

Using a Backchannel in In-Person Synchronous Classes

In our switch to remote teaching, many instructors noticed an increase in student participation and question-asking during synchronous virtual sessions through the Chat function in Teams or Zoom. How do we continue the practice of using a backchannel in an in-person synchronous or [HyFlex](#) context?



A **backchannel** is a digital conversation that runs concurrently with a synchronous activity (e.g., lecture, presentation, demonstration, whole class activity), providing students with a space to actively contribute to the discussion and ask questions.

Why have a backchannel?

- Increase student participation, particularly among students who may not typically speak in class
- Increase question asking and help seeking when real-time feedback and support can be offered
- Gather feedback on how the class is going and what concepts or skills can be clarified
- Build community through sharing and support among students

What are some general approaches and tools I could use?

Some key questions to consider when setting up your backchannel and deciding on a tool:

- Do I want students to be able to respond to each other's posts? Vote on or upvote posts?
- Do I want the chat to have a structure (e.g., organized into specific prompts/questions/topics)?
- Do I want the chat to be public (e.g., on Twitter) or private to our course or class session?

General Approach	Sample Uses	Potential Tools
Open-ended chat or Q&A Text-based or multimedia (e.g., GIFs, images, videos)	Students ask for explanations of unclear concepts, comment on ideas discussed, share resources related to the topic, ask questions about the course or content, submit questions to stimulate debate, answer questions or make suggestions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teams/Zoom Chat • GoSoapBox • Backchannel Chat • Tricider • Digital visual board like Padlet, Mural • Twitter (example use) • Google Slides (Q&A on, upvoting) • Mentimeter (Q&A slide type)
Open-ended responses to prompts or questions	Students identify concepts that are unclear, describe an idea in their own words, share examples or applications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AnswerGarden (word cloud) • Mentimeter (word cloud, open-ended) • Digital visual board like Padlet
Voting or polling	Check understanding, ask how familiar or confident students are with a new concept or skill	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentimeter • Poll Everywhere • Google Forms

Learn about the capabilities of some of these tools on the [matrix comparing various backchannel tools](#) (scroll to the *More Resources* heading near the bottom). For additional ideas, see [Backchannel in education: 9 uses](#).

A Few Tips

- Set clear guidelines and expectations for behaviour and participation
- Tell students how and when you will view and respond, and if they can respond to each other
- Assign a moderator to point out common questions/ideas and to signal inappropriate comments
- Decide if the backchannel will be projected in the room or viewed on students' own devices



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