Chapter 12
Engaging With Online Graduate Students

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ABSTRACT

The academic landscape has been in a state of flux since the inception of online degrees. In addition to fully online colleges and universities, traditional accredited institutions are adding fully online programs. However, one area that could be supported with further research is the pedagogy of online teaching for graduate students. Teaching online has a whole host of challenges, and so does teaching graduate students; to best serve students, educators must maintain the connectedness and community required by distance learning while simultaneously meeting the intellectual rigor necessary for a graduate course. This chapter will identify three potential ways to foster better communication through philosophically grounded pedagogies between graduate students and instructors including student-centered methods of communication, marketplace application, and group collaborations.

INTRODUCTION

The academic landscape has been in a state of flux since the inception of online degrees. In addition to fully online colleges and universities, traditional accredited institutions are adding fully online programs. A study conducted by Babson Survey Research Group found "more than one in four students (28 percent) now take at least one distance education course (a total of 5,828,826 students, a year-to-year increase of 217,275)" ("Babson Study," 2016). The study goes on to reveal that only 29.1% percent of academic leaders say their faculty accepts the "value and legitimacy of online education" ("Babson Study," 2016). Despite this finding, online learning continues to grow, and many studies go on to shows its legitimacy. In the short amount of time online learning has blossomed, so has the scholarly literature in the field. There are ample perspectives including the efforts of "quality teaching" in online environments (Marks, 2016), the need for social community in online space (Akcaoglu & Lee, 2016), blending formal and informal learning (Czerkawski, 2016), and many others. There are articles and books about the limitations of communication and the ways in which particular disciplines overcome some of the associated

challenges with distance learning. There has even been recent research focusing on graduate students taking online courses. However, one area that could be supported with further research is the pedagogy of online teaching for graduate students. Teaching online has a host of challenges, and so does teaching graduate students; to best serve students, educators must maintain the connectedness and community required by distance learning while simultaneously meeting the intellectual rigor necessary for a graduate course. Additionally, considering that so few academic leaders and faculty believe in the value and legitimacy of online learning, there is an even more urgent reason to better equip instructors with good pedagogical practices to best enhance online education. This chapter will identify three potential ways to foster better communication through philosophically grounded pedagogies between graduate students and instructors including student-centered methods of communication, marketplace application, and group collaborations.

BACKGROUND AND METHODS OF COMMUNICATION

A clear channel of communication between students and instructors is one of the most important factors in a successful online course. Distance learning requires a different set of standards in communication because it lacks the immediacy and the face-to-face interaction.

Nuances of communication such as tone of voice, pitch, body mannerisms, hand gestures, and emphasis on particular words are all lost due to mediated communication. Depending on the style of online class, synchronous or asynchronous, there could be some restrictions on the type of communication used. When choosing a medium of communication, it is important to remember the message may not carry the same meaning.

Media richness theory attempts to explain this phenomenon. Daft and Lengel define media richness theory as "the ability of information to change understanding within a time interval" (1987). Their seminal study helps to rate various forms of communication. Richer forms of communication, such as face-to-face interaction and video conferencing, are seen as effective forms of communication. Then, the telephone would be rated near the middle of the graph. Finally, communications such as letters, emails, bulk mail, and posters would be seen as leaner mediums lacking effectiveness in communication. The general principle is that the more one is distanced from the message's receiver, the leaner the medium will be.

The 20-year-old study obviously would need to account for additional forms of communication such as text messages and social media interactions, but the concept still holds true. If an instructor is separated from the intended receiver and only sends out emails to the class, students will likely not feel truly connected to the instructor or the class itself.

Media richness theory has a direct application to online instructors because each time an instructor chooses a medium to communicate with a particular student, the instructor has control over the richness of that message. However, just because one method of communication is a richer medium does not mean it is always feasible.

In a traditional college classroom setting, students meet directly with an instructor one to three times per week. However, it should be noted that just because a student attends a class does not mean that student will have meaningful interaction with a particular instructor. One of the contributing factors is the student to faculty ratio. In a U.S. News annual survey, "among the 222 ranked National Liberal Arts Colleges that provided student-faculty ratios … the average was just 11 students per faculty member" (Friedman, 2016). Conversely, the numbers reported on Open Education Database show that 53 universi-

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