Journal of Teaching and Learning with Technology, Vol. 2, No. 1, June 2013, pp. 62 - 65.

Strategies for engagement in online courses: Engaging with the content, instructor, and other students

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Framework

In recent years, there has been an increasing focus on student engagement (e.g., Pike & Kuh, 2009; Porter, 2009). Student engagement occurs when "students make a psychological investment in learning. They try hard to learn what school offers. "They take pride not simply in earning the formal indicators of success (grades), but in understanding the material and incorporating or internalizing it in their lives" (Newmann, 1992, pp. 2-3). Research (e.g., Kinzie, 2010; Prince, 2004) strongly suggests that when students are engaged, they tend to perform better. When students are actively engaged in the material, they tend to process it more deeply, which leads to successful retention of the material (e.g., Craik & Lockhart, 1972). In this paper, we describe several ways in which online courses can be designed to promote student engagement. All of these techniques are consistent with Quality Matters Rubric Standards (Quality Matters, 2011) area number 5: Learning Interaction and Engagement.

- 5.2 Learning activities provide opportunities for interaction that support active learning.
- 5.3 The instructor's plan for classroom response time and feedback on assignments is clearly stated.
- 5.4 The requirements for student interaction are clearly articulated.

Consistent with Quality Matters, we have used a number of strategies in our course designs to foster student engagement with the course content, with the instructor, and with other students (see Table 1 for a summary of these strategies). Below, we will describe in more detail how these simple course design and implementation strategies can be used to promote student engagement.

Making It Work

Student Engagement with Course Content. To encourage students to engage with the course content, we employ several strategies. In most of our courses, students primarily receive content from a textbook and from videos and interactive activities. One strategy we use is to create short (no more than five minute) audio introductions to each module. These introductions involve the instructor talking enthusiastically through four to five PowerPoint slides and presenting a general overview of the module content. We use Knovio (www.knovio.com), which is free and does not require any software for students to download. Additionally, we require students to complete a number of engaging, online, interactive activities. These activities are generally in the form of a game, which most students find to be stimulating (e.g., Davidson, 2011). Many activities of this sort can readily be found online (e.g., Merlot: www.merlot.org) or through textbook publishers (e.g., Pearson's MyStatLab: www.mystatlab.com).

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Table 1. ***Summary of Strategies for Student Engagement.***

Engagement with Content	**Engagement with the Instructor**	**Engagement with Other Students**
Listen to the audio introductions	Listen to audio introductions	Respond to classmates' critical thinking answers in discussion board
Engage in the online interactive activities	Watch short, how-to videos	Participate in "Open Discussion" in Learning Management System
Complete mini projects	Read frequent feedback in email and in Learning Management System	Participate in exam review activities
Respond to critical thinking questions in discussion forum	Read "bookend" weekly emails	
	Participate in "Ask the Professor" Discussion in Learning Management System	
	Read and respond to individualized "How's it going?" emails	
	Read and respond to professor's email responses	

Another strategy we use is to require students to complete a "mini project" for each module. The mini projects are designed to require students to apply the material from the text and the interactive activities, relate the material to their own lives, to learn or make use of existing skills such as technology or creative abilities, and to be fun. One example of a mini project includes writing a letter to your grandparents telling them what you will learn in this course, how it applies to your life and to their lives, and what questions you have about the material. When students apply course material to their own lives, they tend to remember the information better (e.g., Roediger, Gallo, & Geraci, 2002). Another example is for students to create a short video (we suggest they use Screenr or Screencast-O-Matic) explaining the parts of the brain and the nervous system. Other mini projects involve creating posters, public-service brochures, and letters to a newspaper editor.

Student Engagement with Instructor. We employ a number of different strategies to encourage interaction with the instructor. In addition to the audio introductions previously described, we also create short, "how-to" videos (using Screenr or Screencast-O-Matic) to present "Frequently Asked Questions" about the course, to show students how to access feedback in the Collaborative Learning Environment (CLE), or to show students how to use software to create a poster. Like the audio introductions, it is important that students know that it is their instructor's voice they are hearing in the audio. Additionally, for each module, students receive feedback from the instructor on their work. Feedback is given in the course CLE as well as via email. The instructor also sends "bookend" emails each week which provide general feedback on the prior module and previews the next module. Typically, the instructor will try to add a sentence or two

that is not course-related, such as a comment about a sporting event or the weather. We also engage with students in an "Ask the Professor" discussion board in the course CLE. The idea is for students to ask questions about the course, the material, or anything else. Other students can then see the student's questions as well as the instructor's response.

One of the most important strategies that we use is to send personalized "how's it going?" emails to students two times per semester. The goal of these emails is to let students know that we care about them, which we know is vitally important to student success (e.g., Christophel, 1990; Swan & Richardson, 2003). We estimate that about 90% of students respond to these emails to let us know how the class is going for them and how they are doing in general. Finally, we respond quickly to students' emails to us. We hear often in course evaluations that students appreciated our quick responses as it let them know that the instructor cared about them. All of these strategies are employed to achieve the goal of promoting student engagement.

Student Engagement with Other Students. There are three primary mechanisms we use to encourage student engagement with other students. First, students are required to post a response to two other students' critical thinking answers in the CLE discussion board. Students post these responses for all modules, so they are interacting every week with their classmates. Second, there is an "Open Discussion" board in the CLE, which students (and the instructor) can use to post comments or questions about anything. In general, if students do not initiate discussion, then the instructor will. Topics might include queries about favorite movies or books, requests for comments on current events, or a simple query asking how everyone's weekend was spent. Third, for each exam, students are required to complete some type of review and post to the discussion board. The review might take the form of generating questions about the material, creating a concept map, or writing a few paragraphs about how the material across three modules is connected. The "interaction" takes place with the requirement that other students are required to read what students have posted (and yes, students are told that the CLE records, for the instructor, who reads what post).

Future Implications

We have been employing these engagement strategies in our courses for many years as they are consistent with how we design our courses with Quality Matters in mind. How do we know if our students are engaged? Research (e.g., Johnson, 2012) suggests that students are engaged when they exhibit the following behaviors:

- Paying attention
- Taking notes
- Listening
- Asking questions
- Responding to questions
- Reacting
- Reading critically
- Writing to learn, creating, planning, problem solving, discussing, debating, and asking questions
- Performing/presenting, inquiring, exploring, explaining, evaluating, and experimenting
- Interacting with other students, gesturing and moving

Anecdotal evidence suggests that our students are exhibiting many of these behaviors, leading us to believe that they are engaged with the material, the instructor, and other students. For example, students are frequently interacting with other students in the online discussion board, they seem to take pride in the mini projects for each module, and they typically exceed minimum word counts on projects and critical thinking questions. They also regularly engage via email with the instructor and report that they are enjoying the class and learning.

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