Chapter 12
Strategies for Online Course Development to Promote Student Success

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ABSTRACT

In spite of online teaching having existed for almost two decades, many courses still mirror the traditional objectivist classroom. However, the literature clearly validates that a different approach must be taken for online course design that includes a pedagogical shift to constructivist methods that encourage transference of learning such as mastery learning, problem-based and project-based learning, authentic learning and assessment, and collaboration. This chapter presents elements of constructivist course design for increased online student engagement that can support online student success.

INTRODUCTION

As predicted, online education enrollment in higher education has continued to increase dramatically each year (Allen & Seaman, 2011, 2012). However, even though online education has been around since the 1990s, online student retention and effective online teaching and learning continue to be a topic explored in recent literature. Many have recommended strategies for online course design for effective learning and student success (Boettcher & Conrad, 2009; Dabbagh, 2007; Hart, 2012; Rossner-Merrill, Parker, Mamchur, & Chu, 1998; Shelton & Saltsman, 2008; Stavredes & Herder, 2014). However, according to Allen and Seaman (2011), there are numerous institutions that still believe student retention in traditional courses is higher than student retention in the online courses. In spite of what we now know about best practices for online education, why is student retention and student success still an issue?

Online student readiness and preparation will always play a role in successful online learning; however, course design and instructor interaction can also play a significant role. In fact, the literature clearly validates a constructivist approach to support online student success. Moreover, Messina (2011) determined that course design, collaboration, and student support were all able to affect online student success. Because course design can be foundational to online student success, this chapter presents elements of constructivist course design for increased online student engagement that can support online student success.

BACKGROUND

Almost two decades later, Internet-based course delivery has continued to grow in popularity and in the quality of online course materials. Online teaching and learning is here to stay, much to the disappointment of some faculty who have yet to recognize the ability of online student engagement or benefits of teaching online. In the beginning, many online courses were nothing more than a few text documents and reading assignments. However, as the technology improved, so did course quality and the ability to retain online students. But it is important to remember that the technology should never be the deciding factor; appropriate pedagogy that centers more on the student and less on the instructor (Knowlton, 2000; Palloff & Pratt, 1999) should always be the focus of the course design (Puzziferro & Shelton, 2008) (see Table 1).

For online learning to be as effective as research has shown it can be, the courses must be carefully designed, meet the pedagogical needs of students, and offer quality resources for course content (Mayadas, Bourne, & Bacsich, 2009; Murray, Pérez, Geist, & Hedrick, 2012). Early on, educators developed online courses that mirrored traditional classroom methodology (Dabbagh, 2001; Hannum, 2001; Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006); consequently, the common issues related to teaching have not changed in the online classroom or the traditional classroom—students must be actively engaged for increased retention (Tinto, 2009). In fact, Tinto (2009) contended the research shows that "active involvement of students in learning activities in and around the classroom, especially with other students, is critical to student retention and graduation" (p. A33). To achieve that same active involvement of students in the online classroom, a different approach must be taken for course design that includes a pedagogical shift to constructivist methods that encourage transference of learning such as mastery learning, problem-based and project-based learning, authentic learning and assessment, and collaboration.

Constructivism and Connectivism: Foundational constructivist methods began with research by Piaget (1972) in the early 1900s. He proposed that new experiences were built upon prevailing knowledge using a process of accommodation and assimilation. Piaget's (1972) theory of cognitive constructivism paved the way for the development of social constructivist theory, often associated with Vygotsky (1978) as a derivative of cognitive

Table 1. Paradigm shift from teacher to learner-centered instruction

Teacher-Centered Instruction	Learner-Centered Instruction
• Knowledge Transmitted. • Passive. • Context Independent. • Assessment Separated. • Competitive.	• Knowledge Constructed. • Active. • Context Dependent. • Assessment Integrated. • Cooperative.

Note: From Hirumi, A. (2005). Systematic instructional design. In K. E. Dooley, J. R. Linder, L. M. Dooley, & A. Hirumi, (Eds.), *Advanced methods in distance education* (pp. 99-117). Hershey, PA: Idea Group Publishing. Reprinted with permission.

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