



Engaging Online Programs

10 Ways to Enhance Instructor Presence
in Online Programs

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Don't settle for passive online learning experiences.



It is well established that a higher degree of faculty engagement positively influences student satisfaction and retention in online programs (Garrison, 2007; Anderson & Elloumi, 2004; Shea, Pickett & Pelz, 2003). However, faculty members often report several challenges when attempting to increase their level of engagement in their classrooms. Heavy workloads, lack of time, and inexperience with the latest instructional tools can restrict even the most diligent faculty (Public, 2011). For the past five years, Wiley has been developing methods of faculty engagement that are effective and efficient to overcome some of these obstacles. This paper offers an array of solutions that foster faculty engagement and drive results.

A Research-Based Model for Designing Engaging Online Learning Experiences

Garrison, Anderson, and Archer's (2000) Community of Inquiry (COI) framework is an excellent model for illustrating how purposeful faculty engagement positively influences learning experiences. The COI framework asserts that "learning occurs within the Community through interaction of three core elements...cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence" (Garrison, Anderson, and Archer, 2000).

Cognitive presence describes the process a group of learners go through as they explore new ideas, reflect on how they resonate or conflict with existing understanding, and finally integrate the new concepts into a more comprehensive view of the topic. Social presence describes the extent to which students feel connected to a real community of peers who share their goals and interests. Teaching presence refers to the organization and design of the course, leading the discourse therein, and providing constructive feedback to learners.

Student engagement results from the interaction of all three COI elements. This paper will focus on teaching presence; specifically, the activities engaged in by faculty while facilitating a course. The COI framework defines the teaching presence as "the design, facilitation and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes" (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, and Archer, pg. 33). Studies show that a higher degree of faculty engagement positively impacts a student's learning experience, influencing student satisfaction and retention (Garrison, 2007; Anderson & Elloumi, 2004; Shea, Pickett & Pelz, 2003).

Faculty's Role in an Online Class

In our work helping hundreds of faculty members make the transition to online teaching, we have noted differences between how the faculty member engages the traditional on-ground student versus the nontraditional asynchronous online student. In on-ground settings, faculty members have developed specific approaches for building rapport with their students. They might engage in small talk prior to class about the weather, campus news, or local cultural events. They likely will share personal stories or talk about projects they are working on. In traditional classroom sessions, students experience a level of affiliation through this kind of exchange and from their physical proximity to instructor and peers. In the asynchronous online learning environment, faculty members often forego these kinds of rapport-building activities (and their online analogs), thereby missing the opportunity to build the same sense of familiarity and togetherness with their students.

Part of the challenge is that online students can essentially choose their level of engagement with the communication occurring in the course (Branch, Chen, and Jang, 2010). In the traditional classroom, students are sequestered in the same place free from outside distraction and must follow along with the activities the faculty chooses. Online students direct how they spend the bulk of their class time; as an example, they may choose to focus only on assignments and not lecture or discussion. And as comes with the territory for adult learners, they are likely to encounter distractions



when sitting down to complete their coursework, whether from other online activities, family, or work (Roper, 2007). Both of these factors—students' self-direction and outside distractions—can interfere with their connection with the class and make it difficult to establish an effective learning community.

In our experience, we have observed that specific types of faculty interaction can overcome these challenges and reduce the perceived distance that online students may feel in their online courses. The skills required are simple to learn - faculty members need only to be willing to introduce new techniques. Just as the structure of the course must be adjusted to transition successfully into the online world, faculty engagement strategies must change as well. Ten techniques we have found to be effective are outlined below.

Ten Ways to Engage Online Students

1. Post a Video Introduction

Just as it is important to prompt students to introduce themselves, instructors should do the same. Welcome videos allow instructors to present their personality, share their passion for the subject matter, inform students of their experience with the material, and outline expectations. This is a simple technique that reduces the perceived distance an online student may experience during the course. Most laptops come with integrated webcams and free software is widely available online, making this suggestion a virtually no-cost option that is easily reusable for future sections of a course.

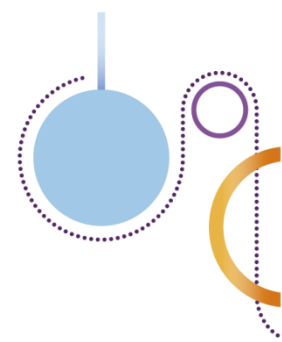
To support the objective of time efficiency, we recommend that these videos are no longer than two or three minutes. It has been our experience that students typically start to drop off the video after the three-minute mark, so this is a good length for giving students a brief overview. We recommend watching the video before posting or asking a colleague to take a look—in order to make sure that the audio and visual aspects are of a high quality, ensuring students will benefit from the experience.

2. Rediscover Student Introductions

We find that as students progress through their degree program, they may start to post messages that are very short or repeat previous information. Instructors can rejuvenate the introductory exercise by asking stimulating questions that students will want to answer or that will instantly connect the student to the subject matter.

Suggestions here include asking students to state a goal as it relates to the subject matter, or conversely, to describe their prior experience with the material, so that the instructor can locate information to help make certain course concepts easier to understand. For example, faculty in a Master of Nursing program can ask students to share their experiences with hospice or palliative care. Another suggestion is to ask students what they are hoping to achieve by enrolling in the program. This information can be used by faculty in upcoming discussions, prompting students to think towards their future goals instead of regurgitating information about their current situation. Enhance interaction even further by asking students to post video introductions as well.

3. Customize the Course Roster



Bonding with students is much easier when faculty can connect a face to a name. This concept is especially true in the online environment. Have students post an actual picture (no avatars, pets, or kids) to the discussion forum as well as upload it to the learning management system. Photos build authenticity into interactions. The faculty member should lead the effort by having his/her picture already in the course when it opens to students.

If the learning management system does not display pictures in the course roster itself, faculty can tie the roster photographs to the student introductions in a separate document, creating a tool that will allow them to easily refer back to student backgrounds. This will allow for more personal interaction and allow faculty to tie the student's personal and professional goals into interactions.

4. Set Up Web Alerts

Set up Google Alerts that relate to each module in the course and let Google do the work of keeping you abreast of news and developments in the field. Google will automatically email the results of a search related to the specified topic or topics at specified intervals. A quick review of the results can supply links to news stories that are relevant to the course material, which can then be easily posted in the online classroom. For example, in a health policy nursing course, the faculty member can post weekly links to healthcare legislation under congressional review, which can potentially impact the treatment of patients.

Highlighting course relevance is particularly important so students can immediately associate the news and information with the course content. As an example, students earning a degree in early childhood education may not understand why they need to take a general education course in IT to learn how to build a database.

An instructor in this circumstance might improve her student's motivation by posting an article to the class on how schools use databases to track student performance, instructor behaviors, and other data that inform curricular decisions.

5. Produce a Podcast

We have heard from many of the faculty with whom we work that increasing numbers of students want to listen to instructor insights while away from the computer. Since many online students are also working full-time, they spend some portion of their day in a car, on an airplane, or on a train and can effectively use that time to listen to information from their professor on that week's topic. Podcasts are typically considered supplementary resources and not imperative to student understanding of the course content. If you wish to make the podcasts mandatory for students, we recommend informing students of this fact in your syllabus.

Audacity® is a free piece of software used to record voice presentations. The presentations can be exported as mp3 files and easily uploaded to a Learning Management System (LMS). Brevity is strongly suggested, as the idea is to connect with students, not lecture to them. Learning Management Systems often have size limitations, so keeping the podcast short, the file size small, or finding a streaming solution is a good idea.

6. Use RSS Feed and News Aggregators



RSS feeds and aggregators are similar to web alerts, but they provide continuous updates from a specific website instead of topical search results. Not only do these tools promote relevance of the topic, but they also teach students to start actively reading about best practices and events happening in their industries. iGoogle and Yahoo both do an excellent job of managing RSS feeds.

Both students and instructors can set up RSS feeds/aggregators to keep them informed of events happening in higher education and their particular industry, as well as emerging trends. Another tool that can be used for this purpose is Diigo, which allows for group bookmarks and forums. Diigo promotes discussion, which reinforces relevance and encourages students to both read and write about the subject of the conversation. Diigo also offers free, upgraded accounts for educators.

7. Post a Screencast

Screencasts are excellent for situations where a visual demonstration would be helpful and are particularly vital for courses where demonstrations of computer software are essential. ScreenrSM and Jing® are useful tools for creating videos of a computer screen with audio voiceover. Jing offers both a fee-based and a free version, but the free version's capabilities are usually sufficient. With a writing input tool or tablet PC you can even walk through handwritten problems step by step.

Another tool that we recommend is join.me, which allows instructors to see the screens of their students and vice versa. After a quick, free download, instructors can take control of students' computers to demonstrate a concept instead of trying to explain it via email or over the phone. A session can be started within seconds and can save hours of emailing back and forth.

8. Make a Word Cloud

Word cloud tools create graphical representations of words and are great for presenting themes from student submissions or module topics. The clouds are created from text, giving greater prominence to words that appear more frequently within the text. Clouds can be tweaked with different fonts, layouts, color schemes and preferences regarding word exclusion. They are great for creating a kind of collective mind map with which you can visualize the themes students are writing about. Some faculty use these to determine if there are things missing from the discourse and if the right themes are being emphasized in the right balance. Wordle™ is one example of a tool that creates word clouds.

9. Post Unit Summaries

A weekly summary is a powerful learning tool that allows instructors to recap themes presented in student submissions, ask additional questions that challenge perspectives, and transition to the next topic. When managing discussion boards, faculty members often start with a strong question and then lead students through a great exploration of the issues, but they often neglect to bring those issues to resolution at the end of the week.



A summary post or unit debrief presents an opportunity to close out these discussions proactively by tackling common misconceptions, highlighting remaining open questions, and ensuring that the right learning is reinforced (even if there is legitimate and instructive ambiguity therein). As experts themselves, instructors often overestimate students' ability to integrate knowledge, draw these kinds of conclusions and make the right connections between units, but this should not be taken for granted. Debriefs add consistent presence and reinforce the knowledge that students need to retain as they continue through the course. Summaries can be audio-video- or text-based. Text-based summaries are created using the announcement or discussion tools accessed through the learning management system, such as Angel, Blackboard, Moodle, etc.

10. Create a VoiceThread

VoiceThread allows faculty to replicate the types of interaction that occur naturally in traditional classrooms. VoiceThread is like a multimedia discussion board that allows students to post comments via audio, video, or text. An instructor can upload a video or annotate a picture as an initial "starter" post, and then students can reply in any mode they prefer. The result of all this interaction is an experience that mimics the traditional synchronous environment, but in at least one way is even better as everyone has had time to thoughtfully consider their contribution before posting.

Wiley has assisted faculty with using VoiceThread to encourage discussion about pictures or videos, especially with subjects about which people feel passionately and for which text may leave too much texture out of the conversation. It is important to carefully consider your objectives when integrating this or any technology to make sure the tool supports your goals as well as possible.

Summary of Ten Ways to Foster Community in Online Courses

	What do I do?	Why would I do this?	How it works	Intended impact
1	Post a Video Introduction	It connects you with students, orients them to your expectations	Instructor initiates contact with students by uploading a video-based introduction	Initiates social and cognitive presence in the classroom
2	Rediscover Student Introductions	Provides stronger community-building opportunity in initial forum	Students upload text-, audio- or video-based introductions	Increases social presence and interaction
3	Customize the Course Roster	To create and sustain a sense of community	Instructors create one document listing student-provided background information	Instructor is able to lead discussions that connect students to common themes



				in their professional lives
4	Set Up Web Alerts	Reinforces instructor lectures and comments, enriches discussion	Instructors post web articles relevant to their course	Learners are able to construct and confirm meaning through reflection
5	Produce a Podcast	To develop audio/video mini-lectures	Instructors post audio files to the site to highlight relevant issues in order to stimulate thoughts for individual reflection	Reinforces learning outcomes
6	Use RSS Feeds and Aggregators	Reinforces instructor lectures and comments, enriches discussion	Instructors initiate by creating an RSS aggregator site that collects information on course-related topics	Injecting new sources of information; useful for directing discussions
7	Post a Screencast	To post lecture notes onto the site; develop audio/video mini-lectures	Instructors develop instructional tools that support course content	Accurate understanding of the material; injecting new sources of information
8	Make a Word Cloud	Provides collaborative insights into the course material	Instructors develop visual tools that emphasize key themes Discussed	Deep learning by looking for patterns
9	Post Unit Summaries	Provides personal insights into the course material	By using any type of tool, instructors summarize the events of a week/module and post to the site	Diagnose comments for accurate understanding; scaffolding learner knowledge to raise it to a new level
10	Create a Voicethread	Asynchronously replicates the natural interaction that occurs in traditional classrooms	Highlight relevant issues and stimulate thoughts for individual reflection	Reinforces learning outcomes



Conclusion

The presence, interaction, and engagement of faculty influence the sense of community, connection, and confidence students have about their learning experience (Heyman, 2010). The enhancements outlined above do not require a significant amount of time, special skill, or significant investment. We hope you'll try them and find that incorporating these simple solutions into your classroom will increase the likelihood that students become actively involved, remain engaged in their program of choice, and continue their degree to completion.

Resources

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