

Course-Embedded Advising for International Students: Opportunities for Engagement Building

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This pilot involved the implementation of a course-embedded advising model in a graduate level ethics course of a small international university. Online education has been employed to reduce the effects of massification and target resources (Franco et al., 2019; Yann & Ibrahim, 2020) with the aim of increasing access to education in underserved and developing countries. Online education improves access but access alone does not suffice. Quality in online courses, determined in part by engagement, is one factor that may address inequity of access Adarkwah (2021). Lessons learned and future directions are discussed in the context of Self-Determination Theory.

Keywords: course-embedded advising, international students, engagement, online education, online teaching, access to education, quality in online education

INTRODUCTION

Access to quality higher education in developing countries around the world is severely limited (Boughey, & McKenna, 2021). In fact, access to higher education represents a significant inequity in sub-Saharan Africa (Yann & Ibrahim, 2020). In cases where higher education is available, massification tends to result in overloaded classes, where learning and engagement are extremely difficult to nurture (Mohamedbhai, 2014). In some cases, students who are unable to access higher education institutions in their home countries travel to universities outside of their locale, and research demonstrates that the flow tends to center on the United States (Barnett, Lee, & Park, 2016). Not all students are able to relocate to different countries to pursue their education, due to inequitable resources in their home countries (Hiralal, 2015). Further, not all students want to relocate (Barcus & Werner, 2017; Breines, Raghuram, & Gunter, 2019). Online education provides students in these situations with the opportunity to remain in their home countries while still accessing higher education. Online education's ability to bring higher education to rural and remote areas also contributes to the development of these areas (Franco et al., 2019). Online education can also serve to empower individuals who lack resources and opportunities (Butcher, Latchem, & Levey, 2011).

Adarkwah (2021) notes widespread support for online education in many developing countries, combined with significant concerns regarding the quality of the education provided. In many cases, quality is impacted by technological resources. Varying levels of technology readiness among economically disadvantaged higher education institutions in South Africa, for instance, impacted learning outcomes for students at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (Aruleba, Jere & Matarirano, 2022; Jacob, Abigeal, &

Lydia, 2020; Mpungose, 2020). Agormedah, Henaku, Ayite, & Ansah (2020) outline resource needs which determine the effectiveness of online learning in Ghana.

Although online education is an effective strategy for increasing access to higher education (Agormedah, Henaku, Ayite, & Ansah, 2020), intentional engagement strategies must be employed in the online course room to facilitate learning and retain students (Aruleba, Jere & Matarirano, 2022). Xu, & Xu (2019) argue that online higher education impacts access, cost, and quality in a variety of ways. In cases where access is increased in a manner that does not adhere to best practices and the needs of students and faculty, quality often suffers.

Applying effective strategies for the engagement of online students is paramount if administrators hope to build community and nurture retention. A great body of literature demonstrates that incorporating synchronous sessions, utilizing web-based conferencing software to facilitate student meetings, actively building community amongst students, and cultivating instructor presence impact student satisfaction, engagement, and retention (Allen & Seaman, 2014; Bailey & Brown, 2016; King & Alperstein, 2015; Stewart, Harlow & DeBacco, 2011; Richardson et al., 2016). One factor that influences the ease with which engagement may be built in an online course is faculty readiness to meet student needs, which have drastically changed in recent years, due in part to the global Pandemic, Covid-19 (Callo & Yazon, 2020).

Faculty preparation is influenced, in part by the consistent delivery of relevant professional development (Dennis, Halbert, & Fornero, 2021), which is impacted, in part, by consistent leadership – a factor that was not always nurtured during the past several years (Engelbrecht, 2022). In addition to faculty preparation, student engagement can be facilitated through peer-to-peer interaction, which requires technology access. Access to and adoption of e-learning technologies is one factor which impacts the quality of online education (Kaliisa, Palmer, & Miller, 2019; Yakubu & Dasuki, 2019). Watts (2021) found that communities of inquiry and Gunter, Raghuram, Breines, & Prinsloo (2020) found that networks, both of which are typically supported by e-learning technologies, helped to support engagement among online students, due to part to their emphasis on building connections. Research elucidates several key effective practices when delivering online courses to International students

There are many opportunities and challenges surrounding the delivery of online education to multicultural and international students (Chen, Basma, Ju, & Ng, 2020). For instance, research indicates that experiential activities increase belongingness and perceived social support among international students (Caligiuri, DuBois, Lundby, & Sinclair, 2020). The global pandemic, COVID-19 provided an opportunity for international student higher education delivery to be reimagined (Veerasamy & Ammigan, 2022). Universal design and intentional inclusion help to support international students engaged in online programs (Ferguson, McKenzie, Dalton, & Lyner-Cleophas, 2019).

Factors impacting retention among international students center around social integration, study skills, adjusting to college life, and extracurricular activities (Haverila, Haverila, & McLaughlin, 2020). Many of these factors can be addressed through targeted and intentional engagement strategies. For instance, Madge et al. (in press) argue that the use of WhatsApp among African international distance education students can effectively facilitate engagement and transform educational experiences.

One solution is course-embedded advising, which makes use of formal assignments delivered near the midpoint of online courses to facilitate targeted individual interactions between faculty members and students (Dennis, Fornero, Snelling, Thom, & Surlles, 2020).

Martirosyan, Bustamante, & Saxon (2019) argue that academic and support services for international students must be intentional to meet the needs of students.

Formal advising in online programs has been shown to contribute to success in careers, post-graduation, as well as successful degree completion (Craft, Augustine-Shaw, Fairbanks & Adams-Wright, 2016; McGill (2019). Academic advising promotes persistence (Tippetts et al., 2022), and helps students to overcome the impact of long-term disruptions on success (Sholes, Sullivan, & Self, 2023). Further, psychological distress may be alleviated through online academic advising support (Askar, Adawiyah, & Nurdin, 2021).

Academic advising can help to ensure student understanding of academic integrity policies and concerns (Turner, K. L., Adams, J. D., & Eaton, 2022), and it can be helpful in facilitating the completion of independent research (Fiore, Heitner, & Shaw, 2019). Course-embedded advising has been used in field

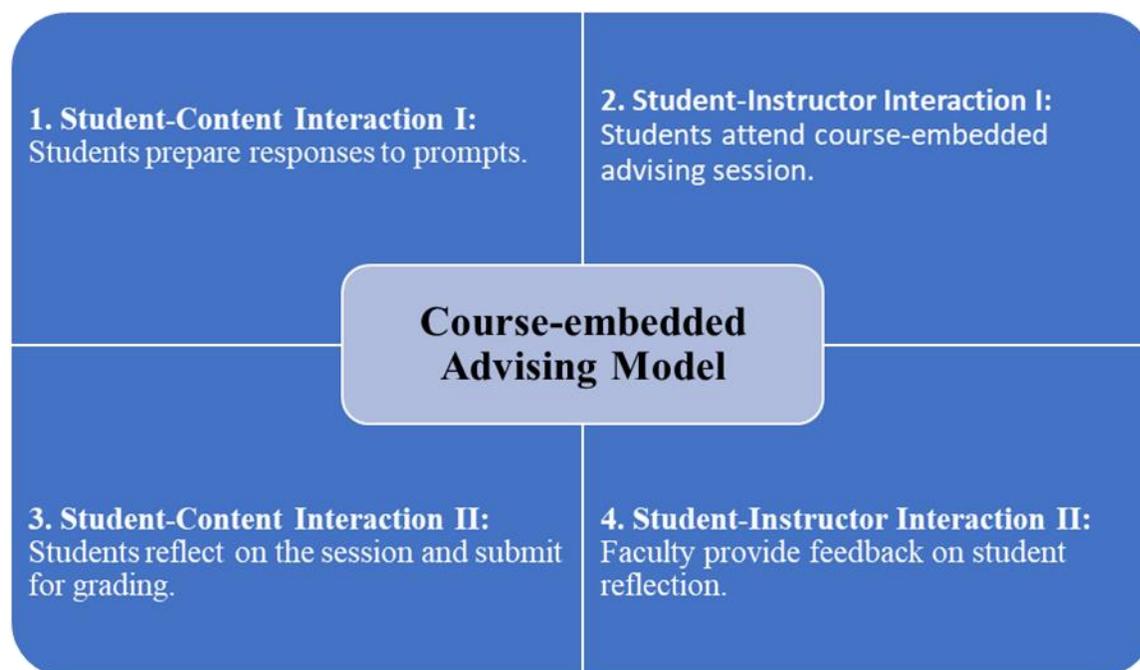
research in study abroad courses (Hamel, et al., 2021), task planning (Harrington, 2021), and lab projects (Heermann, Getty, & Yucel, 2020). Tutor-based advising has been explored in the context of student outcomes (Kara & Can, 2019) and peer-teacher mentorship in the online course room has demonstrated promise for increasing student engagement (Lowe, Stone, & Macy, 2023). When providing mentorship to graduate students online, Pollard & Kumar (2021) note key strategies and challenges, including the need to nurture interpersonal aspects of the relationship, the need to clarify expectations of students, and the need to prioritize competence in technology.

According to Richardson, et al. (2022), small interactions, termed micro-advising, can significantly impact career preparation and progression of learners. Dennis, Fornero, Snelling, Thom, & Surles (2020) demonstrated positive student perceptions of engagement through the implementation of a formal course-embedded advising course in an online campus serving domestic and international students. It may be the case that course-embedded advising makes an impact on the student experience through its nourishment of relatedness and engagement, in alignment with Self-determination Theory, which has been used as a framework to explain student engagement in online learning (Chiu, 2020). Course-embedded advising aligns well with this theory and, as such, may be extremely useful in efforts to engage online international students.

METHOD

This pilot involved the adjustment and application of a formerly implementation course-embedded advising model (see Figure 1) in a graduate level ethics course of a small international university with campuses in Cameroon, Africa and the United States.

**FIGURE 1
COURSE-EMBEDDED ADVISING MODEL**



Course Selection

An ethics course was selected for implementation of the pilot model due to its placement within the curriculum as well as the content contained in the course. First, in terms of placement within the curriculum, the selected course comes third. As such, students presumably have become relatively comfortable

navigating the learning management system and interacting with content, peers, and faculty. In prior iterations of the course-embedded advising model (Dennis, Fornero, Snelling, Thom, & Surles, 2020) sessions were built into programs starting in the first course. There are certainly benefits of interacting with online students individually during initial program courses but, due in part to feedback solicited from former and current students, term one seemed full enough, with a synchronous session included in the first course as well as ongoing orientation modules. In terms of content, ethics was selected due to the rich dialogue afforded by the presentation of ethical dilemmas. Further, discussing ethical dilemmas in real time provides a sense of synergy and course designers hoped that it would lend itself well to an initial course-embedded advising session.

Course Characteristics

The ethics course into which the course-embedded advising session referenced in this pilot was built was a fully online asynchronous course. The course was 5 weeks in length and included multiple opportunities for students to engage with content, peers, and faculty. A minimum of two weekly activities was included in each module of the course, and the course-embedded advising session was conducted during the third week. As in prior iterations of this model, the session replaced one complete assignment. This is an important aspect of the model, as it ensures the preservation of workload for faculty and students alike.

As discussed in a later section, prompt development must align with course and module level objectives to ensure that student learning outcomes assessment is preserved. The session was introduced at the start of the course, through “looking ahead” announcements beginning in week one. This was done to ensure that students were aware of the requirement and that they had ample time to plan for the meeting. Following the session, students were asked to submit a reflection, including their responses to the prompts and their experience of meeting with the faculty member. This portion of the course-embedded advising helps to memorialize the session and its impact for students as well as faculty. Faculty then grade the reflection, providing feedback to the student and sharing their own reflections of the experience.

Model Adaptation

The original course-embedded advising model developed by Dennis et al. (2020) was adapted for use in an international university. Core adjustments centered around placement within the course sequence, planned mode of communication, and scheduling. First, regarding placement in the course sequence, this pilot was conducted in the third program course, rather than the first, as outlined above. This choice was an intentional effort to tailor the experience to the students. Next, in terms of mode of communication, course-embedded advising is typically conducted via web conferencing software, to allow students and faculty members to see and hear one another, thereby promoting an authentic connection. For the purposes of this pilot, the session was offered via web-conferencing software and WhatsApp. This is due to the challenges which are often experienced by international students who are located in remote or rural areas where continued access to high-speed Internet is often problematic. If we had requested that students use web-conferencing software and allowed WhatsApp to be an alternative, then students who needed to use WhatsApp might have felt that they received an inferior experience. To avoid this possibility, WhatsApp and Zoom, the web-conferencing system used by the university where this pilot was conducted were introduced as equivalent options. Time fame was the final aspect of the session that was adjusted.

In terms of scheduling, faculty setting up course-embedded advising sessions considered the timeframe of their students. When working with international students in online courses that are primarily asynchronous, assignment due dates are generally the only aspect of the course which will require adjustment. However, some aspects of synchronous communication are necessary to fully engage the students. For instance, when scheduling synchronous sessions for international students, offering two or three options, and soliciting feedback from students are both best practices. In terms of scheduling course-embedded advising sessions, faculty asked students to share 6 times that they were available, given a block of time that the instructor was available. This helped to empower the student to lead the scheduling aspect

of the session, at least to some degree, in alignment with research demonstrating the choice impacts engagement among online students (Wu, Li, Zheng, & Guo, 2020).

Prompt Development

Prompt development for the course-embedded advising session described here began with an evaluation of current course assignments, to assess the ease with which each could be converted into a discussion. In conducting this analysis, assignments that involved extensive writing were avoided, as their learning outcomes would not accurately map to the session. The assignment below was selected and adapted for use:

Assignment Title: Culture and Business Ethics^[L1]_[SEP]Instructions: Schedule time to connect individually with your instructor by sending an email that lists 6 days and times you are available during the blocks of time that are listed below. Please include your time zone. Your session may be completed via text using WhatsApp or your session may be completed during a meeting via Zoom. Your appointment can be scheduled by emailing the instructor.

Prior to attending your call, prepare responses to the prompts below: Consider the following scenario:

- You are faced with an ethical dilemma where you have the opportunity to gain a significant financial benefit by engaging in a questionable business practice. Analyze this scenario using the concept of grace and explain how it can influence your ethical decision-making process.

Prompt 1: Are business ethics universal? Why or why not?

Prompt 2: Share personal or professional examples or published cases to illustrate your points.

Prompt 3: How can this content be applied in your current or future work as a practitioner or leader? After your discussion with your instructor is complete, please submit a short summary of your responses to the prompts, commenting on the interaction with your faculty member and how it did or did not influence your thinking.

RESULTS

Lessons learned centered around flexibility, relevance, and meaning making.

Flexibility

One important lesson learned through the pilot implementation described here was that flexibility was needed. The need for flexibility was influenced by the distance between faculty and students. In most online courses, students and faculty work and live within different time zones, but those time zones typically do not differ by more than a few hours, facilitating communication with relative ease. When working with international students, time zones must be carefully considered. For example, if it is 7 am in the time zone of the faculty member and 8 pm in the time zone of the student, the faculty member who starts their call with a “good morning” may present their student with a more welcoming stance. Student-centered communication begets student centered teaching, and it matters for engagement and for retention. A best practice that was developed over the course of this pilot was scheduling time to check the local time of students ahead of session start. A second lesson learned pertaining to flexibility was mode of communication for course-embedded sessions.

The model employed here allowed students to schedule meetings via Zoom or WhatsApp, in an effort to apply flexibility and allow students to exercise choice. Many students selected WhatsApp, and some students selected Zoom. Of the students who selected Zoom, several were unable to connect. Of those that did connect, many were not able to keep their cameras on due to Internet access in their home countries. In cases where these challenges interfered with scheduled meetings, faculty rescheduled using the preferred method of the student. The next category of lessons learned centered around relevance.

Relevance

Content relevance is of utmost importance when developing prompts for course-embedded advising (Dennis, Fornero, Snelling, Thom, & Surlis, 2020). Relevance to course content and weekly course objectives allows student learning outcomes to be accurately assessed. This is important, because the addition of the course-embedded advising accompanies the removal of a formal class assignment, to preserve the workload of both students and faculty members. In addition to relevance to course content, practical relevance should be considered. In this session, the prompt which aligned to practical relevance was prompt 3: How can this content be applied in your current or future work as a practitioner or leader?

Students in the course shared excellent ways that the content could be applied to their work. Despite the tremendous sharing that resulted from this prompt, faculty reported that many students brought up career goals. This likely resulted from the placement of the course within the programs in which the students were enrolled; the course was third in the sequence. It may be the case that applications to work are more relevant for students who have progressed farther in the program and that students in course three would have been more receptive to a prompt that addressed applications of the concepts to career goal development or job searching. The final category was meaning making.

Meaning Making

Meaning making is the process of assigning meaning to events in one's life (Walsh, 2020) and it can be impacted by a host of factors, key among which is interactions. Through connections, we define our experiences and their meanings. Research demonstrates the possibility of advising and mentoring to facilitate the meaning making process (McGill, Ali, & Barton, 2020). In the session described here, prompt 2 aligns well with the process of meaning making. In prompt 2: *Share personal or professional examples or published cases to illustrate your points*, students were asked to personalize the discussion by identifying an incidents from their own lives. Many students chose to describe a professional encounter and some students described a personal encounter. Irrespective of the incident described the conversation which ensued epitomized the process of meaning making. Further, students pondered related issues, which also aligns with the process of meaning making.

DISCUSSION

Future directions include a formal focus group of students from course-embedded advising sessions, a formal focus group of faculty who are leading course-embedded advising at the university, and a comparison of engagement for students participating in course-embedded advising, those attending synchronous sessions, and those engaging in both opportunities. Conducting a student focus group will allow an impartial evaluation of key themes from the student perspective. The results of these analyses can be utilized to inform future iterations of the model. In addition to evaluating the student experience, faculty experience must be assessed, as faculty engagement influences student engagement.

Faculty focus groups including faculty conducting course-embedded advising will provide an assessment of faculty perspective on issues such as faculty workload, perceived student workload, student learning outcomes, and overall impact of the session. Workload is of the utmost importance, as it has a significant impact on faculty satisfaction and engagement. Course-embedded advising was designed with workload in mind, and continuous assessments are necessary to ensure that the original design remains effective over time. One pertinent piece of feedback that faculty may be able to provide is timing. Placing course-embedded advising into the right courses, during the right weeks, and at the right cadence will optimize the student's engagement experience throughout the completion of their degrees. Finally, comparing the impacts of course-embedded advising with those of synchronous sessions will provide valuable insights that will help to inform program development.

Many students enjoy participating in synchronous sessions, though many other students are not able to fully engage in these opportunities due to responsibilities. Particularly in situations where courses are composed of predominately international students, scheduling can pose a challenge. Due in part to this challenge, institutions catering to adult international students tend to employ a flexible stance regarding

synchronous sessions, by offering an asynchronous option for students who are not able to attend the sessions live. Students who select the asynchronous option may receive equivalent content but they do not benefit from the interaction enjoyed by their peers who did attend. Course-embedded advising, on the other hand, personalizes the connection opportunity by allowing students to schedule individual meetings with faculty. Assessing the relative impact of synchronous sessions, course-embedded advising, and the combination of both on engagement could help to inform program design, thereby maximizing faculty resources.

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