

Student Engagement Tips for Week 1

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It is the first day of a brand-new semester, and your class will begin shortly. The classroom (or Zoom session) is set up and ready to go, and students are slowly arriving. You can sense their enthusiasm – and their uncertainty. You can feel your own nerves too.

Starting a new semester with a blank slate is a powerful opportunity to engage students from your first moment together, in person or virtually. With minimal planning, you can spark engagement from day one and keep students motivated for the whole semester.

No Planning Necessary

Which of these simple-but-effective engagement techniques do you already use? Which ones will you try out?

1. Make eye contact (if you are in-person).
2. Show yourself on camera (if you are online).
3. Share who you are and what motivates you.
4. Find out from students who they are, what they care about, and what motivates them.
5. Ask. Listen. Breathe. Pause. (Bali, 2025)
6. Try a 30/30 approach. This means having 30-second micro-breaks every 30 minutes (approximately). Invite students to move, stretch and “shake it out” (Hughes, 2025). Research shows that microbreaks can help the brain to reset, which minimizes cognitive overload and keeps students engaged in learning tasks (Terada, 2018).

Some Planning Required

Requiring a little more planning, the following strategies will help keep students engaged during Week 1 and beyond. Which ones have you incorporated? Which ones would you like to bring into your practice?

1. Pose a paradoxical question. Follow up with “why” and “how” to provoke curiosity, critical thinking, and discussion.
2. Activate students’ prior knowledge before starting a new topic. Get a sense of what they already know and what their gaps are (Darby, 2019).
3. Introduce real-world scenarios that connect to course topics and students’ lives (Bali, 2025).
4. Use the [Think-Pair-Share](#) technique: Present a problem. Give students time to think individually, then discuss in pairs, and then share with the class. Leave time for a debrief and questions (Activity 1, 2025).
5. Design inclusive group tasks with clear goals and instructions. Consider learner variability (i.e., students’ different abilities, goals, life situations, cultures, and preferences). Allow time for feedback and reflection.
6. Break down complex topics into smaller bursts of learning. Present information as problems that are broken down into meaningful steps. Give students the relevant information ahead of time so they can reflect and prepare for the activity. This helps to reduce cognitive load and make long-term retention of complex information more likely (Sachdeva & Hewitt, 2025).

The time you spend with students is valuable. It does not have to be about passive learning and memorizing facts. To engage students effectively, your time together is well spent on problem-solving, real-world practice, clear communication, and healthy debate.

Remember, small shifts in your approach can make a big impact on students. By integrating just one of these elements into your course, you are more likely to sustain engagement throughout the semester.

For more engagement strategies tailored to in-person, flex, and online learning environments, reach out to the Teaching & Learning Centre: teaching@senecapolytechnic.ca.

References

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GenAI Disclosure Statement

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