Warming Up and Cooling Down: Prompts to Engage Students in Synchronous Sessions

The arc of a class is like a story arc

Beginnings, middles and endings are always important, and we can improve our skills at facilitating these in online synchronous sessions. A true learning community does not just happen but is formed by creating intentional spaces for personal and learning connections with you, the instructor, and among students. Creating routines for the beginning of class to get everyone settled, connected to what they did last time, and engaged with the topic for the day does not have to be complicated or lengthy, but may require some prompting. The same is true of taking a pulse in the middle of the class, and of planning endings. Rather than have students just trickle out, saving five minutes at the end of class to summarize, project, or reflect is part of the learning experience.

Below are some prompts to get you started in thinking about how you will engage students throughout each class. These can be done as a whole in a small class, or in breakouts in larger classes. Though we focus here on synchronous sessions, many can be adapted to be synchronous or asynchronous. You can put the prompts in the chat space or on the Zoom whiteboard.

Beginnings: Prompts for Warm-ups/Ice Breakers

One-minute Personal Item Stories
- Value: This is a great ice breaker for the beginning of the semester in either the first or second class/live session. This can also be done asynchronously as a series of video introductions that are uploaded to the Canvas discussion board. It offers students the flexibility to share as much or little as they would like. You can also do this using Voice-Thread, which integrates with Canvas.
- Directions: Ask each student to choose a meaningful personal item that they are willing to share with the class (It cannot be their phone or keys). They have one minute to tell a story about the significance of this item. After this is done, share some themes that may have emerged that create connection and commonality among your students

Naming Stories
- Value: This is a great way for people to learn about each other and share how they wish to be called in class. It also honors cultural and communal identities and traditions.
- Directions: Ask each student to tell the story of how they got their names or the meaning of their names in no more than two to three minutes (if synchronous).

The Weather Report
- Value: This enables students to reflect on their feelings, concerns, and anxieties through metaphor. If there are a lot of stormy weather reports, for example, consider how the class may be contributing to their current weather outlook. Or, acknowledge that there is a lot going and offer empathy and support.
- Directions: "If you were the weather report, what would your report be?" This works best synchronously since it is time sensitive. For larger classes, students can put their responses in the chat.

Oh-Wow-Chow
- Value: It begins to build a culture in the class of sharing, and hopefully trust. Offering the third prompt allows students to opt out of revealing themselves if they are not comfortable.
- Directions: "Please reflect alone for a minute about the week about: Ow: A challenge from the past week / Wow: A highlight/wow-moment from the past week / Chow: The best thing you ate in the past week."
- For this activity, students can share individually in a small class, in breakouts, on the whiteboard or via chat in a larger course. It is a good idea to put the three prompt choices in the chat or on the whiteboard.

Middles: Prompts that Double as Formative Assessments

Playlist activity
- Value: This is a fun task because students must demonstrate some understanding of content in order to search for songs. Invite them to choose songs from any genre. You will find that there is a lot of energy and excitement during this activity as human beings find great connection through music and they can co-construct knowledge as well.
- Directions: "Create a three-song playlist that describes the content you are learning. Enter the song titles and artists in the chat space." Alternatively, you can set up a Google Doc and have them post there.

Write a Haiku
- Value: Haikus, when focused on content, are an effective metacognitive activity and formative assessment. Writing them forces students to succinctly summarize their learning in a creative, simplistic way. It helps both the students and you know where they are in their learning.
- Directions: "You have ten minutes to construct a haiku (give a bit more time if you can). When our time is up, I will ask you to enter yours into the chat space – but not before I ask you to. I want you to write about…" Offer a list of concepts, theories, or content areas from which students can choose. For example, "Write a Haiku about what it means to create equity in classrooms."
- Haikus are comprised of three lines with a 17-syllable structure. The first line is 5 syllables (not words); the second is made up of 7 syllables, and the third line is comprised of 5.

Chalk Talk (Brookfield & Preskill, 2017).
- Value: This may be a space for students to have voice if are less confident, if English is not their first language, or they are less verbal. More importantly, it is a space for intellectual risk.
- Directions: "Please respond to the prompt I have written here on the white board." (Or other sharing space that is anonymous). This can be a question, a piece of text, a poem, an idea, or the beginning of a case. Ask students to respond to the prompt in any way that resonates with them. As ideas emerge on the white board, guide participants to draw lines between ideas that they think are connected. This is a silent conversation and when done in Zoom is anonymous.

Lightning Round Check-in
- At key points during a class, ask students one of three types of questions and have them quickly respond in the chat space:
  - What is one concept that feels reasonably clear?
  - What is one concept that feels muddy?
  - What is one concept that is making your brain hurt?
- This takes a couple of minutes and helps you stay connected to your students' collective development, helps them remain engaged, and fosters metacognition. You can do this several times throughout a class or live session. If you are in a face-to-face classroom, Poll Everywhere is a great tool for this activity.

Endings: Learning Audits and Exit Tickets

Critical Incident Questionnaire (Adapted from Brookfield)
- Value: The Critical Incident Questionnaire is asked before the end of each class and is a way for students to assess their learning experience and provide suggestions for improvement. This conveys to your students that you care about their experience and are involving them as partners in the process of improving the course as you are in it together.
- Directions: These are suggestions for questions, but you can adjust them to meet the needs of your students and your particular class.
  - Question #1: At what moment during this class did you feel most engaged with what was happening?
  - Question #2: At what moment during this class were you most distanced from what was happening?
  - Question #3: What action did anyone (teacher or student) take during this class that you found affirming or most helpful?
  - Question #4: Do you have any suggestions for improvement?

Learning Audit
- Value: Fosters student reflection and metacognition. This is really helpful information for them and for you at mid-term and near the end of the semester.
- Directions: At the end of a class or at important points in the semester, ask the following questions:
  - What do you *know* now that you did not at the beginning of this class?
  - What can you *do* now that you could not at the beginning of this class?
  - What could you *teach* to a colleague now that you could not at the beginning of this class?

Memo to a friend
- Value: Asks the student to do some recall (retrieval practice) from the class, recognize gaps in their knowledge or understanding, and fill them in. They will also use their own language so you can see how they are thinking.
- Directions: Imagine your friend is sick or had unstable WIFI and could not attend today's class. Write a letter or memo to your friend summarizing the key takeaways from this class and post it on the discussion forum. There will be a period of time when you can begin to post.

Roses and Thorns (Exit Ticket)
- Value: Social-emotional experiences as well as intellectual experiences are important for learning, and this activity allows for the expression of both. It will give you information about how students are experiencing the class.
- Directions: (At the end of the class) "Today I am asking you to check out with a phrase or two identifying either a rose from class (something you appreciated) or a thorn (something you struggled with)." This can be related to content, discussion, or classroom dynamics.

Technology Support

- [ETS Recorded Trainings](#)
- [ETS User Guide Poll Everywhere](#)
- [ETS VoiceThread Support](#)
- [ETS Canvas Support](#)
- [Find an upcoming training session](#)
- Email edtech@tufts.edu for 1-1 support

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