

Faculty Leadership in Online Education: Structuring Courses to Impact Student Satisfaction and Persistence

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Abstract

With an increasing number of online courses, many faculty members who are inexperienced in online teaching are being asked to teach in an online environment. This author's position is that faculty leadership through curriculum structuring can have a significant impact on student motivation, satisfaction, and persistence in online courses. After a discussion of what initially motivates students in online courses and a discussion of factors that maintain motivation, the topic of online community is examined. Ways in which faculty can purposely design curriculum to encourage student motivation and facilitate student involvement in the online community are discussed.

Keywords: curriculum structure, online pedagogy, student motivation

Introduction

Regardless of the format of a course, the ultimate goal is to ensure that learning is facilitated and outcomes are achieved by the student. The course structure may be face to face, fully online, or a hybrid of the two, and while there are important pedagogical considerations depending on the type of structure, the successful educational experience (in any delivery format) will culminate with achievement of the course goals and learning outcomes ([Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005](#); Svinicki & McKeachie, 2011).

It may go without stating, but in order for student learning outcomes to be met, students must persist in the course. Student motivation must be sufficient to carry the student to the end of the term because student success without student retention is impossible ([Serwatka, 2005](#)). With ever increasing numbers of students enrolling in online courses, the number could reach six million in just a year or two ([Allen & Seaman, 2010](#)). In spite of the fact that students are enrolling in online classes in increasing numbers, the persistence of students in online programs is generally low ([Angelino, Williams, & Natvig, 2007](#)). While online attrition rates are difficult to track nationally due to undifferentiated delivery mode data, the best estimate is that most institutions lose half or more of their students enrolled in online programs ([Betts, 2008](#)).

An important question for educators to ask is, "How can we as faculty design and structure online courses in order to positively impact student motivation, persistence, performance, and satisfaction?" The purpose of this paper is to highlight important literature about critical issues in online education and discuss some practical considerations for faculty interested in assessing their curriculum and pedagogy through a lens of successful online learning practices. This may be particularly helpful to those relatively new to online teaching, but experienced online faculty can also reflect on their use of various pedagogical tools and instructional strategies in the online environment.

Motivation

Student motivation is always important in student success, but in online environments where students must initiate logging into the course, motivation becomes especially critical ([Stanford-Bowers, 2008](#)). Initial student motivation in online learning is affected by student perception of course content relevancy and student perception of whether or not the student is well suited to online learning ([Kim & Frick, 2011](#)). For some students, seeing a course as relevant may not be an issue. For example, an economics student in a macroeconomics course likely sees the course as pertinent to the goal of graduation. On the other

hand, students majoring in economics may not perceive a world history or other general education course as one that is relevant and important. In such cases, faculty discussions with students about the relationship between their field of study and the current subject are a potential way to increase student motivation in online courses.

Initial motivation is also affected by whether or not a student feels that he/she is well matched to online education ([Kim & Frick, 2011](#)). There are many reasons why students might feel that they are well suited to online learning. Some reasons relate to course access and fluency with technology. Students living far from campus have limited options for face-to-face courses; therefore, online education for the technologically competent might seem to be a logical option.

Consideration of each student's technical capabilities is essential because there appears to be a link between student motivation and the technology demand placed on the student ([Cai & Zhu, 2012](#)). If a faculty member suspects (or is told directly) that a student is not as strong technologically as might be required for the course, directing a student to an online orientation program or student support services could be an effective way of ensuring the student does not lose initial motivation out of concern over technical aspects of the course. Guiding students to online support before it is too late is critical ([Stanford-Bowers, 2008](#)).

Like initial motivation, continued motivation is determined in part by the student's sense of whether or not the subject and topic is significant and the student's sense of technological competence. Beyond those two items, "instructors can employ various strategies to stimulate and enhance students' motivation by influencing students' learning experience" ([Cai & Zhu, 2012](#), p. 323). Ways to support continued motivation through their experience in the course is with prompt, online feedback or interaction and a sense of social presence and community ([Cai & Zhu, 2012](#); [Hara & Kling, 2000](#); [Morgan & McKenzie, 2003](#)). The literature is clear that precise, timely, professional, fair, and ongoing feedback is an important element in online courses ([Baker, 2011](#); [Eliason & Holmes, 2010](#)).

When students receive feedback promptly, they can either have reassurance that they understand the content sufficiently, or conversely, students can request assistance to guide them in the right direction. In face-to-face courses, verbal and non-verbal cues are common (as is written feedback in most courses) allowing students to get a sense of their competence and understanding of the material. In online courses, the need for feedback is still present, and is a key element in student satisfaction ([Schutt, Allen, & Laumakis, 2009](#)). As [Richardson and Swan \(2003\)](#) discuss, "Instructors need to be aware of the impact that their immediacy behaviors and social presence or lack thereof may have on their students' satisfaction, motivation, and learning" (p. 81). Although truly immediate feedback in an asynchronous online course may not be possible, every attempt should be made to respond in a timely manner and with as much interest and attention to the student as you would give in a face-to-face environment ([Stanford-Bowers, 2008](#)). In online courses, there are few if any non-verbal cues to guide or reassure the student, so feedback to the student in one form or another (likely through the online portal, but potentially over the phone, by e-mail, or by another form of technology) is very important ([Betts, 2008](#)).

Any student who does not receive feedback in a timely matter might question whether he/she properly understands the material or whether other students disagree with the presented perspective. In today's technology-laden environments, students are accustomed to fast responses and comments outside the classroom ([Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), texting, etc.). As [Stanford-Bowers \(2008\)](#) notes,

the sense of immediacy may not be as prevalent with the online student as with the student who frequents the campus to initiate actions to resolve problems. Thus, prolonged procrastination ultimately leads to inevitable separation from the course or institution as the issues remain unresolved. (p. 48)

If the degree of online interaction does not meet student expectations, or if it is perceived to be chronologically too delayed, students might lose interest or feel that online learning is not a good fit for them ([Hara & Kling, 2000](#); [Stodel, Thompson, & MacDonald, 2006](#)), which could lead to decreased student motivation.

Unfortunately, student motivation cannot be measured by monitoring online activity alone. It would be simple if student activity in an online course meant the student was motivated, but literature indicates that motivation is more complex ([Chyung, 2007](#)). A student may be in the online portal and posting in online discussions but not be sufficiently motivated to persist in the course. The implication is that faculty must try to gain a sense of each student's motivation using other means. Some suggestions in the literature for

monitoring student motivation are phone calls, chats, learning contracts, reflective journals, electronic portfolios, or e-mails to students ([Betts, 2008](#); [Chyung, 2007](#)).

Again, online activity does not necessarily mean a student is motivated; however, a significant change or drop off in student online activity may be indicative of a motivational slump ([Stanford-Bowers, 2008](#)). There is not a single, simple way for faculty members to monitor student motivation, but trying to engage the students through a variety of online activities should provide faculty with some mechanisms to better ascertain the motivational level of each student in the course.

Sense of Community

Another key element that faculty must be cognizant of in an online course is the sense of community. For decades, research has documented that a strong sense of community is essential to student success, and without it, attrition, student burnout, and a sense of isolation are likely to follow ([Betts, 2008](#); [Booker, 2008](#); [Dede, 2005](#); [McCarthy, Pretty, & Catano, 1990](#); [Ritter, Polnick, Fink, & Oescher, 2010](#); [Rovai, 2002](#); [Rovai & Jordan, 2004](#); [Tinto, 1993](#)). In the words of Rovai,

one strategy to help increase retention is to provide students with increased affective support by promoting a strong sense of community. Such a strategy has the potential to reverse feelings of isolation and, by making connections with other learners, to provide students with a larger base of academic support. (p. 12)

Even as technology is more and more prevalent in the lives of students today, there is still a craving for human interaction ([Njenga & Fourie, 2010](#)). Both face-to-face and blended courses are associated with a greater sense of community than fully online courses ([Booker, 2008](#); [Rovai & Jordan, 2004](#)).

In a study conducted by [Stodel et al. \(2006\)](#), the authors investigated student feelings about online courses that are perceived as outstanding (from the perspective of zero attrition, the course receiving awards, and the learning objectives being met). Interestingly, "despite the success of these online courses as assessed by these more common and obvious indicators however, learners often reported that they missed face-to-face (F2F) contact when learning online" (p. 2). What can educators learn from this? Arguably, it implies that a sense of community and social interaction are often missing in online environments – even in "successful" ones. Creating a sense of community is especially challenging to develop in asynchronous, online courses, but it is achievable, and educators must not lose sight of its importance ([Ritter et al., 2010](#)).

What Does Online Community Look Like?

How might faculty members develop and utilize instructional strategies in order to create a sense of community in online classes, and how might a sense of community in an online course differ from some sort of social networking community? It may be helpful to explain what it would *not* look like. It is not simply interaction with the online course components ([Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001](#); [Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005](#); [Hyland & Kranzow, 2011](#)). Just as interaction with the portal and technology aspects of the course do not indicate student motivation in the course, they also do not ensure student cognitive engagement. Indeed, what characterizes effective and meaningful interaction is a highly debatable topic in the online learning discourse ([Anderson, 2003](#)) and beyond the scope of this piece, but it seems evident that simply interacting with the technology in an online environment is not enough.

Having identified what an online community is not, let us now turn to the question of what constitutes an effective online community, and how curriculum structure and design can encourage its establishment. A sense of online community in an educational arena may be considered more of a community of inquiry (Col – [Garrison et al., 2000, 2001](#)). While Col has early ties to Dewey (see, in particular, Dewey, 1897, 1902, 1916, 1938a, 1938b) – and was further developed by [Lipman \(2003\)](#) with an emphasis on philosophy – it is often seen as valuable in the realm of online education because of its potential to encourage active learning, collaboration, and higher order thinking ([Bleazby, 2012](#)).

The goal in the online course is the creation of a learning community such that it engages the cognitive realm and encourages higher levels of learning ([Shea, Li, & Pickett, 2006](#)). This is an educational pursuit; therefore, the community cannot simply focus on interaction and connection between students and the faculty member. In a Col, there should be three components – social, cognitive, and teaching presence ([Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005](#)). The sense of community needs to engage the students in the learning process. [Garrison and Arbaugh \(2007\)](#) note that "creating a climate for open communication and building group cohesion are essential for productive inquiry" (p. 168).

While the social presence aspect of community may be the most easily understood due to the prolific use of social media websites, the way in which cognitive presence is established online may be more difficult to conceptualize. At the core, cognitive presence is the ability of an individual to participate in higher order thinking through a process of reflection and problem solving that results in new knowledge ([Daspit & D'Souza, 2012](#)). It may be helpful to consider [Garrison et al.'s \(2000\)](#) model of a critical community of inquiry (which builds on the model for developing critical thinking in adult learners proposed by [Garrison, 1991](#)). Garrison et al.'s model assigns stages to the cognitive processes that students experience in the online environment. Those stages are triggering event, exploration, integration, and resolution, and speak not only to the stages of cognitive processes, but also to areas of consideration for effective online facilitation and interaction.

Social presence and cognitive presence are both essential elements of a Col, but alone they still leave a void for students in online courses. The missing piece is the faculty presence, and that faculty member's presence cannot be underestimated. The good news is that the faculty members themselves, and not the technology are still the key element in a successful course – even in, and especially in, successful online courses ([Abel, 2005](#)).

Teaching presence relates to the sense of teacher involvement in the course. [Mandernach, Gonzales, and Garrett \(2006\)](#) assert that "teaching presence involves frequent and effective interaction with the course instructor" (p. 1). It is also composed of those elements to which faculty members generally give thought to when planning a course – elements such as curriculum structure, facilitating student engagement and interaction, and sharing discipline related expertise with students. We will further investigate ways in which faculty can effectively interact with students in an online environment shortly, but for now, it is important to recognize the contribution faculty members make to the sense of community through the presence of various pedagogical components.

Faculty Role in Creating a Community of Inquiry

As [Morgan and McKenzie \(2003\)](#) argue, "attention needs to be given to how the social dimensions of learning relate to curriculum issues" (p. 10). This section will do exactly that – discuss ways that faculty can impact the social community of their online course via pedagogical and curriculum considerations. Faculty can set a welcome stage for community by taking specific steps, leading by example, and providing guidance in the online classroom ([DuCharme-Hansen & Dupin-Bryant, 2005](#)). Initially, faculty members must consider the amount of time set aside for introductions. They must consider how they speak to the importance of community through curricular structure, modeling, and course leadership. Faculty might think about recording an audio or video introduction that can provide a more personal feel than the text-based introduction ([Betts, 2008](#)). Students should be encouraged to introduce themselves, post pictures or short videos, and share experiences ([Meyers, 2008](#)). While this may not seem particularly academic, it lays the foundation for interactions, so considering how to handle and weave introductions into a course is very important.

It is appropriate and recommended that faculty find out if any of the students in the class have taken an online course before. Students should share this with the instructor and other members of the course. Faculty might encourage an experienced and successful online student to mentor a new online student in the beginning of the course.

As part of the introduction stage of the course, students should be given an assignment that they can do with very little understanding of specific course content, and students can discuss the assignment with two or three of their course peers. Depending on the location of the students, students may be interested in meeting face to face for group work. Just because students are enrolled in an online course does not mean they would not appreciate meeting personally with their class peers.

Alternatively, students might communicate using [Skype](#), [Adobe Connect](#), [Wimba Classroom](#), or chatting face to face via their mobile phones to complete the assignment, or they may choose to chat through the course portal or interact in another way. Faculty can provide students with options and remain flexible. [Drexel University](#) holds "virtual teas" as a way for students, faculty, and adjunct faculty to connect outside of the classroom in a relaxed and less formal environment ([Betts, 2009](#)). Students should be encouraged to get to know each other in ways that seem meaningful to them.

As the term continues, faculty should continue with group and collaborative learning. Problem based instruction and situated learning activities are a good way to develop Col. Students should be allowed the chance to apply their learning to real issues and problems, and faculty members should encourage a

variety of responses ([Meyers, 2008](#)). Role-play assignments and/or use of virtual worlds such as [Second Life](#) allow students to interact with each other via technology.

As faculty members plan their courses, they must remember that the size of the class will influence the feeling of community. Those who teach face-to-face courses likely already have a sense of the importance of this concept. Ideally, classes have enough people to do some group work and have students interact, but not so many students that building community seems overly challenging. Some researchers consider eight to 30 students a workable number ([Rovai, 2002](#)). Others have a smaller parameter, stating that 16 to 20 is ideal, with 16 being better in terms of maximizing interaction (Orellana, 2006). While breaking students into smaller groups for group projects has already been mentioned and recommended, breaking students into smaller groups for discussions and introductory activities might also work well.

As faculty plan an online course, they should consider the dialogue that will take place in threaded discussions. Perhaps faculty should introduce students to educationally valuable talk (see [Uzuner, 2007](#)), or at least provide students with some parameters and guidelines for good and not so good discussion postings. Faculty can have students use language in such a way that they encourage each other to think in new ways or to substantiate their opinions with research.

In a face-to-face classroom students can make statements or ask questions that take conversations and related discourse in a new direction. When an online course is structured to allow for a similar phenomenon to take place – for discussions to go in ways that students find meaningful – students are more likely to want to discuss and post. For this reason, less structure is preferable as it gives students the feeling of community and is less likely to make a student feel they must only operate within a narrow "box" or frame ([Rovai, 2002](#)).

To clarify this concept or demonstrate how this might play out specifically, consider that instead of asking students to comment on their understanding of a leadership theory, students might be asked to discuss a way in which they can see an element of that theory in their personal work experiences or environment (or even in a work environment on television). Allow the discussion to go to a place where students discuss themselves and make their learning fit in with their own experiences.

It is often stated that constructivism is the best framework for viewing online learning and learning with information and communication technologies ([Chan, 2007](#); [Hyland & Kranzow, 2011](#); [Overbay, Patterson, Vasu, & Grable, 2010](#); [Wang, 2009](#)), and this is a clear example of why this is the case. Students are making meaning of the new information based on their own experiences, preexisting knowledge, and sense of the world.

Even if structure seems necessary at the beginning of the course, faculty might consider allowing more student choice as the term continues. Student choice may be a challenge to students who are accustomed to being told what to do and how to do it, but through a balance of challenge and support (see Sanford, 1967), students can make progress toward becoming more autonomous and self-directed ([Chyung, 2007](#); [Rovai, 2002](#)).

[Bruff's \(2011\)](#) article discusses the benefits of integrating social bookmarking and collaborative documents into classes of all types. Most traditional aged students will be familiar with blogs, wikis, and tagging websites. Asking students to mark or tag web pages that have relevance to the course allows them to engage their social and Internet world with the class. Collaborative documents allow students a new "space" in which to work together. As Bruff notes, "social pedagogies provide a way to tap into a set of intrinsic motivations that we often overlook: people's desire to be part of a community and to share what they know with that community" (para. 18). As this paper has presented already, the power and need for the sense of community is great, and there are many ways in which faculty can lead students into a greater sense of community simply by their curricular decisions.

Concluding Thoughts

The aim of this position paper was to examine literature on successful online learning practices and to allow those practices to serve as a lens for faculty wishing to evaluate or assess their use of those successful practices in their own teaching of online courses. Offered in Table 1 are some broad considerations for faculty beginning such a process.

Table 1. *Pedagogical considerations to encourage student motivation and student involvement*

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has there been consideration of the climate in regard to welcoming open communication and discourse? • Are online activities created to allow for reflection, interaction, and problem solving? • Are there mechanisms for frequent exchanges with: (1) other students; (2) course content; and (3) faculty? • Is an inviting personal introduction modeled for students? • Has consideration been given to evaluating technical skills (and is a remediation strategy ready if needed)? • Have options been provided at different points in the course to allow students to have an adaptive environment? • Are guidelines and/or examples of the types of discussions desired available for all students to see before they are asked to respond to anything? |
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By evaluating various aspects of current pedagogical practices and curriculum structures for online teaching, faculty have the ability to self-assess and determine if what they are currently doing lends itself to sustaining student motivation, persistence, and success. Furthermore, for faculty who are new to online instruction, this piece has suggested multiple ways for faculty leadership to impact the student experience.

Campuses struggling with online student attrition might use this discussion to open dialogue between faculty members teaching online courses. Professional learning communities (PLCs) can be meaningful for faculty looking to increase their competency and or comfort level in the online learning environment (Unwin, 2007). While faculty reading this article might be willing to try wikis and other pedagogical practices discussed in this paper with students, not all faculty members will know how to do these things. The PLC can be a safe environment for expanding skills, as can centers for teaching and learning (Hyland & Kranzow, 2011).

Importantly, programs and online courses that are carefully constructed around research principles of successful practice have an excellent chance of achieving much higher than average online retention rates (Betts, 2008). With faculty attention in curricular and pedagogical arenas, this author believes that increased student motivation, persistence and success is not only possible, but should be expected.

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