

Resource Guide

Teaching Online: Four Tips for Promoting Engagement

Research demonstrates that online student success and retention rates are intimately tied to engagement, which occurs through students interacting with course material, their instructors, and their peers in substantive and meaningful ways (Lear et al., 2010; Banna et al., 2015; Martin and Bollinger, 2018). If anything, students are more likely to judge the quality of your online course based on the types and degree of engagement they encounter. Incorporating PowerPoint lectures from a similar face-to-face (F2F) course, for example, is unlikely to “light a fire” in your students or inspire much motivation. Below are four tips you can adopt to promote online engagement:

- **Tip 1: Structure though modules.** Organizing course content around major topics or themes in modules, or units, represents a simple, yet powerful way to present content to your students in online formats. For a 15-week course, you might consider adopting a module for each week or designing modules spanning two- to three-weeks in length. A modular approach to online course design helps structure student focus and scaffold the learning process itself, by making connections between seemingly disparate parts of a course or moving from lower-ordered to higher-ordered thinking skills in Bloom’s Taxonomy.
- **Tip 2: Leverage multimedia content.** One clear benefit of teaching and learning online is the ability to take advantage of multimedia content in a range of formats. Consider varying the representation of your course content by including audio (e.g., podcasts), videos (e.g., YouTube, TED Talks), case studies, simulations, and games to complement readings or text-based content. Research demonstrates that motivational barriers in online formats stem from uninspiring course designs and, more importantly, content presented in a single mode.
- **Tip 3: Personalize your content.** Consider creating digital content to infuse presence in your online course. Using *Panopto*, or another lesson capture software, you can create video announcements, tutorials, “how-to” guides, and lecture content that allows you to mimic the F2F interactions common to traditional courses. You can also use audio applications, such as *Audio Memos*, *Audacity*, or *GarageBand*, to create podcasts or infuse audio feedback in rubrics. [*Words of caution: Creating digital content can be a time-consuming enterprise, especially as you are learning how to use the tool. With enough patience and practice, you will find the payouts greatly outweigh the start-up time for both you and your students alike.*]
- **Tip 4: Reimagine discussion boards.** If you want your students to engage in deep reflection, journals, blogs, or portfolios may be better tools suited for this purpose.

Reimagine discussion boards by viewing them as collaborative-based tools for group-work, peer-review exercises, and “role-playing” options. If you’re uncomfortable using discussion boards for this purpose, another strategy is to reimagine text-based, threaded discussion boards by asking students to incorporate video, audio, or image-based content. When students “see” and “hear” their fellow classmates, this helps build a sense of community and reduce a sense of isolation that often accompanies asynchronous online learning environments. Providing students options for incorporating video, audio, or image-based content is important, also, when considering the principle of expression in the Universal Design for Learning model.

Resources

Banna, J., Lin, M.-F. G., Stewart, M., & Fialkowski, M.K. (2015). Interaction matters: Strategies to promote engaged learning in an online introductory nutrition course. *Journal of Online Teaching and Learning*, 11(2), 249-261.

Lear, J. L., Ansorge, C., & Steckelberg, A. (2010). Interactivity/community process model for the online education environment. *Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, 6(1), 71-77.

Martin, F. & Bolinger, D.U. (2018). Engagement matters: Student perceptions on the importance of engagement strategies in the online learning environment. *Online Learning*, 22(1), 205-222.

For more information or to discuss how you might incorporate these ideas into your courses, contact the Reinert Center at ctl@slu.edu.