INCREASING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN ONLINE EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP COURSES

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ABSTRACT

Utilization of online instruction continues to increase at universities, placing more emphasis on the exploration of issues related to adult graduate student engagement. This reflective case study reviews nontraditional student engagement in online courses. The goals of the study are to enhance student focus, attention and interaction. Findings suggest that interactivity seems to be a key in keeping students involved and achieving, with specific activities routinely favored by students. It is recommended that time spent engaging students is worthwhile and results in greater course satisfaction and academic effort.

Keywords: graduate students, online learning, student engagement

THE CHALLENGE OF INCREASING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN ONLINE EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP COURSES

Increasing student engagement in educational settings has become a priority for university instructors, because "student disengagement in school is widespread," (Bundick, Quaglia, Corso, & Haywood, 2014, p. 1) and when students are disengaged, they do not attend to the course the way they should. This topic has received considerable attention with the advent of online learning opportunities for working adult graduate students. It is important to recognize that, overall, engaged students are better students, who are able to attend to important instructional events (Zepke & Leach, 2010). They are more actively involved with the content and the coursework and they consequently earn higher grades and score higher on standardized tests (Finn & Rock, 1997; Newmann, Wehlage, & Lamborn, 1992; Pintrich & De Groot, 1990). Although we have more information on student engagement in programs, student disengagement continues to be an issue (Bundick, Quaglia, Corso, & Haywood, 2014) and this is especially pertinent when exploring online educational programs as some researchers believe online technologies might actually be a distraction to students (Vazquez & Chiang, 2016).

The stakes are higher than ever due to the expanding growth of online programming at the university level. Therefore, engaging adult graduate students in an online learning environment is an important area of inquiry as there is relatively little data about the level of engagement of adult graduate school learners in a nonresidential context (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). Additionally, increasing student engagement has been demonstrated to be a factor in reducing student attrition (Kizilcec & Halawa, 2015), which is germane to this discussion due to the high attrition rate for students enrolled in online programs (Boton & Gregory, 2015).

PURPOSE OF THIS INVESTIGATION

While considering the complexity of online delivery systems is novel and worthy of consideration, the authors believe the practical information they bring to the theoretical discussion of adult student engagement is worth pursuing. The reflective inquiries provided here might be useful in helping others in similar situations identify areas of importance as they move forward in their own instructional online settings. The majority of the programs offered by our department are for adult graduate students who have full-time jobs. Combined, we have over 30 years of experience teaching graduate students in face-to-face, hybrid

or online formats. We have taught thousands of graduate students within hundreds of courses across the world. We have obtained important feedback from anecdotal experiences, e-mails from students, comments made in class, end-of-course evaluations and exit interviews conducted prior to students' completion of the program. These form the basis for the authors' insights and recommendations.

BACKGROUND LITERATURE ON STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Student Engagement Defined

For the purposes of this article, we have used the Great Schools Partnership (n. d.) definition of student engagement: "Student engagement refers to the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism and passion that students show when they are learning or being taught, which extends to the level of motivation they have to learn and progress in their education," (para. 1). Student engagement is defined and measured in various ways due to the lack "of a broad conceptual framework for understanding how students are engaged at the classroom level and the ways in which teachers may play an active role in promoting student engagement," (Bundick, Quaglia, Corso, & Haywood, 2014, p. 1).

Even though a definition remains elusive, attempts have been made to measure student engagement issues over time, with most definitions usually focusing on two or three components: behavioral, affective or cognitive (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008). Appleton, Christenson and Furlong (2008) caution that even with increased researcher and practitioner interest in student engagement, more research needs to be done to develop terms and conceptualizations that provide consensus around these areas: "The theoretical and research literatures on engagement generally reflect little consensus about definitions and contain substantial variations in how engagement is operationalized and measured" (p. 370).

Venable illustrates valuable guidelines that define student engagement in learning and specifies activities it can provide. According to Venable (2012, para. 5), engaging learning is:

1. Relevant: The learner understands how the topic and materials are important and related to their academic program, as well as the potential for future application and learning transfer.

2. Participatory: Engaging learning is more than just a presentation of information. Students are active participants in the learning process interacting with the content, each other and their instructor, involved in conversations and decisions related to their learning.

3. Collaborative: Instructional strategies that promote engagement often leverage collaborative activities in which students work together to solve problems, practice new skills and create products that demonstrate their learning.

4. Challenging: Students are more likely to engage with learning activities when working toward a challenging, but reasonably achievable goal.

Venable (2012, para. 6) continues by saying that engaging learning activities provide:

5. Specific feedback. Students should receive feedback that extends beyond "correct/incorrect," with explanations of why they were correct or incorrect and suggestions for further improvement.

6. A friendly climate. Student engagement often hinges on the comfort level of the student in the learning environment. The culture of this environment should foster a safe classroom in which questions and input are encouraged and not subject to inappropriate criticism.

7. Connections. Opportunities should be present for online students to connect with each other and their instructors as members of a learning community. Students that feel like they are part of the group and know each other may be more likely to engage in class activities in a meaningful way.

Why is Student Engagement Important?

We know that active learning classrooms that promote student engagement within the instructional process lead to a positive change in student behavior (Reeve, 2012). When students are actively engaged, they "transition from being mere recipients of information to being participants actively engaged with new information in a learning environment" (Coastal

Carolina Community College, n. d., para. 1). Not only is there a change in student behavior, there also might be a change in the students' attitude towards education. "Research shows that engaged students experience greater satisfaction with school experiences, which may in turn lead to greater school completion and student attendance rates, as well as lower incidences of acting-out behaviors" (Voke, 2002, para. 4). According to Dixson (2010) online education has gotten to the point where it will remain an alternative for college students and we need to do a good job of programming it for these students. "Therefore, it is imperative that we learn what engages students in order to offer effective online learning environments" (p. 1). Handelsman, Briggs, Sullivan and Towler (2005) have made the point that student engagement is considered to be an important predictor of student achievement; yet, prior to their work, little had been done to develop an instrument to assess college student engagement in their courses. "Knowing about students' level of engagement might be useful when teachers work with individual students and design classroom experiences" (Handelsman, Briggs, Sullivan and Towler, 2005, p. 184). Kuh (2003) cautions that there is much more that needs to be learned about student engagement and educational effectiveness. Although there is a large body of research over the past 30 years related to faculty-student interactions (Cotton & Wilson, 2006), this information needs to be further examined from the point of view of online learning, especially since the traditional site- based university is changing. Students no longer just come to campus and focus primarily upon their studies, while simultaneously enjoying the supplementary social activities offered outside of their instructional program.

Zepke and Leach (2010) conducted a search of academic databases, trying to identify areas that encouraged student engagement in higher education. These include students' self- beliefs of being able to achieve their own learning objectives and their ability to work autonomously. They also found that recognizing both teaching and learning as necessary parts of student engagement, as are engaging in collaborative learning experiences that foster relationships and stretch the students academically. Finally, allowing students to be involved in academic environments that value and support students from diverse backgrounds increases engagement in higher education.

Changing Demographic Landscape in Online Adult Education

The makeup of the student demographic has seen an increase in a higher number of students with disabilities (Sears, Strauser, & Wong, 2014), more first-generation college students (Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012) and a greater emphasis on international students matriculating to institutions (Ward, Jacobs, & Thompson, 2015). Class work competes with a compounding number of other concerns in adult students' lives (Hartwig & Dunlosky, 2012) such as a strong predisposition to spend time utilizing social media (Kitsantas, Dabbagh, Chirinos, & Fake, 2016), dealing with increasing family responsibilities (Markle, Yeatts, Seward, & Spencer, 2016) and meeting financial need through employment (McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001).

Due to all of these competing issues for an adult graduate student's time and focus, establishing a supportive, flexible, yet rigorous set of expectations for student engagement benefits everyone involved. From the beginning of our program, our students recognize that our program requires effort to complete the courses, yet they also are provided student engagement supports by our program staff, as well as university supports through the Writing Center, the Mathematics Center, Technology Support, the Library and through academic achievement supports. Combined, these allow students to focus on their studies without having to worry about the logistics of their program.

Academic Impact on Student Engagement

Today's higher education environment places a stronger focus on ever-expanding curricular content combined with increased academic rigor (Arum & Roksa, 2011; Barnes & Slate, 2013; Campbell & Cabrera, 2014). Students in our program are being held to higher academic standards due to state certification as well as national program accreditation changes, which puts greater emphasis on increased student academic achievement. Student engagement plays a vital role in the success of students academically and longitudinally (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2004). McCormick and BrckaLorenz (2015) found that students were

concerned about teaching and learning factors as well as instrumental factors and that the level of concern varied by age, race, gender and academic major. Rabourn, Shoup and BrckaLorenz (2015) looked at adult learners and found that they were more likely to enroll part- time and take all of their classes online. These adults were also more engaged academically, found the campus to be less supportive of their needs and interacted less with faculty and peers when compared to their traditionally aged peers. Even with this supportive and important information, there is little known about the relationship that exists between teacher clarity and student achievement (BrckaLorenz, Cole, Kinzie, & Ribera, 2011).

Technology Impact on Student Engagement

College students have increased access to technologies and more of them are opting out of traditionally formatted classes for hybrid or fully online courses (Chen, Lambert, & Guidry, 2010). The reliance upon technology might mean that students are participating in purely online courses, blended-format courses or via flipped instruction utilizing digital media outside of class. According to Bergmann and Sams (2012), flipped teaching is a type of blended learning that utilizes Internet technology to allow instructors to have more time interacting with students, thus reducing the reliance on lectures. It is common practice to replace in-class lectures with online audio or video files, readings from text, notes or inquiry-based activities using offline resources (Willey & Gardner, 2013). These technological interventions often require students to not only learn the content but understand the associated learning technologies that might take cognitive precedence over curricular need. The majority of the students in our program never have the chance to meet their instructors until they attend graduation. The majority of our programs have our student meet virtually during weekly synchronous settings, with asynchronous activities embedded within the course. The professors in our department recognize the impact that this "impersonal" relationship might have on student achievement as well as student engagement. We minimize the impact of the lack of face-to-face contact by being readily available to our students via phone, e-mail, Blackboard or audio/video conferencing. It is not uncommon for faculty to have to schedule 3:00 am conference calls with students overseas to meet the instructional needs of the students. We believe that our emphasis on student contact via technology increases and improves our relationships with our students and this is seen in increased student engagement with their peers and coursework.

METHODOLOGY OF THIS INVESTIGATION

This introspective case study will explore the topic of adult student engagement in online settings from a theoretical and practical perspective. The authors' students are graduate student adult learners who generally are currently serving as classroom teachers during the day while simultaneously enrolled in an online master's degree program in educational leadership at a large regional university that conduct synchronous sessions in the evening or on the weekend. The introspective considerations and investigations presented here are post hoc and all insights contained are somewhat subjective. However, we believe that the mark of a true professional is to take feedback and apply it directly for continuous improvement. What you have here reflects a portion of our journeys for increased andragogical competence and effectiveness through self- reflection. Although the case study methodology employed here does not lend itself to a tight empirical investigation, we believe the insights we have gained and shared provide content that might be useful for other professionals as they formulate their own programs for graduate students utilizing online instructional delivery formats. Our experience is with adult learners in a graduate program in educational leadership, primarily through an online instructional delivery system. The students enrolled in our courses come largely from the Midwest, with students from also from around the country as well as the world. Information for this work was collected through informal formative assessment though online surveys administered during courses and through feedback from discussion board responses constructed during the course. Finally, feedback from summative, end-of-program exit interviews with program graduates provided a great deal of information.

We have found that professors who purposely and intentionally involve adult students in the learning process enhance student satisfaction and achievement. We have identified several factors related to student engagement that became apparent through the final formal course evaluations of both

faculty members and through discussions that took place with our students during online courses.

FINDINGS

Inconsistent Technological Capabilities

A major theme running throughout all of the information assembled relates to the impact that technology has on adult student engagement in online settings. For most students, the integration of online learning and technology in their program is still not reliable. Students from all over the world take classes online in our program and they connect to the course content using all types of equipment and software applications. While universities can mandate certain minimum thresholds in terms of connectivity, software and hardware, these can be hard to enforce. In order to be admitted into our program, students commit to having an up-to-date technology system, one that is robust enough to meet the rigors of media-rich educational content. Our students are expected to have software that can access and produce text as well as multimedia content. Technologically, these issues are often subject to what the student can afford. Our adult graduate students often are working professionals early in their career. Some take two jobs to help pay for their courses while still meeting the needs of their families. Consequently, we have had to identify and implement many creative solutions to help insure that students have ways to stay engaged synchronously throughout the course when unexpected occurrences happen.

Synchronous audio and video streaming can be a valuable tool, but connection speeds vary, often dramatically impeding instructional effectiveness when technological messes occur. One disadvantage that some "live classroom" applications have is that uploading audio or video files often occurs at different transmission speeds. This has the potential to leave the instructor with a hodgepodge of student work delivery times and this limits her or his ability to engage students synchronously in a coherent fashion. When the planned audio/video technology does not work, we have had to resort to text-based alternatives for delivering student work such as Google Docs, discussion boards embedded within the university's learning management system or blogs for the students to be able to get their perspectives across to their peers during instructional sessions.

Learning Management Systems

Our university selected the learning management system utilized in all of our online courses and it tends to work for the majority of students. However, for some, especially in countries with limited bandwidth capabilities or in areas of unreliable internet connectivity, the standard system is an impediment to robust student engagement. When students interact synchronously with embedded audio or video, we have had to rely upon other formats to get our adult students engaged "in the moment" with their peers or their instructional content. We have resorted to having students provide prerecorded audio or video responses to classroom instruction when the students are not able to participate in real time. This "work-around" strategy provides students the opportunity to offer their perspectives asynchronously and it allows them to have their perspectives heard and acknowledged. Since all of our online programs have a synchronous and asynchronous component that relies heavily upon a fully functioning learning management system, when unforeseen issues arise, the impact on the instructional process is usually significant. Having alternative means for students to be actively engaged in the synchronous instruction usually results in their "participating" asynchronously, often through independent projects where they provide their insights after listening to a recording of the session. Although this is not instructionally optimal, students have relayed to us that they appreciate the efforts that we make to assist them in staying instructionally active during trying technological issues.

Providing Content from a Variety of Perspectives

The ability of students to provide their worldview of what is currently transpiring in their professional lives (in literally every corner of the world) provides a robust and enhanced perspective to the andragogical issues being dealt with in the course curriculum. We have been able to move away from a state- or regional-centric perspective (which tends to be constrained by homogenous experiences due to legislative, fiscal and policy similarities) to a more expansive view of the content and topics offered in class. We believe that making content more applicable to the lives of the adult students greatly enhances the opportunity for

student engagement during instruction and when assignments are completed.

Our students normally take online classes after a long day of work, with a typical synchronous session of 90 minutes in the evening. The impact of working all day, taking care of home issues, meeting family obligations and often dealing with young children, adds stress on the instructional setting. If this is left unaddressed, it has the potential for minimizing student engagement, not just with the instructional session but with the program as a whole. We recognize this fact and take the time to reach out and understand the family, work, social, medical and educational issues that occur in the lives of our students. We take a great deal of time supporting students and thus their engagement, by providing the support typically given by a mentor. Instructionally, we attempt to address the students' needs to increase engagement by restructuring both instructional format and delivery and we consider additional or alternative ways for adult graduate students to demonstrate course competency to get credit for engaged time apart from the time designated for synchronous activities. The learning management system utilized by our university has a feature that allows instructors to establish and keep running text in chat windows during the entire length of the course. This provides students the opportunity to meet online at predetermined times with their peers to work cooperatively on assigned projects or to meet with their instructor for "online office hours" to discuss issues of interest to the parties involved. Providing the freedom from the traditional perspective on physical, synchronous meetings has provided tremendous flexibility in both course content acquisition and discussion by allowing our adult graduate students to have access to content when they are cognitively, technically, logistically, physically or socially able to attend to the course materials.

Distractions in the Students' Environments

In our online environments, most of our adult students are participating from home, with many attendant distractions seldom found in face-to-face environments. During synchronous activities we have heard children crying, dogs barking, family arguments, television and music and even roosters crowing. In one notable instance, a student was concerned that her apartment was being broken into during the class session.

Routine, as well as extreme, home-based situations can make participation in synchronous online instructional sessions more difficult, not just for the students in the immediate frenetic environment, but also for other students and the instructor that coexist in the online classroom milieu. With our course requirements for weekly synchronous classes, family life often gets in the way. During times of significant commotion, students have the option to mute their microphones, yet they are still able to respond to instructional content synchronously thorough the use of chat rooms, whiteboards, discussion boards or ancillary programs like Google Docs. The Web 2.0 learning tools and learning management systems have the flexibility and capabilities to offer adult graduate students attending school online increased opportunity for engagement, even when their immediate situations might warrant distraction or even inattention.

Continued Addition of Newer Technological Capabilities

There are many technological supports and interventions that exist, which, if we attempted to chronicle, would take up volumes in a professional journal. Educators interested in increasing student engagement have the technological world available to them, with newer tools being developed daily. We continue to be amazed and in awe of the capabilities that currently exist; yet, we realize that these capabilities will continue to expand and grow as appropriate learning tools are developed then integrated within learning management systems or become available as stand-alone programs and applications. According to Robinson and Hullinger (2008), developments in online learning are ever changing yet here to stay. With that in mind, we continue to be responsive and reflective as we integrate Web 2.0 tools into our online learning environment and expect that we will need to continue to do so as long as we remain in education. We are always looking for technological capabilities that are scalable and provide capabilities for enhanced student engagement during individual courses as well as during a student's time within our program. We continue to search for ways to keep our graduates engaged as alumni because once credentialed, our graduates provide a potential resource for field work with our most recent set of students enrolled in our program.

Any increased technological functionality that we consider for inclusion in our program needs to be supportive of and in compliance with the existing technological specifications mandated by the university. When newer capabilities are discovered, we make our technological support personnel aware. We work closely with them to identify the potential for inclusion in a way that does not interfere with or impede the functionality of our existing technology. Conversely, we have both been approached by the technological support staff to beta test newer technologies that they have identified as being potentially relevant and supportive to establishing, maintaining and increasing student engagement in the instructional process. Finally, we believe that the best way to integrate newer technologies is to have a strong emphasis on their curricular applications and their ability to meet instructional and learning needs. There are many instructional "toys" that are not applicable to our program. Therefore, we subject any new technology under instructional consideration to a curricular alignment process.

The Need for Professional Development for Faculty

The development of tools that influence student engagement and that are available for instruction across academic disciplines and fields of study will probably continue to increase unabated, so we both spend considerable amount of time presenting at and attending professional development conferences and presentations related to the utilization of Web 2.0 tools for online education. No matter what is developed, the tools incorporated into the program need to enhance the instructors' ability to transmit course content, increase the students' ability to understand the content and to effectuate increased student engagement with content and their colleagues.

We are very fortunate to work for a university that provides a great deal of instructional technology support and professional development. We are also fortunate to have faculty campus wide, representing many colleges and disciplines, in our training sessions. The ability to attend training opportunities with faculty outside our content areas provides us with avenues to explore, compare, expand and share tools that we find of instructional value with our colleagues across departments or colleges at the university. We have found during these trainings that the tools utilized to meet a specific instructional need in a totally different discipline in one program have the potential for adoption in portions of our program. We encourage those reading this to recognize that there are tools that their colleagues use for content-specific reasons in their programs that might have applicability in their program. Focus on the instructional utility and capability of the technology in use by your colleagues and ask them for their impressions on the impact they have on student engagement. Also, talk to the instructional support personnel in those areas outside of your academic area. They often can help you efficiently navigate instructional adoption issue within your program.

We strongly believe that university professors should continue to try new technologies, when andragogically appropriate, in order to augment their instruction with the tools necessary to facilitate adult graduate student engagement within their courses. These tools might be utilized as the primary format for content delivery or they may provide the main basis for student interactions. Either way, technological tools will always form the basis of delivery for online educational opportunities and as they become more sophisticated, they will be able to address individualized instruction needs as well as content to decrease the impact of interruptions, thus helping to increase student engagement. As newer technologies are developed, we are suggesting that alternative methods and capabilities be proactively considered by instructors teaching in online environments so when the inevitable synchronous interruption occurs, there will be an immediate "work-around" solution readily available to maintain student attention, interaction and engagement.

Assessing Student Needs for Engagement through Assessments

It is easy to assume that your efforts will lead to increased student engagement with your course content, with their colleagues or with the instructor. Often, we only fully understand the impact of our initiatives with students when we ask them for feedback. Student feedback related to faculty behaviors that positively impact student engagement should be solicited and utilized for future courses. The background knowledge obtained for this paper relies heavily on feedback provided by students, both formally and informally. The standard university-accepted method for soliciting

student feedback is through the course evaluation system. Encouraging students to complete the faculty performance assessment often does not provide the breadth or depth of feedback desired because student feedback via these instruments can be difficult to obtain. Obtaining appropriate assessment and feedback data related to instruction in the online environment can be challenging. Mid-semester and end-of-course evaluations of the teacher by the student, as well as the student from the teacher, provide a vehicle for expressing mutual expectations for social behavior and engagement. Having each party discuss what is going well and what can be improved is a great tool to allow both instructor and student to identify ways that engagement can be enhanced and improved. End-of-course interviews, where students provide the instructor with feedback related to the course, are another way that students have an opportunity to participate in the development of engaging with online courses. Providing feedback for future course development to the instructor increases the likelihood that future courses will provide multiple opportunities to increase student engagement. We encourage you to try and find ways to open reliable and valid, as well as organizationally accepted, lines of communication with your students to generate course feedback. We believe that demonstrating to students that you not only care about their impressions but that you take steps to meet their expectations for future courses helps to establish a trusting instructional relationship and this leads to increased student engagement.

STRATEGIES AND TIPS

An instructor is perceived as being "present" in the online classroom when "visible" to the student (Baker & Taylor, 2012). A strong instructional presence is necessary in synchronous online learning environments during the instructional presentation, discussion, activity and assessment stages of instruction so students recognize that the instructor is engaged, thus encouraging students to be engaged. In asynchronous instructional settings, presence is even more important. Providing appropriate parameters for interactions among the participants in the course for both synchronous and asynchronous instructional settings requires proactive, creative and consistent faculty attention. We offer several insights that we have identified

that have helped to increased student attention, compliance, motivation, engagement and academic success in our programs.

Establishing Attention Prior to Class

Recognizing that many of our students come to their virtual synchronous class after a long day of work and might have to deal with situations in their environment where they have their computer, we feel that the way that we open a class session needs to be inviting, welcoming, motivating and centering. We have a minimal amount of time to refocus their attention, emotionally and intellectually, before we get started with the instructional content for the session. We have asked our students for feedback on motivating activities that help them center and focus on the instructional mode and that allow the faculty to gain an instructional presence and control in the instructional environment.

At the beginning of each synchronous class session, a strong instructor presence and a centering of student attention and motivation can be achieved through webcams and frequently engaging students in the class. Offering quick interactive activities at the start of class, such as providing a map and asking the students to enter their hometown or having them identify their city of birth, are ways to motivate students to get their "voice in the room" and start them attending to the content. Playing music before class is another way to get students focused and engaged. We survey students before the first class session and incorporate their preferences in songs played to increase attention and engagement. Harris (2008) suggests that tasks must be enjoyable for student participation to occur and music is one enjoyable way to reach students. Konrad (2000) asserts that "Music enhances the process of learning.it nourishes, which include our integrated sensory, attention, cognitive, emotional and motor capacities" (VH1 Save the Music Foundation, n.d., p. 3). Our students say they enjoy this aspect of our courses.

During Synchronous/Asynchronous Instructional Sessions

Faculty can help maintain adult attention and engagement during both synchronous and asynchronous instruction by taking online polls at multiple points during class. This allows the faculty to get a quick assessment of student content acquisition, while ensuring that students are

engaged and attentive. Inserting brief audio files of noted persons whose work is relevant to the class and then asking several students to summarize the audio in a few sentences is another way to maintain attention and engagement. Interspersing instructor lectures and activities with short student presentations keeps students focused and allows for rich discussions related to the students' individual perspectives. To keep the student activity and engagement level high, the authors use a "five and five" rule: They have recognized that it is important that they provide no more than five PowerPoint slides lasting no longer than five minutes of instruction before changing the format or instructional expectations. Again, these deliberate instructional interventions help prevent wandering attention spans of students and forces the presenters to be concise and to the point.

Establishing and Maintaining Student Relationships Over Distance

Since our students often need to schedule their lives around their online classes, we have placed a great deal of emphasis on establishing times when we are available for student questions, comments or concerns. We often schedule time for student-faculty interactions directly before or after synchronous class sessions. If students are not available during these times, we make a concerted effort to provide opportunities for virtual office hours.

Virtual office hours during the course provide an opportunity for adult students to meet their instructors away from the "classroom" so issues and ideas can be discussed. The authors have found these non-structured times to be very important to the development and maintenance of student engagement and relationship building. Issues related to course content and student achievement are traditionally a part of office hours, but in a virtual environment, the discussions often revolve around technology capabilities and limitations and the impact they have on student access and achievement. It is important that instructors in virtual environments have a level of technological sophistication to be able to assist students in trouble-shooting minor issues. When major issues arise, the instructor should have an understanding of the levels and types of technological support that are available at the university for the students to access.

CAUTIONS AND LIMITATIONS

As the reader moves through this topic during further exploration, it is important to identify how the authors have conceptualized "engagement." In this article, we have conceptualized it as the way synchronous and asynchronous online educational experiences and expectations are developed from a programmatic support, university policy and procedure and instructional delivery frame of reference: All of these items have occurred within the frame of our professional and personal experiences. With that caution, it is important to realize that many of the interventions and suggestions that we have provided might be situationally and resource specific. The content covered here is reflective of our experience and you might not have all of the features described here in your setting.

Guidelines for Technology

Online learning opportunities, both synchronous and asynchronous, are always constrained by the least common denominator of technological availability and acceptance. If one part of the instructional online setting is deleteriously impacted, that has an effect on the capability of the entire system, thus potentially resulting in loss of student focus, attention, achievement or engagement. It is difficult to integrate an immediate non-technical intervention during times of technical difficulties to maintain adult student engagement, the best way to deal with glitches is to state expectations related to course expectations for technological capabilities. A proactive and honest discourse related to the technological needs and capabilities in the teaching and learning environments should occur with the students before entering the program. Supports for students at the university level should exist for technical trouble shooting as well as academic supports.

Guidelines for Social Interactions

It is important to recognize that the term engagement can be subjective. Engagement does not necessarily equate to participation and it certainly does not attendance. Engagement can be an elusive construct from a practical student perspective and it must be discussed by the instructor and the learner. In many ways, we believe engagement of adult graduate students in an online course is impacted by the culture established by

the instructor. A portion of the establishment of culture relates to expectation of student behavior in both synchronous and asynchronous learning environments. These guidelines help support the expectations that all participant in the course have for each other and they give direction to both the learner and the facilitator alike. Although some of the guidance provided here may appear to have the potential for being incredibly punitive, when the authors proactively discuss their expectations with their adult students, they have seldom had to resort to interventions beyond simple reminders and redirection. Through practice and experience, the authors have incorporated the following guidelines to assist their adult graduate students in establishing a mutually respectful ground rules that encourage student engagement during their courses.

Ground rules.

Each student is encouraged to help create an environment during class that promotes learning, supports dignity and shows mutual respect for everyone, thus increasing engagement for all. Ground rules are established for student interactions so everyone has the ability to express themselves in a nonthreatening and respectful environment. Many of the issues discussed in the authors' courses have the potential for conflict if left unchecked. The authors have found that taking a proactive approach by making expectations known through language in the course syllabus and by a review of university policy for civil discourse, have dramatically reduced the amount of and potential for conflict within the authors' courses.

Administrative relief.

If a significant misbehavior on the part of a student occurs, the result might be that the student would be asked to leave the class. If the infraction is significant enough, the student may be subjected to disciplinary action under the Code of Student Rights, Responsibilities and Disciplinary Procedures. Infractions not tolerated under the authors' university code of conduct include students that speak at inappropriate times, display inattention, take frequents breaks or interrupt the class by coming to class late. Students who engage in loud or distracting behaviors, use cell phones or pagers inappropriately in class, use inappropriate language, are verbally abusive or display defiance or disrespect to others might also

be open to sanction. Finally, students who behave aggressively toward others are subject to discipline. Making expectations clear to all students before the course begins, with frequent reminders during the course, helps students develop self-control so they can conduct themselves in a fashion consistent with a respect for the rights of others and with the university's function as an educational institution

CONCLUSION

The topic of adult student engagement will continue to be of considerable interest to practitioners and researchers alike. The topic gets even more interesting when issues related to online instruction are included. Although it is true that some students want to move through the coursework with minimal interaction with the instructor, their peers or even the instructional content, the authors believe that the majority of adult students enroll in courses for professional and altruistic reasons. In order to meet the moral obligations of providing effective instruction, the authors have taken a great deal of care to critically examine their own instructional behaviors (Burgess, 2012) and engage in a great deal of professional development and reflective practice (Schön, 1983) related to effective online instructional delivery of content. We encourage others in similar situations to consider the resources listed in this paper. We also suggest that faculty members get to know the instructional capabilities that exist within their designated learning management systems and that they exploit the capabilities they have to increase student engagement, attention and participation. Ensuring that all students have a functioning audio and video system, with the expectation that they utilize it, also helps to ensure that students remain engaged in the learning process. Finally, providing students the opportunity to choose how to demonstrate their own learning of content is another way we have found to engage students in the online learning process.

In this article, we have examined the perspective of student engagement through a faculty lens. According to Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005), faculty do matter. Faculty have to develop student-centered programs that are based on student learning needs. This is accomplished when barriers to learning are removed and techniques and experiences that promote student learning are

developed. This introspective case study combines our teaching experience and program review and it relates them with practical interventions we have found to be effective in students' online environments. It is our hope that this article provides the reader with useful and relevant ideas, along with an academic framework highlighting their importance in the instructional decisions made by the professor. We also hope to encourage our peers to explore the topics further in light of their own instructional needs and situations.

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