Success in the Online Classroom: Lessons Learned

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In the early 2000s, we embarked on research to study online education. At the time, online courses offered by traditional institutions was in its' infancy. Through our research, we learned that increasing students' intrinsic motivation could lead to more successful learning environments. Today's online learning environments are afforded many more technological advances that were not available 20 years ago. In addition, the Covid19 Pandemic has forced the creation online learning environment. Therefore, we believe that revisiting the elements that lead to successful online learning is timely and necessary. Through this research, we affirm that technological advancements have led to more meaningful ways to enhance online learning environments.

Keywords: online learning, distance education

INTRODUCTON

Modern online learning began in the late 1900s, with Phoenix University being one of the first universities completely modeled to provide online learning experiences for specific populations. However, it took several years for brick-and-mortar universities to begin offering these non-traditional courses to students. In 2016, 32% of all students were taking at least one online course and nearly 15% were taking their entire course load online. (Seaman, Allen, & Seaman, 2018). As faculty in a College of Business, we began exploring and offering online course content to students in the early 2000s. In 2004, we embarked upon a mission to determine what practices and/or student traits lend to success in the online classroom.

The convenience of the online course model is the main attraction for students. Through online study, students can complete course requirements while also engaging other activities that may not be possible while participating in traditional courses. However, there are questions about which student attributes, course design, and delivery methods contribute to greater quality and success. Because technology constantly changes the digital learning environment, those same questions persist today.

Given the pandemic forced most American universities to temporarily convert curriculum to online platforms with relatively no preparation and little guidance to teaching professionals and students engaged in those courses, we believe that now is a good time to revisit what we learned in the past. In this paper, we

discuss theory and techniques that help foster successful online learning environments. This discussion will include constructs that we were proponents of in the early 2000s, given the limitations of technology available, but now know are inferior in online learning environments. In addition, we will explore some lessons we have learned in over 15 years of teaching online courses.

A review of previous research on distance education (Arbaugh, 2001; Carr-Chellman, 2000; Cooper, 2000) indicated that effective online versus traditional classes included analyzing teaching design and methods, a focus on the frequency and timeliness of e-mail interactions, weekly discussion boards, the use of collaborative student groups, and recognizing diversity of study attributes and experiences. Further, while some previous research suggested that student profiling is key (Hansen, 2003; Schuemer, 1993; Wang & Newlin, 2002), other research, including our own, found that demographic variables are not directly related to performance outcomes in online classrooms (Brown, 2001; Wallace, Juban, & Walker, 2004; Wegerif, 1998). This year, the pandemic required most classes in the nation to convert to online platforms for at least one semester. Many campuses are still online, while others are teaching through hybrid methods. Moreover, the future of higher education is uncertain. Given that our online research was over 15 years ago, we believe that revisiting our past study and looking at it through today's lens can provide useful insight.

Through conducting research, reviewing professional collaboration of recommendations and experiences in a higher education forum, and through experience in teaching online classes, we continue to believe that intrinsic motivation is important in increasing online student success. However, the components of online courses that foster intrinsic motivation have changed over the years. Those changes are usually facilitated through creation of new online tools, software, and equipment. Further, the instructor's role in both providing and facilitating meaningful communication in online courses and developing a sense of community play key roles in the intrinsic motivation process.

Intrinsic Motivation Theory

Intrinsic motivation theory is a construct of Deci and Ryan's (1985) Self Determination Theory (SDT). The basic assumption of SDT is that "people are active organisms, with innate tendencies toward psychological growth and development, who strive to master ongoing challenges and to integrate their experiences into a coherent sense of self." Particularly important, is the role that the environment plays in development. Deci and Ryan (2000) explain that the process of development does not occur automatically, but rather is either supported or thwarted through social context.

In previous research, we surveyed students to determine how intrinsic motivation theory related to online class success (Wallace, Juban, Walker, 2004). Results from the research showed that participants perceived intrinsic motivation was significantly correlated to students' level of satisfaction with their final grades and course experiences. Through the intrinsic motivation survey, as well as qualitative questions, we learned that the most important construct was meaningful communication between instructors and their students.

As practitioners of online courses, we have conducted research, attended conference sessions, reviewed online higher education forum posts, and applied various forms of communication techniques to the courses we teach. In this paper, we discuss strategies that we have found useful in design and maintenance of online classes that provide greater satisfaction and success in the learning process.

Measures to Increase Intrinsic Motivation

Creating a sense of community and engaging in meaningful communication has garnered success for many educators engaging in online instruction. Figure 1 depicts the strategies that we found to help increase intrinsic motivation in our earlier study compared to now.

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FIGURE 1
THEN AND NOW: STRATEGIES TO INCREASE INTRINSIC MOTIVATION

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Early 2000s	Student Homepages	Discussion Boards	Group Activities	Meaningful & Timely Email
2022	Preparing Students for Success	Building a Learning Community	Synchronous & Asynchronous Learning	Meaningful & Timely Feedback

Preparing Students for Success

In our earlier study, we did not address preparing students for success in online environments. At that time, online learning platforms and methods were very limited. The ability to easily make and stream video reliably had not been achieved. Therefore, it was assumed that students who embarked in the online learning process did so with the knowledge that they would have to approach the course with a willingness to dedicate time to the online learning content. However, today's technological achievements provide an overwhelming number of tools and ways that the online learning environment can be shaped. Therefore, it is increasingly helpful to provide either a graphic or short video to help students learn what will be expected of the course, as well as give them tips about how to be successful. Providing this information up-front has the potential to help students increase their intrinsic motivation by giving them a map to success. Figure 2 illustrates a short graphic that can be useful for any online learning environment (Semingson, 2020).

<div align="center">

FIGURE 2

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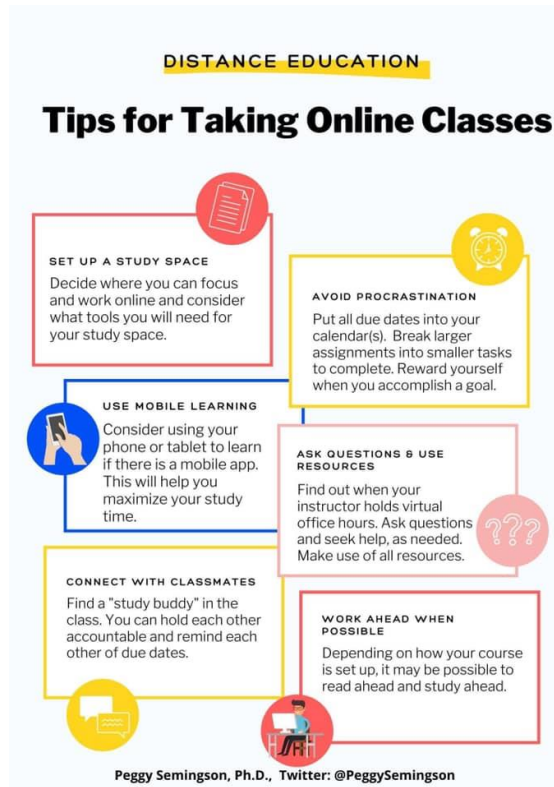
Building a Learning Community

Our earlier research suggested having students create personal homepages to introduce themselves so that they could feel a sense of community. We believe establishing a rapport is extremely useful in maintaining motivation. Compared to early online learning, the tools that allow students the ability to introduce themselves and express themselves are vast. Regardless of the avenue, students can make connections with other students and create a building block for faculty to deploy assignments that are not only interesting to students, but also contribute to greater completion and success rates.

Further, allowing students to creatively expressing themselves with self-chosen videos, photos, and narratives, helps to establish a sense of autonomy for the student. In addition, taking the time to examine each student's expression of self and giving feedback helps the professor establish a connection with the student. We have learned that taking this course of action not only increases a sense of autonomy but can also increase a student's feelings of closeness to the professor, which both indicate positive intrinsic motivation.

Synchronous and Asynchronous Learning Environments

Technology limitations of the past necessitated discussion board conversations because they were an important part of most online classes. Discussion boards not only encouraged students to use critical thinking skills, but also allowed students to collaborate with one another and increase their sense of autonomy. In the past, it was the only way faculty members could facilitate interactivity by posting questions on a discussion board that required student participation through thoughtful responses. However, technology advances have afforded better tools to achieve these goals.

Today, there are several synchronous learning environments, such as Zoom and Google Meet and others, that allow professors to conduct real-time classrooms through digital platforms. For this learning style to be successful, teachers must be prepared and find ways to motivate students to participate. Given that these platforms have been implemented on large scales in a relatively short time, there is a learning curve about decorum, best practices, and protocol with platforms in both the instruction and learner roles. However, real-time instruction would not have been possible 20 years ago. Also, the ability to record those sessions and review them provides great advantages to the learning process.

Group Activities

Both in the past and today, developing groups online is possible through online course platform tools. Currently, however, the synchronous tools available provide the potential for more meaningful group interaction and learning. Groups allow students to collaborate and communicate without the observation or participation of the entire class. Students can share files, schedule and meetings, and private email with other group members. Facilitating online groups creates an environment where students have all the advantages of online technology, but no time or physical meeting restraints.

Face to Face Meetings or Timely Email

In the past, email was the main medium for corresponding with students online. Of course, we now have the added ability to easily engage in face-to-face interactions through digital means. Regardless of the technology, to be effective, responses need to be frequent and meaningful. Because these engagements can be time-consuming, faculty members may feel overwhelmed when using these tools. However, some tips to make communicating more meaningful, without detracting from faculty time and sanity, can be established here. These tips are based on our experiences with online teaching and surveys of other faculty members who teach online.

1) Answer students' emails within a 24-hour period.
2) Set a time and day where students can meet you through videoconferencing, email, or phone.
3) Post announcements or establish a digital space for students to find answers to their questions before they email you.

CONCLUSION

Online courses are becoming a more prevalent way to teach and learn, not just in America, but throughout the world. To remain competitive, educators are charged with constructing and facilitating courses that are satisfactory and successful. In 2004, when we embarked on our first online learning study, we could not have predicted the great advancements in technology that provide real-time and reliable visual communication for online courses. Because online teaching and learning environments are here to stay, educators must continually assess the tools that become available to enhance the ways that we make connections with students and to increase their perceived value and quality of learning experiences.

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