

Promoting Meaningful Engagement

By Stephan Perun

Live sessions in an online course create dynamic exchanges that lower students' anxiety about their learning by connecting them with their professor, classmates, and institution. They also enrich students' learning by giving them the space to think through ideas and encouraging them to reflect critically upon the course content and the perspectives of others.

Live sessions also present challenges. The lack of physical presence makes it easy for students to multitask by doing something else during these sessions. And, students don't want to be wrong, ask a "stupid" question, or otherwise embarrass themselves. Consequently, for students, the stakes are high: risk embarrassment to earn a good grade.

The challenge is to provide an experience that will engage students and meaningfully share information within the limits of the technology. John Immerwahr's (1994) framework of four Socratic questions—free fire, toss-up, inviter, and hot seat—is highly effective in meeting the challenge. The question types range from low to high stakes and can be used in combination to first get students participating and then

move them to engaging in higher-level critical thinking.

Free Fire

The lowest stakes question type is the free fire. It is a prompt that any student can answer, as there are many answers, or any honest answer is acceptable. The instructor might ask students for their reaction to an author's argument or a provocative statement by the instructor. This ultra-low-risk dynamic is a great ice breaker to get students active in a class discussion. But this question type does not necessarily require preparation or critical thinking, and thus is more likely to promote quantity, not quality.

Toss-up

A slightly higher stakes variation is the toss-up, a question to which there is a right answer, but anyone can respond (making it a good chat board or poll question). For example, the professor might ask, "What was the author's thesis statement?" This question type can also be a good discussion starter. The added advantage is everyone pauses on a key idea from an assigned reading or other source.

Compared to the free fire, the

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A Solution to the Free Rider Problem in Group Activities

By John Orlando

Group activities are an excellent way to improve student learning in an online course. But they invariably raise the free-rider problem—the student who does not contribute his or her fair share of the effort. This is particularly bothersome to students when there is one group grade for all members of a group. While there is a real-world value to giving a group grade since many activities in life are evaluated on a team basis, there is an issue of fairness in the students' minds. This leaves the faculty member with the unenviable choice of using a group grade and having to deal with student complaints about free riders, or using an individual grade and being unable to accurately distinguish one student's contribution from another. Kadriye O. Lewis, professor of Pediatrics at the UKMC School of Medicine, came up with a solution by creating an "Intra-Group Member Peer and Self-Evaluation" to assess individual performance.

Dr. Lewis uses a variety of small group activities in her classes that involve one or two weeks of work each, with the

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toss-up saves time by getting to the topic at hand quickly, and holds students more accountable for preparation. Given the higher stakes, there is a risk of no response (after all, students do not like to be wrong). If the professor asks a toss-up and gets silence, then he or she can ask a more general free-fire question to uncover the idea. Neither the free fire nor the toss-up promote critical thinking; that can best be achieved with higher-stakes questions.

Inviter

After building participation, the professor can then shape a higher-level discussion with the inviter or hot seat. The inviter is a question to which there are many answers. For example, the professor might select a student who answered a toss-up correctly and invite him or her to explain “why” or “how.”

This question type can force students to think more deeply about the course content. It is also interesting to students, and provides teachable moments. The professor might also use an inviter if he or she knows that a particular student has

a good response. The professor might ask the student to elaborate upon a discussion board post or perhaps highlight salient points of a prior email exchange.

The inviter also brings risks. Inviting one student to respond to a follow-up question in front of the whole class puts that student on the spot. Inviting any student to respond to a question may result in a student simply talking about something with which he or she is comfortable and struggle to make connections to the ideas under study. This sets the stage for one student to monopolize the discussion, which can waste valuable time and/or require the professor to interrupt and refocus the student. In both cases, the inviter can create a confrontational feel that might inadvertently promote hiding or diminish students’ engagement in other areas of the course (e.g., discussion boards, emails, etc.).

The key to using the inviter productively is to give students an out by responding positively to whatever they say, especially if you interrupt them. In this way the professor lowers the stakes of an otherwise high-stakes question, which mitigates the confrontational

feel and encourages other students to take the risk of participating.

Hot Seat

While lowering the stakes for students can equate to increased participation, consistently doing so can create a dynamic whereby students do not feel the need to prepare. The highest-stakes question type—the hot seat—is needed as a follow-up (or a lead) to make the students uncomfortable enough to prepare, focus, and think critically. The professor asks one student a question to which there is only one right (or approximate) answer. The student must then think critically about the course content and how to use it to respond to the question. The professor will quickly identify to what extent a student has prepared and/or is paying attention, and other students will learn that everyone is accountable for preparation and substantive participation.

Asking a student to respond on the spot is confrontational. The whole class will hear the student’s understanding of the material and thinking process; the stakes are high to save face. To manage this risk of diminishing participation, let students off the hook if they are wrong. Affirm a student’s efforts with a statement like “You’re almost there,” and then change the question type to a toss-up by asking the class “Who can help answer the question?”

Promoting meaningful engagement in the live virtual classroom is a matter of lowering the awkwardness and raising the stakes.

References

Immerwahr, J. (1994). The Socratic classroom: Classroom communication strategies. *Journal of Management Systems*, 6(1), 37-44.

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	Question Type	Strength/Utility	Deficiency/Caution
	Hot Seat • one student • one answer	Accountability Promotes preparation Promotes critical thinking	Confrontational Embarrassing
	Inviter • one student • many answers	Promotes critical thinking Creates teachable moments Elaboration of a “good” point	Lengthy elaboration/off topic Hot seat feels confrontational
	Toss Up • any student • one answer	Focus the class Low risk/icebreaker Promotes preparation	Silence Only one student contributes Repetition
	Free Fire • any student • many answers	Many students participating Low risk/icebreaker Discussion starting point	Time consuming Can diminish thinking Promotes quantity