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Strategies for Engaging the Adult Learner

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Abstract

Students demonstrate their level of engagement in three ways: behavioral engagement, cognitive engagement, and emotional engagement. Instructors who proactively implement strategies to better engage their students enhance student learning and satisfaction in course work. Establishing shared responsibility between the student and the instructor is recommended to achieve higher levels of student engagement for adult learners.

Introduction

The landscape is rapidly changing in higher education, both for students and for instructors, in light of student and employer demands,

financial challenges, and technological advancements. Students today have expectations for lower tuition costs and securing their education quicker than before. Instructors have the task of providing students with learning opportunities to meet their expectations for an engaging experience and achieve expected academic outcomes. Integrated technologies, evolving modes of delivery, and competency-based learning opportunities all affect the student experience.

While technology advancements provide multiple opportunities for increased interaction with students, the lecture format remains commonplace. Traditional forms of instruction, including the lecture format, are being challenged by adult learners because many of these instructional approaches do not provide students with as rich an opportunity to engage in learning at the level that they expect. Additionally, some instructors who integrate technology options do not employ optimal teaching strategies for the tool being used.

Unmet expectations have consequences. Students frequently talk with others about their learning experiences. If they have good experiences, they share these with others. Likewise, if classroom activities do not meet expectations, students share these negative experiences as well. This sharing of experiences affects the reputation of the institution in significant ways. Consequently, many institutions survey students on their level of engagement to measure students' perceptions of their experiences at the institution.

Defining Student Engagement

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) Institute for Effective Educational Practice (2013) describes student engagement both as (a) the time and effort that students apply to their studies and other related activities and (b) the resources the institution invests to organize the curriculum and other learning opportunities in meaningful ways.

In broad terms, engaged students take initiative, apply effort, and generally display positive emotions about the learning experience. "Students are engaged when they are involved in their work, persist despite challenges and obstacles, and take visible delight in accomplishing their work" (Schlechty, 1994, p. 5). Disengaged students do not produce their best work and often display passive behaviors such as boredom, anger, and anxiety.

They withdraw from learning challenges and even rebel against instructors and peers (Bomia, Beluzo, Demeester, Elander, Johnson, & Sheldon, 1997).

While definitions vary considerably, common themes emerge in the literature, providing potential frameworks for discussing strategies for student engagement. Three common themes are related to student engagement for the adult learner: behavioral engagement, cognitive engagement, and emotional engagement.

Behavioral engagement focuses on the extent to which students are actively involved in learning tasks with others (Harper & Quaye, 2008). Examples include respecting others, listening to instructors and peers, engaging in discussions, and participating in teams.

Cognitive engagement refers to the student's level of investment in learning and effort exerted to comprehend complex ideas or master difficult skills (Blumenfeld, Kempler, & Krajcik, 2006). Examples include the effort in understanding course material, completing assignments, critically analyzing information, applying concepts to real-world examples, and deepening insights through research and interaction.

Emotional engagement focuses on how students feel about the educational experience. (O'Donnell, Reeve, & Smith, 2011). Examples include students' level of excitement, interest, and enjoyment of their academic experiences.

These themes are broad and often overlap. One challenge for academic leaders is determining where to focus efforts for improvement. At institutions where the majority of students are adult learners, this adds an additional layer of complexity when challenging faculty to continuously improve student engagement.

Engaging the Adult Learner

Adult learners are operating in an environment where what they learn is often immediately applied to their work, career, and success. As such, these students have many expectations of instructors and the classroom

experience. Adults are interested in the effective application of concepts learned in their course work (Honigsfeld & Dunn, 2006). Instructors would benefit from approaching the classroom environment with the characteristics of adult learners at the forefront of their minds.

Knowles (1980) stressed that adult learners need independence, self-direction, ownership of learning, relevant and applicable contexts, and sharing of life experiences as a source of knowledge. Instructors seeking to improve engagement of adult learners should ensure that course activities provide multiple pathways for learning and sufficient opportunities for discussion. Bocchi, Eastman, and Swift (2004) determined that adult learners should be "self-motivated and have self-discipline, initiative, commitment, time management skills, organization skills, and a willingness to participate in the class" (p. 247). Instructors should ensure that adult learners have these skills and characteristics and modify learning experiences accordingly.

Cercone (2008) recommended that instructors consider the following characteristics when designing learning experiences: (a) potential limitations such as preexisting learning histories or preferred learning styles; (b) a need to be actively involved in learning experiences and a possible need for support through coaching, resources, and other strategies; (c) a need for the instructor to act as facilitator to provide opportunities to share prior experiences; (d) a need to apply relevant learning to reality; (e) value placed on self-reflection and opportunities to test learning along the way; and (f) a desire for collaborative environments that promote dialogue, social interaction, and mutual respect.

Instructors are advised to evaluate the students in their courses to discover learning patterns, to permit self-directed learning among the students, to provide opportunities for the students to understand learning preferences, and to apply these preferences throughout the course (Honigsfeld & Dunn, 2006). Through interaction with the instructor and fellow students, adults learn from shared stories about successes and failures; they have the opportunity to explore concepts and learn from each other. When students come together to learn, instructors should strive to replace student passivity with active engagement.

Strategies for Increasing Student Engagement among Adult Learners

Instructors should monitor their courses for evidence of disengagement and proactively implement strategies for increasing engagement of adult learners. The following strategies for increasing behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement can be implemented to enhance the learning experience for adult learners.

Behavioral Engagement

Students demonstrate behavioral engagement when they are actively involved in learning tasks with others (Harper & Quaye, 2008). They are more behaviorally engaged when they are respectful in their interactions with instructors and peers, actively listening to diverse viewpoints, engaging in generative discussions, and effectively participating in teams. Evidence of behavioral disengagement can include distancing, independence (versus interdependence), and repeated tardiness to agreed-upon meetings. Other examples might include interrupting, side conversations, superficial responses, halfheartedness, and lack of participation.

Strategies for improving behavioral engagement among adult learners include:

Modeling expected behavior: Model respect by actively listening, acknowledging the value of student contributions, and honoring students' unique perspectives.

Promoting interdependence: Promote engagement between students by having them complete tasks together, share ideas with one another, or constructively challenge each other's positions with research support.

Providing constructive feedback: Provide explicit and constructive feedback to students on their interaction in the classroom, praising them for the areas in which they are performing well, and sharing areas in which they can work on improving.

Inviting interaction: Invite students to interact with each other by scaffolding ideas, highlighting connections between similar interest areas, and challenging students to resolve contradictory perspectives.

Cognitive Engagement

Students demonstrate cognitive engagement when they exhibit effort and investment in their learning experience (Blumenfeld, Kempler, & Krajcik, 2006). Students are more cognitively engaged when they exert significant effort into understanding complex course materials and completing assignments, critically analyzing information, applying concepts to real-world examples, and deepening insights through research and interaction. Evidence of cognitive disengagement can include lack of preparedness for class, superficial analyses, and basic responses to prompts. Other examples might include minimal application of content to personal and professional experiences and a simplistic approach to finding supportive research.

Strategies for improving cognitive engagement among adult learners include:

Encouraging critical analysis: Provide opportunities for students to identify opinions, underlying assumptions, and major ideas in readings or course work; have students critically evaluate each other's work and provide constructive feedback.

Personalizing summaries: Invite students to share key ideas learned, content they found most useful and relevant, and the questions that remain. Include these ideas in course summaries and announcements, addressing key questions.

Applying concepts to real-life scenarios: Share relevant case studies and real-life examples, and encourage students to do the same. Include additional resources (e.g., videos, websites, blogs, articles, or activities) to enhance learning and reinforce key concepts.

Promoting information literacy: Challenge students to support their positions, resolve controversies, and deepen their understanding through scholarly research. Model information literacy in discussions and summaries.

Emotional Engagement

Students demonstrate emotional engagement by how they feel about their educational experience (O'Donnell, Reeve, & Smith, 2011). Students are more emotionally engaged when they are excited about coming to class, interested in the content of the course, and enjoy the learning experience. Evidence of emotional disengagement can include absence from class, infrequency of participation, and a negative or critical tone in interactions. Other examples might include disinterest, indicators of boredom, and nonchalance toward the learning experience.

Strategies for improving emotional engagement among adult learners include:

Establishing personal connections: Reach out personally to students to find out what their goals, hopes, and expectations are for the class. Find out about personal and professional interests and find ways to establish personal connections.

Recognizing achievements: Praise students when they perform well, make improvements, respond to feedback, and when they lead by example. Where appropriate, praise publicly, and incorporate their contributions in course summaries.

Integrating students' goals: Find ways to integrate students' individual goals into the curriculum or discussions. Provide real-life examples that resonate with students and empower them to share their own examples to make connections.

Providing personalized feedback: Take the time to provide personalized feedback on the work students submit, and hold them accountable for incorporating feedback in future work. Invite

students to discuss feedback and questions in a face-to-face or virtual meeting.

Shared Responsibility for Student Engagement

Accepting responsibility for student engagement is challenging and for good reason, especially in circumstances where factors affecting results are beyond an institution's direct control. Many businesses conduct *employee* engagement surveys for the purpose of identifying opportunities to retain the talented people they employ (Markos & Waltair, 2010). Questions cover a variety of topics. Some are areas where the employee's manager has a direct impact on the engagement level of staff. There are other areas where the manager's impact is far less direct. Outside influences that are beyond managers' control can have a significant effect upon the motivation and engagement of employees. For example, compensation and benefits are typically not within managers' control but have a measurable impact upon the retention of their employees.

Despite the lack of complete control, many business leaders hold their managers responsible for the engagement level of those who report to them directly (Duguay, 2010). One reason for this may be that employees respond more favorably in those areas where the manager has direct control; correspondingly they likewise respond less favorably in those areas when the manager's control and influence is limited. While they realize that engagement is a shared responsibility (Duguay), they recognize that the manager's impact is far reaching.

With adult learners, academic leaders should consider the parallels that can be applied to student engagement, specifically in areas where the responsibility resides for improvement. Like managers, there are influences that are far outside of an instructor's ability to control, that can and do clearly affect the student's level of engagement. Just as the manager is the primary link between the employees and the organization, the instructor is perhaps the most important link to the success and engagement of the students.

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