

**LOGGED IN OR LOCKED OUT:
ENGAGEMENT IN VIRTUAL ROOMS***



There is a peculiar theatre that plays out repeatedly in virtual environments, dozens of squares, polished display pictures, muted microphones, and the sacred assumption of attendance. Presence is measured by login. Engagement is presumed by visibility. Value is imagined by duration. We count numbers. We celebrate turnout. We thank participants for “actively engaging.” Yet if we are brutally honest, logging in is not learning. It is digital body parking.¹

We have cultivated a culture where participants attend the way some drivers approach a traffic light, engine running, eyes elsewhere, waiting for green without studying the road. The light changes, they move. No awareness. No intention. Just mechanical compliance. Our virtual engagement has become a red-amber-green ritual –

red: cameras off.

amber: “can you hear me?”.

green: “thank you for the insightful session”.

And nothing has moved internally.

The loudest problem in our virtual spaces is not poor connectivity, it is cognitive absenteeism. People show up in pixels but not in mind. Post-pandemic studies consistently show that perceived participation in online environments often masks low cognitive investment, with multitasking and distraction emerging as dominant behavioural patterns in virtual learning contexts.² They are simultaneously present and absent, scrolling through other tabs, replying to emails, negotiating deals, cooking dinner, mentally drafting excuses, lol. The modern participant has mastered the art of

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¹ Diana Laurillard, *Teaching as a Design Science: Building Pedagogical Patterns for Learning and Technology* (Routledge, 2012) 272; Muhammad Imran, Norah Almusharraf and Milana Yunis Abbasova, ‘Digital Learning Transformation: A Study of Teachers’ Post-Covid-19 Experiences’ (2025) 11(1) *Social Sciences & Humanities Open* 1-15.

² Can He & Elsie Ong, ‘Post-pandemic shifts in online learning: motivation and engagement of Chinese students’ (2025) 5(6) *Educational Research and Evaluation* 520-536.

optical participation. It is a refined performance, present enough to be counted, distant enough to avoid contribution.

Yet, I resist the temptation to blame participants entirely. Many of our virtual environments are designed like traditional banking halls: you take a number, sit quietly, wait your turn, transact, and leave. Interaction is linear. Power is centralized. The facilitator speaks, the participants consume. But learning is not banking, it is metabolism. Constructivist and post-COVID digital pedagogy research converge on a single point: engagement is a function of design, not attendance.³ You do not grow by watching someone else eat. If value must truly be gained and shared, then engagement must become costly. What costs nothing changes nothing. February sharpened this truth for me. We cannot continue to design passive rooms and expect active minds.

Consider the traffic light model. Most virtual sessions treat participants like cars waiting for instruction. Intelligent engagement would invert the system, participants become co-drivers. Large-scale post-pandemic analyses across multiple countries show that feedback loops, interaction frequency, and active task participation are the strongest predictors of engagement in online and hybrid learning environments.⁴ Polls that require judgment. Live case disruptions that demand analysis. Rotating provocations that insist on perspective. Mandatory synthesis summaries that compel listening. The road must demand steering, not waiting. If the mind is not required to decide, it will drift.

Similarly, consider the banking modality trap. Traditional education deposits information, participants withdraw certificates, transaction complete! But real engagement is venture capital, not savings. Participants must invest intellectual risk (speak, critique, build, defend). Contemporary systematic reviews of post-2020 online learning literature identify self-directed learning, motivation, and social interaction as

³ Tolga Yildiz, 'From Constructivism to Cultural Cognition: A Comparative Analysis of Piaget, Vygotsky, and Tomasello's Theories of Cognitive Development' (2025) 13(25) *HUMANITAS Journal of Social Sciences* 411-429.

⁴ Filiz Kalelioğlu and Sila Acun Çelik, 'Investigating Student Engagement, Learning, and Attendance During the COVID-19 Disruption: A Machine Learning Analysis of Online, Hybrid, and Offline Learning Modes' (2026) 14:16 *Kalelioğlu and Acun Çelik Large-scale Assessments in Education* 1-28.

the core drivers of meaningful engagement, not passive content delivery.⁵ Without cognitive equity in the process, they remain passive account holders, holding statements but not ownership.

Lastly, consider the eating craving principle. You only truly taste food when you are hungry. Forced feeding produces indigestion. Post-COVID learning science reinforces that curiosity, uncertainty, and problem tension are central triggers of sustained attention and deeper learning engagement in digital environments.⁶ Virtual engagement must first provoke appetite, a problem, a tension, a discomfort. Start with contradiction. Start with stakes. Start with something that unsettles certainty. Curiosity is the hunger that makes learning digestible.

And let us be clear, cameras on is not engagement. We mistake visibility for vitality. A camera-on participant can still be absent. A silent participant can still be deeply engaged. Engagement is not aesthetic, it is neurological. The real metric is transformation. Did thinking shift? Was a position challenged? Did someone build on another's idea? Is there post-session action? If the answer is no, then what occurred was streaming, not learning. Empirical studies after COVID-19 repeatedly show that student satisfaction and learning outcomes correlate far more with interaction quality than with mere presence or attendance metrics.⁷

To close this loud gap, we must redesign virtual spaces as ecosystems, not webinars.⁸ Interruption must be embedded by design, no twenty-minute monologues, cognitive spikes every five to seven minutes. Intellectual ownership must rotate, participants summarize, critique, or extend arguments in real time. Thinking must be made visible through collaborative boards where ideas evolve rather than disappear in chat scrolls.

⁵ Hee Sun Kim, Judy Waight, Xiaoyan Xu and Seung Won Yoon, 'Navigating Leadership in Hybrid or Remote Workplaces: A Systematic Review of Employee Engagement Strategies' (2025) *Human Resource Development Review* 282; Syeda Nazneen Waseem and Kashif Mehmood, 'A Study on the Drivers of Employee Engagement and its Relationship with Employee Performance' (2019) 13(2) *South Asian Journal of Management Sciences* 172-190.

⁶ George Loewenstein, 'The Psychology of Curiosity: A review and reinterpretation' (1994) 116(1) *Psychological Bulletin* 75-98.

⁷ Ziqi Deng and Zhi Yang, 'Exploring the impact of online education on student engagement in higher education in post-COVID-19: what students want to get?' (2025) *Frontiers in Psychology* 1-7.

⁸ Ziqi Deng and Zhi Yang [n7].

Accountability loops must exist, post-session micro-deliverables within forty-eight hours. Engagement must carry consequence.

This is not cosmetic reform. Wherever serious outcomes matter, passive attendance is dangerous. Decisions shaped by half-engaged minds produce fragile systems. Weak engagement upstream becomes weak policy downstream. Virtual rooms, therefore, must become laboratories of shared cognition.⁹

The question is no longer how many attended? It is who was altered. A session where ten minds shift is superior to one hundred silent squares. If we are serious about value, about competence, about development that endures, then we must design environments where disengagement is uncomfortable and contribution is inevitable.

Because learning is not a login.

It is a collision.

⁹Maciej Jakubowski, Tomasz Gajderowicz and Harry Anthony Patrinos, 'COVID-19, School Closures, and Student Learning Outcomes. New Global Evidence from PISA' (2025) 10:5 *NPJ Science of Learning* 1-7.