students are doing with particular material, you might reset your own expectations, and realize that maybe you need to wait until later in the course to introduce this concept again. Or maybe a certain concept is just difficult for certain students to grasp, and you may need to reset expectations about that.

Or conversely, you might find that you can actually move faster and move more quickly through a certain set of concepts, because students are really grasping the material. So, those are some ways you can adjust and adapt based on what you find out as you gauge student understanding.

In summary, gauging students understanding in online classes is crucial because it can really make a difference in how we engage students in online classes and retain them. And we can do so in a way that enhances their learning as we go. So, by engaging students with these exercises, with these activities, with these assignments, not only do we determine how much they're understanding, but they're actually reinforcing their own understanding by going through that process.

As you move forward in your own teaching I encourage you to give a shot at gauging student understanding throughout your online teaching, so that we can ensure that students meet the learning objectives that we have set for them and that they've set for themselves.

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Please take the survey: https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/gauge-online-learning