Chapter 14
Creating Inclusive Online Learning Environments That Build Community and Enhance Learning

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ABSTRACT

The current status of today's society is driven by and involves technology. Many people cannot function without their cell-phones, social media, gadgets, tablets, and other forms of technology for which people interact. Many of these technologies depend upon and are utilized within an online context. However, as it pertains to online learning environments, many faculty struggle with developing and implementing opportunities that builds a sense of community for their learners. This chapter: 1) Discusses key factors that impact student engagement, 2) Addresses factors that facilitate continued engagement for diverse online learners, 3) Provides evidence-based practices for creating and sustaining online learner engagement, and 4) Offers real world suggestions from the online teaching experience of chapter's authors.

It is virtually impossible to engage learners in purposeful and meaningful inquiry without the Internet and communication technologies to precipitate and sustain discourse that is central to higher order learning…

– Dr. Randy Garrison & Norman Vaughan

OVERVIEW

The current status of today's society is driven by and involves technology. The average person is not willing to or cannot function without his or her cell phone which is a popular medium for social media and acts as the gateway for other gadgets such as smart watches, tablets, and other forms of technology people utilize to interact with one another. Many of these technologies depend upon and are utilized within an online context. However, as it pertains to online learning environments, many faculty struggle with developing and implementing opportunities that build a sense of community for their learners. One of the leading issues in online learning environments involves a lack of community. Oftentimes learners do not feel connected to their peers and in many cases their instructors. Being that these same learners' primary social interactions and relationships mostly occur in similar mediums outside of the learning context, this seems odd and serves as the impetus for further discussion.

One of the major critiques or concerns with online learning environments is its supposed limitations in providing a comparable learning experience to rival what learners receive in face-to-face learning environments. It has been suggested that online learning environments lack a sense of community and that learning experiences are not as significant as they are in more traditional learning settings. Garrison & Vaughan (2008) posit that it is essentially impossible to engage learners in significant research without utilizing online communication technologies to increase rapid exchange and involve momentous discussions that are needed to facilitate higher order learning. Moreover, well-designed learning environments are likely more meaningful learning experiences than sitting passively in a lecture hall. Therefore, online learning environments and its design should be given adequate consideration to better serve the growing online learner population.

Research in neuroscience and the physiology of learning demonstrates the strong link between emotion and cognition; little real learning occurs in the absence of the strong, positive emotions engendered by deep engagement, motivation, interest, and caring (Zull, 2011). This chapter

1. Discusses key factors that impact learner engagement
2. Addresses factors that facilitate continued engagement for diverse online learners
3. Provides evidence-based practices for creating and sustaining online learner engagement
4. Offers real world suggestions from online teaching experiences

The notion of environmental dynamics speaks to the circumstances or conditions that surround the social, intellectual, or moral forces that produce activity and change in a given place (Thomas, Hilton & Ingram, 2015). The circumstances and conditions of online learning environments are important to consider since there is an increased demand for online programs. According to the Babson Survey Research Group, online learner enrollments continue to be the fastest growing sector in higher education. Hence, the analysis of these learning environments is extremely important to ensure that they are inclusive for the ever increasing learning population. Moreover, it is extremely important to consider that learners have varied needs, and these learning environments should be able to accommodate and serve the broadest learner spectrum (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1999). Furthermore, building community is important because several studies suggest that when learners experience learning environments where they feel a sense of belonging; they internalize higher adjustment and satisfaction values with those institutions and are more likely to persist to graduation (Schwitzer, Griffin, Ancis, &

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