Discussion Board Boredom? Creating an Engaging Online Course

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Abstract
Student engagement is a challenge in the traditional classroom setting but even more so in an
online course. Outdated, passive learning strategies have to be replaced with active learning
strategies. This paper focuses on three keys to increasing student engagement in an online
course; creating an online community, providing a variety of assignments, and focusing on
challenging the student.

Introduction
The use of online instruction in higher education has taken off in the last decade. A survey found
that 89% of four-year public colleges and universities and 60% of four-year private schools offer
online classes (Parker, Lenhart, Moore, & Pew, 2011). Students are seeking and utilizing online
courses for their convenience and access. But just because 46% of college graduates (Parker, et
al., 2011) have taken an online course, it does not mean that they are adequately prepared to be
successful in the online format. And guess what? Neither are their instructors! One study looked
at self-reported efficacy of online instructors and 53% of participants reported low or medium
computer skills and rated themselves the lowest in fostering online student engagement (Horvitz,
Beach, Anderson, & Xia, 2015). Another survey of online instructors found that 100% of
respondents considered student engagement a challenge regardless of the number of years they
have been teaching online (Khan, Egbue, Palkie, & Madden, 2017). Despite feelings that student
engagement is a concern, a majority of online instructors do not pursue active learning strategies
and admit to relying on a traditional lecture method for online courses (Khan et al., 2017). This
means that most online instructors are recording lecture notes to accompany their slides and
giving tests over the content. This is not an engaging online course! Neither is posting a
discussion board assignment with the prompt: "Read chapter 4 and summarize the key concepts
of the chapter." So why do instructors continue to use this format?

Instructors believe that their students are engaged in traditional lecture methods delivered online
(Khan et al., 2017) and this is because instructors are making assumptions about their online
students. Three major assumptions about online learners have been identified: learners have
acquired the learning strategies to work through the online learning component, learners have
acquired the knowledge to learn from the online learning component; and learners have acquired

the attitudes that enable them to use these strategies and knowledge confidently, flexibly, appropriately and independently of the instructor (Lim, 2004).

Assuming that students have the skills to navigate the online "classroom" can cause the students considerable frustration and cognitive overload. Where do they find support when they have technical issues? How do they find tools on the learning platform? Do they know how to work through a module and submit their assignments? How do they contact the instructor if they have questions? All of these questions should be addressed by the instructor at the start of the class to reduce students' stress over navigating the online format. If too much effort is involved in seeking support or trying to submit assignments, students are less likely to be engaged in the course (Lim, 2004). Instructors should consider creating a brief video that shows students where all of the essential tools and support can be found on the learning platform and give clear information regarding contacting the instructor.

The second assumption, learners have acquired the knowledge to learn from the online learning component, is a dangerous assumption both in the traditional classroom setting and an online course (Lim, 2004). This assumes that the learner has all of the foundational knowledge that they need to successfully integrate new information into their education. Instructors can help online students draw a connection between old and new information by providing "warm-up" activities or assignments that review information from the previous week and show them how it will connect them to the next chapter or module. Drawing that connection may seem obvious to the instructor but without the face-to-face interaction it is harder to gauge if students have successfully mastered last week's materials and are ready to build upon that knowledge.

Lastly, online instructors assume that learners have acquired the attitudes that enable them to use these strategies and knowledge confidently, flexibly, appropriately and independently of the instructor (Lim, 2004). There is an expectation by students that they can watch a lecture once and retain all of the information needed to be successful. This attitude is unfortunately supported by instructors who only use the traditional lecture format in their online courses. It sends the message that watching a lecture, passively learning, is enough to pass the class but is that enough to actually learn? Probably not.

Now that we have an understanding of some of the assumptions made about online learners, how do we use that information to create a more engaging online course that promotes active learning and real retention of knowledge? Through my personal experience, I have found three key components for a successful, engaging, and beneficial online course; creating a community, providing a variety of assignments, and challenging the students.

Creating a Community Online
One of the most important strategies to help develop best practice in online learning courses is to develop a community (Khan et al., 2017). Apart from making a clear statement about expectations regarding interaction and contribution for both students and the instructor, it is vital that assignments are geared towards the creation of your online community. An example of an assignment that can help students feel more connected to one another is a welcome video. This is a great first assignment to follow up to the instructor's welcome video where they introduce themselves and show the students the basics of navigating the learning platform. Students can

record a brief introduction video that includes who they are, what they want to learn from the class, and a fun fact or two about themselves. To even further this assignment, students can be required to respond to two of their classmates' videos just to engage a little bit and acknowledge each other. This helps students get a feel for who they are going to be interacting with in discussions and group assignments.

Another way instructors can help students feel more connected is to create a forum that is simply a "Q&A" area for students to ask questions about anything in the course. Sometimes students forget where to find a support tool, are having technical difficulties, they aren't understanding the assignment instructions and need clarification, they want to bounce an idea off of their peers. Whatever the case may be, this area allows for ungraded discussion and support and helps the students feel more connected to their peers and their instructor. This also doubles as a valuable tool for the instructor as it enables them to see what the students are asking each other, where instructions need clarification, and where students are having trouble so they can address these issues as they arise instead of waiting for midterm or end of course evaluations.Instructors need to provide multiple ways of interacting with students to create their own social presence which the literature confirms is an integral component to a successful online course.This can be accomplished by offering a live "Q&A" through an synchronous chat feature to provide a real-time review session (Kirk, 2019). Courses that have multiple ways of interacting with the instructor are proven to have higher student engagement (Dixson, 2010).

An instructor can establish their presence by providing weekly "check-in" announcement emails or videos. This can be a great way to start each week by reviewing last week's content and how it will link to this week's information. This is also a good time to acknowledge any recurring themes from the previous week whether it was everyone did a great job with the assignments or there was an area that several students struggled with. Acknowledging these trends show the students that you are spending time looking at their work and are invested in their understanding of the content and you are flexible to change content as needed based off of student results and feedback.

Lastly, be an active participant! It is recommended that instructors contribute at least 10% of discussion postings. Research studies have shown that in discussion boards where the instructors are more involved, learners respond with more enthusiasm and regular participation (Lim, 2004). If you find your discussion boards lacking in quality or depth of responses, you will probably be surprised at how quickly that can be remedied once you insert yourself into the discussion. Student contributions dramatically increase in both quality and quantity when they know the instructor is actively participating and essentially monitoring the discussion post throughout the week rather than just grading the end product.

Variety of Assignments
I think this is where instructors are at a bit of a loss on how to design and implement authentic and engaging assignments that also meet their course objectives. It is certainly easier for the instructor to make lecture slides and assign an automatically graded quiz and call it a day. Being authentic takes time, trial and error, revamping, and an understanding that some of your ideas may end up being a flop. Aiming for less content that may send students into content-overload,

try using a variety of methods to deliver course content, and an emphasis on projects, case studies, experiential learning and other forms of engaging assignments (Kirk 2019).

Authentic activities have the capability to motivate and encourage learner participation by facilitating learners' engagement with the instructional message (Lim, 2004). But what is an authentic assignment? This will vary by discipline, but authentic activities include activities that are based on real situations and simulation models that focus on applying new knowledge and skills (Lim, 2004). My background is in athletic training and health sciences so for my students, designing assignments or tasks that center on patient care and interprofessional education with a variety of healthcare providers is the overall focus. These types of assignments can include virtual laboratories for anatomy, video case studies where students critique the assessing clinician's performance, or having students post videos of themselves demonstrating special tests for specific body regions. Reverse case studies are another great online assignment that get the students to engage with each other outside of a discussion board. I break students up into groups and present them with a concussion patient describing the mechanism of injury. It is the group's responsibility to invent realistic signs and symptoms the patient may exhibit and how they would proceed with an evaluation based on those signs and symptoms. The goal of these assignments is to make the task as real and applicable to their professional development as possible.

Other more generalized ideas for assignment variety include students receiving a topic and creating narrated slide presentations on their topic as if they are teaching the topic to the class. Students can be required to create a visual representation of a specific statistic. For my Intro to Healthcare Systems students this could be creating a pie chart that depicts a health disparity, perhaps rates of heart disease among different ethnic groups. This allows the students to take the general information presented in the chapter and do their own research on a topic that interests them or pertains to their field. Infographics are another way for students to link information presented and have the opportunity to put their own stamp on the assignment. Infographics are designed to be eye-catching and summarizing so it is a fantastic method for students to assess the key concepts of the chapter and present it in an interesting and concise format. Assignments that are personalized and based on the student's interests, hometowns, backgrounds, experiences, also limits the ability for students to cheat or copy since these factors cannot be duplicated (Kirk, 2019).

If you must do a discussion board, there are ways to make this process beneficial for the students. Discussion board forums can be engaging and meaningful if certain guidelines are followed. First, participation expectations must be clearly identified and stated. My basic discussion board requirements state that students must post their original post by Wednesday and they are required to respond to two classmates by Sunday. This gives ample time for discussion and follow-up posts. It is hard to have a discussion on meaningful concepts in a few short hours before the assignment is due. Participation requirements are absolutely vital to the success of discussion boards because it ensures that there is adequate discussion, feedback, alternate opinions, and learning taking place.

An important guideline for instructors is to have a very clearly stated prompt. What do you want students to discuss? What is the most important concept for them to grasp this week? Ask a specific question or two that students should focus on. Can you tie in one of your authentic

assignments and ask them how they applied another group's information? And as stated before, instructor participation is critical to enhancing the quality and quantity of student engagement and participation in discussion boards. Just think how much more effort you would give in an online discussion board if you knew the instructor would comment and maybe even ask you a follow-up question throughout the week rather than just giving you a grade at the end of the discussion.

Challenging the Student
This last truth about creating an online course may shock some instructors; but yes, your students want to be challenged! Students are investing time and money into their education and taking an online class should be worth just as much of those two valuable resources as a traditional class. I was very surprised reading through my first midterm student feedback surveys that a number of students said they actually wanted more challenging assignments! This is when I realized that I needed to create those authentic assignments that translated to real-life experiences and prepare them for their future profession more than any automatically graded quiz ever could.

Put yourself in the student's shoes for a moment. If your online class was the same every week; a narrated lecture, a graded quiz, and a discussion board asking you to summarize the chapter for 15 weeks would you look forward to the class? Would you feel that it was a valuable use of your time and money? Would walk away feeling like that class adequately prepared you for the next step in your education? Probably not. Students who said they were highly challenged by their courses "were more likely to engage in a variety of effective educational practices," (Mathews 2015). When you aren't sure what the next week's module will include you are eager, (dare I say) excited, to log in and see what the new assignment will be. This is what keeps students engaged in an online class. We have to substitute variety and challenge to make up for the fact that we do not have face-to-face interactions, cannot play off of visual cues and student reactions, or display our passion for the subject in person.

There is increasing concern that online classes are not maintaining let alone increasing in academic rigor over the years. (Keating, 2015). Online instructors need to set the expectation with students that they will be asked to step outside their comfort zone and incentivize work that encourages them to do so (Bell & Murphy, 2019). Academic rigor can be maintained in an online classroom by creating assignments that target complex ideas and concepts and requiring students to reflect on their own understanding (Bell & Murphy, 2019). Rigor is that which leads a student to the understanding, knowledge, applications, skills, and competencies that are required for academic success, regardless of whether the student is sitting in a classroom or before a computer screen (Keating, 2015).

Conclusion

If you are an instructor for an online class and you feel unprepared or uncertain that you are structuring the course "correctly," take comfort in the fact that you are not alone. A majority of online instructors, even those with years of experience teaching online, are unsure of how to integrate new and active learning strategies to students they cannot see. The first step to gaining confidence in your online instructing is to identify and remediate any of the previously mentioned assumptions that you may have about online learners. Many instructors are unaware

of these assumptions and the negative impact that they can have on their students' success in the course. The biggest assumption that you must overcome is that your online learners are engaged in the traditional lecture style delivery of content. This style is hard enough to successfully execute in the traditional classroom setting and nearly impossible to pull off in an online course, that is if you care about your students learning and retaining the information.

Doing away with traditional lectures and stale discussion board prompts and replacing them with authentic and engaging assignments that are catered towards your discipline is vital for student learning. It will take time, creativity, and even collaboration to design assignments that are intended to give the students an experience rather than just a grade. Start by thinking about what skills, activities, or qualities do professionals in your discipline utilize or possess and then design activities that would allow students to develop those components. Be prepared to altar, revamp, or even toss out an assignment idea that didn't pan out. This process can be frustrating and time-consuming but once you get assignments and activities that are successful you will find that your students are much more engaged and enthusiastic in their participation.

Remember, challenge = engagement. Taking an online course should not be synonymous with being easier than taking a class in the traditional classroom setting. Every course a student takes should be a meaningful experience that gives them a new layer of knowledge to carry into the next step of their education or into their career.

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