

Chapter 58

Communication in Online Learning: Being Meaningful and Reducing Isolation

Barry Chametzky

*Washington & Jefferson College, USA & Ozarks Technical Community College, USA & City
University of Seattle, USA*

ABSTRACT

An online learning environment is a rather lonely, isolated place. Because of this seemingly dismal venue, learners suffer in invisible ways such as attrition and disempowerment. While great educational things can and do happen online, it is vital to remember that because of the reduced visual clues, a number of things that need to be accomplished if learners are to succeed in this environment. In order to understand more clearly what is required in an online environment for learners to be successful, under the umbrella of communication, this author will discuss a number of ways to help course members break down feelings of isolation, increase meaningfulness, and increase empowerment.

INTRODUCTION

With some trepidation, this author is going to show his age: Growing up, as a member of Generation X (Keeling, 2003), this author believed that teaching took place solely in classrooms. After all, that location was where he had learned; no other place existed. He was not aware of distance learning, though it has existed for more than 100 years (Caruth, 2013; Keegan, 1996). Indeed, up until the end of the 20th century, traditional learning took place in schools. However, in the 21st century, educators and Millennials (Jukes, 2012) know that learning can take place in an online environment as effectively as in a classroom. But, as effective as an online venue might be, certain limitations (Chametzky, 2016a) and differences (Cochran & Benuto, 2016) exist. If educators are not cognizant of these variances, problems will ensue.

Schullery (2013) explained that “digital natives” (Prensky, 2001, p. 1)—people born between 1982 and 1999—have different values and experiences from their older learner counterparts who grew up without the Internet. From the perspective of an educator, it is vital to understand more clearly these

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differences to have effective interaction and gain more nuanced learning (Svirko & Mellanby, 2008) in an online course environment. Without such knowledge, all concerned parties (educators and learners) will experience intense stress (Chametzky, 2013a); such increased anxiety may result in frustration and learner attrition (Lee & Choi, 2011)—a most undesirable behavior.

Budak and Agrawal (2013) and Chametzky (2015a) spoke of several closely-tied components that are vital to online engagement. From a macro perspective, though, the idea of engagement refers to the interaction of a course member with the subject material. Such engagement may manifest itself as peer-to-peer, peer-to-educator, or peer-with-course material interaction. From a conceptual and Jakobsonien (1963 originally published in 1952) perspective, such engagement is communication.

Regardless of how scholars, mentors, or students might describe the necessary elements for a successful online environment (Chametzky, 2015a; Ryan and Deci (2000), communication and interaction form its core. Without a more nuanced understanding of these elements, learners and educators will continue to flounder in the sometimes-murky waters of online learning (Chametzky, 2015a). In this chapter, this author will discuss ways to increase engagement, meaningfulness, and online communication to avoid the often-present feeling of isolationism. Ultimately, with increased communication and interaction, students and educators will have a more positive learning experience. Such an experience, will, in turn, lead to increased learning and the possibility of the creation of new cognitive connections (Chametzky, 2016b).

BACKGROUND

Before we can adequately discuss meaningfulness and ways to reduce isolation, it is important, albeit briefly, to discuss some precipitating factors that result in meaninglessness. All educators are passionate for the subjects they teach; if they were not, they would not have studied it in detail in school. Additionally, they would not want to impart the information to their students. On some intrinsic level, the subject matter was appealing to educators because they were able to relate to it vis-à-vis events or persons in their lives. Such connections are how learning takes place (Chametzky, 2014).

However, not all students share the same passion for a subject that an educator does. One reason for this lack of interest is that the subject matter is not valuable to the learner. Educators need, somehow, to impress upon each learner how important the subject material is to him or her. Connections with the course material need to be made by learners. Without these valued links, students will find the subject matter irrelevant and will not relate to it; deep learning will not take place.

With respect to isolation, on a basic level, all students and educators involved in online learning sit in front of computer screens. Axiomatically, therefore, each person in an online course is isolated from one another. While such isolation (de los Arcos, Coleman, & Hampel, 2009) is common, and, in an asynchronous online environment, is unavoidable, two unfortunate byproducts occur: increased anxiety and decreased enthusiasm (de los Arcos, Coleman, & Hampel, 2009; Falloon, 2011) for the subject matter. It is crucial, therefore, for educators to understand and to be cognizant of such angst and reduced eagerness for learning. In the subsequent sections of this chapter, this researcher will discuss various mechanisms for increasing meaningfulness and reduce feelings of isolation.

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