Reflections in Online Education

Guardian, Guide, Cheerleader, Coach: Strategies for Improving Student Engagement in and Online Environment

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Abstract: Instructors in an online environment have a number of resources and avenues at their disposal for increasing student involvement in courses. However, choosing the right strategy to use can be a challenge in its own right. Add to that the need to ensure that students are truly developing mastery over course material in an online environment, and the challenge may be too great and nothing is done. A review of roles that instructors fill is followed by ways to fill them with authentic, individual communication for the benefit of student engagement and mastery is presented.

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Post-secondary instructors at all levels of expertise find themselves needing to answer a critical question: At what point does interaction with a student cross the line from providing help to giving a hand out? Clearly, balance between the two extremes is required, as many students who are engaging a professional discipline for the first time require assistance in developing not just a mastery of the new discipline but often also learning how to approach the material. In days gone by, students and instructors met in a classroom or lecture hall, and discussions were nearly always synchronous if not scintillating. An instructor could discern which students (if any) were

catching on to the complicated concepts being presented and students could pick up the passion (if present) that the instructor had for the subject being studied.

Today, it is becoming more and more likely that the conversations, if they happen at all, will be through a series of texts or tweets in a much more asynchronous model. Complicate that by the notion that much of our intent in communication is often conveyed through non-verbal indicators and that such indicators are frequently missing from much of the posting that is being done online, and we have the ingredients of chaos brewing in the lives and minds of today's learners.

To be sure, when working in an online education environment, there are a number of students, perhaps even a majority of students, who do just fine when it comes to this type of model. But for the thoughtful instructor, the instructor who is concerned with setting the stage for students to develop the greatest level of mastery possible, leaving these things to chance is simply unacceptable.

Instructors have always had to balance the roles of Guardian (making sure that students demonstrate mastery of concepts) with the role of Guide (laying out the intellectual path that a student can follow to achieve the desired mastery). However, because past structured environments provided more opportunities for organic feedback and fine tuning of ideas and concepts, it is critical to remember that the equally important roles of Cheerleader and Coach must be integrated and thoughtfully implemented when one is teaching in an online environment. What follows is a series of suggestions of how the power of these four roles may be harnessed in an online environment.

Guardian

Working in an online environment provides some easy ways for instructors to serve as guardian and protect the integrity of the discipline. They can implement this role by the way they use the Learning Management System, or LMS. Most LMSs are set up with auto scoring quiz and assessment tools. These tools allow instructors to establish thresholds that match the level of mastery that is expected for a course. Is spelling important? A quiz in an LMS can be configured to ask a student to enter a word or phrase as an answer to a question, and the words to match against can be entered along with stipulations of matching spelling in the grading section. The LMS takes care of the rest. Similarly, when a multiple-choice question is used, options can be created which all contain correct information, but only one is most correct. Some question banks have even been set up with adaptive questions or multiple answers that an instructor can select from. The instructor can select away and allow the LMS to be the Guardian.

While this example is not terribly different from the past when teachers were responsible for developing assessments for their courses, the beauty in this is that the LMS becomes responsible for the grading. Rather than spending countless hours evaluating students written answers for errors or gaps in understanding, exams of sufficient depth and breadth with questions of sufficient complexity can be crafted which can satisfactorily guard the discipline from those who would pretend understanding without truly having paid the price to develop it.

This does take time, especially on the front end of a class. And when done thoughtfully, the resulting time available to the instructor during the subsequent scheduled class time can allow for greater adoption of the other three roles.

Guide

A more difficult proposition for most new instructors, regardless of the arena of instruction, is determining the appropriate level of assistance to provide to students. At what point does careful instruction cross the line and become spoon-feeding information to those who are not doing their own work? While this question must be answered individually, there are some tools that can be utilized by instructors as they come to those answers.

Interestingly, the answer suggested to the previous question may hold the key to the answer to this one as well. If an instructor utilizes a process of Backwards Design, as recommended by Ralph W. Tyler, Jay McTighe and Grant Wiggins, the assessment is designed first. Then, by developing lesson plans that ensure that the material to be tested is discussed in the various learning sessions and activities, the instructor can easily honor both Guardian and Guide roles.

To implement these activities, again, the LMS itself may hold several tools. They may be called different names, but they serve the same purpose of engagement. For instance, if an instructor wants to evaluate students on how well they have understood a concept beyond their ability to select a correct answer from options provided, a question (or several) can be asked on a regular basis that requires thoughtful and original responses. Grading for these can be approached in a variety of ways, but the intent should remain one of discovering how well the student is making and perceives him or herself making progress toward mastery. Using prior information is useful, but so is asking a simple question of, "How do you feel you are doing?" or, "Which of the following concepts have been most challenging for you?" By obtaining this feedback, fine tuning adjustments can be made to future instructional delivery choices.

Why put these types of questions in an LMS? Why give a grade to a student (even a small point value grade) for providing such critical feedback? Perhaps only because it is a way of increasing the likelihood that all students will provide feedback, especially the ones that are struggling.

Cheerleader

Of all the roles to play, the Cheerleader role is perhaps the most fun. This role is all about giving encouraging feedback. In the past, this might be done in class, or before or after class, depending on the student. In an online synchronous environment, an instructor may choose to recognize a particular contribution during a video conference lecture or phone session, or perhaps utilize a private chat, depending on the student. If the instructor is teaching in an asynchronous online course, other options might be more useful. For instance, many LMSs feature tools for the instructor to provide video feedback to individual students for individual activities. Taking a few moments to say something (and record yourself saying it) might provide some variety in the abundance of text heavy feedback that most students receive. Granted, this requires having the technology tools to record the feedback, but with the availability of technology to meet this need, this idea might be easily implemented. The more difficult part of this solution is getting over the fear of utilizing technology in this way.

Another option is to find creative ways of encouraging future engagement within the course. Many schools have access to a virtual library of online images and GIFs that can be used to augment the message of an email. Asking about these may open an entirely new set of tools that can enliven the feedback provided in an email or text message.

Coach

Whether teaching offline or online, synchronous or asynchronous, it is possible that none of the roles that an instructor fills is as critical as the Coach role. This is an individual role, tailored to the needs of the one, not the group. It can be time-intensive, regardless of the environment, and can also present challenges with engagement. For instance, a motivated and driven student who is on time with assignments, attends every lecture, and is forthcoming with questions may be easier to coach than one who is difficult to reach or who seems sporadic at being engaged.

To be clear, both types of students can benefit greatly from coaching. But finding a way to engage one who is obviously willing to be engaged is simple; in fact, the first type of student is probably already getting sufficient coaching by way of feedback to assignments, posts and other submissions without needing to worry about creating a new mechanism to deliver it.

But what about the second type of student?

For that type of student, it may be worthwhile to explore three different modes of outreach, namely texting, social media, and email. More and more of the communication that is happening today revolves around these three channels so it only makes sense to explore them in connection with helping a student as well. If text numbers were obtained at the beginning of class, using them to reach out to a student and share congratulations on a well written assignment or post can be a valuable touchpoint on the way to developing a more responsive relationship. Likewise, if a closed social group was established in an online social media platform, a private message may be sent, or a public message with the less than frequently engaging student population being tagged in the invite to encourage engagement. Finally, while email may be somewhat less frequently used than the other two channels, it can be ideal for sharing a short

message, along with a picture or GIF as mentioned earlier, to a student who is otherwise

struggling to maintain engagement. All of these open the door to renewed engagement without

fear and awkwardness that sometimes bars a student from making the first effort.

Conclusion

Are these the only methods or tools that exist for reaching students? Obviously the

answer is a resounding "No!" But they are certainly tools that work. Finding the one that works

best for any student or situation is only determined by trying them all, and others, until

something clicks for both the instructor and the student.