The Power of the Human Face in Online Education

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ABSTRACT

The modern student exists in a highly technical and digitally driven educational world. Online delivery of courses and interactions, with the primary purpose of enhancing learning, and access to learning opportunities is becoming almost mainstream. Yet, despite the broad availability of online education courses and systems, the completion rates and levels of student satisfaction with online courses remains comparatively low. Studies have indicated that online students are seeking personal engagement to drive their learning. This project looked at the importance of having a human face at the heart of the online course materials to help develop a more personal level of engagement. The project, carried out between 2016 and 2018, involved a randomized control trial of 84 students, and compared two sets of course materials, for a common course topic, one with human face-based resources, and one without. The results clearly showed a significant increase in student engagement with the human face-based resources, but the learning outcomes, for those who completed, were not significantly different between the two groups.

KEYWORDS

Education, Engagement, Human, Online Learning

INTRODUCTION

Students in contemporary schools and universities are engaged in a learning environment with an ever-increasing digital focus (Collins & Halverson, 2018; Johnson et al., 2016). This digital focus, ranges from the availability and delivery of courses and content, to social and classroom engagement, both personal and educational in nature. For many online education systems and tools, the desire to provide an experience that is both "personal" and "engaging" in nature is at the core of their objectives (Hew, 2016; DeBoer et al., 2014). Despite this desired personal touch there is also a desire to deliver this knowledge to a large audience, as evidenced by the rapid growth of Massive Open Online Courses, or MOOCs (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2016; Kennedy, 2014). These two desires, a personal touch and a massive target audience, create a dichotomy in the educational objectives of many institutions and course developers. Course designers are then left with the challenge of creating rich personal engagement that can be delivered to a massive audience.

CHALLENGES FOR ONLINE COURSE DESIGN & DELIVERY

Online courses, and particularly the asynchronous delivery of course materials, offer many valuable features, particularly in the area of flexible viewing and interaction by students at times of their own choosing. These benefits, in flexible delivery, are often described as being student driven and meeting the desires of (in MOOC cases) a very large student body.

Yet the lack of connectedness, between student and the teacher/content, that these materials involve, also creates a situation where the students' level of commitment and engagement can easily drop away. If we look at a more classic face-to-face teaching scenario, where the student commits to coming to a class and working through the materials, the time specific nature of the delivery of those resources force student commitment. As materials are only delivered once, if they fail to attend they fall behind, so as a result most make the effort to attend, thus committing to the class and its materials. The online scenario is quite different in terms of student commitment, with all materials available at any time (24/7 access is a pivotal principal of flexible delivery systems), as a result there is no need to commit to the current moment, as one student who was involved in this research study indicated "it will be there later". The impact of this difference in commitment is evident when looking at the poor retention and completion rates in large online courses (Bawa, 2016; Hew, 2016; Onah, et al., 2014). This raises the key challenge of how to engage online students and improve their levels of commitment to the course? This project explored the applied use of the human face, and a sense of inter-personal link, with the intent of making the course materials less content driven and more human in nature.

Retention, Completions & Drop-outs

No matter what form of educational experience a student enters, most students start out with an aim to complete their studies, yet many will fail to reach that goal. In the

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