Chapter 71
Learners' Perception of Engagement in Online Learning

Misha Chakraborty
Texas A&M University, USA

ABSTRACT

The widespread popularity of online classes is evident in both professional and academic settings. Learners' engagement and satisfaction with the online courses, especially from the learners' perspective, are considered core to the promotion of quality learning. The voices of the present day's "virtual generation" need to be heard. The opportunities they see and the challenges they face can be utilized in creating engaging online learning environments. This chapter discusses online class engagement strategies that work. Multiple sources including semi-structured interviews with eight participants at a Research 1 University in Southwest United States, online course documents, email exchanges, and discussion transcripts were used to collect and analyze data. The findings indicate online class engagement factors and issues that need to be considered in effective design and successful delivery of online courses. The findings can be used to help faculties and learners achieve optimum benefits from online classes.

INTRODUCTION

The profit and nonprofit work sectors necessitate incorporating new technologies to sustain competitive advantages. The workforce need to be equipped with the knowledge and skills required to deal with recent technological sophistication in an environment where changes became the norm (Marsh, Taylor & Holoviak, 2011). Universities, colleges and schools need to adopt programs and curriculum that help students prepare for the complex work environment. The factors that need to be considered are: "the need for speed, the need to respond to vast technological changes, the trend toward globalization and increased market pressures" (Marsh, Taylor & Holoviak. 2011, p. 31). Lawrence (2013) added "critical thinking, problem-solving, collaborating with peers, and using technology" to the list (p. 53). Educational institutions need to be responsive of these factors when designing and delivering their courses.

Researchers (e.g., Harris, 2008; Lamb, Walstab, Tesse, Vickers, & Rumberger, 2004; Willms, 2003) indicated disengagement of learners as one of the primary factors in achieving learner retention and

learner satisfaction in virtual class environment. Harris asserted that "Desires to increase engagement have led to interest in measuring and collating data about student engagement" (p. 58). Indiana University's effort in preparing and selling a standardized test to measure and quantify online learners' engagement highlights the interests and ardency of engaging learners online (Viadero, 2004).

Empirical evidence suggests that online class enrollment is increasing at a faster rate than higher education enrollment. The United States Department of Education (2010) revealed that in K12 public school sector, students enrolled in technology based distance learning increased by 65% between the years 2002-03 to 2004-05. In 2004 2.3 million University students took at least one online class. The number increased to 3.2 million in 2005 fall semester (Dixson, 2010). A similar trend is reflected at the state level too. Former Minnesota Governor, Chair of Minnesota State Colleges and Universities Board of Trustees plan that 25% of the State's University System courses will be offered online by 2015 (Thiede, 2012). Hence, the inclination towards offering online classes is evident at the workplace, in the schools, in the colleges and universities, and in governmental action plans.

We use the term, "online," synonymously with eLearning, virtual learning, computer mediated learning and web based learning in this chapter. Online learning here is defined as a mode of learning in which learners are not necessarily in the same geographic location, and learning content is delivered using the Internet.

Engaging learners is important in any learning environment. Achieving it in a setting where learners and instructors are physically away from each other is challenging. Engagement is defined here as a multidimensional construct that includes behavioral, emotional, and cognitive outcomes of learners (Fredricks & McColskey, 2012). Behavioral constructs deal with factors like time spent in the class, cognitive construct deal with learning outcomes and last but not the least, emotional construct is related to learners' perceived sense of satisfaction in the online class.

The popularity of online classes is evident in both professional and academic settings. Student engagement and satisfaction are being the primary issues in online classes. The educational and professional communities of today's world understand the significance and value of online learning environment. "Online learning has been promoted as being more cost effective and convenient than traditional educational environments as well as providing opportunities for more learners to continue their educations" (Han, 2012, p. 69). Two main reasons are identified to explain the popularity of online class environment: Flexibility and accessibility. They can review the course content as many times as they want. The users of online classes can access the class anytime and from any part of the world. In this era of globalization, where geographic location is no bar to attend quality classes in educational and professional sectors, these attributes provide huge advantages.

To discuss the readiness of the learner to provide online classes, Hawkins and Rudy (2008) confirmed that US students seeking for undergraduate degree usually own computers. Most college classrooms are equipped with wireless internet network. Apart from the classrooms, university halls, coffee shops etc. have internet connections that the students can access. Numerous universities use learning management systems like Blackboard, Webct, and Moodle. The authors also pointed out that 79 to 95% college students use my space and facebook. Debevec, Shih and Kashyap (2006) pointed out World Wide Web's effort towards creating effective online classes. The videos, lecture slides, evaluation tools available in the site in some cases are as effective as face to face classes. It has created knowledge repository for the learners.

The online environment is different from the traditional classroom setting. The virtual class environment is accessible to the students at any place and at any time. This convenient accessibility acts as an advantage when the students are away from the campus. "Online interactive technologies have the

Related Content

Ideation to Execution: Flipping an Undergraduate Pre-Calculus Course to Create Significant Learning Experiences
Denise Natasha Brewley, Priya Shilpa Boindalaand Jennifer L. Sinclair (2015). *Implementation and Critical Assessment of the Flipped Classroom Experience (pp. 25-40).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/ideation-to-execution/123920

The Use of Technology in Urban Populations
Terry T. Kidd (2008). *Encyclopedia of Information Technology Curriculum Integration (pp. 925-935).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/use-technology-urban-populations/16816

An Exploratory Study of Student Self-Assessment in an Online Learning Context
Chien-hsing Wang (2011). *International Journal of Online Pedagogy and Course Design (pp. 50-61).*
www.irma-international.org/article/exploratory-study-student-self-assessment/58662

Reflecting on Portfolio Development: How Does the Portfolio Facilitate a Preservice Teacher's Growth?
Hea-Jin Leeand Leah Herner-Patnode (2011). *International Journal of Online Pedagogy and Course Design (pp. 64-78).*
www.irma-international.org/article/reflecting-portfolio-development/51380

Integrating Educational Board Game in Chinese Learning Environment to Enhance Students' Learning Performance and Flow Experience
Ju May Wen, ChunHung Linand Eric Zhi Feng Liu (2019). *International Journal of Online Pedagogy and Course Design (pp. 31-43).*
www.irma-international.org/article/integrating-educational-board-game-in-chinese-learning-environment-to-enhance-students-learning-performance-and-flow-experience/236167