

# Proven Approaches to Motivating Engagement by Students in Online Classes

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## **Abstract**

An instructor's role in motivating students may be more important in online than in any other format of classes. Online classes can still be viewed as isolating for students who have to learn on their own and present their knowledge through participation in various activities on the discussion board. Students do not always have enough self-motivation to contribute consistently and thoughtfully in activities. Thus, involving students in collaboration seems to be one of the more perplexing tasks with which instructors have to deal. Even so, several proven approaches are available for encouraging students to participate in online class activities.

## Introduction

Participation in online activities can easily be imposed upon students through curriculum design. Engagement in class activities could be simply included as one of required and graded assessments, and students may view it as more or less important depending on the percentage of their final grade for that course. This approach, while successful in driving students to participate, most likely will result in students' minimal engagement in discussions or online activities. Additionally, the quality of contribution may not be as high as it could be if instructors were to use other, more positive methods of motivating and engaging students.

Highly successful instructors do not rely on curriculum requirements only to facilitate a quality class. They engage students in activities and are actively involved in the facilitation of discussions. They post interesting and complex questions, show other aspects of discussed topics, incorporate new ideas, provide real-life applications, and share their own professional experiences in discussions as they work to create a supportive classroom environment.

## Background

The impact of an instructor's presence on the dynamics of the class is a highly researched topic among those studying higher education. Mandernach, Gonzales, and Garret (2006) emphasize that the instructor's presence is central to the effectiveness of online learning. They point out that a delicate balance needs to be found in online classes, as too much interaction leads to student feelings of being overburdened, while too little interaction may cause isolation and feelings of not being heard. Mandernach, Dailey-Herbert, and Donnelly-Sallee (2007) add that in online courses students could only notice the presence of instructors when they visibly participated in discussions by submitting posts to the threaded discussions. This is also a reason why Burgess and Strong (2003) stress that "each online class must be a reliable and robust teacher-present environment, that is in effect, always in session throughout the term" (p. 2).

A supportive classroom environment is a broad term that describes various instructor behaviors. It includes friendly ice-breaking activities at the very beginning of the quarter when students introduce themselves to their classmates and learn about expectations in the class. In the online delivery format, those activities may also be conducted by posting a self-introduction with a photo or scavenger hunts that would make students search for details about their class.

Creating a supportive classroom is not a new concept and is very important in any classroom setting. Vella (1994) described twelve principles of effective adult learning, including safety in the environment and process; respect for learners as subjects of their own learning; and teamwork or working in small groups. While she discussed these in the context of a traditional classroom, the online environment is not that different. In fact, creating a supportive classroom may be viewed as even more critical in this format as students' online learning is still often viewed as very isolating and anonymous (Bambara, Harbour, Davies, & Athey, 2009; McInerney & Roberts, 2004). Therefore, creating a safe learning environment helps students overcome anxieties about online learning and learn to participate with no fear that they will be ignored, ridiculed, or exposed to others as negative examples. Through positive classroom experiences, students realize that instructors are available and will assist them in their learning. Such positive activities also include offering periodic summaries of what was already taught in the class, detailed feedback on student performance, and help for those students who need to improve. Finally, as pointed out by Heuer and King (2004), instructors can model student behavior by setting a positive example for collaboration and discussion participation. They also coach students, providing them encouragement, support, motivation, and feedback. Highly engaged instructors, who are visibly present to students through posts and comments, observe similar behavior in their students who also actively participate in discussions, incorporate new ideas into their posts, and in general do not limit their presence and contribution to mere fulfillment of basic requirements for engagement in course activities.

Quantity and quality of student interaction in online courses depends, however, not just on the active engagement of instructors; it also depends on the quality of the instructor's engagement. Instructors cannot limit their interactions to scattered and short comments to students. Their role as facilitators starts with soliciting complex and interesting problems or questions that compel students to use course concepts and to make references to concepts learned in previous courses or professional experience. Moreover, it is the instructor's role to move discussions to a further level by emphasizing the advantages and disadvantages of students' approaches and alternative viewpoints as well as the results and the importance of their standpoint. Simultaneously, instructors facilitating online activities advocate clarity of response by persuading students to be elaborate in their posts. As Maor (2003) points out, online instructors need to be ready to intervene in the discussion when it stalls or goes off track and ensure that student postings are professional and scholarly and that they serve as experiences that connect the students to one another.

Observations from courses taught at City University of Seattle appear to support the findings presented in the literature. Analysis of courses taught by twelve Division of Arts and Sciences instructors showed that the level of student engagement depended significantly on the instructor's engagement. In all classes, most of the students began with a very positive attitude; they engaged and made an effort to participate in class activities. By the third week of the quarter, students started to show signs of differentiating between highly engaging classes in which instructors did not rely on curricular requirements only and courses that were much less engaging where instructors merely expected students to fulfill minimum requirements for participation. In the latter the number of student posts started dropping from the first and second week highs. This trend continued until the very end of the quarter. Students typically posted only on two different days, and some submitted all posts on one day. None of the students exceeded the minimum required number of posts, and some of the students submitted less than the minimum required number of posts. In extreme cases students chose not to participate at all. Similarly, qualitative analysis of student posts in such classes showed that

student responses were very short, with no or very few connections between concepts learned in the current session and those learned in previous sessions or previous courses; students did not make an effort to use materials other than textbook resources or real-life situations to illustrate or support their posts in the discussion. Overall, course quality seemed very low.

At the same time, students in classes with active facilitation of discussion were very engaged. Most of the students posted more than the required number of times and typically a high number of posts continued throughout the entire quarter. Students posted on more than two days, and none of the students posted on one day. While the quality of the posts varied between classes and students, generally it was relatively high; in each class there was evidence of students connecting concepts from various sessions and classes as well as using various examples to support claims in the discussion.

### Proven Practices

When City University of Seattle started offering online courses over a decade ago, no specific guidelines existed for student and instructor participation. Even though participation in online activities, such as threaded discussions, was built into those courses as a graded assessment, it was not clear what it really meant in terms of timeline. In 2004 the first set of guidelines was created for Division of Arts and Sciences students. Those guidelines included clear expectations for timely submission of posts. More specifically, a three–four rule was created. It required students to post their initial responses to an instructor's questions no later than the end of the third day of the weekly session and then to participate in student-to-student and student-to-instructor discussions during the remaining four days. That simple rule significantly changed the dynamic of the discussions.

In 2006 the CityU Online Coordinating Committee (OCC) introduced a set of guidelines for all instructors and students. Those guidelines described the timelines for submission to threaded discussions, the number of posts required in the discussion (origi-

nal response and at least two posts in student-to-student discussion), and the quality of the discussion (using writing conventions, not limiting posts to short comments such as “good job”), and the response time to e-mails and inquiries, etc. Implementation of these guidelines increased the level of participation in many courses. For example, in the first psychology courses offered online, there were less than 100 posts per session in a class with 12–16 students. This number increased to about 120 posts per week after the first set of guidelines was introduced and then jumped again to more than 150 posts after guidelines for online instructors and students were implemented. Currently, it is not unusual to see more than 200 posts each week in classes of similar size.

Clear guidelines for students help them understand that online discussion does not happen on its own. At the same time, guidelines for instructors help them realize that they need to be active as well as to model student behavior. Instructors who moved from message posting to engaging in discussions helped students to do the same. As a result students felt that they learned more from those instructors. This was reflected in student comments and evaluations. As noted before the evidence in the literature about online education is clear: it is instructors who shape the course and the student-to-student and student-to-instructor interactions. While there is no “one-size-fits-all” rule indicating the optimal level of interaction, students need to see active instructors, and instructors need to find a balance between encouragement and the activities, depending on the nature of their classes, group composition, etc. (Dennen, 2005).

The required level of participation in online threaded discussions was just a small part of the success in increasing student engagement in course activities. As Dallimore, Hertenstein, and Platt (2004) note, non-voluntary participation is not an effective way to increase participation. It has to be accompanied by other practices to keep students interested in courses and course activities as well as to help them feel safe to share. CityU created a set of best practices in collaboration with the most successful instructors who shared their ideas about teaching online. The perception of isolation, from other students as well as the instructor, is one

of the main student complaints about online courses (Bambara, Harbour, Davies, & Athey, 2009; McInerney & Roberts, 2004). Therefore, all CityU instructors are required to post their profiles in class shells so students know how to find them. While the profiles in early online courses were very short and limited to contact information and office hours, most instructors now submit their photo and include personal information about themselves. Additionally, to make interaction in class more personal, many instructors require students to submit their photos as part of the introductory assignment. Similarly, instructors are strongly recommended to greet all students in the course by replying to their introductory posts. These practices ease initial fears about a class and make students feel welcome and comfortable as seen by the number of posts in the introductory activity.

While the quantity of interaction could be relatively easily prescribed by requirements built into the curriculum, it is much more difficult to define the quality of participation. One way to ensure quality is to create rubrics that specifically describe how activities will be assessed. The OCC created a rubric that is used in all online courses. In addition to being graded for timeliness and the number of posts in the discussion, students are also graded based on the depth of their posts, their use of concepts from the course, and the way that they support them with evidence from the required textbook and additional sources. However, it is important to emphasize that even the best rubric will not prevent students from discussing unrelated issues, and, as Maor (2003) pointed out, instructors need to be ready to intervene in such situations. Additionally, as the literature suggests, instructors need to model professional discussions in which students learn from instructors and fellow students. Through questions and comments to student posts, instructors need to shape discussions that will help students learn course concepts. However, what is most important is that instructors need to make discussions relevant to students’ experiences and other course activities (Dennen, 2005). The CityU “practitioner/instructor” model seems to encourage that practice. In combination with questions based on case studies, vignettes, or current events, faculty add their practical experiences throughout the discussions and online activities whenever appropriate.

The best instructors are practitioners who regularly use their professional experience, share articles with students, and encourage them to do the same. Documentaries and news are often used as examples for the discussions in psychology and social sciences classes. The best instructors contribute significantly to the discussion, accounting for about 20–25 percent of the total number of posts each session. Students looking for a model of online behavior see their instructors engaged, asking questions, and making relevant connections between theory and practice.

While in general this is a desired model, it is important to realize potential problems. The literature about online education cautions about overactive instructors who can be viewed as a threat to student learning. They can easily dominate discussions, which can prevent or discourage students from participating (Dennen, 2005; Mandernach, Gonzales, & Garrett, 2006; Palloff & Pratt, 2001). Instructors need to find that right balance between being too absent and being too active. Moderation and balance are the keys to a successful class, and this balance may differ based on many factors, such as discipline, class (introductory vs. advanced) topic, group dynamics, etc. There is no magic number of posts that could be recommended for all instructors who are teaching online. To avoid bias and instructor-dominated discussion, some instructors choose not to participate in discussions until students post their original responses to session questions. They observe discussions at the beginning of the week and start posting their comments in the middle of the week, allowing students to freely express themselves in their initial posts. Then through various questions, they show students different sides of the discussed issues. Finally, while it is recommended that instructors make relevant connections between theory and real-life examples, it is difficult at times to keep students focused on the course concepts. Instructors constantly need to observe discussions to make sure that real life examples and applications are simply used to illustrate or support discussed theories and concepts rather than allowing them to dominate the class objectives. Otherwise discussion might become useless or at times even uncomfortable for students to participate.

## Future Research Directions

There is a great need for future systematic research that would investigate ways to motivate online students to participate in class activities. Motivation is a very complex concept. Many variables impact motivation, starting with intrinsic factors such as student motivation for taking courses, personal situations, personality of the students, etc. and ending with extrinsic factors such as the personality of an instructor, group dynamics, the composition of the class, the type or level of the class (elective vs. required, introductory vs. advanced), or the relevance of topics discussed to students' experiences. It would be beneficial to conduct a longitudinal study of different groups of students to better understand the correlation of these factors with student motivation.

Online learning can be very engaging and beneficial for students. In a supportive online classroom, less formal activities are seamlessly combined with formal and academic discussions while instructors find a delicate balance between being too active and too absent.

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