

Chapter 17

Designing and Teaching for Student Engagement in Online Courses Through UDL

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ABSTRACT

Any course must be goal-focused and consider the needs of all learners. However, online courses require instructors to be proactive in planning for learning. Recruiting and sustaining engagement in an online course must be carefully considered and planned for during all learning modules or units. This chapter addresses how to keep students engaged by considering their affect, the general way students feel toward their learning. Affect impacts motivation, which in turn can impact how a student persists in a course. The Universal Design for Learning principle of engagement addresses the affect through three guidelines. These guidelines are explained in this chapter with potential barriers to student learning and motivation explained as well. Furthermore, possible solutions are provided to give readers examples of ways in which they might reduce or remove barriers to engagement in their online courses.

INTRODUCTION

Online enrollment in the fall of 2016 accounted for 31.7% of undergraduate and post baccalaureate students; this statistic up from 29.8% in 2015 (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2018) and is only expected to increase (Venable, 2019). Thus, instructors must address the unique opportunities and challenges inherent in designing and teaching online courses. Anyone who has taught an online course knows that the nature of such courses requires an approach to curriculum design and instruction that differs from traditional face-to-face courses. While both face-to-face and

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online courses must be goal focused and empathetic to student needs, instructors in online courses must also be proactive in planning for the online learning environment. Although meaningful student engagement is a worthy goal of all courses, in an online environment, instructors must carefully consider how to recruit and sustain engagement in learning through synchronous and asynchronous online learning experiences. This chapter will explore how to meaningfully engage students from diverse backgrounds in online courses through the lens of the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principle of providing students with multiple means of engagement.

UDL is a framework based on the premise that traditional curriculum inherently creates barriers to learning for all students (Gordon, Meyer, & Rose, 2016). A key idea in the UDL framework is that variability in how students emotionally engage with curriculum is a strength to be leveraged in course design and instruction. To leverage student engagement and emotions, instructors and curriculum designers need to consider the variability in how their students learn (i.e., culture, background knowledge, personal learning preferences, etc.) and how online environments can create barriers and opportunities for engagement (Coy, Marino, & Serianni, 2014). It is important for instructors of both undergraduate and graduate online courses to consider the needs of today's student. Many undergraduate students are juggling greater responsibilities than students of yesteryear. The stereotypical college student who lives in a dormitory and whose sole responsibility is to be a student rarely exists (Tobin & Behling, 2018). Survey research conducted by Best Colleges identified changing demographics as a finding among respondents, including a variety of online students being from international contexts, from outside the state from which the institution is located, and from farther distances from campus than in the past (Tobin & Behling, 2018). In addition, Best Colleges identified a wider range of diversity among students enrolled in online courses compared to traditional courses. This includes students with disabilities, students from lower income families, students for whom English is not their first language, and from minority groups traditionally not represented (Venable, 2018). These changing demographics in higher education requires that instructors reconsider curricula and how teachers design meaningful learning opportunities to effectively engage all students. UDL provides a grounded approach for instructors taking on this opportunity.

This chapter will provide an informative and practical description of how course instructors and designers can implement UDL with specific strategies for how to provide multiple means of engagement that make learners 1) interested in learning, 2) focused and persistent even when it gets tough, and 3) self-motivated and reflective in their learning (CAST, 2018). The UDL principle of multiple means of engagement allows instructors and designers to better understand how students' busy lives of balancing work, family, studies, and extracurricular activities can affect learning.

Universal Design for Learning and Engagement in Online Learning

Learners affect, or their general sense of feeling, is important to their motivation to learn. Student affect is an important source of variance, as students' feelings about learning differ because of their neurology, culture, personal experiences, background knowledge, and skills (CAST, 2018). For example, some learners may generally feel excited and internally motivated to learn in online environments because they appraise their own background knowledge of using learning management software as strong or have developed skills useful in online educational settings. In contrast, other students with limited background knowledge or skills in online learning environments may negatively appraise online courses and consequently, their affect toward learning is more hesitant or weary. Likewise, we can anticipate that an individual student's affect varies over time, and his or her interest and motivation is constantly in flux

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