

Chapter 6

Is This Your Best Work? Complications and Limitations of Online Instruction for High Quality Student Engagement

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ABSTRACT

This chapter summarizes both psychological and achievement considerations for student participation in online learning environments. Using journaling, student responses, and interviews, this study yielded consistent conclusions regarding the need for supported and interactive opportunities for students to interact with both peers and the instructor of the online course. Online classroom practices are described, and a number of issues contributing to student success and satisfaction are summarized. Future concerns for practices in online instruction and student learning are described.

INTRODUCTION

A burgeoning market in online instruction and an increasing impetus to create and deliver online courses have created a need to monitor and assess the success of both the course content and the methods with which such courses are delivered. The nature of online instruction may lend itself to isolation of individuals from robust interaction with each other, or from meaningful professor-to-student interactions. It was the intent of this

study to examine some of the qualities that can be advanced in online course design to contribute to a more meaningful and connected set of interactions among students and their online instructors.

The impetus for delivering online instruction in this case follows from the typical reasons cited in the literature: the physical necessities of delivering a program to students who are widely dispersed geographically; the need to modernize and bring technology proficiencies and course delivery up to date; and the need and capacity to

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deliver the course using methods that assure the material is sufficiently learned (Bernard, Abrami, Lou, Borokhovski, Wade, Ozney, Wai, Fiset, & Huang, 2004; Choi, Land, & Turgeon, 2005; Dede, 2004; Tallent-Runnels, Thomas, Lan, Cooper, Ahern, Shaw, & Liu, 2006). The intent for this study, however, was creating a productive and rewarding learning relationship with students, specifically focusing on the ways in which assessment can help accomplish that end.

PROGRAM BACKGROUND AND STUDY RATIONALE

Many dynamic factors must be considered in designing approaches to online instruction, including student capabilities, course content and assessment, and often the inherent instability of digital technologies which make the learning process a challenging one (Prensky, 2001). Recent innovations in teaching with technology have highlighted the importance of curriculum-based technology integration (AACTE, 2008; McDonald, Stodel, Farres, Breithaupt, & Gabriel, 2001) as well as the effectiveness of comparative methods for course instruction and evaluation (Sitzmann, Kraiger, Stewart, & Wisher, 2006; Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006).

Different instructional methodologies have contributed to emerging knowledge of student self-efficacy regarding computer use (Torkzadeh & Van Dyke, 2002). One documented learning benefit which has emerged from years of online instruction is the possible greater opportunity for reflection and creation of supportive online communities (Dede, 2004). Learners who tend to be silent in face-to-face settings may make more frequent and meaningful contributions in mediated online interaction (Liaw, 2002; Saito & Miwa, 2007). The electronic classroom may also provide unique opportunities for experiencing virtual experiences and interactive communication not practicable in a typical classroom setting (Preece & Maloney-Krichmar, 2003). Some criti-

cal determinants for successful online learning have been identified, particularly the necessity for students to be actively engaged in initiating learning (Dringus, 2000), in accommodating the ways in which students incorporate prior knowledge (Rafi-Nachmias & Segev, 2003), and in critical feedback for promoting understanding of the content (Nelson, 2007; O'Leary & Quinlan, 2007).

The motivation for this study was consideration of how students experience the course and curriculum, over and against the experiences and outcomes of face-to-face instruction. Student engagement and learning in an asynchronous setting has been documented in a number of ways, and several factors are acknowledged to contribute to advancing engagement. Clarity of instructional sequence was consistently shown to promote student engagement in online learning (Barab, Kling, & Gray, 2004; Rafi Nachmias & Segev, 2003; Renninger & Shuman, 2002; Zirkle, 2003). Similarly, the most direct and quantifiable expectations for assessment were shown to correlate highly with positive student outcomes (Gao & Lehman, 2003; Mishra & Koehler, 2006; Stanley, 2006). Less well-established has been the effect of using frequent and formative assessment as part of online instruction (Mentzer, Cryan, & Teclehaimanot, 2007; Riel & Polin, 2004; Zhao, Lei, Yan, Lai, & Tan, 2005).

This chapter specifically focused on the effects of instruction and peer formative feedback in promoting student engagement and achievement, emphasizing the importance of assessment, illustrated in a number of previous studies (Crippen & Earl, 2007; Frederickson, Reed, & Clifford, 2005; Wang, Wang, Wang, & Huang, 2006; WestEd, 2006). A number of additional questions evolved as the focus of this study. Was the preparation and delivery of the course effective in providing students with developmental experiences in communicating and critiquing their own and peer work, comparable to typical classroom instruction? What kinds of experiences could be constructed to allow for student interaction and analytical thinking related to each other and to

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