Engaging Learners in an Online Course: Success Factors

Zoraini Wati Abas, Ed.D.

Director
Center for Learning, Teaching and Curriculum Development
Putera Sampoerna Foundation University Project
Jakarta, Indonesia

Abstract

Changes in higher education today include the way courses are delivered. It can be seen that many courses are increasingly incorporating a blend of media and approaches. However, we are also seeing an increasing number of courses being offered online primarily as an effort to expand the market and to reach out to students in faraway places in order to increase enrolment. These students live away from each other and may be in different time zones. How then, does one design and deliver successful online courses? One of the key factors is the ability to engage students. This, in fact, is the greatest challenge. The paper will highlight how one online course facilitator in an open and distance learning institution uses a social media platform to engage learners with each other, with the learning materials and learning tasks, and how momentum is sustained throughout most if not the entire semester. A framework is also offered to help understand the role of the success factors.

Introduction

One of the key elements of successful course completion is how instructors succeed in engaging students in the class, particularly online. While offering programs and courses online appear to be increasingly popular as a means to increase enrolments by bridging the distance, expanding the geographical boundaries and reaching students in different continents, it is imperative that these are implemented well by, among others, engaging students with the instructor, with coursemates, as well as the course content and activities. Student engagement is important as it is the key to completion of a course, and hence, an academic program. It has attracted the attention of educators and researchers since the mid-90s.

While student engagement is generally interpreted as providing a learning-centered approach (Hunt & Chalmers, 2012), it, more often than not, requires a facilitator of an online course to be well-versed in how to use technology to support the learning-centered approach in order to keep students who are at a distance continuously interested and engaged. Course facilitators need to be able to provide effective facilitation of learning through new or innovative ways. When used appropriately, Web 2.0 tools have the potential to support social constructivist learning. A review of research literature points to the importance of the social constructivist perspective where collaboration between learners in a learning environment is essential to any educational experience (Maor, 2003). Web 2.0 largely comprises social media or
networking platforms. These can be used effectively and efficiently to support a learning community where interaction and communication takes precedence over individual.

The paper will discuss some of the success factors in the design of an online postgraduate course in engaging students around the world. The course was designed using the social constructivist approach in order to maintain a learning-centered environment for a course that is offered at an open and distance learning institution. The social constructivist approach involves “encouraging interaction and collaboration among participants in the construction of knowledge” (Maor, 2003, p. 203). A Web 2.0 social website platform was adopted for the course as its features and capabilities such as forums, chats, RSS feeds, video embeds, and so on were seen to be able to incorporate and promote the social constructivist elements. Nevertheless, within each feature and capability, the real design to encourage and support social constructivist learning is what makes a huge difference to engage students in the learning tasks and activities as well as with each other and with their online course facilitator.

Review of Literature

Definition of Student Engagement

Student engagement has been defined in several ways. Stoval (2003) indicates that engagement is defined by how students’ time on task is combined with their willingness to participate in activities. Lim (2004) defines engagement as “the mobilization of cognitive, affective and motivational strategies for interpretive transactions” (p. 16). Coates (2007) suggests that engagement comprises active and collaborative learning, participation in challenging academic activities, formative communication with academic staff, involvement in enriching educational experiences, and feeling legitimated and supported by learning communities. Appleton, Christenson and Furlong (2008) explains that engagement has two or three components such as positive conduct, effort and participation. Chen, Gonyea and Kuh (2008) defines engagement as the degree to which learners are involved with their educational activities and that engagement is positively linked to desired outcomes, high grades, student satisfaction, and perseverance. They further elaborated that “student engagement takes many forms—intellectual challenge, active and collaborative learning, meaningful interactions with faculty, and the perception that the learning environment is supportive of the student's efforts to overcome obstacles to learning.”

Rationale and Approach for Student Engagement

In spite of the lack of a universal definition, student engagement is an important element. According to Duffy, Korkmas, Dennis, Bichelmeyer, Bunnage, Cakir and Oncu (2005), “there is a wealth of research that suggests that students who are more engaged learn more and that engaging students in learning can be facilitated through pedagogical approaches (p. 2).” Beer, Clark and Jones (2010) found that student engagement has been linked to undergraduate academic achievement, student
attrition, student retention, student motivation and institutional success. Research increasingly suggests that when learners are engaged, it means that they are shaping and leading their own learning and education (Trowler, 2010). Kuh (2003) highlighted earlier it matters less to their success and development, what students bring to higher education, or where they study, compared to what they do during their time as a student. Student engagement holds the magic wand making it possible for student to succeed and develop their potential.

The following are benefits for students who are involved or engaged with the course:

- Greater sense of ownership over their learning
- Increased motivation
- Improved self-esteem
- Greater achievement
- Improved relationship with peers and educators
- Increased self-efficacy

As Ruey (2010) stated, when learners feel involved and engaged in the course, they will also perform well and the desired learning objectives are achieved. One of the ways to achieve this is through constructivist learning. As Coates (2005) pointed out earlier, a large body of literature indicates that student engagement is directly or indirectly related to improvement in student learning. He explained, “the concept of student engagement is based on the constructivist assumption that learning is influenced by how an individual participates in educationally purposeful activities . . . . In essence, therefore, student engagement is concerned with the extent to which students are engaging in a range of educational activities that research has shown as likely to lead to high quality learning. Cassidy (2012), when promoting her online seminar, recommended that active learning is key to engaging students. Her suggestions include: turning readings into active student engagement tools, immediately incorporating student feedback into course materials to better reflect the needs of each class, turning student questions into whole-class learning opportunities, improving learning by leveraging student presentations, field trips, and other class activities.

The Community of Inquiry (COI) Model of Engagement

The COI model by Garrison, Anderson & Archer (2000) is a model that explains how to design or provide engaged learning. There are three elements in this model, by which through the teacher, cognitive and social presence, respectively, an educational community of inquiry is formed online by having a group of students collaboratively engage in purposeful critical discourse and reflect towards the construction of personal meaning and confirmation of mutual understanding. As shown in Figure 1, there are three interdependent elements (social, cognitive and teaching presence). The group of students would undergo a process of creating a deep and meaningful (collaborative-constructivist) learning experience through tasks designed by the course facilitator. As defined by the creators of the model, social presence is the ability of participants to feel comfortable in the learning environment and able to project themselves socially and emotionally, while cognitive presence is the extent to which participants construct meaning through sustained communication. Teaching
**presence** is the facilitation of the construction of learning where the facilitator provides guidance related to the subject matter.

![Image of the community of inquiry model](image)

**Figure 1.** The community of inquiry model by Garrison, Anderson & Archer (2000)

### Methodology

The study provides a case study approach concentrating on how the design of an online post-graduate course provided a social constructivist learning environment using Web 2.0 tools. It was also to see how the design or choice of learning materials and learning activities made an impact on student engagement in a postgraduate course at an open and distance learning university. The aim of the study was first to determine how the students viewed being "engaged" during the course, and what they felt were indicators of “engagement”. In other words it was to seek what the students felt about student engagement, as they perceived it, based on their experience of having just completed one online course.

Based on the importance of student engagement, especially in online courses among distance learners, it was timely to gather feedback from students of a postgraduate course to determine the effectiveness of the overall course design. This includes the design of a learner-friendly environment, and how the provision of learning materials and tasks had supported interactive learning. In addition, the study also sought to determine the perception of the students with regard to online facilitation that led to engaged learning, if any.

The course was designed to provide a social constructivist environment. The facilitator used a popular social media platform called Ning to provide the learning environment to support the delivery of an entire course. Its use was designed by the facilitator and comprises a welcome message and announcements from the facilitator,
embedded learning resources such as videos and slides and links to reading materials, course outline, assignments, assessment rubrics and forum discussions (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. The main page of Ning for the online postgraduate course

It is to be noted that there were only five students from five different countries enrolled at that time. As indicated earlier, the study is a case study and findings are limited to this particular situation. Given the small number of students, it was initially thought that it would be a challenge to get students to engage with each other, especially, in the forums. It was initially believed that fewer students meant fewer postings or interactions and the facilitator had initially feared a somewhat poor performance among students. Nevertheless, understanding the need to provide meaningful and relevant as well as authentic tasks, the facilitator had designed for the learning to be based on readings and viewings of materials that were relevant and that would trigger thoughts among the students.

Nevertheless, it was found that in spite of the low enrolment of students in the course, the students were actively discussing in the forums, had carried out the readings and viewed the embedded videos. They too had performed well as indicated by the marks of their assessments. The low number of students had triggered the facilitator to determine what, in spite of the low enrolment, motivated students to be involved with the course.

The facilitator sent an email to all students and asked two questions after the completion of a course titled, “Current Trends and Issues in Instructional Technology.” The questions were:

1. What does “to be engaged in learning,” mean?
2. What are three factors that will encourage or show evidence that the learners are engaged?
The students replied the email with their responses. They were not instructed to respond in any particular format. Instead they could say as much or as little as they wished. It is believed that in undergoing an academic program to become well-versed with instructional design, the above two questions would have suggested that it was to obtain feedback on the design and effectiveness of the implementation of course with respect to student engagement. Evaluation is one of the stages of a systematic approach within any instructional design models, one of which is the ADDIE (Analysis, Design, Develop, Implement and Evaluate) model.

Any shortfalls received during feedback would be considered for future improvement. It was assumed and expected that students were frank when giving their responses as they were trained to become instructional designers and were expected to understand how important their feedback were to the improvement of the design and implementation of the course in the future. Furthermore, it was important that their active participation in the forums as well as time and effort spent on learning tasks led to timely and quality completion of the course.

**Findings and Discussion**

The feedback obtained from the students indicated (a) the way they viewed engaged learning, and (b) the indicators that served as evidence that learners had been engaged.

**Views of being “engaged in learning”**

The responses from students were similar to those reported in the literature. The following were responses received from various students of the online course:

“To be engaged in learning means to be self motivated to learn.”

“Learning engagement refers to a situation where the instructor encourages learners to take an active role in their own learning by giving them practical tasks that will promote information processing and understanding of concepts.”

“I think that this means for the learner to be actively involved in all learning activities through interacting with instructor, peers, web, learning material.”

“It also means that the tasks must be able to maintain the students interests and so must include tasks designed to challenge the student’s problem solving abilities, reasoning, evaluation skills and other cognitive abilities.”

“Learning engagement involves learners in authentic tasks to involve problems solving.”

The themes mentioned in the students’ responses include self-motivation, encouragement from the instructor, active role/involvement in learning, practical
tasks, helping students to learn, involvement with instructor, peers, Web and learning materials, authentic and meaningful tasks to maintain student interest where student’s problem solving abilities, reasoning, evaluation skills and other cognitive abilities are suitable challenging.

**Indicators of student engagement**

Students responded to the question, “What are three factors that will encourage or show evidence that the learners are engaged?” The following is a summary of what students said:

1. The learner interacts with the content and discovers concepts and principles to apply
2. The learner takes responsibility for learning and collaborates with other learners
3. Actively participating and enthusiastic in the lesson discussions, and posts, that is students respond in a timely manner
4. Completing the assignments
5. Submitting assignments on time
6. Completing the course online
7. Obtaining good grades for the course
8. Motivating others in class
9. Getting involved in class discussions
10. Doing self-learning where needed in order to understand the subject matter even more

It appears that the indicators pointed to the learning aspect, the core element of any education opportunity. It was about interacting with the content, learning materials, discussions, collaboration, completing and submitting the assignments on time, completing the course and motivating others. It is also about being motivated to do more self-studying in between the interactions. These all point to student engagement with the learning process and it indicates the success of the design of the course or instructional delivery via the online platform selected.

**Framework for Student Engagement**

In designing the course, the researcher who is also the course facilitator adopted the COI model by Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000) to drive the design. The facilitator adopted the role of an instructional designer for the course. As in any generic course design processes, the process involved analysis, design, development, implementation and constant evaluation of the learning events. It was believed that its important to achieve an engaged learning community via the online forums. The model is known for its usefulness and applicability in achieving high and quality participation in online forums. Seen as a framework in getting students to be engaged with the facilitator and fellow students, the facilitator believed it as an appropriate model to influence the design of the learning tasks (discussions and assignments) especially when an earlier study of student and tutor facilitation indicated the applicability of the model (Abas & Fadzil, 2009). In addition, other elements of a larger framework would include creating a learner-friendly environment...
and provision of relevant and meaningful learning opportunities (see Figure 3). The final aim for the course was to create a learning environment to support social constructivist learning. In addition, the facilitator attempted to find ways to make the online forums more attractive and interesting so as to not only attract but sustain the interest of the students. This was done by weaving in the reading activities outside the forums with the online discussions. Hence, students were asked to read selected articles or chapters of the textbook and discuss their thoughts in the forums. The discussions would reveal more examples or reinforce concepts, ideas and trends in various parts of the world. This then leads to more meaningful learning.

![Figure 3. The relationship between the success factors of student engagement](image)

**Success Factors**

With online distance learning courses, it is even more important that the course is designed in such a way that it helps students learn and supports the achievement of the desired learning outcomes of the course. When designing the learning environment and providing opportunities for learning, four factors were considered (see Table 1) as part of the aim to provide a social constructivist learning environment. Again, the latter is expected to translate to creating a learning-centered environment that will foster student engagement. Table 1 lists the four main factors and describes the steps taken to foster student engagement. The four factors were:

- Supporting social constructivist learning
- Engaging students in forums
- Creation of a learner-friendly environment
- Provision of relevant and meaningful learning opportunities

<p>| Table 1 |
| Factors to Foster Student Engagement |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FACTORS</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION</th>
<th>STEPS TAKEN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supporting social constructivist learning</td>
<td>Design of learning within a social context where social interactions in forums and other online activities are predominant learning events.</td>
<td>Creation of forums and online group activities to connect learners with each other as they construct their new learning/knowledge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaging students in forums</td>
<td>Application of the COI model to engage students meant that it was important for three elements to be present:</td>
<td>Teaching Presence: Facilitator visited and posted comments, issues for discussion, encouraging remarks, reminders, instructions or provided motivation to students. The facilitator provided learning guidance, for example, in the forum on assignments. There were eight (8) discussion forums to have students discuss various topics. Generally, forums provided issues for discussion for which 20 percent of the course marks were allocated for active and quality participation. Cognitive Presence: Careful selection of resources to be viewed or read individually and then discussed. Discussions were to be relevant and meaningful suitable for a matured group of postgraduate students to help them learn and achieve the objectives of the course. Students were allowed freedom of expression during online discussions. Students were provided opportunities to combine their new learning with previous knowledge and experience. Social Presence: Creation of a pleasant, safe, secure and respectful environment where ideas were shared and differing opinions were shared and discussed. The facilitator ensured a positive atmosphere to support online interactions. Everyone was courteous and respectful of each other.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creation of a learner-friendly environment</td>
<td>Selecting a platform with a learner-friendly interface and supportive of online group interactions.</td>
<td>Selection of a social web site, Ning, popular because of its friendly interface and easy navigability that supports Web 2.0 learning for group interactions and collaborative activities. Its features include forum discussions, chats, RSS feeds, embedding of videos, and the like. Learners were encouraged to upload their</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Provision of relevant and meaningful learning opportunities | Designing (a) relevant and meaningful learning tasks, and (b) provision of learning activities using meaningful learning resources. | Students were required to read/view, analyze, give feedback and opinions in relation to his/her personal or work experience. Learners were assessed based on two assignments and their forum participation.  
- a report on current trends and issues, based on readings and discussions to demonstrate understanding of the trends and issues in instructional technology  
- a paper based on learning technologies in the open world with the development of a demonstrator application of the selected learning technology(ies)  
- Forum discussions were also evaluated and comprised 20 percent of the course marks. Reading of the textbook on *The World is Open* was very much favored by the students as they reported that the book was not only informative but also interesting to read. Other readings were related to latest learning technology trends in higher education. Selected videos for students to watch were meaningful in terms of helping them to appreciate and understand new learning technologies. |

### Summary and Conclusion

The paper highlights the design of an online learning environment for a postgraduate course taken by students around the world. The course is delivered entirely online via a Web 2.0 platform that supports social constructivist learning which in turn provides a learning-centered approach. It involves the creation of online learning communities where learners are engaged with the learning interactions and activities. The course had a small enrolment of five students. Despite having a small number of learners, they were found to be actively engaged during course, active during the online discussions with the facilitator and peers, involved with the learning tasks and the course assignments. In addition, it was also found all learners submitted their assignments and completed the course successfully. There were four factors considered for the design of a successful course that would engage learners with each
other, the facilitator and with the learning tasks. It is believed that for the successful implementation of the COI for online discussions, the creation of a learner-friendly online environment is necessary and provision of relevant and meaningful learning materials and activities are essential.

References


