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UNG's Academic Alert System: Outcomes for Online Students

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Early Alert Systems

The basis of an early alert system can focus on many different pain points. Some revolve around performance evidenced by grades, while others on class attendance, and some even focus on specific student behaviors within the learning management system. Some institutions use early alerts for reasons such as adjustment to college and choosing a major, while others use it for at-risk groups such as academic probation. While the reasons for early alert programs vary, outreach strategies remain largely the same as email, phone calls, and text messaging are the most commonly used outreach tools (Tampke, 2013, p. 524).

Certainly, early alerts are designed to improve persistence towards graduation, but there are more characteristics that place a student at-risk. Gayheart (2021) identified some of the most prevalent characteristics: academically underprepared for college-level work; not entering college directly after high school; attending college part-time; being a single parent; being financially independent (i.e., students who rely on their own income or savings and whose parents are not sources of income for meeting college costs); caring for children at home; working more than 30 hours per week; and being a first-generation college student (p. 3).

Research shows that the manifestation of two or more of these traits or characteristics correlates with a failure to persist and increases the likelihood of dropping out. Non-traditional and first-generation students are more likely to exhibit these qualities (Gayheart, 2021, pp. 3-4).

How do we mitigate these characteristics and improve student success? Most of the academic community would agree that early alerts are key, but there is disagreement in the outreach approach and messaging to these students. For example, “electronic advising and alerts systems have potential but fall short because not enough attention is given to the human side of educational technology” (Gayheart, 2021, p. 7).

The goal of the early alert (which should be submitted before the withdrawal deadline) is to re-engage the student and to provide intervention and appropriate resources to improve performance which results in a positive course outcome (Hutson et al., 2019, pp. 81-82). Moreover, an alert can be very effective as students react positively to continuous feedback on academic performance from their instructor. But faculty does not have to be involved in the intervention of an alert for it to be successful as departmental support (advisors, success coaches, etc.) can be just as effective: “students who are able to name someone on campus who cares about their academic success and accomplishments are more likely to be retained” (Hutson et al., 2019, pp. 83-84).

History of UNG's Early Alert System for Online Courses

The University of North Georgia's Division of Distance Education & Technology Integration (DETI) has utilized an early alert system for online courses since 2014. This program, which was administered by the Online Student Success (OSS) department within DETI, included a web-based instructor-initiated reporting form which sent an email to the OSS department when submitted. Instructors were encouraged to submit a form starting after roll verification was completed and before the withdrawal deadline to ensure the maximum potential for academic success. Instructors could choose from a selection of primary issues including not logging in to the learning management system (LMS), not participating/missed assignments, missed a major assignment/test, needs tutoring, needs writing assistance, not prepared for the online learning environment, will not return phone calls or emails, and

other. Outreach to students, conducted by the OSS team, occurred via email and phone calls. A customizable template was used to create the emails while providing resources and referrals to the appropriate support and success resources. The OSS team would then follow up with the instructor to document outreach attempts and results. Historically, few early alert forms were submitted. For example, let us take a look at the Spring and Summer semesters of 2022. In Spring 2022, 43 early alert forms were submitted. 93% of those students never replied to the outreach conducted by the OSS team. 37% of the reported students withdrew from their course. One of which withdrew failed. Only 21% of reported students successfully passed the course with a grade of C or higher. In Summer of 2022, 17 early alert forms were submitted. 88% of those students never replied to the outreach conducted by the OSS team. 29% of the reported students withdrew from their course. One of which withdrew failed. 24% of reported students successfully passed the course with a grade of C or higher.

University-Wide Implementation of an Academic Alert System

In the Fall of 2022, a university-wide academic alert system was created based on DETI’s previous early alert system. The Online Student Success department continues to administer the alerts for online courses and collaborate on in-person and hybrid course forms where an instructor reported the student needing online learning assistance. The web-based instructor-initiated reporting form, located within a case management system, allows instructors to choose the primary issue including course assignment/grade concern, course attendance/engagement concern, needs academic support, technology concerns, and needs online learning assistance. Outreach to students has expanded from the original email and phone call. Now, outreach consists of an official letter and initial text message from the case management system. The OSS team also sends a personalized text message to students during the initial outreach introducing themselves and explaining that the student just received an email with information regarding their reported course. If there is no response within 24 hours, students receive a phone call. There are also follow-up letters/emails and emails closing out the case (see Appendix). Almost all communications feature psychologically attuned language except for the initial text generated by the system. The OSS team provides personalized resources and referrals as appropriate to students including online tutoring, online learning resources, StudentLingo workshops, student counseling services, financial aid, and many others. Throughout the outreach process, instructors are copied in the initial emails and informed of any progress all the way to the end when the case is closed. In Fall 2022, 162 academic alert forms were submitted for students in online courses. This is already an increase from the previous versions. 35% of students did not retrieve the initial letter sent to them (see figure 1). However, 65% of reported students at least opened the initial letter and received information on resources available to them. While 32% of those students did not reply to an OSS team member, that does not mean that they did not contact the instructor independently or utilize the resources recommended to them.

Outreach Letter Retrieval Rates	
Letter Not Retrieved	55
Letter Not Sent	1
Letter Retrieved with No Response	34
Letter Retrieved with Response	72
Grand Total	162

Figure 1

57% of reported students withdrew from their course (see figure 2). 19% of those students withdrew failed their course. Unfortunately, only 19% of reported students passed their course with a grade of C or higher. An additional 2 students were granted late drops. While the goal of our academic alert system is academic success in the course, we oftentimes recommend a student withdraw from an online course if they know they are not going to succeed in the course. Many students may not have been prepared for the online learning environment or the course subject may not be a good choice for them to take online. Other times, the student has fallen too far behind to be able to catch up and pull a passing grade.

Grades Received in Reported Courses – Fall 2022

A	11
B	9
C	11
D	4
Dropped	2
F	32
W	75
WF	18
Grand Total	162

Figure 2

Furthermore, of the students who made a grade of “D” or lower, or were granted late drops, only 17% registered to retake the course in the following two semesters (see Figure 3). This could be due to some of the reported courses being major specific therefore students could have switched majors or the courses may not be in rotation the following two semesters. Some of the reported courses were taken to fulfill one of UNG’s core curriculum requirements however, students could have chosen another course option available to them instead. However, 47% of the students who made a grade of “D” or lower, or were granted late drops, did register in at least one course the following two semesters.

Course Retake	Registered in Next Two Semesters		Total
	Yes	No	
Yes	22		22
No	39	70	109
Total	61	70	131

*Registered to retake course within the next two semesters. UNG’s registration time periods for Spring and Summer open at the same time.

Figure 3

Growth and Implementations for the Future

While the first semester was not as successful as expected, there are many opportunities for growth. One of those is continued communication with instructors on the existence and purpose of the academic alert system and the most effective time to report students in need of assistance. We will also partner with our instructional designers and technology integration specialists to communicate best practices for online course design and implementation of third-party integrations. Throughout our communications with students, we have found that many were unprepared for the online learning environment or were not familiar with the course design format or third-party integrations used in their course. This provides an opportunity for us to create guides and tutorials on how to access third-party integrations through the LMS. In addition, many of our students taking online courses are students accepted into one of our physical campuses. We will extend marketing efforts towards these students by increasing the use of digital signage across campuses and sharing information about our resources directly to departments and faculty. We will continue to create self-paced workshops and tutorials within the learning management system on how to navigate the LMS system, how to be successful online learners, and more. We will also have targeted email communications with specific language and resources for students registered in our most commonly reported courses such as English, Mathematics, Sciences, and Accounting.

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Appendix Outreach Process for Online Courses

- Send the initial outreach letter (UNG Online Academic Alert Outreach) and copy in the instructor; send the system-generated generic text with link to the letter and send a personalized text to the student telling them to check their UNG email account.
 - Ex: “Hi, this is a member of the Online Student Success team from UNG. Please check your UNG email account for important information pertaining to your POLS 1101 class.”
- If the student does not respond to the initial outreach attempt within 24 hours, call the student and leave a voicemail.
 - If they pick up, update the instructor via their UNG email (and copy in the case ID number) and close the case out by sending the student the Post Meeting Summary letter.
 - If they do not pick up, send the second outreach letter (No Response, First Follow-Up) and copy in the instructor (also check the box to send the student a system-generated text with a link to the letter).
- If the student does not respond to the second outreach attempt within 24 hours, contact the instructor via their UNG email (and copy in the case ID number) to see if they heard from the student.
- Send the student the final outreach letter (No response, Final Follow-Up) and copy in the instructor (also check the box to send the student a system-generated text with a link to the letter).
- *If the student responds to any outreach attempts, update the instructor by contacting them via their UNG email (and copy in the case ID number) then send the student the Post Meeting Summary letter and close the case out.

Explore UNG’s Self-paced Professional Development Workshops: An update on our micro-credential series for online teaching certification.

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Abstract

The University of North Georgia’s division of Distance Education & Technology Integration, DETI, developed a series of self-paced workshops to assist faculty in professional development as a response to faculty inquiries and the pandemic. The pandemic changed the way we look at our professional development opportunities. DETI concluded that we needed to re-visit our method of professional development opportunities. This presentation outlines the way we use our self-paced workshops to allow faculty to gain new knowledge and complete the workshops when it best fits into their schedules. It outlines UNG-DETI’s progress in designing and developing self-paced, course workshops and digital badge designs. Successfully completing a-workshop earns a badge that culminates in our UNG Online Teaching Certification, UNGOTC. As a continuation in improving the quality of our micro-credentials and badging system and contribute to existing literature, we are conducting a pilot (mixed methods) study to understand the UNG faculty participants’ perceptions about our micro-credential series for continued improvement and quality.

Beginnings

Distance Education and Technology Integration, DETI develops and facilitates multiple workshops, as part of our commitment to faculty development. Before the pandemic, we saw a shift in faculty becoming more unresponsive to face-to-face workshops and our participation was at an all-time minimum. UNG has seen a dramatic decline in participation of our professional development opportunities, in both face-to-face and webinars. This decline comes from recognizing the challenges of our faculty, such as varying course workloads, scheduling conflicts, and other academic duties that prevent them from attending face-to-face workshops. The pandemic was a catalyst to developing fully online workshops. At first, we decided to transition to a more webinar focused workshop schedule. We did see a rise in the participants, for a time. Even that started to decline before the pandemic. DETI concluded that the we should revisit the method of professional development opportunities and developed a series of self-paced workshops that allow faculty to gain this new knowledge at their own pace. With the pandemic happening, like most universities, we transitioned to a fully online presence. DETI created a self-paced fully online workshop series to onboard new faculty and give existing new opportunities for profession development and saw a very positive response. We found our faculty are more responsive to taking a workshop they can complete at their own pace. To support this new paradigm shift of professional development, we have instituted a new badging system as well as a “menu” approach to the workshops required to achieve the UNG Online Teaching Certificate, UNGOTC. Each completed workshop grants the learner a digital badge that culminates in our UNG Online Teaching Certification. The menu (Figure 1) allows the instructor to choose from multiple workshops in different tracks. This gives our faculty the opportunity to be more invested in the certificate by choosing courses that apply to their own interests. DETI refocused the professional development menu to building all current offerings into self-paced workshops.

As a solution to meeting this dramatic decline, DETI refocused our professional development opportunities to building all our current offerings as well as future offerings into self-paced, online workshops. We have updated the existing online certification workshops, to award digital badges for successful completion of a workshop. The workshops are chosen from a three-tiered menu that culminates in the UNG online teaching certification. The Facilitating Learning Online Certificate, FLOC, will serve as precursor to a series of micro-credential courses in offering best practices of teaching online and instructional deliveries for faculty and professional development. This

track process grants UNG faculty more autonomy in choosing specific online workshops by their own interests that culminates to their future UNGOTC.

Supporting rapid growth

The DETI division, of UNG, manages all online courses offered through the academic departments. We create new professional development opportunities and educate faculty in online design, management and LMS tool usage. Faculty choose from a menu of professional development opportunities and are a fully online experience, at the individual pace of the enrolled faculty. All self-paced workshops have an estimated time of completion to aid faculty in scheduling their time commitment. Opportunities are in each self-paced workshop to contact DETI for support. Each participant works at their own pace and typically completes the course within the posted time commitment.

Setting the stage: FLOC as our flagship workshop

Facilitating Learning Online Certification, FLOC, is the flagship of our newly designed professional development process. Per the UNG handbook, all online instructors must complete the FLOC workshop.

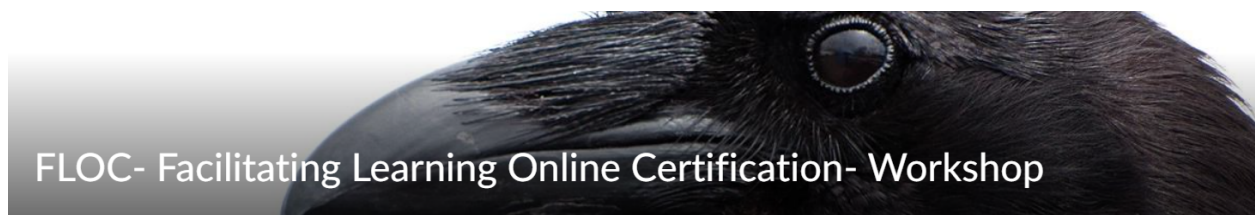
UNG's Faculty Handbook. 8.4.1

All faculty teaching fully online instructors will be certified either through prior experience or through the Distance Education & Technology Integration (DETI) certification process; this includes a self-paced course on teaching online.

The FLOC workshop is fully online and at the individual pace of the student. Facilitators are available through email, as required. It provides faculty with the necessary competencies to teach an online course for UNG and focuses on theory, concepts, and best practices for effective online facilitation including UNG specific content. It also prepares faculty in the skills related to the LMS (Learning Management System) and other software. FLOC serves as precursor to a series of future micro-credential courses in offering best practices of teaching online and instructional deliveries for faculty and professional development.

In Figure 1, FLOC is the only workshop faculty are required to attend. UNG online faculty are required to complete the Facilitating Learning Online Certification workshop before teaching online. All others are voluntary. In support of this policy, we developed the professional development menu to meet our professional development goals. However, it goes beyond this, as UNG acknowledges that continued professional development is paramount in providing high quality teaching to our students.

Figure 1. The header design of the FLOC online, self-paced workshop

















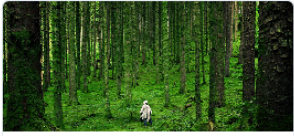


FLOC introduces new seasoned instructors to trends in online teaching, best practices, UNG specific directions and required facilitation of an online class at UNG. It focuses on theory, concepts, and practices for effective online facilitation in addition to UNG specific information. This workshop takes faculty through the basics of how to set up their online course and directs them in how to use the LMS. FLOC is a living course. It is continuously updated with new best practices and suggestions from the end of course surveys. It is the stepping off point for additional, more focused workshops in a specific subject. Successful completion of FLOC is the first step to achieving the UNG Online Teaching Certification, UNGOTC.

Using D2L's EXPLORE to access UNG's self-paced professional development

DETI has chosen to use D2L's Explore feature. Explore allows participants to review and self-enroll from list of workshops. (Figure 2)

Figure 2. The EXPLORE dashboard of self-paced, online workshops

 <p>Grade Book Setup and Feedback - Self Paced</p>	 <p>Quality Matters Prep Online Workshop - QMPOW</p>	 <p>Discussions- Interact and Engage with Learners- Self Paced</p>	 <p>Copyright and Your Course- Self-paced</p>
 <p>Turnitin - Self Paced</p>	 <p>Softchalk - Self Paced</p>	 <p>Rubrics Tool - Self Paced</p>	 <p>Content Tool - Self Paced</p>
 <p>Assignments Tool - Self Paced</p>	 <p>Best Classroom Practices with AI Technology</p>	 <p>What to Expect as an Online Student</p>	 <p>ProctorU FAQs and Troubleshooting</p>
 <p>Respondus FAQs and Troubleshooting</p>	 <p>Getting Started with eLearning@UNG- D2L</p>	 <p>Using Intelligent Agents</p>	 <p>Using the Video Assignment Tool</p>
 <p>Using the Turnitin PeerMark Assignment Tool</p>			

Tracks: Steps to achieve the UNG Online Teaching Certificate, UNGOTC

- 1- Each semester new online/hybrid faculty are required to complete the FLOC workshop before teaching online with UNG.
- 2- Along with this, faculty have access to the professional development menu. (Table 1)
- 3- Faculty choose the 6 additional workshops they would like to attend. Selecting two self-paced workshops from each track.
- 4- Each successfully completed workshop earns the faculty member a digital badge.
- 5- After successfully completing FLOC + 6 workshops (7 total), faculty members are awarded our UNG online teaching certificate, UNGOTC and its digital badge. (Figure 3)

Table 1. Track system of professional development menu

	Track 1		Track 2		Track 3
	PEDAGOGY		DESIGN		TECHNOLOGY
1A	Modules Overview pages	2A	Content	3A	Advanced Presentations- PPT
1B	Learning Objectives (QM)	2B	Grades	3B	Teams + Zoom
1C	Syllabus / Course Map	2C	Discussions	3C	Softchalk
1D	Rubrics	2D	Assignments	3D	Kaltura
1E	Creating Presence in your classroom & Feedback	2E	Quizzes	3E	Turnitin
1F	Copyright & your course	2F	QM-Pow		

Figure 3. Image of the UNG Online Teaching certificate (printed-paper) with its digital badge.



Micro-credentials at UNG

In figure 4, UNG chose to offer electronic badges to successfully completed workshops. Successful completion of 6 additional workshops, from the menu, culminate in a UNG Online Teaching Certificate, UNGOTC.

Figure 4. Examples of digital badge designs of the self-paced online workshops.



Current trends in digital badges

In recognition of these current trends, the researchers have updated the existing online certification workshop, FLOC, to award digital badges to our faculty for their completion of the FLOC workshop and the promotion of a series of workshops from a three-tiered menu that will culminate in a UNG online teaching certification.

Current trends indicate that digital badges are prominent in higher education and industry.

For example:

- Technology, healthcare and finance have become some of the most popular topics in digital badges for the past three years (www.emergingtech.com, as cited in UPCEA, 2020).
- Companies such as IBM, Salesforce, and Ernst & Young have developed their own badging initiatives. IBM alone doubled the number of badges issued in 2019 (www.emergingtech.com, as cited in UPCEA, 2020).
- Academic segment has been elevating as the primary market for digital badges. This is largely due to an increase in promoting credentials as a way for teachers and others to gain professional education in various topics (www.insidehighered.com, as cited in UPCEA, 2020).

Pandemic: Effects on professional development.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, students were asked to remain home while their courses and many of their research and internship undergo a reconfiguration to online platforms (Baker & Lutz, 2021). The sudden increase involving faculty members to shifting their teaching and learning methods to online platforms remains to overwhelm them and instructional technologists and staff as well (Baker & Lutz, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic crisis affected the traditional practice of education practices from its face-to-face setting to online learning. Basham et al (2020) identified the transition to online instruction as without any forewarning or training. Basham et al (2020) reported that 91.3% of global student population were out of school due to the pandemic

and dramatically changed the face of the education system. However, the pandemic offered an expansion of digital technological tools for ensuring teleworking and distance learning. Bentata (2020) reported that the COVID 19 pandemic has imposed education completely by distance on millions of students and forced institutions and countries to invest in and fully adapt, making distance learning one of the great challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Based on these two justifications (e.g., current trends and the COVID-19 pandemic) that lead to the culmination of the design and development of the UNGOTC for faculty and professional development.

The FLOC will serve as precursor to a series of future micro-credential courses in offering best practices of teaching online and instructional deliveries for faculty and professional development.

Originally, the use of open micro credentials to indicate educational progress was adapted from youth scouting programs (Zhang & West, 2020). Zhang and West support the use of open badges for micro credentials in creation and issue for validating an individual's acquisition of a skill in training settings (Zhang & West, 2020). In agreement with Cheng et al. (2018) and Zhang and West's (2020) depictions, UNG-DETI encourages UNG faculty to successfully complete the FLOC workshop as the first step in obtaining their UNG online teaching certification. In combination with FLOC and additional self-paced online courses, UNG faculty can choose and complete the required number of workshops and be awarded the UNG online teaching certification.

Purpose of the pilot study

The pilot study would identify any discrepancies affecting validity and reliability of the data collecting instruments administrated to the UNG faculty participants assessing their perceptions about micro-credentials and the digital badging system.

The researchers will report on the proposed pilot study with 14 UNG faculty participants using a participatory inquiry type as one of the qualitative rules of thumb by Mertens (2005) to also represent the quantitative sample size. As a step forward for implementing our proposed plan to conduct a pilot study, the researchers completed an UNG-IRB (institutional review board) online application and received an IRB approval letter in proceeding with the pilot study.

Rationale

As a continuation to improve the quality of our self-paced workshops (micro-credentials) and badging system and contribute to existing literature, the researchers propose a plan to conduct a pilot (mixed methods) study to understand the UNG faculty participants' perceptions about our micro-credential series and the digital badging system for online teaching certification.

Research Design

Mixed Methods exploratory. The researchers proposed to use a mixed methods exploratory research design because it offers a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods that enables a researcher to apply a qualitative approach as an exploratory phase of the study and then follow up with the quantitative approach for a larger scale of the study (Chow et al., 2010, as cited in Howard, 2014).

Research Question 1. What are the UNG faculty participants' perceptions about the micro-credential series and digital badging system for online teaching certification?

The central phenomenon for this qualitative research question is the UNG faculty participants' perceptions about micro-credential series for online teaching certification. Using a directional hypothesis based on certainty of the expected outcome or predicted result of the variables involved the difference between UNG faculty receiving feedback and UNG faculty not receiving feedback (Falk et al., 2012; Ursu et al., 2003, as cited in Howard, 2014). An important aspect of instructional design of micro-credentials is a careful receipt of feedback both at the individual badge level and over the entire learning journey (as cited in Gish-Lieberman et al., 2021)

Null hypothesis 1: There is no difference between NASA TLX rating scores of the UNG faculty participants receiving feedback than the UNG faculty participants not receiving feedback.
($H_0: \mu_1 = \mu_2$)

Alternative hypothesis 2: There is a difference between NASA TLX rating scores of the UNG faculty participants receiving feedback than the UNG faculty participants not receiving feedback.
($H_0: \mu_1 > \mu_2$)

Qualitative Procedures

After obtaining permission to use data collection instruments and methods (e.g., survey questions, coding schema, and coding themes) from Besser and Newby (2019) and Dyjur and Lindstrom's (2017) studies, the researchers created a survey instrument using the MachForm online form application in collecting qualitative and quantitative data from UNG faculty participants.

Open-ended questions. The researcher will collect qualitative data from the survey instrument and enter each data set in on an Excel spreadsheet. The researcher will codify the responses from the survey questions by matching to the following themes:

Learning for mastery (LM): The learner receiving responses about acquired learning ability, skills, meeting the course or module learning objectives, and asking about the critical course components (e.g., instructional materials, assessments, and learning activities) of micro-credentials.

Engagement involving motivation (EM): The learners experiencing positive motivation interaction at some level in terms of asking and responding to questions about micro-credential(s) and digital badging system.

Engagement involving performance (EP): The learners receiving engagement and interaction at some level in terms of asking and responding to questions about their performance towards completing the requirements of the micro-credentials and the digital badges.

Digital literacy (DL): The learner's ability to communicate with social media platforms such as LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, or other social media platforms. The researcher will post hyperlink to the survey instrument in an email with directions on completing the survey instrument. The data collected is stored on the MachForm Server and researcher receives a copy of UNG faculty participants' data responses via email notification.

Data analysis. The researcher will analyze and compare responses from emails of the selected UNG faculty participants and open-ended survey questions. "The researcher will interpret the significant statements with the aligned significant themes in explaining the phenomenon as the essence and meaning of the phenomenon" (Creswell, 2007, as cited by Howard, 2014, p.78).

Quantitative Procedures

Survey questions. On the survey instruments, there are ordinal questions (e.g., strongly agree, agree, not sure, strongly disagree, and disagree) types that will collect data identifying significant (statistical) measures between UNG faculty receiving feedback (responses) and UNG faculty not receiving feedback (responses) in their perceptions about micro-credentials and the digital badging system. The same survey questions will appear with the open-ended questions on the survey instrument created by the MachForm online form application. The data collected is stored on the MachForm Server and researcher receives a copy of UNG faculty participants' data responses via email notification.

NASA-TLX (Task Load Index). "The NASA TLX (Task Load Index) questionnaire is a multi-dimensional workload assessment tool utilized for measuring mental and physical workload required for completing a learning task" (Hart & Staveland, 1988; Miller, 2011; Rubio et al., 2004, as cited by Howard, 2014, p.77). "The NASA TLX has a six dimension. The NASA TLX has six-dimensional rating items: mental demands, temporal demands, physical demand, performance, effort, and frustration in assessing cognitive aspects of the individual's cognitive load in completing an entire task" (Currie, 2008; Rubio et al., 2004; Trujillo, 2011, as cited by Howard, 2014). Each

dimensional rating scale has 21 vertical tick marks that divides the scale from 0 to 100 increments where each tick mark is measured as 5. The researchers reformatted the NASA TLX (PDF) file document as an editable PDF document. Now, the UNG faculty can mark their selections with a letter or character, “x” between the indicated tick marks for each dimensional rating area on the editable NASA-TLX document from their desktop computers. The researchers plan to email a copy of the NASA TLX in a PDF format to fourteen UNG faculty participants to complete and email it back to the researchers.

Data analysis. Apply Paired T-tests and correlational analyses on the NASA TLX index ratings.

Paired sample t-test. The researchers will apply a paired sample t-test in analyzing the NASA TLX ratings of both groups in addressing the research question and determine statistical differences.

Correctional test. The researchers will apply a correlational test in analyzing the NASA TLX ratings of both groups about levels of significant relationships and in addressing the research question. The researchers will apply the same approach in Gehbauer’s study, by designating the critical values ($\alpha = .01$ and $\alpha = .05$) as benchmarks to determine how strong the indication of evidence between the independent variables (Gehbauer, 2010, as cited in Howard, 2014). Thus, the researchers will determine the strength of the participants’ perceptions about micro-credentials by comparing p-values from the NASA TLX cognitive index ratings with the critical values as benchmarks (Gehbauer, 2010, as cited in Howard, 2014). The p-values less than the critical value ($\alpha = .01$) where $p < .01$ represents a strong relationship (Gehbauer, 2010, as cited in Howard, 2014, p. 128). The p-values greater than the critical value ($\alpha = .01$) and less than the critical value ($\alpha = .05$) where $.01 < p < .05$ represents a weak relationship (Gehbauer, 2010, as cited in Howard, 2014, p. 128). The p-values greater than the critical value ($\alpha = .05$) where $p > .05$ represents no relationship (Gehbauer, 2010, as cited in Howard, 2014, p. 128).

Proposed final study

Once the researchers have determined that the data collecting instruments are valid and reliable, the researchers will accept the proposed prior analysis that determined the appropriate and quantitative sample size of the final study and it aligns to supporting the qualitative sample size.

Quantitative sample size. Mertens (2005) recommended a statistical program in calculating an estimated sample size because the optimum sample size has a direct relation to the type of research where the appropriate sample size is necessary. Using a priori analysis provided an efficient method in controlling statistical power before the start of the actual study (Faul et al., 2007; as cited in Howard, 2014). The researchers generated a priori analysis showed the effect size f for the intended study is, 0.50, alpha ($\alpha = 0.05$), and the actual statistical power is 0.9514318 where $t(198) = 1.6527460$. The sample size for the actual study will be calculated as 198 participants divided into two groups. The study expected to achieve the likelihood of a 95% probability that 198 participants was sufficient in finding a statistical relationship with the effect size of 0.50 between variables where $\alpha = 0.05$ (Faul et al., 2007; Melenovich, 2012; as cited in Howard, 2014).

Qualitative sample size. Using a participatory inquiry type as one of the qualitative rules of thumb by Mertens (2005) to determine a recommended sample size as a supportive approach to align with the calculated, quantitative sample size generated by the priori analysis.

Future considerations

The researchers could consider utilizing the self-regulated learning theory that could offer benefits to encourage learners to plan, set goals, monitor, and evaluate their learning processes (Zimmerman, 1990, as cited in Carey & Stefaniak, 2018; Krauel-Nix et al., 2019). The researchers would consider a plan to apply self-regulated learning techniques with instructional design when creating micro-credential programs for UNG students and UNG alumni.

Gish-Lieberman et al.’s. (2021) study concluded that micro-credentials could continue to flourish in educational research in supporting formative development as the need for standards and best practices in instructional design becomes a priority.

Self-regulation. Newby and Cheng (2020) exclaimed that digital badges could influence self-regulated learning (SRL) development by providing a list of performance criteria in motivating the learner to plan and establish goals in completing learning, comparing, and self-evaluate their performance level. By offering the UNG faculty, the opportunity to select or choose corresponding self-paced, course workshops from micro-credentials program that underlines the three micro-credential categories: **PEDAGOGY, DESIGN,** and **TECHNOLOGY** displays one of the aspects of the self-regulation learning theory. As the UNG faculty members must complete nine micro-credential courses from their selections, they can plan on how to select their learning of achieving and meet desired goals towards completing the UNG online teaching certification.

Acknowledgements

The researchers want to acknowledge and thank Besser and Newby for the permission and modification of their survey instrument and borrowed coding schema (Besser & Newby, 2019). In addition, the researchers want to acknowledge and thank Dyjur and Lindstrom for the permission and modification of their survey questions (Dyjur & Lindstrom, 2017).

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Leaving Room for Faculty Expertise in Online Course Design: The Implementation of a Quality Review Process for Faculty Built Online Courses

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Abstract

Distance-education programs are gaining increasing attention in a culture becoming accustomed to working, playing, and learning online. There is always a focus on how to deliver a high-quality learning experience for students. How do we best ensure quality? There has been a recent push to use more standardized courses to ensure consistency and quality. Our department prefers faculty-designed courses over standardized courses. The learning experience is improved when the course and the faculty member are aligned. We also recognize the need for quality assurance and a certain level of consistency. We have developed and implemented the STAR Process to accomplish this. STAR is an acronym for Sound Teaching and Review. This process includes defining a level of consistency, incorporating self-reviews and departmental reviews, assisting in course design, and maintaining buy-in from deans, faculty, and the distance education staff.

Introduction

A quality analysis system for online classes relies on teamwork between deans, faculty, and the distance education staff. The STAR (Sound Teaching and Review) Process is a quality assurance measure allowing room for both instructor expertise and standard consistency. The STAR Process was developed at Augusta Technical College over a 5 year period by the Distance Education department and a faculty committee to implement some standardization across all courses, instructor ownership of the majority of the course design, instructor training, instructor self-review submission, Distance Education departmental review of courses, and feedback and guidance from the instructional designer.

Background

Augusta Technical College is a two year college in Augusta, GA with an enrollment of just under 4,000 students. Almost 2,000 students per semester take online classes; 628 students are fully online. We offer five Associates Degrees and three Diplomas online. The Distance Education staff is comprised of a Director, an Instructional Design Specialist, and two temporary part-time assistants to support 182 faculty members who use the Blackboard LMS.

Development

Before this initiative, the Distance Education Department supported faculty in course building, but there were no consistency requirements and student survey results consistently showed frustration with finding content and tracking due dates in online courses. To address student needs, we initiated a large scale plan to bring some standardization to online courses.

The plan progressed from literature review, focus groups, pilot courses, faculty training, course review rubric development, finally to a set of requirements for all online courses. The balance sought and found in the plan was

providing some consistency for students and allowing instructors to design and build their own content, while still meeting the standards of vetted quality course rubrics.

Our experiences support the conclusion of Sylvia Hurtado and Erin Cech that “Faculty are typically passionate about their content areas and often report that their work is intellectually satisfying...Teaching is a creative process that involves developing course materials and designing pedagogies that are engaging and effective” (qtd. Sax 2016). We have seen a trend in understaffed Distance Education offices to rely on courses built by one instructor and handed off to other instructors who have little or no control over the content. We believe such a practice undermines and wastes the expertise of the teaching faculty member as well as creates distrust in the students when the instructor is unfamiliar with the course resources and assignments. Halupa (2017), in describing research by Smaldino and Yamagata-Lynch (2015) aligns with our perspective on pre-built courses: “These courses are ... are primarily instructional design rather than faculty driven.... [W]hen other instructors taught these types of courses, they often had difficulty maximizing the effectiveness of their instruction.” Smaldino and Yamagata-Lynch (2015) use the term ‘course-in-a-box’ in their study which compares the experiences of participants across courses built someone other than the instructor. Although some faculty were appreciative of the work having been done for them in the pre-built courses, concerns arose such as “that there were no apparent ways to customize the course to each instructor’s individual teaching style. In fact, one instructor revealed that she had actually added some material, but kept it secret from the others involved because she was concerned that she might have overstepped her bounds as an instructor for the course. Most of the instructors complained they had little understanding of the actual course outcomes.” Our faculty advisory team supported the development of minimal organizational requirements, instead of taking the course-in-a-box approach.

Plan

1. Course Organization

To ease student acclimation, the STAR Process requires basic consistency for course organization without prescribing presentation of academic content.

Course requirements include these elements:

Consistent base navigation menu - Instructors cannot alter the course menu, but they can add elements to it.

Start Here section – Administrative needs such as a faculty bio, syllabus, course calendar, course orientation, and student resources.

Classroom section – Academic content organized at a root level by chronological folders with a uniform naming system. Faculty build content into folders as they see fit while maintaining accessibility, student-student interaction, and other pedagogically sound presentation and assessment methods.

2. Review

The STAR Process includes a 2 tier review process: (a) the faculty self-review every semester and (b) an annual departmental review of 33% of instructors, so every instructor is evaluated once every 3 years. We evaluate one course from each instructor as a representative sample of the instructor’s application of the requirements and sound principles.

The faculty self-review, submitted as an automatically graded quiz in the LMS, serves as an opportunity for reflection and checklist of the necessary components. Our departmental review uses a versatile rubric to direct attention to areas we know are in need. Instructors who score below passing on our rubric are removed from our approved instructor list and notified to schedule time with the instructional designer to plan the course enhancements. After either the changes have been made or a plan has been established if changes cannot be implemented immediately, instructors are re-approved.

3. Training

Faculty complete a 19 hour online training course before teaching online. The course covers the use of the LMS, the required standardization pieces and options for implementing them, and considerations for teaching in the online environment. The instructional designer hosts monthly professional development; full time instructors must complete 25 hours of distance education professional development per year. All adjuncts get a 19 hour contract to complete the initial training. They must submit self-reviews and remain on the approved list; however, their participation in professional development is voluntary.

4. Goodwill Management

The key to the Process is maintaining goodwill and a cooperative relationship with faculty and administrators. We communicate with deans regularly and make weekly updates to individual internal webpages for each dean to show the status of faculty in their department. We currently have support from all deans because the Process ultimately reduces the number of student complaints and shifts the burden of evaluating course design from the deans to the Distance Education staff. The deans are still responsible for the review of the academic content.

We also have faculty buy-in. We are the support team for faculty in their course development. We need their cooperation with our self-review process to keep them on our approved list of online instructors and to ensure our follow-up meetings are met with acceptance instead of resistance.

A number of ways we attempt to build goodwill with faculty are

1. Expressing warm reminders of our support and encouragement
2. Serving them as a primarily faculty-facing, not student-facing, department
3. Offering space in our office for a cup of coffee or tea and a quiet place to work or a conversation about educational ideas
4. Advocating for their interests and communicating to them that we do this

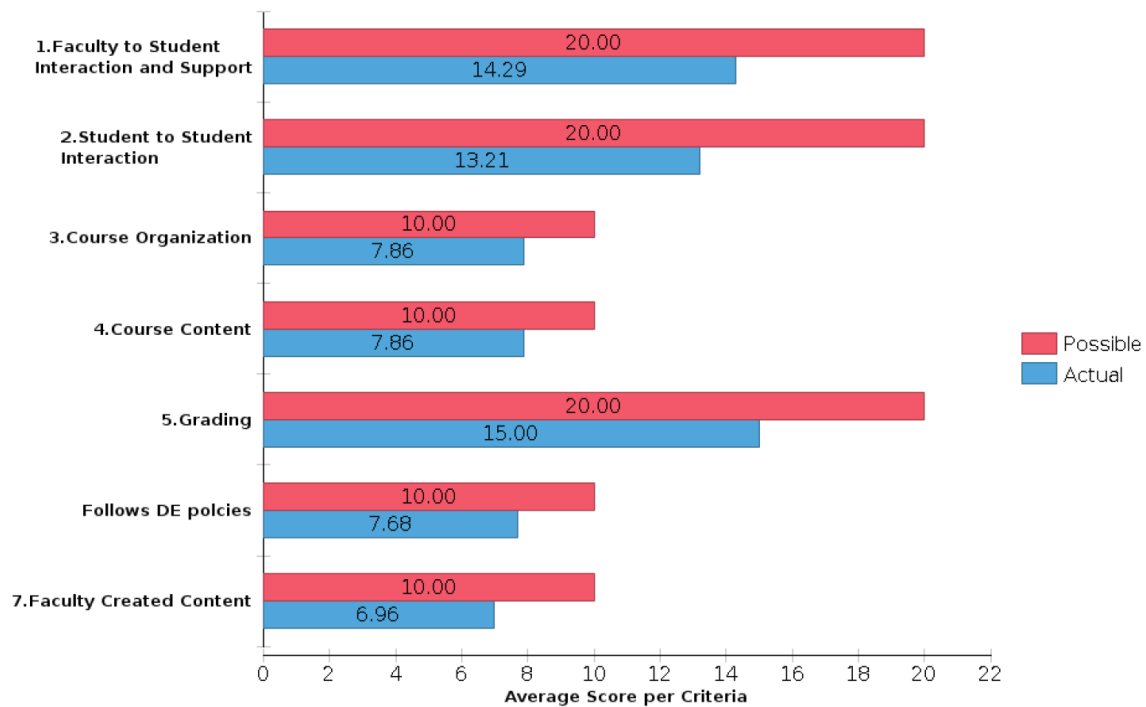
Results

After the first year of the STAR Process, 111 instructors were reviewed by the department. The average evaluation score was 70.33%. The quality of student-student interaction opportunities scored lowest on the rubric at an average of 59.2%. Sixteen instructors were removed from the approved instructor list, pending their completion of the requisite work with the instructional designer.

In year two of the Process, the average evaluation score rose to 72.4%. The quality of opportunities for student-student interaction rose to an average of 66.1%, an increase of 11.7% (figure 1). In all, of our 182 instructors, 28 are currently not approved to teach online until completing their work with the instructional designer. That number reflects an 85% rate of instructors with courses built to the quality standards that we desire.

Rubric Analysis

Star Instructor 22



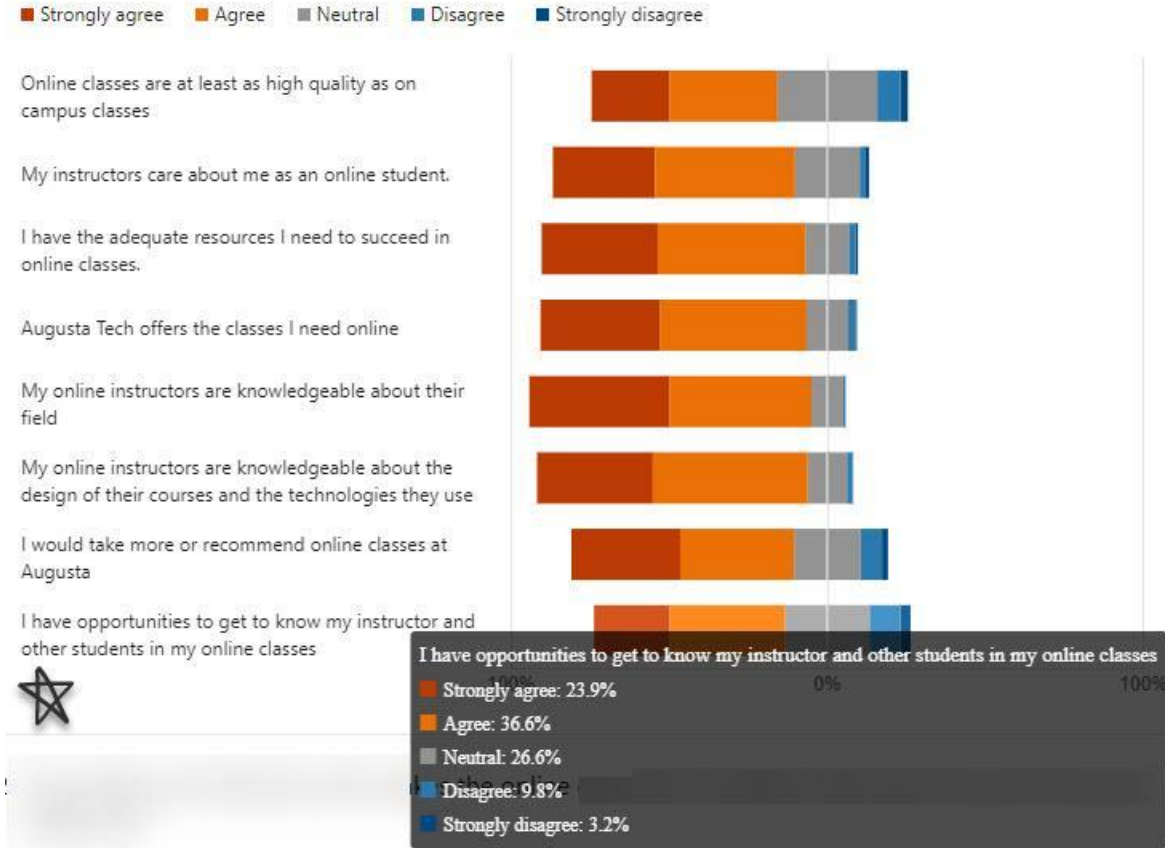
(figure 1)

Student satisfaction

After year two, qualitative responses were collected from 679 students about their experiences in online classes. The highest positive ranking was for the knowledge their instructor had about the content and the course design. The lowest positive ranking was for the opportunities for interaction with faculty and other students. Still, only 13% of students disagreed that the opportunities were available (figure 2). Another positive result is the reduction of student help requests. In a manual tally from pre-STAR and post-STAR semesters, the student help topics shifted largely to concerns not related to their courses (figure 3).

Please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following. If your experiences are different in different classes, use your best class for the answers.

[More Details](#)



(figure 2)

Response category Ranked by Number of Student Complaints

Pre-STAR

1. Instructions for assignments and due dates were not clear
2. The course organization was confusing
3. Third party software caused problems

post-STAR

1. Issues not related to Dist ED
2. Trouble caused by students' lack of computer skills
- β. Desire for IT support for home computer

(figure 3)

Brown and Lewis (2018) found similar results in their comparison of courses built by the instructor with support from an instructional designer and courses built by someone other than the instructor. The students consistently reported higher satisfaction with the courses in which the instructor had ownership of the building: “The courses developed with the assistance of an instructional designer were of significantly greater quality and had a better course structure. Students scored courses developed using the designer-supported model (DS) higher on all Quality Matter Standards. These courses employed the talents of both a faculty member and an instructional designer, the best of both worlds. An instructional designer provides pedagogical and technical expertise to support the faculty members as they implement their vision of the course.”

Going Forward

The STAR Process will continue because of the successes with raising instructor evaluation scores and student perception of online course quality. We will continue to develop asynchronous and synchronous training for faculty. Results of the departmental course review will determine professional development topics. The process is a win-win-win for students, faculty, and administration.

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How You View the World Matters: Connecting with Students Different Than Yourself

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Abstract

Cultural understanding is an essential skill for online educators (Cooper, He, & Levin, 2011; Cushner, 2007; Horvat, Horey, Romios, & Kis-Rigo, 2014; Kereluik, Mishra, Fahnoc, & Terry, 2013; Partnership for the 21st Century, 2018). Education in a distance learning environment has a larger diverse population than in-person classrooms which creates the need for greater cultural competency with online faculty (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Educators recognize the need for cultural awareness and the importance of it in the classroom (Batey & Lupi, 2012; Cushner, 2007) yet research indicates that their limited knowledge prevents them from reflecting within their classroom practices (Moore McBride, Lough, & Sherrard Sharraden, 2012). Educators with an awareness of culture shape their teaching practices to the individual student (Binger, 2018). This paper discusses the importance of world views and inclusive teaching and learning practices that embraces differences in gender, age, economics, culture, and faiths.

Introduction

Online education has raised the level of diversity in remote classrooms. In 2022, diversity in online learning was higher than diversity in brick-and-mortar facilities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). The rise of diverse classrooms led to an increase in cultural misunderstandings and conflicts among faculty, staff, and students. (Pew Research Center, 2020). Based on population projections, the United States will become a majority-minority by 2045. Educators need to present an appreciation of the changing dynamics of student population. Preparing leaders to contribute to the maturation of a diverse work force is an investment (Hassan, 2022). To ensure learning, equity, and a reduction in attrition rates, it is essential that educators are skilled in cultural diversity and understanding and appreciating differences between students and faculty (Horvat, Horey, Romios, & Kis-Rigo, 2014; Partnership for the 21st Century, 2018). Unfortunately, most institutions are unprepared to handle the emergent cultural cognizance required to educate diverse classrooms of the future. (Batey & Lupi, 2012; Cushner, 2007; Moore McBride Lough, & Sherrard Sharraden 2012). Here we examine how an educators' view of the world matters and inclusive teaching practices that embrace differences.

How You View the World Matters

When experiencing cultural differences, individuals progress through a developmental model from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism (Bennett, 2004). Milton Bennett (2023) explains that he developed this model to rationalize how people dealt with or not dealt with cross-cultural situations. There are six developmental stages (See Figure 1):

1. Denial
2. Defense
3. Minimization
4. Acceptance
5. Adaption

6. Integration

The first three stages are ethnocentric stages and the last three stages are ethnorelative. Ethnocentric stages have a belief system that their culture is right and better than others. Ethnorelative stages have a belief system of appreciating their own culture as well as appreciating other cultures. The ethnorelative view of culture should be the goal of educators with an emphasis placed on understanding how to reach the integration state. Recognizing when there is *denial*, such as believing we are all the same, will assist in understanding the first stage of cultural awareness. *Defensiveness* such as supporting stereotypes or having an “us” versus “them” belief is a step up from denial but still in the ethnocentric stage. To *minimize* difference is to perceive that one’s worldview is universal and does not recognize the importance and differences of each culture. It is not until an individual *accepts* there are true differences in culture that the first steps are taken in an ethnocentric viewpoint. *Adaption* to cultural difference such as showing empathy or viewing the world as a part of the different culture provides a deeper understanding and participation in the ethnorelative viewpoint. Lastly, those who reach the stage of *integration* are able to become like a bridge between their culture and another culture. They may find they feel limited in their own culture since they are able to understand other cultures at a deep level. They may feel like they are in-between cultures. This stage of ethnorelativism is ideal for educators as they can connect ideas that would otherwise create barriers.

Teachers judge their students through their own cultural perspective unaware that their judgements build barriers for their students to learn (DeCastro-Ambrosetti & Cho, 2005). To reduce hidden biases and judgements, an increase in cultural awareness is needed. To increase cultural competencies in educators, universities can provide four practical techniques for their educators: Teacher Development Programs, Cultural Experiences, provide incentives for Learning a Foreign Language, and increase Cultural Arts programs and experiences (Binger, & Hassan, 2022). See Appendix 1.

Figure 1
Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity



Retrieved from <https://organizingengagement.org/models/developmental-model-of-intercultural-sensitivity/> (2023)

Inclusive Teaching Practices

Inclusive teaching practices adhere to an ethnorelative mindset. Inclusivity and the feeling of belonging is a fundamental need and develops sustainability, greater altruism, and greater student engagement. It provides equal access for all students without regard to their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, linguistic or socioeconomic background (Ainscow, 1999). Without an inclusive environment, diversity within the classroom suffers. The following list was developed from the authors experiences and personal teaching practices within and outside the classroom. There is overlap in some areas but ultimately inclusive teaching practices involve research based, best practices with deep and sustainable teaching methods.

Get to Know Your Students & Build Rapport

Getting to know your students is an essential part of creating an inclusive classroom. Learn your students' names. Ask them why they want to take your class. Discover their previous experiences. Provide them with the opportunity to meet you during your office hours. Encourage your students to get to know each other. Create projects in which students work together. Provide the opportunities for students to move around or interact with different students.

Safe Learning Environment

To ensure a safe learning environment, the educator should provide psychological safety. Psychological safety includes: setting the stage for learning, clarifying respectful communication, model respectful communication, express the importance of confidence in learning (Clapper, 2010). Develop the growth mindset (Dweck, 2008) in which students understand that making mistakes are part of the learning process. Encourage students not to hide their mistakes but rather address them, review them, and discover how they fit into their learning process. In safety, students are able to take risks and challenge themselves. Assist students developing their critical thinking skills to move beyond the mistake creating the change for which they were striving.

Assess Early and Often with a Variety of Methods

Reduce high stakes exams, papers, and projects and rather assess quickly after the learning process begins (Cadimensions, 2023). Low stakes techniques provide quick assessments to ensure the student is moving in the desired direction. Examples may include asking students to examine areas of a module that they feel is vague or confusing to them in which the educator can provide a quick answer of clarification.

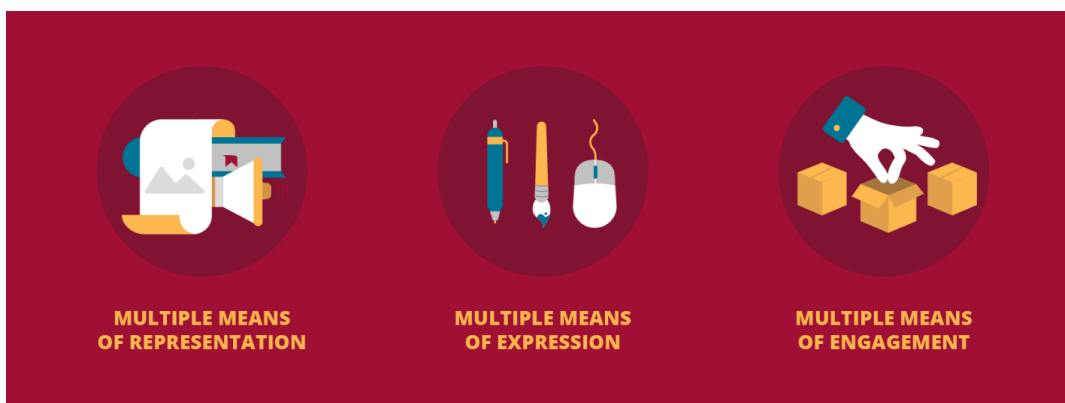
Vary Learning Styles and Intellectual Methods

Provide your class with a variety of learning styles and intellectual methods to ensure you are reaching all students at a deep level of learning. Learning styles may consist of visual, group, kinesthetic, individual, tactile, and auditory methods (Flemming & Mills, 1987). This includes using images in lessons as well as asking students to develop ideas with their hands. Lessons should involve individual as well as group work. Auditory methods could include the use of your voice, their voice, music, videos, etc. Varying intellectual methods include special-visual, verbal-linguistic, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, natural, interpersonal, intrapersonal, logical-mathematical, and existential methods to learning (Gardner, 1983). Spatial-visual ideas include manipulating 3D objects or finding the quickest route on a map. Verbal-linguistic methods include writing stories and public speaking opportunities. Musical intelligence lessons would involve teaching with music, rhythms, words, and videos. Bodily-Kinesthetic learning involves students obtaining information through moving as well as controlling their body and find motor skills. Naturalist learning involves asking students to go outdoors and use their curiosity to discover the natural world, animals, and/or plants. Teaching through interpersonal lessons would contain asking students to become involved in social or empathetic events. It would ask them to use their intuition, reading moods and emotions, and/or relating to their peers. To create intrapersonal lessons, a focus would be put on inward rather an outward learning such as asking students to reflect or use thoughtful words from their own minds. To develop logical-mathematical learning, an analysis of problems and reaching for logical solutions work well as do standardized testing and identifying patterns. Existential lessons would ask students question such as “what is the meaning of life?” and “what is beauty?”. It would ask big questions, accentuate deep thinking, and develops the philosophical mind by trying to get the student to understand the world around them.

Use Materials from Diverse Areas

Representation matters. Include material in your curricula that provides diverse perspectives and represents multiple groups and identities (Cohn, & Gareis, 2007). Ensure the inclusion of diversity is a goal in your course. Critically evaluate your course content to ensure there is diversity represented in images, readings, and examples. Communicate your dedication to diversity by including a disability statement in your syllabus. Incorporate Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in your instructional methods and materials (Rose, 2006). A UDL curricula is a universal design framework that can be used by all people without requiring special adaptations or accommodations (The Center for Universal Design, 1997). The UDL design allows for the creation of flexible learning materials and methods (Johnson & Fox, 2003). The UDL has three principles (see Figure 2):

Figure 2
The Three Principles of UDL



Harvard BOK Higher Education Teaching Certificate 2022-10-12 (Adapted from Rose et al., 2006)

Multiple means of representation address multiple formats in which information is presented and is based a variety of ways students comprehend and perceive information. For example, visual representation should be taken into account for those students who are predominately visual learners. A conscious effort should be made to reach the diversity of all students. The second principle accounts for the many methods a student should be able to show, express, and demonstrate their learning. Due to differing physical and cognitive abilities, it is important to allow them to express themselves through a variety of methods. The last principle addresses the various ways students engage in the learning experience. This will assist students with maintaining a high level of motivation. These means of engagement may include spontaneity, challenges, taking risks, understanding dynamism and collaboration. There is no unified method but instead tailors the learning environment to encourage many types of engagement. See Appendix 2 for a more detailed explanation.

Do Not Assume

Be clear and unambiguous with your lessons. Ensure you are explicit and precise recognizing that some may not understand what you would consider basic. Provide a rationale for each assignment and ensure students understand how to succeed in your classroom. This would include clear rules for the classroom, a detailed syllabus, defined assignments, and a plain and easy to follow assessment for each assignment.

Be Mindful of Language

Inclusive language matters in education. According to a study published in the Journal of Language and Social Psychology, using inclusive language in the classroom positively affects student motivation and engagement (Palmer & Brashears, 2018). The study found that students who received feedback that used inclusive language were more motivated to learn and were more engaged in the learning process than those who received feedback that used exclusive language. This suggests that using inclusive language in education can improve student outcomes and promote equity. Ensure you are modeling for your student's inclusive language, actions, and behaviors. Use inclusive language such as using "Hi everyone" rather than "Hi guys" when it is a group of both men and women. Discuss current topics surrounding language such as the use of pronouns. Recognize the English language is culturally based and may alienate those of other languages and cultures.

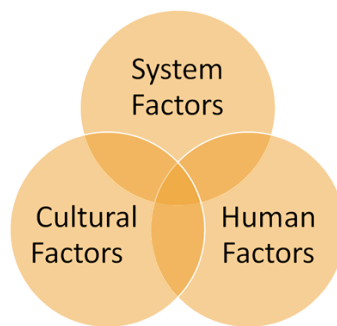
Leadership

Leadership matters. Teachers that treat their classroom as a team have a higher level of success. Teachers as leaders helps build a relationship with their team, the students, through comradery and a common purpose, goals, and motivation to perform successfully. As the center of gravity, the educator is responsible for the successes and failures of the classroom. The increased personal responsibility and accountability of the teacher, is an incentive that

helps galvanize the entire classroom as a single unit. When the teacher leads, the classroom becomes a cohesive laboratory of learning, interpersonal relationships, and shared experiences.

As a team, students are guided by the teacher who influences and monitors classroom achievement. Each classroom has a cast of characters with different opinions, beliefs, and values that unite as a class. However, the teacher must help develop an environment that fosters cohesion, collaboration, intellect, and diligence. There are three factors that an educator should consider for optimal learning (See Figure 3): System (educational system), Human, and Cultural (Caplan, 1987). System factor refers to a person's social environment, intrinsic & extrinsic rewards, demands, and/or characteristics of another individual. Human factors refer to the person's biological or psychological needs, values, goals, abilities, and/or personal attitudes. Cultural factors, arise from the group's unique learning styles, actions, and decision-making. However, as the factors are key in building success in the classroom, they can also create destructive environments as well. Each classroom is an informal combination of behaviors, values, and attitudes. The concept of classrooms as teams can correct behavior, develop understanding of one another, and increase performance levels

Figure 3
3 Factor Systems, Human, and Cultural Model



Michael Woody (2023)

Each Factor intertwines creating its own dynamics for the educational system and classroom. *System and Human Factors* are an intermixing of the educational systems policies and the individuals' characteristics that can have a positive or a negative impact on a classroom (Bandyopadhyay, Das, & Mahajan, 2022). The system should have policies in place highlighting diversity, equity, and inclusion. The educator should be aware of these policies and their individual students to ensure these unions enhance their classrooms rather than create strife.

Where *System and Cultural* factors intersect, the educational entity and/or classrooms function through the educational systems policies yet are guided by the culture of the individuals, classrooms, and school (Seong & Kistof-Brown, 2012). Educators aware of this dynamic have the flexibility to enhance these two aspects to produce optimal learning experiences. Diversity, if not understood can create tension, anger, and resistance in a classroom but when educators understand diversity, they are able to produce classrooms that are more productive, innovative, and creative. Educators can use difference as a strength highlighting each difference and how they enhance each other creating a whole entity that is better than a single entity.

When *Human and Cultural* factors intersect, educational and classroom dynamics become complex. Although Human factors are essential components of team Culture, challenges arise when implementing culture as an educational or classroom strategy. The group's culture influences individual and group behavior and ensures uniformity in decision-making, communication, celebration, and recognition (Ryba, 2022). Group members must align classroom duties, personal values, beliefs, and behavior to align with cultural expectations.

Lastly, all three *Factors of System, Human, and Culture*, intersect forming a completed unit that make up the educational system and/or classroom. Acculturation results from all three factors connecting in the middle that creates an unintended dominant culture. This acculturation process can be a negative force which may impede stability, predictability, and overall success of the class (Bohannon & Glazer, 1988). The awareness of the

acculturation process can be shifted to a positive force through the reduction of the reactionary responses allowing the educational system and/or educator to maintain a balance with each Factor and their union. Maintaining balance will assist in creating a productive, optimal learning environment for all students.

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Appendix 1

4 Practical Techniques to Increase Cultural Awareness

4 PRACTICAL TECHNIQUES TO INCREASE CULTURAL AWARENESS IN ONLINE HIGHER EDUCATION PROGRAMS

CULTURAL AWARENESS FOR EDUCATORS OF ONLINE LEARNING PLATFORMS IS ESSENTIAL TO AN EQUITABLE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT.

WHY DO WE NEED TO BE CULTURALLY AWARE?

Teachers judge their students from their own cultural perspective unaware that their judgements build barriers to their students' learning. Educators who are culturally aware tailor their teaching to specific needs of their students. Although teachers are aware that their pedagogy should contain cultural understanding their limited knowledge of culture limits them from implementing it.

1 TEACHER DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

Teacher development, seminars, education, and training programs on cultural sensitivity and cultural competency.

2 CULTURAL EXPERIENCES

Transformative cultural immersive experiences such as: study abroad, extended travel abroad, Fullbright scholar, working abroad, travel to cultural areas around you.

3 FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Multi-language learning increases people's tolerance to the unknown and ambiguity. Language learning creates a new journey and is a gateway for deep cultural understanding.



It immerses you into a new world full of difference, unknown, and vulnerability. As the new language learned is different, new exciting opportunities open up and communication becomes easier.

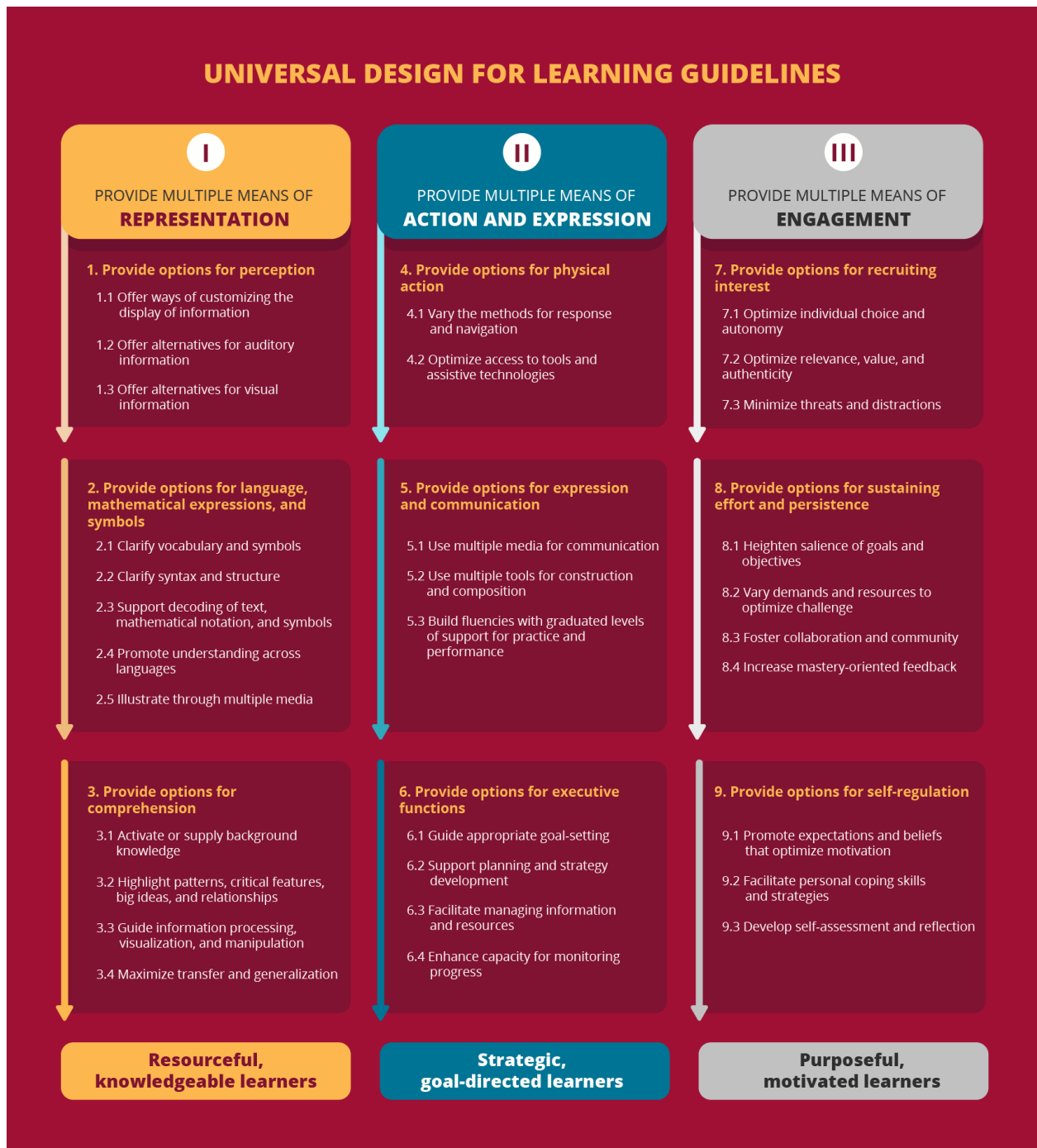
4 CULTURAL ARTS PROGRAM



Art has the power to move individuals to social action. It has the power to influence and educate. Visual and performing art programs promote higher level of cultural understanding, change view on culture, and enjoyment of learning different perspectives and view points. The arts are embedded in all cultures and are often an undercurrent that shapes the human experience. The arts seek to ask questions about power and justice frequently tapping into themes that can have a global impact advancing our understanding of justice and peace.



Poster presented by Dr. Alison Binger at Inaugural Scholarship of Teaching and Learning at University of People conference. (2022)



Cast, 2011

Researching Student Experiences to Inform Faculty Development Programs

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Abstract

Miami University Regional Campuses (MUR) have been involved in online education for over two decades, serving primarily non-traditional students. In Spring 2022, MUR E-Campus formed a research team to investigate student and teacher perceptions of quality online learning experiences. While previous faculty training and development largely focused on LMS technical functions and basic pedagogical best practices, this research indicated that teachers and students described social-emotional support as a key factor in positive and negative online experiences. Based on these results, revisions to professional development programs should include a greater focus on the three themes: Communication, Course Structure and Content, and Teacher Qualities related to social-emotional support and the development of "soft skills."

Introduction

Miami University Regional campuses (MUR) have offered online courses for over 24 years. Located in Southwest Ohio, MUR serves primarily non-traditional students through a blend of face-to-face and online course and program offerings. Managed by MUR E-Campus, faculty professional development (PD) programming is designed to provide online instructors with the necessary tools and training to create quality student learning experiences. In Spring 2022, E-Campus formed a research team to investigate student and teacher perceptions of quality online learning experiences. Our findings are informing the redesign of PD offerings for faculty, with the key finding being the need to develop PD focusing on social-emotional support skills (Mays et al., 2023). The researchers have a manuscript describing this research currently in peer review.

Previous Approach to Faculty Engagement and Development at MUR

In late 2015, the university began migrating to a new learning management system (LMS) to host not only its expansive catalog of traditional face-to-face courses but also a growing list of courses offered entirely online. That same year, E-Campus established a faculty engagement team dedicated to serving the unique needs and interests of faculty teaching in the online environment. During the first three years, PD offered by the engagement team centered primarily around the basic functions and features of the Canvas LMS as the campus worked to migrate existing

online courses into the new system and continued to develop new online courses. Since the online catalog wasn't that extensive, engagement team staff could easily monitor and directly observe how faculty and students engaged with the LMS to determine focus areas for improvement and enrichment. Additionally, the cadre of faculty who taught online was still relatively small, limited to a few dozen early adopters, making it easy to nurture and maintain close working relationships between faculty and staff and identify issues of concern via the engagement team's technical support desk. Tracking support request tickets provided robust data that was used to determine areas in which additional training may be required. As a result, the PD curriculum grew to include training on additional technological tools, software applications, and pedagogical best practices.

Over time, dozens of new online courses were developed and launched at the college, and with them, a steady stream of faculty and students entered the online environment for the first time. Consistent online enrollment growth coupled with the emergency move to remote learning precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic led to an explosion of newly-developed online courses and made it increasingly difficult to keep a close eye on ways in which faculty and students engaged in their Canvas sites. Technical support tickets began to reflect a clear division between faculty new to online teaching, Canvas, or even to the college at large, who continued to rely on the engagement team in large numbers for help with and access to basic course edits and Canvas functions, and the occasional veteran faculty member requesting assistance with more advanced Canvas functions and third-party plugins to facilitate increasingly sophisticated online learning strategies. Gone were the easy days of one-size-fits-all faculty engagement activities as the engagement team turned its attention to increasingly reactive programming, tackling problems, identifying pain points, and addressing FAQs through periodic PD activities.

Yet even as E-Campus developed more sophisticated course development rubrics and user-friendly templates, student experiences in online courses differed greatly from course to course and instructor to instructor. With course structure and delivery almost universally standardized and common online pedagogical best practices part of the standard engagement programming, it became apparent that something was missing from the data gathered via course evaluations and faculty support requests. In response, we began a research project to understand better how our students perceived their online learning experiences.

Brief Overview of Our Research and Findings

Our original research included two research questions relevant to this stage of our PD update project. (1) How do students describe the great and poor qualities of online teaching? (2) How do faculty describe the qualities of great online teachers? Our most surprising finding centered on the high number of survey respondents who referred to social-emotional teacher qualities compared to expected concerns, including course content, structure, quality, and speed of communication. These teacher qualities included kindness, positivity, support, understanding, engaging, friendly, and flexible. Respondents also noted that the opposites of these qualities negatively impacted their learning experiences. Other negative teacher qualities included being unprofessional and egotistical. These findings led the research team to review and revise the institution's online teaching PD programs (Mays et al., 2023).

Literature

Improving our understanding of student experiences is critical in addressing deficiencies or issues in faculty development and training programs. Bowne et al. (2022) noted that teacher and student perceptions can vary, with faculty having a good experience and students a poor one. Another concern is the diverse non-traditional student body found on regional or satellite campuses. Ortiz-Rodríguez et al. (2005) noted this as a hindrance in creating a typical student profile. While higher education institutions remain consistent in their goals and mission, a study of Ohio branch campuses found significant differences between branch and main campuses, which include student demographics (Cavanaugh, 2007). Branch campuses were more diverse, with a larger female student population. However, minority populations were smaller (Cavanaugh, 2007). Non-traditional students have characteristic

variances, including age, enrollment status, work status, and educational experience (Colorado & Eberle, 2010). Irrespective of characteristic variations, including gender or language, Weise et al. (2010) study found that the quality of teaching at higher education institutions was the most important factor for students in their institutional choice. "Quality of teaching refers to the quality of the training process such as the curriculum, education technologies and methods, and staff qualifications" (Wiese et al., 2010, p. 150, para. 2).

Furthermore, differences in learning style (Clary et al., 2022), number of online courses taken (Dumford & Miller, 2018), and academic discipline (Stuart & Holt, 2010) can also influence student perception of satisfaction and engagement with online learning. Finally, as Van Wart et al. (2020) described, students differ in the experience they expect in an online course. Some students prefer a more interactive and engaging course, while others prefer higher-quality content. These differences make it challenging to develop appropriate faculty development programs.

Meyer (2014) examined 39 institutions of higher learning and their PD offerings, finding that assessment, community development, and LMS training were the most offered areas across institutions. Meyer (2014) also found differences across institution types. Alexiou-Ray and Bently (2015) provide a detailed approach to faculty training involving clear communication, engagement, rubrics, and module design. Scarpena (2018) recommends focusing on community development, and Sydorenko (2019) and Trisnangsih et al. (2018) point to the importance of teacher "soft skills."

Revised Approach to Faculty Engagement and Development at MUR

Based on our findings and subsequent exploration of the literature, the research team has recommended a new approach to faculty engagement and PD at the college, focused less on formal programming dedicated to the technological aspects of online teaching and more on supporting faculty to help address what *students* say they need and want. Introducing student survey data into the faculty engagement needs analysis adds a new vector for determining skills gaps. In this case, it revealed where student feedback, current instructor practice, and a lack of established training overlapped to identify the need for PD dedicated to strategies for improving Communication, Course Structure & Content, and Teacher Qualities related to social-emotional support and "soft skills." Undertaking this revised approach is possible as the number of veteran faculty familiar with online technology increases. At the same time, there is still an established protocol for identifying and addressing ad hoc technical skill gaps via course development feedback and support requests. Perhaps most importantly, this approach tackles issues important to all online learning stakeholders. The college is interested in improving student retention and success, and faculty are more likely to embrace PD generated by statistically-significant student input and, therefore, more likely to engage with the newly-developed training topic areas.

The model of student experiences of good and bad online teaching is based on three primary themes: Communication, Course Structure and Content, and Teacher Qualities. While current PD opportunities cover Communication and Course Structure and Content, they primarily focus on the technical "how-to" for Canvas features and other applications. Based on the research, the area with the most potential and opportunity for growth is related to Teacher Qualities. While communication is important, it should not be communication for communication's sake but meaningful and impactful communication as expressed through Teacher Qualities. While most current faculty have the technical knowledge to teach effectively in the online environment, many still struggle with the social-emotional support skills students identify as necessary for a quality learning experience, or they struggle to adapt existing skills honed in face-to-face courses to the online environment. The future evolution of faculty development at MUR is in the growth, advancement, and refinement of these Teacher Qualities online to give students a consistent end-user experience of consistent teaching excellence. As MUR redesigns and refines the faculty PD curriculum, the primary focus will be on qualities related to social-emotional support and related "soft skills."

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Providing Appropriate Support to Faculty in Online Programs

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Abstract

COVID-19 exposed structural issues in online programming that higher education is now trying to address while missing some very important issues related to the faculty voice. Our work examines the support faculty working in online programs need to be successful related to tenure and promotion, mentorship, and work-life balance.

Introduction

Very little research has been conducted on the tenure-seeking faculty experience for those teaching in online programs. The majority of the research that does exist focuses on the online classroom but not on the online faculty experience in relation to the academy as a whole. This would include needed support for tenure and promotion, while also taking into consideration the variation in their workload due to the online modality and their interactions with students and colleagues. Online faculty need greater mentorship to aid in navigating institutional policies and practices. Our work focuses on the concerns related to the tenure-seeking faculty experience in online programs. We provide insight into their experiences and examples of how to support their basic needs as they move forward in their fields.

Defining Online Faculty Roles

According to Martin and colleagues (2019), online faculty assume five different roles: facilitator, course designer, content manager, subject matter expert, and mentor to students. However, this falls short of capturing the other roles they assume related to program management, research, and service across campus while working across multiple time zones and responding to working adults during the evenings and weekends. If they are holding program coordinator/director roles, it may not take into consideration the administrative roles that are also associated with admission, enrollment management, and institutional and accreditation reporting. Online faculty often have many *hidden hats* within their roles.

Tenure and Promotion

According to the American Association of University Professors (n.d.), “the principal purpose of tenure is to safeguard academic freedom, which is necessary for all who teach and conduct research in higher education” (para. 3); therefore, “free inquiry, free expression, and open dissent are critical for student learning and the advancement of knowledge” (para. 5). Promotion, on the other hand, is representative of the promotion in rank of faculty (Misra et al., 2011). Most institutions of higher education focus on the quality and quantity of research, teaching and service as measures of tenure and promotion (Interfolio & Hanover Research, 2022) though some variation may be found in the specifics of each of these areas depending on institutional, school/college, and departmental requirements.

For faculty teaching in online programs, there are specific challenges related to tenure and promotion that may not always be easily seen by their administrative supervisors. This includes the ability for administrators to recognize the daily workload responsibilities related to teaching and service that may impact tenure-seeking faculty’s ability to conduct research and publish. Mahdavi and Brooks (2022) noted that faculty need equity to be prioritized over equality in the push for tenure and promotion.

Mentorship

Mentorship is a critical aspect of professional development for faculty (Minshew et al., 2021). Mentorship provides support for junior faculty that can lead to retention and job satisfaction while also assisting with the avoidance of faculty burnout. Minshew and colleagues (2021) noted that junior faculty need this type of support in order to move forward in the tenure and promotion process, as well as to acclimate to the institutional environment; however, they often face challenges related to designated mentee-mentor, as well as meeting times for follow-up with their chairs. In addition, mentors in the study also noted that time is a consistent barrier. Mentees are often involved in so many things that setting a time to meet on a regular basis is a challenge. For faculty who teach online, this is an even bigger barrier because their active hours outside of student engagement, teaching, service, and research may not always align when paired with a faculty member who teaches face-to-face or across campus in another department and/or school than them.

Work-Life Balance

Achieving work-life balance can be a challenge for all faculty (McDonald & Hatcher, 2023; Owens et al, 2018). However, for new faculty who are tenure seeking the academic pressure to publish, teach and serve can sometimes be very overwhelming (McDonald & Hatcher, 2023). The challenges faculty face related to work-life balance are rarely discussed, yet the literature clearly states that poor work-life balance is often the reason most cited by faculty and students for leaving the academy (Flaherty, 2022; Jones, 2019; McDonald & Hatcher, 2023; Owens et al., 2018; White-Lewis et al., 2022). Dumford and Miller (2018) noted that online students engage differently with their faculty in online courses. For online faculty this includes meeting students where they are from a virtual perspective and making meaningful connections at times that best meet their needs as predominantly working adults. This creates a more challenging schedule outside of the typical workday. This also shifts the current ideology related to work-life balance due to the inclusion of evenings and weekends for student engagement while also having to adhere to other daily service and research obligations during normal business hours.

Implications for Best Practices

When reviewing the information provided above, one might think this is what all faculty need and not just faculty teaching online, but the reality is that these issues impact online faculty differently due to the online modality of their work. There seems to be a lack of understanding related to what their typical work week really looks like and the types of support that would best meet their needs. They need a more balanced workload that is thoughtful of the timing of their service placements, office hours, and teaching schedules, as well as their mentorship and guidance for professional development related to their online obligations. Specifically, administrators must recognize that an 8:00 am committee meeting for an online faculty who has been up late engaging with the working adults in their program across four time zones may not always be the best assignment, nor should all committee meetings require face-to-face attendance when this does happen. For online tenure seeking faculty, there is an additional type of protection that is needed which takes into consideration student engagement and working hours. A lack of administrative understanding of online tenure seeking faculty schedules and needed support could be detrimental to their longevity within the institution.

Conclusion

Individuals who teach in online programs work with students that are placed all across the United States and sometimes globally, but we rarely think about the online modality of these faculty in alignment with their needed support outside of the classroom. This work provides a heightened awareness of the *hidden* hats worn by online tenure-seeking faculty and the ways in which they need to be better supported.

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The Art of the Story: Integrating Narratives in Distance Education

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Abstract

This presentation examines the role of storytelling in teaching adult students. It posits that storytelling is a historically practical and natural approach to connecting adults' life-world experiences to new knowledge acquisition. A discussion of specific types and best practices of storytelling for distance education will be provided.

Introduction

The challenges encountered by those attempting to teach adults are well documented. Adult learners often require cognitive bridges to connect the information encountered with their own life worlds to enable them to self-examine prior experiences, critically assess currently held assumptions, chart a course to accommodate the new knowledge, acquire the new knowledge confronting them, experiment with the newly acquired knowledge, and build self-efficacy; all prerequisites for transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991). Today's online university instructors are likely to encounter five different generations, each with very different life experiences and expectations about the relevancy of the knowledge components they attempt to "teach." Moreover, these adult students are likely to be culturally more diverse than either their instructors or textbook authors that created their study materials. While much has been written about the valuable experiential knowledge these students possess, it is important to also remember that not all experiential knowledge is beneficial with some hindering the application and synthesis of the new knowledge they encounter in class.

The challenge for those seeking to educate adults becomes how to present knowledge components in ways that allow adult learners to connect it to their individual lives and make it meaningful for them. Storytelling or the narrative is both a natural and effective way to accomplish this.

The narrative or story is an ancient device used to convey information and meaning. Its importance in ancient times is evidenced by Aristotle's examination of its elements in 350 BCE (Aristotle, 1996). The world's major religions employed the use of parables to illustrate principles in ways that could be readily understood within human life experiences. Oral storytelling was a principal means of transferring knowledge in pre-literate societies, and it has remained an important part of many modern cultures. Due to its history and importance, the use of narrative has been the subject of much research, often centered on an individual's autobiographical use of it to assist in constructing meaning. In this work, we examine the use of storytelling by those tasked with educating adults as a vehicle to build bridges between theoretical knowledge and the learner's own life experiences.

Modern transformational learning theories posit that five interacting elements are always present in human learning:

1. The meaning in which the learning is situated.
2. The communicative conditions that delimit how problems are defined or stated.
3. The intentionality of the learner in the process.
4. The learner's own implicit self-image; and
5. The situational factors that determine how the learner interprets and remembers the phenomena (Mezirow, 1991).

For the adult learner encountering new knowledge, the challenge thus becomes how to contextualize the new knowledge and make sense of it. To incorporate it into their own stock of knowledge, it must have sufficient relevance to the learner. Lave and Wenger (2007) noted,

“The generality of any knowledge always lies in the power to renegotiate the meaning of the past and future in constructing the meaning of present circumstances,” (34).

In a Harvard Business Publishing Corporate Learning blog, Vanessa Boris (2017) outlined the benefits of good stories in learning. “Good stories do more than create a sense of connection. They build familiarity and trust and allow the listener to enter the story where they are, making them more open to learning. “(para 3.). Well-crafted stories permit listeners to connect with the object in a persistent and efficient way regardless of their individual learning styles to “influence, inspire, and teach.” (Boris, 2017, para 10).

Caminotti and Gray (2012) examined the practice of storytelling to assist adult learners and outlined the use of experience, role-playing, and the use of case studies, and concluded:

“Adult education is built around the student’s interest; moreover, the value in adult education is the adult learner’s awareness of significant experience.” (436).

While most of the extant literature addresses the use of narrative by students themselves; the underlying concepts can be readily adopted by instructors for their own use (Clark & Rossiter, 2006; Johnson-Bailey, 2010; Pfahl & Weissner, 2007; Rossiter & Garcia, 2010).

Eight Types of Storytelling

Emily Bartlett (2022) outlined eight different story structures in the Sparkol blog of Feb. 1, 2022. Each of these can be applied to oral storytelling. Some require more time to develop than others but all can be applied to teaching adults.

Type	Description	Possible Uses
Monomyth	A hero’s journey, overcoming adversity with new knowledge. This is used in many folktales, religious narrations, and others.	The monomyth is useful when illustrating a personal challenge that involves risk-taking.
The Mountain	Begins by setting the scene, encountering a series of challenges, culminating in a dramatic conclusion. This is similar to monomyths except these may not always have a happy ending.	The mountain structure is useful to illustrate a changing series of events leading to a central conclusion.
Nested Loops	Features two or more narratives centered around a central lesson that reinforce the central narrative.	The nested loop structure is useful for using analogies to make a central point.
Sparklines	An emotional appeal draws attention to a problem and motivates the audience to support a solution. It	The sparkline is useful when the goal is inspiring others to take some action to support the central idea.

	features the use of narrative to contrast the ordinary with the ideal.	
In Media Res	Begins the narrative in the middle of the action and then frames the causes at the beginning. It gives the listener just enough information to capture their attention before sharing the complete story.	In media res is a useful structure when it is important to grab the audience's attention quickly and to keep it focused on the key message of the story.
Converging Ideas	This is like the nested loop structure, but rather than framing one story, it uses multiple complementary stories to show how several equally important stories reach a single strong conclusion.	Converging ideas is a useful structure to illustrate a convergence of relationships or ideas.
False Start	A 'false start' story is when you begin to tell a seemingly predictable story, before unexpectedly disrupting it and beginning it over again. You lure your audience into a false sense of security, and then shock them by turning the tables.	The false start is useful when the desire is to surprise the audience and disrupt the status quo.
Petal Structure	Petal structures involve telling peripheral stories one by one before returning to the central story. The petals can overlap as one story introduces the next, but each should be a complete narrative in itself. The story resembles a woven tapestry.	Petal structures are useful for multiple discussions or scenarios around a central point.

Table 1: Bartlett (2022) Eight Types of Storytelling

Creating a Purposeful Story

The following represents our own practices for using storytelling in the classroom. We recognize that there are many different approaches and make no claim that our approach is better than others. It has been used for several years with success.

1. Carefully choose when a narrative is appropriate. Storytelling requires work and emotional energy on the part of the storyteller and if used to excess, can lose impact. Stories are reserved for concepts and ideas that experience has shown to be difficult for many adult learners to grasp and integrate successfully.

2. Be purposeful. The best stories illustrate the subject economically with simple themes. Such simplicity aids in remembrance and cognitive processing. Determine the beginning and end result of the story at the beginning.
3. Allow the listener to get to know your characters. This will assist them as they compare the elements of the story with their own life experiences.
4. Introduce emotion in your narrative. This will help the listener develop empathy.

In Application

At Purdue University Global, each undergraduate class features a one-hour weekly class seminar utilizing the Zoom meeting platform. These seminars are recorded and students unable to attend may view this transcript and submit an alternate seminar assignment for credit. During seminars, the topics are explained and supplemented by PowerPoint slides or other screen-sharing resources, and assignments for the unit week are reviewed and clarified. Students have the benefit of using their microphones and cameras at the discretion of the instructor. The instructor is visible to the students via camera. In this format, as well as in-classroom lectures, the skillful use of narrative has been observed to:

1. Enhance and retain student seminar participation.
2. Enhance the quality of weekly class discussions.
3. Improve the quality of students' written assignments.

Student feedback substantiates the authors' observations. Each term, students respond with comments like "Your stories really helped me to understand the material." "Now I see how this makes sense." "Your story made this real for me."

Conclusion

Placing a challenging concept or principle within the context of a narrative and sharing it with adult learners can often help the student to connect it to their lived experiences and thus make it more meaningful for them. This is consistent with a basic precept of andragogy that real learning for adults requires that it have relevance for the adult. Skillful use of narratives can help the adult student as they attempt to negotiate newly encountered knowledge with their stock of existing knowledge in a natural and non-threatening way.

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Building an Online Community Through Research

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Abstract

One of the more complex things to do when becoming a new faculty is meeting the scholarship expectations of your role. A finished dissertation does not easily equate to a peer-reviewed publication later. What if we could give students the tools to embrace scholarship before graduating? This paper outlines a process for engaging online learners in research endeavors outside the course room. It also shows how this unique method can increase community and belonging among peers. The model presented here can be used for research and other community-based projects. While it is useful for faculty development, it is designed to benefit both experienced and new faculty. However, the primary purpose of this model is student development. This model is meant to give the students the skills and tools they need to become researchers on their own.

Introduction

Research has shown the effectiveness of online higher education (Nguyen, 2015; Shambour & Abu-Hashem, 2022). As professionals in this arena, we are always looking for new ways to improve the experience and build strong online communities while giving students the tools they need to thrive. Research is nothing new in the online environment; ask any online thesis or dissertation student. However, there are few opportunities to participate in research projects outside the usual curriculum. This paper will outline effective steps for implementing extracurricular research projects and show how these projects can also lead to community building.

Literature Review

Models like those used in this paper benefit both students and faculty, and it is the institutions' responsibility to develop and train their faculty. This responsibility becomes significantly more critical for those universities that harbor mostly minority students (Donham, Pohan, Menke, & Kranzfelder, 2022; Rajasekar, Al-Asfour, & Boomer, 2023). Faculty are needed to mentor students' progress (Pollard & Kumar, 2021). Faculty development opportunities are important to keep online faculty up to speed on best practices (Johnson, Hewapathirana, & Bowen, 2023). Studies have shown that more developed faculty lead to higher student satisfaction (Erchul, 2023; Khan et al., 2023).

Like development, community building is pivotal to online education (Brennan, Packard, & Newman, 2022; Chu, 2022; Dennis, DiMatteo-Gibson, Halbert, Gonzalez, & Byrd, 2020; Eodice, Geller, & Lerner, 2019). The engaged student is more likely to continue their education online, and now students are seeking new opportunities to grow their academic network (Archambault, Leary, & Rice, 2022). Online students desire to engage in more activities outside the course room with faculty and other student peers (Berry, 2019; Clayton, Medina, & Wiseman, 2019). The recent pandemic of 2020 has led to an even greater demand for online learning modalities (Clary, Dick, Akbulut, & Van Slyke, 2022).

Methods

Conducting research on an Online Campus requires intentional organization and a time commitment by the facilitator and the students involved. Our team realized that many of our faculty are willing to work on research

projects but may not have the tools to start one themselves. Knowing this, we developed a "how-to model" to help the online community thrive in research. Dissertation and thesis faculty will be excellent with this as they will already know the steps involved in mentoring research. However, this model can serve as an instructional guide to help develop those faculty who are not as familiar with the process. Table 1 below shows the six steps to building a research community on an Online Campus. This model was created from our own experience facilitating research through an online degree program.

The Model

Table 1: Community-based Approach to Research Model

Step 1: Topic Creation	For this step, the facilitator can use a topic they already know well or hold off this step until the research group/s are formed. Then the students will decide.
Step 2: Recognizing the Chief	In most cases, the faculty pulls all the strings; however, students or alums can also facilitate their projects with the faculty member taking the back seat. Either format can be successful. It's important to know this first, then to make a facilitator change in the middle of the project down the road.
Step 3: Forming the Group/s	This step takes a little finesse, as you may already know who you want to be in your group. However, it's best to offer the opportunity to all students through a selection process unique to your project.
Step 4: Commitment	This step can be the most crucial. You will want to ensure you have people on your team who will carry the project through. It will be essential to include this step in the selection process. A meeting time is also needed for all group members to meet.
Step 5: Delegate Roles	Each member of the group will have a function. Some students will work on the lit review, and others may work on the methods, etc. Each member is responsible for the role they are assigned.
Step 6: Finishing Well	If the facilitator wants to take the back seat, they can assign a student to look for publication opportunities. Once the paper is published, or the presentation is accepted. Be sure to celebrate together.

Table 2: Selection Process

Step A: Send out a recruiting email	Explain to the students the idea/topic for the research group (if this has been chosen already), and the group end goal. Ask them to reply if interested
Step B: Reduce the participant pool	Once you know the interested students, remind them of the commitment involved, GPA needed, etc., and that they will also be responsible for attending weekly/biweekly meetings until the project is over.
Step C: The students left will have to apply for the role through a section process unique to the study.	See our example in Appendix A

Step D: Congratulate the selected, and be transparent about the process to all applicants.

Our application process was lengthy on purpose to weed out those students who would not commit, so in the end, we congratulated all those who were chosen and let all the applications know why these certain individuals were selected for the roles we needed.

Results

Population

Using the selection process in Table 2, we received over 250 responses. After organizing a Zoom meeting and communicating what was expected of the 250 students, we narrowed the pool to 35 students. We asked those 35 students to complete the rigorous application process. With 11 applicants, we quickly determined the five final candidates. The final team consisted of two master's students, three doctoral students, the student alumni who led the team, and the faculty member.

Going through the Steps

In step one, we needed a topic. Although it would have been much easier to initiate a research group with a clear process and design already in place, we quickly realized not to underestimate the students. During the brainstorming phase of our first two meetings, an excellent academic project developed. It required more time and effort rather than using a project already thought out. However, the reward was great for the students as they worked through their ideas; they were already forming a community, a workforce, and a dynamic team. Step two, while the easiest way is for the faculty member to lead/facilitate the group based on their own project, the authors tried releasing the urge to control the outcome and let the graduate students, cohort leader, and alum take the wheel.

In step three, it was time to build the group. It was best that the group not be too large. This way, students get to know each other well, and no student gets lost in the process. It is also easier to manage a small group of five students than 30. However, this means a selection process was needed. We developed a selection process to help move this project forward that was equitable and fair. This is shown in Table 2. In step four, all students would have needed to commit to the timeframe and duration of the project. All students knew what was expected of them during the recruitment process. In step five, we delegated the roles to each group member. Since there were five students, each part of the paper was designed evenly. Meaning they were in charge of getting that part of the paper done. However, it did not mean they had to do the entire section alone.

Discussion

Following the steps in Table 1 allowed us to create a research community that is not always available for online students. In step 2 of the model, we noticed the community-building potential by allowing an alum who recently graduated after writing her thesis to lead other potential graduates into a research project. As part of her thesis, the alum produced belonging tactics to establish fair, equitable, and respectful interactions (Carter, 2022).

This taught the students that they could work more efficiently working as a cohesive team and sharing the workloads of each section for the finalized version. We went from an idea to a finished paper in 16 weeks. Bearing in mind that these were inexperienced researchers, this is a noteworthy accomplishment. The faculty member sat in the Zoom meetings, took a back seat to the project, and observed a wonderful display of community building and cohesiveness.

It is also important to note that because of our selection process outlined in Table 2, we were able to get qualified student researchers that worked well together. Many of them were meeting for the first time. If a facilitator picks students they know without making it equitable to everyone, it can cause discontent with those not selected. Even though these were online students, the students belonged to different cohorts and communicated regularly. The purpose of this model was to bring about a community and a learning experience unlike any other. If the unselected students felt that they were not picked because they were not well-liked by the faculty, this would cause another problem for online education. Our rigorous selection process leveled the playing field for all potential researchers.

Conclusion

Yes, we can organize research via Zoom and publish in high-impact journals. While this experience is welcoming for faculty needing help with their research projects, it dramatically benefits students as well. Going through the different steps in the model, we acknowledge that one size does not fit all, and some aspects of the model may need to be amended to fit one's purpose. The authors encourage all readers to amend and publish their research process in these proceedings/journal.

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Automation - the "Other" Employee

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Abstract

In 2000, the United States of America was challenged to incorporate online learning as part of the national education agenda by the Web-Based Education Commission (Web-Based Education Commission, 2000). Since that time, Learning Management Systems (LMSs) have developed to become the standard means for institutions of higher education to deliver education through the online medium (Dahlstrom, Brooks, & Bichsel, 2014; Woods, Baker, & Hopper, 2004). As LMSs have become standard in academic institutions over the past 20+ years, incorporating digital technology into processes has become essential as forms of technology like automation serve as the "other employee." Effective use of LMSs combined with automation solutions can be precious when developing reports and structured processes to assist student success and matriculation.

Automation in Action

Utilizing and modifying existing frameworks to create customized automation solutions is practical and cost-effective. When using automated solutions in higher education, the possibilities are limitless. However, there are two that are incredibly significant when ensuring that there is student engagement with remote learning. These examples are setting up a Student Communication Plan and an Attendance Verification Watchlist which can be accomplished via a product like Smartsheet. A Student Communication Plan can be created by pulling a student information system (SIS) report containing a list of students currently registered for courses. This data is integrated into a sheet in Smartsheet while filtering out students not enrolled in at least one online course. Once the data is filtered, the sheet can allow a user to track and contact applicable students. These identified students can now be sent emails informing them of the start of the upcoming semester. This communication is essential to ensure students' access credentials are valid, complete any available online student orientations, and access course information. Additionally, once the semester is underway, supplemental data can be pulled from the institution's LMS to ensure that the student is accessing the system and has completed any required orientations. System notifications can then be put on a schedule to notify students not logging in and completing the necessary components to access their courses.

An Attendance Verification Watchlist can be created by pulling a report from the LMS. This report will filter out students actively participating in the course by completing the following activities: quizzes, assignments, or discussions. Therefore, the filtered data contains students not participating in any course components. Next, a Smartsheet Dynamic View can be established for individual faculty to reference which students may be at-risk and need communication and support. This report only shows the faculty members the students who are enrolled in their courses and are of concern. This data access method maintains governance while providing a simplified view (Smartsheet, 2023). A variation of the view can be made for chairs, deans, and administrators. Thus, a department chair would only be able to view the classes of the faculty that work for them and the corresponding students of concern. Additionally, an academic dean or authorized member of Academic Affairs can see an even larger swatch of courses where students are concerned. Data can also be made available to staff who work in offices that handle Student Success and be used proactively with Early Alert Systems.

Creating Customizable Automation Solutions

Upon obtaining a Comma-Separated Values (CSV) file needed to become a report, an individual can use Smartsheet and create a new sheet by importing a Microsoft Excel document. Smartsheet will then ask for a primary column

(key column) to be designated to create the sheet. Upon creating the sheet, a copy can be added as an attachment. Next, Data Shuttle can be accessed to create a workflow process using the uploaded data. The source location is the sheet that was created in the previous step. Stepping through the workflow requires setting the "chose attachment" option to "Most Recent" to allow the workflow to update the sheet whenever a new file is attached to the source sheet.

The data in the attachment saved to the target sheet is then placed on the same sheet. Depending on the data type and its purpose would ultimately dictate the "workflow action" of either replacing or merging the data to the sheet. If required, filters can be added to extract unneeded data rows. Next, the columns in the attached document are mapped to the columns in the sheet. Once the mapping is complete, the workflow can be set up either with the option to "Run on Attachment" or "Run on a Schedule." Once the workflow is named and published, an individual can run it to verify that it worked without errors. If successful, it can run whenever a new file is attached to the sheet.

Once automation and filtering work as anticipated, additional columns can be included to help create data interpretation simplification. For instance, when creating a new column using the Red/Green circle symbol, a formula can be written to automatically illustrate which courses are held online with a green circle or a red circle if they are face-to-face. Another example would be to use formulas to pull the last accessed date and calculate how many days since a person had accessed a given course. Leveraging Smartsheet's dashboards feature can allow for the creation of landing pages to provide quick access while also making the data more easily understood by the end users. Using links on the Smartsheet dashboards can allow users to access Dynamic Views (Smartsheet, 2023). These Dynamic Views can be tailored to only present data relevant to the user (Pratt, 2022).

Conclusion

Data is essential, but data, for data's sake, is just a collection of facts that often no one has time to interpret. When asked for copies of reports, individuals frequently feel that they just receive columns of numbers and letters. However, reporting needs to take a step further. The data should be presented to show the requested information without the distraction of unnecessary information. In addition, administrators, faculty, and staff receiving data are often restricted by time constraints and obligations. Hence, the data created and distributed must be easy to review and digest and effortlessly accessible with a few clicks of a mouse button. Therefore, leveraging the power of automation, "the other employee," is essential in moving forward using technology tailored for higher education to achieve student success.

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An Evaluation of Virtual School's Preparation of Second Grade Students for Third Grade Proficiency

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Abstract

Third-grade reading proficiency is an indicator of future student success in middle school and ninth grade, on-time graduation rates, and career success; however, 44% of third- grade students in one state were not meeting this goal. The purpose of this study was to investigate the extent to which virtual school in second grade prepared students for third- grade reading achievement. I used a mixed methodology to compare extant data from a state database on third-grade state achievement tests in the area of English Language Arts. Sixty-one second and third-grade teachers completed surveys, and three teachers participated in follow-up interviews. The data from my study demonstrated that third- grade students in virtual school outperformed third-grade students in face-to-face learning environments in reading proficiency by seven percentage points on the State Standards Assessments between the years 2015-2019. These data were in direct contradiction with the data from the teacher survey and interviews. With the results from this study, I made recommendations using Michael G. Moore's Theory of Transactional Distance to improve teacher effectiveness in online instruction to increase student reading achievement.

Introduction

20% of third-grade students in the state under study were at risk of being retained because of low achievement test scores in the area of English Language Arts. Meanwhile, the importance of third-grade students' reading proficiency has been identified as an indicator of future student success in middle school, high school, and their future adult career (Fiester, 2013, p. 3). With virtual school enrollment in second grade increasing to become a more mainstream charter school choice and necessity during the coronavirus pandemic, it was important to research if virtual school is a viable option in improving third-grade student achievement.

The rationale behind my study came from a public school board member in the state. I wanted my study to be on a topic that was important to the stakeholders in my community to make impactful change. His suggestion was to research VS in second-grade for reading proficiency to see if it was successful (Citation withheld to protect confidentiality). There was a major concern in the state under study for third- grade reading proficiency and stakeholders were trying very hard to improve it. With more families choosing VS as an option in the primary grades, stakeholders wanted to know if VS at this age was viable. The school board member wanted data to help the school board make an informed judgement.

This study can benefit the state under study and add to the body of knowledge in online school effectiveness for elementary education, primary education, and more specifically, second-grade education. Recommendations for future research in the area of primary online education success have come from authors of various articles and reports, with one in particular, by Patrick and Powell (2009). They urged researchers to conduct a large-scale study across a state comparing online and traditional students using state achievement data because of the research gap in the primary grades (p.11). With the current state-wide problem with low achieving third graders and no research on second grade virtual school effectiveness, this was an area that needed more research.

In recent studies, second-grade student success in a virtual school setting has had no focus but rather a generalized attempt to group K-12 students. With third grade being a critical academic indicator year for future student achievement and success, having rigorous recent data on the success of virtual school in second grade is paramount. Through my research, I aimed to gather and analyze second-grade student success in a virtual school setting and fill this gap in the literature.

The goal of my evaluation was to study whether a full-time virtual school in the second grade made a difference among students in the area of English Language Arts in third grade. Additional goals were to build on existing research in this field and to fill in the gaps of knowledge. If a virtual school in second grade proved to be successful, then it could be used to increase student achievement. Additionally, I wanted to document how successful second-grade students were in attaining reading proficiency while attending a virtual school from the teacher's point of view.

Methodology

Research Design Overview

I used this program evaluation to determine the effects of full-time virtual school in second grade for third-grade student reading achievement. I used a mixed-methods design, examining quantitative and qualitative data (Patton, 2008, p. 438). The results of my data analysis will help educators understand the impact of second-grade virtual school reading proficiency to assist the state and districts in supporting current and future virtual schools in the primary grades.

For quantitative data, I evaluated extant data from the state's department of education PK-20 Education Information Portal for all brick-and-mortar public schools and Virtual School (VS) Full-time to measure student achievement in third-grade. I collected data from the State Standards Assessments (SSA) English Language Arts (ELA) scores from 2015- 2019. These data were for all third-grade students in brick-and- mortar public schools and VS Full-time in the state under study. The SSA is the only common test administered to public school students and VS Full-time students which can be used to compare achievement accurately. I also used demographic data to gain a broader perspective of the students enrolled in both settings. I analyzed the differences in the scores and demographic information between the two sets of data.

I surveyed second and third-grade educators who were in Facebook educator groups to collect quantitative and qualitative data. The surveys consisted of multiple- choice and open-ended questions. I conducted semi-structured interviews with second and third-grade virtual teachers from the participants who completed the surveys to gain more in-depth insight from the teachers' perspective. I was able to ascertain a degree of satisfaction or dissatisfaction educators have in virtual education for second-grade reading proficiency using the surveys and interviews.

My quantitative and qualitative data sets analysis provided insight into virtual school reading instruction strengths and weaknesses for second-grade students. I used a summative evaluation (Patton, 2008, p.140) in conjunction with an effectiveness focus (Patton, 2008, p. 301) and an implementation focus (Patton, 2008, p. 303) to study the effectiveness of second-grade virtual school from the perspective of student performance and teacher satisfaction. Through the summative evaluation, I described the effectiveness of an English Language Arts program of the virtual school in second grade. The effectiveness focus allowed me to provide data to stakeholders. The implementation focus provided insight for future adaptations of virtual schools.

My overarching question in this program evaluation was: To what extent does virtual school in second grade prepare students for third grade reading achievement?

My related research questions were:

1. How do third-grade virtual students compare to traditional brick and mortar third-grade students in English Language Arts state assessments?
2. What is the experience of second-grade virtual teachers in relation to student achievement in English Language Arts?
3. What is the experience of third-grade teachers who have taught second-grade virtual students in relation to third-grade student achievement in English Language Arts?

Participants

I used extant data from the SSA from the state's department of education for public school third-grade students (both male and female, approximately 220,000 students, ages 8-10) and VS Full-time third-grade students (both male and female, approximately 300 students, ages 8-10) in ELA. These data are public records and available online through the department of education's website.

I surveyed second and third-grade virtual teachers who were in Facebook educator groups (male and female, ages between 18-99). A total of 77 second and third-grade teachers responded to the survey. However, one second-grade teacher did not agree to the informed consent form, and 16 third-grade teachers did not meet the requirements to continue onto the second section of the survey. Therefore, 30 second-grade teachers and 31 third-grade teachers completed a full survey. Additionally, 11 survey respondents agreed to a 30-minute interview and provided their contact information. After I followed up with these participants, two second-grade teachers and one third-grade teacher scheduled and completed an interview.

Results

Through this study I aimed to determine the effectiveness of virtual school in second grade for third-grade student success in English Language Arts (ELA). I used the state-wide Virtual School (VS) in the state under study because of the large student enrollment in the primary grades, the program’s availability to all students in the state as free of charge, the long-standing history with the state, and the mandatory State Standards Assessments (SSA) in third grade. I presented the data results in three areas: extant data, survey data, and interview data.

Percent of Students at Level 3 or Above in SSA ELA in Years 2015-2019

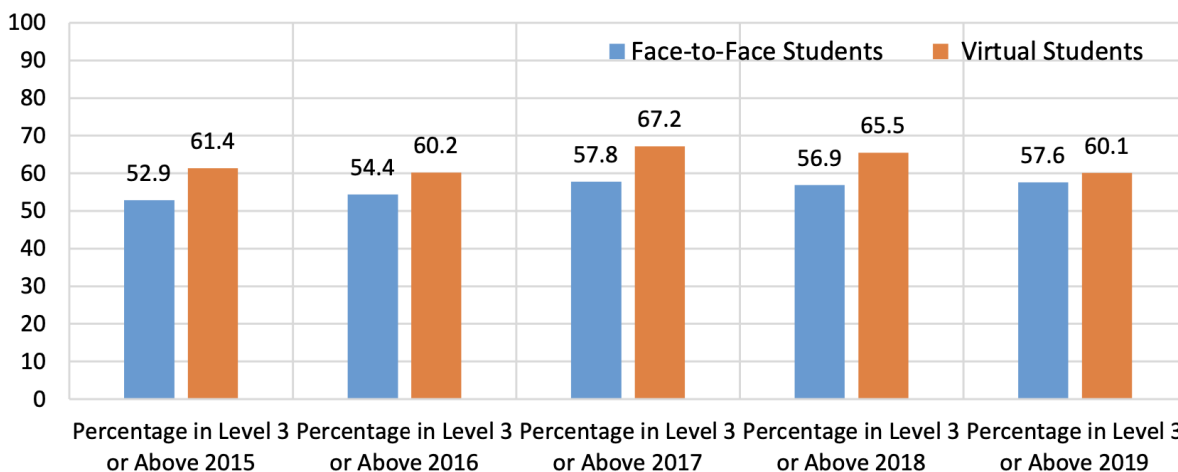


Chart 1. Data are displayed as reported in the department of education portal; percentages may not add to 100 due to state report rounding.

Virtual students consistently outperformed face-to-face students on the SSA in ELA for five consecutive years, 2015-2019 (Figure 2). However, the gap has narrowed over time. In 2015, more virtual students than face-to-face students passed (8.5%). In 2016, more virtual students than face-to-face students passed (5.8%). In 2017, more virtual students than face-to-face students passed (9.4%). In 2018, more virtual students than face-to-face students passed (8.6%). In 2019, 2.5% more virtual students than face-to-face students passed.

The overarching question in my study was: To what extent does virtual school in second grade prepare students for third grade reading achievement? My data results were overall positive. Sixty-three percent of virtual students between 2015-2019 passed the SSA in ELA compared to 56% of face-to-face students. That was an average of 7 percentage points higher. These data are in stark contrast to teachers’ perceptions.

The extant data did not correlate with the quantitative and qualitative data in the teachers’ surveys and interviews and raised the question of why. According to the survey data, 85% of second and third grade teachers felt that virtual school did not prepare second-grade students to achieve grade-level reading proficiency in third grade. Furthermore, the interviewed participants had concerns and faced many challenges teaching reading proficiency to second-grade students virtually.

A related research question was: How do third-grade virtual students compare to traditional brick and mortar third-grade students in English Language Arts state assessments? Again, the results were positive for the third-grade virtual students. The data gathered from the state under study showed that virtual students were outperformed face-to-face students on the SSA in ELA by an average of 7 percentage points over the five year period of 2015-2019. This included the demographic areas of Economically Disadvantaged students by 11.5 percentage points, Students with Disabilities (SWD) by 13.6 percentage points, Hispanic students by 17.9 percentage points, and Black students by 15.4 percentage points. The demographic areas not measurable were ELL, Asian, Pacific Islander, and Not Reported because of the low virtual student population of fewer than 10 students.

The second related research question was: What is the experience of second- grade virtual teachers in relation to student achievement in English Language Arts? The results were negative. Among the second-grade teachers surveyed, 90% thought that face-to-face students performed better than virtual school students in their reading proficiency levels. Additionally, 83.3% of second-grade teachers surveyed did not feel that virtual school prepared second-grade students to achieve third-grade reading proficiency. The significant challenges second-grade teachers reported facing were their teaching methods, resources, technology, and parents with some concern over support, time, and handwriting. However, second-grade teachers also reported benefits of virtual school as none (about a third), better lessons, increased access to books online, increased student autonomy, and a better environment with some increased interaction with students and less social pressure for students. Among the second-grade teachers surveyed, 80% felt that second-grade students in a virtual school did not receive an equitable ELA education compared to their peers in a traditional face-to-face school.

The final related research question was: What is the experience of third-grade teachers who have taught second-grade virtual students, in relation to third-grade student achievement in English Language Arts? The results were negative. Among the third- grade teachers surveyed, 90.3% did not feel that virtual school prepared second-grade students to achieve grade-level reading proficiency in third grade. Furthermore, 87.1% of third-grade teachers surveyed felt that students who attended a face-to-face school for second grade performed better in third-grade ELA assessments than students who attended a virtual school in second grade. Finally, 90.3% of third-grade teachers surveyed felt that students who attended a virtual second grade did not receive an equitable education in English Language Arts compared to their peers in a traditional face-to-face school.

Recommendations

I propose a policy that requires all teachers in the state under study to have online education training. The policy will occur in two prongs. The first prong requires preservice teachers at every level to have three semester hours in the area of online teaching and learning. The second prong requires all in-service teachers to have professional development in three semester hours or 60 in-service points in the area of online teaching and learning. Inservice teachers will have one year from the day and month assigned an online student to complete the professional development. Inservice teachers without an online student assigned to their classroom will have two years to complete the three semester hours or 60 in-service points requirement. Teachers will submit documentation of required completion to the Certification office at the state's department of education office. Teachers not meeting the requirement will be considered out-of-field.

Conclusion

I evaluated a state-wide Virtual School (VS) and compared it to the brick-and- mortar public schools in the same state to measure the effectiveness of the VS program in second grade for third-grade reading proficiency. My research results informed my future vision for teacher training. I hope educational leaders read this evaluation and see the potential impact on student success if they implement the teacher training recommended. As virtual education increases around the world, the physical distance between teachers and students also increases. Teacher and student success depend on making an impactful change to cross this distance barrier and change our mindset of education.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Survey Questions for Second-grade Teachers

1. What is your experience with teaching virtual school in second grade?
 none less than 5 years more than 5 years
2. What is your experience with teaching in a traditional face-to-face classroom?
 none less than 5 years more than 5 years
3. Do you think virtual school prepares second-grade students to achieve grade-level reading proficiency for third grade?
 yes no
4. How would you compare the reading proficiency levels for virtual school students compared traditional face-to-face school students for second grade?
 same
 virtual school students performed better
 face-to-face students performed better
 I do not have experience in both virtual and face-to-face teaching environments
5. What challenges do you face when teaching second-grade reading proficiency to students online? (written response)
6. What benefits which effect reading proficiency do you think students have when attending a second-grade virtual school? (written response)
7. Do you feel that students in a second-grade virtual school receive an equitable English Language Arts education as their peers in a traditional face-to-face school?
 yes no
8. Would you be willing to participate in a 30-minute interview?
 yes no
9. Thank you! Please provide your contact information and someone will be in contact with you soon.

Name: _____ Phone number: _____
Email: _____

Appendix B

Survey Questions for Third-grade Teachers

1. How many years have you taught third- grade?

- none less than 5 years more than 5 years

2. Have you taught third grade students who attended virtual school in second grade?

- yes no

3. How would you describe your teaching experience?

- virtual school only
 face-to-face only
 both virtual and face-to face school

4. Do you think virtual school prepares second-grade students to achieve grade-level reading proficiency in third grade?

- yes no

5. How do third-grade students who were enrolled in a virtual school for second grade perform in English Language Arts assessments compared to their peers who were enrolled in a traditional face-to-face classroom for second grade?

- same
 virtual school students performed better
 face-to-face students performed better

6. Do you feel that students in a second-grade virtual school receive an equitable education in English Language Arts as their peers in a traditional face-to-face school?

- yes no

7. Would you be willing to participate in a 30-minute interview?

- yes no

8. Thank you! Please provide your contact information and someone will be in contact with you soon.

Name: _____
Phone number: _____ Email: _____

Appendix C

Interview Questions

1. Please briefly share with me your background as a teacher.
2. What different types of professional development have you had for virtual teaching?
3. Can you explain how satisfied you have been with the virtual teaching?
4. How would you compare your experiences for virtual and face-to-face teaching in English Language Arts for student reading proficiency?
5. How would you assess students for reading proficiency in a virtual school setting compared to a face-to-face setting?
6. What are some aspects of virtual teaching English Language Arts that you like?
7. What are some aspects of virtual teaching English Language Arts that you do not like?
8. Can you describe the structure and routines you have established in your classroom that you feel have positively impacted student achievement in reading proficiency?
9. Is there anything else that you would like to add from the teacher's point of view in regard to virtual teaching English Language Arts?

Incorporating Modality Analysis to Move the Needle in Student Success

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Middle Georgia State University

Abstract

Over the last two decades higher education has experienced continuous growth in online education, with students and faculty enjoying the flexibility. With that flexibility came new pedagogies, new course preps, and a new era of teaching, learning, and academic planning. Just as those in the classroom had to modify behaviors and strategies, administrators had the opportunity to modify student support strategies seeking to increase student success and retention. We embraced that opportunity at Middle Georgia State University and engaged students across modalities in meaningful ways with an integrated academic master plan. In a short period of time we realized significant gains and were able to design a course schedule that maximized campus presence and student success while meeting the demand for flexible, online programming.

Introduction

Middle Georgia State University is located in the heart of Georgia with its main campus in Macon. The university was created in 2012 through the consolidation of Macon State College and Middle Georgia College, resulting in a new university that spread across five campuses and 180 square miles. This created a natural environment for online coursework embedded within programs to maximize flexibility for students on multiple campuses. We found it was much more engaging for faculty and learners to have well-designed online and hybrid courses with a community of 15-20 rather than five lower enrolled courses across multiple campuses which limited peer to peer interactions and the overall college experience.

With greater competition coming out of the pandemic, decreasing prospect pools, and the anticipation of decreasing resources, we turned to improve retention as a method to increase enrollments. College administrators view retention rates as indicators of the quality of faculty instruction, support services, and student success (Barbatis, 2010). The pandemic encouraged us to embrace better design, mentoring, and engagement in the online classroom, followed closely by our return to campus where face to face engagement seemed foreign and inconvenient at first. Complementing this was our need to ensure significant support services were offered in a variety of modalities. We became very good at online design and delivery and were soon confronted with a question from students and faculty alike, why return to campus? Our analysis was driven by an idea that similar to the fact that we all learn in different ways (Willingham, Hughes, & Dobolyi, 2015), we may also learn and engage differently across modalities by subject and class structure. The results were certainly not definitive for all learners, but we were able to direct at risk learners into modalities where they were more likely to find success.

Background

Middle Georgia State University (MGA) was in the midst of years five and six of the Momentum Approach, a multi-year data-driven student success initiative focusing on course success rates, retention, persistence, and graduation. Each year we focused on one big idea that would impact student success. MGA's 2021 big idea was to develop strategies and practices that build the academic mindset as an institutional culture. Using the lens of the academic mindset, strategies were planned to address institutional goals. We gathered a team of nine individuals, representing advising, student success centers, registrar's office, deans, the provost's office, residential life, career and leadership development, and instructional designers to serve as our champions. These individuals were split

into committees to develop action items that incorporated the academic mindset while addressing student success goals.

The teams questioned whether variables could be analyzed to find significant differences in student performance across modalities and campuses. Specifically, whether failure rates were significantly related to modality after controlling for instructor and campus. The analysis was completed in part based on prior research that found classroom design and furniture options were significantly related to student performance in English and Math (Jenks and Jenks, 2019). English students performed better in more fluid, dynamic classrooms with flexible movable furniture, while math students performed worse in a similar environment. The exact opposite was true for classrooms with static desks in classic rows. The hypothesis was we may be able to find similar actionable results across modalities.

It was clear from the outset that we were not going to be able to analyze modalities in a vacuum or attribute any successes solely to directing learners into them with targeted support. Retention initiatives go beyond just adding another student service here and there within the college, to a more comprehensive approach that will create a collaborative educational environment that promotes the academic success of all students (Tinto, 1999). The reality in higher education is that we have a good sense of what we can do to improve student success and many universities are making improvements in those areas: advising, mental health counseling, engagement in the classroom and on campus, making personnel connections, reducing cost, expanding financial aid services, etc. Student engagement with faculty, peers, and the college community through deliberate institutional action is critical to a student’s college life and success (Schultheis, 2015). None of these are surprising to anyone who has worked in student success over the last decade. Modality, however, is not seen as one of the universal variables at many universities, even those that emphasize quality design and delivery. Online coursework has expanded exponentially since the pandemic and certainly over the last two decades, and we need to be cognizant of learning patterns and preferences of today’s learners.

Student Success

Middle Georgia State University realized significant gains in student success metrics since summer 2021 which can be seen in Table 1, when there was a renewed push to analyze data, identify opportunities, and reallocate resources to areas we often refer to as ‘low hanging fruit’. Of significant note is our deliberate efforts to engage and empower faculty. Working toward student success alongside an empowered faculty builds engagement and maintains momentum. Forcing faculty to teach in modalities they do not enjoy or see their strengths realized hurts student success. Similarly, failing to provide faculty support for development and improvement can be barriers.

Table 1: MGA Student Success by the Numbers Summer 2021- Spring 2023

	Spring 21	Fall 21	Spring 22	Fall 22	Spring 23
Retention (IPEDS)		56.8%		61.8% (+5%)	
Persistence	73.9%		80.1% (+6%)		84.1% (+4%)
Learning Support English	49.7%	58.1%	52.8% (+3.1%)	59.5% (+1.4%)	

Persistence defined as reregistration rates from Fall to Spring, was the first metric we intentionally attempted to affect. We addressed this issue through several avenues that included more intrusive centralized advising, a personal call to faculty to connect with one more student in every class, and an analysis of scheduling and instructional modality that resulted in a more deliberate schedule of classes in the second semester to maximize interest and successful completion. The results were clearly a success as fall to spring persistence in the first year increased by 6.2 percentage points. In addition to our overall increases, the deliberate scheduling of students into specific modalities positive impacted our developmental English and math pass rates (+3.1% for spring and 1.4% for fall) for a student population that is traditionally higher at-risk to be retained. These efforts were complemented by some of the additional tried and true strategies such as the use of early alerts, supplemental instruction, pushes to increase social engagement, and the use of financial gap funding. While we celebrated the accomplishment, this also created

some hesitation on our part to say we found a ‘secret sauce’ and the trendline would continue. We were able to replicate our success the following year, mainly through an expansion of efforts from the prior fall.

We are excited that our efforts to increase persistence contributed to a one-year increase of 5 percentage points on our first-time full-time freshmen. It is quite difficult to increase retention effectively by more than a percentage or two in institutions our size. It is also quite difficult to maintain that success without continual and deliberate action at the institution.

We continue to engage faculty on modality analysis as we expand engagement activities across divisions to build campus identity and presence. Our continued efforts of addressing the ‘low hanging fruit’ and reallocating resources drove us to expand advising which reduced their average load of advisees by 20%, increase supplemental instruction, build a residence life academic support program, and more. Once again, we face the future of our gains with trepidation. We are confident in our process, our faculty, and our upward trendline which has contributed to our enrollment rebound following the pandemic.

Conclusion

Modality analysis is critical in moving the needle in student success going forward. We need to understand that faculty and staff have a greater ability to succeed based on modality and that not all are adept across modalities. Student success cannot be done with one singular strategy. We also must be willing to find ways that move the needle in student success at our institutions and move away from those that do not. Through this work it is important that all are willing to accept the knowledge and experience gained by failing and supporting areas of success.

We have not achieved our overall retention and graduation rate goals. We still have lots of growth and opportunity. With continued effort, student success will continue to improve at Middle Georgia State University, and we hope our nudge to include modality in the analysis is helpful.

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Increasing Student Retention and Grades with Robust Academic Support

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Abstract

Institutional growth creates the need for re-evaluation of student services, as the University of North Alabama experienced when their enrollment increased 13 percent from 2021 to 2022. Among the student services being evaluated, academic tutoring emerged as a high need service for student retention and persistence. The University of North Alabama partnered with Tutor.com to provide online, 24/7 access to its students, which resulted in higher retention rates, lower DFWI rates, and higher GPAs for students who utilized the program.

Evaluation of services to accommodate growth

Whether they are labeled as Admissions or Enrollment Management, most institutions have one designated department whose primary focus is student enrollment. In contrast, student retention and persistence are key motivators of multiple departments within an institution. At the University of North Alabama (UNA), the University Success Center is one such department. UNA's University Success Center consists of several units: University Advising Services, Career Center, Academic Testing Services, Center for Writing Excellence, Mathematics Learning Center, and Academic Tutoring Services.

UNA experienced enrollment growth across three student demographics: traditional on-campus students, nontraditional on-campus students, and online students. An evaluation of services required each unit to determine their ability to reach and support each of these unique student groups. One area found to be severely lacking in supporting each of the three groups was Academic Tutoring Services, which hosted a peer tutoring program primarily for 100-level courses. The peer tutoring program possessed several issues when determining its effectiveness in student retention and persistence: peer tutors were not consistently hired, trained or evaluated; they were only accessible for certain courses depending on greatest need, request or ability to locate a tutor; and their available hours were inconsistent and only during University office hours. These issues meant that only students who were on-campus, available during office hours, and able to secure a time with the limited number of tutors could benefit from the resource.

University Success Center leadership addressed the glaring problems in order to find a suitable solution. When imagining the future state of an ideal tutoring program, five critical features were identified: tutors needed to be available 24/7 to meet each student's varying schedule; students could access tutors either by appointment or on-demand; student privacy was protected, encouraging them to access services without fear of embarrassment; tutors were qualified, trained, and monitored; and tutoring could be provided across multiple subject areas and academic levels. It quickly became apparent that a peer tutoring program could not fit these needs, which led to researching online tutoring programs.

Tutor.com emerged as a quality candidate due to meeting these key criteria, in addition to other factors: the ease of availability for students to connect with a tutor, the usage data provided for the university administrative team, and their formula for calculating student time spent with a tutor. The University of North Alabama implemented Tutor.com as a replacement for the peer tutoring program in August 2021.

Tutoring usage outcomes on student retention and grades

In the initial months following implementation, University Success Center staff closely monitored the usage of Tutor.com among its students and faculty, including tracking the courses where tutoring was most often sought and reviewing early alerts tutors submitted after meeting with a student who may still be struggling with the content.

UNA students shared positive feedback through end of session surveys, citing ease of access and availability, thoroughness of the tutor in answering questions, and gratitude to the university for providing this service. As word of the new service spread through marketing efforts and word of mouth by students and faculty, demand for tutoring through Tutor.com grew at an unforeseen pace. This demand led the university's administration to collect data on student usage, particularly in relation to its part in the retention and persistence of students. Data was collected for the Fall 2021 and Spring 2022 semesters, revealing higher retention rates, lower DFWI rates, and higher GPAs for students who used Tutor.com for tutoring compared to those who did not.

Retention: From Fall 2021 to Spring 2022, 88 percent of Tutor.com users were retained at the institution, compared to 83 percent of non-users. Students who are identified as at-risk (not in good academic standing) displayed greater outcomes, as Tutor.com users from the at-risk group were retained at 85 percent from Fall 2021 to Spring 2022, while only 70 percent were retained of the at-risk group who did not use the program. Students in Online Programs showed similar outcomes, with 88 percent of Tutor.com users being retained from Fall 2021 to Spring 2022 compared to 84 percent of non-users.

DFWI Rate: DFWI rate reflects the percentage of students who receive grades of D or F, withdraw or are marked as incomplete in their coursework. The DFWI rate of Tutor.com users were reviewed in four student-groups: overall students, new freshmen, at-risk students, and students enrolled in a remedial basic English course. In each of these groups, the DFWI rate was discovered to be lower for students who utilized Tutor.com versus those who did not. For the overall student group, DFWI was 17.1 percent for users compared to 18.6 percent of non-users. In new freshmen, the DFWI rate was 14.8 percent for users versus 20.3 percent. The DFWI rate for at-risk students who used Tutor.com was 18.4 percent while the same group of non-users held at 23.7 percent. The most drastic difference was among students enrolled in a remedial basic English course—17.2 percent of students who used Tutor.com received DFWI, compared to 45.7 percent of non-users.

GPA: Fall 2021 GPAs were higher for students who utilized Tutor.com—the overall GPA of students who used the program averaged a 3.11 GPA, while those who did not averaged a 3.05. At-risk students fared even better, with a 3.03 average GPA among the population of Tutor.com users versus a 2.63 average for those who did not. Students in Online Programs who utilized Tutor.com finished with an average 3.47 GPA, compared to non-users who averaged a 3.35 GPA.

Future considerations

The University of North Alabama will continue tracking retention, DFWI rates, and GPAs for students who use Tutor.com in order to compare year-over-year data. Overall usage of the program will continue to be monitored, including number of sessions, number of unique student users, and subject areas where tutoring is utilized. Marketing of the service to students and faculty will continue, with the added support of the data collected over the first implementation year. Leadership in the University Success Center also plan to utilize the early alerts feature in Tutor.com and incorporate that data with academic recovery efforts to aid in student retention.

Amid Dramatic Enrollment Growth, Robust Support Helps Increase Student Retention and Grades—Greatest Gains for At-Risk Students: A Case Study of the University of North Alabama and Tutor.com. New York: Tutor.com, 2023. www.tutor.com/cmspublicfiles/WWW/HEd_UNA_Case_Study_2023.pdf

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Creating Communities of Practice for Continuous Improvement in Distance Education

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Alabama Community College System

Abstract

The Alabama Community College System (ACCS) is composed of 24 colleges at 130 locations. Distance education is critical to providing the access required for today's learners but the resources available to provide quality instruction vary dramatically across the colleges. Developing a community of practice (CoP) has enabled distance education administrators from across the state to collaborate and maximize the use of resources between institutions. Members cited the ability to share experiences and best practices with peers as the most valuable aspect of participation. Communication has improved across departments, both locally and statewide. In addition to establishing consistent terminology and online course evaluation tools, the CoP has played a key role in the development of strategic objectives aimed at continuously improving the quality of distance education. The work of our CoP will continue to evolve to address the future challenges of delivering high-quality distance learning across the ACCS through a shared vision and commitment to student success.

Introduction

Communities of practice (CoP) were first introduced over 30 years ago and were based on the concept of learning as social participation (Wegner, 1998). Wegner, McDermott & Snyder define CoPs as “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (2002, p. 4). CoPs are distinguished from traditional working groups by their focus on learning and growth through peer mentorship rather than productivity (Jones et al., 2022). The development of communities of practice is regarded as a successful innovation model for bringing about institutional change in higher education (Hakkola et al., 2021). It is through the regular collaboration of teachers and administrators on issues of practice and professional knowledge that schools can grow and change (Kruse, 2001). Professional learning can be enhanced substantially using online communities of practice and social networks, especially if they are aligned with stated goals and policies (*The Future Ready District: Professional Learning Through Online Communities of Practice - Office of Educational Technology*, 2020).

CoPs have evolved to include groups that interact in online environments due to geographical separation (Hanson-Smith, 2013). CoPs supported by technology are commonly referred to as virtual communities of practice (VCoP). Members of a VCoP can communicate and share information efficiently in online environments utilizing a variety of web and social networking applications for engagement. The VCoP discussed in this study is a group of distance education professionals that interacts primarily using teleconferencing software and electronic communications. Our VCoP has created opportunities for distance learning administrators to collaborate and engage in open discussions on current trends and challenges. While there are many advantages to a VCoP, there is also a possibility that the nature of online interaction can make it difficult for less engaged members to participate and contribute to the community. Motivated participants, administrative support, active facilitation, and trust are required for a VCoP to be successful (Ford, 2015; McLoughlin et al., 2018).

A Virtual Community of Practice: The ACCS Model

Various factors have been identified that contribute to successfully creating and stewarding a VCoP. CoPs can form in a multitude of ways, both intentionally and organically. Bond and Lockee (2014) identified specific tasks in designing a VCoP using the ADDIE model (analyze, design, develop, implement, and evaluate) as a framework. However, preexisting connections can be nurtured and sustained to grow into communities of practice (Webber, 2016). Regardless of how the CoP is formed, the theoretical framework requires domain, community and practice in order to create a community able to successfully steward knowledge (Wegner et al., 2002). Each of these structural

elements will be discussed using the ACCS VCoP of distance learning administrators and staff as an organizational model along with the processes that continue to guide continuous improvement in distance learning.

The domain refers to the shared knowledge of the group and creates “a sense of common identity” (Wegner, 2002, p.27). Our VCoP arose organically from a group of distance learning professionals that were tasked with managing professional development for online course quality at their institution. Over time, the domain has shifted to become broader in scope and currently centers around distance learning infrastructure. VCoPs require flexibility and must adapt to the changing needs and interests of its participants (Wegner et al., 2002). Though primarily composed of distance learning administrators, membership is inclusive to all administrators and staff across the system. The heterogeneous approach has benefitted the VCoP by permitting points of view from experts from various disciplines and areas of expertise. It is important to recognize that various departments within the institution are involved in successfully delivering quality distance education programs, which can present communication challenges. The lens through which a distance education process is viewed can vary dramatically among practitioners in different roles. The application of knowledge from an administrator in distance education can vary dramatically from another expert in the field of information technology or institutional research and effectiveness. Change processes at institutions of higher education can be slow and cumbersome, but CoPs can serve as model for innovation, particularly when they mix members from different areas of expertise (Wegner et al., 2000). The implications of utilizing a single-lens approach can obfuscate observed outcomes and limit the growth and development of distance education programs. The ACCS distance learning VCoP allows stakeholders to share their understanding of how technology influences the delivery of distance education, particularly, as new software and tools shape the landscape.

The community creates the “social fabric of learning” that facilitates interaction among its members (Wegner et al., 2002). Members are motivated to participate because of a deeper understanding of each other through shared experiences in identifying and addressing organizational progress and development (Ulla & Perales, 2021). Increasing productivity, helping people overcome obstacles, and being adaptable so people can join at their convenience or when an area of interest is actively developing have all contributed to creating a growing community of scholars who choose to fit this work into their schedules (Jones et al., 2022). CoPs require a predictable cycle of engagement opportunities to sustain the community (Wegner et al., 2002). Our VCoP has met biweekly over the last year and while attendance is voluntary, it remains constant. As the VCoP has evolved, asynchronous communications have become more common and effective in soliciting input from members. Creating the opportunity for members to engage asynchronously has been important in facilitating participation. Participant surveys are provided periodically to capture perceptions of members and to anonymously provide feedback and information. Our VCoP has created more than just the ability to network with other professionals in similar roles. Through open lines of communication, it has contributed to a greater sense of belonging among members and established a system of support.

Wegner et al. (2002) identify “the practice as the set of frameworks, ideas, tools, information, styles, language, stories and documents that community members share” (p.29). In the early stages of our VCoP, we began by creating a common instructional language for distance education. This exercise helped to acquaint members and establish the framework employed for collaborative processes. Microsoft Teams was used to centrally house contact information, working drafts of documents, meeting agendas, and other tools. It also provides a historical reference for new members on the previous work of the VCoP. It has since become a repository of knowledge, information, and strategies that are shared amongst the VCoP. Members have taken advantage of this practice to share their institutional documents and resources that may be of assistance to other members in the process of developing similar policies or processes. An email distribution list is also available to the VCoP and allows members to share articles and materials that are of interest to the group, often leading to deeper discussion of current topics.

Conclusion

Our VCoP has facilitated frequent interactions among distance education administrators which have provided support to its members and propelled continuous improvement in distance education across the ACCS. There is a high degree of positive feedback regarding the operations of the VCoP among the members. Collective sharing of knowledge and resources has become more efficient and frequent. Establishing a VCoP has eliminated numerous barriers in administrative processes, particularly in helping to break down organizational silos. The ACCS has benefitted from not limiting participation in our VCoPs to a single field of expertise, which has helped to produce common language and goals that all members recognize and value. Our VCoP was established with the primary objective of building relationships, sharing expertise and finding solutions to common problems. Ideally, the VCoP

will continue to grow and create a cycle of support that will allow members to share knowledge as new challenges emerge in the world of distance education.

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Clubbing with Faculty to Promote Engagement Using the Extracurricular Model

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Abstract

It may be challenging, but not impossible, to engage online faculty in different geographical spaces, time zones, and interests. American College of Education (ACE) uses different techniques to promote mindfulness, health & wellness, and reflective practices to increase faculty engagement. The extracurricular model and joining clubs allow faculty to choose areas they enjoy. Some examples of the virtual clubbing scene including walking, meditation, book clubs, and subcommittees themed around social responsibility.

Introduction

The American College of Education (ACE) is dedicated to graduating students who are happy with their student experience and will be successful in their careers. Satisfied students are produced by engaged faculty (Brandl et al, 2017). The College develops successful and engaged faculty, based on the notion that employee satisfaction leads to greater productivity, fewer workplace conflicts, and lower stress (Kohli & Sharma, 2018). Breugh (2021) also found that strong interpersonal relationships are paramount in maintaining positive work environments.

In the online environment, faculty and students can engage with one another as long as they are able to connect to the Internet. Engagement should seem easy with the ability to communicate in a convenient manner. While extracurricular activities have been found to allow students to feel more connected to their faculty (Brandl et al, 2017), the same principle can be applied when faculty participate in activities with other colleagues within a college.

Typically, extracurricular club activities are used in higher education institutions to allow students to develop personal and social skills that contribute to their academic learning, professionalism, and involvement with the overall community (Díaz-Iso et al, 2020). These clubs are meant to deliver a positive social experience, while developing or maintaining human relationship skills. Friendships could be developed with other faculty or staff, in which they may not typically interact otherwise.

The importance of how interpersonal connections tie into the human experience cannot be overstated. Human relationships are what encourage participation and satisfaction with teaching and learning activities. Thus, it is important to foster faculty engagement. Positive connections are the foundation of having a feeling of belonging and community. That sense of community is a major factor in increasing motivation, learning, and positive self-identification (Kennedy, 2018). Online learning communities help fulfill educational goals and are personally satisfying (Donovan, 2015). While there is a lot of literature about engaging students in the online environment, little is known about engaging professors and creating professional communities in the virtual setting.

ACE emphasizes mindfulness, health & wellness, reflective activities, and the promotion of socially responsible related pursuits. Faculty and staff can also choose the topics they wish to focus on by taking advantage of the college's extracurricular approach and join clubs. All participation is voluntary.

Mindfulness Activities

In addition to getting staff and faculty together to develop relationships, meditation sessions were developed with the hopes of experiencing the following benefits: lower stress, improved memory and concentration, positive change within the brain, and a better well-being (Bonney, 2020). Meditation sessions are held on Mondays, Wednesdays,

and Fridays via a Zoom meeting for 15 minutes each. Everyone within the college is encouraged to drop into the session whenever they have time available. Some of the different mindfulness meditations include gratitude, stress relief, body scans, creativity, playfulness, and several others.

Health & Wellness Extracurriculars

Health & wellness practices are applied in a variety of ways. First, monthly wellness meetings are held to offer nutritional information, learn more about healthy eating, and offer exercise tips. Additionally, wellness group coaching sessions are held weekly. The purpose of the group is to motivate each other into a healthier lifestyle and share ideas on what is helping them. For example, some topics include new year's resolutions, sugar alternatives and solutions, holiday eating tips, exercising by playing, addressing diet myths, and promoting self-care.

The use of mobile apps and friendly competitions are also encouraged to support health & wellness activities. The free Charity Miles app tracks how far the user walks, runs, or bikes. For every mile tracked, the app sponsors financial incentives toward the user's chosen charitable organization. The leader board shows everyone's performance on the team. The MoveSpring app, which is also free, has different themes and contests for the month. One month may track mindfulness minutes, another month may track steps walked, the following month may consist of tracking total movement minutes. Contests include gift cards or cash prizes provided by the college. The top performers are offered bragging rights. However, the winners of the contests are chosen at random to encourage participation.

Reflective Clubs

Faculty and staff have an opportunity to interact with one another based on reflective practices. Book clubs are held each quarter. Starting in 2022, the books are purchased by the college. However, to support differentiated learning, the book club member can choose their book format preference as a hardcopy, e-Book, or audio book. Participants vote on a book they would like to read, which usually consists of a title on leadership. A discussion is held about the book using guiding questions, though many times, the conversation is continually built from other ideas brought up by a book clubber. "Good times and good food" has been a slogan to encourage the feel of a traditional book club within the virtual scene.

For those who have read the *StrengthsFinder* (Rath, 2007) book and completed the CliftonStrengths assessment, participants can partake in a biweekly Strengths Club. The book is purchased for full-time employees upon hire. The goal of the group is to learn more about their strengths, how to apply them, hear about strengths of others, and determine the ways they can see other's strengths. Various ideas and experiences are discussed within each of the reflective clubs, which allow members to get to know each other on a deeper level.

Socially Responsible Subcommittees

With ACE being a Benefit-Corporation (B-Corp) since 2016, the organization is required to consider the impact of decisions on internal and external stakeholders including workers, customers, suppliers, community, and the environment. These requirements are assessed annually by completing the B Impact Assessment Scorecard (B Lab, 2022). Three subcommittees were formed, in which faculty and staff could sign up for a subcommittee based on their interests. Subcommittee include: (a) Community, (b) Environment, and (c) Workers. While called a "subcommittee," just as other extracurricular activities, participants are able to develop professionally and personally by working toward something they are passionate about (Díaz-Iso et al, 2020). The purpose for each subcommittee is to make a positive impact on workers, customers, suppliers, community, and the environment.

Each role of the subcommittee becomes more specific. The Community Subcommittee's role is to commit to serving the community and creating social change. The mission of the Environment Subcommittee is to enhance virtual office stewardship, encourage environmental awareness, and find ways for the entire college to go green. The role of the Workers Subcommittee is to ensure the college stays in line with B Corp's overarching purpose of being a socially responsible business, which can benefit all stakeholders.

Each subcommittee reviewed the areas of improvement from the B Impact Assessment Scorecard and took action throughout the year. Each group meets monthly. Table 1 demonstrates the activities of each group. All activities and accomplishments are shared and published in a quarterly B-Corp Newsletter.

Table 1. B-Corp Subcommittee Activities

	Community Subcommittee	Environment Subcommittee	Workers Subcommittee
Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop #ACEDayofService Campaign to donate 16 hours of time, provided by the college • Create Vendor Evaluation to determine whether they are minority owned, female owned, veteran owned, or local 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create environmental handouts and tips • Develop Environmentally Preferred Purchasing Policy to encourage use of recycled and environmentally preferred products • Host a seed exchange called “Seedcret Santa” • Share the “Recycling Champ” badge to acknowledge environmental do-gooders in the college 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share ideas with leadership regarding bonus structures and retirement plans • Evaluate the idea of stock/ownership shares • Develop an employee survey called “Financial Benefits Survey” to determine what workers want from the college

Conclusion

Through the virtual clubbing scene, staff and faculty get to know each other and develop relationships, which may not have happened outside of department-level faculty meetings. To develop engagement, activities must be encouraged throughout each department for everyone to socialize and interact with one another. Activities could be developed around interests which could be non-work related or based on one’s core values, such as social responsibility. Faculty engagement is possible when opportunities are given.

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Can Formative Assessment be Used to Effectively Teach Instructional Content?

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Abstract

This paper aims to discuss ecological validity in the context of teaching Master's students about educational research. Ecological validity ensures that educational research findings can be applied in real life. It can assist teachers in explaining educational research methods through education and psychological research techniques. This paper investigated problem-based instruction and formative assessments while providing students with various types of feedback.

Emphasizing ecological validity helps students understand research and how it can be applied in the real world (Chen et al., 2017). Ecological validity helps them develop critical thinking skills as students must assess the relevance and applicability of research findings to typical real-world settings (Gowda et al., 2019). Validity can assist students in comprehending the significance of study findings, conclusions, and educational research. This study seeks to determine whether it aids Master's students in understanding the limitations and challenges of educational research. The emphasis on ecological validity assists students in understanding study biases and limitations and in seeking alternative methods.

These studies used students' ideas of the benefits and drawbacks of problem-based learning and immediate feedback research to create a better online experience. By presenting students with a real-world problem, problem-based scenarios encourage critical thinking and practical application (Ebner & Holzinger, 2007). It also motivates and interests students by giving their learning a purpose and relevance (Hmelo-Silver, 2004). Finally, problem-based scenarios allow students to practice applying their knowledge and skills in real-world situations. (Jones, 2006). But information overload is a risk in problem-based scenarios as students may struggle to locate critical information in complex problems or situations (de Jong, 2010). Because problem-based learning emphasizes problem-solving rather than topic understanding, assessment is difficult (Hmelo-Silver, 2004). Finally, problem-solving scenarios must be carefully considered while developing the problem, scaffolding, and assessment procedures (Jones, 2006).

Teachers employing instructional paradigms and formative assessment potential to transform teaching has grown in recent years. Formative assessment enables teachers and students to work together to identify strengths and weaknesses and to implement changes to improve learning outcomes, fostering a culture of continuous improvement. It alters the delivery of instructional practices by emphasizing student learning over the content. Monitoring and providing feedback to students can assist them in becoming self-regulated learners.

According to meta-analyses of formative assessment studies, formative assessment gathers evidence of learning during instruction to inform and improve instruction by changing teaching methods (Black & Wiliam, 1998, Hattie & Timperley, 2007). In a meta-analysis of 250 studies, Black and Wiliam (1998) discovered that formative

evaluation improves student learning, particularly for children with disabilities. Another meta-analysis of 65 studies was completed by Hattie and Timperley (2007). They discovered that formative assessment had one of the largest educational intervention effect sizes, with a value of 0.90. These findings indicate that formative evaluation can help students learn better.

Feedback assists students in improving by demonstrating their progress. There are numerous methods for providing feedback. One-time feedback is a common educational strategy suggesting improved learning outcomes. With timely feedback, students can learn from their mistakes and grow (Shute, 2008). One-time feedback can be simple and quick (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Students' metacognition and reflection may be hampered by one-time feedback (Butler & Winne, 1995). Feedback with only one opportunity to see correct and incorrect thinking may result in partial understanding and limited metacognition. Students may not fully appreciate their mistakes or uncover underlying beliefs when they think their answer is correct due to faulty reasoning (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Finally, one feedback opportunity makes applying and integrating into instructional procedures simple for faculty.

Frequently education employs feedback with only two chances to see what is right and wrong. Feedback with only two chances to see correct and incorrect reasoning improves learning and comprehension. This feedback displaying correct and incorrect distractors can assist students in recognizing misconceptions and gaining a deeper understanding (Butler & Winne, 1995). Students have two opportunities to reflect on their input, and they can compare their original reasoning to the amended reasoning and assess how they arrived at their original conclusion (Dinsmore et al., 2008). They further suggested students have two chances to provide good feedback; the detail, timing, and frequency must be carefully considered (Dinsmore et al., 2008). Overburdened students may struggle to select the most important facts (Butler & Winne, 1995).

Feedback with infinite opportunities to see correct and incorrect thinking is a common teaching technique for improving learning. Feedback on correct and incorrect reasoning can assist students in identifying misconceptions and better understanding the content (Winne & Butler, 1995). Feedback with limitless opportunities for illumination gives students a sense of control over their learning and encourages them to persevere (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Finally, feedback with various instructive opportunities may encourage metacognition by encouraging students to reflect on their thinking and reasoning (Nicol & MacFarlane-Dick, 2006). There is a possible disadvantage to giving feedback with infinite instructive possibilities to see correct and incorrect reasoning can overload and impair performance. Effective feedback with limitless illuminating possibilities necessitates careful consideration of specificity, timing, and frequency (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

Methods

The first class presentation of these ideas about sampling was problem-based. The students were given a chapter about sampling and responded to two problem-solving scenarios. The questions were about the study technique and sampling for each scenario. They were asked to select one of the ten options that best matched their sampling logic. Throughout the scenario, they were asked to decide and rate their level of comfort with it. They could reconsider or move on if they did not agree with the decision. A survey was administered following the two scenarios and the students' decisions. The findings evaluated sampling confidence, and the professors were able to make minor adjustments using student suggestions in the preliminary study. These problems and how they were presented would be useful in the future. They provided a deeper understanding of the various sampling methods and how to select the best ones for a study. These statements represent a few of the comments from students.

It would be preferable if it were made clear that you could refer to the "check box" section for more information. Also, I believe it would be beneficial if we were informed whether we were correct about the sampling method before the screening.

It would have been helpful if the scenario had been visible the entire time so that you could refer back to it while answering.

Adjustments were made based on minor student suggestions based on preliminary results. These small adjustments to the presentation had an impact on these students' second delivery.

Some scenarios were less complicated than before.

I liked how words were explained before selecting an answer, situations were presented above the simulation for reference, multiple chances to get the correct answer was provided, and graphics were used to motivate.

With some success of the first attempt at improving instruction, investigators began using unlimited attempts and instant feedback. Quizzes consist of ten multiple-choice questions in educational research textbook chapters. After selecting one of the four multiples, students received immediate feedback on whether their choice was correct or incorrect and why. Every move the student made during the quiz attempt was captured on video. This allows professors to assess student comprehension and query impact.

Table 1: Student feedback when asked about the process of quiz feedback

Question	
Did you think the quizzes help learn the course material	75%
I chose many wrong answers to see more about the correct answers	43%
I believe the quizzes helped me learn more about the course content	81%
I believe the quizzes prepare me for the final	84%

Quiz scores and final test results supported the hypothesis that feedback from correct distractors produced a favorable result. $t(58) = 7.79 E-08$

Using the data from the first trial of unlimited feedback demonstrated that a few students played the choice game until they got the correct answer. The question of the effect of having one attempt at answering each question was developed for the third iteration. A statistical comparison revealed a marginal improvement ($t(38) = 0.07$). Compared to students who had multiple chances to take the quiz and analyze the feedback, quiz scores on the final test improved slightly. The final exam scored 87.56, while the semester quizzes scored 82.38%.

From that trial, the question emerged about students not seeing much possible feedback to each question. It is believed that seeing why a question is wrong is as beneficial as seeing the correct answer. To that issue, the next trial offered students two attempts per question. Students were given feedback after answering the question and, if needed, attempt a second opportunity to answer and see the feedback for their answers.

Table 2: Student feedback when asked about the process of quiz feedback

Question	
Did you think the quizzes help learn the course material	77.9%
I chose many wrong answers to see more about the correct answers	75.59%
I believe the quizzes helped me learn more about the course content	76.75%
I believe the quizzes prepare me for the final	87.21%

Final exam scores ($M = 85.9\%$) outperformed quizzes ($M = 82.4\%$). A dependent t-test revealed that for accurate and distractor feedback, $t(17) = 0.048$.

Random questions in the fourth iteration required an open-ended statement by the student to explain why they would be choosing their answer. The results demonstrated a gain in their knowledge about the subject, but questions without the requirement of rationale produced better results.

Table 3: the effect of students adding the rationale before answering questions

Condition	Quiz	Final Exam	t-test
With rationale	83.32%	88.54%	$T(12) = 0.903, p < 0.192$
Without rationale	81.87%	87.05%	$T(24) = 38.03, p < 2.91E-23$

Discussion

Ecological validity is an important issue in educational research. Students can better understand research techniques, practice, and the challenges and limitations of educational research by emphasizing ecological validity. Master's students should learn about ecological validity from a curriculum that emphasizes it.

Educational paradigms are shaped by formative assessment. Formative assessment collects evidence of learning during instruction to improve instruction. Formative assessment data assists teachers in changing their teaching and providing students with tailored feedback to improve learning. Formative assessment enables teachers and students to work together to identify strengths and weaknesses and to implement changes to improve learning outcomes, fostering a culture of continuous improvement. Monitoring and providing feedback to students can assist them in becoming self-regulated learners.

There are advantages and disadvantages to problem-based learning. These can help students improve their critical thinking, problem-solving skills, motivation, and real-world readiness. They also run the risk of information overload, having difficulty assessing student learning, and having difficulty planning and implementing appealing scenarios. As a result, educators must carefully weigh the benefits and drawbacks of problem-based scenarios and create well-structured, scaffolded, and assessed scenarios. Feedback with infinite opportunities to see right and wrong thinking has advantages and disadvantages in education. It can improve learning, motivation, and metacognition but can also cause overload, inefficiency, and difficulty in providing feedback. We are left with some understanding to answer in the positive to the question, "Can formative assessment be used to effectively teach instructional content?"

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Regular and Substantive Interaction in Online Courses is Critical for Distance Education Administrators

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Abstract

Distance education administrators live in a world where definitions matter. While terms, such as online, hybrid, blended, non-traditional, and alternative, can be defined in different ways by various groups, associations and institutions, certain definitions, such as distance education, correspondence education, engagement and interaction, can have regulatory, compliance, and fiscal consequences when definitions are not adequately understood by faculty and academic leadership.

Distance education, as defined by the U.S. Federal Government, means using technology to deliver instruction to students who are separated from their instructors and to support regular and substantive interaction between the students and their instructors, either synchronously or asynchronously. In correspondence education, by contrast, the interaction between instructors and students is limited, is not regular and substantive, and is primarily initiated by the student.” (Code of Federal Regulations, 2022). The critical difference between distance education and correspondence education is the presence or absence of “regular and substantive interaction” (Poulin, 2016).

Regular and Substantive Interaction

Why is this three-word difference so critical to distance education administrators? One compelling reason is that students taking distance education courses are eligible for federal Title IV financial aid, while students taking correspondence courses are not. A program in which one-half or more of the courses are available via correspondence is considered by the U.S. Department of Education as a correspondence program and is ineligible for financial aid—even in instances where taking correspondence courses is optional (Bordenkircher, 2023).

Audits by the U.S. Department of Education Office of Inspector General (OIG) of St. Mary of the Woods College in 2012 and Western Governors University in 2017 both concluded that the online courses offered by the two institutions were, in fact, lacking regular and substantive interaction and that their programs should have been classified as correspondence programs (Poulin, 2016; Parrott, 2019). These conclusions resulted in initial recommendations by the OIG that St. Mary of the Woods College return \$42 million in federal Title IV funding (Office of the Inspector General, U.S. Department of Education, 2012). In the case of Western Governor’s University, the nation’s largest competency-based institution, the OIG recommended the return of \$712,670,616 (Office of the Inspector General, U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

Western Governors leadership immediately challenged the OIG’s recommendation. A subsequent review of the OIG audit by the Department of Education’s Federal Student Aid Office found that “Because of the ambiguity of the law and regulations and the lack of clear guidance available at the time of the audit period...FSA finds that it would not be appropriate to require WGU to return Title IV funds for violating the institutional eligibility requirements under 34 C.F.R. § 600.7(a)(I)” (Parrott, 2019, p. 8). “The terms “regular,” “substantive,” and “instructor” are not defined in the HEA or in the regulations, and, at the time of the audit, no guidance had been provided establishing the Department’s policy with respect to those terms” (Parrott, 2019, p. 9).

Defining “Regular” and “Substantive”

To address the lack of clear guidance regarding various aspects of online and competency-based education, the Department of Education appointed a committee in 2018-19 to engage in a negotiated rulemaking process to provide needed definitions. The committee reached consensus on a number of topics, including “regular and substantive interaction” in online courses (Downs, 2020; Office of Postsecondary Education, U.S. Department of Education.

(2020). A letter sent by the WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies to the Office of Postsecondary Education resulted in a letter with further clarifications (Downs, 2022; Weisman, 2022).

As defined by the U.S. Department of Education for online education, *Regular* means interaction that predictable and scheduled, originating primarily from the instructor, not periodically in response to student inquiries. In answer to an inquiry about instructor office hours, Weisman (2022) stated, “an institution meets the requirement for regular interaction between students and instructors by, in part, providing the opportunity for substantive interactions with the student on a scheduled and predictable basis commensurate with the length of time and the amount of content in the course or competency. This requirement could be met if instructors made themselves available at a specific scheduled time and through a specific modality (e.g., an online chat or videoconference) for students to interact about the course material, regardless of whether the students chose to make use of this opportunity or interact with the instructor at the scheduled time” (p.4).

Substantive interaction is now defined as engaging students in teaching, learning, and assessment, consistent with the content under discussion, and also includes at least two of the following five criteria (Office of Postsecondary Education, U.S. Department of Education, 2020):

- Providing direct instruction
- Assessing or providing feedback on a student’s coursework
- Providing information or responding to questions about the content of a course or competency
- Facilitating a group discussion regarding the content of a course or competency
- Other instructional activities approved by the institution’s or program’s accrediting agency

Direct instruction is defined by the U.S. Department of Education to mean synchronous instruction. This instruction can be delivered online via Zoom, MS Teams, Google Meet, or other live videoconference platforms (Bordenkircher, 2023). This does not discount the importance of asynchronous video from the instructor in online courses, however, in order to be considered “interactive,” the asynchronous video must be accompanied by a substantive interaction activity, such as those listed in Table 1 below.

Activities Considered Regular and Substantive

Table 1 below lists activities in which distance learning administrators can provide orientation and training to faculty, reminding them that activities must be “regular” and include a minimum of two of the five criteria for substantive interaction.

Table 1: Regular and Substantive Interaction Activities

Activity	Substantive Interaction Criterion
Offering scheduled synchronous instructional sessions.	Providing direct instruction.
Offering regularly scheduled on-campus and/or virtual office hours.	Providing information or responding to questions about the content of a course or competency.
Recording a synchronous instructional session and tying it directly to a specific assignment that requires watching the session to complete.	Assessing or providing feedback on a student’s coursework.
Posting instructor audio, video or text-based announcements in which the students respond directly via audio, video or text.	Facilitating a group discussion regarding the content of a course or competency.
Providing instructor audio, video or text-based discussion forums in which the students respond directly via audio, video or text.	Facilitating a group discussion regarding the content of a course or competency.
Providing audio, video or text instructor feedback on assignments.	Assessing or providing feedback on a student’s coursework.
Facilitating online discussion forums by posting responses, questions summaries or observations within the discussion forum.	Facilitating a group discussion regarding the content of a course or competency.

Participating on online discussion forums providing feedback to individual students during the grading of the discussion assignments.	Assessing or providing feedback on a student's coursework.
Having a dedicated "Ask the Instructor" discussion board where the instructor can provide information or respond to course-related questions.	Providing information or responding to questions about the content of a course or competency.
Engaging in other activities as approved by the program's accreditor.	Could be any of the five criteria.

Examples of actions that would, by themselves, not constitute regular and substantive interaction would include:

- Posting announcements with no mechanism for students to respond directly
- Providing asynchronous video (either from the instructor or via YouTube, Vimeo, etc.) with no mechanism for students to respond or interact directly
- Having all instruction or assessments delivered by a 3rd-party vendor system without the instructor engaging in any of the substantive interaction activities

What if My Institution Does Not Offer Fully Online Degrees?

In January 2021, the U.S. Department of Education informed accreditors and institutions that if an institution offers any program in whole or in part through distance education—even as little as one distance education course in an otherwise in-person program, it is considered a distance learning program. It must be evaluated and approved to offer distance education programs by its accreditor. (Higher Learning Commission, 2022). So, regular and substantive interaction must be evidenced in any online course.

Conclusion

St. Mary of the Woods College and Western Governors University were able to avoid massive returns of Title IV federal funds due to the ambiguity of the federal definitions and requirements for regular and substantive interaction. Although there are still questions to be resolved around this issue, regulatory and accreditation agencies have more solid ground than ever to require institutions to demonstrate that regular and substantive interaction occurs in online courses. Distance education leaders need to assure that their online instructors are aware of requirements for regular and substantive interaction, provide them with training and instructional design support, and establish policies regarding minimum quality standards and expectations for distance education courses.

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Turn Your Online Course Upside-Down!

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Abstract

When the 2020 pandemic forced instructors to start teaching virtually, many tried to replicate their in-class lessons in the online environment. This didn't always work so well, as face-to-face courses don't always leverage the strengths of the online classroom. This paper addresses how to turn an online course "upside-down" to leverage these strengths.

Introduction

Online learning has been growing steadily; nevertheless, the COVID pandemic still caught many educators unprepared for an abrupt transition to fully online learning. From elementary through graduate education, many were thrust into the role of online educator for the first time, often with little or no training. Results were mixed.

Several factors can affect the success of an online learning experience, including physical environments, access to technology, and learning preferences for the student as well as teaching preferences for the instructor.

Online vs. Face-to-Face Learning

Much has been written about online vs. face-to-face learning, and findings have often conflicted, partly because teachers use different approaches and not all students are equally prepared. One could argue that, inherently, online teaching is neither inferior nor superior to its face-to-face counterpart; rather, each modality has its own advantages and disadvantages, and these are often complementary. For example, during live lectures, instructors can monitor students' facial expressions and body language to gain real-time insight about how well students are grasping the lesson, and teaching can be adapted accordingly in real-time. Conversely, instructors cannot observe students while they watch a recorded video; however, students are able to watch a recorded video multiple times from any location in ways that unrecorded classroom lectures cannot be viewed. Moreover, in a live lecture, sleepy students are forced to wrestle with their drowsiness for long stretches – if they doze off, they miss what they miss. Online students can simply pause a video and take a nap, resuming when they are refreshed and alert. Thus real-time feedback available to the classroom lecturer can be offset by flexible access to the recorded lecturer.

Similarly, discussions in a face-to-face classroom can be lively, spontaneous, and interactive. Such discussions enhance learning by sparking curiosity and emotional engagement in the topic; however, face-to-face discussions have some inherent disadvantages, too: impromptu thoughts are blurted out without any chance to be refined, while introverted students can feel excluded as their more extroverted peers dominate the discussion. Conversely, in an online discussion, the shy and the outgoing student are on an equitable playing field. Also, students have a greater opportunity to research, reflect, and refine their input before contributing to the discussion. Therefore, an in-class discussion that takes only ten minutes inside the walls of a classroom may take two days using an online discussion board, yet the end result of the online discussion may be more inclusive than the ad-hoc discourse of a live classroom and potentially foster a deeper learning as well.

In the midst of the pandemic, when school buildings were mostly empty and cyberspace was teeming with lectures, one dean reportedly told his faculty: "I don't understand the problem here. You know how to teach; you know how to use Zoom. Just teach on Zoom."

This utterance, though well-intended, is ignorant of many challenges associated with online teaching. A "just teach on Zoom" mentality ignores common experiences in a well-managed face-to-face classroom, such as breaking students into small groups, uncapping a marker to write a long equation on the whiteboard, or think-pair-share

exercises. (Some online tools might allow for such activities, but the technological learning curve can be a hindrance.) Moreover, the dean's casual remark fails to address many limitations of on-line conferencing platforms, such as distracting technical glitches, fuzzy cameras, and dim lighting. Moreover, it assumes a student watching a live lesson from home can remain as focused as they would in a classroom – a precarious assumption at best.

Two Maxims for Online Learning

After two decades of personal experience teaching in the virtual classroom and mentoring newer online professors, two maxims have emerged:

- 1) The less my online class looks like its face-to-face counterpart, the better my online class seems to be.
- 2) They that do the work do the learning.

Face-to-face classes are taught in blocks of fixed time, such as 50-minute class periods. This is done for the convenience of the institution's room scheduler, not because course objectives naturally break themselves into segments that are best taught in 50-minute chunks, or because students learn best when seated for 50 minutes at a time. The professor who visits the registrar to request a 40-minute class on the first day of class, a 30-minute class on the second day, a 45-minute class on the third day, etc., will not get very far before they are flatly told to leave because that's not how it works. Students congregate with the instructor at a fixed time, and instructors attempt to best use the time while everyone is together.

Conversely, an online class can be structured so that each course objective is taught with whatever time is needed to teach the objective well. Many novice online instructors think, because they are accustomed to lecturing in 50-minute blocks, their online course should contain a series of 50-minute lectures as well. They are taking a limitation of face-to-face instruction – room scheduling – and carrying that over to an environment where there should be greater flexibility. One advantage of asynchronous online learning is the ability to use as much or as little time as needed to adequately cover a particular topic; this should be exploited in a well-designed online class.

Moreover, the Socratic method of teaching is an effective way to promote learning and can be employed in both environments, but not necessarily in the same way. An extemporaneous discussion in the face-to-face classroom, where it is easy for students to raise hands and voice their opinions, might be better implemented as a threaded discussion in the learning management system of an online class.

The second maxim – they that do the work do the learning – underscores how most students learn better when they are actively engaged in a subject, and learning can be amplified when students must master a topic deeply enough to teach it to their peers. This works especially well in graduate education, where students are being groomed to develop higher-level learning skills. Instead of having a professor invest a lot of time and energy into creating a video discussing a given topic, why not have students create that video instead? This creates a win-win situation: a professor can expend less effort to have the students learn the material better than if they had instead passively listened to the professor's recorded lecture.

When putting courses online, instructors should consider which techniques best leverage the strengths of the medium: asynchronous and independent learning, the ability to compartmentalize learning into smaller and shorter pieces, peer reviews of work between students, and giving students extra time to let course concepts ruminate in their minds. Also, consider what may not work so well, such as a lengthy, live lecture delivered to a large audience. Strive to avoid the less effective techniques in the online environment and restructure the class to leverage the strengths of online learning instead.

Any mode of teaching can be misused to the detriment of learning. Most of us have endured awful lectures, but that doesn't mean that lecture halls are inherently ineffective. When a dynamic speaker learns how to capture attention and spark curiosity, the lecture hall can be a fruitful way to engage students and promote learning. Online classrooms can be effective as well, but a different skill set may be needed to create a vibrant virtual classroom. Before writing off remote learning due to bad experiences in the wake of the pandemic, educators must first reflect to see if courses were adequately restructured for the online environment.

Discussion boards can be very effective, but care must be taken to avoid questions that can be easily answered with cursory thought. Instead, questions should be structured so that students must probe deeply into the course materials to compose a solid answer. For example, consider this hypothetical discussion question in a business class:

In Chapter 4, the authors discuss neoclassical, Keynesian, and Marxian economics. Which of these theories best fits with the post-pandemic economy where many workers insist they be able to continue to telework, and why?

This question could be greatly improved by omitting some key information:

In Chapter 4, the authors discuss three economic theories. Which of these theories best fits with the post-pandemic economy where many workers insist they be able to continue to telework, and why?

In the original question, a lazy student could simply look up the three theories on Wikipedia and hastily compose an answer. In the revised question, students must first delve into Chapter 4 just to figure out what the question refers to; such subtle changes can produce handsome dividends in student learning.

Conclusions

Techniques that work well inside a face-to-face classroom may not be ideal for online instruction, and vice-versa. Many institutions saw dramatic declines in performance in the wake of the pandemic and its sudden shift to on-line learning. Before using this data to denounce online learning as a whole, though, one must first consider how well instructors were trained or prepared for this dramatic change, and how much they adapted their teaching techniques for this new environment. Moreover, online learning can work especially well for independent learners, while other students might find the online environment too unstructured to focus and effectively learn. Online learning works better when students have more liberty to decide which learning environment will work best for them.

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Utilizing Assignment Templates for Student Success

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Abstract

One challenge in adult distance education is providing sufficient guidance for student success without undermining academic rigor. One practice that has become popular is using instructor-provided templates for assignments. This presentation will explore the use of templates in distance education through a literature review and real-life experiences of faculty and administrators. Attention will be given to comparing student results data before and after implementing assignment templates. Attendees will participate in an open discussion of best practices, concerns, and experiences with using project templates.

Introduction

Adult distance education has historically relied heavily on writing as a means of both instruction and assessment. The important role of written communication skills and their effectiveness in education is well documented. The emphasis on writing has its challenges. Students balance multiple tasks included in the writing process in addition to mastering the subject matter. They must organize their thoughts, create a logical structure, and contend with the rigors of academic formatting. Mastering these skills is vital for collegiate success. However, it may also be prudent for students to sometimes focus primarily on the subject being studied with an assignment template. Templates can vary greatly in complexity, but they all give students a start to the assignment rather than a blank slate. Wandersee (2006) observed that for highly complex subjects such as botany, written assignments were effective in teaching, and templates effectively focused the students' attention and efforts on just the course objectives. Similarly, Swenson (2016) champions the use of question-based templates noting that it "works in most situations to provide structure and process to a writing situation" (147). But what impact does the incorporation of assignment templates have on grades, and how do the students perceive them?

Sample Course: HU245 Ethics

At Purdue University Global, ethics is emphasized as an integrated core subject across the curriculum. The main general ethics course within the School of General Education is HU245 Ethics. This course introduces students to normative ethical theory and provides students with the opportunity to apply these theories to issues related to bioethics, social ethics, business ethics, and environmental ethics. For many students, this course is their first collegiate-level philosophy course. Generally, ethics and philosophy are not easy subjects. Courses run for ten weeks, and the outcomes are rigorous. The course relies on written assignments for assessment. Unlike many written assignments, the assignments for this course emphasize concise writing with the understanding that in modern communications, time and space are very limited. These short assignments require complex ethical principles and theory application.

Quantitative Analysis

In August 2022, the same instructor taught three sections of HU245 Ethics without assignment templates. The scores from four written assignments across all three sections were compiled to arrive at a baseline. Each section holds approximately 30 students. Not all students complete the course, and as is the case with most courses, many failed to submit assignments and were assessed a zero. These zeros were considered in the data analysis in case the presence of a template might encourage students to attempt an assignment rather than forfeit the grade. The average grade for the four assignments across three sections was 76.735%.

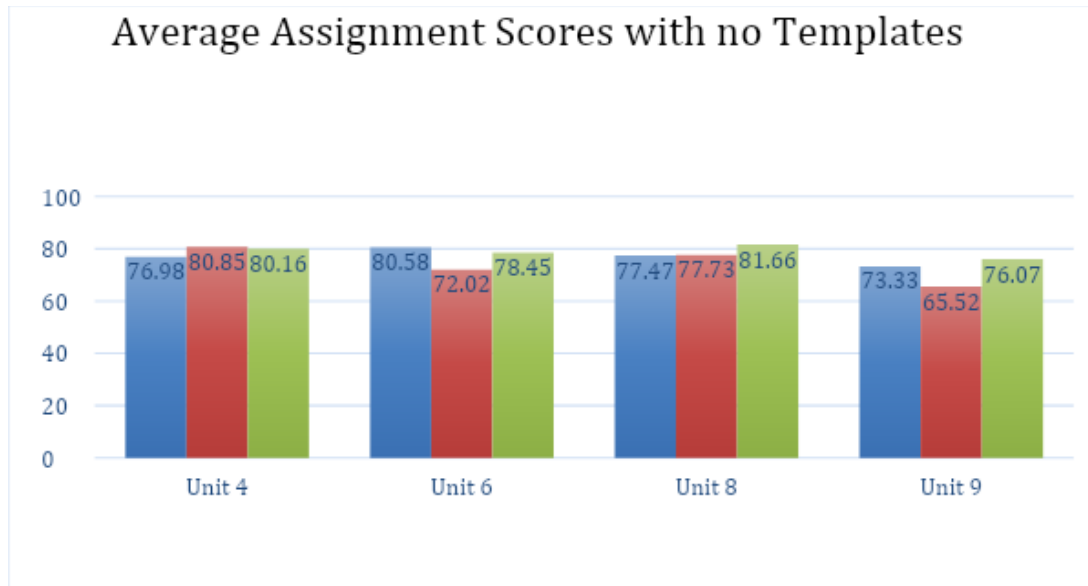


Table 1: Average Assignment Scores for HU245 Ethics without Templates

Table 1 represents the average scores for four assignments in three sections of HU245 Ethics, represented by three colors collected in the August 2022 term. These average scores are based on assignments that did not utilize assignment templates. The data represents the average of all scores, including zeros for non-submission. The same instructor facilitated each section. The average grade across all three sections for all four assignments was 76.735%.

For the next term, assignment templates were provided for students if they wished. These were not required. The templates used were basic. They included a Word document formatted to APA (American Psychological Association) 7th Edition. Figure 1 shows the content of the unit 6 paragraph assignment template. Students were required to explain their position on the death penalty, what ethical theory supports them, and what impact their position would have on society.

Unit 6 Position Paragraph

Student Name

HU245 Ethics

Russell E. Fail, PhD

Purdue Global

Unit 6 Position Paragraph

1st Sentence: State whether or not the death penalty should be abolished and why.

2nd Sentence: Explain the ethical theory you are applying to the topic.

3rd Sentence: Explain how the theory supports your position.

Remaining Sentences: Explain what effects implementing your position regarding the death penalty would have on society.

Figure 1: HU245 Unit 6 Sample Assignment Template

Figure 1 represents a sample assignment template for the unit 6 assignment in HU245 Ethics. In this assignment, students must construct a concise paragraph in which they articulate their position on the death penalty, provide support from an established ethical theory, and articulate the impact of said position on society.

After the October term was completed, the data from three sections of HU245 Ethics were collected. The same instructor taught these three sections as the previous sections from the previous term. The scores from those three sections were significantly higher. The average score, including zeros from non-submission, was 81.952%. Compared to the previous term's average of 76.735%, a difference of 5.2175% or half a letter grade.

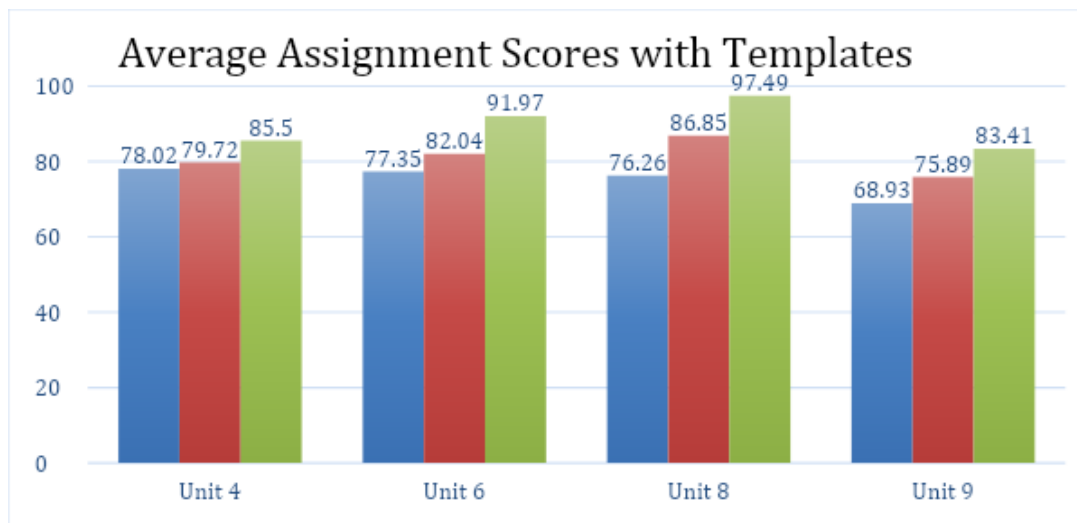


Table 2: Average Assignment Scores for HU245 with Templates

Table 2 represents the average scores for four different assignments in three sections of HU245, represented by three colors collected in the October 2022 term. These average scores are based on assignments that include optional templates for students. The data represents the average of all scores, including zeros for non-submission. The same instructor facilitated each section. The average grade across all three sections for all four assignments was 81.9525%.

Qualitative Analysis

An analysis of student evaluations following the term with assignment templates indicated general appreciation. One student stated, "Templates in the assignment helped my writing stay on topic; the way this lesson was taught kept the

students engaged in the lesson plans and kept an open dialog for inputs.” Another stated, “the professor provided templates for the writing assignments, which helped me turn in a good paper.” Students reported that having templates to help with formatting was appreciated. The consensus was that the templates allowed them to focus more on the specific outcomes of the assignment. Another student stated, “the templates he created also helped exponentially with our written assignments.” It is also noted that templates were not a significant theme in student evaluations compared to the quality of instruction, timeliness of grading, and general positivity of the instructor. However, each set of evaluations included at least one student discussing the benefit of the template. This is significant, given the modest response rate of approximately 33%.

Conclusion

The experience of comparing two terms with and without templates was enlightening. As an instructor, it can be difficult to remember the stress of simple activities such as formatting. Templates also allow instructors to focus on key assignment elements, which can increase grading efficiency. It was noted that not all students used the offered template. Some students used the templates as a guide but began with a blank document. The use of templates must be weighed carefully. Sometimes, teaching and assessing other elements of writing could be circumvented with templates. For example, if the goal is to teach students how to create a title page, one should not provide one. Used in conjunction with careful curriculum design, templates have the potential to increase student satisfaction, lower anxiety, and improve the grading process, all while improving performance.

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Entrepreneurship: Moving Your Institution Forward with Innovative Ideas

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Abstract

It's a great idea, but how do you make it happen? There is a process, and this paper covers some of the basics for how to apply entrepreneurial concepts to bring about positive changes for your institution.

You have a great idea for your organization. It may be a better way to do something, like training new staff. It may be a new academic program you believe your institution should offer. It may be a new software tool that would improve support for staff, faculty, or students. You are excited about the future and meet with your manager to recommend this innovation, but your enthusiasm is quickly doused when the response is a polite “thanks for the idea, but we aren't going to do that.” When you were hired, you were told your organization valued an entrepreneurial spirit, so why aren't your innovative ideas adopted? You may not be applying some of the concepts that successful entrepreneurs have found lead to adoption of innovative ideas. Let's explore those concepts and a process for gaining acceptance and adoption of your recommendations.

What Is an Entrepreneurial Spirit?

In response to a lack of definition of *entrepreneurial spirit*, Wickam, Finley, and Saeger (2020) performed an analysis of concepts employers associate with this term and offer the following definition: “Entrepreneurial Spirit is a mindset held by individuals within organizations aspiring to create and implement new and improved products, processes, and services through collaboration.” We tend to think of an entrepreneur as someone who is a for-profit business owner. A person who has an entrepreneurial spirit within an organization can be referred to as an intrapreneur. The term *intrapreneurship* is associated with innovative practice within an organization. There are distinct differences between entrepreneurs and intrapreneurs (Baruah and Ward, 2014), and a key concept for our purposes is that an intrapreneur must consider the organizational structure and management policies of their organization when pursuing any innovation.

From an Idea to an Action Plan

Your idea for an innovation requires some background work before you present it to those whose approval and support are needed for it to be adopted. Your innovation will have business implications whether your work is within a corporation or an academic institution. Depending on the nature of the innovation and its complexity, you may have to present your idea at more than one stage of development. However, even at your initial presentation, you should be prepared to address questions related to the: a) need for the innovation, b) value to the organization, c) resource requirements, d) operational impacts, and e) timeline for implementation. At a general level, the model for developing and implementing an innovative idea is as follows.

Stage 1: Idea Formation and Initial Needs Analysis

There are two important questions to be answered during the initial idea formation. First, is there a significant need in the “marketplace” for the innovation? Marketplace here would be the environment in which customers, or beneficiaries of the innovation, exist. Second, if implemented, does this innovation align with the mission, goals, and objectives of the organization? For example, there may be a need for a master's program in entrepreneurship in the marketplace of prospective students; however, if the mission of the institution is to serve undergraduate students only, the innovation would not be in alignment. Another type of innovation may solve a problem. In assessing the need for a problem solution, you would examine the significance of the problem and whether your proposed

innovation would yield greater benefit than the cost of implementing the innovation. Similarly, whatever type of innovation you are proposing, you would also need to determine if another source already exists for the service, product, or problem solution. If other sources exist, be prepared to explain why your innovative idea should be pursued in spite of their availability. At this stage, you also would explore anticipated resource requirements, cost of adopting the idea, and a timeline for development and implementation. In accordance with the definition of the entrepreneurial spirit, your work at this stage of idea development is likely to be done in collaboration with colleagues who have expertise, data, or other contributions to the development of your innovation.

Stage 2: Pitch Development and Delivery

After you have done the preliminary background work, you will be ready to pitch your idea to one or more persons who are in a position to approve and/or provide resources and support for adopting your idea. Acceptance of your idea is more likely if you prepare a formal presentation (even if it is in simple form). Pitching your idea is the process of helping your audience understand a) what your vision is, b) how it could be realized, and c) why your audience should contribute to that realization. Your pitch should a) identify the problem (or need) you want to address, b) demonstrate that you have done your homework and have the sufficient knowledge, skills, and planning to succeed but also know areas of challenge, and c) explain what you need from a specific audience (e.g., project approval, finances, resources, or other support). You may be pitching to a limited audience or one with persons of varying perspectives. It will be important to learn about your audience members so that you understand their interests, values, priorities, etc.

Intrapreneurs who are on an academic or training side of an institution may not initially think of the business perspective affecting adoption of their ideas. For example, if an innovation requires the use of computer or staff resources, it is tempting to think there is no cost involved because those resources already exist; however, those resources are already allocated. If they are redirected, work that was being accomplished with them may no longer be possible. The cost is either loss of effort for prior work or procurement of additional resources to handle the increased workload. Your pitch will be stronger if you can demonstrate that you understand the business implications of your proposed idea. You may need to explain how revenue can be generated to offset the cost of implementing an innovation.

Stage 3: Business Model and Plan

A learning enterprise has much in common with a business that provides a product or service. Each needs a sound model that defines it as an entity and a plan that addresses all aspects of its operation. An innovation requires an investigation of how that innovation fits into the larger entity and its operation. Laverty and Little (2020) present two versions of a planning tool that supports such an investigation. The first is The Business Model Canvas, which identifies the nine components of an initiative, including stakeholders, activities, customers, etc. The second version of the tool, The Lean Model Canvas, can be used for addressing problems, including proposed solution, metrics, costs, etc. At the center of both canvas tools are Value Propositions, which define the benefits to be derived from an initiative. It will be important to explain the value of your idea and why your organization should expend the effort and resources to adopt it. Explaining the value from a business perspective will strengthen your proposal.

Stage 4: Project Development and Implementation

If you reach this stage, you will have approval for your idea and a commitment of resources for you to move ahead; however, now you need a plan for developing your innovative idea, including a list of tasks, resources required for each task, and a timeline for project development and implementation. You also need to have a plan for obtaining buy-in from those impacted by the project. Depending on the scope of your innovative idea, a prototype may be the best approach to prove the concept, identify areas of improvement, and obtain data to support buy-in from all stakeholders.

Summary

We have explored some basic concepts for how to present innovative ideas to move your organization forward. Academic institutions are not known for their readiness to adopt new ideas, in spite of expressing interest in being modern and progressive. Similarly, large organizations with values embracing the entrepreneurial mindset may be

somewhat reticent in adopting new ideas for their learning initiatives. The intrapreneur who wants to have her/his ideas heard and adopted will be prepared with background research, a sound business perspective, and an understanding of what will influence the audience(s) who need to hear the pitch for the innovation. With preparation, you can convince your organization that your idea is an opportunity that should not be missed and that you know how it can be implemented successfully.

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How Accreditation Can Drive Enrollment and Program Excellence

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Abstract

Accreditation is one mechanism to review the quality of higher education institutions and programs. Having accredited programs can differentiate programs and provide opportunities to increase student enrollment and signify program excellence. Additionally, accreditation can be a forcing function for continuous improvement and program assessment. This paper provides a brief review of the accreditation process for two programs at a college within a Tier-1 Research Institution. Additionally, it provides a brief overview of the results experienced after accreditation and the associated benefits of having accredited programs.

Introduction

In an era where new colleges and programs seem to pop up every other week, having something that differentiates one college or program from others is vital. Accreditation is one such mechanism to differentiate programs. The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) defines accreditation as a “review of the quality of higher education institutions and programs (CHEA, 2023)”. There are 19 recognized accrediting organizations at the institution level and approximately 60 programmatic accrediting organizations (CHEA, 2023). The benefits of accreditation include the ability to communicate a commitment to quality; strengthens the focus on student performance data; supports intentional, innovative, and reflective design; increases program visibility; and provides faculty a voice in the program (NAEYC, 2023). More importantly, accreditation, guided by industry standards, can act as an external stamp of approval to set a program apart from similar programs. An accreditation process provides a way of certifying that a program has met established criteria and standards, ensuring it has met acceptable levels of quality within its industry. This paper will review accreditation and the accreditation process for a Human Services and a Cybersecurity program at a Tier-1 Research Institution, provide statistics on program growth and opportunities, and provide recommendations for pursuing accreditation for programs.

Accreditation

The University of Arizona’s (UA) College of Applied Science and Technology (CAST) has pursued accreditation for two of its programs; namely, Cyber Operations and Human Services. These programs represent the highly technical with Cyber Operations to the community engaged and social science with Human Services. Their respective accreditation processes vary greatly as do the outcomes of the process.

Cyber Operations

Although the University of Arizona maintains the three accreditations in Cyber Defense (2009), Cyber Operations (2018), and Cyber Research (2017) from the National Centers for Academic Excellence in Cybersecurity (NCAE-C) program, the Cyber Operations program will be the focus of this paper. The Cyber Operations program began in 2016 coinciding with the application process for NCAE-C designation. The program was evaluated twice before receiving its designation in 2018 as one of 24 schools in the nation to receive the Cyber Operations designation.

The National Centers of Academic Excellence in Cybersecurity (NCAE-C) program was established in 1999 to evaluate curriculum and program requirements and address the lack of qualified cybersecurity professionals in the workplace. NCAE-C aims to create and manage a collaborative cybersecurity education program with community colleges, colleges, and universities that establish standards for cybersecurity curriculum and academic excellence, includes competency development among students and faculty, values community outreach and leadership in

professional development, integrates cybersecurity practice within the institution across academic disciplines, and actively engages in solutions to challenges facing cybersecurity education (NCAE-C, 2023). The accreditation process consists of two primary aspects: Program of Study (PoS) Evaluation and the CAE Designation. The PoS Evaluation consists of eight steps which takes approximately 12 – 14 weeks. This process reviews curriculum, student related information, faculty profiles and qualifications, and continuous improvement information (Hamilton, 2022). Once the program of study is positively evaluated, the institution can apply for a designation. The criteria necessary for designation are accreditation, institutional commitment, evidence of sound cybersecurity posture and plan, established “Center” for cybersecurity, affirmation of the NCAE-C core values and guiding principles, sustainability, professional development, and commitment to support the CAE Program (Hamilton, 2022). NCAE-C identifies 10 mandatory Knowledge Units (KU) and 17 optional KUs (Image 1) of which programs must meet at least four.

Mandatory – 10 required	Optional – 10 of 17 required
Low Level Programming Languages (programming assignment required) (M1)	Programmable Logic (hands-on labs required) (O1)
Software Reverse Engineering (hands-on labs required) (M2)	Wireless Security (hands-on labs required) (O2)
Operating Systems Theory (M3)	Virtualization (hands-on labs required) (O3)
Networking (hands-on labs required) (M4)	Cloud Security/Cloud Computing (O4)
Cellular and Mobile Technologies (M5)	Risk Management of Information Systems (O5)
Discrete Math and Algorithms (M6)	Computer Architecture (includes Logic Design) (O6)
Overview of Cyber Defense (hands-on labs required) (M7)	Microcontroller Design (hands-on labs required) (O7)
Security Fundamental Principles (i.e., first Principles) (M8)	Software Security Analysis (hands-on labs required) (O8)
Vulnerabilities (M9)	Secure Software Development (Building Secure Software) (hands-on labs required) (O9)
Legal and Ethics (M10)	Embedded Systems (hands-on labs required) (O10)
	Digital Forensics (hands-on labs required) (O11)
	Systems Programming (hands-on labs required) (O12)
	Applied Cryptography (O13)
	Industrial Control Systems (O14)
	User Experience (UX)/Human Computer Interface Security (O15)
	Offensive Cyber Operations (O16)
	Hardware Reverse Engineering (hands-on labs required) (O17)

Image 1 – NCAE-C Knowledge Units (Hamilton, 2022)

The timeline for the designation process has changed recently; however, the process can take from six months to two years. For CAST, once the PoS was positively evaluated and the designation documents submitted, site visits from the accreditation team were conducted. Site visits lasted two days and included a review of all courses, interviews with faculty, research discussions, and a review of support systems within the college.

Human Services Program

Similarly, CAST’s undergraduate human services program is top notch and one of quality. CAST started the Council for Standards in Human Service Education (CSHSE) accreditation process during the spring 2020 semester culminating with it being CSHSE’s first fully online accredited program in the nation during spring 2022.

CSHSE, established in 1979, provides direction and guidance to education and training institutions in the mental health and human services industries – ultimately standardizing and providing a national accreditation process in this environment. The overall application process was rigorous, challenging, and time consuming but rewarding once successfully completed. From start to finish, the process took nearly two years for our program, with many long hours for our program director and human services faculty to work on it. The CSHSE’s accreditation process is a 12-step process that starts with the initial application and can go no longer than two years from the start of the initial application submission. Once the application was submitted, the two-year period started. One of the most time-consuming steps of the process was the required self-study, which can take between 3 to 6 months to write if you have no curriculum modifications. After the self-study was submitted and CSHSE evaluators reported sufficient information to move forward, and a two-day site visit was set up. During the site visit, multiple meetings (nine

different meetings) took place with the following groups: CAST Administration, faculty, advisory board, library and technical support staff, students/graduates, and fieldwork supervisors. Once the site visit was completed, a final decision on accreditation was obtained within a month. The final decision letter included strengths of the program, recommendations to strengthen the program, and a reaccreditation date set for spring 2027.

Results and Benefits

The amount of effort required to obtain these accreditations were extensive. Since the Human Services program was recently approved, there is limited data on the impacts accreditation have had on the program. The Cyber Operations designation provides nearly five years of data and outcomes which will be used to compare and contrast with Human Services in the future. The results will focus on program growth and increased opportunities.

The Cyber Operations program began with six declared majors in 2016 and currently has over 1100 declared majors (Image 2). At the time of designation, the NCAE-C program office estimated that designated schools receive a 100-200% increase year over year for the first three years. The enrollment numbers for Human Services are provided as an established baseline to track enrollment growth and comparison post accreditation. Enrollment has been consistent over the same time period with approximately 60 students.

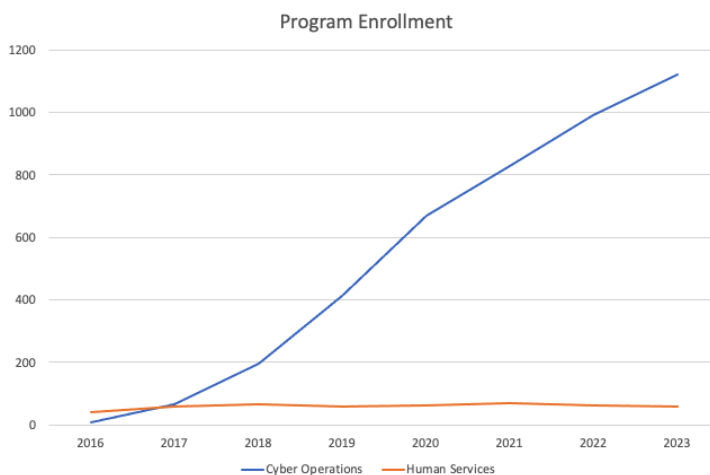


Image 2 – CAST Program Enrollment

There are many opportunities and benefits associated with accreditation. Depending on the accreditation body, programs may get access to professional networks, professional development opportunities, grants, and scholarship opportunities to name a few. For example, NCAE-C utilizes the Cyber Scholarship Program (CySP) as a recruitment and retention tool to attract top talent to support Department of Defense (DoD) organizations (Clark, 2022). This scholarship provides students with full tuition and fees, a \$25,000 stipend, guaranteed employment at a DoD organization post-graduation, and conference travel funds. Additionally, institutions can apply for capacity building grants each year to support faculty and program development. To date, 26 students have received the scholarship and the program has received over \$4 million in total funding to support students and the program. Additionally, accreditation and associated membership provides access to additional resources such as self-study materials (CSHSE, 2023), faculty development (CAE Workshops, 2023), and curricular materials such as those found with CLARK (CLARK, 2023) and CARD (CARD, 2023). Finally, accreditation provides access to marketing materials, outreach networks, and methods of posting job ads to hire faculty. Accredited programs are listed on the national websites and added to listservs to build community and networking opportunities. Logos can be used to develop program promotional and marketing materials. These examples demonstrate a few potential impacts and benefits of accreditation from our experience.

Conclusion

While the overall accreditation process was rigorous, challenging, and time consuming, it was well worth it. Accreditation processes vary within accrediting bodies and the specific program requirements. The Cyber

Operations program accreditation was broadly broken down into two stages with multiple sub-steps in each stage. The overall accreditation process can take from six months to two years. The CSHSE process included 12 steps and must be completed within two years of initial application. Accreditation generally provides benefits including the ability to communicate a commitment to quality; strengthens the focus on student performance data; supports intentional, innovative, and reflective design; increases program visibility. CAST's accreditation experience with their cyber operations and human services programs reflected these benefits in the exponential enrollment growth, millions of dollars in grant and scholarship funding, and access to training, professional development, and curriculum. These results demonstrate how accreditation can drive program enrollment and signify program excellence.

Three recommendations are provided before pursuing accreditation. First, identify whether your program has an associated accreditation process or accrediting body. Second, identify the return on investment for pursuing accreditation. It is important to recognize that exponential growth can introduce problems such as hiring qualified faculty to support program growth. Finally, fully understand the requirements post-accreditation. There can be extensive data collection and reporting requirements.

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Autonomy Supportive Teaching in Asynchronous Online Courses: Seven Strategies

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Abstract

Drawing on his recent book, *Autonomy-Supportive Teaching in Higher Education: A Guide for College Professors* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2023), Patrick describes how to apply the evidence-based principles of autonomy-support into asynchronous online courses.

Introduction

Autonomy supportive teaching (AST) is a method for supporting and growing students' inner motivation for learning. Rooted in Self-determination Theory (SDT), professors who use AST create classroom conditions where students' psychological needs are satisfied. Students who feel supported experience their learning as more enjoyable, they achieve learning objectives more easily, and their learning is more likely to continue outside of the classroom. Instructors who use AST benefit, too, and find teaching more fulfilling. For detailed descriptions of autonomy supportive teaching in practice as well as supporting evidence, see Reeve (2016) or Whitehead (2023). For an in-depth overview of self-determination theory, see Ryan and Deci (2017).

Though many hundreds of studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of AST in traditional face-to-face classrooms, only about a dozen have been directed at distance learning. It is my opinion that AST can be translated into online courses—even asynchronous courses where students and instructors do not meet in real time. In this article, I explain what AST looks like in practice.

In what follows, I draw on my own experiences using AST in asynchronous online courses. In doing so, I have opted to use an informal, first-person writing style.

The Strategies

Strategy 1: Taking Students' Perspective

Taking students' perspective means thinking about course information, problems, learning objectives, and resources as though I am a prospective student. I ask myself: "What am I interested in?" "What problems do I perceive as relevant to my life?" or "What am I most worried about?" With practice, I find myself consulting my inner student with every course modification, such as the font I am using, the pictures and videos I share, course deadlines, grading scheme, invitations for feedback, and so on.

When the semester begins and students start logging in, I am grateful that I now have the chance to ask my students for their feedback directly. I ask, "What did you think of my video introduction? Was it too long? What might make it better?" And so on. The course gradually feels less like my own private creation, and more like a joint collaboration between me and my students.

Strategy 2: Inviting Students to Pursue Their Interests

Learning objectives can be accomplished in a variety of ways. If, for example, the goal is for students to use one math problem as a model for solving another (such as seeing how a 20% tip was calculated, and then using that as a model to calculate a 15% tip), then any important math procedure will do. My first idea, as you can see, is to calculate the tip on a restaurant bill. But maybe they would rather know how to convert a recipe that serves 4 into a recipe that serves 1, or whether their gas mileage is as good as the dealer has promised. Inviting students to pursue their interests draws on their intrinsic motivation.

For example, a goal for one of my courses is that students will be able to use a psychological assessment tool and interpret the results. But I don't make them all use the Sense of Coherence inventory, even though that is my personal favorite. I give them dozens to choose from, such as inventories for anxiety, stress, depression, autism, ADHD, dementia, quality of life, relationship compatibility, and so on. In all of those they are likely to find something that concerns them directly.

Strategy 3: Presenting Learning Activities in Need-Satisfying Ways

You and I have physical needs that must be satisfied or else we will die. But we also have three psychological needs that must be satisfied in order for us to thrive. These needs are autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The more that I can satisfy these three needs for my students, the more they will thrive in my classroom. (Note: this was tested in AST courses by giving students psychometric tests to examine anxiety, stress, depression, and psychological well-being. When students perceived that their autonomy was being supported by their teacher, anxiety, stress, and depression decreased and psychological well-being increased. The reverse occurred when students perceived that their teacher was controlling [see Reeve et al., 2022, for summaries of the research].)

In order to support student competence, learning has to be challenging but not too challenging. You want to navigate the boundaries between so easy as to induce boredom and so hard as to induce helplessness. Providing scaffolded activities allows students to locate their own optimal level of difficulty. I do this by offering a basic activity (e.g., "Take the inventory and report your results") along with option of going further (e.g., "Organize your results into an inventory report following the model I have given you.") There is always a higher level to reach for, and, as we all know as teachers and scholars, it is often up to us whether or not we reach for it.

In order to support student relatedness, students need to feel connected to you and their classmates. This is not easy in an asynchronous course. I believe that I have been successful at communicating to my students that I hear, understand, and accept them. I do this by inviting my students to share their personal problems and concerns at the beginning of class by way of a letter to me. I respond to each of these individually and personally.

I admit that I have not been as successful helping students connect with one another. I think this is because I am myself a very private person, and I prefer one-on-one correspondence. For me, invitations to work in groups have always felt contrived—like I am checking something off of the list. But perhaps you are more at home creating opportunities for students to interact. Lead with that.

Strategy 4: Providing Explanatory Rationale

This strategy is as simple as it sounds. It means explaining why I am asking students to write their discussion post or submit their reflection or record a video introducing themselves. By sharing my rationale behind the activity, students are more likely to climb onboard with me. They will begin to feel as if doing the activity was their idea, even though it was assigned by me.

I have learned that not all of my course activities had justifiable rationales. For several years I required my online health psychology students to complete a quiz for each textbook chapter. At 26 chapters, this was a lot of work for students. But what I was most interested in was their response essays, which were organized around possible problems in the healthcare industry—problems such as whether healthcare was equitable or whether medicating ADHD children was ethical. My rationale for the essays was easy: "Clarifying your own position helps promote greater precision in thinking and communication." I could not say the same for my quizzes. These, I later realized, had been assigned so that I could show my colleagues and department chair just how much work my students were doing. I didn't actually believe that they were beneficial beyond testing student obedience.

Strategy 5: Acknowledging Negative Feelings

I get some version of the following email from online students around ten times every semester: "I'm SO CONFUSED ! What even am I suppose to be doing ?" I have to avoid my impulse reaction, which is to lead with criticisms to student grammar, word choice, punctuation, spelling, and principles of formal correspondence. This reaction, I realize, is my way of defending myself against the student's criticism that I have been unclear.

If I can accept that my student feels confused, then I can avoid the inevitable email exchange where we take turns politely explaining what the other person is doing wrong. Instead, I respond, "Hi _____, it sounds like you are confused. I know that it isn't always easy to find your way around a new online course, and that can be frustrating.

Is there something that I can do to help?” That’s generally it. Crisis averted. This student was feeling helpless—just like I feel whenever the university travel authorization portal is down—and wanted to make human contact and feel heard. I can understand that.

I give the email example because this is how emotions are generally expressed in online courses. I occasionally get phone calls from students, but it is mostly the frantic and urgent emails that roll in between 11pm and 4am that make the hair on the back of my neck stand on edge.

Strategy 6: Relying on Invitational Language

Most coursework assigned by instructors is mandatory. Students are required to do all of it or face a penalty. Invitational language means introducing activities in a tentative way. This might include giving students the choice between multiple activities, or an invitation for the student to do something entirely different and of their own choosing.

Invitational language is easy in the face-to-face classroom. This is because instructor and students can discuss alternatives and reach a spoken agreement. When this occurs online, however, it isn’t always clear what it is that students are expected to do. “Is it a requirement or not?” is what they want to know.

I have found that this works best when I explain that a given activity is required. This is the opposite of invitational language. Doing so, however, will avoid confusing those students who aren’t interested in reading beyond what they have to do and when to do it by. In the description I explain why I have chosen the activity (Strategy 4), and then invite students do something different if they feel like they have a better way of accomplishing the objective. These students will typically reach out to me in order to make sure that my invitation was sincere, to which I respond with a rosy-cheeked smiley face and an enthusiastic, “Yes!”

Strategy 7: Displaying Patience

On a hike the other day, a friend asked me about my new book on autonomy supportive teaching. In particular, she wanted to hear an example of one of the strategies. I said, “Autonomy supportive teachers are patient.” But, as I said it, it felt sort of obvious. Of course patience is preferable to impatience. My example didn’t say much for the book.

But I had forgotten just how easy it is to be impatient, particularly in online courses. College students, who represent ages 16-60, enter online courses with a variety of digital skill sets. Some are comfortable on a desktop computer, others are comfortable on a smart phone. Still others are uncomfortable on any sort of device. This is to say nothing with the learning system itself, such as Blackboard. I have been using my school’s online learning platform for over ten years, and I still find that links have expired, pages have moved, images have become corrupt, and on and on. (And you should have heard the complaints from faculty when we shifted Promotion and Tenure portfolio submissions to our online learning system.)

As online instructors, we do our best to help our students navigate the online coursework no matter their skill or inexperience. Still, it is difficult to hear from a student who is frustrated that they cannot find the activity or resource or submission page or deadline.

This is where I must remember to be patient! I adopt my students’ perspective (Strategy 1) and recall what it was like when I couldn’t figure out how to pay my license plate tag fees online the first go around, or how difficult it was to make changes to my retirement allocations (and how stressed out I felt when trying to do so).

Conclusion

These seven strategies combine into what perception psychologists call a unified Gestalt. This means that the more you practice taking students’ perspective and giving explanatory rationale, the more you will also be practicing patience and acknowledging negative feelings. In my experience, autonomy supportive teaching feels awkward at first. But, just as we have learned to speak a language, we experience the impact these strategies have, and soon enough they become our default mode of interacting with students.

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