Chapter 85

The Importance of Social Presence and Strategies for Incorporating It Into an Online Course

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ABSTRACT

As with any mode of course delivery, there are both positives and negatives to online learning. There are the commonly cited positive features of online learning like the removal of geographic restrictions and scheduling barriers. Limitations may include unfamiliarity for those new to online learning and misunderstandings resulting from the transition from primarily face-to-face interactions to only online interactions. One of the nice things about online learning environments is that many of the possible drawbacks can be countered turning them into strength. Building a strong social presence in an online course can help with this. This chapter discusses three categories of strategies for building a social presence; ice breakers, netiquette activities, and discussion activities.

INTRODUCTION

Online learning in postsecondary education has grown in frequency and has grown consistently over the last decade (Lederman, 2018). This increase is seen mutually exclusive for both online programs and for students who have taken at least one online course. Almost one-third of college students take an online course as part of their program of study (Protopsaltis & Baum, 2019). Half of those students are enrolled in completely online programs (2019). At the same time, research is mixed about whether achievement or learning tends to be stronger in online or face-to-face learning environments (Cavanaugh & Jacquemin, 2015). A large body of research has found that there no significant difference in learning in online and face-to-face learning environments resulting in the "no significant difference phenomenon

(Nguyen, 2015). Students may take online courses because they are what is offered or because of their perceptions of its benefits. They are not taking the courses because they believe they will learn more, as a matter of fact, some students perceive that online courses are easier. Jaggers (2014), in a study with community college students found "most students preferred to take only 'easy' academic subjects online; they preferred to take 'difficult' or 'important' subjects face-to-face."

As with any mode of course delivery both as asynchronous and synchronous, generally there are both positives and negatives to online learning. The most commonly cited positive features of online learning in the literature include the removal of geographic restrictions and scheduling barriers (in asynchronous courses). Limitations may include unfamiliarity for those new to online learning and misunderstandings resulting from the transition from primarily face-to-face interactions to only online interactions, and experiencing isolation. One positive quality of online learning environments is that many of the possible drawbacks can be countered turning them into strengths (Berry, 2018). The previously mentioned absence of face-to-face interaction in online learning environments is an example of this. Face-to-face interaction affords the opportunity to observe facial gestures and body language. Using facial gestures and body language to gain context is not an option in online asynchronous environments. This potential gap in a communication channel can result in misunderstandings that are much easier to avoid or resolve in face-to-face learning environments. In the latter setting; the factors like facial gestures, body language, and the ability to ask quick low-pressure questions diminish the likelihood of many misunderstandings (Hwang & Song, 2018). This does not mean that misunderstandings do not occur in face-to-face classes. It only means that many of the potential misunderstandings can be stemmed before they become an issue. A student can ask a quick informal clarification question or inadvertently show they are not understanding with a confused look letting the instructor know they need to clarify. Asking a question in an online environment is a more formal process and there are no facial gestures or body language to guide understanding except for strategies such as more formal video communications. To ask a question of an online instructor may require a dedicated email, message, or phone call. Although this may not be a big deal, it may be seen as such since it is a more formal process than the quick question option with face-to-face interactions. In a face-to-face class, this may be reserved for bigger issues than those that can be handled with a quick hand raise and question (Molnar, Kearney, & Molnar, 2017). Instructors and course designers can turn this possible issue into a strength with proper planning and forethought. For the purpose of this chapter, only asynchronous online learning environments will be discussed. However, it should be noted that adding synchronous tools to an otherwise asynchronous course is a viable option. Possible tools include chat rooms and video tools like Zoom and Skype. For this chapter, synchronous learning is being defined as a learning environment where learners do not need to be present at the same time. Synchronous learning is being defined as a learning environment in which learners must be present at the same time for learning to occur.

BACKGROUND

The research is mixed on the topic of learning in online versus face-to-face course formats. The results have ranged from improved learning in one area over the other on both sides to no statistically significant difference. One consistent finding is that students who struggle academically or do not see themselves as strong students can have an even harder time in online formats (Cavanaugh & Jacquemin, 2015). One theory for this is that students who do not have academic self-efficacy feel even more isolated in online

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