Chapter 17
Communication and Collaboration Strategies for an Effective Online Professor

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ABSTRACT

Online classes in higher education bring unique challenges to faculty. This chapter identifies best practices for effectively communicating and collaborating with students online. The information presented was gained via "crowd science" qualitative methodology, in which online faculty responded via email and a blog post requesting best practices for effectively communicating and collaborating with peers and students online. Faculty were from diverse backgrounds and teaching experiences. Data are presented in concert with recent research in the field of effective online learning and communication with students. The current literature in tandem with the data provides an effective collection of practices to provide online instructors with a guide to successfully facilitate online classes.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Online faculty bring a variety of experiences to their positions. Some of these educators are employed full-time online working for multiple institutions, some work only for one online institution, some faculty work equally online and in face-to-face classrooms, and still other faculty work full-time in face-to-face institutions and maintain a part-time online teaching job. Gathering the experiences of these instructors resulted in a myriad of communication challenges and successes.

This study drew upon the best practices and experiences of online faculty who work effectively communicating and collaborating with their peers and students. This exploratory process included looking at how these educators collaborate and engage in professional development and collaborative projects, and online collaboration, often across institutions, to bring best practices to students and peers. In addition, we learned how faculty build learning communities to support their own personal best practices. By examining the tools and practices faculty use to build community and establish relationships with their students, we also discovered how faculty communicate with students in the virtual environment. As a result this research focuses on how educational leaders can help promote and improve communication and collaboration from their faculty to students.

DATA COLLECTION

This qualitative study drew upon the concept of "crowd science," which is used in the natural sciences to collect data (Franzoni & Sauermann, 2012). The key components of the method of data collection are open participation, meaning that participants need not commit to an interview or a lengthy time commitment in data collection. Participants needed to include something they value as a best practice in communication and collaboration, via an email, document attachment, or blog post. In order to facilitate data collection the research team set up a blog (http://onlinecrowdscience.blogspot.com/) within Google and an associated email address (onlinecrowdscience@gmail.com). This allowed the researchers to gather, clarify, and organize information from participants over a 3-week period. One question was asked: "Please share your best practices for effectively communicating and collaborating with peers and students online." From this email and blog, the research team contacted other online faculty they knew personally, and asked them to share the question with anyone they knew who teaches online courses – a form of snowball sampling. This call for participation resulted in more than 75 email responses and posts to the blog. Participants often self-disclosed how many years they had been teaching online, additional ways of contacting them for follow-up questions, whether they taught full- or part-time, and the type (or types) of institutions for which they taught (state universities, community colleges, for-profit institutions). Responses ranged from one paragraph to attachments that were several pages long. We used this method of data collection to co-construct these data for this chapter and discover the underlying meaning of faculty student relationships.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data collected for this study were analyzed using inductive analysis (Hatch, 2002). Although the question was posed to faculty participants in terms of communication with colleagues or students, respondents focused primarily on communication with students. Thus, faculty communication with students became the frame of analysis, captured in this quote from a participant.

When I am interacting with students, it is really important for me to convey energy, positivity, and an eagerness for getting to know/interact with the students. I think this type of communication/interactional style impacts their willingness to be part of a greater community where they are valued and know their

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