

Chapter 108

Online Strategies for Stimulating Learner Engagement


Lynne Orr

William Paterson University, USA & Walden University, USA


Linda Weekley

Walden University, USA

Sharon C. Little

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7096-5014>
Walden University, USA

Robert P. Hogan

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1792-7553>
Walden University, USA

ABSTRACT

Active student engagement in online classes is an important component of retention, pass rates, and student satisfaction. Although online class enrollment has grown steadily over the past several years, student retention is 8% less compared to on-campus courses. Synchronous instructional strategies can encourage online student engagement. In this chapter, the reader will gain an understanding of the benefits of online student engagement as described by three professors using synchronous strategies in their online courses. The increasing global demand for job training, professional development, and affordable education can only be met with online programs. However, asynchronous delivery fails to develop social skills and analytical thinking. The chapter describes innovative, cost effective synchronous approaches, and concludes with suggestions for further research to improve online student success.

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INTRODUCTION

Improving online retention is a significant concern for 21st century institutions of higher education. Online classrooms that build a sense of belonging, actively engage students and instructors, and teach social and thinking skills can be as effective as on-campus classes. Synchronous online pedagogy can retain students and develop online relationships. In this chapter, academic success is defined as completing a degree. Most of the literature on retention pertains to community colleges and bachelor's level degree programs. In this chapter, the authors describe their practical experiences in online bachelor's, master's, and doctoral programs.

Both engagement and feelings of belonging offer opportunities, and a framework towards strengthening academic success as measured through retention. Thus, instituting instructional strategies to enhance learner engagement, are considered a viable strategy for retaining the student (Angelino & Natvig, 2009). There are also administrative functions, student services integration, and pedagogical practices, which can contribute to academic success (Braxton, 2008; Engstrom & Tinto, 2008). This chapter will only discuss learner engagement and belongingness in relationship to instructional strategies and program recommendations, which increase the retention of students for the course, program, and degree completion.

Three faculty members describe their experience aiding online learners to participate in synchronous class activities in undergraduate and graduate degree programs. The first professor describes a study that investigated students' reasons for discontinuing undergraduate online course. The second faculty member describes mentoring approaches in national and international online doctoral programs. The third instructor relates discoveries teaching in an online master's program. The final portion of this chapter will give further suggestions on instructional strategies, which could increase learner engagement and course completion.

This chapter has five objectives. The first objective is to understand the importance of online learner engagement and sense of belonging in relation to student success. The second objective is to present the perspectives and practices of three online faculty that developed synchronous class activities to improve student success, social skills, and analytical thinning. The third objective is to describe the three models of online learner engagement. The final objective of the chapter will include practical knowledge of instructional strategies, which, when implemented, will encourage greater learner engagement.

THE IMPORTANCE OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Academic and social engagement are two aspects of student engagement. Academic engagement relates to active learning or 'deep' learning (Thomas, 2012). Social engagement pertains to creating a sense of belonging which provides the student with informal support. When students are academically and socially engaged, their feelings of belongingness increase, and active learning is supported, leading to academic success.

Learner Engagement with Online Courses

Kivlighan et al. (2018) noted that academic success and retention rates continue to be a problem. Cachero-Gonzalez, Medina-Rivilla, Dominguez-Garrido, and Medina-Dominguez (2019) described online learner engagement as the amount of time learners spend on synchronous educational activities.

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