Handbook of Research on Student-Centered Strategies in Online Adult Learning Environments

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Chapter 22

An Inquiry Into Creating and Supporting Engagement in Online Courses

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focused on the challenge to build an interactive online environment based on a progressive pedagogy that puts the student at the center of the learning. The authors grappled with the question, How do instructors transform discursive dialogue into generative discourse? Helping students understand what it means to engage in discourse is part of this challenge and it is not separate from building an understanding of content. They are interconnected and interdependent. Online learning, like on campus learning, requires purposeful experiences in which learners are able to negotiate meaning and reflect on what they have learned. The authors set out to discover how to create the structures that support active engagement. It was their understanding that through the learning environment they created, they would model and define how to engage in the discourse of the discipline. In exploring this understanding, the authors offered the distinction between participation and engagement.

INTRODUCTION

Online learning, like on campus learning, requires purposeful experiences in which learners are able to negotiate meaning by reflecting, exploring, and building on what they have learned with the instructor and one another. This process evolves from the relationship that students have with the content, their

instructors, their classmates, and themselves. Students are active members of the online community, leaving no room for passive participation. Consequently, the way in which the online environment is organized has a direct impact on the type of interactions that happen. In this chapter, the authors offer what they have discovered about creating and facilitating structures that support active engagement that promote the social construction of knowledge in online interactions.

BACKGROUND

Progressive Pedagogy

As Bank Street College of Education seeks to keep pace with the demand for digital access, it does so with the intention of remaining aligned with its progressive values of advocacy, voice, and social justice. In preparing educators at Bank Street College who work in various settings, the authors have a prevailing commitment to creating innovative communities where students are inspired to learn about constructivist theory and apply this knowledge to their craft. Social constructivist theory (Vygotsky, 1978) posits that new learning grows out of prior knowledge and interactions with others. As students interact with classmates and instructors, they expand their understanding of both the new and the familiar.

Setting the stage for a robust and generative learning community, the authors turn to the founder of Bank Street, Lucy Sprague Mitchell (n.d.). Over a century ago, she wrote that education is the opportunity to build a better society. In the Bank Street credo, Mitchell wrote that in educating children, teachers, and ourselves, educators wanted to see "lively intellectual curiosities that turn the world into an exciting laboratory and keep one ever a learner," and "flexibility when confronted with change and ability to relinquish patterns that no longer fit the present" (bankstreet.edu). The authors believe that learners need to actively engage in interactions with teachers and peers in order to learn.

Nager and Shapiro (2007) wrote that Bank Street programs emphasize the development of teachers, integrating "processes of thinking, feeling, doing, and reflecting" (p. 7). This conceptualization is known as developmental-interaction, a pedagogical approach rooted in developmental psychology and progressive education. Shapiro and Nager (2000) explained:

[D]evelopmental-interaction...was named for its salient concepts: the changing patterns of growth, understanding, and response that characterize children and adults as they develop; and the dual meaning of interaction as, first, the interconnected spheres of thought and emotion, and, equally, the importance of engagement with the environment of children, adults, and the material world.

This coherent philosophy focuses on human development, interaction with the world of people and materials, building democratic community, and humanist values. It has an explicit purpose: to educate teachers and children within an educational frame which brings together concepts from dynamic and developmental psychologists, and progressive educational theorists and practitioners. (p. 5)

The developmental-interaction approach sees cognitive development as inseparable from the growth of personal and interpersonal processes (Nager & Shapiro, 2007). In the last few decades, understanding of learning has evolved, moving educators from a transmission approach to teaching toward learner-centered environments (Meier, 2015). In an online environment, we must not abandon this shift in our understanding of how students learn.

Engagement in Online Discussions

Researchers posed questions regarding the use of discussion boards and whether their use promotes or hinders engagement (Acolatse, 2016). Responding to discussion boards and posting assignments does not necessarily mean students were engaged with content, each other, or instructors. The authors' challenge was to build and grow an interactive online environment based on social constructivist learning theory. The authors grappled with the question: How do we transform discursive dialogue (a conversational back and forth) into a generative discourse (an engaged communal voice)? Helping students understand what it meant to engage in discourse was part of this challenge, and the authors did not separate this from building and deepening an understanding of content and building community. They are interconnected and interdependent.

What does it mean to create and support an engaged community of learners online? A common approach to student discussion online is instructor-created prompts to which students are expected to respond. Students are then required to comment on classmates' posts. To encourage discussion, instructors often provide students with prescriptive expectations for participation; for example, a directive to post a response and reply to the posts of at least two other classmates. Throughout the lifespan of the prompt, students participate in the discussion by following the directions of the instructor. How else can instructors assess participation and track attendance?

This structured experience has been a staple of online discussions since the inception of teaching and learning online. It continues to be accepted even as instructors and students confess that it does not allow for authentic and organic discourse. Following expectations by responding to prompts has the potential to produce perfunctory participation from students, who cross off online activity expectations as though attending to a checklist. It is this malaise surrounding the traditional online discourse that compelled the authors to create a new understanding for a more engaged and communal voice in the online classroom. It is also the authors' understanding that through the learning environment created and the activities in which students are engaged, instructors model and define for their students how to engage in the discourse of their discipline. In order to address this issue, the authors made the distinction between participation and engagement.

Defining Engagement

The meaning of engagement is often assumed in educational research and is rarely explicitly defined (Kahn, 2017, Trawler, 2010). The authors found it was important to focus on its specific meaning to describe learners' ways of relating to the educational experiences that Bank Street offers. Focusing on a narrower definition of engagement allowed the instructors to name and address core elements of progressive pedagogy in the online environment.

For this purpose, the authors defined engagement as a qualitative level of interaction with content, activities, and people that involves students' interests, curiosity, and passion. Engagement requires students to use their own ideas, understandings, and emotions in tasks that are meaningful to them and can result in powerful generative learning.

Trawler (2010), citing Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004), identifies three dimensions of student engagement:

- **Behavioral Engagement:** Where students comply with behavioral norms, such as attendance and involvement, and demonstrate the absence of disruptive or negative behavior.
- **Emotional Engagement:** Where students who engage emotionally experience affective reactions such as interest, enjoyment, and a sense of belonging to the community.
- **Cognitive Engagement:** Where students are invested in their learning and seek to go beyond the requirements, relishing challenge. (p. 5)

In distinguishing engagement from participation, the definition requires a level of emotional and cognitive involvement not necessarily present when students merely participate in online interactions. The authors' definition emphasizes trust of and responsibility to the community of online learners, which they believe are essential elements for learning. Instructors were able to observe engagement in online discussions by looking at the discourse created by the participants. Engaged discourse is a unique construction of knowledge by interactions of a group of individuals.

Reflective Practice and a Stance as Learners

Reflective practice is the key to engagement. If all learners are engaged in reflective practice, then all take stances as learners. When educators are provided with the opportunity to think critically about their own learning, and this learning is situated at the center of their practice, then a learner's stance that develops voice and agency can be nurtured. Taking a learner's stance makes our practice deeper and richer (Hummel, 2017). Bank Street believes that sound practice is grounded in a learner's stance. It is from these conceptions that Bank Street approached the initiatives of teaching in blended and online environments.

BANK STREET'S APPROACH TO GOING ONLINE

Bank Street states that the aim of progressive education is to nurture the creative, independent, and problem-solving talents of all learners by applying all available knowledge about learning and growth to the educational process (www.bankstreet.edu). Recognizing that instructors are the content experts, students also have experience to offer and can enhance learning while supporting their own growth and supporting the learning of their peers and instructors. The authors sought to create courses that reflect the practices of a democratic environment based on collaboration and the interdependence among content, instructors, students, the community, and the world. Additionally, it was important to inspire students to seek knowledge and develop as learners and theorists. As Palmer (2007) wrote, "To educate is to guide students on an inner journey toward more truthful ways of seeing and being in the world" (p. 120).

The goal was to create discussions, reflections, activities, and assignments that would create opportunities for students to thoughtfully engage within the classroom to stimulate growth (Lowry & Pinkney, 2016). Technology is then an instrument that can enhance learning, which changes the question from: What must students know by the end of the course; to: How do students learn and grow as independent thinkers and seekers of knowledge? Creating interactive courses that are not driven by the digital tools but by student learning forces the examination of what elements support the engaged generative discourse (Kelly, 2015).

Instructors discovered that decisions that are evident in on campus classrooms needed to be explicitly stated in the online environment. Implementing a universal template for all syllabi within a program,

rubrics for discussions, and describing the interactive expectations for assignments and activities supported more engaged student learning. When instructors and students shared an understanding of expectations from course to course, more time was available for students to engage with each other, the instructor, and the content. Creating a set of foundational definitions and developing a common layout for the structure of courses offered students an entry point for engagement with content, instructors, and each other within a program.

The Learning Environment

A major component of any online course is the learning management system (LMS). The particular learning environment used in this study, while not considered a traditional LMS, was Google Communities. The authors felt that this offered instructors and students opportunities to experiment with different methods of creating and demonstrating an interactive experience using narrative, videos, pictures, and drawings. It is imperative to note that any LMS becomes the interface among learners to make sense of interaction (Walker, Lindner, Pesl Murphrey, & Dooley, 2016).

When considering an LMS, one must think about the following questions: Are students presented with media choices for sharing ideas, resources, and presentations? Are there opportunities for students to collaborate and share insights, ideas, and questions in small and large groups? Does the LMS allow students with different learning needs and accommodations to easily access and contribute information? Does the LMS seamlessly allow opportunities for synchronous and asynchronous interactions between and among the instructor and students? Does the LMS allow for large and small group interactions with and without instructor presence? Do students have easy access to the LMS across all of their devices? As more schools provide distance education programs, how and where students engage with their coursework has expanded and continues to change.

When taking a stance as learners to teaching and designing online learning, instructors needed the systems to be flexible. An LMS that is open and works more as a hub than a container, where different tools can be linked and changed, serves the purpose of engagement more effectively than an LMS that is a toolbox with all the functionality already built in. An LMS that allows students to post and share ideas in an equal space with instructors, to work collaboratively in the evolution of the course, that invites students' voices (in any medium) is an LMS that supports engagement.

The Syllabus: A Living Document

There is something lost in translation when instructors attempt to use on campus syllabi interchangeably in an online program. The authors found that engagement was very much connected to being consistent with the expectations outlined in the various syllabi. It was essential for instructors to be clear about what they meant by engagement. It became necessary to define what was meant by discussions, and how discussions differed from activities and reflections. For students to embrace online learning, the consistency in syllabi can diminish various degrees of anxiety for students and instructors (Ge, Yamashiro & Lee, 2000).

By offering the syllabus as a living document rather than something static and immovable, the syllabus can serve to support engagement. In an effort to create coherence among the courses, the syllabi became documents that bridged information in on campus courses with the new information for online courses. Using the syllabus as a roadmap removed the guesswork for online expectations and empowered students to explore content and theory through engaged discussion.

Various Strategies for Online Engagement

Through iterations of research, reflection, and redesign, instructors identified different strategies that led to engagement, which included the structure of discussion and discussion guidelines, discussion rubrics, discussion roles, discussion prompts, and instructor presence and feedback.

The Structure of Discussion and Discussion Guidelines

Three types of interactions affect the experiences of students: 1. interactions with course content, 2. interactions with instructors, and 3. interactions with peers (Moore, 1989; Moore, 1993). Students are clearly looking for an opportunity to engage with their peers, instructor, and content in a way that deepens their engagement and knowledge of the field of study (Lowry & Pinkney, 2016). If the syllabus provides the consistency and clarity, and the LMS offers students flexibility, the discussion board should provide an opportunity for students to share information learned from previous courses, their own inquiries into topics of interest, and professional or personal experiences. Interaction with other learners is essential to engagement; thus, the discussion board becomes a design consideration that must offer students the flexibility to be part of a learning environment that is rich, engaging, and communal.

Instructors were still left wondering how to measure engagement while prescribing participation. Is a prescriptive design of the discussion truly a way to assess student engagement? Or are instructors only assessing participation? The directions for discussions in the syllabi (2016) explained: Discussions should occur during the entire course of the week. It is recommended that at least 1-2 posts occur Wednesday and 1-2 posts occur by Friday.

These guidelines required a minimum number of posts from students and allowed instructors to measure student participation in discussions. For many students the directive offered the framework they desired; a clear understanding of expectations based on number of posts and when to post. This freed them from worrying about if they were "doing it right." For example, a student in the Child Life Program End-of-Program Student Questionnaire (2017) wrote, "I think it was good to put an exact number for minimum of posts because it gave a framework."

However, for others, the prescription of quantity and timing was detrimental to their engagement. As students satisfied the requirement for participation, engagement diminished.

Another student in the Child Life Program End-of-Program Student Questionnaire (2017) wrote:

I think I tended to always post the required amount. And the 1-2 times by Wednesday and 1-2 times by Friday definitely hindered the flow of the conversation. You wanted to space out your posts so you could make the requirement, so even if you wanted to respond to someone's post that night you might wait so you could get your post for the next day. If the conversation was really great I would be willing to post more than what was required.

A possible strategy that focuses on engagement involves shifting the focus of the discussion guidelines from student participation to the product of the discussion, or the collaborative discourse. Discussion guidelines would then focus on the clear purpose of keeping the conversation going (Gallagher, 2006). Students would be supported to move from the focus on the number of requirements for posting and focus on the development of the shared discourse. When this happens, student engagement becomes visible.

The issue of measuring engagement continues to be an important conversation among faculty who teach online. For example, a student posted a substantive comment that generated discourse amongst the rest of the students for days, with students making multiple posts, continuing the dialogue, posing questions, and engaging with each other around the student's initial post. However, the student who made the initial post did not post again. Does that mean she was not engaged? Her post generated a lot of discourse. How would an instructor assess her engagement?

Discussion Rubrics

Using discussion rubrics can support engagement by making criteria explicit for students and instructors. Rubrics help students visualize what good participation looks like without giving a number of frequency of posts. Rubrics give instructors a tool for assessment of student actions that contribute to the learning community.

In on campus classrooms, generative discourse can be evident from the beginning of the class. Students can see and hear other students and the instructor engaging in discussions. In an online classroom, students are expected to immediately create interaction without having the experience of seeing or hearing generative online discourse. Furthermore, not all students have experience in creating and engaging in online discussions. Students were unsure of how to engage in discussion and were unsure of the expectations of each instructor. Providing a rubric for discussions that was consistent across all courses supported students in knowing the expectations for discussions. This led to a deeper understanding of what engagement looks like and provided the structure for more organic dialogue. When given the opportunity to develop and explore complex issues, students were able to ruminate and share ideas within a community that fostered discussion and deep reflection. "I liked to see how the conversation developed, and my viewpoint changed while learning new facts and information," said a student as she explained how she "listened" to the thoughts of others, analyzed and synthesized new information, and built her understanding of the material while scaffolding new knowledge (Lowry & Pinkney-Ragsdale, 2016). The rubric made the criterion for discussion transparent.

Discussion Roles

Providing roles as a way to co-create generative discourse offered a way for students to engage with each other. Most students in an on campus course are comfortable with the small and large group flow of discussions, the give-and-take that leads to engagement. In online classrooms, students do not experience the immediate response, facial cues, or the highs and lows of a conversation. The roles create an entry point for students by encouraging them to include additional resources, clarify or ask a question, provide an example from their practice, validate and expand upon other students' comments, all in an effort to expand and further the discussion and deepen the learning. Hummel and Goss (2015) identified four possible roles that students can take on as they pursue online discourse: 1. validating, 2. being resourceful, 3. inquiring critically, and 4. expanding the community.

The first role is validating, which recognizes the contributions of others and explains why the contribution is valuable beyond what the original post already stated. Often a student participates in the discussion by acknowledging agreement or validates another student's post. This can be an acceptable way to enter into the dialogue. However, statements such as "Good idea," or "I agree with what you said," is not considered engagement. It may demonstrate the student has read through the discussion but

has not provided any evidence of understanding. In playing the validating role, a student recognizes a previous student's ideas and goes on to add new information and insights.

A second role is being resourceful, which requires sharing or creating resources that contribute or expand the discussion. An example from the Child Development course (2016) was the following post offered by a student: "As we talked about the struggles and thoughts of parents, this article came to mind. It provides another poignant perspective on presence and strength in parenting." In this example, the student offers a resource that supports her classmates to think more deeply about parents' perspectives. When students share resources with the group, students become shapers of the course and take ownership of their learning.

A third role is inquiring critically, which requires students to offer feedback by way of asking questions, or providing reflections or connections that support the ongoing discussion. In this role, students take an authentic learner's stance to ideas offered by their classmates. Inquiring supposes a genuine curiosity about the post that encourages further reflection.

The fourth and final role is expanding the community, which leads the community to a deeper discourse by offering other ideas that transcend the explicit content of the course. This role allows students to bring ideas from their practice and offer other contexts for these ideas. In an example from a Child Development course (2017), a student offers this expansion:

This discussion also has me thinking about the different parenting styles. We have seen the correlation between certain styles and areas like social skills, emotion regulation and even self-esteem in the long run. I wonder how that gets complicated during adolescence especially since often there is a shift in terms of how parents approach their teen?

And a student's response:

Great point about parenting styles. When we talked about that [in our previous course], the various styles of parenting did have an impact on children's behavior that [could possibly] translate into adolescent and emerging adult [behaviors]. I think parents need to recognize the importance of the peer relationship and not try to take away the peer involvement but model appropriate positive decisions and choices that work towards a positive self-concept.

This example demonstrates how the conversation between students can deepen the discourse, each bringing in a new element to be discussed further. There is no correct answer, but deep reflection demonstrated in their questions, considerations of information learned in previous courses, and applications of knowledge they are learning currently.

Discussion Prompts

Prompts are questions or ideas that cue students on how to enter a discussion. They often look like long lists of questions to be answered rather than inspirations for students to share their thoughts. Prompts that are lists of questions based on material provided by the instructor might compel students to answer each question to prove they read the material. The discussion board then becomes a series of disconnected posts all saying the same thing. Prompts should cultivate a learner's stance for students. Creating discussion board prompts plays a key role in promoting online discourse. A prompt that promotes

reflection on existing knowledge as well as incorporating new information requires learners to reflect upon what they know and how they have come to learn what they know (Du, Yu, & Olinzock, 2011). In the following prompt used in a Child Life course (2016), students were asked to review a video and respond with one word or image to describe the interaction in the video. Students were also asked to explain why they chose their word or image and they had to also respond to a classmate's post. One student responded by validating another student's post and went on to deepen the discourse by offering another perspective through her word choice:

I also felt the same sense of nurturing from these parents. From the offering of towels for warmth, to holding hands, and even humor at the end, these parents were fully present and there for their child.

An additional word I might choose is "unknown." I chose this word based on the sense of weary desperation in the parents' voices. There were also times when a parent commented, "He has never done that before." and "It's getting worse." Along with their clear and appropriate care, there was definitely also a strong sense of fearful nerves related to their unknown.

Another student responded by asking questions:

Now that I rewatched the video, it seemed to me that the parents were starting to become more anxious about halfway through. During this second time, a question came to mind: Does the parents talking to Slate throughout the seizure help him in any way?

The exchange above demonstrates the reflective practice needed for engaged discussion. Students are not only examining their own experience when watching the video but also placing themselves in the position of the parents and the child. When students are able to offer their own reflections to the content, it leads to deeper learning. By actively engaging the learners and nurturing ownership of knowledge ensures that learning transcends the classroom (Du, Yu, & Olinzock, 2011). In one of the online feedback forms used to assess courses, a student (2016) responded with the following comment about the above prompt and discussion that followed:

Not only did I learn a lot from the class discussion, I learned a lot about myself by watching the (assigned) video. I was nervous to click play on that video because I was afraid of my reaction to watching a child having a seizure. Then I read and participated in the discussion and was able to go back and look at the video again from a more informed perspective.

Instructor Presence and Feedback

In on campus classrooms students physically see their instructor, the nods of the head, the verbal acknowledgments, and guiding questions that propel a discussion forward. This presence offers students a clear signal they are on the right track as they engage with the content. How do students in an online format get that same acknowledgment? Progressive pedagogy supports creating space for the development of students' own ideas. But students do not see the instructor's curious eyes as they risk their thoughts in online discussions so how can they know instructors are listening?

The authors continue to struggle with presence and feedback. Too much feedback would direct the conversation and create the impression that the student only needs to respond to the instructor. Too little feedback or inconsistent feedback and students might think, why bother? Instructors developed strategies that allowed for student voices to emerge while simultaneously letting students know they were paying attention to the discussions. For example, instructors used weekly wrap-up videos to pull together themes, ideas, and lingering questions. The wrap-up videos were often used to provide further instruction or a resource on a topic that had been previously discussed. If discussions lagged or got too far off topic, instructors would model the discussion roles and interject a question, provide a resource, or model how they engage personally with the topics by sharing their stories. In the course assessment form, a student (2016) commented:

Different questions would be prompted usually during group discussions or reflections in order to bring in a different approach or view. This would help us to realize who or what we were forgetting in our original idea and who we had to focus on.

In another course assessment form, another student (2017) offered this perspective:

I appreciated when instructors interacted in our group discussions, asked questions, and engaged with my group's [discussion by posting]. I also really enjoyed the professor's videos during the week and wrap up videos because they helped to deepen my learning from the readings.

In mindfully pacing their posts, professors challenge learners to see their own voices as equal to the professor's and important to the health of the community (Hummel & Goss, 2015). Allowing time for students to contemplate and respond, the instructor steps into the discourse as an equal participant.

CONCLUSION AND QUESTIONS MOVING FORWARD

In this chapter, it was the intention of the authors to develop strategies that fostered student engagement by examining their online pedagogy. The authors found that common prescriptive guidelines for online discussions failed to support and sustain engagement, and realized they needed to focus on their understanding of engagement in order to design elements that support the goal of engaged discourse.

A metaphor that illustrates this way of learning is rhizomatic learning. Others have explored this metaphor in the past (Cormier, 2011; Reilly, 2011). A rhizome is a plant that grows roots from new shoots as it grows, spreading in multiple directions, and forming a natural network with no clear center, beginning, or end. Its structure is not hierarchical and has no defined direction of growth and is always in the process of development. While this metaphor works well with our understanding of learning, the authors are still grappling with balancing the need of some students for structure and an open-ended approach to content. Supporting a student-centered online classroom requires the course to be open to the needs, interests, and questions from the entire group. Rhizomatic learning offers the possibility of discourse that removes hierarchically imposed predetermined directions in order to remain open to the development of meaning and content by individuals in the course.

Bank Street's pedagogical tenets provided the foundation for the development of Bank Street's online courses. In distinguishing between participation and engagement, the authors were able to develop structure and consistency that align with their progressive pedagogy.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Democratic Environment: A learning environment in which all voices and ideas are heard regardless of the speaker's position in that environment.

Humanist Teaching and Learning: Teaching and learning that is characterized and based on the humanist values of dignity and the pursuit of knowledge.

Interactive Courses: Courses based on a principle of student engagement, which requires a balance between student and teacher voices. Students and teachers are equally engaged in learning.

Learner's Stance: To take a learner's stance is to position oneself as a learner in order to think deeply and creatively about one's own practice. It is to authentically embrace one's own disequilibrium, acknowledging that there is always more to learn.

Reflective Practice: The approach to teaching where educators create intentional opportunities for thinking critically about their practice and their own learning with the purpose of continually growing and developing their pedagogy.

Student Voice: A student's ideas and thoughts are central to the evolution of the learning and curriculum. Student voice can be expressed both collectively and individually, and plays an essential role in the development of the course.