

Chapter 49

Engaging Online K–12 Students: Using Instant Messaging to Foster Teacher–Student Relationships

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ABSTRACT

Online learning for K-12 is the fastest growing segment of education. Advantages include access to courses for college and career readiness; world languages; science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM), including electives that might otherwise be unavailable to students. However, K-12 students increasingly miss valuable interactions present in face-to-face classes and, as such, engaging students in online courses can be difficult. For this reason, teachers in an online setting must be flexible and creative and find approaches to make the online classroom feel more like a face-to-face classroom. This would include finding ways to decrease the cognitive and emotional distance often associated with not seeing a teacher or fellow students. It also presents the case of school leadership need for exercising caution while implementing school policy to encourage appropriate social media behaviors.

INTRODUCTION

Thanks to the ubiquity of the Internet, a new platform has emerged for teaching and learning. While distance education has been around since the days of the Pony Express (Moore & Kearsley, 2011), this method of learning is gaining increasing importance at the K–12 level, growing at greater rates than for colleges and universities (Bryans-Bongey, 2015). Many educationally-based institutions, K–12 and

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higher education alike, find themselves developing online learning opportunities to keep up with the demand of their constituency.

Online classrooms are very different from traditional classrooms. The traditional classroom presents teachers with a physical space in which to meet students. The teacher and students experience the content and activities together. For students, they see a teacher present and are able to address questions and content immediately when questions arise. Discussions take place in the moment. Meaning-making and interactions take place in the same context for all participants.

Students and teachers in online classrooms are often separated by geography. Students have 24/7 access to course materials and may move through the materials in personalized and unique ways. The experience of online students is different from traditional classroom experiences because there is latitude to search for additional resources at the discretion of the student for further understanding. The physical separation of teacher and student often creates a feeling of separation for students who are not accustomed to directing their own learning (Barbour, McLaren, & Zhang, 2012; Borup, 2016; Borup, Graham, & Drysdale, 2014; Rice, 2012). For high school students, this distance may increase the perception that the student is learning the material on their own without the help of a teacher or classmates. In online classroom discussions, students can reflect before responding allowing for a richness of discussion that the traditional classroom does not have. If online teachers make the effort to use synchronous online tools, such as instant messaging or other social media, there is the perception of an increased “teacher presence” in the course contributing to more student engagement (Huun & Kummerow, 2018). Using tools that students are already using and familiar with can increase student engagement in online courses. Students are actively engaging in the use of synchronous tools for communication on their own and have incorporated such use into academic endeavors (Chromey, Duchsherer, Pruett, & Vareberg, 2016). For this reason, teachers must be willing to incorporate those same tools into their teaching if they are going to actively engage with online students.

Inherently, classrooms are social spaces. Anytime more than one person is in a space, it becomes a social space, and the sheer notion of this should enable a sense of learning dynamism. In order to facilitate learning, students must be engaged in both the cognitive and emotional context of learning. Online courses can often make engaging in the social realm difficult. According to the National Survey of Student Engagement (<http://nsse.indiana.edu>), instructors using synchronous communication tools were able to successfully create positive student engagement. The online format can enhance student learning, but in some cases it can obstruct learning if teachers do not actively create a way to support it. By creating a way to use informal communication methods, such as through instant messaging, instructors can improve student satisfaction and engagement (Beins, 2016).

We use the term *instant messaging*. For the purposes of this chapter, instant messaging refers to any social media tool that allows for instant, synchronous communication between two people. This chapter explores the use of instant messaging as a method of engagement for students enrolled in a fully online course. In addition, it discusses potential barriers to use, such as the need for caution and development of administrative policies for use of such tools.

BACKGROUND

Online learning at the K–12 level is the fastest growing sector of education. Nearly every state has its own online based, state-run virtual school (Bryans-Bongey, 2015), with many states mandating online

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