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Evaluating the Way Forward in Online Student Engagement.

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Evaluating the Way Forward in Online Student Engagement.

Abstract

Several factors make up the successful instructional experience in online higher education classes. With the advanced offerings in online learning, educational institutions are compelled to innovate all aspects of their online classes (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). The innovation can lead to a higher caliber learning environment. This paper advances a simple model for Instructors to follow, an Instructional Online Model (IOM), with the intent of improving student engagement, knowledge retention, leading to increased business profit. Instructors who model the discussed techniques may find increased student's satisfaction with their courses, leading to the students pursuing further online education. Technological advancement and student maturity are themes identified during this research. These trends are topics for further research.

Keywords: online, student engagement, Instructor model, instructional success, teaching with humility

Background: Competition is stiff and virtual

With current technological advances, you can achieve anything online, even earning advanced academic credentials. Pursuing an undergraduate or graduate degree online is an accessible option for adults who are not interested in the traditional campus experience. The number of students comprising online undergraduate degree programs is rising (US News and World Report, 2017). One thing leads to another; greater student satisfaction with online courses leads to more online enrollment. The more successful students are in their online education, the more likely they are to pursue graduate degrees online (Hazelkorn, 2011). Larger online enrollments indicate more profit for the institutions.

Higher education is following the money. Since the fall of 2014, and increasing since then, over five million students enrolled in online programs at degree-granting institutions (US Department of Education, 2016). There are many reasons for why increasing numbers of higher education institutions rely on online courses as a survival strategy. Universities and colleges may see offering online courses as justification to cut back on expenses of traditional brick & mortar classrooms. As online enrollment increases, offering more virtual or blended modality classes allow educational institutions to remain competitive. The competition for online enrollment is getting fierce as evidenced in program rankings such as US News and World Report's yearly educational rankings (Hazelkorn, 2011).

Financial considerations for the established learning institutions have much to consider. There may be hesitation in offering equal number of online classes. Academic leaders do not always adapt well to technology changes, and the cost of advanced technology may hamper institutional enthusiasm for offering online courses. Dual-modality of course delivery may mean more upfront technology costs to the organization, and increased training for the Instructors. Component costs ranging from Learning Management Systems, to Video Teleconferencing equipment may squelch some institutions from advancing their online course offerings (Barnett, 2004).

Time is also valuable to students and equals money. Success in online learning debates three components: quality of instruction, time investments, and cost (Seiver & Troja, 2014). The institution's course price may be similar for online courses. If enrollment is the same cost, but you are saving commute and attendance time, online courses become value-added proposition. The degree program path of online education is becoming more fluid in offerings. Some students start and complete their academic programs entirely online. Proponents of online learning attest this modality can be effective in potentially removing barriers and bias while boosting convenience, flexibility, relevant course material, and enhanced feedback over a traditional face-to-face classroom experience (Ni, 2013). There are also those on the path to finishing an on-campus degree program.

Course delivery methods affect student engagement. Many online and in-person course offerings have identical components. Each course's modality uses the same syllabus, textbook, quizzes and tests, and grading rubrics. Class sizes can also be similar. It is the mode of Instructor-to-student communication where the main difference lies (Bettinger, Fox, Loeb & Taylor, 2017). The timing of participation between students and Instructors follows a strict schedule in campus classes, while class participation is mostly asynchronous for online classes. Many institutions offer a blended or dual-modality approach, of the Instructor teaching from

inside a classroom, while televising to off-site students. This method of course delivery allows more flexibility for both the students and the institutions. Studies indicate certain courses are more challenging to students who persist in the virtual environment “while participation may be less intimidating, and the quality and quantity of interaction may be increased in online classes” (Ni, 2013, p. 212). This paper will not go into detail on the various scenarios but concentrates on the engagement skills of the online Instructors, with a detailed model for successful engagement.

Problem Statement

There is a plethora of educational choices available to working adults (Bettinger, Liu, & Loeb, 2016). What would make taking online courses not just appealing to potential students, but a more rewarding educational experience? What can universities and colleges do, through their classroom management and Instructor training, to ensure that students receive the highest caliber of education from online Instructors? How can Instructors attempt to replicate the personalized instruction students can receive while instructing an online course? There is research to indicate that students taking online courses are not as successful in achieving their education goals as those who stick to on-campus courses (Bettinger, Fox, Loeb & Taylor, 2017). This paper posits that the quality of instruction depends on the Instructor, transcending the learning modality, as most instrumental to the success of the student’s knowledge gains.

Research Question

What are Instructor-based factors contributing to effective online learning and satisfaction with taking online classes? This paper advances a simple instructional model, an Instructional Online Model (IOM), contributing to online student’s satisfaction with online classes. The factors detailed here are agnostic to the learning modality, and student demographics, although the examples shown have working adults as the student model. The dynamics covered in this paper, could make Instructor-student engagement stronger, leading to growth of online courses success, and prove useful to higher education institutes. Many of the techniques covered in the Instructional Online Model (IOM) are also possible for use in on-campus classes.

Proven Factors

What research shows lacking in online instruction is the human interaction, and empathetic responses that in-person instruction is capable of delivering. The human engagement, even when delivered virtually, enhances online courses. Even with advances in technology, people have not changed in their basic desire for simple human interaction. “*Emotional intelligence competencies are necessary for a leader to be successful in reflecting on experience, interpreting environmental cues, relating to followers, and developing relationships*” (Watkins et al, 2017, p. 150). Success in online learning is also attributed to internal locus of control, and self-efficacy of the students. While students can prepare themselves for online success, by developing their computer skills, time management, and developing more emotional intelligence, the Instructor’s role in a successful class warrants a more detailed model (Berenson, Boyles & Weaver, 2008).

Model Element Implications

The Instructional Online Model (IOM) described here, focuses on Instructor-to-student interactions, building rapport while building client loyalty. The IOM is mainly designed for

classes online, not requiring a visually interactive Instructor/student interface. However, Instructors could also follow this model using any educational modality. Many of today’s students are working adults, with full-time employment, and families. Their lifestyle also makes enrolling in online courses an attractive and viable option for work/life balance (Bettinger, Fox, Loeb & Taylor, 2017).

In this paper, we detail a conceptual framework suggesting compassionate engagement, dynamic communications, intellectual humility, and educational servant leadership as essential components of robust classroom engagements (Lynch, 2017). Initial impressions of the Instructional Online Model (IOM) carry throughout a typical nine-week online course. Dr. Patricia Schmaltz has employed this framework and model in classes for Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University since 2014. As described in the model, the attitude from the Instructor establishes and builds credibility and trust, required for a successful course experience. The elements listed in Table 1 below detail how an Instructor initiates engagement with students, establishing the foundations for successful classroom experiences. The term ‘daily’ indicates that this technique should be employed at least once a day. The term ‘continual’ indicates a technique recommended for use in every possible instance of communications.

Table 1
Instructional Online Model Interaction and Occurrence

Instructional Online Model (IOM)	
<i>Type of Interaction</i>	<i>Occurrence</i>
Establish trust / credibility / humility / Teaming Environment	Continual
Daily Engagement: Show how to succeed in all you communicate (grading comments, and in discussion posts)	
Say ‘Thank you’ in all communications	
Use the student’s name when communicating	
Share knowledge of tools to use (IT or other)	
Post a variety of content in your announcements with attached articles of interest cited	Daily
Responding to Posts with pertinent examples to share	Daily

Establish credibility and trust:

For an Instructor’s effectiveness, and a student’s cognitive growth; both depend on a cooperative relationship of trust (Chang, Doll, van ’t Wout, Frank, & Sanfey, 2010). Establishing trust in the Instructor/student relationship starts with the initial introduction. An Instructor builds trust with the students by aligning commonalities during the introductory first week of class. Articulating any perceived commonalities in the introduction, such as an affiliation with the military, or an awareness of the challenges of online instruction, go a long way to build trust between Instructor and students. As Chang (et al) state, “*trust is a broad concept that extends to many different aspects of social interaction and may depend on the assessment of a variety of factors, including, honesty, competence, competitiveness, and greed*” (p. 88). Many universities, such as Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, hire Instructors with terminal degrees, thus establishing competency in the field of study.

Empathy and humility

Why is it that humility seems to be a dying trait, particularly in academia? An Instructor is hired to perform a service. Instructors of any course do not have omnipotent knowledge on a subject. Instructors do not magically possess the knowledge, skills, or ability to perform this service. It takes Instructors years, if not decades, to reach this level of proficiency in their subject matter and in teaching the material. After knowing and experiencing the struggle, Instructors should approach the delivery of knowledge with a high level of empathy and humility. Intellectual humility is a vital component of knowledge growth (Lockhart, McKee & Donnelly, 2017). Good Instructors should show humility and empathy, and effectively convey those traits to their students. Instructors recognize their own fallibility, reconnect with basic values, and open themselves up to new knowledge (Lynch, 2017).

Daily Compassionate Engagement

- a. Setting the framework for establishing a virtual ‘team’ in each class is the first element of success (Earnhardt, 2009). As the Team Leader, the Instructor needs to have daily interaction with the class, not just sporadically addressing the class. Each day, the Instructor posts a class announcement with the initial (and continual) greeting of ‘*Hello Team*’. Each time the Instructor addresses the entire class, the word ‘Team’ emphasizes the virtual team element. In the IOM, the posted Announcements contain on-topic insights to share. These Announcements contain Instructor insights, and an article related to, but not grade-related in content. Announcements also contain an attached reference article the students can use in their research papers, along with an example of how to properly cite the reference in APA format. There is no obligation for the students to acknowledge or use these announcement contents.
- b. Adult students pay for their education, and they deserve to get the best service. They pay for a quality designed course, and a credentialed Instructor to teach; not an Instructor to simply monitor the classroom discussions. “Monitoring” is not “Teaching”. If the Instructor is an Adjunct Faculty member from another institution, then there may be a conflict of communication strategies, as the Instructor may bring a more limited set of engagement expectations (Ridge & Ritt, 2017). Quality Universities should establish a strict policy for the quality and quantity of Instructor engagement in the online classroom. The Instructional Online Model (IOM) offers enhancement to an engagement policy with deeper engagement, more focused discussions and interactions with the Instructor to students.

Each week, as the students reply to the Discussion Posts, the IOM model suggests that the Instructor also responds, sharing the ‘expert’ knowledge they can share on the topic. Every day the IOM model recommends answering emails from students within 24 hours, and if there are students who have not been ‘in class’, then after 5 days absent, the Instructor should send a ‘Wellness-Check’ email, inquiring if the student is experiencing unforeseen challenges. Just because the students are adults and not physically present, does not preclude caring about their welfare.

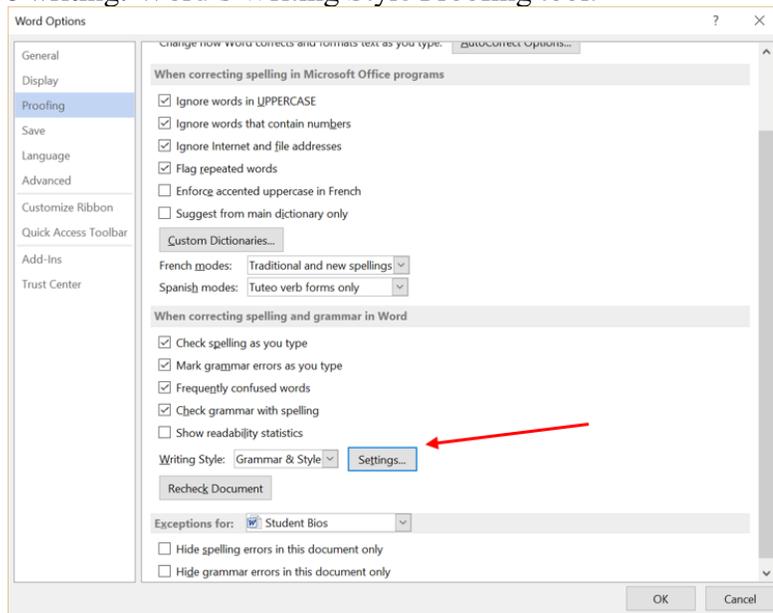
- c. Integrate the elements of trust, inclusion, and communication *daily* with the students. Demonstrate to the students how to succeed. When you set students up for success

from the beginning of class, this action builds trusts, emphasizes inclusion, and the bonus is it makes grading so much easier! In this model IOM, the Instructor provides daily constructive comments on what it takes to turn in the best work. When an Instructor reads a Discussion Posts, and notices that the student has yet to post one including a reference/citation, mention the post requirements in a non-judgmental manner: *“Great post Jerome and thank you for sharing your insights. Since you’re going to respond to two other posts this week, make sure you include a reference, and then cite that reference. THAT is the way to your best grade; proving your knowledge is backed by the experts.”*

The IOM recommends humility and the sharing of knowledge. If an Instructor knows of a tool to use in their particular course of study, they should share that knowledge. This speaks to the humility of the Instructor, with awareness that everyone benefits from assistance and encouragement to succeed (Lockhart, McKee & Donnelly, 2017).

For classes on qualitative material, having extensive writing requirements, introduce the students to the Word feature that checks spelling, grammar, and punctuation. Knowing and using this tool allows them to turn in more quality writing assignments. In the IOM, Instructors share the knowledge of this tool in the first weeks of class, by placing the information in a Class Announcement. Here is an example:

Improve writing: Word’s Writing Style Proofing tool:



Another general knowledge announcement would be sharing exactly how to properly use APA format, in references, citations and general formatting. This knowledge benefits students throughout their academic pursuits. Sources such as Google’s Scholar and Purdue University’s OWL ease the activities of crafting research papers, so they can concentrate on the paper content. Sharing this knowledge also lessens grading difficulties for the Instructors, so they can concentrate on better communicating.

Below are detailed components of the Instructional Online Model. Initially the recommendations may seem just as courtesy points. As Seiver and Troja point out, the ‘manners’ part of human interaction may be missing in online engagements (2014). All the more reason to make these courtesy’s part of a model to follow:

- a. When students first introduce themselves, Instructors should make a Word File with student names and introductory information. Instructors can then refer to this during the course, tailoring their responses and communication with the students.
- b. If students are ‘missing in class’, send them an email to inquire if they are okay. It is surprising how many students have responded that other professors do not practice this courtesy. This is not to have a parental approach, but more empathetic and customer-oriented style to classroom engagement.
- c. Provide daily interaction and responses geared to the Instructor and student’s accessibility. When an Instructor engages daily in discussions with the students, this ongoing communication provides a richer experience in the classroom. Students cannot feel as if they are in the ‘classroom’ by themselves, when they are engaging daily with the Instructor.
- d. The ability of Instructor to share on-topic insights for all to digest is even more valuable in an online classroom. The rationale of having a qualified Instructor is that they have knowledge to share, not just experience in administering instruction. When an Instructor relays insights and experience on the course topics, this broadens the vision of the students to entail not just the textbook, but also real-world examples.
- e. Set the students up for excellence; clear directions and detailed feedback. When Instructors grade assignments, providing clear and positive feedback on exactly how to improve, assists in the student’s growth as an online participant. An example:
Joe! Thank you for your posts and for your engaging discussions. You have very balanced approach to your points and are respectful of others. However, you need to show a reference, and you also need to cite it inside your text. Also, when you do not distribute your posts throughout the week, you do not give yourself a great chance to respond to other’s post: they have all moved on! That is University policy as shown in the rubric. So, cite, reference, and increase activity! Please look at the rubric to gain insight about your grade. Thank you, Joe.
- f. The interaction between the Instructor and students should *not* be sporadic. The quality and duration of the interactions should be the same as if they were in class together. Too often, in online courses, the Instructor ‘checks in’ periodically, essentially leaving the class to engage with each other, and not with the Instructor.

The components of the IOM, compassionate engagement, dynamic communications, intellectual humility, and educational servant leadership are fluid constructs and flow throughout the courses. The IOM model illustrated here works best with emotionally intelligent Instructors who are well versed in practicing servant leadership skills. “*Emotional intelligence competencies are necessary for a leader to be successful in reflecting on experience, interpreting environmental cues, relating to followers, and developing relationships*” (Watkins, Earnhardt, Pittenger, Roberts, Rietsema, Cosman-Ross, 2017, p. 150). Servant leadership coexists with

emotional intelligence; these can be personal traits, but they are also skills to be learned and deployed (Berenson, Boyles & Weaver, 2008).

Success of programs

Each year, U.S. News and World Report magazine awards the ‘Best In...’ Rankings for various industries (US News and World Report, 2017). U.S. News has awarded Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University – Worldwide (ERAU-W), the No. 2 spot (tied with Temple University) in 2017 for online bachelor’s degrees. This makes the fifth consecutive year Embry-Riddle Worldwide earned this prestigious award as one of the nation’s top 5 online educators. Embry-Riddle is the only institution to be ranked in the top 5 each of the past 5 years. Dr. Patricia Schmaltz is an Adjunct Professor and teaches exclusively for ERAU-W and has stellar responses from her students for the past 5 years, all related to the compassionate engagement, dynamic communications, intellectual humility, and educational servant leadership she deploys in her classes. As ERAU-W offers many courses for their instructors to enhance the educational experience, it may be that other ERAU-W Instructors are using the IOM model as well.

Conclusion

Either way, in person or using online education, with proper time management skills, today’s adults can finish a four-year degree program while working full-time (King, 2017). An education completed online can aid in professional growth, as well as offer academic credentials, while achieving a work-life balance. Motivating those online students, using quality engagement techniques from the Instructors, enhances each course, assisting students in completing their academic journey.

When Instructors have more quality engagements with online students, not only is learning enhanced, but online enrollment increases (Bettinger, Liu, & Loeb, 2016). The likely consequence of following this proposed model is universities and colleges supporting this higher level of engagement would also see gains of enrollment in their graduate programs. When used in an online university classroom, the IOM proposed in this paper enriches the student experience, provides a richer learning environment, and ultimately improves everyone’s bottom line.

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Dr. Patricia is a Professor for Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University. She holds a PhD in Management and Organizational Leadership. She has 28 years of experience teaching adults in vocational and professional skills, in addition to her 4 years of University teaching. Her background is in professional course-ware development, technical writing, and instructing. She had developed numerous professional level courses, most recently for the Veteran Administration.

Dan Petersen holds BA and MBA degrees earned primarily in the online environment. Dan is finishing his PhD, also achieved in a primarily online modality. He also possesses over 10 years of platform training experience as a US Army and DoD Contracted training provider. He has an extensive background in adult learning environments and continues to provide training services as a DoD service provider.

Dr. Julia Carpenter is a Professor for Valencia College. She holds a doctorate in Curriculum and Instruction, with a specialization in online teaching and learning. Dr. Carpenter is an experienced principal instructional systems designer and instructor with extensive experience designing, developing and facilitating instructor-led, computer-based, web-based, and paper-based learning products for a variety of government, military, and educational institutions, including the Veterans Benefits Administration.