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How to Add Student Engagement to Your Online Courses

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Student engagement has become a focus of higher education—online education in particular—over the past few years. The wide range of interactive methods now available on the web provides instructors with a multitude of ways to insert engagement into their courses.

But while we hear about engagement from instructors and software companies, students themselves have been a somewhat silent voice in the discussions. Florence Martin and Doris Bolliger address this oversight by surveying students in online courses to identify which activities they find most engaging. The researchers divided engagement activities into three categories: learner-to-learner, learner-to-instructor, and learner-to-content. Their findings suggest a number of ways for online instructors to infuse student engagement into their courses.

Learner-to-learner

Students ranked the good old icebreaker discussion activity as the best means to foster learner-to-learner engagement. We are naturally hesitant to share information in online discussions with people we do not know, and so a simple icebreaker can be a good way to get students comfortable communicating with one another. Perhaps the simplest icebreaker is to ask students to post a personal bio in the first week of class. I believe that this bio should not simply list major or work history. It should It should include information about the student's interests. It is the non-professional activities that most interest us to others. Just as I tell instructors to avoid the common error of summarizing their CV in their bio, students should be asked to include at least one interesting thing about themselves.

The instructor should model the type of posting he or her wants. For instance, I always mention that I was married on a 100-mile bike ride. I also make a joke about growing up in Wisconsin. These things also provide something to comment on. Maybe someone else has an interesting bike story. I also recommend always responding to each student's bio to demonstrate that you read it.

Collaborative work was ranked second among learner-to-learner engagement strategies. Interestingly, group work in general was ranked low by the students. How can this be? Students might be drawing a distinction between formal, graded projects, and more informal work to help each other succeed. Formal projects can be difficult to coordinate because of differing schedules, as well as creating the free rider problem. But collaboration need not lead to a group product. An example is peer-review of written work. Students can post a draft of their assignment and get feedback from other students to improve their work before handing it in. Students doing individual projects could also be given a space to ask others for advice or ideas. This can be a discussion forum dedicated not to examining particular readings or answering predefined questions, but rather

a place for students to request help of others. Students thus become a resource for one another. In the real world we ask coworkers, neighbors, or even online strangers for advice when running into difficulty on a project, and there is no reason why students must be prevented from doing the same. I have found that students enjoy taking on the role of teacher by helping others with their problems.

Instructor-to-learner engagement

Students ranked instructor announcements and reminders as the most beneficial form of instructor-to-learner engagement. Too often instructors rely on students to remember course deadlines under the guise of teaching students responsibility. But in the real world it is good practice to always send out reminders of upcoming events to groups. Plus, the messages keep students connected to the course, and can be used to supplement course material with information about current events that relate to course topics.

Most instructors rely on email to contact students, but email has become passé among students as the world had moved to texting. Some Learning Management Systems have a mass texting function, but if yours does not, then two good free systems to use are Remind (https://www.remind.com) and MightyText, a Google Chrome extension. Both allow instructors to text entire classes at once from their desktop computer, similar to sending a mass email. I recommend that instructors send their students at least one or two texts per week with deadline reminders, links to outside material, or questions.

Grading rubrics were the second most valued form of instructor-to-learner engagement. Too often students are given limited understanding of what went into determining their grade. Providing a rubric lets students know what they need to do to get the grade they want, and what kinds of things to avoid when crafting their work. They also help the instructor standardize the grading.

Rubrics are just a part of feedback on student performance, and students are starved for good feedback from their instructors. Most faculty take a grade-based mentality to feedback, just providing short margin comments on what the student did wrong as a means of justifying the grade. But this does not teach the student anything, because it does not help the student understand what they ought to have done differently. Good teaching means shifting from a grading to a coaching mentality by providing students with feedback that will improve their performance. Instead of just pointing out that a student missed a concept, the instructor should explain the concept. Instead of just stating that the organization of a work is confusing, the instructor should suggest a different organization. This kind of teaching feedback is by far the most effective for improving student performance.

Learner-to-content

Students reported that realistic scenarios are the best means of generating engagement with course content. For instance, students in my medical ethics class spend a lot of time assuming the role of a doctor who must decide what to do in a medical ethics case. Not only are these scenarios interesting to students because most are real, but they are better teaching devices than narrowly

focused questions about ethics, because students must determine what in the case is relevant. Dan Meyer argued that instead of teaching math by giving students math problems, students should be given practical problems, such as determining how long it will take to fill a bucket with a garden hose (See his Ted Talk). This forces the student to pull out the relevant information from the situation, as they would need to do in real life. Similarly, my medical ethics cases force students to determine what is important and what principles apply to the considerations. This will better prepare them for clinical practice. Nearly any subject lends itself to similar scenarios that can be used to both draw the student's interest and improve learning.

Structured discussions ranked second in value within the learner-to-content category. Importantly, unstructured discussions were listed as lacking much value. This illustrates the balancing act between structure and freedom in online discussions. The instructor does not want to constrain imagination and monopolize the discussion, yet also wants it to stay on track and be productive. The best method for doing so is to start with specific questions for discussion but make them open-ended enough to allow for different responses. I like to use debate-type questions that allow for reasonable positions on both sides in order to get the competitive juices flowing. I also believe it is important for the instructor to make his or her presence known in the discussion to demonstrate interest in student views without taking over the discussion. This can often be done by taking a student statement and turning it into a question that is pitched back out into the class for further discussion.

Finally, students stated that they valued material presented in multiple formats, especially multi-media formats such as video. Sound and imagery is captivating to everyone, student or otherwise, and goes a long way toward drawing and keeping the viewer's attention. This is why video is my first choice for most educational content that I create. I would add, though, that interactions should be distributed across the content to elicit further engagement. Simple questions added via a system such as EdPuzzle (https://edpuzzle.com) force the student to contemplate the information and ultimately improves retention.

References

Martin, F. & Bolliger, D.U. (2018). Engagement matters: Student perceptions on the importance of engagement strategies in the online learning environment. Online Learning 22(1), 205- doi:10.24059/olj.v22i1.1092

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