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Supporting Students Through Online Learning

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Handbook of Research on Inequities in Online Education During Global Crises

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A volume in the Advances in Mobile and Distance
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Preface

When disasters and crises occur, resilient institutions adapt to ensure the continuity of services (Tull, Dabner, & Ayebi-Arthur, 2017). This precisely happened when many educational institutions were faced with the Coronavirus Disease of 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic forced many educational institutions to make unprecedented and unanticipated changes. Some of the strategies executed included implementing social distancing interventions, initiating closure, developing plans for employees to work remotely, and transitioning teaching and learning from traditional classrooms to remote settings or online environments.

Regarding the choice to go online or offer classes or courses remotely, the assumption made was that this mode of instruction was possible because students had the required technology and skills to engage in online instruction. Additionally, many students, particularly those in higher education, had taken at least one course online in the past, and therefore already had some experience with online education (Clinefelter & Aslanian, 2016; Seaman, Allen, & Seaman, 2018). Safe to say, the abrupt mandatory switch to remote teaching and learning in the spring of 2020 was not as easy as anticipated. The usual concerns surrounding the soundness of delivering pedagogy using online modalities were present. Not only this but reactions to this crisis in the form of moving teaching and learning solely online exposed educational inequities in the system and the specific effects of such injustices for certain subgroups of students.

This book highlights some of the stories of marginalization, experiences, challenges, and lessons learned as teaching and learning transitioned from face-to-face classrooms to online settings during the global health crisis. Also documented are best practices, adaptations to changes, adoption of e-learning tools, and the shifts in thinking among students, teachers, faculty, staff, and administration concerning online education. The authors of each of the 27 chapters in this book are experts who span multiple dimensions of identity and areas of specialization across the globe. The three main themes under discussion in this book include: *Realizing the Inequities: Who was Affected and How*, *Searching for Solutions and Getting Them Ready: Best Practices and Recommendations*, and *Global Perspectives: Challenges and Lesson Learned*.

The target population for this book is educational researchers, teachers/faculty, staff, and administrators in educational institutions. As the pandemic brought about an unusual situation for institutions, the hope is that the narratives and information presented in this book could be useful for making future decisions regarding what supports teachers, faculty, staff, and students need and what concerns remain. The information provided in each chapter is essential as the details could help educational institutions better prepare teachers, faculty, staff, administrators, and students for online education or remote learning in general. With this evidence, implications for policy considerations and procedures and strategies

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would help support and meet constituents' needs equitably as we move forward, especially should such an unprecedented situation arise again. Specifically, the recommendations will help direct strategies and institutional policies to better prepare and support faculty and serve students in online classrooms.

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Chapter 8

Supporting Students Through Online Learning

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ABSTRACT

With the onset of a pandemic, there were opportunities and challenges for supporting learners. Schools and universities were physically closed while interaction shifted to a distance learning modality. In some instances, courses became asynchronous, while other courses met synchronously using video conferencing. Educators were adaptable when the pandemic occurred, quickly setting up home offices to meet their learners' needs. This occurrence showed that it was in educators' best interest to understand distance best practices. Distance learning has been utilized at institutions in the United States for the past two decades. However, it has not been widely adopted as mainstream because of the inequities that arise for learners. This chapter will address solutions for systematically addressing inequity from the educator's perspective, maintaining academic rigor, building a community of learners, creating a workflow for educators to interact with learners, and how to amplify learner engagement in the online learning environment.

INTRODUCTION

Within higher education settings, students come from a diverse range of backgrounds both in regard to their education, culture, and socioeconomic status. As learning environments transitioned from face-to-face, on-campus to digitally online during COVID-19, it was imperative to remember where our students come from, their experience with digital learning, and the social-emotional support they may need during a global pandemic. While distance teaching and learning has been taking place for decades, this sudden shift to online learning brought on in Spring 2020 was unlike any other learning shift that has occurred in our lifetimes. Typically, a faculty and learner make a choice to teach or learn via distance learning. In our pandemic situation, schools abruptly needed to close their physical doors and turn to virtual options. This chapter will address solutions for systematically addressing inequity from the educator's perspective, maintaining academic rigor, building a community of learners, creating a workflow for educators to interact with learners, and how to amplify learner engagement in the online learning environment.

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Supporting Students Through Online Learning

Background

Distance learning began as correspondence courses where students would receive content knowledge through mailed packets of information from an instructor (Taylor, 2001). Assignments were completed, exams taken, essays written, and mailed back to the instructor through the postal service. Feedback was provided in written form and typically included alongside the next unit's content learning. According to Garrison (1995), this type of distance learning occurred as early as the 1970s. Instant access to grades, content learning, or instructor communication was not always assumed. As technological advancements were made, correspondence courses were updated to include faster delivery and response times to students. Electronic communication in the form of e-mail and interactive television courses came about as described by Taylor (2001) in the third and fourth generations of distance education. Some university programs utilized interactive television to teach synchronous graduate level courses to students. In a synchronous course, the instructor and students are together live in time, but not necessarily in location. Previous correspondence courses, before the interactive television classes, were asynchronous; This meant that the student and instructor were in the course at different times or not in-sync. In the interactive television or other means of synchronous courses held in the 1990s, an instructor would be in a classroom on campus teaching while students would be in a remote classroom or office elsewhere. In these early days to online education, if a student had a response to a discussion question posed by the teacher or another student, the student would call a classroom phone number, wait for the teacher to 'pick up' and their voices would be broadcast via the teacher's interactive television classroom for all students to hear the response. This example is one of many ways synchronous, distance learning began occurring in the 1990s. Soon, bandwidth expanded, software allowed for more flexibility, and home computer costs decreased (Taylor, 2001). These occurrences allowed for the synchronous, or live, delivery of classes to happen over the internet instead of in expensive, interactive television classrooms. Software options that supported classroom-like learning in a synchronous included at a minimum, an area for sharing a presentation, a participant list, a live video stream of the instructor (and in some cases the students), and audio capabilities.

University programs adopted synchronous online instruction primarily at the graduate level between 1990 and 2010. In the mid-2000s, for-profit institutions began to offer asynchronous opportunities for students to earn degrees at both undergraduate and graduate levels. These institutions leaned on the correspondence model of teaching but utilized a digital learning management system to deliver the content. This had varying success due to course delivery, instructor knowledge and experience, and students' learning habits. Asynchronous, synchronous, and a blend of the two types of courses were beginning to be offered on campuses across the nation by 2010 at public, private, not-for profit, and for-profit institutions. At this time, there was also interest peaking from K-12 charter and private schools for online opportunities for students for a variety of reasons.

By 2012, online learning was a buzz word in university program planning, but still only discussed in affluent or chartered areas across the K-12 school sector. The benefits were beginning to outweigh the drawbacks to online teaching and learning. Courses could be delivered through technology, students would not need to live in the area to enroll at the institution, unique programs could be marketed and shared across the nation or world without additional expenses, such as moving, for students (Aoki, 2012). Likewise, with technological course delivery, students would have ample opportunity to work with the content and connect with faculty and other students. However, for the most part, it was only innovative

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faculty and/or programs that would move online. There was not a significant change in course delivery across all programs at most institutions until 2020.

Teaching and Learning in a Pandemic

In March 2020, a global pandemic required higher education institutions in the United States to quickly shift courses to a distance learning modality. How those courses were shifted varied by institution, program, and individual faculty member. Primary modalities for course delivery were asynchronous, utilizing the institution's learning management system (such as Google Classroom, Desire2Learn BrightSpace, and/or Blackboard), and synchronous, via a video conferencing tool (such as Google Meet or Zoom). Early on it appeared institutions planned for a short-term distance learning opportunity with the likely chance that students would be back on campus to finish the semester and complete finals. However, the calendar soon read mid-April and faculty began to doubt they would return to campus before the end of the semester. Institutions continued offering courses in a distance learning mode – to which many faculty and students began to feel mentally burned out from the intense video conferencing hours and screen time required for this new type of coursework. The COVID-19 pandemic required many educators to quickly learn new skills and pedagogies. However, those familiar with online course delivery seemed to fare better during the transition.

Institutions offered faculty support in the transition to pandemic teaching and learning via workshops, webinars, and training sessions. As mentioned in Carlson's (2012) work for supporting faculty entering the online teaching world, "seminars, trainings, and workshops for faculty members can help to increase awareness of best practices for the online classroom" (p. 12) but they aren't fully able to explain an online learning framework or help with the implementation in one session. In the United States COVID-19 did not decrease to allow full return to normal campus life at many institutions. This meant faculty needed to alter their fall semester schedule to accommodate physical distancing. Options at one mid-sized, Midwestern institution included changing a face to face course to: 1) hybrid where half the class came one day and the other class came a different day and an increase in asynchronous learning on the "off" day; 2) synchronous video conferencing at the class' normally scheduled time; 3) Hyflex model where students attend synchronously or in person at the normally scheduled time; 4) asynchronous online with no regularly assigned class time.

With forward planning by institutions and engaged faculty some were able to follow online learning strategies and frameworks to emphasize learner engagement in the updated delivery modality. Through thoughtful development and planning, a faculty choosing to offer coursework asynchronously could provide a clear and concise plan for students who are balancing their decisions about returning to campus for class, balancing school and work, and caring for themselves or loved ones.

The Shift to Online Learning

Distance learning has been around for decades, beginning as correspondence courses and shifting to different online modalities as technology improved. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2018), 37% of post-secondary students participated in distance education coursework in the fall of 2017. That number has increased at a steady rate beginning in 2000; between 2000 and 2008, there was a 12% increase in students who had enrolled in at least one online course and that number has continued to grow. In 2011, Parker et al., found that the number of courses being offered online

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is expected to increase exponentially. Learners are showing through enrollment numbers that they are comfortable with the digital format.

In a distance learning experience, there are opportunities for a faculty member and students to meet live or synchronously, such as a streamed video conferencing, in a virtual world, or typing over instant messaging or group chat. There are also distance education courses that are asynchronous, or that never meet simultaneously together. Faculty and students work on their own time and in their own space. In a pandemic environment, asynchronous coursework would allow students and faculty the most flexibility in teaching and learning if they become ill, need to support sick family members, or if small children are unable to return to the K-12 setting. Similarly, the re-opening of all face-to-face courses would require faculty and students in CDC high risk categories to return to campus. These high-risk categories are not typically something that would be submitted for the American with Disabilities Act. The Accessible Campus Action Alliance (2020) writes:

“As recognized by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission’s guidance on the ADA and COVID-19, existing procedures that require employees and students to submit medical documentation of underlying conditions may disadvantage those facing medical stigmas, barriers to accessing health-care in a timely way, or potential discrimination if their conditions are reported to administrators. Many disabilities related to respiration, immune system, and allergies are not easily medically documented. They may require years of diagnosis and can be extremely expensive to document. Research on health-care disparities shows that marginalized people (particularly people of color, disabled people, and poor people) are less likely to be believed or to have access to the types of healthcare necessary to provide such documentation. Furthermore, new conditions of risk may arise through institutional responses to the pandemic.” (para. 7) These disabilities, whether documented or not, impact a faculty members ability to teach effectively and a learner’s ability to learn in school. Through online education, faculty and learners have the ability to remain in an environment that is beneficial to them. Faculty likely have the ability to work remotely from their home. Unfortunately, this is not always true of learners as they may need to be responsible for family members’ health or care while also learning. Asynchronous learning opportunities during a pandemic allow for more flexibility in course delivery, content learning, and a learners’ time.

While safety is a concern this year, other concerns have surfaced as faculty have made the transition to online teaching. One specifically was, and still is, the desire to maintain academic freedom. In their book, Alexander and Alexander (2017) explain the tenets of academic freedom, as faculty being entitled to freedom in research, publication, classroom discussions related to their teaching subject, and their speech and writing is as a citizen. The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAUP) (1999) reported that:

a faculty member engaged in distance education is entitled to academic freedom as a teacher, researcher, and citizen in full accordance with the provisions of the 1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure, jointly developed by the Association of American Colleges and Universities and the American Association of University Professors. (para. 16).

Very similarly, faculty often worry that they may be required to teach an online class without training or before they feel ready. The AAUP (1999) also reports that “the precise terms and conditions of every appointment should be stated in writing ... before the faculty member is assigned to utilize distance education technologies ... No member of the faculty should be required to participate in distance educa-

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tion courses or programs without adequate preparation and training, and without prior approval of such courses and programs by the appropriate faculty bodies.” (para. 15).

Many educators are new to teaching online courses, so to properly design, develop, and implement online courses, faculty members need to have dedicated time and professional development training (Benson & Brack, 2009). However, according to the review done by Tham and Werner (2002), one session seminars are not likely to fully explain an online learning framework to faculty as completely as an entire series of workshops. Through complete professional development, seminars and hands-on workshops, the faculty will be better able to create a positive online-learning experience (Chickering & Gamson, 1991). While time is of the essence this year to prepare for a pandemic semester, campuses should continue offering professional development while building a mentoring program for veteran online faculty and new to online faculty. There are many face-to-face principles that can be re-tooled to the online environment. Chickering and Ehrmann (1996) created a list of several principles to outline the best practices in building a course for the online world. Examples include student-faculty communication, active learning, prompt feedback, high expectations, and respecting the many learning styles as seen in Table 1 that is created based off of Chickering and Ehrmann’s (1996) work.

Table 1. A Summary of Principles of Best Practices for the Online World as suggested by Chickering and Ehrmann (1996)

Principle	Example
Encourages Contacts Between Students and Faculty	Faculty member builds a relationship with the student; regularly provides detailed feedback promptly to the student.
Develops Reciprocity and Cooperation among students	Case studies and discussion assignments that make learners work in small groups
Use Active Learning Techniques	Learners engage with real-world assignments and actively reflect on that assignment.
Gives Prompt Feedback	The learner receives feedback from other learners and the faculty member on submitted work.
Emphasizes Time on Task	Faculty members must anticipate the time an assignment will take and attempt to not give additional, meaningless tasks.
Communicate High Expectations	Faculty should communicate clearly where the final project will go, possibly to a real-world client or published in a journal.
Respects Diverse Talents and Ways of Learning	Faculty members are open to allowing students to be creative and use their many talents.

By utilizing principles shared by Chickering and Erhmann (1996), faculty will have the opportunity to maximize their time, create a sense of belonging for learners within the course, maintain academic rigor, and address inequity amongst learners.

Addressing Inequity

In an online course, especially one that is online due to the recent COVID-19 pandemic, it is crucial to have an understanding of the learners’ background in regard to academic readiness, technological access, skills, and knowledge, as well as the traditional information learned about in a face-to-face course such as the learners’ cultural background and personal interests. Prior to beginning the course, faculty

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can review content inequity in their online course either on their own or with consultation from an instructional designer or course developer. Beyond non-inclusive curriculum or biased curriculum, in an online course, content inequity also includes instructional design flaws that may prohibit a disadvantaged student from accessing materials. Following Universal Design for Learning Guidelines provided by CAST (2021), faculty instructor might ensure there are opportunities built into each week of the course for learner engagement, for learning content material through multiple means of representation, and opportunity for expressing the learning. Faculty whom have taught of many years sometimes rely on one single means of content delivery, however, in an online course, multiple means of representation is crucial to meet the needs of all learners. Offering alternative means of content delivery might include chunking video lectures into five or ten-minute lessons, providing articles and/or readings, and/or linking podcast content delivery. A faculty member should not feel the need to create three versions of all content delivered but should provide opportunity for each of the opportunities to be present throughout the duration of the course. If a course becomes read and quiz, or watch this video lecture and write an essay, the learner will become disengaged from the lack of multiple means for content delivery and expression (or assessment).

Similarly, during the course, faculty should regularly connect with learners about course progress but also about the learning environment in which the learner works in. When a class is taught on-campus in a face-to-face setting, a faculty assists in arranging the room, ensuring that enough chairs are present, the correct number of handouts are available, the classroom technology and/or manipulatives are present and functioning. In an online course, these things still need to take place, but, sometimes since learners are not directly in front of the faculty insisting a handout or chair is needed, the check-in or concern by the faculty instructor is forgotten about. In higher education, it is assumed that the learner will speak up and speak out if they need something, but that is not the case always in online courses. However, that should not be assumed at all in a pandemic. Higher education or K-12 learners may not have access to technology in such a streamlined manner, even if the learning institution provided it, when the learner (or learner's parental guardians) did not choose distance or online learning as the learning model. In this scenario, faculty instructors should show care to learners by checking in regarding the learning environment. Questions they may ask in a synchronous session, anonymous survey, or other means, could include: are you comfortable using your microphone and/or webcam for live class? Similarly, are you comfortable using it for recordings or asynchronous class work? Are you able to view all of the content and learning activities within our course?

If a student is regularly disengaged in a synchronous session or is not regularly checking in to the learning management system (Google Classroom, D2L Brightspace, Blackboard), faculty should be encouraged to reach out to the learner directly using different means of communication than typically used in the course. The learner may not purposefully be disengaged from the course material but rather, having connection issues, whether technological tool issues or skill. Likewise, the learner is not always comfortable in an online learning environment, much like the faculty instructors who are learning 'online teaching' as the pandemic continues.

Beyond thinking about the online learning environment, faculty instructors should also consider the social-emotional learning impacts of distance learning and pandemic learning. Faculty should make an effort to send regular check-ins to learners, both to increase positivity and productivity with course content, but also the check-in for social emotional well-being. Learners often balance work, caring for family, and school simultaneously. When a learner is not regularly attending class on campus or at school,

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the student services aspects are not as evident to the learner. Therefore, faculty need to find ways to incorporate those resources or support within the class. One suggestion that could help faculty instructors check in with an entire class would be to email or survey learners with a few questions such as “how are you? Do you need anything, how can I help?” After sending surveys or emails to a class in this way, it is important to follow up with the learners based on their comments. For example, adding student service resources to the learning management system, meeting with individual students or small groups to address needs such as late submissions, flexible attendance policies, etc. Often, as educators process and procedure are relied on heavily to ensure organization and structure within the class. However, in a pandemic faculty instructor should do their best to be flexible with course policies if possible. This will allow the learners to feel more comfortable approaching the faculty with non-course related concerns. By offering support in these ways, it does not imply that the faculty members need to bear all of the weight and to become counselors, student life directors, financial aid officers, and health care workers. However, faculty instructors become bridges or connectors to these resources to facilitate and support learners to be successful in the course.

Maintaining Academic Rigor

Beyond building a sense of belonging and connection with the learners, faculty new to online teaching and learning often fear that the rigor of their course may decline. This does not have to be the case. Plagiarism and cheating on exams are often the most common responses from novice online faculty members when they are asked about their fears of learner assessments in an online environment. While those concerns are something to thoughtfully consider, they are also prevalent in a face-to-face course. Rather than dwell on those learners that are apt to cheat, faculty could create larger authentic assessments to showcase learner knowledge. Authentic assessments are artifacts created by learners to showcase their learning. These assessments allow learners to apply relevancy-based learning to create. By condensing the number of graded assessments into larger, more infrequent assessments, faculty are not adding to their workload but providing learners with an opportunity to learn the information on a deeper level, prior to regurgitation or synthesis. Examples of authentic assessments might include one-pagers where learners are asked to synthesize the information learned over the course of a unit into a single page of information that is presented both graphically and textually. One-pager assignments may be searchable online, however the information on the page is particular to the learner’s viewpoint and the content presented in that specific unit or lesson. Learners organize information and learning differently; A one pager, or other forms of authentic assessments, can play to the strength of non-paper writers or artistic learners. In the other direction, instead of making more infrequent assignments that are larger in nature, faculty could make weekly assignments that are short. Tidbits of content learning can be shared with an authentic assessment in the form of a reflective response such as a tweet, blog post, podcast, or video. Frequent authentic creation will inhibit a learners’ ability to fall behind. If a faculty instructor assigns weekly authentic assessments, it is important to ensure those assessments are small in nature, encompassing fifteen to thirty minutes of time for the creation aspect. The motivation that another classmate or the faculty member is watching or participating regularly will help keep learners on track. However, if authentic assessments are creatively time consuming and occur too often, they can become off-putting to learners. Faculty instructors should work to find a balance for requiring authentic assessments and formative, learner check-ins.

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Other examples of maintaining academic rigor would include self-check quizzes between video clips, ungraded quizzes that appear on the screen after useful or important information is shared. Learners receive immediate feedback to help them assess for their own understanding. This assists in promoting intrinsic motivation of the learners. Finally, use of the formal discussion board will help to maintain academic rigor in a class, if and when, other learners have the opportunity to interact with one another. One slight caveat to this, if learners are required to have a lengthy post, this can lead to an increase in a desire to plagiarize. If discussion boards are new to faculty, it would be recommended to not require a set number of words for a post or reply, but rather, faculty should spend time writing thoughtful prompts for the students to respond.

Building Community in the Learning Environment

Within a learning environment, it is crucial to maintain academic rigor of the course material regardless of how the course is delivered. It is equally important to maintain a sense of community for the learners, in the form of personal connection between learner and instructor but also between learners. If a learner feels alone or isolated in the course, they will quickly disengage with the content and assessments. However, when a sense of community is present the learner feels more comfortable engaging with the content, asking deeper questions to the instructor, and discussing with their classmates. The following sections outline how to build community within an online learning environment from a faculty instructor perspective.

Educator Workflow for Engagement

Teaching in a face-to-face environment provides opportunity to hone pedagogical skills and develop a sense of who faculty members are as educators. With the COVID-19 pandemic still surging, higher education institutions have not returned to normal campus life. Many institutions are giving faculty the choice to move to an online environment, but faculty wonder where do I start? This section will outline some initial steps and ways to address the three types of interactions in a course as describe in the previous section.

First, when planning on how and what students will interact with for content (instructional materials) in your course, lean on your pedagogical style. A pandemic is not a time to develop a new strategy or plan – we’ll get there later, supporting the students through is the priority! If a lecture/exam model is what has been used previously, continue with that model and structure for your learners. Video record the lectures, share them within the learning management system, and place the exam in the learning management system as well. It is important when recording video lectures to keep them under ten minutes to hold the learners’ attention and to reduce the cognitive load. If you need more time, simply create a second, or third, video lecture. Using a micro-teaching or chunking strategy is more effective at reducing cognitive load and ensuring your learners are engaging with the course content. Similarly, if a PowerPoint is not needed, simply record a podcast or a video of yourself. In an online environment, reducing the extraneous inputs (audio, visual) is helpful for learners.

In an interactive face-to-face course, engagement often occurs through discussions, small group activities, and projects. This can still occur in an asynchronous online classroom too. Faculty may write prompts for discussion within the learning management system, embed a video discussion board such as Flipgrid or VoiceThread, or even use an email chain using the “reply all” feature. To ensure discussions remain engaging, faculty should make the communication expectations clear from the start of the class:

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are students required to respond a specific number of times; Will they hear from the faculty member; How will they know if they are successful; Those are all questions to consider ahead of assigning a discussion prompt in an online environment. Small group activities and projects can also occur in an online course. As with discussion board prompts, the largest factor for learner engagement lies in the expectations provided by the faculty ahead of time for the activity or assignment. Connect the small group of learners or partners through a collaborative document that can be inserted into the course. For example, pre-selected groups can be provided in a word document and shared with learners or for increased engagement, learners can select their own groups and fill their details in on a whole class cloud-based document.

Similar to thoughtfully designing the learner-content and learner-learner interaction, learners appreciate knowing the communication plan. This includes how they will interact with the faculty member. Clearly indicating response times for questions, emails, assignment grades in a syllabus will provide a foundation to begin the course. Outlining on the discussion boards and grading rubrics where and what the learner to learner requirement may be will also provide a clear start for learners. Further, continue to check-in and be accessible to learners. Post regularly scheduled announcements or class emails about the course material or group feedback on an assignment. Learners should know when those whole-class updates or check-ins are coming. For example, a weekly video update about course progress, last units class feedback, etc. can be posted every Monday afternoon (or whenever is convenient for the faculty) to an easily accessible location within the online course. Learners should also know how to contact the faculty member for office hours to ask class questions and share one-on-one course issues or concerns. Another creative idea to maintain engagement from faculty to learner is to provide assignment instructions in both text and video format. In a typical face-to-face course, the faculty would likely verbally describe the upcoming assignment and maybe provide a past example, as well as provide a handout of grading criteria or detailed instructions. An online course doesn't need to be any different. The short assignment video can be only a few minutes in length but be so beneficial to all learners within the course. Similarly, continue providing the handout or assignment instructions.

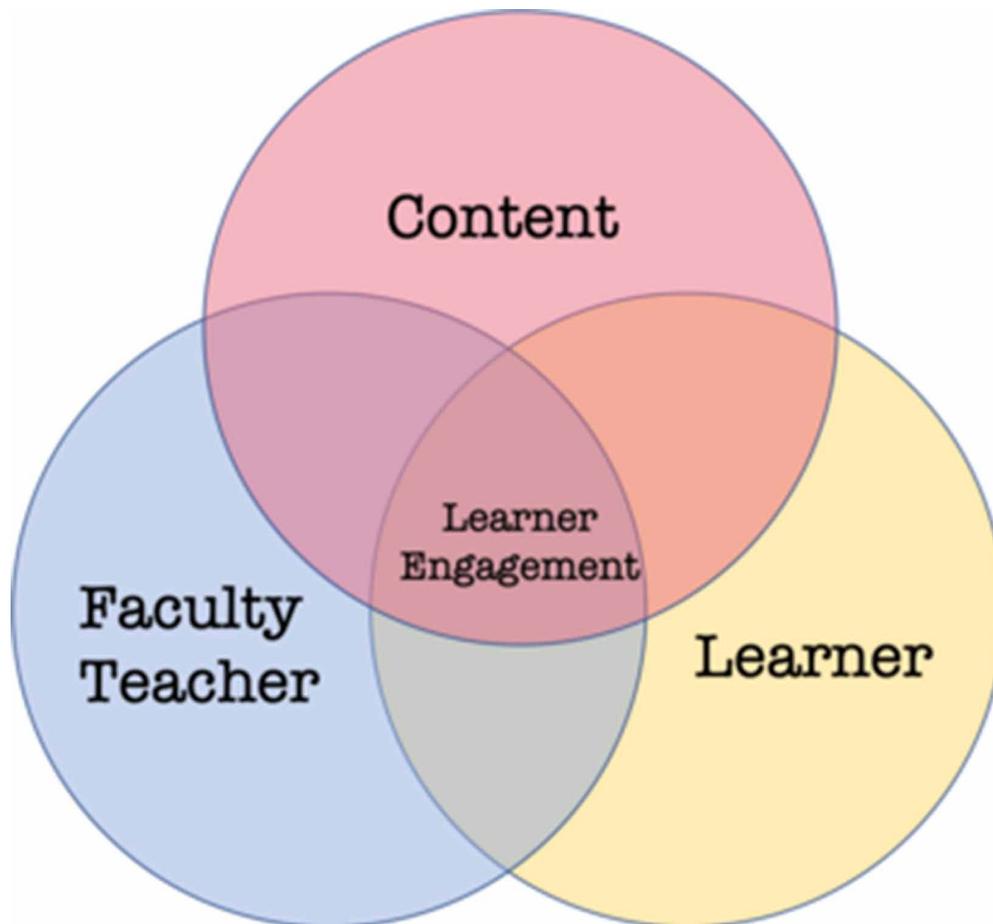
Creating a Learner-Centric Community

Whether online or in a face-to-face classroom setting, there are interactions that are crucial to engaging a learner. Often in the realm of online teaching, it is seen as three different types of interactions: learner to learner, learner to content, and learner to instructor, as visualized by American Secondary Education (2013) in Figure 1. Through learner to learner interaction, communication and collaboration are utilized to create engagement; through learner to content, interaction, an individual learner engages with course material to achieve increased cognition; and through learner to instructor interactions, the course instructor and the learner develop a relationship by means of assignment feedback, video lectures, and discussion board replies to enhance course content knowledge and a sense of belonging.

To achieve learner-content interaction in an online environment, faculty often need to re-think how the instructional material is designed and developed. By providing learning activities that are well thought out and designed the learner will engage with the course material and retain the necessary information (Zen, 2008). Examples of online learning activities include resource scavenger hunts, video lectures with intermittent questions, interactive simulations, online jigsaw learning, and interactive polls. "A course activity engages the learner by requiring the learner to actively participate. The examples listed above ensure that the learner must interact with the course content to show his/her understanding" (Carlson, 2012, p. 23).

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Figure 1. A modified figure of “The Student Engagement Model” by American Secondary Education (2013)



Similarly, to achieve learner-instructor interaction in an online course, faculty need to pre-design the course to include those components. Often, faculty forget to build in interaction points. For example, on a discussion board, “the students generally placed high value on communication and the instructor’s responsiveness, they did not place as much importance on synchronous or face-to-face communication” (Sheridan & Kelly, 2010, p. 8). This indicates that scheduling time to reply to learner discussion posts should be a priority within an online course. The faculty must be an inspirer in the online classroom, one whom will “promote professional dialogue among online learners; relate personal experiences and cases to the discipline” (Ice, Curtis, Phillips, & Wells, 2007, p. 3) Also, he or she should be plan for time to give feedback in which they “build social rapport; and build online learning community” (Ice et al., n.d., p. 3) as well as detailed assignment feedback. Learners do appreciate audio feedback. Comments in one particular study included how it was “very rewarding and helpful to hear your comments” (Ice et al., 2007, p. 12.) There were not any negative comments made about the audio feedback. Students felt that they were “a real part’ of the class” (Ice et al., 2007, p. 14) and felt cared for by the faculty member. Overall, tips for faculty to increase learner-instruction interaction in the online course would include 1) Being available for questions via office hours, email or discussion board correspondence, etc. 2) share the communication plan up front so expectations are clear, 3) promote classroom interaction by build-

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ing opportunity for interaction during course development and encouraging it during the semester, 4) recognize outside of class and real-life opportunities as they relate to the class material and/or students.

The third type of interaction, between peers, has multiple benefits when a constructivist approach to course design and delivery is utilized. Through active participation and knowledge construction with small groups or networks of other learners, there is opportunity to build relationships with peers in the course, which would lead to increased engagement. In a paper by Allen (2016), group work was emphasized, even in an online asynchronous course, stating that “skills that are learned through group projects are critical thinking, problem solving and interpersonal skills... Also, students learn how to identify their 26 goals and objectives, assign tasks and deal with conflict. Using group projects helps the students to feel connected to the class and create relationships. Having these relationships helps with retention of students which in turn helps the institution” (p. 25). There is no secret to developing these three interactions except for deliberate, thoughtful, and intentional planning to each of the areas. The most often seen trepidation during faculty online consulting sessions is the unknown and the fear of making a mistake with the technology.

Learners have enrolled in the online course and are interested in the topics being covered within the course, whether it is for their future career, to fulfill a liberal arts area, or to add credits to their degree through a delivery platform that works for their lifestyle. Whatever the reason, they selected this course, faculty, and delivery model for a particular reason. As the faculty or designer of the course, it is imperative to design a well-rounded course in which the learner can regularly engage in all three interactions described in the previous section: learner-content, learner-learner, and learner-faculty. Through the use of authentic communication, regular check-ins and worthwhile assignment feedback, faculty fulfill social-emotional needs of the learners within the course. Often, learners become disengaged in a course because they feel alone in the online course, without other learners or without a faculty facilitator. Authentic interaction build using course announcement platforms can often be scheduled. A faculty may choose to create all of the weekly announcements in one setting but alter the release of those announcements, so learners have a personalized, content specific announcement each week.

Gierdowski, Brooks, and Galanek (2020) suggest in their recent report that faculty may consider building in student wellbeing and carefree notes of encouragement as well. Another opportunity to create authentic interaction between the faculty and the learner would be to provide detailed feedback on assessments. When assessments are created instead of tested, it is often easier to leave personalized, authentic feedback. For example, a faculty member may review a well-written paper or creative artifact. Upon evaluation, she may provide a video or audio clip of the review. This allows the learners to feel they are creating the assessment for another human (the faculty member) instead of it being auto graded or lost into an electronic abyss as it may when only a numerical score is provided.

Faculty are likely thinking that this may be time consuming in large classes. Authentic interactions do not need to occur daily or even weekly when they are done thoughtfully. Perhaps half of the learners receives audio feedback on an assignment in on unit and the other half of the learners receive the detailed feedback on the next unit. Likewise, leveraging learner-learner interaction will help to amplify engagement. The sole responsibility for engagement should not fall on the faculty during the course, however, it does fall on the faculty to design the engagement opportunities. Examples of learner-learner engagement may include collaboration on assignments, discussion opportunities with varied media (for example video, audio, or text response inputs), and a place within the online course to have conversations about course connection to real-life happenings or current events.

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FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

As faculty begin to feel more comfortable in the online learning environment, likely more courses will remain online or continue to be offered in a synchronous, asynchronous or hybrid format. Ultimately, this will provide more opportunity for the working, professional learner to return to higher education for a graduate degree or a change of career. If there is an increase in online or hybrid course offerings, formal training, mentorship, or support will be needed to assist in the creation of engaging learning environments for students. Without additional institutional support and formal processes in place, implications surrounding faculty and learner success will arise. Similar to the face-to-face course offerings, some faculty have natural, innate ability to teach others while some may struggle. The same is true in the online environment. However, those that are natural in an in-person course, may be desperately out of their comfort zone in an online situation especially if placed in the situation with limited choice.

Future research should be conducted in mentoring faculty who adopt online course delivery. Successes and failures in online course adoptions could be shared at an institutional level through professional development events and/or utilizing a Pineapple Chart for informal observations (Gonzales, 2016). Further, academic sharing across institutions or in the scholarly realm could include best practices and journal publications. This research could look at instructional strategies that are effective in online learning environments as well as faculty and student perceptions of the learning that is occurring. Similarly, a mentoring program for new university teaching faculty and/or new to online would be useful to research. What type of mentoring, workshops, or trainings are useful to develop a new online course? Certainly, not every faculty member needs to become an instructional designer to develop a strong online course. What are the key components that a faculty member needs to know? How can they best be supported? At an institutional level, it will be crucial to have sharing opportunities as more faculty adopt to online delivery. This will help institutions build a repertoire of best practices and skills for online modalities.

CONCLUSION

Decades of distance learning has provided vast knowledge of learner engagement and faculty support in best practices for transitioning to online course delivery models. With the onset of COVID-19, unprepared faculty were forced into a technological unknown to finish out a semester and start a new academic year. While faculty and learners are beginning to adapt and find benefits to the technology opportunities daily, there are still many facets to learn. Continuing to support learners in the online learning environment, especially in a pandemic, is important. Similarly, maintaining academic rigor and learner engagement is crucial to success in completion of an online course for a learner. By being cognizant of the three interactions: learner-content, learner-learner, and learner-faculty, the faculty member can build a strong online course with limited technological skills. Regular interaction with learners through feedback, communication plans, and assignments will help learners to be successful. As more courses remain online in the future, it will be worthwhile to study the impact of COVID-19 online learning and how faculty self-taught their online skills as well as how mentorship programs might shape the future of faculty trainings.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Asynchronous: An online course that is taught via a digital learning platform where students can meet the course requirements any time, day, or place.

Distance Learning: A course where the faculty and learners are physically distant to one another.

Engagement: Learners interact with course material, regularly communicate with the faculty and other learners.

Inequity: Learners do not have the choice to engage in a distance learning course but are forcibly placed in an online position, specifically, when COVID-19 occurred and schools shut their physical doors.

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Learner-Content Interaction: Learners interact with the course instructional materials to learn. Examples include watching a video lecture, reading the assigned textbook, or using adaptive learning materials.

Learner-Instructor Interaction: Learners communicate regularly with the faculty instructor via video or text class announcements, discussion board posts, video lectures, or electronic communications.

Learner-Learner Interaction: Learners interact with other learners enrolled in the same course via communication methods such as discussion boards, video messages, and collaborative class projects.

Learning Environment: A space, virtual or physical, in that the faculty and/or student has created for learning to occur.

Synchronous: An online course that is delivered in real-time, where learners and faculty instructors meet together. These sessions often occur through a video conferencing tool but can occur through text chats as well.