

Chapter 15

Creating a Culture of Engagement

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ABSTRACT

Many online faculty members pattern their teaching after traditional models of face-to-face instruction. However, these models fail to support meaningful content delivery and interaction in today's online classroom. This chapter discusses faculty development efforts that serve to cultivate effective online teaching practices. Presenting the communication processes and technical skills necessary to create social presence in online and hybrid courses, the chapter equips both novice and experienced instructors with the tools required to redesign traditional courses for online delivery, to deliver quality instruction, and to promote strong interaction. Teaching strategies and adult learning theory are explored. The appropriate use of technology to achieve desired student learning outcomes is also discussed. In addition, instructors' concerns and attitudes towards the implementation of social presence strategies in online learning are examined.

INTRODUCTION

Numerous studies have linked the concept of social presence, a sense of belonging in a learning community, to student motivation (Svinicki, 2004) and engagement in higher levels of learning (Bain, 2004; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005). While social presence is important in any learning environment, it must be intentionally designed in online courses where impromptu opportunities for social interaction and immediacy are less available. According to the 2013 Sloan Report (Allen & Seaman, 2013) which chronicles ten years of data in online education, the annual growth rate in higher education enrollment rose at a slow but steady pace between 2003 and 2009 but remained nearly constant between 2009 and 2011. In contrast, the annual growth rate for online enrollment has averaged double-digit increases each of the last ten years, ranging from a low of 9.3% in 2011 to a high of 36.5% in 2005. This trend has resulted in online enrollment representing nearly one-third (32%) of the total enrollment

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-5631-2.ch015

in post-secondary education in 2011. Given this change in course delivery, one may question how well traditional faculty members are positioned to move to online instruction.

In 2009, a report by the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) found that nearly one-third of faculty have some online teaching experience and nearly a quarter teach online routinely (Seaman, 2009). The majority of faculty reported student-centered reasons for teaching online: Over 70% were motivated by factors such as providing flexible access or reaching particular populations. Approximately half cited personal/professional growth and “it’s the wave of the future” (p. 32) as motivating factors. Just over 40% noted pedagogical advantages to teaching with technology. Hung and Jeng (2013) reported similar findings in their survey of educational technology Ph.D. students who plan to teach at the post-secondary level. Most (79.8%) indicated they expected to teach online. Less than 30% were concerned about the technology skills needed to teach online, yet three-quarters (74%) desired more training in strategies for effective teaching online.

Redesigning face-to-face courses for online or blended delivery can be a daunting task. Many faculty hold serious concerns about the time required to manage the course (Allen & Seaman, 2013; Betts, 1998; Seaman, 2009), student learning outcomes (Allen & Seaman, 2013; Hahn, 2012), and establishing rapport with students (Chickering & Ehrmann, 1996; Conceicao, 2006; Hahn, 2012). Faculty development on the management of social presence has implications for addressing the primary concerns of faculty, particularly given the differences in perception between those who have effectively taught online and those who have not (Allen & Seaman, 2013; Seaman, 2009). This chapter will focus on standards and challenges in creating social presence as one aspect of a comprehensive faculty development program.

BACKGROUND

Swan (2004) in a meta-analysis of literature on relationships between interaction and learning found distinct connections between teaching presence, social presence and student learning. Teaching presence (i.e., faculty facilitation of instruction, quantity and quality of interactions, on-going/immediate feedback) contributed to successful student learning outcomes. Social presence (i.e., interaction with classmates in discussion forums, sharing of experiences and beliefs, modeling verbal immediacy behaviors) reduced psychological distance between participants and contributed to feelings of safety in the learning environment (Vella, 2002). A general sense of social presence was linked to attainment of learning outcomes across all studies reviewed by Swan.

Adult Education Theory and Practice

Since the first online courses were offered, researchers have explored methods for motivating students to be engaged, self-directed learners who achieve at levels comparable to face-to-face courses (Russell, 1999). A wealth of data links meaningful interaction in the classroom to student satisfaction, attainment of learning outcomes, and motivation toward self-directed learning (Allen & Seaman, 2013; Pogue & AhYun, 2006; Svinicki, 2004). Adult learning theory was used to develop teaching methods specifically for non-traditional students, which led Malcolm Knowles to coin the term *andragogy* to separate adult learning strategies from strategies employed in primary/secondary education (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Andragogy has since guided the development of formal training programs for adults as well as strategies for teaching at the post-secondary level.

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