

Conquering the Wicked Obstacles of Online Learning

Dan Hoekstra, Teri Horton, Scooter Nowak

Michigan State University

Conquering the Wicked Obstacles of Online Learning

Online learning is a way for institutions to increase their program offerings while also keeping costs in check (Meyer, 2014). However, there are several challenges that are preventing online learning from reaching its full potential. This paper focuses on the lack of student engagement regarding both social experiences and real-world experience and the fact that students often lack the technology skills necessary to successfully navigate the online environment.

How to Improve Social Engagement

Humans are relational creatures who crave interactions and meaning. Gee, in his book “The Anti-Education Era, states that “every human being needs to feel a sense of worth and respect (status) and a sense of belonging and acceptance (solidarity)” (2013, p. 210). A common complaint of online learning is that students often feel isolated and disconnected from their classmates and instructors as they seek to learn in their own place and on their own time. This lack of social engagement is a significant problem as Dow (2008) believes “social presence to be the most important factor in distance education and a significant factor in improving instructional effectiveness” (p. 233). Research by Yamagata-Lynch (2014) shows that combining both synchronous and asynchronous learning can create a rich social environment where “through the synchronous communications students are able to engage in spontaneous discussions while through the asynchronous communications they are able to take the time to reflect and prepare a response for discussion topics that were designed for any given week” (p. 201). At the conclusion of their class, students shared that this model “gave them the opportunity to experience a higher level of participation in a flexible learning environment” (p.201). With

today's technology, there are many ways to provide both synchronous and asynchronous learning. Students can participate in chat rooms and on discussion boards as well as work collaboratively through the use of tools such as Google Docs and Trello. In addition, video conferencing (Skype, Google Hangouts, Facetime, etc.) can occur and these "synchronous online whole class meetings and well-structured small group meetings can help students feel a stronger sense of connection to their peers and instructor and stay engaged with course activities" (Yamagata-Lynch, 2014, p. 189). Also, using a proper educational framework such as the Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge Framework (TPACK) can increase social engagement. Meyer (2014) found "the lack of engagement was attributed less to the online setting and more to students not experiencing active and collaborative pedagogies" (p. 10). When proper technology is selected and used alongside sound pedagogical practices and deep content knowledge, effective social engagement can occur.

How to Create Real-world Learning Experiences

Students expect their learning experiences, both traditional and online, to be applicable to, or simulate real-world problems. Some researchers indicate that any attempt to mimic an authentic real-world scenario is impossible (Petraglia, 1998). There are others who believe that the dynamic interactions between the different components of the activity (i.e. learner, task, environment) are where learning is occurring, and is not a result of the authenticity of the activity (Barab, Squire, & Dueber, 2000). In order for an activity to be as authentic and effective as possible, some level of imagination or disbelief is needed on the part of the learner to accept the learning environment as a possible real-world situation (Herrington, Oliver, & Reeves, 2003). The other option is for the learner to accept that all educational situations, including traditional

and online, are authentic real-world learning opportunities. Unfortunately, most learners are reluctant to view traditional learning experiences as real world so attempts must be made to create authentic experiences. Reeves et al. (2002) have compiled the following ten attributes from existing literature that help define authentic activities: 1) have real-world application, 2) are ill-defined, 3) comprise complex tasks requiring sustained periods of time, 4) can be examined from different perspectives using multiple resources, 5) provide opportunity to collaborate, 6) provide opportunity to reflect, 7) cross different subject areas leading beyond domain-specific outcome, 8) are seamlessly integrated with assessment, 9) create polished valuable products, 10) allow competing solutions and diverse outcomes (p, 564). As educators, we must be careful that attempts to create new online learning scenarios are not a result of just digitizing traditional materials and methods (Culatta, 2013). There must be some use and understanding of current accepted pedagogy, and existing content knowledge while integrating the technology (www.tpack.org).

How to Better Prepare Students for Online Learning

According to Gee, “it is the high inequality in society that creates deep divides in educational success (Gee, 2013, p. 157). For example, students with limited access to technology have difficulty navigating the online environment and “cannot concentrate on their coursework, become frustrated, and eventually drop out of their online courses” (Jones, 2013, p. 43). A review of the literature suggests that the most comprehensive solution to this problem is an online orientation course. A research study by Excelsior College found that “just-in-time tutorials and course orientation improved course completion rates” as well as grade averages (Taylor & Dunn, 2015, p. 113). Courses were embedded with orientation tutorials on topics such

as the “learning management system, available services, and course expectations” (p. 114). The study results revealed that “four of five courses involved in the study showed a reduction in withdrawal rates and an improvement in grade distributions” (p. 117). Richland Community College also studied the impact of an orientation course for new online students (Jones, 2013). The course was designed based on survey information from students and faculty, and included data from Help Desk tickets, online student retention rates, and a survey of the literature” (p. 44). The course included modules on the following topics: “computer requirements, how to be an online student, important online student services, navigating the LMS and submitting assignments in the LMS (p. 44.) The results were overwhelmingly positive. 90% of students felt the orientation was helpful, retention rates were higher, faculty reported that students who had taken the course were better prepared, and there was a decrease in student help tickets. Because these results impact the performance of those who have had limited access to technology, the success of online orientations serve as an equalizer in a “society that creates deep divides in educational success” (Gee, 2013, p. 157).

Conclusion

To conclude, online learning can pose significant challenges when it comes to student engagement and technology skills. However, when educators weave their knowledge of technology with their pedagogy and content knowledge, rich social experiences and authentic real-world learning opportunities can occur. In addition, training courses can properly prepare students for online learning by providing them with the necessary technology skills to succeed. When all these pieces come together, “truly meaningful and deeply skilled teaching with technology” (Koehler & Mishra, 2009, p. 66) can occur and online learning can be reimaged.

References

- Barab, S. A., Squire, K. D., & Dueber, W. (2000). A co-evolutionary model for supporting the emergence of authenticity. *Educational technology research and development, 48*(2), 37-62.
- Culatta, R. (2013, February 6). Richard Culatta: Reimagining Learning [Video file]. Retrieved from <http://www.tedxbeaconstreet.com/richard-culatta/>
- Dow, M. J. (2008). Social presence for online learning: A case study of MLS students. *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science, 49*(4), 231-242.
- Gee, J. P. (2013). *The anti-education era: Creating smarter students through digital learning*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Herrington, J., Oliver, R., & Reeves, T. C. (2003). Patterns of engagement in authentic online learning environments. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology, 19*(1), 564.
- Jones, K. (2013). Developing and implementing a mandatory online student orientation. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks, 17*(1), 43-45.
- Koehler, M., & Mishra, P. (2009). What is technological pedagogical content knowledge? *Contemporary issues in technology and teacher education, 9*(1), 60-70.
- Meyer, M. A. (2014). Student engagement in online learning: What works and why. *HSHE Higher Education Report, 40*(6), 1-15.
- Petraglia, J. (1998). *Reality by design: The rhetoric and technology of authenticity in education*. Routledge.

Reeves, T. C., Herrington, J., & Oliver, R. (2002). Authentic activities and online learning.

HERDSA 2002 Quality Conversations, 7 - 10 July 2002, Perth, Western Australia pp.

562-567

Taylor, J. & Dunn, M. (2015). Innovative orientation to improved success in online courses.

Online Learning, 19(4), 112-120.

Yamagata-Lynch, L. (2014). Blending online asynchronous and synchronous learning.

International Review of Research in Open & Distance Learning, 15(2), 189-212.