

Chapter 41

The Promise of Protocols in the Virtual Classroom: Using Microstructures to Enhance Adult Learning

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ABSTRACT

Learner engagement in online learning environments tends to be erratic and dependent upon the learners themselves, not necessarily fostered by the macrostructures that house the virtual classroom. Protocols—which the authors term microstructures—can bring engagement strategies traditionally seen in face-to-face classrooms to the virtual world of online adult learning. This chapter explores how the use of microstructures supports learner-centered engagement, illustrated through a case study of a successful virtual professional learning network. This chapter also introduces the concept of accountability for participation, its role in creating engaged learners, and how microstructures can foster the psychological safety required for high levels of engagement and performance in the virtual classroom.

INTRODUCTION

By its very nature, adult learning in the virtual classroom embodies concepts of learner centeredness through flexibility in when, where, and how learning takes place, often extending to content flexibility. At the same time, virtual classrooms do not necessarily promote the learner interaction required for deep engagement, content retention, and ultimate satisfaction with the learning experience (Kahn, Everington, Kelm, Reid, & Watkins, 2017; Takkunen-Lucarelli, 2016). Despite a desire for more peer and faculty collaboration (West & Jones, 2007) online learning environments allow the adult learner to hide behind virtual classroom walls. In addition, learners may lack the skills for productive collaboration or the type of thinking inherent in academically challenging dialogue, both characteristics of highly engaged students (Kuh, 2001, 2009; National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, 2013).

Systems scientists claim that structures drive behavior (Meadows, 2008), and certainly online learning embodies that concept. In online education, a macrostructure might be the institution's chosen technology platform, often known as a learning management system (LMS). LMS platforms enhance or limit learning opportunities through their design, e.g., content folders, discussion boards, virtual meeting rooms, etc. To date, many of the typical online learning structures in use are macro in nature: They define where collaboration takes place, where feedback may happen, and how contributions may be posted. These critical macrostructures, however important to online learning, fail to affect the quality and content of student participation that impacts the ultimate value of student centeredness, which online environments intend to promote (Kosloski & Carver, 2016; Palloff & Pratt, 2013). Micro-level structures, more in line with protocols typically used in face-to-face environments, have similar power in the virtual classroom. Used to teach critical competencies such as productive collaboration, data-based feedback, and reflective learning, microstructures enhance student engagement, and in turn create a more learner-centered and satisfying experience (Kosloski & Carver, 2016; Miller, 2016; Takkunen-Lucarelli, 2016). This chapter presents adaptations of popular face-to-face protocols for online adult learning, and illustrates how learner collaboration and deep engagement can occur in the synchronous or asynchronous virtual classroom through the use of microstructures.

BACKGROUND

What Is Learner Engagement?

Every instructor seeks learner engagement. Engagement convinces instructors that the content and the way in which it is taught have hit home and are a good match for that particular learner. While numerous definitions for engagement have been constructed, most include the notion of effort (Hu & Kuh, 2001; Krause & Coates, 2008) and participation (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2007) in pursuit of academic outcomes (Kuh, 2001, 2009). The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) adds measures of academic challenge to its definition of engagement: higher order learning, reflective and integrative learning, and quantitative reasoning. NSSE also measures two specific aspects of how students learn with peers: collaborative learning and discussion with diverse others (NSSE, 2013, p. 8). These descriptors match the authors' experiences in assessing the degree to which learners of all ages are truly engaged in rigorous and relevant content.

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