

# Increasing Student Engagement in an Online Setting

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*As our society becomes increasingly “technology savvy”, students are requesting more online course offerings from college and universities. Postsecondary enrollment in distance education courses has increased (Allen and Seaman, 2013). This mandates a change in how instruction is delivered. For subject areas where personal interaction is crucial for student success (i.e., teaching, counseling, and administration), this change provides challenges since the online instructor does not get to see how his/her students interact with others. This paper examines differences in face to face interactions which occur in a brick and mortar setting versus online courses. Best practices and recommendations are examined.*

## INTRODUCTION

There are currently over 600 accredited online schools and colleges/universities offering online instructional programs in the United States, providing over 23,000 degrees (Guide to Online Schools, 2015). Online instructional programs have become a critical part of many universities long-term strategic plans (Allen & Seaman, 2014). Because of the flexibility provided to both students and instructors, online education has become the ‘wave of the future’ with over 7.1 million students currently enrolled in at least one online course in the United States (Allen & Seaman, 2014). Additionally, since students can attend class at any time of the day or night, those who need a more freedom in their course schedules, due to work and/or family issues, have the ability to attend programs they might not otherwise be able to (Daymount & Blau, 2008). The landscape of online post-secondary learning, as an industry, is changing faster than existing postsecondary educational institutions are evolving to keep up. With total postsecondary enrollment declining as of Fall 2011 (Allen & Seaman, 2013) and online enrollment continuing to increase (Gray, 2013) there is motivation for educational institutions to change more quickly.

The three prototypical classifications of course delivery are web-facilitated, blended/hybrid and pure online courses (Allen & Seaman, 2014). In web-facilitated courses, instructors use technology to enhance a traditional face-to-face classroom experience, (1% to 29% of the content is delivered online) (Allen & Seaman, 2014). In blended or hybrid courses, instructors deliver a substantial portion of the content online (30% to 79%) and conduct the remainder of the class in person (Allen & Seaman, 2014). In a pure online course, instructors deliver most or all of the content online (80% or more) (Allen & Seaman, 2014). All of these courses can be designed for synchronous or asynchronous content delivery and interaction. They are also typically structured around the same time parameters as the traditional face-to-face courses, as it relates to assignments, quizzes and exam deadlines (Southard, Meddaugh, France-Harris, 2015).

As in public K-12 education, the single most important factor in public school student achievement, has been, and continues to be, the quality of the instructor standing at the front of the room. With the

movement to online instruction, how do online instructors motivate their students with limited face to face interaction? Just how important are the emails sent out prior to the start of the course, or the online collaborative learning sessions that can be held synchronously or asynchronously?

### THE UNIVERSITY'S RESPONSIBILITIES

It is the responsibility of the university to provide its instructors with professional development so they, in return, can provide a rigorous academic program for their students. While many universities have begun to offer Professional Development to its instructors, the differences between the online and traditional programs cannot be understated. The chart below, adapted from McConnell (2000), shows the comparisons on interactions between online programs and those in traditional classrooms:

*Comparison of Interaction between Online and Face-to-Face Settings*

	<b>Online</b>	<b>Face to Face</b>
<b>Mode</b>	Discussions through text only; Can be structured; Dense; permanent; limited; stark	Verbal discussions: a more common mode, but impermanent
<b>Sense of Instructor Control</b>	Less sense of instructor control; Easier for participants to ignore instructor	More sense of leadership from instructor; Not so easy to ignore instructor
<b>Discussion</b>	Group contact continually maintained; Depth of analysis often increased; Discussion often stops for periods of time, then is picked up and restarted; Level of reflection is high; Able to reshape conversation on basis of ongoing understandings and reflection	Little group contact between meetings; Analysis varies, dependent on time available; Discussions occur within a set of time frame; Often little time for reflection during meetings; Conversations are less likely being shaped during meeting
<b>Group Dynamics</b>	Less sense of anxiety; More equal participation; Less hierarchies; Dynamics are 'hidden' but traceable; No breaks, constantly in the meeting; Can be active listening without participation; Medium (technology) has an impact; Different expectation about participation; Slower, time delays in interactions or discussions	Anxiety at beginning/during meetings; Participation unequal; More chance of hierarchies; Dynamics evident but lost after the event; Breaks between meetings; Listening without participation may be frowned upon; Medium (room) may have less impact; Certain expectations about participation; Quicker, immediacy of interactions or discussions
<b>Rejoining</b>	High psychological/emotional stress of rejoining	Stress of rejoining not so high
<b>Feedback</b>	Feedback on each individual's piece of work very detailed and focused; Whole group can see and read each other's feedback;	Less likely to cover as much detail, often more general discussion; Group hears feedback; Verbal/visual feedback;

	Textual feedback only; No one can “hide” and not give feedback; Permanent record of feedback obtained by all; Delayed reactions to feedback; Sometimes little discussion after feedback; Group looks at all participants’ work at same time	Possible to “free-ride” and avoid giving feedback; No permanent record of feedback; Immediate reactions to feedback possible; Usually some discussion after feedback, looking at wider issues; Group looks at one participant’s work at a time
<b>Divergence/ Choice Level</b>	Loose-bound nature encourages divergent talk and adventitious learning; Medium frees the sender but may restrict the other participants (receivers) by increasing their uncertainty	More tightly bound, requiring adherence to accepted protocols; Uncertainty less likely due to common understandings about how to take part in discussions

*Source.* Adapted from McConnell (2000).

## STUDENT INTERACTIONS

One method of interaction with students in an online format is establishing synchronous learning environments. This presenter is familiar with Blackboard, eCollege, Zoom, SKYPE, and Adobe Connect platforms. These platforms offer an opportunity for the online instructor to “engage” in synchronous conversations with students by establishing a “link” given to students so they can sign-in to the classroom for a meeting with the entire class. However, to be effective, the instructor needs to know how to utilize the platform(s) its university implements. Professional development needs to be provided to the instructors, via online or face to face, if the expectation is for them to engage rigorous instruction in the class.

While synchronous sessions allow for more interaction with students, there are often times when students cannot join in the discussion due to employment schedules and/or other issues. Most of the ‘synchronous’ platforms used in online university programs allow for discussions to be recorded so students who were not able to attend the “live session” have the ability to go back and review the material that was presented in the synchronous session and listen to the discussion by the instructor and other classmates. Additional methods of contact are individual emails and phone conversations with the student that can either be student or instructor initiated. Another method of getting students more engaged with the class involves assigning group projects. Since this presenter works in the area of education, and collaboration is a skill needed by teachers, counselors, and administrators, assigning group work is an excellent method to gauge how students are able to interact with others, whether they live close by and can meet in person or if they have to work together in another online environment. One of the best methods for increasing interaction with students is to host “online office hours” where the instructor is available to answer questions in an online format either via Skype, Zoom, or even just a phone call. Students will call in if they know their instructor has set that time aside for meeting, responding, and answering questions.

## CURRENT PRACTICE

Below is an example of what a typical week in an online class could look like if one wants to increase student contacts in an online setting:

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
	Individual SKYPE or phone calls; emails, responses to Discussion Boards, etc.	Discussion Boards (Asynchronous)	Synchronous Online Chat Sessions (ZOOM, Blackboard Collaborate, etc.)	Online “office hours” via SKYPE or phone calls		Assignment/s Due

What are some of the methods one can use in an online setting that will allow for the rigor and engagement that will enhance learning? Some of the best practices include:

- Establishing and publishing the schedule/calendar, early, for synchronous elements in online courses. Sending an email **prior** to the beginning of the class informing students of the synchronous chat requirements – along with links to a tutorial for those unfamiliar with this format – at least allows students to prepare for these sessions and possibly rearrange their schedules to participate
- Scheduling a practice session for students who are unfamiliar with synchronous formats, ahead of the actual sessions which are graded
- Familiarizing students (and any co-instructors) with the online chat interface
- Grading – requiring participation in synchronous chat sessions as a part of the student’s grade helps foster participation in the chat. For students unable to attend due to previous commitments, having the session recorded allows them to review the session and submit a different assignment (i.e., reflection on the session) for the grade
- Holding online office hours as an initial foray into the use of synchronous elements
- Introducing one or two mandatory synchronous sessions per course
- Advancing to optional (makeup or extra credit) sessions with online students
- For large classes, holding several sessions during the week and/or assigning students to groups can minimize connection and internet speed issues. If doing this, the instructor must make sure to have an outline to follow so that all students receive the same information regardless of which session they attend
- Communicating chat session details/protocols/guidelines to students: date, time, muting your computer if you’re not speaking to eliminate feedback, using the ‘buttons’ (raise hand, etc.) appropriately, etc.
- PRACTICE – as the instructor, you must be able to display confidence in leading the session. Have your friends/family “pretend” to be students and play around with loading power points, documents, links, etc., so that while you’re in your ‘live session’ if you should encounter a problem you will know how to deal with it flawlessly

National University, headquartered in San Diego, California, has learning centers throughout the entire state, as well as a campus in Henderson, Nevada. Online programs have been offered at National University since 1996 to business students, with the School of Education beginning to offer online

courses in 2000. Since this time, due to student requests, many of the formerly traditional, or “on-ground” programs have been replaced by online programs, with some departments within the School of Education (Counseling) only offering an online program. In this particular program, getting to know students as best as one can as the instructor, is imperative, since much of the student’s employment responsibilities will be dealing with school-age students and their families. As an instructor, knowing that the student in the online classroom has the ‘people skills’ necessary to be successful as a counselor (or teacher/administrator) is critical. Without having some type of verbal interaction during the course of the class, this would be difficult to accomplish. Hosting synchronous sessions allows for the instructor to “meet” the students and engage them in discussions and interactions that would not normally occur in an online class.

All National University classes are offered in a ‘one course per month’ format. Each course is divided into units with discussion board threads along with assignments due each week. Some classes require two discussion board threads per week, and each student is required to post not only his/her response to the prompt, but are also required to post to at least one other student’s response within that week’s unit. Each course contains a ‘signature assignment’ which will become part of that student’s reflective portfolio which she/he will present at the end of the program. Lectures, power points, interactive activities are intertwined with each course. Collaborative sessions, provided through the Blackboard platform, have replaced chat rooms. ZOOM has also become a popular tool for instructions to use. Instructors are able to talk to students, present material, and answer questions, all from the comfort of home – for both the instructor and student. Additionally, full-time faculty at the National University’s Campuses are always available to meet with students to discuss concerns, and there are tutoring labs – online and onground – where assistance is provided as well to students requesting assistance.

The budget crisis over the last several years, especially in California, has resulted in several universities within the state closing or severely cutting back on their teacher/administrator preparation programs which has led to a shortage of teachers. California, along with Nevada and other states, are finding themselves scrambling to produce enough credentialed/licensed teachers and administrators to fill all of the vacancies due to retirements and people leaving the profession (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education, 2015). Clark County School District, the 5<sup>th</sup> largest school district in the United States, began the 2015-16 school year with over 700 positions throughout the district, not fully staffed with licensed teachers. Statewide, that count was over 900 vacancies in Nevada. Universities are scrambling to fill these vacancies, and many are offering online programs as a way to meet this demand. What is the quality of these teachers/administrators who are becoming credentialed/licensed from these institutions? Are the courses adequately preparing educators for the academic demands of the classroom? Can professors accurately gauge the “quality” of the student in an online environment versus meeting with them face to face? By hosting synchronous sessions along with assigning group projects, this presenter feels confident that students participating in her online classes are going to be able to meet the demands of the classroom/administration office.

The Nevada State Department of Education approved National University’s online program for Educational Administration in July, 2015, along with several other programs which are being offered in the School of Education Department at Henderson, Nevada. The Educational Administration program offers candidates a Master of Science Degree in Educational Administration along with licensure for the student to become a school administrator in Nevada. The first cohort of students began classes in December, 2015. Even though this program is “online only” throughout the state, all instructors reside in Nevada. Instructors have the option of scheduling synchronous sessions in their classes, and are encouraged to do so. The faculty program lead for the Educational Administration program holds office hours (online and onground) weekly for those students who desire contact. The hope is that students will feel supported in this manner.

Since all teaching programs require student teaching, and the Educational Administration program requires administrative fieldwork, even if students take all courses online, they are all assigned a university supervisor who works with them at their site and works with their mentor teacher (for student teacher candidates) or their site administrator (for those in the administration program). The quality of

each student candidate is assessed not only while in the program – and maintaining a specific grade point average is just one requirement – but also through self-reflective essays, dispositions, and interactions with their course instructor and/or interactions with the full-time faculty at the Henderson Campus.

## **CONCLUSION**

While it is too early to determine the effectiveness of students at the Henderson Campus, National University has surveyed students who completed programs in California. Responses were based on student perceptions of the quality of the program of online versus traditional instruction and showed that most students felt the online program provided as much rigor as the traditional program (Hoban, Nue, Castle, 2002). Castle and McGuire's (2010) study found that most students still preferred an onsite course offering over online instruction, with the exceptions being if the online course closely adhered to strategies normally found in an onsite setting (synchronous interactions via live video engagement). It is the intent of this researcher to follow the candidates from the Henderson Campus to gauge their effectiveness as teachers and administrators upon completion of their respective programs for the next several years.

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