

**FACULTY FOCUS**

**Special Report**

**Online Student Engagement  
Tools and Strategies**

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IDEAS FOR EFFECTIVE ONLINE INSTRUCTION

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# Online Student Engagement Tools and Strategies

Most online students, even those who are successful, will tell you it takes an extra dose of motivation to stay on top of their assignments compared to the traditional classroom. In fact, the anytime/anywhere convenience of online learning sometimes makes it too convenient ... to procrastinate, forget about, and become otherwise disengaged. No wonder online courses have an attrition rate that's 10 – 20 percent higher than their face-to-face counterparts.

For faculty teaching in the online classroom, this reality underscores the importance of having activities that build student engagement and help create a sense of community among their geographically dispersed students.

***Online Student Engagement Tools and Strategies*** features 11 articles pulled from the pages of *Online Classroom* and provides practical advice from online instructors who recognize the value of engagement and its role in student retention and success.

Here are just a few of the articles you will find in this report:

- Engaging Students with Synchronous Methods in Online Courses
- Indicators of Engagement in the Online Classroom
- Teaching Online With Error: A Tried and True Mini-Guide to Engaging Online Students
- Engage Online Learners with Technology: A Free Tool Kit
- Promoting Student Participation and Involvement in Online Instruction: Suggestions from the Front

In short, this special report explains how adjustments in tone, technology, teaching presence and organization can bring positive changes to student learning.

Mary Bart  
Editor  
*Faculty Focus*

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# Engaging Students with Synchronous Methods in Online Courses

By Michael Scheuermann, Ph.D.

When describing online courses or programs, “Anytime-Anywhere” is, for some, a marketing phrase used to entice students to consider enrolling. Unfortunately, that very phrase also eliminates the opportunity for online facilitators to include mandatory (or even optional) synchronous course elements and strategies in their teaching and learning initiatives.

Over the past decade, I have found that required and graded synchronous course elements have, in fact, heightened the learning experience by engaging students in a meaningful manner. Further, it has provided me with an additional mechanism whereby I can judge student performance.

During that same time frame, as an administrator in higher ed, my colleagues and I have been providing instructional technology support to faculty and found that four myths have seemed to surface. They characterize, generally, how many educators view synchronous elements in online courses. They are:

1. “Anytime-Anywhere” is the way that online learning needs to be!
2. “I will never be able to get my students together for any synchronous online chat sessions!”
3. “My students will either think it is impossible to do chat sessions—or they will not find any value in them anyway.”
4. “By the way—conducting online chat sessions will be too much work for me!”

These *myths* have also been voiced by various colleagues and practitioners whenever the *synchronous* topic arose during higher ed conferences and other events where practitioners and support personnel would gather and exchange fresh and meaningful insights. Quite often, these conversations center on the value found in various learning management system (LMS) features and functions, online chat among them, of course.

Since the spring quarter of the 2000–2001 academic year, I have included mandatory, graded, synchronous elements

in online graduate courses. While teaching as an adjunct professor in different programs, during the most recent five years I have gathered both qualitative and quantitative student data relative to the value they found in our online chat sessions. I have examined this data, discussed it with colleagues, presented it at myriad conferences, and attempted to determine whether the data refutes or supports *The Myths*.

To date, the evidence indicates that online students (and course facilitators alike) overwhelmingly find considerable value in synchronous course elements. Over time, between 70 and 100 percent of enrolled students, on a course-by-course basis, have stated that I should retain the online chat sessions in future offerings of my courses, that is, not make the course completely asynchronous where “Anytime-Anywhere” prevails.

In order to gather the qualitative data from my online students, at the end of the last chat session in each online course, I ask them four questions. This is one of them:

“Should I eliminate these chat sessions in future offerings of this course and make them completely asynchronous?”

Here are just a few examples of their (verbatim) responses:

*“NO!! Please do not eliminate these online chat sessions. This is a great way to garner everyone’s thoughts, comments, opinions, expertise, and examples of how principles in this course are applied in real-world situations. I look forward to these sessions.”*

*“No, I like the chats. It makes me feel like I am in a more interactive environment, like I am in a classroom setting rather than 100 percent online.”*

*“No, keep these chats; they are very beneficial to the class and learning experience. They bring a personal feel to this virtual class.”*

So for my colleagues and others, the question is: What are some of the mechanisms that can be brought to bear in order to get to this level of usefulness, engagement, and enhanced learning? Some of the best practices that have surfaced include:

- Gaining programmatic support for required and graded synchronous elements in online courses
- Employing a ramp-up strategy for using online chat
  - Holding online office hours as an initial foray into the use of synchronous elements

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- o Advancing to optional (makeup or extra credit) sessions with online students
- o Introducing one or two mandatory synchronous sessions per course
- o Broadening the required use of online chat elements across the academic term
- Communicating strategies ahead of time to the enrolled students
- Ensuring success from the instructor's and the program's perspectives
- Setting the students up for success in using synchronous chat
- Establishing and publishing the schedule, early, for synchronous elements in online courses
- Regulating group size in each online chat session
- Communicating the chat session details to students
- Setting up guidelines for students relative to the synchronous sessions
- Scheduling practice sessions—ahead of the actual ones, which I will grade
- Familiarizing students (and any co-instructors) with the online chat interface
- Deciding which chat room features and functions add value—and which do not—relative to the learning (i.e., academic objectives)
- Launching online sessions effectively
- Conducting actual online sessions in a synchronous manner that are engaging and meaningful
- Winding up synchronous sessions effectively
- Soliciting student feedback relative to synchronous online elements
- Modifying one's pedagogical construct going forward

Much of the above has been garnered from:

- Experience in facilitating online courses
- Receiving feedback from students
- Discussing this approach with colleagues
- Attending related sessions at higher ed conferences
- Networking with vendors that develop synchronous applications for online programs

Regardless of the feature or function we discuss with regard to online teaching and learning, when we make informed choices and focus on effective instructional design, our methods will align with our academic objectives. If synchronous online course elements enable educators to meet those objectives, it behooves us to utilize them. When all participants can enjoy heightened levels of engagement, learn in meaningful and effective

ways, and discover yet another methodology with which to demonstrate (and assess) learning, we should take advantage of it—and leave the marketing phrases and taglines to the marketers.

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## Enabling: A Strategy for Improving Learning

*By Teresa K. Dail, Ph.D.*

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Technology enables students to connect with each other, the instructor, and the content. However, distractions—in the form of real-time electronic conversations and a barrage of dozens of commercial and personal interjections—can be omnipresent. Perhaps the online instructor needs to provide his/her own steady stream of engagement that can serve to interrupt (at least temporarily) the flow of extraneous information that competes for both time and focus.

A simple, but often-overlooked solution is to require students to submit work on a daily/weekly basis. Assignments that tie reading to the application of material are a standard part of pedagogy, but far too often we presume that this connection will be made without providing a structure. We assume that college students are mature enough as learners to automatically connect the dots. Certainly some students are, but many—especially those who are first-generation college students—lack the sophistication to employ a holistic approach to their own learning.

What types of practical, out-of-class assignments are needed? Certainly, some of the work can be rote; there is no substitution for quality repetition. Many texts now come with test banks that can easily be uploaded into Blackboard or course management systems. Quizzes that reinforce vocabulary and principles, once set up, can be required at least once a week.

At least part of the assignments should, however, connect the reading with previously covered material in an analytical way. The idea of creating a thread is not

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unlike that of online blogs in which a person's history becomes part of the present context. For maximal learning, this threaded learning should be consistent (daily) and predictable. These threads can be part of a small discussion board or blog group and can contain material that connects assigned reading to classroom activities (lectures, labs, etc.).

The completion and submission of daily assignments seems like such an obvious practical strategy, but many instructors just do not require this. The reasons are obvious: assignments demand assessment, and of course, assessment requires time. The key ingredient, therefore, is to design assignments that are easy to grade (multiple-choice questions can require analytical thinking) but challenging.

Step two in the thread is creating a daily in-class assessment. This works well as a bonus-points opportunity and when presented precisely at the class start time, provides an incentive for students to get to class and to be there on time. These assessments are brief (three to four carefully crafted multiple-choice questions will suffice), and they include material from the reading as well as the homework. Therefore, if the student did the out-of-class assignment/reading, he/she would likely score well on the in-class assessment.

I am familiar with the arguments against this approach. Teachers are already spread thin with research expectations, grant procurement, advising, and committee work. I submit, however, that this strategy takes careful planning on the front end but can produce remarkable results on the back end. An instructor will rarely get to mid-terms or to the end of the semester thinking, "What went wrong?" or "Why does the performance of my students not meet expectations?"

The feedback that comes from daily assessment can serve two important purposes. First, the instructor gains insight into how the students, both individually and collectively, are doing in the course. Second, and most important, the student can see tangible evidence of how he/she is performing. To reiterate, the incorrect assessment of one's own learning can be a strong detriment to monitoring and altering one's own learning habits.

In conclusion, it is natural to find ourselves thinking, "Students aren't self-motivated" or "Students should be mature enough to direct their own learning" or even, "Students just don't care". The truth is that a small percentage of students will take ownership of their education without intervention, but many more will not. This does not mean that the other students can't do the work or that they don't care. It merely reflects competitions for their

time that override the requirements that we as teachers lay out. A return to carefully planned and consistent assignments and assessments can lead to impressive rewards, when it counts.

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## The Importance of Teaching Presence in an Online Course

*By Credence Baker, Ph.D., Staci L. Taylor*

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### What is teaching presence?

Think back to your most inspiring and influential teacher. What did she or he provide for you as a student that so effectively engaged you in learning? Can those inspirational traits actually translate in an online learning environment to bridge the transactional distance between learner and instructor? Research tells us that they can, through the deliberate assertion of "Teaching Presence" (Arbaugh & Hwang, 2006; Nippard & Murphy, 2007; Russo & Benson, 2005; Shea et al., 2006). An instructor is perceived as "present" in the online classroom when "visible" to the student. In other words, the student knows the instructor is attending to and participating in the class. In this article, we'll tell you why teaching presence is important and how it can be assessed, and we'll give you strategies for increasing teaching presence in your own online class.

### Why is teaching presence important?

Research studies surrounding teaching presence in the online learning environment have shown that it is associated with increased affect and motivation. (Baker, 2009; Russo & Benson, 2005; Wise et al., 2004). There is also considerable correlational evidence to suggest that teaching presence in an online course is an important factor for

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fostering a sense of classroom community (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000; Shea et al., 2006). Importantly, several studies have positively correlated teaching presence with successful student learning, the ultimate goal of education (Anderson et al., 2001; Baker, 2009; Richardson & Swan, 2003; Shea et al., 2003).

### Assessing your teaching presence

A widely accepted and validated instrument for measuring teaching presence is the Teaching Presence Scale (Shea et al., 2006). It is designed to measure the perception of students based on the three teaching presence constructs of course design, facilitating discourse, and direct instruction, and is anchored on a seven-point scale ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. Using this instrument, you can evaluate students' perceptions of your own teaching presence to make adjustments for improvement.

### Improving your teaching presence

In an online course, asserting teaching presence requires intentional preparation and action on your part in terms of the design, facilitation, and direction of learning. For example, before your course even commences, you can infuse presence by building in personalized graphics, using pictures or avatars, developing a "welcome" video, establishing a "virtual hallway" discussion forum, and designing content with personalized anecdotes (the same type of "stories" or examples you use in your face-to-face classes to supplement content). This development phase of the course is the perfect time to deliberately assess the structure, evaluation, and interaction components of the course. Moreover, it is during this phase that instructors can design explicit and transparent expectations for classroom "norms" and coordinate learning activities so that learners feel in sync with the rest of the class. All these techniques will ensure the infusion of teaching presence in the design of your course.

Once the course commences, it is important for you to maintain the interest, motivation, and engagement of students in both synchronous and asynchronous learning by establishing effective patterns of interaction from the very beginning. A construct from the communications field provides us with a framework for interacting with students that involves addressing students by name, initiating discussions, asking probing questions, using humor, using self-disclosure, responding quickly and frequently, praising others publicly and privately, and conveying attentiveness (Mehrabian, 1971). These communication strategies can be used as you model appropriate etiquette and effective use

of the tools in the learning environment.

While providing direct instruction in either content or synchronous learning activities, it is important to use strategies that you probably already use in your own face-to-face courses. That is, to focus the discussion on specific issues, diagnose possible misconceptions, inject knowledge from diverse sources (including your own personal experiences), and summarize the discussion at its conclusion (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001).

Using the tools you already know to improve your teaching presence

As an online instructor, you are likely familiar with some of the basic tools inherent in using any learning management system (LMS). Whether you use Blackboard, Desire2Learn, Angel, or another system, fundamental tools such as announcements, email, and the discussion/whiteboard are some of the features your LMS likely has that can be used to reach out to your students on a daily basis.

Some other tools that your LMS may have for you to use in order to connect with your students are chat and instant message. These tools might be called "Who's Online," "Pronto," or "Communicator" in your current LMS. These chat and instant message features allow you to use synchronous communication to assert teaching presence both in your content expertise and for accessibility to students (e.g., using it for online office hours or scheduled appointments). Some instructors even log in to their chat or instant message tools whenever they are in the office for answering just-in-time student questions or problems. Your frequent use of these basic communication tools is a great way to ensure that students will feel more connected to you and your class.

### Using other technologies and techniques to improve your teaching presence

Besides the fundamental tools inherent to most LMSs, there are also other (sometimes third-party) tools that you can use to assert teaching presence. Some of these options are free, and some you or your institution can purchase. One option is to add audio or video lectures into your course through the use of free, downloadable Audacity software or with the microphone and sound recorder that come with most computers.

Another option for computer screen simulations or voice-over presentations is to use Camtasia, Jing, or Captivate. These programs will record your screen and allow you to capture audio to go along with the video. Camtasia and Jing are both produced by TechSmith, while Captivate is offered by Adobe. Camtasia and Captivate cost approxi-

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mately \$150-\$200 per individual license, while Jing is free; the downside to Jing is that your video must be shorter than five minutes. Some useful applications for establishing teaching presence with these screen and audio recorders are course orientations to walk students through the layout of your online course, demonstrating difficult math or economic problems (more useful if you have a tablet), and answering quick questions that your students might have about your course or an assignment.

Last, video options where students actually get to see and hear you speaking are a great way to add teaching presence in an online course. Some options to add video in your course could be utilizing the recording rooms of your campus instructional technology department. A simpler video solution would be to use a Flip cam. Flip cams allow you to make videos on demand and then upload them straight to your course via YouTube/TeacherTube. These videos could be used as reminders for assignments, to give a weekly update, or to inform students about something that pertains to the class. Another idea is for you to take videos in your own personal setting (in your home, at the office, or even on vacation) to share with your students.

For more information on technologies and techniques for establishing teaching presence, please visit our blog at <http://teachingonlinecourses.edublogs.org/>.

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# Increasing Instructor Visibility in Online Courses through Mini-Videos and Screencasting

By Satarupa Das, Ph.D.

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Online education is gradually becoming an integral part of how education is being delivered. I have been teaching online economics courses (mostly undergraduate courses) for the last seven years. As online courses offer flexibility to students, most of whom will not sign up for a traditional classroom, educational institutions have jumped in to offer online classes to capture this untapped category of nontraditional students. However, not

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all online classes are successful. What are the needs of students in an online environment?

In my experience, in order to be successful an online class needs to be lively. It should not be just a collection of PowerPoints, reading materials, and assignments. One way to enliven the class is to integrate multimedia material—such as interactive exercises and/or audio-video materials relating to the subject matter in the classroom. No doubt, there is a lot of material on the Web that can be appropriately used to enrich the class. I use a lot of that material myself to connect real life to textbook economics. I have also created Web-resource websites ([www.montgomerycollege.edu/~sdas/webresource](http://www.montgomerycollege.edu/~sdas/webresource)) to achieve this.

However, the most important way to enliven the class is to bring instructor visibility to the classroom. One of the fundamental criticisms about online education has been the lack of a teacher's presence and the ability to interact with him or her. Both traditional educators and students have alleged that students miss out on the benefits of a teacher's presence in the classroom, including lectures, interaction, oral explanations, and feedback. As a result, critics contend that online education is inferior to face-to-face classroom teaching. Announcement tools, discussion tools, and chats are traditional tools to achieve instructor presence in the classroom. However, new technology is providing us with better tools to empower the human teacher in the online classroom.

Since I realized that my students liked my announcements, discussion comments, etc., very much, I tried to add some more of "me" into the classroom. This past year, I started making videos and adding them to my class. Since there are no dedicated media personnel at my school to help with this, I started making them myself with a simple flip camera. I uploaded them to YouTube and then used the embedding code from YouTube to put in a file in the WebCT class management system. I now have an instructor's introduction video in which I introduce myself to the students and set the expectations of the course, much in the same way that I do in my traditional classroom. I added a few more to explain certain key concepts of the subject. I am careful to keep the videos very short—mostly under three minutes. I think this is long enough for students to feel my presence and yet short enough to fit into their attention span. It seems to me that this venture is successful since I have received requests from some students to make more of these videos. I plan to add these short clips to every weekly module.

I have found another very easy way to add some instructor visibility in the online classroom: screencasts. Even

though technology in general requires some learning time, I have seen that the learning time for screencasting is unbelievably short—15 minutes and a little experimentation were all that was needed to get me started. I use free downloadable software from TechSmith called Jing ([www.jingproject.com/](http://www.jingproject.com/)), which allows the created file to be saved in a .swf format or in screencaster as a link that can be easily shared in email or announcements. The file created can be a single image or a video. In economics, I have to explain a lot of graphs and tables, and these are more easily explained and understood using a screencast than if the explanations are presented in a written format.

Essentially, a screencast works for me as follows: I pull out a graph and while I mouse over it explaining the different parts of the graph, the software captures my voice and the movement of the mouse on the screen. Jing recordings can be up to five minutes, which is actually an advantage since most students will listen to mini-lectures more attentively than they would hour-long lectures. The recordings can be uploaded easily to play in my class management system.

The new tools of video and screencasting not only add instructor visibility but also offer other pedagogical benefits. I think they can take away some anxiety from some online students, especially the newcomers. They are suitable for visual and auditory learners. They give students a chance to get some fundamental concepts clarified with the help of the instructor. Also, students can watch the video clips as many times as needed, which increases their engagement.

Some might argue that the students who demand instructor presence in the online classroom should then sign up for a traditional class instead of an online class. But online students are mostly students who will otherwise not register for a traditional on-campus course. Most online students are single parents, people whose job requires a lot of travel, or individuals who have substantial family obligations but still want to advance in their careers. If we want to cater to this student group, we need to adapt our online delivery techniques to their needs.

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# Tips From the Pros: 4 Ways to Engage Students

By Rob Kelly

Wendy Bass, distance education coordinator at East Los Angeles College, offers the following suggestions for keeping students engaged in an online course.

**Remove unused tools.** If your course management system allows, remove or deactivate online learning tools you will not be using in your course. This will reduce distraction and confusion. An uncluttered course will be more visually appealing and easier to use.

**Use video.** There are many sources of relevant video, including those produced by the instructor, those found on YouTube, and those provided by textbook publishers. “If I’m working and all I’m seeing is text, I explain how it can get boring for students if all they’re doing is reading lecture notes. We have to find a way to input other things,” Bass says. At a minimum, instructors should include a brief video introducing themselves and conveying their enthusiasm for the subject.

Videos can be an excellent way to illustrate course concepts. For example, in her child development courses Bass uses videos of her young children to provide examples of Piaget’s stages of development. She also uses videos to get students to engage in controversial topics such as whether or not spanking children is appropriate.

When using video, it’s important to comply with ADA requirements by providing subtitles for any videos used in a course.

**Change pictures frequently.** A relatively simple way to increase interest in an online course is to change graphics on the course site. For example, Bass posts humorous photos of children in her child development course.

**Offer choices.** Bass gives her students two choices for each discussion in her courses. Each student can participate in whichever discussion he or she finds most interesting. Students can participate in both discussions if they choose.

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# Indicators of Engagement in the Online Classroom

By B. Jean Mandernach, Ph.D.

Student course engagement “typically refers to the amount, type, and intensity of investment students make in their educational experiences” (Jennings & Angelo, 2006, p. 6). While research overwhelmingly supports the value of engagement for promoting student achievement and retention, the research is less definitive in its guidance concerning how to monitor whether or not your students are engaged. The challenge in assessing engagement is that it is not openly visible and rests primarily within internal student characteristics. Engagement encompasses a range of academic correlates, including personal-

Recognizing the value of engagement and its vital role in the educational process, faculty should monitor student engagement as a formative strategy to examine the impact of their teaching and assessment activities.

ity, affective, motivational, and persistence factors; it is driven by “students’ willingness, need, desire and compulsion to participate in, and be successful in, the learning process” (Bomia, Beluzo, Demeester, Elander, Johnson & Sheldon, 1997, p. 294).

Recognizing the value of engagement and its vital role in the educational process, faculty should monitor student engagement as a formative strategy to examine the impact of their teaching and assessment activities. A number of formal, self-report assessments of student engagement are available; for example:

- *Student Engagement Index* (Langley, 2006). Developed to identify specific measures of classroom engagement aligned with the benchmarks set forth by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE).

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- *Revised Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ)* (Koljatic & Kuh, 2001). Assessment aligns general issues of engagement according to student-faculty contact, cooperation among students, and active learning.
- *Revised Student Engagement Questionnaire* (Handelsman, Briggs, Sullivan & Towler, 2005). Measures four dimensions of course engagement: skills, emotional, participation/interaction, and performance engagement.
- *Student Engagement Survey (SE)* (Ahlfeldt, Mehta & Sellnow, 2005). Short assessment that adapts specific items from the NSSE survey for use at the course level.
- *Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE)* (Ouimet & Smallwood, 2005). An adaptation of the NSSE designed to assess faculty perceptions of student engagement in a specific course.
- *Classroom Survey of Student Engagement (CLASSE)* (Smallwood & Ouimet, 2009). The complementary measure to the FSSE designed to assess student perceptions of engagement in a course.

While these formal measures may provide a useful metric for summative examinations of student engagement, faculty wishing to adapt their instructional strategies to maximize engagement may wish to monitor informal, formative indicators of student engagement throughout their courses. As such, the issue becomes how to monitor student engagement in your online course when you cannot see the looks of excitement, interest, or enthusiasm (or when there is a noticeable absence of these engagement indicators).

Indicators of engagement in the online classroom can be monitored via three primary avenues: participation in asynchronous discussions, assignment activity, and course involvement. The key to monitoring engagement is to examine students' self-initiated course activity that extends beyond the graded expectations of the course. For example:

#### 1) **Asynchronous discussions:**

1. Student asks relevant questions that contributed to a more meaningful discussion.
2. Student integrates diverse perspectives in response to discussion items.
3. Student initiates assistance or support to facilitate classmates' mastery of course material.
4. Student applies theories and/or concepts to practical

problems or new situations.

5. Student actively participates in discussions beyond the minimum expectations for participation.

#### 2) **Assignment activity:**

1. Student prepares multiple drafts of an assignment prior to submission.
2. Student voluntarily engages classmates for collaboration outside the scheduled course activities.
3. Student synthesizes and/or organizes ideas, information, or experiences into new, more complicated interpretations and relationships.
4. Student evaluates the value of information, arguments, or methods to assess the accuracy of his/her conclusions.
5. Student utilizes feedback from assignments to improve his/her understanding and future performance.

#### 3) **Course involvement:**

1. Student contacts you with course-related questions that extended the meaning of the required course material.
2. Student works effectively to identify, understand, and complete all given course assignments and tasks.
3. Student logs in to class on a regular basis and participates beyond the minimum requirements of the course.
4. Student seeks out additional information or readings to complement course topics.
5. Student completes all readings and studies on a regular basis.
6. Student seeks out additional feedback or comments on his/her work.

In addition to these behavioral observations, faculty should monitor students' self-reports of engagement that may appear in course activity journals, discussion groups, or other informal interactions.

As highlighted by Nauffal (2010), "The concept of student engagement is receiving increased attention globally as it is viewed as an important element in assessing and improving the quality of higher education" (slide 8). This issue is compounded in the online classroom where faculty may be under increased scrutiny to demonstrate the overall quality of the educational experience for their students. As a result of these concerns, faculty are encouraged to actively monitor student engagement to guide instructional and assessment choices as well as to expand definitions of course effectiveness beyond simple emphasis on cognitive learning.

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# Teaching Online With Errol: A Tried and True Mini-Guide to Engaging Online Students

By Errol Craig Sull

In writing this column for more than four years, I have received many emails asking for information on a variety of topics, and no question is asked more frequently than how to keep online students engaged. This issue is at the heart of any distance learning course. When students are engaged, the class is exciting, learning is more likely to occur, the students want to be a part of the course on an ongoing basis, and the students give you and the school outstanding evaluations. Much has been written on this subject, and should I choose—and if my editor allowed it—this column could be hundreds of pages long. But it is a column, not a book, so I offer six surefire ways to get and keep students engaged in an online course and, as a bonus, two activities that always result in enthusiastic student engagement throughout the course.

## STRATEGIES

**Post a “Welcome to the Course!” announcement that is enthusiastic and motivating.** Your first post is probably the most important of your course, as the students get an immediate sense of you—your enthusiasm, approach (inviting or intimidating?), attitude (upbeat or not really interested?), and willingness to help out. And unlike a face-to-face course where these words are spoken then quickly forgotten, here they are available for your students throughout the course, 24/7. (And remember: read over any post, email, webmail, announcement, etc., before sending it to the class: its overall content, writing quality, and proofreading must be your best ... each time!)

**Be first whenever possible.** You set the tone for the students. When they see you as an enthusiastic member of the class, it helps to get them revved up: they know they will not be on their own, feel you truly enjoy teaching the class, and know you have a real interest in their learning. And when they know this, your students will become more engaged. So be sure you always have the first post of each

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new discussion topic. Post an overview to the coming week (module, unit, etc.), and give little reminder announcements throughout the course so students can see that you are an engaged instructor at all times.

**Respond to all student queries, etc., within 24 hours.**

The all-important “umbilical cord” that connects you to the students—the computer—must constantly be fed by you; when you allow it no food of your thoughts, reactions, instructions, etc., students will be less likely to stay involved in the course. Perhaps the most crucial component is quickly responding to any student posts that shout, “Help!” or “I’m confused!” or—in essence—“I just wanted to share this with you, professor!” In these instances, the students are reaching out to you, and your quick response tells them that you are interested in what they have to say, you are active in the course, and you can be depended upon—three qualities that go a long way toward keeping students engaged.

**Be certain all assignment feedback is detailed and positive in tone.** Students are obviously in class to learn, and the more material they receive relating to the class subject, the better. To help this along and to keep students engaged, offer on all assignments detailed feedback that leaves the students with a positive feeling, no matter how poorly they may have done. To accomplish this: [a] Be sure your comments on assignments point out that something is not correct, why it is not correct, and how to get it right. [b] Give your students a breakdown of how you arrived at their grades (and if it is an ungraded assignment give them a faux grade so they can get a sense of the quality work they are submitting). [c] Always point out a few things the student got right; this is especially important for students who did poorly on an assignment. [d] Make your last sentence or two positive one—it helps motivate a student to do better. (Suggestion: set up rubrics for each assignment, even if your school does not require them. They offer thorough feedback on all areas of an assignment and allow for great motivating text from you. If you would like to see some, let me know—I’ll happily send you some of mine!)

**Respond to all—or nearly all—student discussion postings.** For most courses where discussion postings are required, this can become the heart of the course—it is here where students explore segments of the course subject, interact with one another 24/7, and can touch on areas of the course not included in your syllabus. While most students will eagerly respond to one another, your constant presence reminds students of your sincere interest in the course, allows you the opportunity to continually push discussions forward, and can keep the course discussions on

track. To accomplish this: [a] Respond to all or nearly all student discussion postings—this really keeps students enthused about being involved in discussion. [b] At the end of each day, post a major comment on the discussion topic, ending with a question for the students to explore for the next 24 hours. This keeps your discussions always fresh, something the students will appreciate. [c] On the last day a discussion thread is “alive,” end with a posting that sums up the discussion topic—and be sure to include an upbeat note at the end.

**Have ready a frequently asked questions link at the beginning of your course.** No matter how much information is included in your course, students will continually ask questions that range from course logistics (“How do I post an attachment?”) to content (“When did the periodic table of elements add Au for gold?”). The latter will usually require individual responses, as it is more likely that one or two students will ask such a question. But for the former—and many basic ones like it—you are wise to post a frequently asked questions link somewhere in your course prior to day one. Not only will this save you time—instead of writing individually, many students will simply use the information posted—but students will also appreciate the care you take in trying to help them. (Suggestion: take all new questions, concerns, etc., students raise and add them to a file you keep. This way you will have items you can add for each new course you teach.)

## ACTIVITIES

**Establish and populate an “extra resources” section in your course.** There is much happening in the everyday world of life—outside your course—that relates to your subject; the more students see those connections, the more important your course becomes beyond a grade. So constantly be on the prowl for such items—YouTube clips, articles and essays, pictures, etc.—that highlight and reinforce all or certain segments of your course. These add to the value of the course and show you to be an instructor who really wants to immerse the students in a full learning experience—traits students will certainly appreciate. (Suggestion: also use crossword puzzles and other games and cartoons for excitement. See [www.puzzle-maker.com/CW/](http://www.puzzle-maker.com/CW/).)

**Have students search for useful and fun websites for the class.** This is always a great activity and really helps keep students engaged. Whether you do this in a discussion thread or elsewhere, have each student find three websites useful to the subject or your course and three websites that

are fun or unusual. Be sure each student adds one line of explanation under each website. The students—and you—benefit from the helpful sites, and all in the class have some lighter moments through the non-course-related sites. This is a great way to have students feel they are a true part of the course, offer additional course assistance, and have some plain old fun—and keep students enthusiastically engaged.

*Errol Craig Sull has been teaching online courses for more than 15 years and has a national reputation in the subject, both writing and conducting workshops on it. He is currently putting the finishing touches on his next book—How to Become the Perfect Online Instructor.*

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## Teaching Online with Errol: Personality DOES Matter in Teaching Online!

*By Errol Craig Sull*

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Online instructors are hired because they are judged as having the right combination of education, teaching experience, content expertise, and professional accomplishments. But once an instructor is in the classroom, these abilities and achievements can go only so far. There also must be a constant injection of good-natured, passionate-to-teach, “I’m really glad to be here” personality.

The following are suggestions for conveying a positive, supportive, and enthusiastic personality.

**Establish a friendly and inviting personality on day one of class.** You have only one chance to make a first impression, and in the online classroom this is especially true—and important—as your personality on day one can be examined, experienced, and revisited throughout the course. Thus, any postings on day one that speak of you

must convey that you care about the class, the students, and the subject, and that you are looking forward to the course and are eager to help your students.

**Never confuse personality with teaching strategy.** One can have the right—the best—teaching strategies ever created, yet a bland or dull online personality can make those teaching strategies nothing more than two-dimensional. Once those strategies are sprinkled with heavy doses of an upbeat and just downright nice personality, they truly come alive—and the students will react in a more engaged manner.

**Sometimes you may need be an actor who wears the right personality.** Your everyday, “Hey, this is me” personality might not be the one that is right for online teaching, and that’s fine...as long as you can play the role of an online instructor with a great, enthusiastic personality for your students (as well as your online supervisors, support team, and colleagues). Students take their lead from you—the way you come across to them will determine just how engaged and motivated they remain throughout the course.

**Use your interest in the subject to help build your online teaching personality.** You were selected to teach your subject partially because of your academic and/or professional expertise and interest in the subject, so share it with your students. Beyond what has been prestocked in your course, you can add articles, pictures, essays, cartoons, interviews, YouTube (and the like) snippets, and factoids that add richness and depth to your subject. The students will immediately know you really are “into” the subject, and your excitement and enthusiasm for the subject will spill over to your students.

**Help your personality come alive with audio and/or audiovisual.** Today’s technology allows us to get closer to our students—and lets our personalities really shine through. Skype, MP3, Twitter, Facebook, Jing, Adobe Connect, Prezi, Wimba, and other tools can take us to our students in an audio and/or visual way and thus allows students to see and hear an instructor who is excited, enthusiastic, caring, and dedicated to his or her students, the subject, and the course. Survey after survey of students shows that they appreciate the use of these applications by online instructors—and feel a stronger rapport with the instructor and more enthusiasm for the course.

**Get yourself in a positive and upbeat mind-set to teach online.** We are all affected by what goes on around us, and as humans it can become difficult not to let any negativity impact our interactions with others. This is important in any aspect of our lives, of course, including our role as

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online instructors. Again, any negativity students pick up from you in the course will stay there throughout the course. So if you are in a bad mood, do whatever is necessary to make sure your mood does not affect your courses: use exercise, yoga, self-talk, a walk, watching TV—whatever needs be done to help you return as the online instructor that students need.

**Control knee-jerk reactions.** Students can write or do things that just get us upset—again, it’s that human thing that comes with being us! And we can make egregious errors in our hasty reactions to these student mistakes and oversights that may not only cost us our students’ respect and rapport, but possibly our jobs as well. So hold back—take some time before you respond, and if you don’t have the time—such as in a live chat, a phone call, or a video-conference—always remember that your actions and reactions are not merely yours but also the school’s, and because you are the instructor you are always held to a higher standard than your students are.

**Be careful of your vocabulary choice.** Each of us has words we use on a regular basis; they are part of who and what we are, and they often simply pour out. But our online courses demand that we pay special attention to the words we write, the context of those words, and the perception of the message we are trying to get across. Once posted, our words will live on throughout the course, and thus we must focus on the vocabulary we choose.

**Read and reread each post, assignment comment, webmail, and email before sending.** Beyond our word choice, incorrect grammar and punctuation, spelling and proofreading errors, lack of clarity, misconstrued meanings, incorrect information, etc., can not only wreak havoc on you as a professional, but also put a few dents in the shining personality you are trying to establish. Students will be forgiving to a point—but they do want to see consistency and correctness in what you write. Otherwise they may think you are not as committed to the course as they initially thought.

**Own your course and students; never let them own you.** When the instructor has an online teaching personality that sparkles and emanates confidence, the students will be more likely to dive into the course, to stay engaged in the course, and learn more; you are showing them that the course comes alive through you, rather than the course being the central player. Those instructors who teach well and have great teaching strategies but offer little more than a bland, tepid personality will find that students will not be as involved, will not adhere fully to directions and deadlines, and will limit their instructor-student interaction

to only the minimum required. Working on and maintaining an upbeat, enthusiastic, and passionate-for-the-course personality will always be a big asset to your students!

*Errol Craig Sull has been teaching online courses for more than 15 years and has a national reputation in the subject, both writing and conducting workshops on it. He is currently putting the finishing touches on his next book—How to Become the Perfect Online Instructor.*

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## Enhancing Engagement and the Value of the Course to the Student through Course Organization and Active Learning

*By Susan J. Harrington, Ph.D., Kevin S. Floyd*

Instructors are often faced with the issue of how much time to spend in organizing their courses with learning goals, objectives, and activities, or in developing hands-on learning activities to simulate real-world situations. Some instructors lean toward focusing on presentation of concepts, while others argue that hands-on activities will engage students and enhance the learning experience. Because detailed organization and incorporating hands-on learning assignments into the classroom come with a cost—the instructor’s time and knowledge—it is important to know whether the effort is worth it.

Course organization and planning are critical in the process of teaching effective courses, particularly courses taught online. The process of course planning and organization should go far beyond simply choosing a textbook and developing the syllabus. Instead, it is essential to incorporate detailed planning, including the development of

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specific objectives for the entire course as well as for each individual lesson; the specification of reading assignments in detail; and the description of specific deliverables. It is important that faculty members document expectations for student performance and decide how interaction will take place between and among the instructor and the students.

Developing a well-structured and thoughtfully designed course, particularly in an online environment, can reduce learner anxiety, promote the quality and quantity of interaction, and improve learner satisfaction. Course design, interaction with instructors, and active discussion among participants significantly influence students' satisfaction and perceived learning. Research on effective online instruction has found that course design and organization is one of the most important factors affecting student satisfaction with online learning.

Hands-on activities may be described as "active learning," which is the opposite of "passive learning," in which one-way communication from teachers to students is the norm. Active learning involves substantive changes in the ways students and teachers work together, shifting the focus of classroom instruction to student activities such as gathering, analyzing, and presenting data; defining issues; and drawing and defending conclusions. The aim is to create independent and engaged learners.

Hands-on learning activities increase student engagement and heighten perceived course value. Perceived course value is a measure of how valuable a student thinks a given course is, including whether the course stimulated the student's interest in the subject matter, whether the assignments and readings were valuable, and whether the course has real-world application and is thought to be important to the student's future.

Engagement and perceived course value are believed to be integral to a student's positive learning experience and to retention of less-prepared students. Student engagement is evident when students demonstrate prolonged attention to a mentally challenging task, resulting in authentic learning and increased levels of higher-order thinking. Engagement is the integration and utilization of students' motivations and strategies during learning. An engaged student is a motivated student.

Active learning assignments represent a move toward a more learner-centered approach and away from the traditional pedagogy of lectures and multiple-choice exams. Where instructors choose to incorporate hands-on activities into their classrooms, students have been shown to retain the subject matter and increase their problem-solving skills. Also, active learning assignments increase student engage-

ment with course material. Case studies, in particular, help students gain a deeper understanding of a given problem or situation.

The following social-networking activities can be used in active learning:

- **Facebook:** Popular social-networking system that allows users to add friends, post messages, and update their personal profiles. It can be used in an academic environment to create a "virtual homeroom" that enables faculty and students to get to know each other. This is particularly useful in online course environments.
- **Twitter:** Real-time short-messaging service that can be used by both faculty and students to send and receive short messages known as "tweets." Tweets can be restricted to permit delivery to those in a circle of friends or classmates. Twitter permits students to blog course-related content in real time.
  - o **Skype:** Service that allows students and faculty to make voice calls over the Internet. Additional features include instant messaging, file transfer, and video conferencing. This technology is ideal for conducting presentations in a real-time online environment.
  - o **del.icio.us:** Social-bookmarking Web service for storing, sharing, and discovering Web bookmarks. Del.icio.us can essentially be used to create a repository of bookmarks that faculty can share with their students.
  - o **YouTube:** Video-sharing website on which users can upload and share videos. Faculty members have the ability to create and upload instructional materials to YouTube that can be viewed online by students. Students can also take advantage of existing video-based tutorials, simulations, and presentations.

When students have been asked to describe, from their experience, a "good" university course and a "poor" university course, good courses were described as lecture combined with student activities and active student participation. Factors associated with poor courses included a lecture-only format or a lecture offering combined with slides.

Student engagement and perceived course value are two integral parts of the solution to the puzzle of creating the best possible learning experience for students. Instructors can directly affect these parts of the puzzle by incorporating active learning assignments and clearly specifying ob-



jectives, assignments, and deliverables. The effort is worth it. Students will be engaged with learning course material and will perceive the value of the course as high, and an overall positive learning experience will result.

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## Engage Online Learners with Technology: A Free Tool Kit

*By Hong Wang*

Technologies used for distance education are generally classified into two categories: 1) presentation technologies used to record, present, and display instructional information; and 2) telecommunications technologies used to connect instructors and distance learners.

Are you going to bore your online students by posting only Word and PDF files or engage them by creating the instructional material in a variety of media formats in your online teaching?

To help online learners process information, providing only text is far from enough to make learning effective, efficient, and engaging. The dual coding theory (Paivio, 1986), the multiple intelligences theory (Gardner, 1983), and the symbol systems (Salomon, 1981) all show that it is essential to present instructional material in multiple formats to adapt to students' different learning styles and enhance their processing of the learning material. What I would like to share in this article are some technology tools that are very useful to effectively introduce and present

online instructional information, and most of them are free.

**Concept maps.** A picture is worth a thousand words. Visualizing information is a common and easy way to make learning more fun, interesting, and engaging. To illustrate a concept or provide an advance organizer for a learning module, a concept mapping tool is very helpful. Inspiration is an award-winning visual thinking and learning tool that is popularly used in education. It offers a 30-day free trial that anyone can download at [www.inspiration.com/Freetrial](http://www.inspiration.com/Freetrial), and a single license costs about \$69. Another similar brainstorming tool is located at <http://bubbl.us/>. It is free, and the only thing that you need to do is sign up for a free account. You can create mind maps online, embed your mind maps in a blog or website, email and print them, or save them as images.

**Podcasts.** Audacity is free cross-platform software that can be used to record and edit sounds. It is simple and easy to use, and you can download it at <http://audacity.sourceforge.net/download/>. Instructors can record a talk or a lecture with a microphone and edit the sound file. What I usually do for my online teaching is make a brief summary of each chapter and highlight the most important points in each learning unit and then add some background music to spice up the podcasts. Publish them in iTunes U or post them in Blackboard and students can download to their iPods or listen to them directly on the computer.

**Voice over PowerPoint.** PowerPoint is a nice way to present an outline of a lecture, but it is insufficient for online students to read an outline in the virtual environment. Articulate Presenter is a great tool to quickly create Flash-based presentations from PowerPoint. Articulate Presenter has won several awards, such as Best of 2007 Elearning Readers' Choice Awards, the Elearning Guild Research 2007 Platinum Award for Overall Satisfaction, Best of 2006 Elearning Readers' Choice Awards, and 2005 Innovative Technology Gold. Instructors can record narration over each slide of a PowerPoint presentation and publish it in the form of Web pages or a CD-ROM. The file is much smaller than the original file, and the only plug-in students need is Flash Player, which 95 percent of computers have these days. What I usually do for my online teaching is record my narration over the PowerPoint presentation for each learning module and then post it in the Blackboard course management system. You can download a 30-day free trial at [www.articulate.com/downloads/freetrial-step1.aspx](http://www.articulate.com/downloads/freetrial-step1.aspx).

**Video clips.** To gain students' attention, a video clip is an effective way to introduce a topic. Animoto is a tool with which you can create a professional music video in several minutes. All you need to do is sign up for an account at [https://animoto.com/sign\\_up](https://animoto.com/sign_up). After you upload a set of images and select the music you like, Animoto analyzes the uploaded images and functions, based on a secret artificial intelligence logic. If your videos are only 30 seconds long or if you sign up as an educator, it is totally free. If you prefer to create longer videos, you can pay \$3 per video or \$30 per year. If you do not have time to create anything on your own, YouTube is a great resource for you to find ready-made video clips for Web-based instruction. Some of my favorite educational videos are the "in plain English" set about Web 2.0 tools made by Commoncraft. Just type in the keyword(s) and you can find some interesting videos about a specific topic you are teaching. A good alternative to YouTube is TeacherTube ([www.teachertube.com/](http://www.teachertube.com/)), which is another fine resource for educational video clips. If you are teaching skill-focused subjects such as Web design, Jing can be a good tool to use. It can record everything on the screen and create a video to show step-by-step demonstrations. Jing is a cross-platform tool that is great for creating online tutorials. You can download it free at [www.jingproject.com/](http://www.jingproject.com/).

Most students these days are proactive for technologies, and they tend to be more motivated with effective content presentations in the virtual environment. Are you going to bore your online students by posting only Word and PDF files or engage them by creating the instructional material in a variety of media formats in your online teaching? It is your choice!

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# Promoting Student Participation and Involvement in Online Instruction: Suggestions from the Front

*By John G. Zappala, PhD.*

Students who actively participate in the learning process learn more than those who do not. "Involvement matters," according to Tinto (1997) and can occur both inside and outside the classroom—even if it is an online classroom! The importance of students' active involvement in learning is also documented by James and Taylor, 2002; Fristchner, 2000; and others. Best of all, active involvement facilitates critical thinking and, ultimately, student success.

How can online faculty move students toward increased interaction and overcome the traditional barriers of class

According to the instructors' end-of-course surveys, most students appreciate the opportunity to share responsibility for their learning and are more fully engaged when presented with that challenge.

size, faculty authority, age, gender, or student emotions such as confidence and fear? (Fassinger, 1995; Tinto, 1997; Howard and Henney, 1998; Howard et al., 2002)

To answer that question, at least in part, I reviewed more than 500 faculty self-disclosed end-of-course surveys that underscored best teaching practices and how those practices resulted in more student interaction and greater student satisfaction and, hence, furthered student success. So what has been learned in this review? First of all, faculty who utilized diverse teaching and learning techniques seemed to have higher overall evaluations from their

students. In addition, the following concepts came out of these assessments:

**Anticipation:** One instructor used a pre-course assignment to get students to think about the class and its topics two to three weeks before the beginning of the course. Another had students evaluate four samples of successful capstone projects that were posted on the CMU website.

**Assessment:** Many faculty indicated that authentic assessment strategies promoted the classroom as an active workplace for the student. Some faculty used chapter quizzes, which allowed students to prepare for test-type questions without being penalized for incorrect answers. One instructor used nightly group quizzes to help students digest great amounts of material while it was still fresh. Another common assessment technique was the use of open-book exams requiring mastery of understanding, synthesizing, and applying course material.

Other ways to help assess students' thinking included the following:

- Establishing a calendar of course assignment milestones
- Having each student present course concepts to a small group of three or four other students
- Having students create concept maps, to demonstrate that they had acquired a rich understanding of the complexities of the course content
- Developing a learning contract, where each student could assume greater responsibility for his or her learning
- Providing opportunities for students to apply what they were learning

**Case studies:** Many faculty members indicated that case studies tend to be the best learning experiences. Most often, case study assignments were used to demonstrate practical use of the subjects learned in the course. These were conducted as field assignments, site visits, clinical investigations, and comprehensive financial evaluations of a public company. In many instances, the case study was used as a capstone activity for the class.

**Chat rooms:** "Using the chat room is a great way to keep students (and instructor!) focused, stay on task, and clarify issues," wrote one instructor. Another wrote, "Somehow, using a chat room, and communicating through emails, tends to level the playing field for even the shy students."

**Communication:** Instructors discussed the importance of keeping the students informed about virtual classroom ac-

tivities as absolutely critical for involving students in the teaching and learning process. One instructor developed streaming software tutorials for the class that supported project work. Another offered mini lectures that led into group activities that utilized information from the lecture. A faculty member observed, "Ongoing access to Blackboard for real-time and asynchronous discussion and course documents is helpful to students. However, a candid conversation with the students at the first meeting usually generates some important feedback on how to better deliver the course materials."

**Group:** Online teaching and learning does not preclude the development of groups and teams. Here are some group activities used by faculty in this study:

- Team debates
- A group oral final exam
- Team review of draft term papers
- Students sharing outlines of what they had read

**Homework:** Relevant assignments were used to accomplish the learning objectives and served to encourage student participation. In many cases, the course project assignment was self-directed and each student had to design and integrate this assignment according to his or her own needs.

Learning activity: Many "best practices" were listed here. Some of these included the following:

- A class project of creating an action plan depicting the establishment of a committee to write or revise a curriculum
- The research, critique, and shared responses of professional articles
- Successful collaborative activities
- Short, student-led "teaching moments" on a topic relevant to the course
- A reported court case brief
- Student preparation of a persuasive speech, using Monroe's Motivated Sequence, a method for organizing a persuasive message when you want the audience "to act"
- A journal abstract assignment whereby the student writes and abstracts with opinion and presents it to the class
- A group APA workshop

Relevance: The single most important aspect of teaching and training adults was to allow "participants to apply real work materials, concepts and skills." (Zappala, 1996) This

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was reiterated by a faculty member who wrote in her end-of-course survey, "I use real-world applications of the materials covered in each class. In addition, I use critical thinking exercises to challenge and engage the students as they apply the concepts of HR management to the careers."

Other examples include the following:

- Using student-generated issues or examples to "drive home the point being discussed"
- Selecting relevant articles for class readings
- Incorporating real-world problem-based learning activities
- Developing websites so that faculty can make their learning materials accessible to their students 24/7
- Having students prepare and conduct professional presentations

Self assessment/reflection: Brookfield (1986), Wlodkowski (1993), and others discuss the importance of providing opportunities for adult learners to reflect on what has been learned—especially if it is new material. Many faculty in this study build in those opportunities for their students. Examples of self-reflection or self-assessment activities included the following:

- Having the students complete a reaction paper on selected topics covering textbook material
- Breaking the class into small groups to answer scenarios on material covered in the text
- Using self-assessments such as learning style inventories, the Strong Interest Inventory, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, and card sorts
- Using a learning plan and/or portfolio, whereby every student is required to create a personal plan, use multiple assessment measures, and achieve a specific assessment goal within the professional environment of his or her choice

## Summary

One faculty member summed up promoting class interaction and student success this way: "This may be hedging, but I think the key of my class success was the use of a careful mix of all of these activities along with relevant class discussions, appropriate questions and answers, and lectures with feedback. Collectively, all learning activities were geared toward and complemented the course objectives."

According to the instructors' end-of-course surveys, most students appreciate the opportunity to share responsibility for their learning and are more fully engaged when presented with that challenge. I recommend that we understand factors that influence students' participation in class within "the framework of the classroom as a social organization" (Weaver and Qi, 2005). The models described here show that elements of the classroom's formal and informal structures and of students' attributes are directly related to class participation and interaction. A key point suggests that student interaction is largely influenced by the organization of the (virtual) classroom and that faculty interaction outside the classroom is equally critical in promoting student engagement. When interaction is done correctly, our students can reflect on the class experience, as one business student recently noted during the last week of class, "This is all starting to come together—it makes sense now."

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