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Success Plan for the Online Learning Experience: Student Engagement, Teacher Accessibility, & Relationships

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Abstract

Online teaching in the time of COVID-19 is a new and sometimes scary experience for even the most seasoned educator. It is certainly apparent that many students are struggling to make this instantaneous adjustment. Teachers have a duty to mitigate this stress as they continue to provide relevant instruction. Based on my experience, this can be achieved by fostering student engagement, staying highly assessible, and maintaining the relationships that were formed face-to-face in the conventional classroom.

Introduction

It is 3:00 a.m. on Good Friday morning. I should be in bed fast asleep, yet here I sit, staring at the computer screen as I grade submitted work from my 9th grade English students and tinker with the next week's lesson. Suddenly I see it appear: the red notification alert on my district's grading system, indicating a new direct message from someone. The tiny red circle is a beacon hollering in the night, beckoning me in the quiet stillness of my office. One of my students needs me—I must assist! This is my new reality with distance learning because of COVID-19.

As the nation was thrust into online learning, it became a new experience for most students and also for many educators. Seemingly overnight we were utilizing gradebooks in new ways, and finding new applications and methods of delivering instruction. It was our turn to scramble and find resources we never knew existed. "We cannot assume that academic staff who find themselves working in online environments naturally and automatically know how to proceed in such a way as to maximise student learning" (Dixon et al., 2008, p. 263). Yet, we tried—for the sake of our students, who themselves faced numerous challenges in copious ways. "Learners are left to create their own understanding and develop the skills to succeed in this technologically mediated environment" (Cleveland-Innes & Campbell, 2012, p. 283). Students are learning their district grading systems in more complex methods that many did before, and at times, forced to almost instantly know several new sites and applications and digital-driven pedagogical approaches from various teachers.

This is not to say that there are only negatives to the online learning experience. "Online courses offer numerous advantages to students such as convenience, flexibility and access to education" (Bowers & Kumar, 2015, p. 28). In a random poll of my students, when asked what was better about online learning versus the traditional classroom, 17% (the top answer) stated working at their own pace, followed closely with having more time to work (16%). "Distance education provides students much more freedom in how and when they interact..." (Chih-Yuan Sun & Rueda, 2012, p. 191). Students now have hours outside the conventional classroom to utilize, and they can take more ownership of their learning. Teachers play an important role in promoting this as well.

I have become an honorary virtual teacher of 9th grade English this Spring, and in that time, I feel understanding how to best connect with students may be an important factor in student success in online learning. Specifically, promoting student engagement, staying accessible, and maintaining and cultivating relationships seem key in fostering a positive online learning experience, for both the teacher and student.

Student Engagement

"One of the primary components of effective online teaching (or any other teaching, for that matter) is student engagement" (Dixson, 2010, p.1). Because we cannot be in the same room with students at a designated time, it is more important that we facilitate this engagement in the online platform. Not only does this hold them accountable, we know student engagement is a crucial component of effective teaching overall. "Engagement is positively related to a

host of desired outcomes, including high grades, student satisfaction, and persistence” (Chen et al., 2008, para. 2).

One of the easiest ways to do this is through the use of discussion boards, online forums, and polls. “[T]he use of online activities and tools such as multimedia and discussion boards may be important ways to increase student engagement in an online learning environment” (Chih-Yuan Sun & Rueda, 2012, p. 202). My gradebook allows me to post polls where students merely click on a multiple-choice answer. It is quick and easy, yet it gives them a voice on the page that day and week. I can tailor the questions to the curriculum or make them more fun and humorous to lighten the mood. Furthermore, I have used them to gauge the climate of the class and inquire about their well-being, stress levels, thoughts on the pandemic experience, etc. Giving students a voice promotes their evident engagement in the class. “Active learning assignments, particularly discussion forums and web pages, may serve the secondary purpose of helping to develop students’ social presence” (Dixson, 2010, p. 7). I have been pleasantly surprised that the majority of my students participate in these posts.

Engaging students online also serves to provide them with an emotional release. Since most of our students use the Internet and social media on a daily basis, it can be a platform in which they are comfortable sharing their thoughts and feelings. We can provide them a safe outlet to do this within the walls of our new “classroom.” “Emotion is present for students 1) when they discuss the online experience, and 2) in the experience of engaging in online learning” (Cleveland-Innes & Campbell, 2012, p. 282). This became apparent to me when students freely vented about how they felt being in a lockdown situation, or how they felt about the workload from their teachers. Just having a place to release their raw emotions seemed cathartic to some.

While students may be adept and comfortable with other online modes, opening up in the virtual school may still be uncomfortable to some, exacerbated by the new challenges of online school and social distancing. “[S]tudents experiencing the novelty of distance education (first time users) had lower emotional engagement...it is important to facilitate emotional engagement by increasing student interest” (Chih-Yuan Sun & Rueda,

2012, pp. 199-200). Teachers need to find ways to draw out their students’ emotional engagement. When I post questions about their e-learning experience, it generates myriad answers where my students are able to openly release their feelings. By placing it on the discussion board, it allows them to interact with each other and go back-and-forth with their thoughts. This encourages reluctant participants and allows for validation of their feelings with their peers. Videoconferencing (Zoom, Skype, etc.) is another tool teachers may use to bring their classes together and provide a place for students to further engage in the classroom, even if the topic is not solely curriculum-based. Meetings that are more playful (having lunch together, sharing your workspace, showing off pets, etc.) go a long way to foster engagement, even in reluctant students.

Teacher Accessibility

Being readily accessible to my students was my main priority when this experience started. I vowed to be glued to the computer all day and night, and I have mostly stuck to it. In fact, I have to force my laptop closed and remember I am also a wife and mother. Being available to my students is important to me because I want them to know I am here, and they do not have to wait long to hear from me. “Compared to tradition face-to-face courses, students perceive a lack of social presence and interactions in online courses” (Bowers & Kumar, 2015, p. 28). It is easy to forget about interaction when instruction is delivered by uploads and videos instead of conventional teaching. Because teachers may be scrambling to find new tools themselves, the element of relationship might be pushed aside for more pressing issues. This is why making your presence known is crucial. I still cringe when I go hours before answering a student’s message, even when it is late at night.

“Instructors also need to provide multiple ways of interacting with students...instructors need to use several channels: announcement on the homepage of the course delivery system, e-mails to students, discussion forums in which the instructor interacts and online lecture or connect sessions and chats, to enhance engagement” (Dixson, 2010, p. 8). I reply to messages as soon as I see them arrive. I upload weekly videos that just say hello and talk through the week’s tasks. I post questions and polls weekly to facilitate communication. I leave little pictures and reminders on weekends to let them know I am

still around. I offer and advocate for videoconferencing whenever it is needed. I create my documents on Word but also make .pdf files to ease accessibility. Links to texts online are provided, if available. Paper packets are created for those without Internet access. My Google Voice number is available for all students and parents to text, and text they do. It has become one of the greatest communication tools this term. Basically, I try everything to mainstream the work and be present online for students (and parents) who need me. Getting the message from a student who is having serious struggles and knowing you are their go-to contact confirms that being available to them is important; they are counting on me.

Feedback is also a powerful tool to stay accessible to students, showing them you are online and available. "Student feedback, both formal and informal, usually drives the basis of improvement in many aspects of online learning environments" (Dixon et al., 2008, p. 263). I provide feedback on mostly every assignment I grade. If even one little point is lost, there will be a note as to why. I take the time to read everything carefully and message students if they need to go back and fix something. I provide them with multiple opportunities to resubmit assignments, and direct messages in the feedback grading system facilitate this. What is great is when the students take it upon themselves to message me first, asking for feedback, or where to find it. My messages at the start of online learning seem to have opened the door for students to enter and take the lead on communication.

Relationships

The final component to what I perceive is a successful online experience for both the student and teacher is the nurturing of relationships. "The quality of student-teacher relationships may significantly influence the learning process..." (Goodenow, 1993, p. 25). Adolescents are fraught with transitions and new relationships. Many students are starting new schools with decreased opportunities for meaningful peer relationships, and a perception that teachers no longer care (Eccles & Midgley, 1989). Not only is forming meaningful, caring relationships important in a conventional setting, it is even more crucial during the time of COVID-19, where peers and support systems may not be readily utilized due to social distancing and lockdowns. Relationships formed

between teachers and students provide benefits in the online experience and can carry into the students' overall educational experience and support them when we return to the conventional classroom. "...[S]upportive relationships with teachers continue to predict social and academic outcomes throughout middle school and the transition to high school" (Davis, 2003, p. 216). I always start the year off with student surveys and information polls to get to know my students. I feel fair is fair, so I participate and share things about myself, as well. I have always taken the time at the start of the year to try and create the community in the classroom before diving hardcore into curriculum. This pays off in numerous ways and made speaking with my students online more natural and achievable. For me, it was a seamless transition. This opened the headspace to give everything to my students' needs.

By the time we moved to online learning, our relationships with our students were already established face-to-face. While this makes nurturing them a bit easier, overcoming the challenges of being online are key. It is easy to let this communication slip away in the frenzy of the curriculum, new expectations, personal stressors, and world-view shifts, but this interaction cannot be forgotten. "Schools have a critical role, not only in delivering educational materials to children, but in offering an opportunity for students to interact with teachers" (Wang et al., 2020, p. 946).

I utilize messages a lot to keep a line of communication going. When opportunities arise, I shift the message to something more personal, and have enjoyed many back-and-forth conversations with students about their favorite new book, family dynamics, or general chit-chat about their day and life. I would send pictures to kids on their birthday, knowing the typical celebrations were not allowed. I have offered to be students' personal assistant, monitoring and organizing all their work, not only for my class but for all of them. It feels good to have a student independently message you to say they enjoyed the text you assigned. But perhaps the greatest example is when a student vented to me privately about the experience, stating "...all this is very stressful doing all this online and mentally my mind is all over the place and honestly out of all my teachers you are the only one that understands so I was letting you know" (Z. Walters, personal communication, April 23, 2020).

Discussion

The aim of this paper was to deepen our understanding of how teachers can provide the most effective online experience for students new to e-learning, due to COVID-19. I believe maintaining student engagement, being fully accessible as a teacher, and preserving the student-teacher relationship are crucial for success in an online learning environment.

Although such conclusions are informative and provide valuable insight, there is so much more to learn when shifting quickly into distance learning. I merely described what I found most effective, leaving the door open for more discussion. Just like students, many teachers find themselves as stressed and unsure of how to approach an online learning style. Because most of us were thrust into it overnight, much research needs to be done on the impact of students and teachers, in all facets of the learning experience, and as it relates to the uniqueness of a pandemic.

My first conclusion is that maintaining student engagement is critical for student success. Teachers must find ways to keep students active in the curriculum, even when you cannot be physically present in the same space as them. “By being engaged, students develop habits of the mind and heart that promise to stand them in good stead for a lifetime of continuous learning” (Chen et al., 2008, para. 2).

My second conclusion is that teachers must be accessible for students. This accessibility needs to extend beyond a simple reply to a message but encompass a large online presence in the eyes of your students, in a variety of ways. “The educator’s role is that of facilitator, developer and provider of the learning space or habitat whether that occurs in the physical face-to-face setting or through the use of online learning environments” (Dixon et al., 2008, p. 259).

My final conclusion is that the relationship you form in the conventional classroom must be maintained and even promoted in the online environment. Letting the students know you care assists in their current achievements and extends into their future education. “Relationships with teachers may have an impact on students’ learning and academic achievement” (Fredriksen & Rhodes, 2004, p. 45).

In conclusion, these interesting times have driven teachers and students alike into environments for which we may not have been fully equipped. However, it is our job to make it as healthy and effective as possible for our students. “[T]eachers who were interpersonally involved built higher-quality teacher-student relationships by getting to know students personally, being available and connecting in and out of the classroom” (Kiefer et al., 2015, p. 13). Keeping them engaged in various ways, staying assessible in a variety of modes, and maintaining our relationships that were already formed are but three components that can foster a positive online learning experience.

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