Chapter 8
Supporting Students Through Online Learning

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ABSTRACT

With the onset of a pandemic, there were opportunities and challenges for supporting learners. Schools and universities were physically closed while interaction shifted to a distance learning modality. In some instances, courses became asynchronous, while other courses met synchronously using video conferencing. Educators were adaptable when the pandemic occurred, quickly setting up home offices to meet their learners' needs. This occurrence showed that it was in educators' best interest to understand distance best practices. Distance learning has been utilized at institutions in the United States for the past two decades. However, it has not been widely adopted as mainstream because of the inequities that arise for learners. This chapter will address solutions for systematically addressing inequity from the educator's perspective, maintaining academic rigor, building a community of learners, creating a workflow for educators to interact with learners, and how to amplify learner engagement in the online learning environment.

INTRODUCTION

Within higher education settings, students come from a diverse range of backgrounds both in regard to their education, culture, and socioeconomic status. As learning environments transitioned from face-to-face, on-campus to digitally online during COVID-19, it was imperative to remember where our students come from, their experience with digital learning, and the social-emotional support they may need during a global pandemic. While distance teaching and learning has been taking place for decades, this sudden shift to online learning brought on in Spring 2020 was unlike any other learning shift that has occurred in our lifetimes. Typically, a faculty and learner make a choice to teach or learn via distance learning. In our pandemic situation, schools abruptly needed to close their physical doors and turn to virtual options. This chapter will address solutions for systematically addressing inequity from the educator's perspective, maintaining academic rigor, building a community of learners, creating a workflow for educators to interact with learners, and how to amplify learner engagement in the online learning environment.

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Background

Distance learning began as correspondence courses where students would receive content knowledge through mailed packets of information from an instructor (Taylor, 2001). Assignments were completed, exams taken, essays written, and mailed back to the instructor through the postal service. Feedback was provided in written form and typically included alongside the next unit's content learning. According to Garrison (1995), this type of distance learning occurred as early at the 1970s. Instant access to grades, content learning, or instructor communication was not always assumed. As technological advancements were made, correspondence courses were updated to include faster delivery and response times to students. Electronic communication in the form of e-mail and interactive television courses came about as described by Taylor (2001) in the third and fourth generations of distance education. Some university programs utilized interactive television to teach synchronous graduate level courses to students. In a synchronous course, the instructor and students are together live in time, but not necessarily in location. Previous correspondence courses, before the interactive television classes, were asynchronous; This meant that the student and instructor were in the course at different times or not in-sync. In the interactive television or other means of synchronous courses held in the 1990s, an instructor would be in a classroom on campus teaching while students would be in a remote classroom or office elsewhere. In these early days to online education, if a student had a response to a discussion question posed by the teacher or another student, the student would call a classroom phone number, wait for the teacher to 'pick up' and their voices would be broadcast via the teacher's interactive television classroom for all students to hear the response. This example is one of many ways synchronous, distance learning began occurring in the 1990s. Soon, bandwidth expanded, software allowed for more flexibility, and home computer costs decreased (Taylor, 2001). These occurrences allowed for the synchronous, or live, delivery of classes to happen over the internet instead of in expensive, interactive television classrooms. Software options that supported classroom-like learning in a synchronous included at a minimum, an area for sharing a presentation, a participant list, a live video stream of the instructor (and in some cases the students), and audio capabilities.

University programs adopted synchronous online instruction primarily at the graduate level between 1990 and 2010. In the mid-2000s, for-profit institutions began to offer asynchronous opportunities for students to earn degrees at both undergraduate and graduate levels. These institutions leaned on the correspondence model of teaching but utilized a digital learning management system to deliver the content. This had varying success due to course delivery, instructor knowledge and experience, and students' learning habits. Asynchronous, synchronous, and a blend of the two types of courses were beginning to be offered on campuses across the nation by 2010 at public, private, not-for profit, and for-profit institutions. At this time, there was also interest peaking from K-12 charter and private schools for online opportunities for students for a variety of reasons.

By 2012, online learning was a buzz word in university program planning, but still only discussed in affluent or chartered areas across the K-12 school sector. The benefits were beginning to outweigh the drawbacks to online teaching and learning. Courses could be delivered through technology, students would not need to live in the area to enroll at the institution, unique programs could be marketed and shared across the nation or world without additional expenses, such as moving, for students (Aoki, 2012). Likewise, with technological course delivery, students would have ample opportunity to work with the content and connect with faculty and other students. However, for the most part, it was only innovative