Chapter 12

Technology and Culturally Competent Strategies for the Online Classroom

Justina Elise Kwapy
Grand Canyon University, USA

ABSTRACT

The last decade has brought an increase in online courses in the educational setting. One-quarter of American college students are in an online degree program, and 32% have taken at least one online course. While students, higher universities, and faculty are enjoying the convenience and flexibility of online learning environments, there is an increasing concern over the support in distance education, teaching methods, and a social disconnectedness of students from the course. This chapter explores how technology can support a successful online learning experience and impede the dissatisfaction and higher dropout rates among students in distance learning programs. Higher institution's online faculty are now faced with the task of creating a virtual community of learners, meeting both the academic and social needs of students.

INTRODUCTION

Online programs offer students an opportunity to further their education at their convenience, with the flexibility of learning, despite family, work and other personal obligations. Higher education faculty are no longer only required to teach in the traditional brick and mortar style, but also teach in the virtual learning environment. Teaching methods must now include building a sense of community in their classrooms that mirror those of the traditional classroom, but also giving students the connectedness and sense of belonging that make them successful, motivated, and ready to learn. McMillan and Chavis (1986) define a sense of community as "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together". Personalized instruction is now an essential element of an online instructor's teaching practices and pedagogy (Popescu, 2010). It is expected that an online community

establishes this connectedness of instructor and students. Community can be defined by the relationships and interactions between students and instructor. Research suggests that once a reliable technology system is in place, the design of the course and pedagogy utilized can play more of a significant role in facilitating community building than the actual e-learning platform (Rovai, 2002a, 2002c). Promoting interaction among community members through collaboration provides opportunities for members to learn from each other, contribute to each other's learning, and recognize and accept the differences and perspectives of each learner. Collaboration has been determined to be one of the most crucial elements of successfully integrating technology in the online classroom.

Giving instructors and students the tools to be successful in the online learning environment is essential for success. Instructors can facilitate this sense of community through careful planning, support and intentional tasks and activities that support the best practices of community building through the use of technology and a social presence that motivates and encourages student connectedness, both individually and in a group. Factors that can contribute to online attrition includes high college costs, poor program fit, and lack of technical support for online students (Angelino, Williams, & Natvig, 2007; Patterson & McFadden, 2009; Rovai, 2003).

BACKGROUND

More than four and a half million students were enrolled in at least one online course in 2009 (Allen & Seaman, 2010). The Distance Education Enrollment Report 2017, conducted by the new Digital Learning Compass organization, reveals the number of higher education students taking at least one distance education course in 2015 now tops six million.

Although online courses offer convenience, the social interactions found in the classroom between the professor and students continue to be an area of uneasiness due to the high attrition rates in online programs (Angelino, Williams, & Natvig, 2007). A prime concern for administrators of online degree programs and operative faculty training is an empirically-informed understanding of intentional and effective instructional practices that create meaningful, community-building interaction between students and instructors. Evidence demonstrates that a student's sense of community in an online learning environment contributes to the learner's gains, engagement and overall satisfactions with the online course.

An academic learning community is present through the connectedness of the learners and faculty. In an online learning environment, learners have little connection to the physical university. School spirit, cohesiveness and connection to the university must be demonstrated through the use of technology (Rovai, 2003). Without the sense of a learning community present, learners can experience a sense of isolation and disconnectedness from the online class and university, and ultimately, from their learning and success.

SOCIAL PRESENCE

Research demonstrates that a social presence is essential in promoting student success in the online classroom (Swan & Shih, 2005). Swan & Shih suggest that social presence exists through the sharing of learners' experiences, collaboration and meaningful connections that result in an increased and effective learning experience. Social presence emerges when instructors support students in engaging in genuine dialogue that supports.

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