

Chapter 65

Encouraging and Increasing Student Engagement and Participation in an Online Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Advances in technology have increased opportunities for students to participate in online courses. While some instructors are beginning their careers teaching only online courses, others are discovering a need to teach sections of courses online after they have enjoyed a long career teaching in a traditional classroom. In either situation, it is important for instructors to recognize that students in online learning environments require the use of different strategies for encouraging engagement and participation in class. In this chapter, the author describes the challenges that students and instructors face specifically in the online learning environment as well as strategies for success, including how to maximize the impact of students' experiences and prior knowledge, using multiple platforms to deliver information, discouraging procrastination, setting clear expectations, encouraging individuality, capitalizing on diversity, and providing and utilizing helpful resources.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter is intended to highlight some of the differences between learning that occurs in traditional face-to-face classrooms and online learning environments. Students in the online environment communicate with their peers and instructors differently than students in the traditional classroom. The main objectives for this chapter include providing insights to help instructors engage online students, increase their participation levels, and improve the overall experience of the online course for both instructors and students.

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BACKGROUND

As technology continues to change the way we communicate, interact, innovate, and learn in most areas of life, distance education has become increasingly popular in the past decade. According to the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2011), about 4.3 million undergraduate students (20 percent of all undergraduates) took at least one distance education course in the 2007–2008 school year. About 800,000 students (4 percent of all undergraduates) took their entire degree program through distance education. The National Center for Education Statistics also reported that the percentage of undergraduates who took any distance education courses rose from 16 percent in 2003–04 to 20 percent in 2007–08. In addition to these undergraduate students, about 800,000, or 22 percent, of all post-baccalaureate students took distance education courses in 2007–08.

Measuring student participation in an online course can be quite similar to measuring participation in a traditional classroom setting. Instructors know which students contribute most often to discussions, turn in assignments on time, show up in class or log in to the course, and effectively display their knowledge of the course content. Student engagement may be more difficult to quantify. While some view participation and engagement as essentially the same concepts, Ingram (2005) proposed that true student engagement consists of, “deep attention to the learning tasks and activities at hand, activation of effective cognitive processes that improve both performance in the tasks and learning, and usually a social context, especially in collaborative learning activities” (p. 57). In order to improve the quality of instruction and levels of student engagement and participation, we must first understand what challenges students and instructors face when engaged in an online course.

As the body of research about online learning grows, many universities have trained their admissions departments and academic advisors to tell students that online learning is not for everyone. Bell (2007) asserts that many undergraduate students who have performed well in a traditional face-to-face class environment may not be ready to successfully complete a course in the online environment, because online courses “require more learner control and self-direction than traditional classroom-based instruction” (p. 523). Conrad and Donaldson (2004) suggest that successful online students must be comfortable with technology, communicating predominantly by text only, and maintaining a high level of self-direction. If a student is uncomfortable in even one of these areas, he or she could find the online classroom environment to be more frustrating than convenient.

Rao (2010) completed a study in which challenges and success factors for students in an online degree program were examined. The primary challenge students reported was finding time to do the coursework. Issues with technology (slow internet connections, lack of knowledge about basic computing skills, learning the course management system) took second place on the list.

So, why do online students find time management to be their main challenge? Radford (2011) examined whether 2007–08 undergraduates’ reported participation in a distance education course or degree program differed by a number of factors including age, dependents, marital status, and work responsibilities. This researcher found that older undergraduates enrolled in distance education classes and degree programs at higher rates than younger students. Fifteen percent of undergraduates under the age of 24 participated in a distance education course, compared with 26 percent of those ages 24–29, and 30 percent of those 30 and older. The same study also found that 40 percent of all undergraduates in a distance education program were married and 55 percent of all undergraduates in a distance education degree program had at least one dependent. Lastly, Radford found that 45 percent of all undergraduates enrolled in a distance education class were employed full time, and 62 percent of all undergraduates enrolled in a distance

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