

Tools for engaging online learners: Increasing student involvement in online classes

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Abstract

Faculty who have taught in a traditional classroom are finding themselves having to teach in a setting in which they are unable to interact face-to-face with their students. Online instruction increases yearly. An important factor in the success of online instruction is the degree of student engagement. Though academic content remains substantially the same, the different nature of the online environment should cause faculty to re-examine the methods they use to deliver this instruction and engage students. Online faculty need to investigate new methods of enhancing student engagement. This paper proposes methods of engaging the learner through the online environment.

Key words: online instruction, student engagement, avatars, newsletters

INTRODUCTION

Institutes of higher education today are delivering instruction more and more through online courses. Enrollment in online instruction continues to grow yearly, and currently involves over 6 billion students (Sherer & Shea, 2011; Waits & Lewis, 2003). Online instruction, however, though similar in content, needs to be remarkably different in delivery from traditional classroom instruction. Traditional classroom teaching methods do not translate as efficiently or effectively into the online arena. Lecture notes, transparencies, handouts, and even PowerPoint slides tend to be two dimensional and do not readily engage the e-learner in course content, nor do they motivate him to continue participating in the learning. The key, of course, is to engage the learner so that he consistently returns to the online forum and interacts with the information, material, and inquiry the online class presents and requires of him.

THE VALUE OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Student engagement is a vital dimension in the success of online instruction. Students who demonstrate high levels of engagement will persist in learning through the online format despite technical difficulties (Mandernach, 2009). Student engagement and student-faculty interaction is pivotal both initially and consistently throughout the course and has been linked to student learning and satisfaction (Angelino, Williams & Natvig, 2007; Chen, Lambert, & Guidry, 2010; Mandernach, 2009). Surveys which measure dimensions of student engagement have found student engagement to positively correlate with desired learning outcomes (Chen, Lambert, & Guidry, 2010; Robinson & Hullinger, 2008). Lack of vital communication was cited by students as a reason for not continuing in classes (Willging & Johnson, 2009, p. 125).

While it is the student's responsibility to engage in the coursework required by the class, it is the faculty's responsibility to create an environment that engages the student, promotes interaction and participation, and provides a reason for returning to the online classroom (Herie, 2004; Robinson & Hullinger, 2008). The embedding of tools which are familiar to the online learner will support greater levels of interaction in the online environment (Brownson, 2014, Dixon, 2010).

ENHANCING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

What are some efficient, effective ways of enhancing faculty-student connection and establishing teacher presence through an online environment? In a traditional classroom, faculty engaged the student with their voice and unique presentations meant to capture student interest. Activities were planned which relied on student interaction and allowed us to create interest and assess engagement. How do can this be accomplish this online? How can the student be engaged with so many other online venues vying for their attention? Do students read our emails? How do faculty make themselves more visible to the student? In ten years of teaching online, several strategies which have consistently proven effective in engaging the student have been discovered, including early contact, consistent contact, contact through unexpected avenues, video clips, and newsletters.

CREATIVE USE OF EMAILS

One method of establishing faculty presence and interacting with the student is through the use of emails. Interaction with the student needs to be established early, so two weeks before the course begins, an email is sent reminding them that they have registered, welcoming them to the exciting course, introducing their instructor for the class, and asking them to purchase the textbooks before class starts. This initial email serves multiple purposes. It reminds the student of their enrollment and provides them a chance to become proactive regarding their involvement in the class. It opens the channels of communication so that if students have any questions, they simply reply to the email and are in direct communication with the professor. It sets the tone for involvement and interaction, which is strengthened a week later with a second email.

This second email briefly repeats some of the information of the first email, such the required texts and the beginning date of the course, and adds the first week's reading (further encouragement to become involved). It provides a link to an avatar who explains the general content of the course and how it fits into the overall program. This avatar is unexpected and allows the student to hear the instructor's voice, making direct faculty-student connection. Several classes require that students conduct observations and/or interact directly with others (interviews, assessments); these requirements are mentioned in this second email and provide students with additional information regarding the course.

These two emails are combined and posted on the Course Home as the initial announcement for the course. This announcement is also sent out to all students on the first day of class as an email with a subject line stating: "Class has begun." These initial emails are supplemented weekly, reminding students of upcoming assignments or interactive sessions.

Posting announcements is a common practice in online classes. Though some students may be diligent to read the announcements, others may totally by-pass this portion of the screen, so every time an announcement is posted, I copy it and also send it as an email. Though this is repetition, it doubles the chances that important messages are being read.

PHONE CALLS

Faculty-student interaction can be strengthened through a personal phone call to the student before class begins. Some may balk at the time commitments this may involve, however, with a simple script which reminds the student of their upcoming class, introduces their instructor, and tells them to expect some emails, then the calls take a minimum amount of time and the effort invested is returned exponentially through student engagement.

The phone call message can be quite simple, such as, "Hello. This is Dr. ABC from XYZ University. Is Ms. Student home? I wanted to say hello and remind you that you are enrolled in 'Name of Class' and to let you know that I will be sending out some emails in the next few weeks regarding the class. I look forward to meeting you online." This same script can be used if the student does not answer and may be left as a message on their answering machine/voice mail.

USE OF AVATARS

Though complex online virtual worlds exist, simple avatars in the form of voice-over cartoons or low cost talking avatars are available to techno-novices such as myself and are quite effective in capturing student interest. A simple script introducing the instructor and explaining the class can be created, uploaded into YouTube, and the URL sent to the students. If using an

iTunes app, faculty would simply record the message and send the avatar to the class with a message stating: “This email is being brought to you by Talking Roby. Simply download it and play to hear the message.” Later in the course, these avatars can remind students of due dates for assignments or changes in the schedule. The students are impressed with the instructor’s use of technology and look forward to the next email.

NEWSLETTERS

A newsletter presents content on a visual plane, in an engaging, succinct manner using banners, headings and subheadings to transmit pertinent information quickly. Newsletter templates are available in most word processing programs and once the layout is established and the topics determined, the different issues of the newsletter may be used repeatedly with minor changes to content. This newsletter is sent out on a weekly basis, beginning the week before class starts, highlighting what’s happening now, what is due soon, reminding students of resources, and exploring in depth one pertinent topic. Once the templates are organized, upkeep of the newsletter is minimal since course content remains mostly constant.

VIRTUAL OFFICE

Faculty-student engagement and student-student engagement can also be encouraged through the use of a Virtual Office feature on the course home, an asynchronous discussion forum, also called a threaded discussion, in which one person posts a question or comment and others respond. In this Virtual Office, students are asked to post any questions regarding any aspect of the course and are guaranteed they will receive a response within 24 hours. Of course, the response time is much shorter and students appreciate the ability to ask and receive quick answers. Often, other students will respond with answers to the questions even before the professor is able to access the site. This establishes a type of camaraderie among students which positively influences student engagement.

TIME CONSTRAINTS

Some faculty might react adversely to some of the suggestions for engaging students, citing time constraints (Angelino, Williams & Natvig, 2007; Hirumi, 2003), however, the establishment of a general, repeatedly usable template can facilitate these interactions. For example, an initial email can be written for each course and used over and over, simply changing the beginning and ending dates for the class. Once this initial email is created, it is used as the basis for the second email and can be used repeatedly since both of these are sent before the class begins and before the cultural and social nature of the class has surfaced and, therefore, can be generic in nature. These two emails are then combined into the opening announcement for the class which, again, can be general in nature and be used as a template from class to class. Newsletters can also be reused simply by changing significant dates from course to course. Thereby, the initial investment of time spent creating the newsletter can result in repeated student engagement over multiple courses.

CONCLUSION

A positive relationship has been shown to exist between measures of student engagement and the instructor's use of technology within the course. The engagement of students in an online environment requires educators to think innovatively. This paper proposed that engaging students might be enhanced through the use of early contact with students, creative emails, the use of avatars, phone calls and newsletters. Engaging students early and keeping them engaged throughout the course are both crucial elements which will enhance the learning experience for the student and will allow faculty the opportunity to be effective in the online arena.

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