

Chapter 80

Best Practice to Support Online Student Engagement

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ABSTRACT

A best practice is a technique or methodology that, through experience and research, has proven to reliably lead to a desired result (Rouse, 2007). This chapter explores a best practice that aimed to increase the engagement of online students in a teacher education course. The best practice is related to the Community of Inquiry (CoI; Anderson, & Archer, 2000), a framework that provides an understanding of the development of online learning communities (Swan & Ice, 2010). The chapter includes a brief review of the literature on the factors that foster student engagement; online student engagement is also discussed. A description is provided of a course assignment that was modified to increase the engagement of online students. The results of this assignment's modification were positively perceived by the online students. The chapter concludes with recommended technology tools to foster engagement of online students.

INTRODUCTION

With burgeoning numbers of students enrolling in online classes, traditional teaching methodologies, such as lectures, are becoming obsolete; one significant factor of this change is Web 2.0 technology (Hainline, Gaines, Long Feather, Padilla, & Terry, 2010). According to Hew and Cheung (2013), Web 2.0 technologies appear to have a positive impact on student learning. In their study of sixty-five pre-service teachers, Compton, Davis, and Correta (2010) found a similar result. These researchers noted common pre-service teachers' misconceptions of online instruction - threats to careers, viability of virtual instruction, academic dishonesty, reduced interaction, lack of teacher feedback - were lessened through online curricular innovations.

In addition to Web 2.0 technologies enhancing student learning, a best practice can also positively influence student learning. A best practice is a technique or methodology that, through experience and research, has proven to reliably lead to a desired result (Rouse, 2007). As the definition states, it was

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through experience and applied research that a best practice was selected to support an increase in the engagement of online students. This chapter describes the efforts in a diversity course, and using a teacher education assignment, to more fully engage online students.

The chapter begins with a look at the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework, a theoretical model that has grown in reputation since its creation. CoI, as a pedagogical model, provides an understanding of the development of online learning communities (Swan & Ice, 2010). In terms of instruction, an important factor in a learning community is student engagement. The chapter continues with a brief review of the literature on engagement, in general, and then continues to discuss online student engagement. Next, a higher education assignment used in a teacher education course is described, including the main issue that emerged with its use and how the assignment was adapted by implementing an asynchronous tool. Information on the asynchronous tool is, likewise, provided. The chapter concludes with recommendations for technology-focused and other engagement strategies that could be used in online courses.

By the end of the chapter, the reader will meet the following objectives: (a) relate the Community of Inquiry framework to an online learning community, (b) become informed of the literature on student engagement including factors that promote online student engagement, (c) recognize an issue which emerged on an assignment due to a lack of the Community of Inquiry - social presence, (d) conclude why the asynchronous tool remedied the issue, and (e) select technology-focused and other engagement strategies that provide the best fit for online course assignments.

BACKGROUND

CoI Framework

More than a decade ago, Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000) developed the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework. According to Swan and Ice (2010), CoI is social constructivist in nature and grounded in the practical inquiry philosophy of John Dewey. Evidence exists that the CoI framework is useful as a theoretical tool (Garrison, Cleveland-Innes, & Fung, 2009). Most importantly, this model allows for transformative pedagogy when comparing online learning to brick and mortar institutions (Powell, Stephens Helm, Layne, & Ice, 2012). Swan, Day, Bogle, and Matthews (2014) state CoI focuses on learning processes from a collaborative constructivist viewpoint and is supported by three elements - *social presence*, *teaching presence*, and *cognitive presence*. Cognitive presence is the extent to which learners construct and confirm meaning through reflection and discourse (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001). Garrison and Arbaugh (2007) suggest there are four phases of cognitive presence development: (a) identification of a problem that warrants further inquiry, (b) exploring a problem through critical reflection and discussion, (c) learner construction of meaning, and (d) learner application of meaning to other settings. The second element, social presence, is the ability of participants to connect and identify themselves within a community, communicate in a trusting environment, and develop relationships (Lambert & Fisher, 2013). Garrison, Cleveland-Innes, and Fung (2009) state the CoI framework suggests social presence is a mediating variable between the teaching and cognitive presences. Armellini and De Stefani (2016) posit social presence as a major factor for engagement, while Kear, Chetwynd, and Jefferis (2014) state the medium of communication is one factor influencing social presence. According to Swan, Garrison, and Richardson (2009), social presence includes three indicators: “*affective expression*, where learners share personal expressions of emotion, feelings, beliefs, and values: *open*

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