
Student engagement in the online classroom: The student perspective

Miguel Fernández Álvarez¹, Amanda Montes²

¹Universidad Politécnica de Madrid, Spain

²Northeastern Illinois University, United States

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the face of education in many ways, but one particular way which it has permanently changed both educators' and students' understanding, comfort, and time spent using technology is the fact that the majority of learning has been moved online either entirely or partially throughout the pandemic. Before the pandemic, many students were accustomed to asynchronous online learning, something that increased during the pandemic, in order to offer students a safe alternative to face-to-face courses. Findings from studies of students' perspectives of online learning pre-pandemic have shown that a welcoming environment, students' connections to each other and to the instructor are strong indicators of successful course learning (Bruce & Young, 2011). An effort to build a classroom community with bonds built between both students and instructors have been found to lead to increased learning, with a lack thereof being what Bruce and Young (2011) point to as causes for "student isolation, frustration, boredom, overload, and low course completion rates" (p. 220).

The current chapter presents the results obtained from a survey gauging students' perception of online engagement. The results from the implementation of the online questionnaire, which was developed based on the work by Bruce and Young (2011) offered us two key insights of students' experiences with online learning; teacher presence in online learning is of utmost importance, as is interaction between students. These results are consistent with findings pre-pandemic, and show the same sort of patterns now as we find ourselves learning in mostly online and remote environments for the last year.

According to Vai and Sosulski (2016), there are seven key elements to running a successful online classroom. These elements include appropriate training for faculty, creating an active learning environment, chunking lessons into smaller bits of information rather than long lectures and videos, creating smaller discussion groups for students, being present for students, picking and choosing when to insert one's voice, and embracing multiple assignment types.

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Preparation is key in any type of pedagogical setting, but it cannot be emphasized enough just how important it is to think through the ways that an otherwise face-to-face course could convert itself effectively to an online environment. Instructors that have support in this element, both with time and financially, show greater confidence in their online teaching skills (Vai & Sosulski, 2016), which will inevitably show in the course that is presented to students. This essential element can be key to perhaps even changing the ways that faculty view online learning. As Darby and Lang (2019) have found, faculty believe that online education does not work and have negative attitudes towards online courses. This is an important factor to consider, as it may contribute to the perceptions held by students, as this mentality can be easily detected by them. As this is foundational to the rest of the list provided by Vai and Sosulski (2016), the following are ways to engage students using an asset based pedagogical approach, which will communicate both a desire to teach online, as well as a concerted effort to infuse equity-minded best practices into one's pedagogical approaches online.

The first best practice is that of creating an active learning environment. In order to accomplish this element, instructors must follow examples put forth by Boettcher and Conrad (2016) in that an effective online course contains a combination of discussions, collaboration, video/audio clips, and hands-on experiences with text, as well as short video lectures. It is also highlighted that in the same way that lecture style classes have been found to be ineffective in face-to-face environments, they are also mostly ineffective in the online environment, with the exception of shorter clips that are broken down into what Boettcher and Conrad (2016) call "chunking"; the next best practice: chunking lessons into smaller bits of information rather than long lectures and videos. The authors suggest that in order to effectively engage students in this element, lectures with multiple formats that are broken down in a number of ways that include visuals, writing, and information break down different modes of learning.

As a part of the interaction portion of the best practices suggested, come the next three elements that relate to this; creating smaller discussion groups for students, being present for students, and picking and choosing when to insert one's voice. In creating discussion groups that will engage students effectively, instructors must consider the very possibility of students feeling lost or overwhelmed by the sheer number of colleagues they may be asked to collaborate with virtually. One way to remedy this is through the strategic use of grouping in the asynchronous environment. With this simple modification, affective barriers that could potentially intimidate students, could potentially be addressed, as such facilitating uses of interaction for the purposes of discussions, collaboration, peer critiques and group activities. Thus, with the opportunity to create peer-to-peer learning experiences, both instructors and students will benefit from what is truly powerful about online learning.

It also cannot be emphasized enough that students thrive from the experience of having a "teacher presence" in their online course. The most effective learning experiences for students are those in which the humanity and voice of the instructor can be felt through their pedagogical practices. Students thrive in an environment in which the online course has not been simply designed before the first day of class (as online classes do

take much planning beforehand), and it has been found that that many academics believe that with this ample preparation, students should be able to be self-sustaining in the online environment (Farmer, 2004). Such thinking, however, not only has proven ineffective pedagogically, but is also looked down upon and not the preferred method by students. However, from an instructor perspective, one must choose the appropriateness of inserting one's voice in an online course and cannot be expected to engage with every single student in every single online task. Student expectations should also be mindful of human limitations on time and job expectations of faculty.

The last best practice to note, of creating a learning environment that incorporates a variety of learning experiences, is one that essentially brings all the other ones together. In order to create a dynamic learning environment that truly is student-centered, mindful of students' needs and desires for learning, instructors must take a holistic look at their practices and assess if they are being inclusive of a number of different types of learners, while at the same time thinking realistically about their own capabilities, strengths, and willingness to learn from students and for them to have opportunities to engage effectively with one another.

Method¹

This study looked specifically at students' attitudes and perceptions towards engagement and collaboration in online teaching. The study was conducted in an attempt to provide an answer to the following research questions:

1. What are students' perceptions about their own engagement in online learning?
2. To what extent are instructors present and engage students in an online environment?
3. What aspects of interaction are (not) present in an online classroom?

Instrument

To examine the students' perceptions on online engagement, an online questionnaire was developed based on the work by Bruce and Young (2011). With the permission of the authors, we adapted a questionnaire they used to also examine online engagement across disciplines and to determine if there were any differences between responses by students from different colleges. The instrument (which is included in Appendix 1) consisted of some demographic questions and 22 Likert scale items. It was expected to take no more than 10 minutes to complete. Those items can be categorized in three groups, as shown below:

- Own commitment and effort: Items 1, 4, 6, 7, 11, 12, 13, 15 and 16.
- Role and commitment of the instructor: Items 2, 3, 5, 8, 10 and 14.
- Interaction with other students: Items 17-22.

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Participants

Students who had taken one or more courses at an online institution in the past 4 years were contacted for participation in the study. These were certified teachers who were taking courses to obtain their English as a Second Language (ESL) or Bilingual Endorsement. A total of 105 participants responded to the questionnaire, with only 36.1% taking an online course at that time. The rest had taken online courses in the past. Those who were not taking a course at the time they responded to the questionnaire were asked to recall their experience in the last course they took as they answered the questions.

Results and Discussion

The results from the questionnaire responses were analyzed using IBM® SPSS® Statistics Version 26 to see if any significant patterns emerged in the data regarding the attitudes displayed by the participants.

In terms of demographics, only 13.3% were male students while the majority (86.7%) were female students. This is due to the fact that the participants were teachers, a field in which females generally outnumber males. In addition, the majority of the participants were between 36 and 55 years old as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants' age

		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	20-25	2	1.9	1.9
	26-30	2	1.9	3.8
	31-35	6	5.7	9.5
	36-40	13	12.4	21.9
	41-45	20	19.0	41.0
	46-50	35	33.3	74.3
	51-55	11	10.5	84.8
	56-60	8	7.6	92.4
	61-65	7	6.7	99.0
	66 or more	1	1.0	100.0
	Total	105	100.0	

In addition, the native language of the majority was English, while a smaller percentage reported having a language other than English as their native language, as shown in Figure 1. We wanted to obtain this information because we wanted to find out if mother tongue was a variable that would affect the results. However, no statistically significant differences were found in the responses to the Likert scale questions.

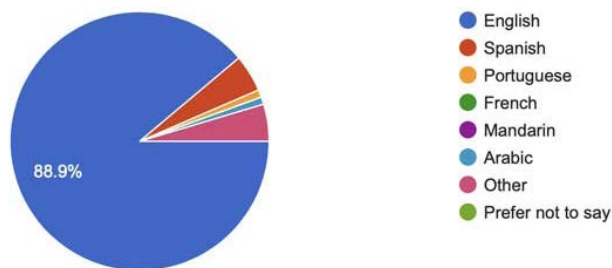


Figure 1. Participants' native language

A descriptive analysis of the results, presented in Table 2, shows that the majority of participants answered either “agree” or “strongly agree” to the questions in groups 1 (own commitment and effort) and 2 (role and commitment of the instructor). These responses indicate positive attitudes towards aspects related to personal responsibility for completing assignments and being present in the classroom on the one hand, and the instructor’s presence in the classroom and responsiveness to students’ questions and concerns on the other. However, the responses to items categorized in group 3 (interaction with other students) received lower scores (“strongly disagree” or “disagree”), with the exception of items 21 and 22. Items in group 3 inquired about students connecting personally with others in the classroom or sharing personal concerns, for instance.

Table 2. Descriptive analysis of the Likert scale items

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
Item 1	5.7	4.8	16.2	45.7	27.6
Item 2	4.8	2.9	5.7	33.3	53.3
Item 3	4.8	5.7	14.3	38.1	37.1
Item 4	3.8	5.7	13.3	46.7	30.5
Item 5	4.8	1.0	6.7	27.6	60.0
Item 6	7.6	2.9	2.9	26.7	60.0
Item 7	5.7	1.9	4.8	30.5	57.1
Item 8	3.8	1.9	13.3	37.1	43.8
Item 9	4.8	--	1.9	31.4	61.9
Item 10	4.8	--	10.5	32.4	52.4
Item 11	6.7	3.8	7.6	32.4	49.5
Item 12	6.7	3.8	10.5	30.5	48.6
Item 13	4.8	2.9	9.5	32.4	50.5
Item 14	6.7	1.9	6.7	32.4	52.4
Item 15	4.8	1.0	2.9	27.6	63.8
Item 16	6.7	7.6	8.6	26.7	50.5
Item 17	8.6	7.6	10.5	40.0	33.3
Item 18	18.1	22.9	27.6	19.0	12.4
Item 19	12.4	19.0	25.7	25.7	17.1
Item 20	19.0	33.3	22.9	16.2	8.6
Item 21	8.6	9.5	21.0	37.1	23.8
Item 22	26.7	23.8	27.6	14.3	7.6

Inferential analyses were carried out to determine whether the responses differed by subgroups (age range, ethnicity and native language). However, no statistically significant differences were found in the responses. The group is very homogeneous in terms of responses to the items. However, it is important to note that a few outliers who responded inconsistently to the items were identified. This was noted by carefully analyzing their answers, which ranged from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree” to items measuring the same construct. Those participants have not been removed from the analysis, as their responses do not affect negatively to the results overall.

One of the items that needs to be taken in consideration carefully is item 22, where participants had to report whether they felt isolated in the classroom. In general, about half the participants indicated they “strongly disagree” or “disagree” with that statement, and even though the percentage of participants who responded “strongly agree” or “agree” is lower, there is a large percentage (27.6%) who gave a neutral response. Although neutral has no negative connotations, they are not positive either. Here the figure of the teacher is very important. The study shows that on a general level the students feel that the instructor is present in the virtual classroom and that he/she can be relied on, but at the same time the results show that they feel alone to some extent and are not able to share their feelings with the other students. All this makes us realize that the purely pedagogical approach needs to be complemented by a social approach, where interaction with other students is encouraged in order to build the rapport that generally occurs naturally in a face-to-face classroom.

Conclusions

One of the most important conclusions of this study is the affirmation of the importance of student engagement in online courses and specifically the need to create community. This is something that usually happens automatically in face-to-face courses, as the interaction between the instructor and students and between students eventually becomes a relationship that has a very positive impact. However, the lack of presence, especially in asynchronous virtual contexts, creates a situation characterized by a void in interpersonal relationships that needs to be filled.

We must keep in mind that we are social beings who like to connect with others. The Internet, and by extension the virtual classroom, can easily obscure the person, making it difficult or impossible to know who is behind the screen; if the student feels isolated or alone, they are more likely to lose interest. To prevent this, it is important to (1) make contact before the course begins, (2) conduct an introductory activity among all participants, (3) provide various opportunities for interaction, and (4) encourage activities where participants can share information and experiences. Social media groups, for instance, will allow course participants to stay connected regardless of their location.

Similarly, emotional barriers need to be managed strategically. Students are easily distracted when working online and spend up to 60% of their time on material other than course content. The role of the course instructor is strategic in preventing these problems. Content delivery is important, but there are other aspects that need to be considered, such as breaking the information into content blocks. Participants are more likely to follow three 5-minute videos than one 15-minute video. Also, the content needs to be organized and delivered in the right order. To prevent students from not keeping up or falling behind, a calendar and reminders are always helpful. Finally, a variety of media should be used in a course. The success of online education depends on students staying motivated and interested in the course, the content and their classmates. Ultimately, it is the very equity-minded, inquiry based pedagogical practices that make for positive and engaging classroom environments in all settings, which prove to be essential in online settings in particular.

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Appendix 1. Questionnaire

Please rate the following statements on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). If you are taking an online class at the moment, think about your experience in that course. If you are not, think about the last online course you took.

1. I participate(d) actively in online discussions
2. The course rules are/were clear
3. My instructor is/was present and active in class discussions
4. I ask(ed) questions in discussions when I don't/didn't understand
5. My instructor is/was responsive to me when I have/had questions
6. I complete(d) all the assigned class work
7. I visit(ed) the course website regularly
8. My instructor is/was consistent about enforcing course rules
9. I know/knew that I can/could contact my instructor when I need(ed) to
10. I trust(ed) my instructor to handle inappropriateness in-class interactions
11. I truly desire(d) to learn the course material
12. I give/gave a great deal of effort to the class
13. I am/was well organized in my learning
14. My instructor provides/provided a well-organized course
15. I will earn/earned a good grade in the course
16. I stay(ed) caught up with readings
17. I interact(ed) with classmates on course materials
18. I connect(ed) personally with classmates
19. I help(ed) my fellow classmates
20. I share(d) personal concerns with others
21. I am/was committed to working with my classmates so that we can/could help each other
22. I feel/felt isolated in the class