

Chapter 38

Strategies for Engaging Students in the Online Environment

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ABSTRACT

Creating an engaging course environment requires a conscious effort from faculty to utilize course design, teaching methods, and instructional technologies that foster high levels of student interaction. Instructional technologies paired with effective pedagogies are making student engagement in online environments rich and meaningful. The use of instructional technologies is linked to student engagement in the online learning environment. Utilization of instructional technologies should address three major types of interaction: student interaction with course content, the faculty, and their learning peers. The use of instructional technologies to engage students can also increase students' motivation for their learning by increasing student value for course content. This chapter addresses specific strategies for utilization of course design, pedagogies, and instructional technologies to incorporate student interaction and develop and maintain students' motivation in their learning.

INTRODUCTION

A course should be an engaging experience where students participate in meaningful interaction and are motivated to learn. A conscious effort from faculty is required to support student interaction through appropriate pairing of technologies and teaching practice. This is challenging in any course; yet, the online environment may require a more deliberate effort. Fortunately for faculty, this is an exciting age in online education, as today's instructional technologies are able to engage students in rich and meaningful ways, especially when they are utilized to address student interaction and motivation.

Utilization of instructional technologies and pedagogies should support three major types of student interaction, which are required for optimal engagement: Student interaction with course content, with the faculty, and with other students (Moore, 1989). In addition, motivation plays a critical role in how

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engaged students are in their learning, by addressing intrinsic and extrinsic factors contributing to student value for course content (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000).

This chapter provides a historical perspective for student engagement in online learning, and addresses engagement as a result of student interaction and motivation. The chapter presents specific strategies for utilization of course design, pedagogies, and instructional technologies to engage online students. In addition, it provides specific examples of application of engagement strategies to demonstrate potential uses.

BACKGROUND

Research throughout the years demonstrates a link between the use of specific teaching methods or technologies and student engagement in online learning environments. Engagement increases with online collaborative activities (Thurmond & Wambach, 2004) and with the use of Twitter to engage students in student-to-student interaction (Junco, Heiberger, & Loken, 2011). What these studies and the many others like them demonstrate is the endless possible combination of specific application of pedagogy or utilization of technologies to effect student engagement. What, then, has the greatest effect on student engagement?

The faculty are online education's greatest asset in promoting and fostering student engagement. Faculty connect effective and empowering pedagogies to their subject matter to engage students in their understanding of course material (Shulman, 1987). Faculty act as artists and craftsmen, placed at the center of the design, delivery, assessment, and refinement of curricula (Flynn, James, Mathien, Mitchell, & Whalen, 2017). Faculty are the principal players in education and are the single most important factor in student engagement through facilitation of student learning.

If faculty are responsible for designing a learning experience that engages students, it is important to recognize what an engaged online student looks like. Classic research tells faculty to look at actions of participation such as talking and thinking about course material, and what students do with and feel about course material (Vygotsky, 1978; Wenger, 1998). How is this possible in online environments? Online student engagement is said in a recent study to manifest in the caliber of student work and the extent students maintain interpersonal relationships with faculty and other students (Kahn, Everington, Kelm, Reid, & Watkins, 2017). Other benchmarks come from the National Survey of Student Engagement, which was originally developed in 1998 to study engagement across campuses and traditional classrooms (Our Origins and Potential, 2019), and has since been used by online learning researchers to investigate engagement in online courses. This survey defines five benchmarks of engagement: Level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student-to-faculty interaction, enriching educational experience, and supportive campus environment. These works help provide ways to evaluate faculty pedagogical, course design, and technology decisions and their impact on online student engagement.

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN ONLINE ENVIRONMENTS

Historical Perspective on Online Student Engagement

Retention has been a central theme for historical views on online student engagement. In 2005, dropout rates for students in online courses were as high as 80% for some colleges (Beck & Greive, 2005). Five

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