RingCentral

Virtual learning: tips, techniques, and tools for higher ed

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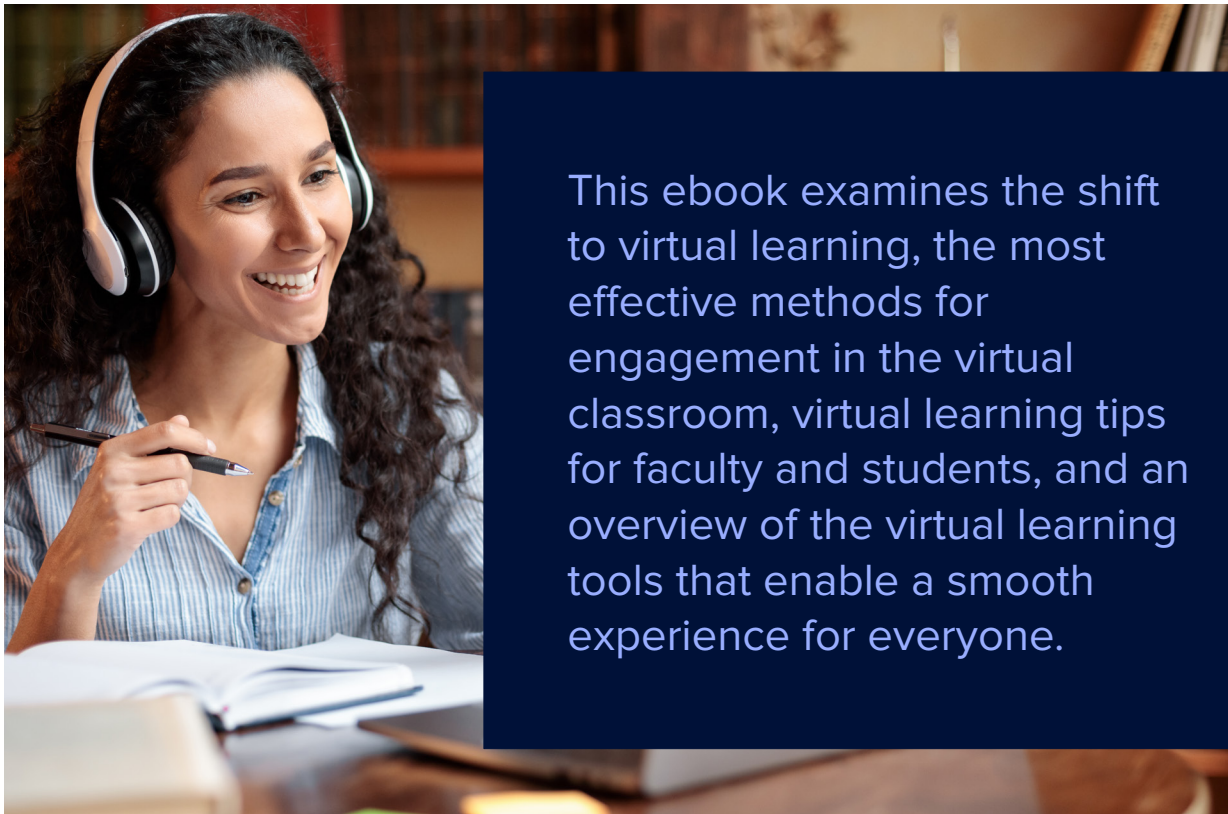
Introduction

Virtual learning was slowly and steadily gaining traction even before unforeseen events led to widespread lockdowns and closures in 2020. Administrators, educators, students, and their families all had to cope with a new normal. From this experience, virtual learning best practices emerged.

This ebook examines the shift to virtual learning, the most effective methods for engagement in the virtual classroom, virtual learning tips for faculty and students, and an overview of the virtual learning tools that enable a smooth experience for everyone.
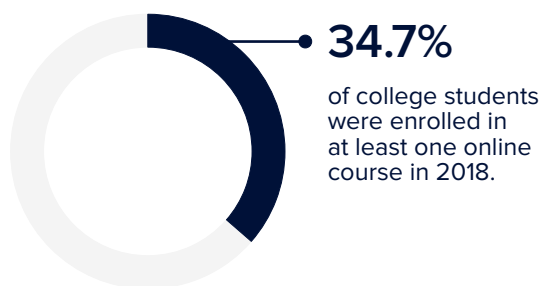
The shift to virtual learning

Even before 2020, there was a shift toward virtual learning taking place. It was quite modest – the National Center for Education Statistics reported that 34.7% of college students were enrolled in at least one online course in 2018. The year before that, the number was 33.1%.

Moreover, there had been greater investment in the technology that powers virtual learning platforms (known as EdTech). In 2019, global EdTech investments reached nearly $18.7 billion. Yet, the events of 2020 took institutions of higher learning by surprise.

Universities and colleges shut down and offered increased virtual learning opportunities for students. Millions of students and educators found themselves in virtual classrooms, trying to figure out how to make the best of the situation.

As virtual learning became more widespread, some best practices emerged.

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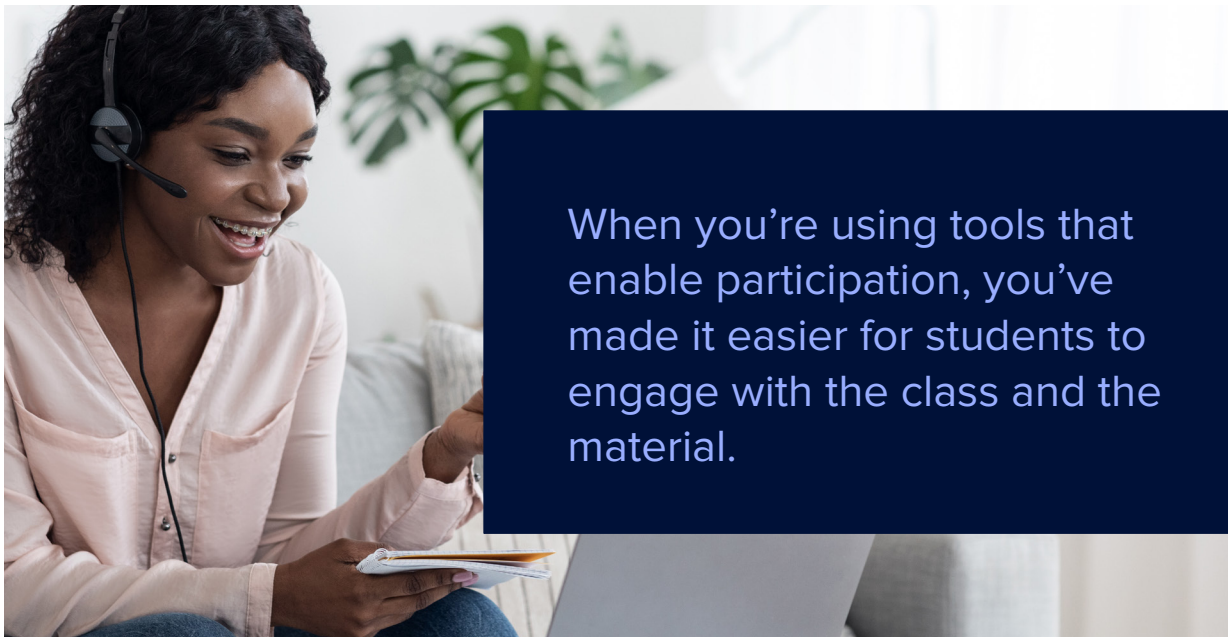at least one online
course in 2018.

The most effective methods for engagement in the virtual classroom

Even in-person instruction can leave students feeling disengaged from their instructor and the material. The challenge is much greater in the virtual classroom; students aren't in the same space with the instructor, and many of them are learning at home, where distractions abound.

Yet, instructors can still find ways to engage students in a virtual classroom. Here's how:

- Use a platform that makes engagement easy

- Set aside time to connect with students

- Create a clear syllabus that includes expectations for learning outcomes as well as behavior guidelines

- Design lessons to maximize participation

When you're using tools that enable participation, you've made it easier for students to engage with the class and the material.

Use a platform that makes engagement easy

The most important step in making virtual learning more engaging is to use the right virtual learning platform. What does that look like?

Virtual learning platforms that promote student engagement have the following features:

- They work on any device (including mobile devices)

- Instructors can hold live classes with video and screen sharing

- Students can participate through live chat

- Instructors can share recorded lectures through learning management tools such as Canvas

- Provide students and instructors a virtual background

When you're using tools that enable participation, you've made it easier for students to engage with the class and the material.

Set aside time to connect with the students

Just because students are in a virtual classroom doesn't mean that instructors can't hold office hours. With the right virtual learning platform, instructors can set up video conferences quickly and easily so students can discuss any pressing concerns they might have.

Video conferencing with instructors boosts student engagement because it provides a sense of normalcy for students. Even if they can't be on campus, they can still connect with their instructors and ask questions.

Create a clear syllabus, including learning outcome expectations and behavior guidelines

A virtual learning experience won't be engaging if there are no underlined guidelines or boundaries. It becomes something of a free-for-all, with students being uncertain as to what's expected of them. Moreover, when teachers don't set guidelines or boundaries, they make it seem as though they don't care about the class (which alienates students). At the same time, however, teachers must keep in mind the importance of creating a safe space for students to encourage participation.

Through the syllabus, instructors should explain what the students will learn in the course, why it matters, and what student responsibilities are (for example, if their grade is based on two tests and a term paper, that should be clear in the syllabus). Moreover, if there's an interactive component, such as a forum for discussions, the guidelines for that forum should be very clear – abusive, derogatory language is forbidden, and students must keep the tone of discussion civil. With such guidelines in place, students will feel more comfortable participating.

Design lessons to maximize participation

Another way to boost engagement in the virtual classroom is to make the lessons engaging. Instructors now have many tools at their disposal, such as live, interactive quizzes and videos to grab students' attention.

This is where having the right virtual learning platform comes into play. With videoconferencing, screen sharing, and live chat capabilities, it's easier to hold a poll or survey and to share content that will enhance learning. Additionally, the right virtual learning platform will integrate seamlessly with leading learning management systems (LMS) providers like Canvas, Blackboard, Moodle, and others.

Tips for virtual learning success

There are two factors in virtual learning success: the instructor and the student. Here are some virtual learning tips so students and instructors get the most out of the virtual learning experience.

Virtual learning tips for instructors:

- Do your homework

- Communicate with the class regularly

- Be flexible

- Consider students' needs

- Provide timely feedback on assignments

Do your homework

"Doing your homework" might sound like advice geared toward students. Yet, instructors must also be prepared for virtual learning.

Students are responsible for learning, but instructors are responsible for creating a coherent syllabus, setting expectations and boundaries, and creating a structure for the course. When instructors take these steps before the start of the course, they'll find teaching the course is easier because students know what to expect.

Communicate with the class regularly

For many students, virtual learning is still an unfamiliar experience. Frequent communication with them is crucial to ensure that:

- They're engaged in the course

- They understand what's going on

The right virtual learning platform will have a function that allows for sending mass emails, so it's easy to keep students informed.

Be flexible

Even when students were in a traditional learning situation, they faced pressures and stresses, including housing, finances, family situations, relationships, and employment. Those stresses can be magnified when students are in a virtual classroom, especially when virtual learning is the only option. Instructors need to be aware of those issues and respond accordingly.

Being flexible might mean changing deadlines or even revising grading requirements due to circumstances outside of either the instructor's or students' control. To be flexible, instructors must keep a clear line of communication open so students can share this information.

Consider students' needs

In a traditional classroom, everyone is in the same space at the same time. The virtual classroom allows students and instructors to occupy the same virtual space, but thanks to the wonders of technology, students could be in a variety of time zones.

When administering timed tests, instructors should be mindful of these constraints. Either think about another option for students to demonstrate their knowledge, or be clear as to what time zone in which the deadline will fall.

Provide timely feedback on assignments

To keep students engaged in the virtual classroom, instructors should provide timely feedback on assignments. Timely feedback helps students feel that their work matters and encourages them to continue working.

There will be times when instructors can't provide timely feedback. In that case, they should use the virtual learning platform to alert students and set a rough timeline as to when they can expect feedback on their work.

Virtual learning tips for instructors:

- Treat virtual learning the same as traditional learning

- Find a quiet place to learn

- Set a schedule

- Connect with peers

- Actively participate in virtual learning

- Ask for help from instructors when needed

Treat virtual learning the same as traditional learning

Out of all the virtual learning tips for students, this is the most important one: treat virtual learning with the same seriousness as traditional learning.

Just because a student is in a virtual classroom doesn't mean that the class isn't being graded, and that grade doesn't count toward the student's GPA. The right mindset is invaluable for success.

Find a quiet place to learn

When students aren't in the classroom, they need to find a quiet place to participate in virtual learning without distractions. Even investing in a good pair of noise-blocking headphones can help.

Set a schedule

As mentioned, virtual learning should be treated the same way traditional learning is. That's why it's important for students to <u>set a schedule</u>, as they would if they were on campus.

Breaking up their day into blocks ("at this time, I'll work on this subject") creates a routine to help students focus.

Connect with peers

<u>Virtual learning</u> can feel isolating—students aren't on campus with their friends. However, that doesn't mean that they have to be alone.

Virtual learning platforms enable students to connect with one another through chat as well as video conference. They can collaborate on assignments as well as gain much-needed social interaction.

Actively participate in virtual learning

One step toward achieving virtual learning success is to actively participate in classes. Depending on what the course requirements are, this could mean being involved in class discussions, completing group projects, or posting to digital forums within a virtual learning platform.

Active participation helps students absorb the material they're learning—a 2017 study showed that <u>70% of students</u> saw a positive relationship between class participation and their ability to learn.

Ask for help from instructors when needed

There are times during virtual learning that students need help understanding the material. That's why it's important to take advantage of instructors' virtual office hours.

Virtual learning platforms offer video conferencing. Instructors can meet with students no matter where they are to explain assignments or difficult concepts.

Virtual learning tools: an overview

Virtual learning tools are the backbone of the virtual learning experience. RingCentral's virtual learning platform provides the features instructors and students need for virtual learning success.

Virtual classrooms

RingCentral's virtual learning platform has virtual classrooms that boost collaboration and engagement.

It's easy for students to learn virtually—they can enter the virtual classroom on the device of their choice, either through a browser or the RingCentral app. With one click, they turn on audio and video.

During live lessons on RingCentral's virtual learning platform, instructors can engage students with screen sharing as well as live chat. After the class ends, instructors can post their recordings to a learning management tool such as Canvas so students can watch it again.

Collaboration

RingCentral's virtual learning platform allows instructors and students to collaborate effectively. Team messaging and file sharing lets students work together.

Moreover, unlimited conference calls with hundreds of participants make it easy for instructors to share information with students, and for students to collaborate on group projects. In addition, one-click video meetings, messaging, and telephony capabilities give students the option to connect with one another how they like, when they like.

Security

When virtual learning takes place, instructors and students shouldn't have to worry about cyber threats. RingCentral's virtual learning platform gives them peace of mind that their lessons won't be interrupted, nor will confidential information be stolen.

Our virtual learning tools are protected by seven layers of comprehensive security. RingCentral data centers are compliant with industry standards as well.

It's easy for students to learn virtually—they can enter the virtual classroom on the device of their choice, either through a browser or the RingCentral app. With one click, they turn on audio and video.

Conclusion

Virtual learning represents an opportunity for students and instructors to preserve the continuity of education, no matter where they are. While there are challenges, they can be overcome by the combination of using the right virtual learning platform as well as putting best practices into place.

The right virtual learning platform connects students and instructors, and it assists students to engage with the material. Virtual learning best practices enable students and instructors to get the most out of the virtual classroom and to achieve academic success.

RingCentral is a leading provider of virtual learning platforms, which comprise unified communication tools and virtual learning features. Our virtual learning platforms support faculty and students at institutions of higher learning everywhere, thanks to secure, built-in virtual learning tools that foster collaboration.

To learn more about our virtual learning platform, get a demo.

About RingCentral

With RingCentral for Education, you can easily bring students, faculty, and campus communities together all in one secure workspace.

Let your community choose how to interact — social, message, video, or phone — and enable various groups to work together. Engage your virtual classrooms, collaborate real-time in an easy to manage and secure place to drive connection.

Any time. Any device. Anywhere. Learning is always in session.

For more information, please contact a sales representative.
Visit us at ringcentral.com/education or call 855-774-2510.

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