

Student Engagement to Initiate Instruction

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Abstract

This research investigates student engagement through four assignments designed to manage classroom behavior by stimulating classroom discussion. Three assignments, “Commercial Break”, “Google Trends”, and “What’s Viral”, were deployed in undergraduate marketing classes, while “Global Minute Chat” was utilized in an international business course. Students select topics of interest, preparing short presentations for class. These assignments are formative assessments that serve as icebreakers, setting the tone and transitioning into daily topic discussion. The assignments foster public speaking skills and provoke discussion. Faculty connect presentations to course theory, deepening engagement. Survey results from four courses show positive student impressions, value, aid in learning, and the confirmation these assignments should be used in future courses.

Keywords

Student Engagement, Active Learning, Marketing, Higher Education, Pedagogy

1. Introduction

Student engagement is a popular topic in higher education. Educators strive to involve students as active participants in the learning process as a way to manage classroom behavior. Developing activities and assignments to stimulate students’ reflection and discernment that apply to theories covered in a marketing course is a challenge. With a teacher’s guidance, students can bring topics/subject matter interesting to them into the classroom discussion. To stimulate students’ interest at the beginning of the period, an activity/assignment can engage the class. These assignments, “Commercial Break”, “Google Trends” and “What’s Viral” were developed to spark conversation and class engagement at the start of a marketing class period. “Global Minute Chat” was developed to engage students at the beginning of an international business course. The assignments were de-

signed to achieve these curriculum objectives to create a positive learning environment, 1) a favorable way to begin class instruction; 2) add value to the class instruction; and 3) aid student learning related to the course content.

The assignments are based on academic theory related to thoughtful discourse, active learning, and participative pedagogy. These three areas of literature review are closely related to student engagement in the educational process. By actively participating in their learning, students can develop a sense of ownership and responsibility for their education.

1.1. Thoughtful Discourse

Establishing an environment in the classroom where students are comfortable contributing to the dialog is important for facilitating learning. Thoughtful discourse around a subject is valuable as well as active listening on the part of students. Active listening has become a topic of conversation within higher education as an essential student competency (Wolvin & Coakley, 2000). An engagement activity is intended to gain students' attention and foster a desire to listen. The communication of ideas includes both discussion and listening. Heifetz (1994) proposed active listening is both an internal and external process for students. First, students must understand their lens and "filters" through which they see the world to interpret information (Heifetz, 1994). Thoughtful discourse includes the willingness to listen to alternative ideas and participate in respectful discussions. The class starters are designed to initiate discussion among students.

1.2. Active Learning

The student giving the presentation is engaging in active learning by leading the instruction. Active learning is a broad concept. Higher education has been moving toward more student-centered and active instructional approaches in recent years (Kozanitis & Nenciovici, 2023). Research has supported the superiority of active instruction for learning achievements as compared to passive instruction (Burgess et al., 2014; Hofer et al., 2018; Swanson et al., 2017). Engagement activities where students select a topic of interest to them, and share this information with the class contribute to developing positive feelings toward the subject matter. The peer-to-peer sharing and discussion of information to promote knowledge creation facilitates an active learning environment at the start of the class period. These assignments empower students as active participants in building knowledge.

1.3. Participative Pedagogy

Chickering and Gamson (1987) offered a framework of seven key actions to encourage student engagement: student-faculty contact, cooperation among students, active learning, giving prompt feedback, emphasizing time on task, communicating high expectations, and respecting diverse talents and ways of learn-

ing. Student engagement is defined as the amount of time and energy students put into creating meaningful learning outcomes and experiences (Lewis et al., 2011). The most fundamental form of engagement is behavioral engagement, which focuses on students' actual actions during class instruction (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). According to Murray (2018), academic achievement requires students' active participation. Students' ability to understand and direct their cognitive effort during learning is a key component of "cognitive engagement", and research has shown that employing various learning techniques leads to distinct types of thought (Kaed et al., 2023). The literature consistently shows a positive correlation between student engagement and academic success (Kunka, 2020). Engaging students at the start of a class with an active learning assignment helps establish students' interests are valued.

2. Methodology

These assignments are formative assessments that include peer and managed instructor discussions. Formative assessment refers to assessment that is specifically intended to generate feedback on performance to improve and accelerate learning (Sadler, 1989).

According to Nicola and Macfarlane-Dick (2006), "Feedback as dialogue means that the student not only receives initial feedback information but also has the opportunity to engage the teacher in discussion about that feedback". The feedback for the assignments was designed by the researcher using Likert scale questions to measure attitude.

Four class-starting activities, Commercial Break, What's Viral, Google Trends, and Global Minute Chat, bring topics relevant to students into an assignment utilizing formative assessment. This work requires students to investigate a topic through an evaluative lens that aligns with their understanding of course content. These activities were incorporated in undergraduate in-person classrooms. The course modality is not limited to in-person instruction. These activities could also be used for online synchronous courses. The researcher did use these activities in online courses. Student feedback from online courses is not included in this study.

Commercial Break, What's Viral, and Google Trends were designed for marketing courses. The Global Minute Chat was designed for an international business course but could be modified, by altering the questions, for other disciplines. Each assignment requires students to engage in active learning through their research, for an example to share in class. An added learning element is having students lead a short discussion. These assignments are also an opportunity for students to speak in front of a group. The students' presentations are short and, on a topic, they found personally interesting. Student engagement activities are designed to spark questions and set the tone to encourage participation for the remainder of the class period. Faculty provide context to transition to the course topic for the day.

2.1. Commercial Break

Commercial Break is an assignment best utilized in an introductory marketing course. Students are exposed to video commercials every day, and many of these advertisements gain students' attention. The average American spends six hours and 58 minutes online per day (Allconnect, n.d.). Requesting the selection of a video and then sharing that video with their commentary flows nicely with course content. Every student comes to the front of the classroom to give their presentation to show a commercial. Teachers can supplement the presentation with applicable course theory and ask for other students' reactions and comments. See Appendix A for assignment details.

2.2. What's Viral

The What's Viral assignment was created for a social media or digital marketing course. Following the same start-of-class format, students share their reactions to something that has gone viral. This clarification is given in the assignment, "Appropriate for class viewing". Students can select a hashtag, video, meme, article, or other element gaining wide viewership. These examples are chosen from any social channel, including X (formerly Twitter), Buzzfeed, Digg, or Reddit. Students need to be prepared with a visual presentation as part of their discussion. The visual can include a PowerPoint presentation or going to the social channel where the viral media was discovered. Again, relevant course theory applied by the faculty follows as part of the discussion. See Appendix B for assignment details.

2.3. Google Trends

The Google Trends assignment was created for an introductory digital marketing course that introduces Google AdWords. Following the same start-of-class format, students pick a topic and research the topic using Google Trends to "explore what the world is searching". The PowerPoint presentation includes multiple graphs outlining the search history for the key term. Students provide a reflection and opinion about the search results including one-year results and subregions within the United States. Analysis of related query topics is also presented by the student. See Appendix C for assignment details.

2.4. Global Minute Chat

Global Minute Chat (GMC) was developed for an international business course, however, this concept could be modified and applied to any course to aid students in a class getting to know each other better. This assignment is valuable for building cultural diversity awareness in courses that have international students. Students lead the class discussion by using one of the prompts provided in the assignment sheet. The key element is the international focus of the discussion. See Appendix D for assignment details.

2.5. Sample Size

The undergraduate courses surveyed were offered in person at a college in the northwest United States. These courses included Principles of Marketing (Commercial Break), Social Media Marketing (What's Viral), Marketing Strategy (Google Trends), and International Business (Global Minute Chat). The sample size of college students varied by enrollment in each course. Class sizes varied from 20 students to 35 students totaling 108 students surveyed. See **Table 1** for class size details.

Table 1. Student self-reported assignment value and learning.

		Commercial Break	What's Viral	Google Trends	Global Minute Chat	Total		
		N35	N27	N26	N20	N108		
1	Rate your initial impression of starting each class with xx							
	Low	★	0	0	1	0	1	
		★★	1	0	0	1	2	
		★★★	2	0	3	2	7	
		★★★★	8	10	6	2	26	24%
	High	★★★★★	23	14	14	15	66	61%
2	Was there value in starting each class with xx?							
	Not Valuable	1	0	0	0	1		
	Somewhat not valuable	1	1	1	0	3		
	Neutral	0	0	1	1	2		
	Somewhat valuable	12	14	9	8	43	40%	
	Valuable	21	12	15	11	59	55%	
3	How would you rate that xx aided in learning about (course topic = marketing, social media, international business)?							
	Low	★	0	0	0	0	0	
		★★	1	0	1	1	3	
		★★★	2	1	2	3	8	
		★★★★	13	13	13	7	46	43%
	High	★★★★★	19	12	10	9	50	46%
4	Should the xx assignment be included in future classes?							
	Yes	33	27	24	20	104	96%	
	No	2	0	2	0	4		

3. Results

To assess the student's perception of the value of the engagement activities, the

students were surveyed at the end of the semester. The voluntary online survey was collected using Microsoft Forms. Participants remained anonymous. A Likert-type scale to measure attitude was used on the first three questions. Questions one and three used a numerical value of 1 - 5, with 5 being the highest rating. The numbers were used to indicate the varying degrees of endorsement of the question. Question two provided verbal anchors in the form of statements. The fourth question asked for a yes/no answer.

Student Survey Summary

Full data collection results are available in **Table 1**.

1) Rate your initial impression of starting each class with a xx (name of assignment).

(Rate out of 5 with 1 low and 5 high)

Commercial Break	4.56 Average
What's Viral	4.58 Average
Google Trends	4.3 Average
Global Minute Chat	4.55 Average

Overall, 85% of students rated the activities with 4 or 5 stars.

2) Was there value in starting each class with a xx?

Somewhat valuable or Valuable ratings

Commercial Break	94%
What's Viral	96%
Google Trend	92%
Global Minute Chat	95%

Overall, 95% of the students rated the activity valuable or somewhat valuable.

3) How would you rate that xx aided in learning about marketing/international business?

(Rate out of 5 with 1 low and 5 high)

Commercial Break	4.43 Average
What's Viral	4.42 Average
Google Trends	4.2 Average
Global Minute Chat	4.2 Average

Overall, 89% of students rated the activities with 4 or 5 stars.

4) Should the xx assignment be included in future classes?

Select Yes or No with Yes answers

Commercial Break	94%
What's Viral	100%
Google Trends	92%
Global Minute Chat	100%

Overall, 96% of students answered yes this should be included in future classes.

4. Discussion

Students generally express positive feedback regarding the various assignments

incorporated into the class structure, highlighting the real-world application of concepts in the Commercial Break activity. They appreciate the assignment's role in easing into lectures and prompting thoughts on the effectiveness of commercials. The What's Viral activity is praised for promoting individual research and contributing to a better understanding of diverse forms of marketing. The Google Trends activity receives support for its quick yet informative nature and the opportunity it provides to explore less common topics. Global Minute Chat is liked for its educational and enjoyable start to class, fostering a sense of connection among students through personal stories, international perspectives, and insights into different cultures. The survey results and student comments support meeting the curriculum objectives by a majority of the students, 1) a favorable way to begin class instruction; 2) add value to the class instruction; and 3) aid student learning related to the course content. See Appendix E for a sampling of student comments.

Assignment and Research Challenges

This study collected data from one college in the northwest United States. This may limit the generalization of findings to other colleges. The low number of students surveyed may also impact the findings at other colleges.

There are challenges with students and incorporating an assignment at the start of class. There is always the risk of students arriving late to class and causing a distraction as they enter the room. This distraction may interrupt the presentation flow. The student's choice of topic could be another challenge. Students could choose an example to share that others in the class do not find interesting or may even find the topic inappropriate or offensive. It is recommended to preface each assignment with the guidance "appropriate to view in a classroom setting". A third student challenge is if students lack enthusiasm or confidence for presenting in front of a group. Specifically, regarding the Global Minute Chat, if students lack appreciation for diverse cultural perspectives some students might lose attention.

For all these assignments the faculty member's expertise is important to facilitate the transition of the opening activities to course content. Instructors' level of knowledge in transitioning the students' examples to the course content could be a challenge (Cowley, 2017). The instructor needs a competent level of knowledge and class facilitation skills to incorporate these activities where students initiate the topic of discussion.

A large class size would also present challenges. The number of students in a class must be factored into the time plausibility of using the assignment. Is there enough time in the class period and the semester to add an assignment for each student? Students may need to work in pairs or small groups to compensate for the time available.

For future research, it is recommended that additional follow-up be conducted with subjects to determine the sustained impact of the assignments on student learning and engagement.

5. Conclusion

This research has provided examples to engage students at the beginning of a class by incorporating a formative assessment that includes peer and managed instructor discussions. These student engagement activities can be adapted to a variety of classes with modifications that match the course content/discipline. The goal is to engage students at the beginning of a class to facilitate interest and learning. When students are allowed to select a topic of interest to them for discussion, there is a likelihood, the example is of interest to their peers.

Student feedback was collected using Likert-scale questions. Students generally express positive feedback regarding these assignments. An overwhelmingly positive response was given by students when asked about continuing to use the assignments in future courses.

The pursuit of excellence in marketing education remains a paramount goal, one way is through innovative pedagogy (Lee, 2023). An active learning assignment to start a class is one such technique for creating a positive learning environment. The challenge for instructors is to continue to explore new engaging learning techniques for students.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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Appendixes

Appendix A: Commercial Break Assignment Instructions

Everyone will give an in-class presentation to share a video commercial.

The presentation should explain: Why do you like or dislike, the commercial? Who is the target audience? Do you think the commercial is effective?

The approach of the commercial – humor, fear, sex appeal, celebrity endorsement, animals, babies/children, informative, emotional, rational (practical needs), music, scarcity (hard to find, limited time), snob appeal, adventure appeal, bandwagon (everyone is doing this).

Have you seen the ad on TV or the web? If on, TV or streaming service where or what program did the video air during?

Appendix B: What's Viral Assignment Instructions

At the start of each class, students will share a reaction to something that has gone viral. (Appropriate for class viewing)

Discuss in a 3 - 4-minute discussion a hashtag, video, meme, article, or other element gaining wide viewership. Select any social channel.

Provide a visual example as part of the discussion. This can mean going to a website or developing a PowerPoint. Suggested social channels to research include; Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, TikTok, BuzzFeed, Digg, Redditt, etc.

Appendix C: Google Trends Assignment Instructions

Explore what the world is searching <https://trends.google.com/trends/?geo=US>

Search a term or topic or sport or TV show etc ... and share your insight...

Provide a reflection/opinion/insight about why the results show what they do in a PowerPoint as part of a 4 - 5 minute presentation.

Begin the inquiry search by selecting a general term. For example, search for "Dogs" (the search can also be a comparison of terms). Include all the Google Trend tables in the presentation. These tables include the "Interest Over Time" and "Interest by Subregion" tables.

Appendix D: Global Minute Chat Assignment Instructions

At the start of each class, students pick one topic to discuss for 3 - 4 minutes.

Suggested topics included:

- International travel experience (pictures welcome/encouraged)
- If native from another country – what have you found unusual about the USA?
- TV commercial/video or print ad from another country (acceptable to show in class)

Provide insight about why you selected the commercial or print ad.

- If you have not traveled internationally – where would you like to go and why?

- Current article (within 6 months) about an international event/story you found interesting.

A visual PowerPoint presentation or visiting a website is optional.

Appendix E: A Sampling of Student Comments Regarding the Assignments

Commercial Break Student Comments:

“I liked the real-world application of the concepts we learned.”

“it was nice to start the class off with this, eases you into the lecture for the day”

“Made me think of what makes commercials memorable and effective.”

What’s Viral Student Comments:

“I thought this was awesome! Promoted individual research too!”

“I enjoy what’s viral before classes a lot. It helps me learn a lot about new things.”

“It was good to look at real-world marketing and all different forms of it”

Google Trend Student Comments:

“I like that it was quick yet still informative.”

“I liked the ability to explore topics we don’t normally hear about”

“I like it because it was quick and easy. It also showed what people were Googling and the trends that were occurring.”

Global Minute Chat Student Comments:

“I liked learning about other people’s travel experiences to other countries or where they want to travel and why. It was an educational and fun way to start class.”

“I actually loved the gmc! It was fun getting to hear personal stories from other students and make me feel more connected to the material and to my classmates.”

“I really enjoyed learning about how other people viewed US culture. It was interesting to see everyone’s different perspectives and experiences.”

“I really enjoyed learning from international students and how their lives differentiate from the US.”