



The State of Online Engagement

We must bring 21st-century technology into learning in meaningful ways to engage, motivate, and inspire learners of all ages to achieve.

National Education Technology Plan, 2010

A significant element in meeting the instructional needs of the twenty-first-century learner is to discover effective ways to reach the individual in the context of diverse technology-enhanced opportunities. Since *Engaging the Online Learner* was first published in the early 2000s, the focus on engagement has intensified, as indicated by the numerous publication of books on the topic since that time (Aldrich, 2009; Barkley, 2010; Bonk & Zhang, 2008; Palloff & Pratt, 2005, 2007; Shank, 2007; Watkins, 2005; West & West, 2009). As the emphasis on online learning intensifies, the demand for quality instruction increases. We believe that an awareness of this evolving instructional approach has been captured within the concept of

transformational learning. As Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner state, “transformative or transformational (terms used interchangeably in the literature) learning is about change—dramatic, fundamental change in the way we see ourselves and the world in which we live” (2007, p. 130). Additional opportunities need to be provided for online learners and instructors to engage not only with the content, but with one another in the spirit of transformational learning (Mezirow & Associates, 2000). The historical foundations of engagement began with Dewey and continue to evolve with the addition of transformational learning.

FOUNDATIONS OF ENGAGEMENT

The paradigm shift to the instructor as a facilitator of active student learning began with Dewey over a century ago. Dewey (1916/1997) valued teachers’ and students’ contributions to the learning experience in addition to contributions from diverse and meaningful peer collaboration. Houle’s early work in the 1960s identified three adult orientations toward learning. He identified learners as being goal-oriented, activity-oriented, or learning-oriented (Houle, 1988). Malcolm Knowles’ (1980) research on adult learners—*andragogy* was his preferred term—determined that an active collaborative learning situation, where the student is self-directed and shares her or his own personal experiences, is one of the key elements to a successful learning experience. Adult learning theory has built heavily on the instructional methodology that is often identified as situational cognition or constructivism. “Concepts such as cognitive apprenticeship, situated learning, reflective practice, and communities of practice are found in both adult learning and constructivist literature” (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 293). Additional theorists have influenced instructional approaches that support adult learners in a learner-focused learning environment.

Bruner, Vygotsky, and Piaget are several of the past theorists who supported the concept that learning is enriched when it includes collaborative and learner-engaged instructional approaches. Bruner wrote that learning includes a “deep

human need to respond to others and to operate jointly with them toward an objective” (Bruner, 1966, p. 67). Vygotsky’s research introduced the concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978). The concept of ZPD enforces his belief that individual learning can be expanded with assistance and interaction with a more knowledgeable individual. Piaget (1969), who preferred the term *constructivism* over the term *engaged learning*, conducted further research on Vygotsky’s ZPD concept of mentoring-learning relationships. His research findings indicated that the synergy between equal partners results in a richer learning experience because it is not adversely affected by power conflicts. The world of online learning continues to evolve rapidly, with an increasing emphasis on collaborative learning and student engagement.

The concept of the instructor as a *guide on the side* is now being revised even further, with the teacher serving as an additional resource within the expanding learning network that is available through the instant access technology provides to information. Building upon this user-driven access to information, the recent decade saw the introduction of the concept of *connectivism*. George Siemens and Stephen Downs are two of the leading advocates of this emerging view. “Connectivism is a theory describing how learning happens in a digital age . . . The connections that enable us to learn more are more important than our current state of knowing . . . Learning and knowing are constant, ongoing processes (not end states or products)” (Siemens, 2006, pp. 42–43). Viewing knowledge acquisition as a cyclical, ongoing process reinforces our understanding of the ways in which collaborative and transformative learning environments are increasing the richness of the online environment. Connectivism supports the idea that online learning is not limited to a one-way linear path from instructor to student. “The learning process is cyclical, in that learners will connect to a network to share and find new information, will modify their beliefs on the basis of new learning, and will then connect to a network to share these realizations and find new information once more” (Kop & Hill, 2008, p. 1). Siemens recommends a new instructional approach, noting that “advocates of problem-based, discovery and cooperative approaches to learning suggest traditional lecture-based learning is ineffective” (2008, p. 12). Siemens (2008) and Bonk (2007) share the educator’s view of the instructor in dual roles: knowledge expert and guide facilitating learner discovery. An online course allows the instructor’s role as learning facilitator to enrich the experience for all participants.

ENGAGEMENT IN TODAY'S ONLINE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

No longer is the learner a passive recipient of wisdom disseminated from the *all-knowing* instructor. Today's online student is expected to be an active participant in her or his own learning experiences. "Many online teachers have observed . . . how online classroom behavior mirrors the shift of power from teacher to student" (Coombs, 2010, p. 24). While it may still be a surprise to some learners to find that online learning requires more from them than some of their earlier classroom and online learning experiences, the message is being more consistently sent by online programs and instructors in the form of student orientations and course guidelines concerning the learner involvement.

The process of online engagement includes the interactions between a teacher and students and also *among* the students within a course's learning community. A great deal of emphasis has been placed on learner engagement, but effective learner engagement is dependent on active participation from each contributor: teacher *and* student. For the learner, "motivation and active learning work together synergistically, and as they interact, they contribute incrementally to increase engagement" (Barkley, 2010, p. 7). The online instructor must remember that "in this century, the first role of the teacher is to maintain and foster enthusiasm for learning. The second role of the teacher is to assist the student in her or his learning and knowledge" (Draves & Coates, 2011, p. 39). Instructor enthusiasm and support are important elements for successful learning experiences.

The focus on instructor engagement is also increasing. Research has shown that a successful online experience is dependent on the interactions between faculty and students (Cavanaugh, 2009). Student engagement has long been considered a foundational element for a successful learning event. However, faculty modeling of dynamic interactions as an instructional strategy is a critical aspect of instructor-to-learner engagement. An important consideration for ensuring course success is a high level of communication opportunities between students and instructor. "Research and experience tell us that prompt feedback is important in online learning settings, where students lack many of the traditional nonverbal cues to which they are accustomed in face-to-face venues" (Finkelstein, 2006, p. 23). The requisites for an effective online instructor are being redefined. Best practices for online teaching have emerged from various authors

and organizations in the last few years and signal that instructional roles are shifting from content experts to pedagogical experts addressing student learning within a challenging technology-enriched online context.

Technology continues to be a double-edged sword for engagement. On the one hand, it is the element that enables engagement to occur online. On the other hand, students need to be provided with additional support to overcome unique online barriers usually related to the technology. Many times this needed support needs to come from sources other than the instructor, such as a help desk or classmates willing to be of assistance. Often technical problems are short-lived. Within the first weeks of class, most challenges are resolved by acclimating the students to the course's navigational or posting requirements through specifically assigned simple tasks. When the problems become more long term, then the technology creates "learning distractions" and learning is adversely affected (Lehman & Conceicao, 2010, p. 29). The important lesson to remember is that online learning, as well as learner engagement, is about the *learning* and not the technology. The challenges of dealing with technology cannot be ignored, but technology needs to be secondary to the learning tasks, the learners, motivational considerations, and communication (Smith, 2008). Additional concepts such as social networking and connectivism are also influencing student learning and engagement in today's twenty-first-century classroom.

IMPACT OF SOCIAL NETWORKING AND CONNECTIVISM

The increasing presence of social networking has caused educators to question how today's students learn and communicate newly acquired knowledge. Responses to the impact of twenty-first-century technology on learning resulted in the development of the concept of connectivism discussed earlier. Siemens advocates that learning experiences go beyond the formal classroom: "We live as an integrated experience—we see, know, and function in connections. Life, like knowing, is not an isolated activity—it is a rich, interconnected part of who we are" (2008, p. 16). The collaborative learning experience—the foundation of the Phases of Engagement introduced in our earlier book *Engaging the Online Learner* (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004, 2011)—is built upon the belief that learning is an interactive learning community event. "In connectivism, the starting point for learning occurs when knowledge is actuated through the process of a learner

connecting to and feeding information into a learning community” (Kop & Hill, 2008, p. 1). Another result of this learner-focused environment is the growing importance of transformational learning.

INCREASING TRANSFORMATIONAL LEARNING

The beneficial aspects of engagement go beyond reported levels of student satisfaction or performance improvement. A deeper gain is realized in what is termed *transformative* or *transformational learning*, and “the mental construction of experience, inner meaning, and reflection are common components of this approach” (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 130). Student reflection has long been a process within a constructivist-type approach, but this concept refers to how the learning experience has changed (or transformed) the learner.

Building an active and engaging online learning community requires time and attention, just as a gardener must tend to her or his spring flowerbeds. As one of our students has observed, the instructor is planting seeds in the learning community that in the proper conditions will take hold and blossom, hopefully within a time frame that the instructor and students can celebrate.

Today’s student is being asked to become an agent for change. Learners might be asked how an experience or newly developed knowledge will make a difference in the way in which they go about their lives. According to Cercone, “adults need to self-reflect on the learning process and be given support for transformational learning” (2008, p. 159). Asking students to document the changes they see in themselves as learners enforces the importance of reflection. To foster transformational learning, the instructional process should include activities that encourage numerous opportunities for self-reflection on the student’s experience, including ways in which a learner has been transformed through engagement.

The addition of the online transformative learning component has been of significant importance to us and prompted us to expand our model to include it. We have come to the realization that one of the benefits of an effective collaborative experience is that both the student and the instructor apply the lessons learned about themselves as learners beyond the restrictions of the instructional setting. The reflective portion of the experiences is elevated to the next level of

application by what can be transferred beyond the classroom experience. This *transfer* phase is what moves instructors and learners beyond the actual course to an elevated level of engagement and shapes them as they continue to learn throughout their lives.

THE TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY LEARNER

Practitioners of instructional design and online learning need to understand the evolving characteristics of learners. The online classroom is populated by a high number of nontraditional adult learners, many of whom are trying to balance the demands of their education with the daily needs of family and, often, a career. However, an increasing amount of online learning occurs in the K–12 educational arena, as well as in professional training venues and in blended learning environments. The term *blended* describes educational settings that include both an online and a face-to-face component. The range of online learning styles is expanding. Smith believes it is important to be aware of online students' diverse learning styles: “we need to strive to present information in ways that are useful to all learning styles” (2008, p. 9). Too often instructors teach in ways that demonstrate a dominant or preferred learning style. Today's learner needs not only “anytime, anyplace” learning, but “any way” of learning as well.

The identification of learner traits and motivational foundations is just as critical as determining achievable instructional objectives. Instructors need to understand that adult learners come to the online experience with three separate learning orientations: there are goal-oriented learners who use education as a means of achieving some other goal; activity-oriented learners, who participate for the sake of the activity itself and the social interaction; and learning-oriented participants, who seek knowledge for its own sake” (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 64). Students also come to the online experience with varying degrees of commitment and self-direction.

In addition, we must be aware that technology has shaped student learning styles and preferences: “for today's students, the classroom is the world, and the information students have available at the flip of a switch is infinite” (Coates, 2007, p. 55). How can one instructor satisfy all the needs of the twenty-first-century learner he or she may encounter in the online learning environment? One answer is through being present and open to knowing your learners.

THE ENGAGED EDUCATOR

Engagement of learners begins with an *engaged instructor* and *reflective teacher* (Brookfield, 1995). It is through educator modeling and guidance that a learner is provided a blueprint for becoming a lifelong learner. As Draves and Coates (2011) remind us, “even with the incorporation of the Internet in instruction and education, the teacher becomes more important to a student’s learning, not less important, in this century” (p. 37). They go on to state that it is clear that “more of the teacher’s time has to be spent in interaction with the students” (p. 39). To be successful in an online environment, the instructor’s skill set needs to be broadened.

Instructor engagement depends on a variety of variables, including timely communication and effective time management skills, both of which are discussed in Chapter 3 in the section on managing engagement. However, instructor engagement must begin with a revised personal definition of the instructor’s role and teaching philosophy and the creation of an encouraging virtual presence.

INSTRUCTOR’S ROLE AND PHILOSOPHY

The traditional view of the educator as the *sage on the stage* has been replaced by the dual terms of *knowledge expert* and *guide facilitating learner discovery* (Siemens, 2008), as lecture-based delivery approaches prove to have a limited value in the online arena (Siemens, 2008). Another term that has gained acceptance is that of *learning concierge* (Bonk, 2007). A hotel concierge is accountable for increasing the value of your experience as a guest. This valued professional is trained to direct you to quality experiences and be of assistance for unforeseen contingencies. In the emerging world of personal learning connections, the online instructor no longer is the sole possessor of the content knowledge. Providing additional resources, while challenging and questioning the student, is part of the instructor’s redefined responsibilities.

Transformative reflection often plays a role in determining an online instructor’s teaching philosophy. Without a front row of students nodding their heads in agreement in response to an instructor’s comment, educators benefit from reflecting on their philosophies regarding the important considerations for teaching online and what can be improved in their own instructional methodologies.

The transformational portion of the term occurs when we implement changes in response to needs for improvement. Teaching online is a dynamic process that involves high levels of energetic interaction and quiet moments of contemplation.

CREATING A SENSE OF PRESENCE

The sense of presence in an online course has been identified as a critical component in the interactions between the instructor and the students (Munro, 1998). Lehman and Conceicao define the concept of presence in this way: “It looks and feels as if the instructor is accessible to the learners and that the learners are accessible to the instructor and each other, and that the technology is transparent to the learning process” (2010, p. 3). Creating effective collaborative learning communities and the acquisition of knowledge through dialogue and reflection all necessitate an effective social and cognitive presence: “Although the natural and appropriate inclination is to first direct interaction efforts to establishing social presence and creating interrelationships, this is only a precondition for a purposeful and worthwhile learning experience. Teaching presence is important for the creation and sustainability of a community of inquiry focused on exploration, integration, and testing of concepts and solutions” (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005, p. 135).

An essential skill for the online instructor is the ability to create a detectable teaching presence in the virtual setting to support a deeper level of interaction and learning than is expected in an online offering. Where online engagement is related to participation and interaction, *presence* has been further defined as “the dynamic interplay of thought, emotion, and behavior” (Lehman & Conceicao, 2010, p. 4). The instructor’s creation of a supportive teaching presence is a critical element for successful interaction not only between the instructor and learners, but also among learners themselves.

One way an instructor’s course presence becomes evident is by the demonstration of her or his own engagement. A personal element is provided by the inclusion of examples from the instructor’s experiences or the inclusion of case studies to further the discussion. Another strategy is to include a welcoming video during the first week of a course. The video can be developed simply with a YouTube level of production to demonstrate a sense of the instructor’s engagement and

accessibility. A textual way to indicate emotions or to emphasize a statement is to use emoticons. A happy face (☺) is helpful to designate a humorous comment that might be misunderstood without additional visual cues. The use of available multimedia resources is another effective way to support course content or to introduce a new concept. The outcome of an effective instructor presence is a virtual learning environment that encourages inquiry and discussion in a non-threatening setting.

MOBILE TECHNOLOGY

While accommodating the newest technology should not be the primary focus of online learning, its influence cannot be ignored. Seemingly overnight, a variety of portable devices have been born. These devices and their associated software, or “apps,” have expanded the possibility for increased instructor and learner engagement and have merged functions that were previously available on separate devices.

There is a growing trend at many universities to offer courses through mobile devices such as smartphones. Research indicates this is also true within K–12 learning (Soloway et al., 1999) and also extends to community colleges and four-year institutions. Mobile learning has been defined by the eLearning Guild as “any activity that allows individuals to be more productive when consuming, interacting with, or creating information, mediated through a compact digital portable device that the individual carries on a regular basis, has reliable connectivity, and fits in a pocket or purse” (Wexler et al., 2007, p. 5).

Current research documents the value of *m-learning* (learning with the assistance of mobile devices), which is facilitated by the technology that is already in the hands of many of our learners (Attewell, 2005; Quinn, 2012; Wagner, 2008). One of the research findings is that mobile learning “facilitates both individual and collaborative learning experiences . . . [and] can help to raise self-confidence and self-esteem by recognising uncelebrated skills, enabling non-threatening, personalised learning experiences and enabling peer-to-peer learning and support” (Attewell, 2005, p. 2). This finding supports the concept of collaborative engagement. The future of this instructional resource has yet to be determined: “m-learning may be the living laboratory for figuring out what technologies can do to engage learners, enable new capabilities, and inspire creative thinking

where learning and performance support is concerned” (Wagner, 2008, p. 3). The concept of pocket-size learning environments is a reality, and the potential methods of engagement in any learning environment are limited only by the speed of the available network connection and the instructor’s and students’ innovative approaches.

SUMMARY

A key to effective learner engagement is for the instructor and course activities to encourage online students to take an increased responsibility for their learning. Similarly, the instructor needs to assume an increased responsibility for providing guidance and support. To engage students in a collaborative interaction, the instructor needs to model a high level of engagement through her or his exchanges within the learning environment. As instructors adapt, online students are also changing. The student population continues to represent an increased number of nontraditional adult learners who are juggling online courses with family and outside pressures. An effective online instructor determines appropriate communication strategies, manages time demands, defines her or his evolving role as an online instructor, and establishes a presence within the online classroom. Engagement strategies that consider the impact of social networking, m-learning technology, and the goal of learning as a transformational experience are critical in today’s environment.

This chapter has presented an overview of the foundations of engagement that have brought us to this instructional moment in time. The importance of understanding the ever-changing world of our learning environments, the expanding opportunities, and our diverse students is critical for the success of online instruction. The concept of transformative reflection will be developed even further in Chapter 2, as it forms an essential part of the new fifth phase in the Phases of Engagement model (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004, 2011).