MAGNA ONLINE SEMINARS

Supplemental Materials

Strategies to Engage Online Learners & Promote Deep Learning

Tuesday, December 7, 2010

Presented by:
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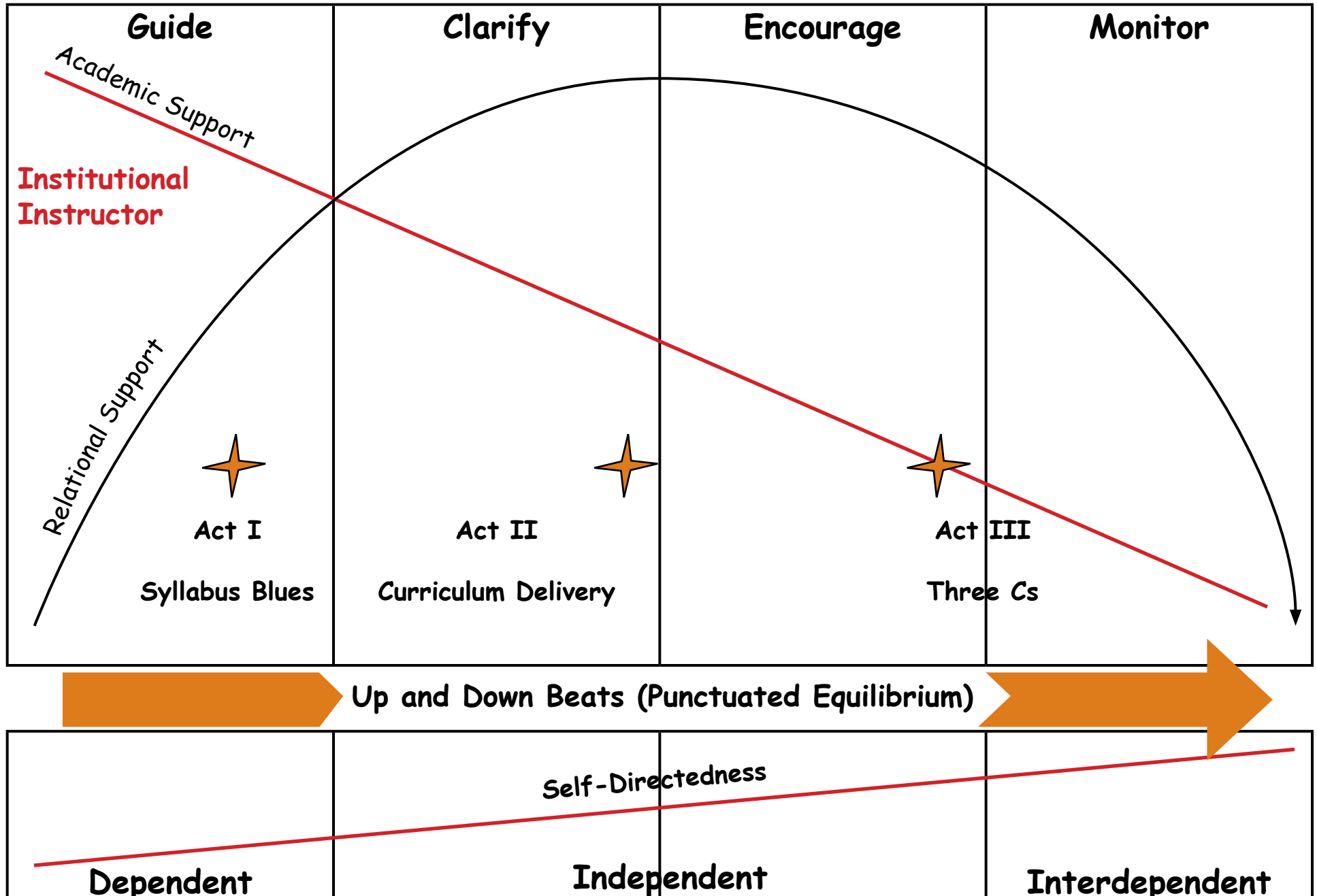
Designing Online Education

The design of engaging online education is not about the technology; it is about student engagement. Simply put, student engagement is about creating an emotional attachment between the student and the material, the student and the instructor, and the student and other students. In other words, engaging online education creates strong networks of interpersonal relationships (Lowe as cited in Levine, 2005) that provides dense nodes and networks of communication that permits learners to engage in knowledge creation that leads to deep learning.

As the course leader, you establish the emotional hooks that cause students to engage in the curriculum. While online courses are designed in advance, it is the instructor's application of learned activities that guides, clarifies, facilitates and encourages deep learning with students during course delivery. *The Online Course Delivery in Three Acts* is a powerful model that bridges and supersedes the work of Stephen D. Lowe (2005) and Gilly Salmon (2001). It links course design with course delivery in a meaningful way, which allows instructors to present academic and relational/social support at the right place, the right time, and the right amount. The power of the model is in its diagnostic capabilities. When the online course does not unfold as expected or is interrupted by dynamic events (punctuated equilibrium), referring to the model assists the instructor in adjusting the amount of academic and relational support that is needed to return to a stable state.
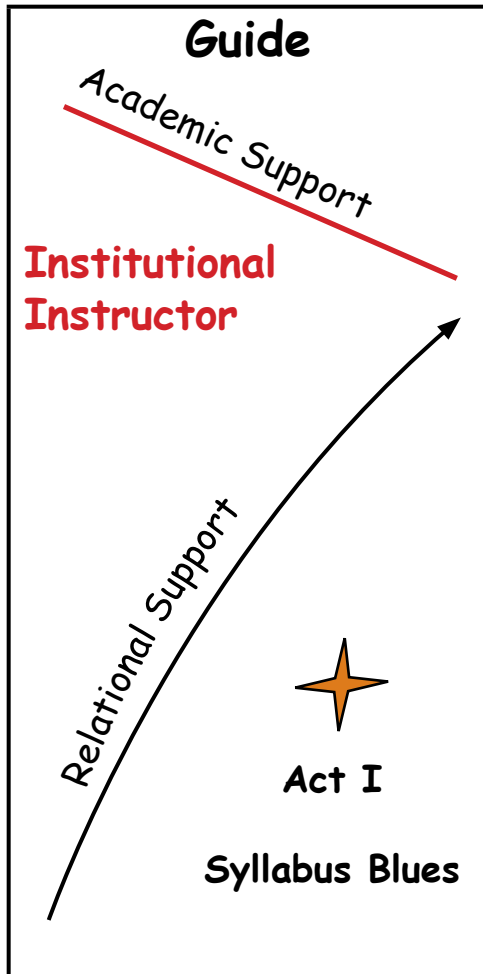
No longer is it necessary for instructors to cobble together a patchwork quilt of best methods from the literature of online and face-to-face courses, in order to determine the best practices for online course design. Built on sound theoretical principles, the three-act model lets course instructors, trainers and designers, from novice to expert, expand upon their current knowledge and utilize personal experience to overcome the E Storm created when pedagogy, technology, and learner needs collide in the online classroom. Rounding out the model is an arsenal of instructional tips and strategies that complements course design and builds flexible learning environments to support social learning and minimize student multitasking away from the course site. Learn the model; apply its techniques to make your classes a memorable learning experience.

Online Course Design in Three Acts

Guide

Clarify

Encourage

Monitor

Academic Support

Institutional Instructor

Relational Support

Act I

Syllabus Blues

Act II

Curriculum Delivery

Act III

Three Cs

Up and Down Beats (Punctuated Equilibrium)

Self-Directedness

Dependent

Independent

Interdependent

Online Course Design in Three Acts

Guide

Academic Support

Institutional Instructor

Relational Support

Act I

Syllabus Blues

Dependent

Act I: Syllabus Blues (Guide)

During the first third of the course, creating emotional attachments is difficult because the students are occupied with trying to navigate the site and determine what is required to pass the course.

From the instructor's point of view it makes no sense to try building relationships when the student's focus is on understanding the curriculum and the evaluation requirements.

From the students' point of view they are dependent learners. They want to be told what to do, when to do it, and where to look to be told what to do.

Relationship Support is low. This is the time to build trust with the students by responding to their requests with guidance and direction. That builds self-esteem that the student can indeed be a successful online learner.
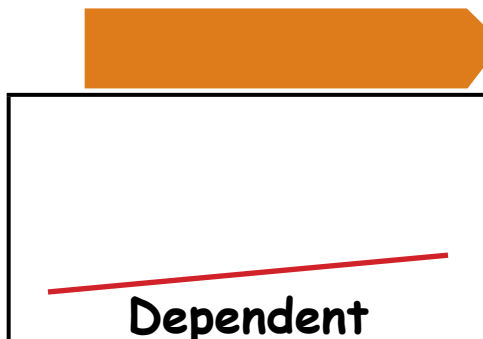
Academic Support is high. During this act the instructor is building the student's self-confidence and establishing a trusting relationship with the students.

Instructor Focus should be on assisting, facilitating, and guiding students around the course learning management system, responding to technical questions with just-in-time assistance, and preparing the student for the first plot point, that being the first graded assignment.

Instructor Tip: You can use short video conferences, less than five minutes, to provide just-in-time assistance.
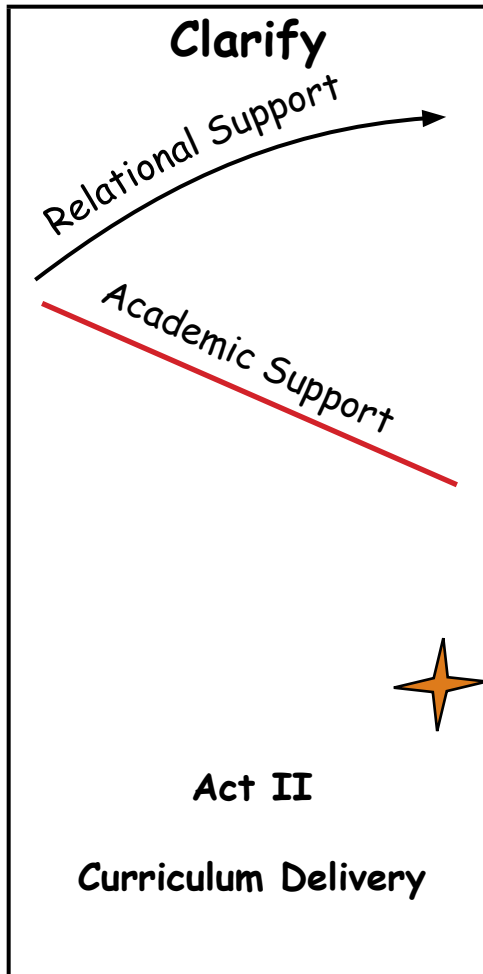
Plot Point One: The administration of the first graded assignment marks the end of Act I Syllabus Blues and the transition to Act II: Curriculum Delivery.

Learner: Dependent

Online Course Design in Three Acts

Clarify

Relational Support

Academic Support

Act II

Curriculum Delivery

Up and Down Beats

Self-Directedness

Independent

By the second third of the course students should understand the course requirements and be able to navigate the course management system. They should be engaging in the curriculum on a superficial level developing responses to discussion questions singularly and with no intention of integrating ideas in their classmate's postings.

Relationship Support is increasing. The instructor is building — bridging social capital, establishing and reinforcing nodes of communication between himself or herself and the students. The focus is understating the curriculum as theory. The turning point occurs (second plot point) when the instructor challenges the students to move beyond the theoretical to synthesis and application of the theoretical knowledge.

Academic Support is lower. The instructors focus has shifted from didactic instructor to subject matter expert. The nodes of communication among students have taken root and the instructor is moving from responding to technical questions to using his or her expert knowledge to assist the student in analyzing and synthesizing the information.
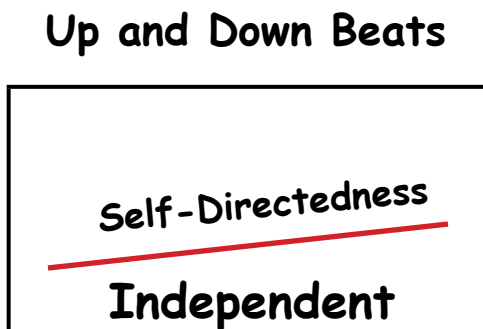
From the instructors' point of view they begin to do what they were hired to do — deliver the curriculum. The instructor strengthens the communication networks by challenging the students to take different perspectives on the course curriculum.

From the students' point of view they are independent learners. They can navigate the system, are comfortable posting their thoughts, and they comprehend the theory. But, as the momentum builds, the instructor moves from clarifying theoretical points to encouraging the students to move beyond comprehension to analyzing and synthesizing the course material.
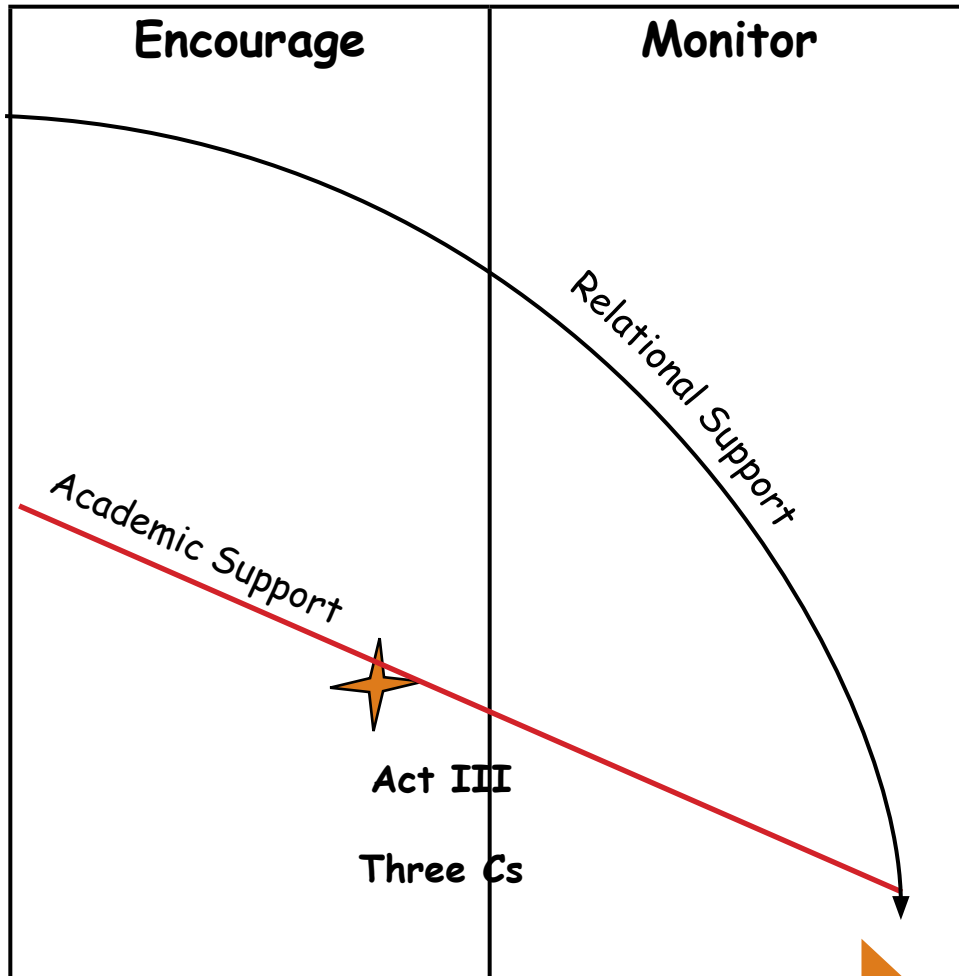
Instructor Tip: Be patient and monitor the course. If the discussion appears to be lagging give the students time to respond. They may be dealing with other issues (punctuated equilibrium).

Plot Point Two: The excitement created when students interact among themselves and build knowledge. Act III: Three C's (Challenge, Critical Thinking, and Creation of Knowledge).
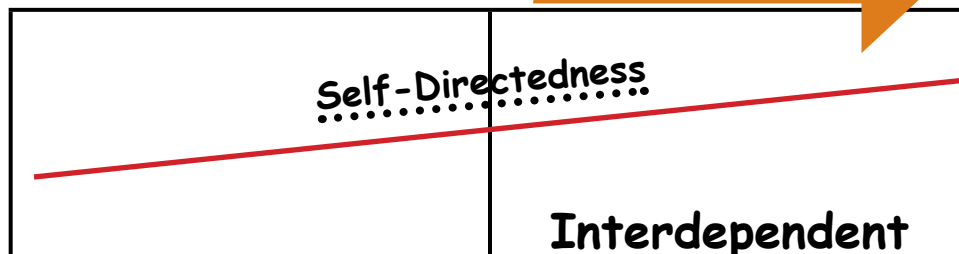
Learner: Independent

Online Course Design in Three Acts

Encourage	Monitor

Relational Support

Academic Support

Act III

Three Cs

(Punctuated Equilibrium)

Self-Directedness

Interdependent

By the last third of the course students are fully engaged with the course material, contributing to the discussion forum, and building scaffolds of new knowledge. Friendships and communication networks and nodes have been established physically and emotionally. The thought of breaking these ties saddens the students. The instructor prepares the students for the completion of the course, congratulates them and celebrates their success in becoming interdependent self-actualized online learners.

Relationship Support is self-maintaining, self-fulfilling, and perpetual. The instructor's role is diminished to maintaining communication network and notes.

Academic Support is at its lowest point. The course's management system has become the student's home. He or she knows how to function within its structure and how to get help. The class has become a functioning, self-directed team that is comfortable responding to each other's questions without the need of an intermediary, the teacher.

From the instructor's point of view the learning objectives of the course have been achieved. Students have engaged in knowledge creation and deep learning.

From the students' point of view they are interdependent learners. They have experienced the deep learning that comes with knowledge creation.

Instructor Tip: Provide praise and celebrate the class's accomplishments. Congratulate them on their persistence and the success achieved.

Plot Point Three: The Resolution. The course is over and the students are confident they can transfer the learning from this course to the next course

Learner: Interdependent

Glossary

Academic Support

Institutional technology support as represented by a stable learning management system, a competent and readily accessible technology help desk, and the emotional support from the academic administration reinforces the idea that online education is as rigorous as face-to-face learning.

Bridging Social Capital

Bridging social capital encompasses creating relationships with people that are from diverse backgrounds with more distant ties among students of different backgrounds

Plot Point

It is a significant event within a plot that digs into the action and spins it around in another direction.

Punctuated Equilibrium

Theory that proposes that organizations move through periods of stability followed by short periods of dynamic, fundamental change that ends with a return to stability.

Relational Support

Affective dimension of the learning process as expressed in the attitudinal quality of the interpersonal relationships between facilitator and learner.

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ONLINE CL@SSROOM

IDEAS FOR EFFECTIVE ONLINE INSTRUCTION

NOVEMBER 2010

5 Ways to Challenge Your Students in Online Discussions

By Nicole Hickland-Harris, MISM

Discussion is an essential learning activity whether you are teaching in a traditional classroom with an online component or teaching a fully online course. There are many ways to engage students on topics that will help them participate actively in class discussion. Over the years, the idea of discussing a topic in class has evolved from having a face-to-face discussion in between lecture topics to allowing the students to speak about lecture content in a full online discussion forum. Engaging students can make a major difference in online discussions, which generate exchanges that allow students to appreciate the topic discussed and to lead a new level of topic understanding.

Below are five tips that can help to add value to your classroom's online discussion.

1. Post early, post often, and post content to help the student.

Each class week is a new beginning for the student. It is important for instructors to engage students and keep them interested in the course and the content. One way to do this is to start the discus-sion forum by capturing your students' attention. This can be done by posting early, posting often, and posting content that will engage them. One way to accomplish this is to create a system of posting a new question each morning. When material is posted early, students can recognize a new week and start it the right way. If you post a new week's material at 7 a.m., for example, it will give students a chance to have full access to the material as early as possible. Posting often is also essential, especially when it comes to discussion questions. It is important to continually engage the students and provide them with challenging topics that will propel the discussion forward.

2. Bring examples and your own experience to the classroom.

One of the most effective ways to reach students is to give them a window into your experience. This applies to the traditional classroom and the online classroom. Students in the online environment have the challenge of not being face to face, yet they are still trying to gain the same information as if they were. One way to make them feel engaged

Creating a Network of Learners

By Rob Kelly

When referring to a group of online learners, Caterina Valentino prefers the term "network of learners" to "community of learners." Network of learners is a more apt description because "it's a much more dynamic visualiza-tion than 'community of learners,'" says Valentino, an innovator in the delivery of distant education, adjunct professor at the School of Health Services Management at Ryerson University and a Sessional Instructor at Athabasca University's Centre for Nursing and Health Studies. Her vision of a network of learners is an interdependent group in which learners learn from each other and create new knowledge. This does not happen by chance, Valentino says. It's a deliberate process that involves a two-pronged approach based on the Providing Academic and Relational Support (PARS) model created by Stephen Lowe.

Academic support includes things such as helping student manage all the "mechanics" of online learning—the technology

Indicators of Engagement in the Online Classroom

By B. Jean Mandernach, PhD

Student course engagement "typically refers to the amount, type, and intensity of investment students make in their educational experiences" (Jennings & Angelo, 2006, p. 6). While research overwhelmingly supports the value of engagement for promoting student achievement and retention, the research is less definitive in its guidance concerning how to monitor whether or not your students are engaged. The challenge in assessing engagement is that it is not openly visible and rests primarily within internal student characteristics. Engagement encompasses a range of academic correlates, including personality, affective, motivational, and persistence factors; it is driven by "students' willingness, need, desire and compulsion to participate in, and be successful in, the learning process" (Bomia, Beluzo, Demeester, Elander, Johnson & Sheldon, 1997, p. 294).

Recognizing the value of engagement and its vital role in the educational process, faculty should monitor student engagement as a formative strategy to examine the impact of their teaching and assessment activities. A number of formal, self-report assessments of student engagement are available; for example:

- *Student Engagement Index* (Langley, 2006)—Developed to identify specific measures of classroom engagement aligned with the benchmarks set forth by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE).
- *Revised Student Experiences Questionnaire* (CSEQ) (Koljatic & Kuh, 2001)—Assessment aligns general issues of engagement according to student-faculty contact, cooperation among students, and active learning.
- *Revised Student Engagement Questionnaire* (Handelsman, Briggs, Sullivan & Towler, 2005)— Measures four dimensions of course engagement: skills, emotional, participation/interaction, and performance engagement.
- *Student Engagement Survey* (SE) (Ahlfeldt, Mehta & Sellnow, 2005)—Short assessment that adapts specific items from the NSSE survey for use at the course level.
- *Faculty Survey of Student Engagement* (FSSE) (Ouimet & Smallwood, 2005)—An adaptation of the NSSE designed to assess faculty perceptions of student engagement in a specific course.
- *Classroom Survey of Student Engagement* (CLASSE) (Smallwood & Ouimet, 2009)—The complementary measure to the FSSE designed to assess student perceptions of engagement in a course.

While these formal measures may provide a useful metric for summative examinations of student engagement, faculty wishing to adapt their instructional strategies to maximize engagement may wish to monitor informal, formative indicators of student engagement throughout their courses. As such, the issue becomes how to monitor student engagement in your online course when you cannot see the looks of excitement, interest, or enthusiasm.

Engagement can be monitored via three primary avenues: participation in asynchronous discussions,

assignment activity, and course involvement. The key to monitoring engagement is to examine students' self-initiated course activity that extends beyond the graded expectations of the course. For example:

1) *Asynchronous discussions:*
   a. Student asks relevant questions that contributed to a more meaningful discussion.
   b. Student integrates diverse perspectives in response to discussion items.
   c. Student initiates assistance or support to facilitate classmates' mastery of course material.
   d. Student applies theories and/or concepts to practical problems or new situations.
   e. Student actively participates in discussions beyond the minimum expectations for participation.

2) *Assignment activity:*
   a. Student prepares multiple drafts of an assignment prior to submission.
   b. Student voluntarily engages classmates for collaboration outside the scheduled course activities.
   c. Student synthesizes and/or organizes ideas, information, or experiences into new, more complicated interpretations and relationships.
   d. Student evaluates the value of information, arguments, or methods to assess the accuracy of his/her conclusions.
   e. Student utilizes feedback from assignments to improve his/her understanding and future performance.

3) *Course involvement:*
   a. Student contacts you with course-related questions that extended the meaning of the required course material.
   b. Student works effectively to identify, understand, and complete all given course assignments and tasks.
   c. Student logs in to class on a regular basis and participates beyond the minimum requirements of the course.
   d. Student seeks out additional information or readings to complement course topics.
   e. Student completes all readings and studies on a regular basis.
   f. Student seeks out additional feedback or comments on his/her work.

In addition to these behavioral observations, faculty should monitor students' self-reports of engagement that may appear in course activity journals, discussion groups, or other informal interactions.

As highlighted by Nauffal (2010), "The concept of student engagement is receiving increased attention globally as it is viewed as an important element in assessing and improving the quality of higher education" (slide 8). This issue is compounded in the online classroom where faculty may be under increased scrutiny to demonstrate the overall quality of the educational experience. Faculty are encouraged to actively monitor student engagement to guide instructional and assessment choices as well as to expand definitions of course effectiveness beyond simple emphasis on cognitive learning.

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PowerPoint for Online Courses, Part 8: Manipulating Clip Art

By Patti Shank, PhD, CPT

In this series of articles, I've been discussing ways to improve using PowerPoint as an online teaching and learning tool. This month, I'm concluding this series with some tips and tricks for working with PowerPoint clip art.

Clip art use is a bit of a can of worms. When done poorly, adding clip art can make your slides look less professional. But when done well, clip art can improve slide aesthetics. So you should do it well! PowerPoint is a visual communication tool. Slides with a wall of words or with long bullet lists up the snooze factor of your online presentation. So, when designing your slides, you must consider how to *show* what you are talking about rather than merely *telling* what you are talking about in slide text. You can expound on what you are showing using narration, which is generally more interesting than telling in text. And if there's a lot to tell, consider adding downloadable documents to read.

The instructions I'll be providing in this month's article are for PowerPoint 2007, but the instructions are very similar for other versions.

Want more?

Let's say you find the clip art provided with PowerPoint to be pretty limiting and wish you had more. Easy—get more!

When using clip art in PowerPoint, you have a choice of using clip art from a variety of collections (see Figure 1, shown when you click **Insert> Clip Art**).
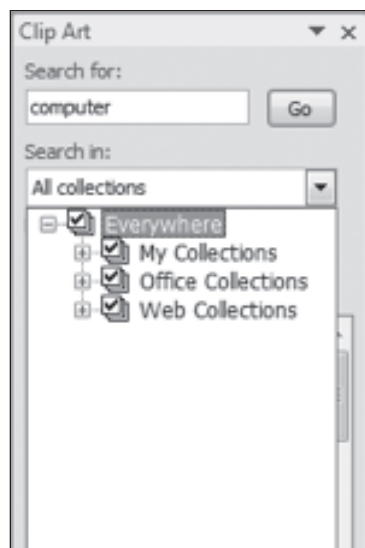

Figure 1. Clip Art Pane

You can create your own collections by letting PowerPoint scan your hard disk for other illustrations and photographs. The Clip Organizer will place images that are found into the **My Collections** folders. You can also download free clip art from the Microsoft Office Online Clip Art and Media site (*http://office.microsoft. com/en-us/images/*), and these clips are stored in a Downloaded Clips folder in the **My Collections** folders.

Office Collections includes all the clips that come with Microsoft Office, so these clips are the ones you expect to see when you look for clip art to use. **Web Collections** includes clips from the Microsoft Office Online collection (you must be connected to the Internet to use these). If you include this collection in your search, you will find and be able to use the clips available on the Microsoft site too.

So, to have access to more clips, check all three collections and search for what you need! If you need additional clips, you can buy more on sites such as iCLIPART (*www.iclipart.com/microsoft*).

Keep a PowerPoint graphics library

Last month I talked about manipulating clip art so you get images that are closer to what you *really* want. That can take some time and effort. Then, when you want to use that image again, you need to remember what slide deck the image is in so you can copy it and paste it into the new slide deck. Far too much work! (Not to mention the time it takes to search and the chance that you won't remember what slide deck the image is in.)

In order to make reuse of images easier, consider creating a PowerPoint library to make it easy to find the clip art you might want to use again. (This idea came from another instructional designer/developer, Jenise Cook of Ridgeview Media.)

Start by opening a blank PowerPoint file and save it with a name such as PowerPointGraphicsLibrary.pptx (or .ppt if you are using earlier versions of PowerPoint). After finding or manipulating clip art elements that you might want to reuse, copy them onto slides in the Library slide deck. Consider organizing the slides by types of graphics, such as faces clips, household object clips, background clips, etc. Use slide titles to label the types of clips on each slide.

When you want to find and reuse these clips, open the PowerPoint graphics library file and change the view to **Slide Sorter View** (Figure 2). This view lets you see all your slides at once and makes it easier to find the image you are looking for. Once you find the slide that has the image you want to reuse, double-click on it and the program will open that slide in **Normal View.** Then you can
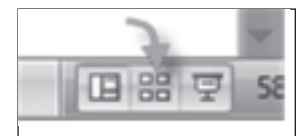

Figure 2. Change to Slide Sorter View

copy the desired image and paste it into your new slide deck.

Copy formatting from one clip art element to another

If you manipulate clip art, such as adding a drop shadow (**Drawing Tools>Format>Shape Effects> Shadow**), you may want to add the same effect to other clip art elements in the slide deck. To save time applying the same effect to other clip art elements you want to manipulate in the same way, you can easily copy formatting from one clip art object to another.

Here's how. Once you have one clip art element formatted the way you want it, select it and then click the **Format Painter button** (Figure 3). Then click the other clip art element (the one you want to reformat). The second clip art element is now formatted with the attributes of the first clip art element. Such a time-saver!

Figure 3

Next month, I'll start a related series of articles on adding narration and interactivity to your online PowerPoint presentations.

Patti Shank, PhD, CPT, is a widely recognized information and instructional designer and writer and author, who helps others build valuable information and instruction. She can be reached through her website: www.learningpeaks.com. @

and the policy and procedures of the course. Relational support refers to creating and supporting productive interaction among students and between students and the instructor. Relational support builds upon academic support. In the first third of the course academic support is the predominant type of support that instructors need to provide—"getting students over the hump or what I call the 'syllabus blues,'" Valentino says. "Whether you're a novice or an expert, there's always trepidation regarding the syllabus. The students want to know what it takes to get an A."

In addition, there is what Valentino refers to as the "technology blues," helping students understand the learning management system. "So that's the first part. Even before you can start building relationships with the students and getting them into the academics of the course, you have to go through the 'syllabus blues' and the 'technology blues'. Then when that begins to subside you can start working on the relational support," Valentino says.

At the core of relational support is the idea that learning is a social event, Valentino says. The online classroom is a social atmosphere where students connect with each other and where they have the opportunity to put their ideas out there for others to agree or disagree with, analyze, and critique.

As the facilitator, Valentino

models how she expects students to interact by the way facilitates the course. Here are two simple suggestions that help students form a network of learners:

- Address students by name.
- Link posts together. Make it a point to link similar or opposing points together and respond by name to the authors of those posts. ("Dear John, Mary, and the rest of the class…")

"Once you get them over the hump and they're comfortable in the environment, then you can start asking questions and facilitating, which is not only linking students' postings but challenging them with new theories," Valentino says. "When you start out, the instructor is probably being pedagogical. As the course progresses, the relationship becomes more androgogical [the role of the instructor is minimized]. And when the network is popping, you're facilitating. You're being a conduit of communication. You're linking them together. You're importing your expert knowledge into their knowledge creation to help them understand the curriculum better."

On December 7 Caterina Valentino will lead the Magna Online Seminar "Strategies to Engage Online Learners & Promote Deep Learning." *For information, see* http://www.magnapubs.com/ catalog/engage-online-learners/. @

A Tried and True Mini-Guide to Engaging Online Students

By Errol Craig Sull

In writing this column for more than four years, I have received many emails asking for information on a variety of topics, and no question is asked more frequently than how to keep online students engaged. This issue is at the heart of any distance learning course. When students are engaged, the class is exciting, learning is more likely to occur, the students want to be a part of the course on an ongoing basis, and the students give you and the school outstanding evaluations. Much has been written on this subject, and should I choose—and if my editor allowed it—this column could be hundreds of pages long. But it is a column, not a book, so I offer six surefire ways to get and keep students engaged in an online course and, as a bonus, two activities that always result in enthusiastic student engagement throughout the course.

Strategies

Post a "Welcome to the Course!" announcement that is enthusiastic and motivating. Your first post is probably the most important of your course, as the students get an immediate sense of you—your enthusiasm, approach (inviting or intimidating?), attitude (upbeat or not really interested?), and willingness to help out. And unlike a face-to-face course where these words are spoken then quickly forgotten, here they are available for your students throughout the course, 24/7. (And remember: read over any post, email, webmail, announcement, etc., before sending it to the class: its overall content, writing quality, and proofreading must be your best … each time!)

Be first whenever possible. You set the tone for the students. When they see you as an enthusiastic member of the class, it helps to get them revved up: they know they will not be on their own, feel you truly enjoy teaching the class, and know you have a real interest in their learning. And when they know this, your students will become more engaged. So be sure you always have the first post of

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> Be sure your comments on assignments point out that something is not correct, why it is not correct, and how to get it right.

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each new discussion topic. Post an overview to the coming week (module, unit, etc.), and give little reminder announcements throughout the course so students can see that you are an engaged instructor at all times.

Respond to all student queries, etc., within 24 hours. The all-important "umbilical cord" that connects you to the students—the computer—must constantly be fed by you; when you allow it no food of your thoughts, reactions, instructions, etc., students will be less likely to stay involved in the course. Perhaps the most crucial component is quickly responding to any student posts that shout, "Help!" or "I'm confused!" or—in essence—"I just wanted to share this with you, professor!" In these instances, the students are reaching out to you, and your quick response tells them that you

are interested in what they have to say, you are active in the course, and you can be depended upon—three qualities that go a long way toward keeping students engaged.

Be certain all assignment feedback is detailed and positive in tone. Students are obviously in class to learn, and the more material they receive relating to the class subject, the better. To help this along and to keep students engaged, offer on all assignments detailed feedback that leaves the students with a positive feeling, no matter how poorly they may have done. To accomplish this: [a] Be sure your comments on assignments point out that something is not correct, why it is not correct, and how to get it right. [b] Give your students a breakdown of how you arrived at their grades (and if it is an ungraded assignment give them a faux grade so they can get a sense of the quality work they are submitting). [c] Always point out a few things the student got right; this is especially important for students who did poorly on an assignment. [d] Make your last sentence or two positive one—it helps motivate a student to do better. (Suggestion: set up rubrics for each assignment, even if your school does not require them. They offer thorough feedback on all areas of an assignment and allow for great motivating text from you. If you would like to see some, let me know—I'll happily send you some of mine!)

Respond to all—or nearly all—student discussion postings. For most courses where discussion postings are required, this can become the heart of the course—it

is here where students explore segments of the course subject, interact with one another 24/7, and can touch on areas of the course not included in your syllabus. While most students will eagerly respond to one another, your constant presence reminds students of your sincere interest in the course, allows you the opportunity to continually push discussions forward, and can keep the course discussions on track. To accomplish this: [a] Respond to all or nearly all student discussion postings—this really keeps students enthused about being involved in discussion. [b] At the end of each day, post a major comment on the discussion topic, ending with a question for the students to explore for the next 24 hours. This keeps your discussions always fresh, something the students will appreciate. [c] On the last day a discussion thread is "alive," end with a posting that sums up the discussion topic—and be sure to include an upbeat note at the end.

Have ready a frequently asked questions link at the beginning of your course. No matter how much information is included in your course, students will continually ask questions that range from course logistics ("How do I post an attachment?") to content ("When did the periodic table of elements add Au for gold?"). The latter will usually require individual responses, as it is more likely that one or two students will ask such a question. But for the former—and many basic ones like it—you are wise to post a frequently asked questions link somewhere in your course prior to day one. Not only

will this save you time—instead of writing individually, many students will simply use the information posted—but students will also appreciate the care you take in trying to help them. (Suggestion: take all new questions, concerns, etc., students raise and add them to a file you keep. This way you will have items you can add for each new course you teach.)

Activities

Establish and populate an "extra resources" section in your course. There is much happening in the everyday world of life— outside your course—that relates to your subject; the more students see those connections, the more important your course becomes beyond a grade. So constantly be on the prowl for such items— YouTube clips, articles and essays, pictures, etc.—that highlight and reinforce all or certain segments of your course. These add to the value of the course and show you to be an instructor who really wants to immerse the students in a full learning experience—traits students will certainly appreciate. (Suggestion: also use crossword puzzles and other games and cartoons for excitement. See *www.puzzle-maker.com/CW/*.)

Have students search for useful and fun websites for the class. This is always a great activity and really helps keep students engaged. Whether you do this in a discussion thread or elsewhere, have each student find three websites useful to the subject or your course and three websites that are fun or unusual. Be sure each student adds one line of explanation under each website. The students—and you—benefit from the helpful sites, and all in

the class have some lighter moments through the non-course-related sites. This is a great way to have students feel they are a true part of the course, offer additional course assistance, and have some plain old fun—and keep students enthusiastically engaged.

> **REMEMBER: Great Thanksgiving get-togethers: excellent combinations of quality and quantity of food, joyous interactions of the folks present, and overall smooth and hassle-free celebrations—we don't want them to end! Yes, these engaging experiences take effort to pull off ... as do online classes.**

Please let me hear from you, including sending along suggestions and information for future columns. You can always reach me at errolcraigsull@aol.com. *And remember: please forward me your computer tips and suggestions to make teaching in the online classroom more efficient and productive.*

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is to provide specific, detailed experiences that they can relate to. This can be achieved by drawing on your background and experience that qualified you to be hired as an instructor in the first place. You can then take this experience and create working case studies for your students; students will truly gain from it an understanding of how the industry works.

Here is an example:

Prior to becoming an online instructor, I worked for 10 years in the field of information technology. During this time, I gained an in-depth understanding of the software development life cycle, which is standard for most organizations that plan huge (tier 1 and 2) information technology projects. When I began teaching, I saw this as an opportunity to walk my students through a "day in the life" of how the software development life cycle works. Since I knew this process inside and out, it was very easy for me to compile my thoughts and the industry standards, and then present them to my students to generate discussion … and boy, did they!

3. Customize your discussion forum as much as possible. It creates an environment that makes the student feel comfortable.

This tip will propel your class discussion to the next level. Think about it: the online discussion forum leaves so much to the imagination. Customization allows you, as the instructor, to make your discussion area "feel" as comfortable as possible. Here are a few ideas for you to customize your classroom.

• Post a note welcoming students

to the forum.
• Post information about the textbook and lecture notes.
• Provide a chat room where students can post biographies and get to know each other.
• Post your biography.
• Create a "student lounge" where students can chat about things that may not necessarily fall under the objectives for the week.
• Post reminder notes for deliverables for the week.
• Post supportive readings that may aid the students in understanding weekly course concepts.
• Post a weekly "Questions for the Professor" thread so that students can have contact with you.
• Post wrap-up information at the end of a week, summarizing the weekly class objectives.
• Post your individual thoughts on the weekly concepts, and allow students to have a "day in the life" glimpse of how the concepts affect the career.
• Provide extensive and detailed examples when available.

4. Provide timely and detailed grade book feedback.

You may be wondering how this point will help students discuss topics more thoroughly. Well, the truth is, feedback is essential for students to understand what they are doing right versus what they are doing wrong. It is important for students to understand as early as possible through grading what the instructor expects in discussion forums. A good recommendation for instructors during the first week is to provide feedback on the first discussion as soon as possible. As the instructor, you should give students very detailed feedback and remind them to contact you should they have any questions. Students will appreciate receiving forum feedback

early during the first week because it helps them understand your expectations. In return, you will find that when your students understand your expectations, they engage in better discussion!

5. Answer questions as soon as possible and post responses so that the entire class can benefit from them.

This tip may sound a bit repetitive, but I have included it to reinforce the notion of interacting with students as often as possible. It is in the best interest of the instructor to provide accurate and timely responses to questions presented by the students. Students typically may post questions in the discussion forum, asking about a topic addressed in class. It is helpful to respond as soon as possible because it gives clarification, which usually generates more discussion!

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