Online Learning is a Drag: Leveraging "Draggables" in Pear Deck to Facilitate Student Engagement

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When we pivoted to a remote instruction model in March 2020 in response to the Covid-19 pandemic the profession of teaching (along with the rest of the world) took a turn that none of us had ever dreamed of or planned for. At that time we were all just doing anything we could to give our students opportunities to continue to learn and remain connected to one another, but the challenges and struggles were significant for students, teachers, parents, administrators, and countless other stakeholders. However, as we limped through the remainder of the 2019-20 school year in this remote model we learned valuable lessons about how to do remote instruction better that would be very valuable, should school buildings continue to remain closed.

My district, the Rochester City School District, chose to continue entirely remote instruction into the 2020-21 school year, but would now do so using a synchronous model where students would attend classes online, but those classes would occur in real time. In order to do a better job teaching than we did in the spring and to prepare to teach online, teachers needed to develop a digitally rich toolbox which they could pull from to engage their students in a virtual setting. Two of the biggest areas of struggle when school buildings first closed were student engagement in online learning experiences, and having students interact with one another online in a way that promotes the social nature of learning. The item in my toolbox that I have found to be extremely effective in working to address those issues is Pear Deck, a Google Slides add-on that allows for students to interact with the presentation in a variety of ways and be actively engaged in online learning. Specifically, I have found the use of a large variety of "draggables" as a method of student response in Pear Deck to promote both engagement and discourse.

The magic of the draggable is that the barrier to engagement for students is almost non-existent, and the options for ways for teachers to use the tool are almost limitless. Every day I start each lesson with a social-emotional check-in where students drag one or two circles on their Chromebooks to let me know how they are feeling.

The responses are only visible to me, so students don't need to worry about making themselves vulnerable to everyone else in their class, and they allow me get a pulse on where each of my students is emotionally so I can support them as needed. And again, the barrier to engagement with the draggable is very low and the vast majority of my students always participate in this activity. Asking students to type or talk about their emotional state, even if it were anonymous, requires students to try to identify their feelings themselves (which can be challenging in and of itself) and then to do the work of putting those feelings into words that someone else can understand, which takes much more work on their part than dragging a little circle and could be a reason for kids to choose to not engage.

Another way I use draggables is by asking students to drag an icon to take a position on some question. The image below comes from an Algebra I lesson where students were learning about what it means for a relation to be a function and students dragged a circle to indicate if they believed the relationship between student and hair color was a function or not.
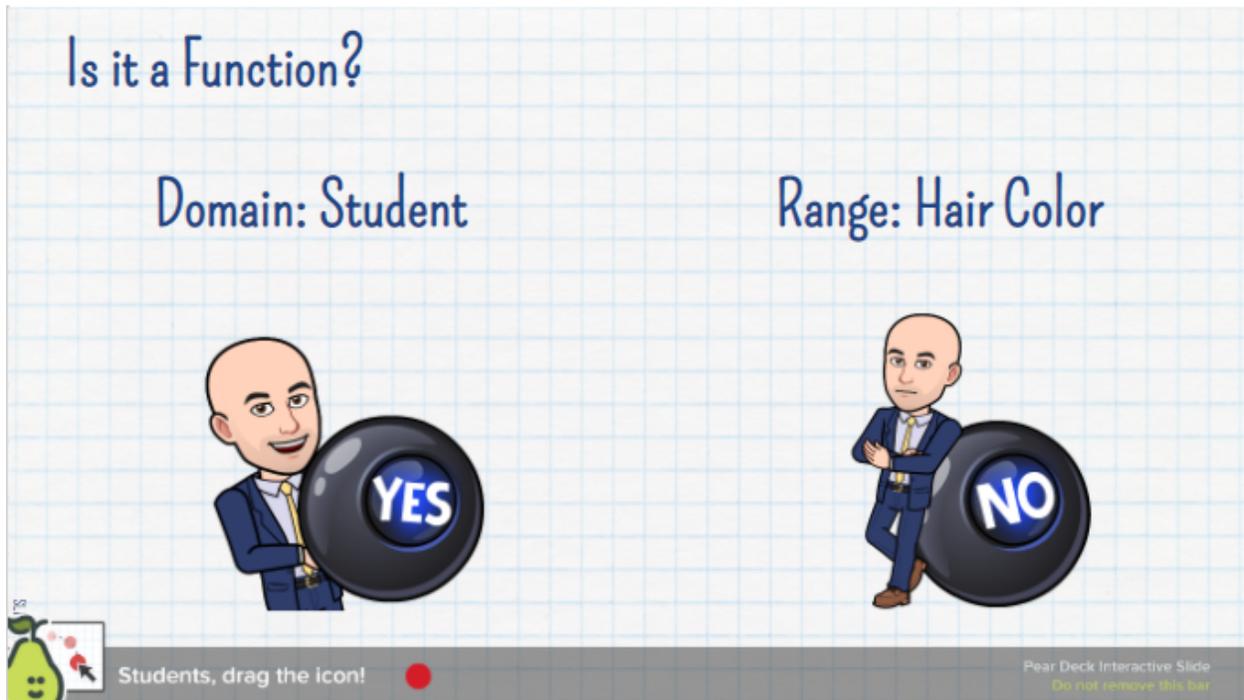
Again, students' barrier to engagement is extremely low so students engage in the activity without much prompting. This allows me to formatively assess my students' understanding during the lesson, but the place I see a bigger benefit is in the conversations that arise between students when I ask them to share their thinking about how they dragged their circle. Students have already begun to engage with the activity by dragging their circle, and they have already spent some time thinking about how they would drag their circle before actually moving it, so they have already done a lot of thinking about this question. This means they all already have something to share ready to go before I ask any questions without feeling like I have asked them to do a whole lot of work or like they need additional support before they can engage in the

activity. The act of actually dragging the circle seems small to them, but the thinking they need to do before they drag it is significant.

I am in a unique position this year because I wound up teaching quite a few students I have also taught in previous years, which gives me an opportunity to see how they engage in this remote setting as opposed to an in person one. I can tell you that there are a number of students who struggled to engage in in-person learning who readily engage in these activities, especially the draggable questions. The draggable is just one type of question you can use with Pear Deck, but it is one I try to incorporate as often as possible because I have seen over and over that students engage with it in a way that they don't with other types of questions, and a lot of quality conversations between students can be sparked by just dragging a little red circle.