

Chapter 67

Building Engagement in K–12 Online Learning

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ABSTRACT

Engagement refers to a learner's interest in their own learning. Engaged students care about what they are learning and spend the time necessary to learn more. Learner engagement leads to increased achievement in a course and also increased satisfaction with the learning experience. This chapter explores elements of engagement from both a researcher and practitioner perspective. The authors explore the definition of engagement along with an explanation of the most influential theories of engagement. They also explain what classroom practices are most likely to build engagement and suggest future research directions.

INTRODUCTION

Practitioners intuitively know that engagement is important for achievement. Engaged learners care about what they are learning, they spend time on the content, and they are eager to know more. Because at-risk students are more likely to take online courses at the K–12 level (Watson, Murin, Vashaw, Gemin, & Rapp, 2013), there's a critical need to build high-quality online programs that prioritize engagement for these populations in order to ensure educational equity (Chen, Lambert, & Guidry, 2010). However, building engagement is incredibly complex. Teachers and researchers struggle to define engagement. If a learner spends a lot of time on a course, does that mean they are engaged with it? What about if a learner does outside research on a topic? Does that signal engagement? Perhaps what matters to engagement is the kind of thinking the learner does or how they feel about a subject. These questions are key to defining engagement, and they lead to the bigger question that is critical to understanding engagement in a K–12 online classroom: How can teachers consistently build engagement in the online courses that

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they teach? Certain elements of engagement may be outside the control of a course designer or teacher. Learner issues of motivation, family support, and workspace are important. But there are other factors that are within the control of a teacher or school. Instructor support and course design can have enormous impacts on the engagement of a learner.

This chapter will seek to explore these complex issues of engagement. We will first explore background on engagement including how to define engagement and what theories currently inform research in engagement. Second, we will look at the key stakeholders in engagement and consider how these stakeholders might impact engagement within K–12 online classrooms. Next, we will explore promising practices in how to build engagement. Finally, we will provide several suggestions on how to support engagement in K–12 schools and areas for future research.

Before this chapter begins, it is important to point out that research on learner engagement in online learning is primarily done at the post-secondary level. Research with K–12 online students remains very limited. Throughout this chapter, we will highlight research that focuses on the K–12 population but will also incorporate guidelines from studies with older students. Future research will help to make a distinction between what best engages elementary, secondary, and post-secondary populations but, for now, we assume that many guidelines remain consistent across levels. Any exceptions will be mentioned in the text.

BACKGROUND

The best place to begin a discussion about engagement is with the definition of the construct. However, with engagement, there's no strong consensus in the literature on what defines an engaged student (Henrie, Halverson, & Graham, 2015).

One approach is to look at student behaviors and define engagement in terms of what students do. Hu and Kuh (2002) looked at engagement as effort. If a student expends significant effort in a course, then they must be engaged in the learning. In a later study, Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, and Hayek (2007) continued to focus on effort and defined engagement as “participation in educationally effective practices, both inside and outside the classroom, which leads to a range of measurable outcomes” (p. 44). Notice that Kuh et al. (2007) focused exclusively on the things a student does when they are engaged. Merwin (1969) looked at time on task, hypothesizing that if a student spends significant time in a course, then they must be engaged in content. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), one of the largest ongoing studies of student engagement in higher education, defines engagement in terms of student activities that they engage in as part of the learning process (Kuh, 2009). They look at a student's perceptions of the level of academic challenge of their studies as well as the number of times a student participates in active learning, collaborative learning, and interactions with faculty members among other activities such as going to the library or accessing library resources (Kuh, 2009). Kuh's (2009) effort-focused definition can be applied within the K–12 online classroom by looking at the student's behaviors on the learning management system (LMS). Students who are engaged will spend significant time on course pages, they will initiate communications with their teachers, and they will consistently submit assignments.

Another approach incorporates both behaviors and attitudes into the definition of engagement. Researchers do this by splitting engagement into sub-constructs such as behavioral, cognitive, and affective engagement (Borup, West, Graham, & Davies, 2014; Casimiro, 2015). Behavioral engagement are the

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