Chapter 82

Computer to Community:
Fostering the Online Classroom Environment

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ABSTRACT

The convenience factor of studying online can be diminished by the lack of interaction with faculty and peers, and students often express feelings of isolation as influencing online engagement. When students can actively participate throughout a program, students feel satisfied with the learning program. Building positive and organized connections in online communities enhances academic success and retention rates and fosters a sense of community. Therefore, the presence of online faculty is vital for building interaction and connectedness between faculty and student, and student and student. There are a variety of ways to achieve this, including facilitating connections between discussions, assignments, and live interactions; merging conceptual learning to pragmatic application; connecting cohorts of students; and leveraging synchronous tools to manage an interactive atmosphere.

PREFACE

Shows like *Survivor*, *Keeping up with the Kardashians*, and *The Real World* clearly indicate society's interest in reality-based input. Though these programs have very little value insofar as higher education is concerned, the message is valuable to faculty: students often want to see that the theories and concepts they are learning have relevance in the 'real world'. Faculty have the opportunity to bring the real world into the online classroom through establishing a variety of connections with students and moving from computer screen to community.

The authenticity of real interactions and relationships should be a required condition of online teaching, and faculty must expand their perspective of what constitutes the learning environment. A clear understanding of the factors that influence student engagement online has strong potential benefits for improving educational outcomes, including retention and completion times (Muir et al, 2019). The information from this chapter can be used to inform and improve online teaching, resulting in enhanced online engagement (Muir et al, 2019; Vincenzes et al., 2019). Further information will be provided including ideas for moving from virtual to reality through the constructs of connections, pragmatics, cohorts, concept linking, and synchronous engagement.

INTRODUCTION

Online instruction is not a new concept in higher education. The wonderful benefits of online learning have been available and utilized for quite some time yet due to the COVID-19 pandemic institutions of higher learning were forced to transition the majority of courses online for a period of time (Weiland & Kollias, 2020). This forced paradigm shift has caused instructors and administration to closely examine the online education model has been used and most importantly what has worked best. Instructors who did not generally utilize online instruction were affected the most from this immediate transition of holding classes fully online and while these adjustments have been enormous for instructors who were not versed in online education it has also given instructors, students and administration an opportunity to embrace a sense of creativity, and collaboration to the field of higher education (Weiland & Kollias, 2020).

The concept of e-learning for higher education has progressed and with-it instruction must evolve as well. The asynchronous module of distance education has now proven to be too outdated and cause barriers to learning including leaving the student feeling alone in the process, having the student develop communication apprehension, and potentially even reaching levels of technology illiteracy (Watts, 2016). This e-learning framework has created a system in which instructors are merely making their readings, lessons, lectures, and gradebook available online. In essence, the asynchronous model has created an environment in which the professor is adhering to their same format from the face-to-face classroom structure. This structure does not translate or resonate well with adult learners in the higher education online environment. Online learning, however, offers a plethora of ways in which technology can be used to engage adult learners with different learning styles and needs within the college experience. Online learning demands online professors, not professors who are merely online. An online professor manages an online classroom atmosphere relying on synchronous engagement within a Learning Management System (LMS) to develop connections, illustrate pragmatic course connections as the content expert, help build cohorts among the adult learners, and focuses on concept linking to reinforce learning. The authenticity of real interactions and relationships should be a required condition of online teaching, and faculty must expand their perspective of what constitutes the learning environment. A clear understanding of the factors that influence student engagement online has strong potential benefits for improving educational outcomes, including retention and completion times (Muir et al, 2019). The information from this chapter can be used to inform and improve online teaching, resulting in enhanced online engagement (Muir et al, 2019; Vincenzes et al., 2019) and retention by bringing real world interaction into the online classroom experience.

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