Chapter 16

Interacting at a Distance:
Creating Engagement in Online Learning Environments

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ABSTRACT

Effective online instruction requires understanding not only interaction but also how to facilitate interaction through technology (Moore & Kearsley, 2012). Specifically, Moore and Kearsley (2012) categorize these types of interactions as "learner with content, interaction with instruction [or] interaction with other learners" (p. 132). This chapter examines each of these interaction types and suggests ways to incorporate them into online learning environments (OLEs). The chapter provides techniques and approaches that will be beneficial to both instructional design practitioners and online instructors. It seeks to assuage some of the concerns that faculty have about OLEs and provides ideas and activities that can be implemented by course designers or instructors in OLE projects.

INTRODUCTION

Interaction in an online course looks and feels different from interaction in a face-to-face classroom. In both environments students interact with the content, the instructor, and each other. One difference between these two learning environments is found in the third type of interaction—between learners and other learners (Moore & Kearsley, 2012). An online learning environment (OLE) that epitomizes this type of interaction can make a course engaging and enjoyable; the absence of this interaction can create feelings of isolation, ultimately causing students to become disenchanted

with online courses. To be successful in an OLE, both instructors and students must adjust their approaches. This chapter provides advice and suggestions for instructors, instructional designers, and administrators interested in improving online courses and creating successful OLEs.

This chapter is an outgrowth of the author's online education experience as both an instructional designer and support person for online instructors as well as an online student. This unique perspective has provided him with a better understanding of the types of challenges and difficulties faced by students in online learning environments and enabled him to provide useful

suggestions for making the learning environment a more engaging and enriching experience. To help illustrate the different components and challenges faced when developing engagement in online learning environments, this chapter makes use of three composite instructors (described below) who represent examples of different personality types and instructional approaches the author has encountered as an instructional designer.

- **Troy Henderson:** A new instructor who has just earned a master's degree in teaching. Troy is a big fan of technology and is always eager to use the newest technological tool.
- **Ruth Murray:** An experienced instructor with over eight years of instructional experience. Ruth enjoys teaching and is open to using technology but often becomes frustrated when she feels that the technology is too complicated or difficult to implement.
- **Charles Smith:** A tenured professor with more than twenty-five years of instructional experience. Charles has been teaching the same courses for the better part of his instructional career and is resistant to technology. He is not comfortable with new technology, considers it distracting and ineffective and strongly feels that in-class lecturing is by far the most effective way to deliver instruction.

Teaching in an online learning environment is very different from face-to-face, classroom instruction, and some teachers find the transition to the online environment quite challenging. These three instructors come from different perspectives but ultimately want to be successful as teachers. Throughout this chapter, their perspectives will be incorporated to help frame the discussion and to illustrate possible ways of addressing the challenges of creating an interactive and engaging online learning environment.

Online education affords new opportunities to leverage technology and create interactive and immersive learning environments for students. At the same time, instructors often struggle with striking an appropriate balance between instructor–learner interaction and learner–learner interaction (Moore & Kearsley, 2012). A common example of poor online instruction is when an instructor takes PowerPoint presentations used in a face-to-face classroom and posts them to a learning management system (LMS) as "lecture notes." An imbalance occurs because students are not given an opportunity to engage with the content or with each other; they are simply receiving passive instruction through PowerPoint slides. According to Vasu and Ozturk (2009), "any distance education course is enhanced if traditional lecture notes can be augmented with rich media." (p. 272). So how might the instructor in the above example achieve the balance of interaction needed for an effective online course? He or she could supplement the slides with a short screencast (a video that shows the viewer what is on the instructor's screen and is equipped with narration by the instructor that provides additional context) and then ask students to answer questions based on both the screencast and the slides. This is only one of many ways instructors can make online courses more interactive and create the type of engagement that makes an OLE successful for students.

This chapter is divided into three main sections, as follows:

- Section 1 ("Background") provides a brief background of online instruction and distance education and an explanation of the connectivist learning theory.
- Section 2 ("Creating Engagement in OLEs") outlines the importance of creating engagement in OLEs and explores the changing roles of instructors and students in OLEs and how these roles can create the kind of engagement and interaction that characterizes successful online courses.

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