Student Engagement Strategies for the Online Learning Environment

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During the past year and a half, our faculty development unit has been gathering data from students about how engaged they felt in their online courses. We wanted to use this data to develop a variety of strategies for faculty to use to better engage their students. Research provides evidence for the connection between higher student engagement and persistence and retention in online programs (Boston, et al., 2010; Wyatt, 2011). Encouraging student engagement is especially important in the online environment where attrition rates are higher than in the face-to-face setting (Allen & Seaman, 2015; Boston & Ice, 2011).

We gained valuable insights from students when we asked: "Define what it means to you to be engaged in a course." Below are student quotes for each theme that emerged and some strategies for encouraging engagement.

Interaction and timely feedback

Student comment: "Engaged is being tasked, questioned, and expected to participate in team and individual projects. Students like myself should be interacted with in various ways, not only through assignments and quizzes, but also through exercises, training, forums, and discussion. Many of us have extensive working experience in the field, but we often do not know how to relate it to the course. Therefore, various engagements should tap into our professional backgrounds, and this would make us better students."

Student comment: "For an instructor, engaged = active participation and timely response/feedback with the end goal of helping a student succeed. / For a student, engaged = active and timely participation in an effort to understand the course material for more reasons than to pass an exam or get an A on a test, and to feel supported by the instructor to learn the material."

Strategies for faculty: Be present in discussion forums or blogs by responding to students' posts, asking probing questions so as to model how you want students to ask more critical questions of their peers, encouraging students to ask probing questions to peer responses, and sending out emails or announcements, if needed, to spur the conversation on. For example, use a student question from a post as a springboard to get students motivated to participate. Furthermore, you can use a rubric that spells out expectations about how to craft initial responses to discussion questions and responses to peers. Many rubrics for online discussions exist on the Internet and can be used as is or adapted. You should also reach out to your center for teaching and learning for additional resources and guidance.

Timely feedback on assignments allows students to incorporate feedback for improvement on subsequent assignments. In larger classes, this may be challenging but not impossible. Providing examples or models of well-written assignments is one way to ensure students focus on the assignment's goals. Having a rubric to guide students' work helps them focus on clearly articulated expectations and helps faculty write comments directly related to the rubric. Comments from prior semester's assignment feedback can be re-used as well. Faculty, through experience from prior semesters, can predict where students typically get off track and incorporate supporting information into the assignment instructions. You can provide tips, suggestions, resources, or FAQs that guide students to success (feedforward). Finally, having students provide feedback to each other before final submission of an assignment will lead to a better quality product.

Relevance and real-world application

Student comment: "Engaged means not only to interact with students but to have a clear understanding of the concepts and apply them to real-world situations."

Strategies for faculty: Many online students are working adults, so making course content applicable to their real-world experiences is very important to keeping them engaged. Adults are more likely to tell you that they feel an assignment is an empty academic exercise or just busywork. Take time to know who your students are through pre-course surveys asking them questions not only about their expectations for your course, where they come from, or what program they are enrolled in, and so forth, but also about the type of work they do and their job responsibilities. Good assignments involve students using research skills, developing ideas for a product, or solving a problem that requires creative thinking skills. Use the information in the pre-course surveys to strategically form teams for assignments where diversity is emphasized. As much as students complain about the challenges of group work, we have to remind them about how important collaborative skills are in the workplace.

Motivation/interest

Student comment: "Engagement occurs on multiple levels: personal, in class, out of class. By in class, I mean that I read and thoughtfully work through the materials and assignments. I work with my peers to understand and explore the material. Out of class means I am so interested in the material or I need to answer a question so I seek outside resources to further explore and understand the material. Personal is the deepest form of engagement. It means that I have internalized the material. I understand it or I am trying to understand and apply it. I want to know more about it and I can extend what I have learned in class to my personal interests and profession."

Strategies for faculty: Making activities interesting and engaging for students usually involves providing opportunities for hands-on exploration. Having students learn about new online tools, for example, gets them relating the tool(s) to practical applications in their own worlds. For example, instead of requiring only text-based assignments, incorporate more audio or video such as VoiceThread, YouSeeU, lecture capture, and Jing. Intersperse synchronous meetings to mix things up. You can set up online meetings using conferencing tools like Adobe Connect or

Zoom. If you schedule a couple of meeting times in a given week, you may get most students to attend. For those who miss the online meeting, record the session and send out the link afterwards. Even if students attended, they may want to review that synchronous session as well. Using a variety of tools to present content is motivating—students learn in different ways—and if you provide variety and choice, that strategy should enhance interest and motivation.

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