Student Success Network
in the California State University

memorandum
from the Knowledge Center

Date: November 2020
To: CSU Faculty, Staff, and Administrators
From: Breaunna Alexander, CSU Student Success Network

Topic: Approaches to Online Instruction That Are Engaging for Students

The COVID-19 pandemic drove classes online at the California State University (CSU) in spring 2020, and the 23-campus system began the following fall semester by offering primarily online instruction. This shift required faculty to deliver instruction in modes that are relatively new to many of them, and many have asked for teaching and learning supports focused on keeping students engaged in an online learning environment. In response to these requests, the CSU Student Success Network (Network) held the Navigating Uncertainty Together series for faculty and staff across the CSU to share ideas, tips, and practical strategies about student-centered online practices with each other. This memo summarizes existing literature in that area. Key findings from the literature indicate that opportunities for collaboration appear to be particularly crucial for online learning environments, and that by actively building a strong "teaching presence" and "social presence" faculty can facilitate collaboration and engagement among students.

Key Findings from the Literature

Opportunities for Collaboration and Communication Appear to Be Crucial

Students who reported that their class had multiple ways for them to interact with peers and communicate with their instructor had higher levels of engagement in the course in general, compared with students who reported no such interactions. This finding suggests the importance of providing students with multiple opportunities or channels for communication.[1] Additionally, students in online courses that utilized a collaborative learning approach, in which instructors engaged students in group learning activities, reported better course satisfaction and learning outcomes, compared with students in courses that did not utilize this approach.[2] In another study, peer collaboration strategies may have a positive impact on students' learning outcomes, particularly for those taking general education courses that are not closely related to their major.[3]

The Knowledge Center is an online resource—to be fully launched in 2021—created by the CSU Student Success Network that will provide curated, synthesized, and succinct information and links to support faculty, staff, and administrators in adopting equity-minded and student-centered approaches on their campus. The Network was created by and for CSU faculty, staff, administrators, and students to advance equitable student learning, engagement, progression, and success. It is facilitated by the Education Insights Center (EdInsights) at Sacramento State, an independent research and policy center devoted to student success and the public benefits of education.

Strategies to Build "Teaching Presence" Online Can Facilitate Collaborative Learning

In a related finding, several studies examined the importance of instructors developing and cultivating a "teaching presence" in online classes, defined as the ability of the instructor to facilitate a sense of connection with and among their students.[4] Students were more likely to report that they felt part of a learning community when they also reported that their instructor had a strong teaching presence.[5] Examples of ways that instructors can foster a strong teaching presence include:

- Reaching out to students often using communication that is concise and mindful of how students may perceive and receive it by:
  - sending welcome emails; and
  - conducting regular, weekly contact via email and social media.[4]
- Providing opportunities for peer interaction by:
  - limiting time lecturing;
  - allowing for peer-to-peer discussions;
  - hosting large group discussions;
  - creating space for small group discussions; and
  - utilizing discussion boards to:
    - maintain clear, consistent expectations about student responsibility (e.g., recurring deadlines with clear requirements); and
    - foster autonomy by allowing students to self-regulate and moderate the discussion, which often ends up creating space for more substantive engagement.
- Using video and chat features to provide multiple levels and modes of engagement, for example, by:
  - mixing spurts of discussion, collaboration, video and audio clips, and hands-on exercises.
- Ensuring interactions with students by:[6]
  - scheduling time to be with students online (e.g., online office hours); and
  - scheduling 1:1 check-ins with students (e.g., phone calls, video conferencing, emails).
- Collecting and examining data about who is participating in the various course activities, and proactively reaching out to those who are not as engaged to better understand their circumstances and provide additional support.

Building a "Social Presence" Is Also Important Online

Students' sense of connectedness and perception of learning was also related to their instructor's social presence, defined as the ability of the instructor to be authentic in their interactions with students beyond academics or subject matter.[4] Students were more likely to report a stronger sense of connectedness within a learning community when they also

reported that their instructor exhibited a strong and active social presence. Examples of ways that instructors can foster a strong social presence include:

- Allowing for both personal and professional updates during class time from instructors and students;
- Demonstrating one's vulnerability, for example, by:
  - sharing personal and professional struggles and challenges;
  - soliciting feedback from students about the class and their ideas for improvement.
- Building in opportunities for flexibility and compassion, for example, by:
  - having a permissive late-work policy;
  - handing out "oops tokens" for students to turn in work late or redo an assignment with no questions asked.
- Encouraging students to learn about each other and the instructor, for example, by:
  - providing class time for students to write about their experiences and share these with peers;
  - sharing one's own professional biography with students; and
  - holding "happy hour" with students to foster informal, casual conversations.

Implications

Supporting student engagement appears to be crucial for all courses, but the strategies needed to develop *online* courses that are engaging can differ from those required for in-person courses. For example, online classes will likely need to provide more opportunities for collaboration between peers as well as more frequent, regular, and detailed communication among peers and with instructors. In addition, instructors will want to collect and examine data about who is participating in the various course activities, and proactively reach out to those who are not as engaged. There are some professional learning opportunities that can help faculty develop and learn these strategies such as working with colleagues to discuss challenges and tailor engagement techniques for students. Additionally, ensuring that faculty are aware of and supported in learning about and implementing these engagement strategies in their classes is critical.

Reflection Questions

For those interested in developing strategies to encourage student engagement in online courses, we offer the following questions for reflection:

- Do I share personal or life updates with my students as a means to connect with them? What is my comfortability with employing this as an engagement strategy? How do I move forward with implementing this strategy in a way that is comfortable for me?
- Where in my courses do opportunities for collaboration and communication exist? Among whom? Which students are participating in these opportunities, and how do I gather that information? Do I provide a range of engagement opportunities that allow for students

to leverage their strengths in different ways? How could I support students who are not yet engaging in the class through the mechanisms I have developed? What other forms of collaboration and communication can I include?

- Are some of my courses' strategies for collaboration and communication more effective in engaging some students rather than others? Are there disparate impacts by race or ethnicity? How would I know if this is the case? What strategies can I develop to provide more equitable opportunities for engagement among students?

- At my university, where can I find support in 1) understanding how effective my current online engagement strategies are for which students, 2) identifying additional strategies that would be useful for my students, and 3) implementing those strategies, and learning from my students to understand impacts?

Resource List

We include the following resources that highlight some of the strategies, related to student engagement in online courses, which we referenced throughout this memo:

- Strategies to utilize online discussion as a tool for student engagement: "Moving Classes Online is Hard. Online Discussion Can Help"

- Guidelines for "Effective Teaching Online"

- Strategies on how to connect with students in an online learning environment: "Make a Personal Connection in Your Online Classroom," and "5 Ways to Connect with Online Students"

Limitations

This memo provides an overview, but not a comprehensive review of all existing research on the topic, nor does this memo provide extensive information about methodologies of the literature included. We searched for literature from within the CSU and from California more generally, but where these sources were not available, we included other pertinent studies. For example, a guide by the Research and Planning Group for the California Community Colleges is referenced in this memo, and it was based on practices in its system. We included some research findings that are from massive open online courses that were provided outside of a public university. Also, most of the studies included students in masters or doctorate courses rather than undergraduates. Due to these and other limitations, the Network does not endorse the strategies presented in this memo as "best practices," and the strategies presented may need to be tailored to specific contexts within CSU campuses.

Both quantitative and qualitative research studies conducted with instructors and/or students are included; however, the findings were not disaggregated by race or ethnicity. This limits our ability to examine the equity implications of these strategies for fostering an engaging online learning environment and raises this as a critical area of focus for future research.

Endnotes

[1] Dixson, M.D. (2010). Creating effective student engagement in online courses: What do students find engaging? Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, 10(2), 1-13.

[2] Arbaugh, J.B., & Benbunan-Fich, R. (2006). An investigation of epistemological and social dimensions of teaching in online learning environments. Academy of Management Learning & Education, 5(4), 435-447.

[3] Kelly, D., Baxter, J.S., & Anderson, A. (2010). Engaging first-year students through online collaborative assignments. Journal of Computer Assisted Learning, 535-548. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2729.2010.00361.x

[4] Berry, S. (2019). Teaching to connect: Community-building strategies for the virtual classroom. Online Learning Journal, 23(1), 164-183. doi:10.24059/olj.v23i1.1425

[5] Shea, P. (2006). A study of students' sense of learning community in online environments. Online Learning. doi:10.24059/olj.v10i1.1774

[6] Hew, K.F. (2016). Promoting engagement in online courses: What strategies can we learn from three highly rated MOOCS. British Journal of Educational Technology, 47(2), 320-341.

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in the California State University

Education Insights Center
Advancing Research and Policy
for K-12 and Postsecondary Education

California State University, Sacramento
6000 J Street
Sacramento, CA 95819-6081
studentsuccessnetwork@edinsights.org
http://csustudentsuccess.net