

Keeping Students Engaged in the Online Classroom

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As an online instructor, I can fulfill the minimum requirements of the university regarding interacting with students, or I can create a learning environment that facilitates student engagement in the classroom. Students enroll in online classes because of the need for scheduling flexibility, work-life-school balance, costs, and convenience. Although online learning holds many advantages, the potential drawbacks revolve around the lack of personal interaction between the instructor and student, as well as the student-to-student contact. Keeping students engaged in the course is a vital function of an effective instructor.

A resource within the online classroom that is helpful is the student activity timer. By reviewing the amount of time each student is engaged in the various component of the course, I can quickly view who is spending the necessary time to be successful. As a quantitative researcher, I decided to test the significance of the relationship between student grades and time spent in the classroom. By using student activity (time in the course) as the independent variable and final grades as the dependent variable, I was able to test the potential correlation. My goal was to determine if final grades correlated with time spent in the course, or in other words, were final grades dependent on student activity. I conducted the statistical procedures of Pearson Product Moment correlation and linear regression. The findings of both procedures indicated a statistically significant relationship at the 95% confidence level between student activity and final grades. In simple language, students that spent above average time in the classroom tended to earn above average final grades. Students that spent below average time in the course usually earn below average grades.

What are the implications of the findings? Does the existence of a correlation imply causation? No. If students simply spend more time clicking through the online course, will their grades magically go up? Once again, the answer is obviously no. I believe the keys are instilling within students a sense of urgency, motivation, and desire to excel through our creative use of our time, technology, and resources. Students typically lead busy lives. We must strive to capture their attention for the duration of the course. I have read numerous student introductions, never finding one that states, "I am a full-time student with no other life duties or responsibilities."

So, how do we keep students engaged in quality learning while operating within the challenges of physical separation in time and distance?

Get to know your students. Make posting a detailed student introduction mandatory, and then personally respond to each student. Learn to recognize key words or phrases that indicate a disability, hardship, or potential problem. Start out by creating a comfortable, safe learning environment. Avoid intimidating the students from the outset of the class. In other words, lose the harshness and negative instructions. Lay out the ground rules, but do so in a manner that does not cause many students to cringe at the thought of needing to contact you.

Know the classroom mechanics of an online course. Student frustrations rise when they have difficulty navigating the course and the instructor cannot answer simple questions regarding the processes required to respond or submit an assignment.

Be accessible and respond to student inquiries in a timely manner. Have an established and well-publicized timeframe for responding to student inquiries. At many schools, it's 24 hours during the week and 48 hours on weekends. Make it easy for students to locate your email address and telephone number within the learning management system (LMS). Oftentimes a five-minute call can alleviate a multitude of student frustrations and fears, and is actually a lot quicker than a back-and-forth email discussion.

Go beyond the university requirement of posting a brief, weekly announcement. Check up on your students. Know which students are falling behind and reach out with a short e-mail, reminding them of an impending deadline or assignment requirement, and include an offer of assistance.

Provide substantive feedback and positive critique. Although students might require corrective criticism, we can always provide encouraging comments.

Inject some fun into the classroom. Put a face to your introduction with a fun photo or video clip. Move beyond posting mundane content. Lighten up! We are not drill sergeants. Learn the value of adding a bit of humor. The Internet is a valuable source for free animated graphics, cool photos, and course related, yet motivating links and videos. Better yet, learn to embed your own video content.

Can we keep all students engaged in the classroom? Past evidence tells us no. We've all had students who are perfectly happy to do the minimum amount required to get a passing grade. Is that a reason to forgo any efforts to increase student engagement? Absolutely not! As instructors, we have a duty to teach. Teaching in the online environment requires us to go beyond posting a lecture or an assignment. Build within your students a sense of anticipation. Give students a reason to be engaged by making sure you are fully engaged in their success.

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