Chapter 5
Engage Online Learners:
Design Considerations for Promoting Student Interactions

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ABSTRACT

Online learning will continue to be one of the popular modes of instruction offered by higher education institutions to accommodate different learning needs. Student engagement is critical to the success of online learning. Students should be engaged cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally. This chapter discusses design considerations for online courses to promote student-instructor, student-student, and student-content interactions to engage students cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally. The chapter also discusses the application of flow theory, specifically, in the design of instruction to engage students during their interaction with course content.

INTRODUCTION

In order to make education accessible to diverse groups of people, many American colleges and universities offer fully online classes and degree programs (Parker, Lenhart, & Moore, 2011). Online course offerings will continue to grow. According to Allen and Seaman (2011), 65% of higher education institutions considered online learning as an important part of their long-term strategy. The growth rate for online enrollments was 10%, higher than the growth rate of only 2% for the overall higher education enrollments. Over 6.1 million students took at least one online course during fall 2010, an increase of 560,000 students over the previous year. The number of students who took at least one online course increased to 6.7 million students during fall 2011 (Allen & Seaman, 2013) and 7.1 million students during fall 2012 (Allen & Seaman, 2014).

The importance of online learning is also reflected in efforts made by institutions to improve online teaching practices. Professional organizations such as the Online Learning Consortium (formerly known as Sloan Consortium) offer many online teaching workshops. Other organizations (Quality Matters and Chico State) have developed a rubric to guide the design of quality online courses. Many colleges and universities offer their own in-house faculty development programs and workshops related to online teaching.

A popular topic that has frequently been addressed in the development programs, workshops, and course design rubrics is student engagement. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) defined student engagement as the amount of time and effort students devoted to their academic activities, and the resources the institution invests in curriculum and other opportunities to support student learning and to enhance student collegial experience (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2014a). Similarly, Kuh (2003) defined student engagement as "time and energy students devote to educationally sound activities inside and outside of the classroom, and policies and practices that institutions use to induce students to take part in these activities" (p. 25).

Student engagement has received a great deal of attention as a measure to assess the quality of student learning experiences (Kuh, 2003) and has been found to be a predictor of college completion (Price & Tovar, 2014). Kuh (2002) claimed student engagement was used as an indicator to differentiate high quality institutions from lower quality institutions. The institutions whose students were more fully engaged in activities that contributed to the college outcomes were considered higher quality institutions. Krause and Coates (2008) found a correlation between engagement and high quality learning outcomes. Engagement encompasses academic, non-academic, and social aspects of student experience and could be used as "a singularly sufficient means of determining whether students are engaging with their study and university learning community in ways likely to promote high-quality learning" (p. 493). In its own right, engagement plays more than a mediating role in the prediction of outcomes and should be considered an independent educational outcome.

The literature categorizes student engagement as cognitive engagement, affective/emotional engagement, and behavioral/physical engagement. These three types of engagement are not isolated but dynamically interrelated (Bartko, 2005; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Fredricks et al. argued that engagement should be considered as a multidimensional construct, under which cognition, emotion, and behavior are united "to provide a richer characterization of children [students]" (p. 61) and to help us understand the complexity of educational experience, which allows the design of more specific and effective instructional interventions.

In a face-to-face course, students can interact with their peers and the instructor. Such interaction takes on a different dynamic for online learners (Hege, 2011). In an online environment, the instructor and students are not in the same physical location. Oftentimes, the interaction is asynchronous. Therefore, online courses require the use of different strategies for engaging students. This chapter discusses tips and strategies to increase student-instructor, student-student, and student-content interactions (Moore, 1989), as a way to enhance student engagement in online courses. Instructors and instructional designers may apply them to design an online course to engage students in the cognitive, affective, and behavioral areas. First, the chapter briefly discusses cognitive, affective, and behavioral engagement and, then, discusses student-instructor, student-student, and student-content interactions. Lastly, the authors review the literature on flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008) to derive common instructional components across the studies to inform the design of course content to promote flow experience in learning. However, it is not the authors' intention to conduct a comprehensive review of literature on student engagement and

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