Chapter 18
Student Engagement and Communication Strategies for Online Courses:
A South African Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Innovations in information and communication technologies (ICTs) and the subsequent development of learning management systems (LMSs) are positive and encouraging. These advancements enable a supportive learning environment for both instructors and learners to engage and communicate. The South African higher education system is dealing with a diversified student population with varied levels of preparedness, multilingualism, and large classes. The premise of this chapter is "how student engagement and communication happen under these circumstances." The exploration of this question could enable HEIs in SA to better understand and serve this vulnerable population. The study is underpinned by social constructivism. A qualitative observational methodology was followed of undergraduate first year students in a typical south African higher education online course. The study concludes that a more supportive role by the institution if there are to be better outcomes for vulnerable groups is important and that could improve learner outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

Innovations in information and communication technologies (ICTs) and the subsequent development of learning management systems (LMSs) are positive and encouraging (Chakraborty & Nafukho, 2014). These advancements enable a supportive learning environment for both instructors and learners to engage and communicate. LMSs play a crucial role in supporting online courses. These systems have the capacity to support the entire student process; from the first enquiry to when the student graduates.

Traditionally, online learning is perceived as being more cost effective and convenient than venue-based learning and it provides opportunities for more learners to continue their learning outside of the venue/classroom (Han & Johnson, 2012). Online courses accommodate many students with little financial investments from HEI's and that's why their popularity continues to grow. On top of low investment costs there is issues related to accessibility, flexibility as some of the reasons there's growing interest in this field (Nafukho et al., 2004).

On top of the benefits listed above, for example, learning content can be accessed anywhere at any time, leaning towards the ubiquitous nature enabled by technology. Further, the virtual environment for online learning enables students from international countries to take courses of their choice (Baker et al., 2009). Robinson and Hullinger (2008) observed that students' computer skills improve when they take computer-mediated classes.

Despite these benefits related to online courses, researchers still report continued high dropout rates and achievement problems in online courses (Luyt, 2013), social isolation and anxiety (Hurd, 2007). Further, the mere presence of these tools is not enough, a proactive human intervention is required for the course to be successful.

To ensure that students' socialization needs are met, HEIs often use peer support, also known as peer coaching and peer mentoring to augment this reality (Parker et al., 2008). The South African higher education is further unique as it is facing challenges of a diverse student population, with varied levels of preparedness, multilingualism, large classes, and massification of education, and is further under pressure to increase throughput rate against a backdrop of limited resources (Jaffer et al., 2007; Scott et al., 2007; Bozalek et al., 2013). There is also a multifaceted digital divide which is characterised by inadequate ICT infrastructure and skills and the socioeconomic divide where student cannot afford computers and internet access and that exacerbates the challenges of student engagement further (Nyahodza & Higgs, 2017).

Owing to the apartheid education system (which affected every sphere of life), a vast majority of students currently entering university come from low socio-economic backgrounds, are first-generation students, and are members of a racial group at high risk of dropping out. As a result, a large majority of entering students present with two or more of the risk factors associated with university drop-out (Kuh et al., 2011). These are a vulnerable population within the higher education landscape and how they interact and communicate in an online environment is relatively underexplored.

Student engagement provides a useful context to examine higher education's promotion of student persistence and retention in South Africa (Strydom et al. 2010; Wawrzynski et al., 2012). Student engagement is widely understood as a useful proxy for academic success, persistence, and retention. Student engagement literature cogently assert that the goals of student engagement serve the goals of equity and participation (Schreiber & Yu, 2016). The chapter poses this question "how does student engagement and communication happen under these circumstances? How do students from these varied and underrepresented socioeconomic backgrounds engage and communicate with the course material, instructors, and peers"?

This chapter is about how student form varied levels of preparedness, multilingualism and large classes engage and communicate in online courses in a typical South African higher education environment using social constructivism as a lens to understand how collaborative learning in an online environment happens between peers, study material and instructors. The rest of the paper is as follows a definition of keywords is presented, followed by communication strategies in online courses, student engagement strategies for online courses is discussed, then the research problem, the underpinning theory, the research methodology, analysis and findings and conclusion discussed last.

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