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This chapter presents research-based practices to improve student learning in online environments through intentional interactions between instructors, content, and students.

Online Course Engagement through Relationship Management and Content Creation

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Over the last several decades, colleges and universities have increasingly offered and relied on online educational technologies to support and enhance the academic mission. Despite overall decreases in postsecondary enrollments, online education has seen increased enrollments for fourteen consecutive years (Seaman, Allen, and Seaman 2018). Nearly 6.5 million students, equaling about 32% of the total enrollment in the United States, took at least one online course in Fall 2016 (Seaman, Allen, and Seaman 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic is going to significantly change the number of students and instructors who have participated in online education, and it is unclear if the massive shift to online courses will affect the landscape of higher education. From wholly online asynchronous courses, to hybrid courses leveraging in-class meetings with substantial online participation, to traditional face-to-face classes utilizing an online system for administrative functions, instructors must consider the role technology plays in their teaching. Substantial scholarship about online teaching and learning exists, including technical considerations such as the design of learning management systems, the architecture of course design, social media in college teaching, the quality of online teaching, and a great deal more (Brazelton 2016). Literature on engagement in online teaching and learning is additionally vast and diverse in topic, scope, scale, and quality, and it can be overwhelming to know how to leverage existing scholarship to support academic outcomes in online teaching and learning. This chapter focuses on enhancing student engagement in online teaching and learning through a reframing of the instructor as a content creator and relationship manager.

Reframing Distance Education as Online Education

The literature is not consistent on the language of online learning. The term distance education is perhaps antiquated but commonly used to refer to students participating in courses without physically being present on campus. This term reflects the historical significance of nontraditional correspondence courses which were offered over a distance, where course participation (such as written assignments, proctored exams, etc.) were submitted according to the technology of the time, such as through the mail or fax machines (King 2017). Reframing education that takes place beyond the physical limits of the campus is better described as online education, removing both the denotation and connotation of the word distance. With technology allowing for real-time participation via online gateways, instructors and institutions have the potential to close the gap between learner and institution, learner and instructor, and learner and content.

Content Creation: Teaching at Day Zero

Online teaching presents an interesting opportunity for instructors, in that an entire course of information needs to be created, collected, collated, and converted before the first day of the class. Whether the course is synchronous (real time; e.g., webinar or chat) or asynchronous (stand alone; e.g., discussion board or email), self-paced (only final deadline) or iterative (staggered progress deadlines), the instructor engages in teaching before learners physically enter the environment. The instructor begins creating an engaging learning environment, choosing pedagogical methods and activities to frame the specific subject content of the course. Often the learning management system architecture supports or disqualifies certain mechanisms of teaching, such as whether it is optimized for text-based content or has opportunities for more diverse methods of student engagement through as audio, visual, or graphic participation (Conde et al. 2014). Regardless of the pedagogical limits of the technological architecture, instructor preparation and the completeness of the course content is positively correlated with student engagement with the course overall and especially with the duration and frequency with which students view course content (Ma et al. 2015). Courses that leverage content designed for significant interactivity between the course, instructor, and students, such as audio/visual participation, gamification, and presentation of student-created content, can further increase student engagement (Dietz-Uhler and Hurn 2013).

While all teaching requires robust consideration prior to the first official day of the course, online teaching requires different considerations in how instructors manage course design. The traditional face-to-face environment allows for more flexibility and improvisation along the way, as changing an online course while in progress might disadvantage some learners who have already progressed beyond certain modules (Arkorful and

Abaidoo 2015). Content must be equitable to every learner, and changes to one variable or parameter of a course may disrupt the environment or undermine the instructor's credibility. When designing online learning environments, then, instructors must prepare online course parameters and content to demonstrate expertise while also providing an engaging learning environment. This chapter centers on a core component of supporting course engagement through a research-based understanding of the instructor as a relationship manager in the online course environment. Three specific relationship types exist within online education: between instructor and learner, instructor and course content, and learner and content.

The Relationships of Online Teaching and Learning

Managing the Relationship between Instructor and Learner. When developing engaging relationships between instructors and learners, what may matter more than any technological advancement in online education is the intention and attention of the instructor. One important distinction when teaching online is for "teachers to greatly reduce the amount of 'telling' they do, relative to the amount of classroom activities and 'partnering'" (Prensky 2012, 137). Telling occurs through the content (online readings, lectures, and other materials in the course shell), which already exists in the learning management system upon course launch, so instruction can be reframed as a partnership with the student in their education. Instructors should focus on connecting with learners about the material and providing individualized feedback. An opportunity for partnership occurs within the discussions that many online courses employ. These discussions are intended to replicate in-class conversations about course materials, but the technology often makes execution seem forced and superficial (King 2017). To manage this superficiality, Pollak (2017) argues for intentional implementation of specific instructor roles in course discussion: moderator (ensuring discussion is on-topic and moving forward), instructor (ensuring that concepts are being used and defined correctly by course participants), and evaluator (determining the overall quality and technical correctness of students' comments) (78–79). Effective instruction in this context means maintaining a connected presence with learners, with as much individualization as possible given the resources available.

Understanding the relationship between instructor and student comes with challenges as the learning environment is complicated by technology. For instance, because participation occurs virtually, instructors must decide whether and how to use technology to prevent distraction and disengagement from the course, such as browser locks which prevent participants from engaging in other websites (Camus et al. 2016; Heflin, Shewmaker, and Nguyen 2017). Despite these challenges, technology also allows for flexible learning approaches and encourages students' self-directedness, while instructors focus on facilitation, assessment of

engagement and motivation, and implementation of activities which require problem-solving (King 2017). Online postsecondary learning often reflects andragogical approaches, a teaching and learning philosophy that acknowledges the maturity and life situation of adult learners (King 2017). Overall, instructors should reflect on how they want to position themselves in the course (e.g., as a supervisor, authoritarian, facilitator), and in what ways they will be involved with their students. By thinking of themselves as a relationship manager, instructors can leverage an intentional and persistent relationship with learners to seek the improvement of their engagement and support a productive learning environment.

Managing the Relationship between Instructor and Course Content.   In this relationship, the instructor acts first as curator of subject knowledge and course requirements. Once the course begins, the instructors adapt this role to become a guide, maintaining consistent and equitable access to content for students. Additionally, instructors can enhance student engagement by enhancing existing content through digital technologies. While audio-visual technology like recorded presentations and synchronous online meetings are not new, this technology is continually improving in the bandwidth required, quality of audio and video, implementation of screen sharing, and an increased number of simultaneous participants (Tobin, Mandernach, and Taylor 2015). Creating videos as opposed to text-based emails or announcements allows for a higher level of connectivity and engagement (Oberne 2017). Instructors can also take advantage of social media as an avenue for sharing information, whether through a specific tool like a class wiki, through the creation of class-specific pages and groups within third-party software like Facebook and Google, or through hosting video content on YouTube (Camus et al. 2016; Henrie, Halverson, and Graham 2015; Manca and Ranieri 2016). Course integration with social media offers several advantages. Students encounter fewer barriers to access the information housed there compared to formal learning management systems, often reducing a four- to five-page navigation path down to one or two pages and offering an interface with a greater number of resources and affordances than are offered by the typical learning management system used in higher education (Brazelton 2013).

Regardless of the technology used, instructors can model the engagement they expect from learners through their management of course content. Providing occasional additional resources to the class shows flexibility without changing course content and allows students to see the instructor as engaging with the learning environment (Hung and Chou 2015). Additionally, instructors can adapt their courses or teaching style to be present through mobile technology, such as tablets and phones, for increased accessibility and presence (Heflin, Shewmaker, and Nguyen 2017). For instance, if an instructor creates a video lecture, the file can be optimized for mobile devices in terms of file size and compression, offered as an audio-only version for students to listen to, or uploaded to mobile friendly formats such as

YouTube. Another mobile learning strategy is to allow or encourage students to record video or audio responses for discussion boards and other assignments, so that learners can embrace more flexibility in their responses. In brief, instructors should be flexible and present in their online teaching in whatever method is authentic and appropriate for their pedagogical approach.

Managing the Relationship between Learner and Course Content. As with all education, an instructor can, at most, only provide an engaging learning environment designed for students to participate and progress. Despite our best efforts, student motivation is the most important characteristic determining whether the learner is successful in their academic journey (Gibson et al. 2015; Tobin, Mandernach, and Taylor 2015). Such a challenge requires the instructor to identify and evaluate the areas of the course they can control to maximize potential for student engagement. As the previous sections of this chapter describe, there are many different ways that an instructor can build an environment that connects the learner to the course. In current online education, the pedagogical experiment known as Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) provides a useful lens for understanding how the learner connects to the content. Despite courses featuring world-class scholars and instructors on varied subjects, all without any financial commitment, MOOCs still struggle with student participation, retention, and completion (Manathunga and Hernandez-Leo 2015; O'Riordan, Millard, and Schulz 2016). Across the literature, the lessons are parallel for MOOCs and nonmassive online education: interactivity with the content, instructor, and classmates are all opportunities for productive engagement. Because MOOCs are voluntary, students face no penalty for nonparticipation, so these courses must rely on interaction and engagement to encourage learners to connect and learn from the course and each other. As higher education moves forward through and past the pandemic, scholars will likely research student engagement in online courses, and their studies may provide more detail about the ways in which instructors encouraged engagement, allowing for more comparison between MOOC and non-MOOC courses. Instructors of non-MOOC courses can leverage assessment for motivation, including regularly and transparently grading participation and using frequent, low-stakes assignments; both strategies require student engagement with course material and the learning environment.

A final avenue for instructors to manage a learner's relationship with the course is through the interaction with classmates. Not all online learning requires engagement between classmates, but many courses routinely require interaction via discussion boards and group assignments. Many scholars believe there is value in social engagement within online contexts, where opportunities for connectivity, interactivity, and peer discussion and collaboration are both possible and required (Henderson, Selwyn, and Aston 2017; Henrie, Halverson, and Graham

2015; O'Shea, Stone, and Delahunty 2015). To be engaging, discussion board interactions should break the model of posting analysis based on a prompt and then responding to classmates. In a redesigned model, students might create visual metaphors of previous learning activities, using word clouds, infographics, and video responses as opposed to purely text-based participation (Joyner 2012). Throughout the literature on interactivity, the intention and creativity of the instructor enhances the activities available to students.

Recommendations

Online education is a collection of opportunities and challenges in the ways in which we serve students. Technology can provide increased access to education and offers a more efficient delivery model; however, "technology should be seen as one solution to a number of problems while still requiring careful execution and development so as not to create or exacerbate others" (Brown 2018, 309). By viewing their role as the manager of relationships, instructors provide students with opportunities for engagement beyond simple post and respond discussion boards. Instructors who establish themselves as having produced a cohesive and comprehensive course and who have clear and varied roles within the course are able to create environments that benefit student engagement (Hung and Chao 2015). Instructors can manage their relationship with course content by building a course with a consistent design and visual appearance, required and optional content, and defined roles and expectations for all involved in the course. There are several ways to facilitate students' relationship with the content. Social media provides a great avenue for connection, communication, and knowledge distribution, with fewer barriers than course management systems, such as creating a class wiki page where anyone can contribute to the course content and share resources. Twitter has been leveraged as an extension of the classroom through a course hashtag where the class community can communicate quickly, freely, and informally. Course material optimized for mobile learning allow for learners to be more flexible with their location and devices when engaging with their courses. Additionally, instructors should employ interactivity between the learner and course through multimedia, content creation, and meaningful classmate collaboration when possible. Through this interaction and presence, the instructor can relate and engage with students across the digital medium.

The selected wisdom of this chapter is echoed by the findings of O'Shea, Stone and Delahunty (2015) on creating online learning environments with significant engagement:

1. Specifically designing high quality courses for online learning.
2. Treating online learners equally to face-to-face learners; communicating with them regularly and appropriately.

3. Being accessible and responsive; engaging regularly and positively with students.
4. Using good design and responsive moderation in student forums to avoid potential pitfalls.
5. Offering students more assistance with the technology. (55)

In the effort to manage relationships in online education, there are even more opportunities, tools, affordances, and gadgets available than traditional face-to-face courses provide, so how does an industrious educator maximize the opportunities technology offer? Beyond digital advancements, the literature and this chapter support a simple recommendation: instructors should be involved and present, and they should use intention and care in course design and management. Although online learning can be automated with system-graded assessments like multiple choice quizzes, and can incorporate peer- or self-graded assignments to simplify the instructor's role, these approaches further displace instructors from their learners. Instead, as a relationship manager, the instructor should be involved in grading and giving meaningful feedback on assignments and should be professionally invested in how learners engage with the course and the associated content.

Conclusion

The different relationships that the instructor needs to curate in online teaching overlap, arguing for a cohesive strategy of relationship management. It is difficult to determine the best practices for online teaching and learning, as the instructor is an immeasurable variable in the education system and the scholarly library on the subject is vast and contradictory. However, this chapter and volume are founded on the research-based conclusion that effective instruction requires engagement. As such, I argue that a pedagogical decision of serving as a relationship manager in online education can create an environment where engagement is present by design.

Rashid and Asghar (2016) conclude that the technologically assisted learning process transforms learners from "receivers of knowledge to the active and engaged learners compelling them to become more responsible for their own education" (610). Students already view technology as an interface for their relationships to and across the university, and instructors can leverage this mentality by framing their courses and teaching behaviors with a relationship management perspective (Brazelton 2013; Brazelton 2016; Oberne 2017). Online education can be designed to run without instructor engagement from day zero, through self-paced modules and standardized assessment; however, online education provides an opportunity to use relationships to connect students with the knowledge and skills to find success in their academics and beyond.

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