

6 Reasons why

students don't attend your (online) lecture
& strategies to enhance student attendance

R#1

"Attending lectures is difficult to combine with everything else"



R#2

"Watching lectures is not the only way I learn"



R#3

"I will watch the recording as it is easier to follow"



R#4

"I already feel familiar with this content"



R#5

"How does this course relate to my discipline and studies?"



R#6

"I value my privacy and prefer to be anonymous"



Colophon

The white paper '6 reasons why students don't attend my lecture and strategies to enhance student attendance' is created by content experts (Blended Learning Developers) from TU Delft Teaching and Learning Services and is based on experiences with TU Delft lecturers. This process and finetuning of the content is facilitated by TU Delft Teaching Academy.

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6 reasons why

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Introduction

In this white paper you will find strategies to enhance student engagement and attendance based on six reasons why students don't attend lectures. It is created together with content experts, educators (indirectly), and students.

The design process was guided by the Teaching Academy using creative facilitation methods and collaborative editing with the content experts. The document is peer reviewed by colleagues, more content experts, educators, and study associations.

For more support and advice on teaching and learning visit the [TU Delft Teaching Support](#) website.

“Attending lectures is difficult to combine with everything else”



Demonstrate the relevance of lectures to your students' learning process

Your students may be new to tertiary education and may not be used to the “freedom” of university education; they are yet to understand the necessity of autonomous learning and being responsible for their own learning. Or they may be overworked, have other priorities, or feel they are too busy to attend to everything. The results are the same; your student doesn't turn up.

Elaborate on the design of your course

In the ‘Welcome to [your course]’ section on Brightspace and in your first lecture explain that a lot of time and effort has been invested into how each aspect of the course is taught. Explain how the different elements of your course are designed and why the set-up is the way it is. Share a diagram with how the lectures link to one another. Elaborate on the deliberate effort in creating a range of activities for strong, didactical reasons; skipping the live online lectures can reduce the overall holistic understanding of the subject matter.

Nudge positive behaviour

Implement the Nudge theory, using positive language to change behaviour. Examples you can use: “From previous years we know that students who completed this course demonstrated better understanding of the study materials from attending (online) lectures live...” or “We know from research that students who attend the (online) lectures are more likely to pass the final exam with a higher grade”.

Create contextual assignments

Make sure that the assignments are relevant for the future and current state of affairs. Let them experience how the assignments contribute to their professional development and passing the course. Consider to add prompts to guide students' learning process. E.g., “after reading this chapter you should be able to solve...”.

Incorporate Peer Feedback

Let students review each-other's work during lectures and use the next lecture to review their work. Make sure you provide clear guidelines on the peer feedback process and clear guidelines on how students should provide feedback as well. Elaborate on the benefit of learning through peer feedback: it will help understanding each other's perspectives and learning how to provide feedback will benefit them as professionals.

Include exam questions and assignments

Go through exam questions and assignments and make it clear that this practice will not be offered in another format/place. Elaborate on how the contents of the lectures are designed to complete the assignments or exam questions. You can demonstrate how theories are used in assignments for example, or use real life examples in the assignments.

“Watching lectures is not the only way I learn”



Design lectures that support the learning process

Learning is more than just watching lectures. It’s understandable that students don’t have a holistic view of learning or understand the importance of student-lecturer and peer-to-peer interactions; e.g. the action of asking questions reinforces learning. During (online) lectures we build relationships and learn through social interactions.

Use and share the science of learning

Learning takes effort. It is an active process and students can miss activating elements when they (re-) watch lectures. Explain to your students that there is a possibility to ask questions to the lecturer (live or via the chat), to discuss the materials with your peers (live or breakout rooms) or participate in quizzes/ polling because questions are essential to the learning process, or to stop and think about what you have experienced. Watching recorded lectures often leads to cramming and missing out on these active learning moments. Explain to your students how cramming is an ineffective learning strategy, share the science behind successful learning, and elaborate on how regular study moments lead to better results. Elaborate on how re-watching can be a nice back-up to use for clarification.

Facilitate dialogues and discussions

Be proactive in getting students to ask questions in the chat and provide answers live if appropriate via your TA. Try to answer questions from a wide range of students. Show a positive attitude towards students who ask questions: thank students for their questions and mention that asking questions activates the active memory and keeps them focused on what you are saying. Facilitate a dialogue with and between your students.

Encourage building relationships

Show students that building relationships with peers and lecturers is a crucial element of successful learning. This can be achieved in many ways but one of the most effective ways this can be achieved is during a live lecture.

Organise “live” (guest) events

Invite a guest speaker who will only take “live” questions. Additionally, you can let the students prepare the questions so they can see the benefit of going to the lecture because they want answers to their prepared questions.

Connect to your students’ mental map

Draw practical examples to activate the working memory and long-term memory of your students’ brains as they are prompted to connect the two by adjusting their ‘memory traces’ with the shared example. A relatable example activates the memory and when shared impactfully, it activates the emotional brain as well.

“I will watch the recording as it is easier to follow”



Create lectures that are easy to follow

It may be that for some reason your students find attending a live online event uncomfortable and difficult to follow. Bear in mind 10% (ECIO) of the student population are hindered in their studies due to a disability¹, it may be that a number of students may attend your lectures following a modification in your presentation. These tips will improve the learning experience of students without a disability as well.

Let your students feel empowered

Students need to experience a feeling of control in what they encounter in their studies. The perception of control has a beneficial effect on the emotion that comes around in the learning process. When designing your lessons it is important to be specific in what will be discussed during lessons. Work for instance with Gagne’s nine events of instruction² to both excite students and increase their perceived control.

Set up Brightspace properly

Important information needs to be communicated beforehand (preferably a few days before) and exercises, tasks, and other content, objectives, and timeframes should be clear. After publishing the Brightspace environment, do not make last minute adjustments to the previously communicated material.

Pay attention to students with disability

Before your lecture, anonymously inventorise the number and variety of students with a disability. Have a look at tips and quick fixes for teachers for inclusive education for students with functional disabilities created by Horizon³ or contact Horizon⁴ for detailed information about giving lectures for students with a disability such as ADHD, visual impairments and blindness, deafness, anxiety, depression etc.

Think about how to tell your story

Ask yourself if words are the best way to tell your story. Use different media formats such as videos, podcasts and posters during your lecture to maintain the engagement of your students.

Add energisers

Let your students be physically active from time to time. When combining both social and physical energizers, as a lecturer feel free to be involved in these energizers and ‘energize’ together (e.g. with 70 Years Old Grandpa’s Chinese Folk Shuffle Dance)⁵. Finally, give your students a variety of cognitive challenges such as quizzes, tasks, questions etc.

Regular & long breaks

Take regular breaks but ensure breaks are long enough to allow all students, including those who may have a mobility or physical disability, to get a drink and take a bio-break, and get back to your presentation. Make it very clear at exactly what time you will start again.

Add a teaser about the next lecture

Add a teaser at the end of the lecture on what will be covered in the next lecture and why it is worth attending it.

“I will watch the recording as it is easier to follow”



Create lectures that are easy to follow

Design clear presentation slides

Have a look at the example slides *figure 1* and *figure 2*. For detailed guidelines have a look at the Dyslexia friendly style guide by the British Dyslexia Association⁶. Here are several low hanging fruits when designing or adjusting your slides:

Consider visually impaired students

Avoid green and red/pink, as these colours are difficult for those who have colour vision deficiencies (colour blindness). Check your slides and images in “black and white” to see whether these are readable vision impairments such as colour blindness.

Test the contrast in your slides

Use sufficient contrast levels between background and text. Don't use a white slide with black text, use a soft/pale background with a dark blue text.

Highlight content visually

Use contrasting colours, arrows or boxes to highlight elements on a slide such as causation, movement, time etc.

Use proper spacing and alignment

Left align the content, without justification. Line spacing should be proportional to inter-word spacing as larger line and word spacing improves readability; 1.5/150% is preferable.

Create readable text

Use letter case text in your presentations to increase readability. Avoid text in uppercase/capital letters and small capital letters, which can be less familiar to the reader and harder to read.

Use Arial for better readability

The font Arial is sans serif font and is easier to read. Make slides as visual (non-verbal) as possible, so students don't have to divide their attention over your story and the content on the slides. Use visuals that support your story.

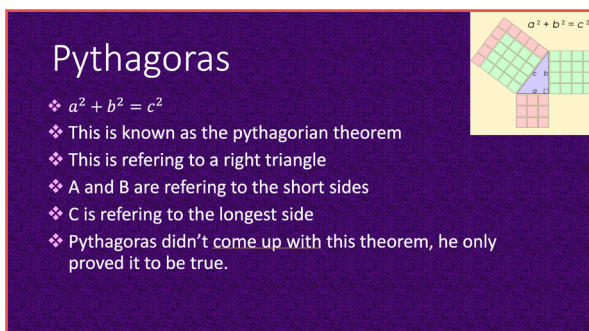


Figure 1 A slide with high cognitive load

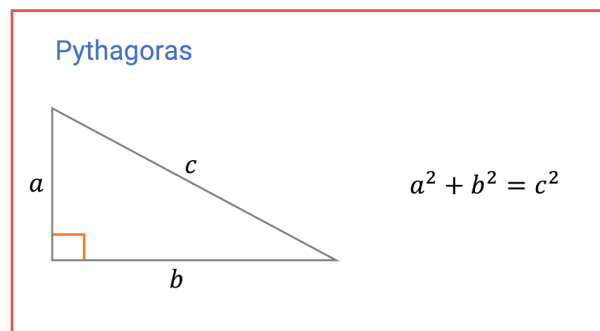


Figure 2 A slide with low cognitive load

"I already feel familiar with this content"



Incorporate different student needs

While some students appreciate repetition of content, some students may feel bored or when a lecturer starts explaining materials students have already prepared for the session, they can be discouraged from attending lectures or they will stop preparing by reading the book or watching the videos. There are a couple of things you can do to make sure that students will not perceive their preparations as redundant.

Incorporate quizzes and questions

Reality is that students differ in how they experience repetitious content: while one group may think it is unnecessary, the other group might actually need it as a scaffold. To keep everyone satisfied quizzes and/or questions that build upon the content with a certain amount of repetition can be beneficial.

Connect preparations to activities

Connect the online preparations with the teaching session. When students need to prepare, try to pair the reading or videos to an activity. This can be an online quiz, a discussion board post, or even an interactive video or document. Use the online activity as input for your teaching session. So, for example, discuss the quiz results and pay extra attention to the difficult questions. Ask your students which questions they consider difficult. Or highlight the most important discussion board posts or the most interesting questions in the interactive video or document.

Regularly check students' knowledge

Check understanding at the beginning of a teaching session: Instead of repeating the most important content of the preparatory readings, do a knowledge check to see if they've understood the materials. Prepare some questions you can ask at the start or end of the lecture. You can use hand raising, think-pair-share or a clicker tool to collect the answers.

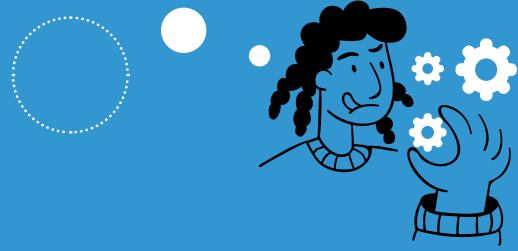
Demonstrate how to apply theories

Show how students should apply the materials they have read/prepared. Instead of re-teaching content students should have learned, show them how that content can be applied. You can demonstrate how theories are used in assignments, give real life examples, or show how the content is used in the exams.

Explain to students how to prepare

Explain to your students how your course works and the importance of preparing for next time; the purpose of repetition, and what the consequence will be on their chances of completing the course successfully if they do not prepare.

“How does this course relate to my discipline and studies?”



Show the relevance of your course in the bigger picture

Even when you design the lecture with lots of activities, new content and learning opportunities, students might miss the bigger picture of their learning journey and why they are learning what they are supposed to learn.

Link your course to study programme

Often, students need the content of your course later in their studies. It is motivating for students to see how your course connects to other courses and to their entire programme. Demonstrate how your course content is used in other courses and how previously learnt content is used in your course. Explain the implications of not having the required skills/knowledge as well. Make connections with real-life examples on how the content is essential for students' professional future.

Show how your course is built up

Try to paint the 'bigger picture'. It can be difficult for students to see the relevance of the materials they read or watch. It can really help when the lecturer shows the bigger picture. Explain how different chapters, concepts or topics are related to each other. Overviews like advance organizers can be used to support this process.

Explain the societal impact

Include real life examples. Demonstrate how the contents are used in the real world. Use case studies, invite a guest speaker (someone from the field or a researcher) and let them explain why students should know the contents.

Inquire what students need from you

Ask your students what topics they find challenging and would like to learn more about. Ask your students why they think the lecture is not relevant. By answering their questions, you can explain why the lecture is relevant or make small adjustments to make it relevant.

“I value my privacy and prefer to be anonymous”



Create a safe online environment

There are many reasons for a student to be uncomfortable with Online Education. For a student, they may be in a place where they are uncomfortable with someone else seeing them, or they may not like how they look on camera. As a lecturer, faced with a screen of frozen thumbnails, it can feel like you are talking to no-one during an online lecture.

Keep the overall experience in mind

All in all, online/remote education has its challenges for students that can be unrelated to your lectures. When following a lecture online, there can be many distractions in the surroundings of students; from the laundry being done to the mailman ringing the bell. Online education is an experience in itself with unforeseen distractions which may bring additional challenges that are not possible to control, and it is important to remember this.

Share your story and perspective

As a lecturer you have your own vulnerabilities when it comes to (online) teaching. The best way of making your students feel comfortable is sharing your discomfort or overall experience so students feel comfortable doing the same. It's valuable to mention coping mechanisms or strategies in handling yourself in situations. This way students will be nudged to do a similar reflection.

Empathise with your students

You can ask your students if they feel uncomfortable being on camera and that they are welcome to e-mail you to let you know and/or talk about it. Explain to your students that it is not mandatory to turn on their camera and that it is their choice. This is how you can show understanding and take these students into account as well.

Manage student expectations

Make it clear if you are going to record the lecture (or not) and make it clear that you will always be clear about your plans so students are never surprised.

Incentivise your students to dive in

Tell your students they can use a background which hide their real situation and the people around them; you can even make this competitive by asking them to find a background thematically related to the day's lecture. Or ask them to create their own avatar.

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