# TIP SHEET: ENGAGING PARTICIPANTS IN THE VIRTUAL WORLD

The National Training and Development Curriculum (NTDC) team members have watched some fantastic facilitation during class sessions we have observed. Here are tips we have learned from you about how to maximize engagement in trainings that occur on a remote platform!

- Strike a warm and inviting tone from the start. Prioritize the first five minutes of class to engage participants. This will set the stage for ongoing participation.

- Ask participants to let the rest of their group know the names they would like to be called. If possible, have them put their full names on the virtual platform.

- If possible, provide each participant with a printed copy of the *Participant Resource Manual*. (Mail copies, or have participants pick them up.) When referencing items in the *Participant Resource Manual*, cite page numbers so everyone can turn to the page you are referencing.

- During the Welcome and Introduction period or orientation, give participants a tour of the remote-learning platform that you're using. Think of fun ways to get them to use the chat function, question and answer, polls and other tools. Clearly state your expectations regarding participant engagement.

- Stop screen sharing, and show attendees' faces when it's time for discussion. Seeing real people is much more conducive to lively discussion.

- Let attendees know that your expectations are similar to those for an in-person class.
  - Let participants know they will need to sit and to participate.
  - Ask them to dress and to act as they would in a physical classroom.
  - If a participant is not following your expectations, address this early. If a serious issue arises that a participant is unwilling to address, discuss this with your supervisor to determine how you should proceed.

- Email participants before class to remind them to complete their prework so they can be ready to participate in class.

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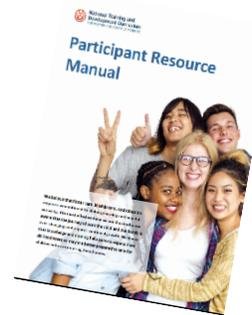
- Have participants turn on their cameras!
    - Make this a clear expectation in advance, and remind everyone at the beginning of class. Cameras help everyone get to know one another and to engage.
    - Reinforce this rule with positive comments, such as, "It's so nice to get to know each other better by showing our faces on camera."
    - Talk privately with participants who repeatedly don't turn on their cameras. Find out what the issue might be (e.g., low bandwidth or other tech problems).
    - If participants continue to keep their cameras off, let them know that you can't count them present when recording attendance.
    - Consult your agency to determine what to do if a participant does not have a camera.

- Take time to acknowledge participants' colors in the Color Wheel at the beginning of each class. Weave their comments into the class later to show that you noticed. For example: "Maybe you're all quiet today because you chose tired colors. So, let's all wake up for an activity!"

- Allow time in the Bridge Section (or while you're waiting for other participants to join the class) to ask whether anyone had any lightbulb or "aha" moments while doing the prework. This is more engaging than just reading key points.

- Try to avoid reading content. Try to look at the camera on your computer as much as possible. Be aware of participants' body language.

- Take time to learn and to use all the available tools: polls, breakout rooms, whiteboards and annotation functions.

- Avoid talking or lecturing throughout the class without inviting participant involvement. If you notice participants' attention lagging, add variety by asking for reactions, taking a stretch break, catching a deep breath together, asking a lighthearted question through a brief poll, etc.

- Involve participants. Ask them to read a slide aloud, to answer a question verbally or to type something into the chat box.

- Use the chat box liberally. That can be a great way to emphasize key concepts. When lively discussions start to happen in the chat, be sure to bring them into the virtual classroom to keep everyone on the same page.

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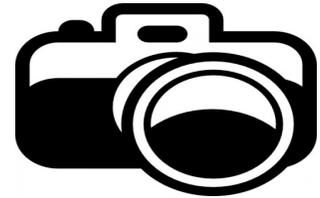
- Consider giving brief breaks (five to 10 minutes) more frequently rather than one long break. Attention spans are shorter on screens than in a physical classroom.

- Notice participants' cues. When participants are too quiet or the content is dense, ask whether the content is making sense to them.

- Allow participants to log on to the session early or to stay online after class to share personal experiences or to ask questions (just as you would do during a session in a physical classroom).

- Check in with participants who don't seem engaged, who aren't completing assignments, etc. Use a private chat; or call them during the week, as necessary. Consider establishing an environment that lets them feel it's normal for you to check on their level of participation. For example: "Nina, we haven't heard from you in a while. I'm just making sure you're still with us." Or "Let's test your audio to make sure it's working, Jim."

- Call on volunteers to speak aloud rather than to rely only on the chat function for giving their answers.

- Partner with your co-facilitator.
  - While one of you is facilitating, the other can monitor the chat box to keep participants engaged, troubleshoot tech issues or verbalize interesting chat points.
  - Talk with one another. This models engagement for participants and helps to keep the tone casual and relationship-based.
  - Have your co-facilitator observe participant reactions and then text you privately to point out any concerns, points of confusion or lack of participation.

- Use personal examples! Story telling creates memorable moments. Use brief, on-target stories about yourself or children and families you know (with no identifying information) to highlight points and to make the class material real. Remember that stories that share mistakes are sometimes better teaching tools than those that show successes!

- Activities are all about engagement. These tips can help you to maximize activities:
  - Invite one or more volunteers to read aloud or to lead the class in any way.
  - Make activities and breakout periods long enough that participants can get to know each other a bit. Remember that they don't have the benefit of making connections easily in virtual classes and that they will need support networks later!

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