BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS AND INCREASING ENGAGEMENT IN THE VIRTUAL CLASSROOM: PRACTICAL TOOLS FOR THE ONLINE INSTRUCTOR

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ABSTRACT

Online education is rapidly increasing in popularity across the globe. Instructors and professors struggle to engage with and build meaningful relationships with online students in the same manner as on-ground students, and without this critical component in place, online students report a lack of interest, and thus, they produce a lower quality of work and report less overall satisfaction. There are a host of tools and strategies that may be used by the online instructor to build meaningful relationships with students and increase these satisfaction levels. This article discusses multiple approaches using both basic and technological tools to manage the online classroom. These tactics reach out to the online student, build these important relationships, and create a greater sense of satisfaction and produce a higher level of work by the online student.

Keywords: online, education, classroom management, video, relationships, higher education, engagement.

INTRODUCTION

The evolution of online education is moving at a rapid pace, and this content delivery platform is not reserved for just colleges and universities. Virtual public high schools are emerging across the United States, and in 2015 it was estimated that more than two million high-school students were enrolled in some form of online education (Watson, Pape, Murin, Gemin, & Vashaw, 2015). Universities are using this technology to reach students worldwide, and this platform is presenting a new set of challenges for teachers and professors who elect to engage with students through a virtual portal. Classroom management has long been a core topic in preservice training for teachers (Martin, 2017). Rules, reprimands, rewards, . . . these are all the standard topics when classroom management is envisioned by most; however, these are far from the only elements of a strong classroom management plan. The organization and delivery of expectations, the strategies used by instructors to engage students, and the efforts made by the instructors to build meaningful relationships with students are equally crucial foundations for an effective classroom management plan. Unfortunately, most of these ideas do not translate well to the online classroom, and most students are left with a bland, uninspiring experience with their online classes.

Clearly, teaching in the online environment is very different than in the face-to-face classroom. The opportunities for spontaneous, formative feedback between a teacher and student are lost. Students are asked to read instructions for assignments and activities rather than hear these directions provided directly from their instructor. This can become a frustrating disconnect for many students, and this is especially true for those with auditory or visual learning styles (Cela, Silcilia, &

Sanches-Alonso, 2016). When a student is required to read a list of expectations set forth for them in a bulleted or checklist format, this often reinforces the disconnect they feel with their instructor, the course, and the school or university. The core theme of this article is centered on research conducted by the author regarding the importance of the student-teacher relationship in a classroom. The findings from this study concluded that these relationships were the single most important factor in determining the success or failure of a teacher's classroom management plan (Martin, 2017). This article will discuss how online instructors can employ ground classroom management strategies to increase these crucial virtual relationships with their students across the globe. By building relationships with their online students, online instructors will increase the engagement level, satisfaction, and retention of their students while improving the efficiency of their online teaching. As Marzano and Marzano (2003) stated, it is all about building the relationships.

RELATIONSHIPS—THE KEY TO CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

A qualitative case study was conducted involving a small group of novice teachers in the first, second, or third year of teaching in a large public high school district in Arizona. The researcher wanted to find the gap, if any, that existed between the training these teachers had received in their preservice education programs versus the practical knowledge needed to effectively manage a secondary classroom (Martin, 2017). The researcher examined the perceptions of these teachers using questionnaires, personal interviews, and focus group interviews. The study organized the perceptions these teachers had into three core classroom management concepts: establishing rules and routines, using positive and negative consequences, and building meaningful relationships with students. The researcher examined the emphasis placed on each of these concepts during the preservice education programs and how important each of these three ideas were in the success or failure of the teachers' classroom management programs.

Each participant was asked to identify any skills or knowledge they wish they would have learned while in their preservice training that would have

helped them manage behavior and outcomes in their classroom in a more effective way. All ten of the participants in the study overwhelmingly identified the teacher-student relationship as the key component needed to successfully manage a classroom (Martin, 2017). Only one of the ten teachers said he remembered a professor discussing the importance of building relationships, yet all of the participants claimed that was the most crucial part of their classroom management plan. Without these relationships in place, the engagement levels, respect, and trust of their students were much lower, and the likelihood of their success diminished.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIP IN CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

The student-teacher relationship is the foundation for any productive classroom management plan. This is true for both on-ground and online modalities. Marzano and Marzano (2003) claimed this relationship is the building block for all class activities, and a teacher who does not actively work to establish these relationships will surely encounter negative situations that could have been avoided had the time been taken up front to establish these bonds with the students. Students of all ages perform for teachers they respect and whom they believe have their best interested in mind always (Martin, 2017). Participants in this study relayed numerous personal experiences working with difficult students who showed clear signs of apathy and often resistance to the content being taught in class. Once the relationship was established, these teachers were able to have meaningful conversations with the students to learn what they could do to help them and engage with them. Without these relationships in place, it was as if there was a barrier in the way of the student learning (Martin, 2017).

The researcher, as a full-time online professor at a large university in the Phoenix area, took these findings and applied them to the online classroom portal. Many of the same strategies used by these participants and countless other teachers in traditional classrooms can easily be adapted to the online classroom to increase engagement and build relationships with their students. The online modality offers many advantages over the on-ground classroom with its access and use of technology. These high-tech tools can be used

to build these relationships and engage students even faster and more effectively. While there are vast differences between a face-to-face and online classroom, many relationship-building strategies translate very well between these two modalities.

THE RELATIONSHIP DISCONNECT ONLINE

Online content delivery is an effective, efficient method to reach a massive number of people on an ongoing basis. The professor can create the content once, present it to a group of students, and repeat. Unfortunately, online education has the tenancy to take on this stale, repetitive nature. Over time, students begin to feel isolated and can become disinterested if they do not feel an emotional connection to the content they are studying. The lack of instructor interaction with the student is often one of the more prevalent complaints logged by online students (Korkut, Dornberger, Diwanji, Simon, & Maerki, 2015). They simply feel disconnected. Vibrant student-teacher relationships have long been key to the satisfaction and success of a student in the traditional classroom (Draus, Curran, & Trempus, 2014). If an online instructor expects the same student achievement and fulfilment as experienced in a similar on-ground course, should not he or she employ similar classroom management and engagement strategies to connect with the online student? The issue for many is how to build meaningful relationships through a computer screen rather than in a face-to-face setting (Underdown & Martin, 2016). While it is much more challenging, employing similar strategies as used face-to-face is an excellent starting point.

The main dissatisfaction expressed by students regarding the use of an online education portal is the lack of instructor presence in the classroom. Too many times students feel like a computer screen is teaching them rather than a live person (Griffiths & Graham, 2009). The struggle for most instructors is to make online content presentation both personal and interactive at the same time. Students want to know a real, caring person is working with them to complete the course, and this support and personal guidance can be the difference between success and failure for some students. Just as with an on-ground classroom, students are curious about the background and experiences of their instructor, but the online platform rarely facilitates a way for these experiences to be shared naturally. Martin (2017) claimed the relationships between students and teachers in the on-ground classroom are the most important factor determining the success of the student. Online instructors must work to establish these same relationships despite the fact there is a virtual gap separating the teacher and student. There are several simple, straight forward solutions any online instructor can easily implement to build that bond and create a visual connection between themselves and their students. Through implementing these strategies, the online teacher will create the connection with the student that is vital for success.

PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR ESTABLISHING RELATIONSHIPS AND ENGAGING STUDENTS

Not seeing a face or hearing a voice may pose the greatest obstacle to establishing the relationships that are so crucial in the success and satisfaction of students today. Fortunately, technology has provided many tools to help instructors to bridge the social gap that exists and connect with students on a personal and genuine level. Screen recorders, such as Screencast-O-Matic (screencast-o-matic.com) and videoconferencing software such as Loom (www.useloom.com) and Zoom (www.zoom.us) are just a few of the tools used today by effective teachers and professors to make these important personal connections. Studies have that shown instructors who include personalized video content in their classrooms are able to create effectively and easily a quasi-relationship with their online students (Draus et al., 2014; Griffiths & Graham, 2009; Korkut et al., 2015). Instructor-created content that establishes credibility and sets course expectations is one of the most important steps in creating this online relationship with students. Additionally, as an instructor, showing a personal side and allowing students to share about themselves are other very effective strategies to build these bonds. It is possible to establish rapport very quickly though using these tactics, and doing so will increase the satisfaction level of the student, reduce potential miscommunication, and ensure maximum engagement at all times. Here are several practical and repeatable strategies one may embed in his or her online classroom today.

Instructor-Created Video Content
Instructor-created video content is a straight-

forward strategy to engage the online student and increase the level of engagement and satisfaction experienced by these students (Underdown & Martin, 2016). These videos, recorded once and used in each course taught, create the quasi-presence of the instructor so many online students complain is missing in the virtual classroom (Miller & Redman, 2010). While the instructor is not creating these videos on a daily basis, it appears as if the effort is being made to repeatedly share information on a personal level with the students in class. You can create the video content one time, use it repeatedly, and engage the students on a level they most likely will not experience in their other online courses.

Course expectations. One of the cornerstones in any effective classroom management plan is establishing the course expectations from the first day of class (Canter, 1996). Doing so in the online classroom typically appears in the form of pages upon pages of text that a student is expected to read and absorb. Combine this with the technological logistics of navigating an online course, and it is easy to see how many of the critical policies and procedures of an online course can slip through the cracks for a student. When instructors create videos that provide these policies and expectations, it allows student the opportunity do two things. First, the video content will continue to develop the quasi-relationship with the instructor, as the students will be seeing and hearing the face and voice of the instructor present these policies instead of simply reading the text. Next, they will have a greater opportunity to absorb the material through this audio-video format than through text alone (Cela et al., 2016). Establishing these expectations for all students is the first step in the successful completion of the course for the student (Martin, 2017). This opportunity should be afforded for both on-ground and online students and through the creation of videos, this can easily be accomplished.

Assignment tutorials. One of the most frustrating aspects of the online classroom is understanding written directions from a syllabus. These instructions are often not written by the professor or teacher but by curriculum writers, and they may be vague and left up to interpretation by the students. When this happens, both teacher and student may be equally frustrated. When setting expectations for both course policies and procedures, as well as assignment directions, the use of video can eliminate much of the grey area that exists. Again, the same process and format is followed as with the video content for the course expectations. The instructor may use one of the mentioned video recording tools and create tutorials that will guide students through the assignment expectation, potential pitfalls, and points of emphasis. The most important part of this exercise is to ensure that the student either hears or sees the personal interaction from the teacher during the instructional process. Through both seeing the instructor's face and hearing his or her voice, the bond is being created between teacher and student in an ongoing process, and the student is feeling a greater level of satisfaction and engagement in the course while expectations are made much clearer than through simply reading text (Draus et al., 2014). These video assignment tutorials benefit both the student and teacher. Students will submit higher quality work because they fully understood the assignment directions and expectation, and teachers will reap the benefit of having this increased level of work submitted, which makes grading both quicker and more enjoyable.

Video Biography

One of the easiest, most straight forward, strategies an online teacher can use is to create a video biography of him- or herself welcoming the students to class. The instructor may elect to share as much or as little personal information as he or she feels comfortable; however, students have expressed the desire to learn as much as possible about their teachers and the experiences these experts bring to the classroom. A well-developed video introduction may help establish the credibility of the instructor from the first moment the class begins (Draus et al., 2014). These videos should be conversational and casual in tone. Items such as teaching experience, colleges attended, degrees, and such are standard items to include, but the instructor should not be afraid to add more. Topics such as hobbies and extracurricular interests provide students with a tangible, potentially common, bond immediately. Shared experiences and interests can instantly engage an online student. Nonspecific information about spouses and children are also very popular with nontraditional students, as many of them are married with children as they return to school seeking a degree.

There are many choices for ways to record this video. Web-based video recording and editing software such as Loom or Screencast-O-Matic provide an intuitive interface that will allow the novice videographer to create professional quality videos. Hardware with a high-resolution camera, such as simple as a smartphone or a laptop webcam, can be used. Hosting services such as YouTube (www.youtube.com) or Vimeo (vimeo.com) make it very easy for the instructor to record and upload the video into cloud storage with very little effort. Simply provide this link along with a brief textual introduction, and the students will begin their course literally being able to put a name with a face. This is the first step to establishing an effective working relationship between the teacher and the online student.

Sharing Relevant Personal Experiences

Teaching in the College of Education at a university provides many opportunities to share classroom teaching experiences with future educators; however, any online course content can be injected with personal experiences from the instructor that add real-life relevance to an otherwise abstract topic. The instructor may use third-party examples and case studies or actual events he or she experienced. Either format works well, but it is important to use a story-telling tone when doing so. Sharing these case studies from personal experiences helps an instructor build immediate credibility and expertise within the online classroom. These case studies also help the students understand how to apply the content they are studying to real-life situations (Martin, 2017). These stories can be done through text or even a short video created by the teacher recounting that interesting experience he or she had years ago regarding the topic being studied. The most important factor with sharing these experiences is to make them relevant. Help the students understand how they can apply the content, and the teacher will continue to develop the relationship with the student as well as provide a reason why the topic of discussion is relevant to the students' learning.

Show Interest in the Lives of Students

While taking an interest in the lives of students may be second nature on a traditional campus, it can become very easy for an online professor or teacher to simply go about his or her duties without ever making the effort to connect with the students on this level. Showing an interest in the life of a student is a powerful strategy to build that bond with very little effort (Martin, 2017; Marzano & Marzano, 2003). Additionally, providing an outlet for students to share their lives with the instructor and other classmates may help build community and trust through a learning platform that relies on daily textual interaction. There are several extremely simple strategies that can be used to help the students feel like part of a group rather than isolated behind a computer screen.

Ask questions. This concept may be overlooked by many online professors or teachers because of its simplicity, but asking questions of the students and soliciting their interests is a very effective strategy to build quickly community and trust (Ahmad, Hussain, Ayub, Zaheer, & Batool, 2017). Most online courses have posting requirements, and these can often be confusing to students. This is especially true of those beginning their programs online. One questioning strategy used by an online professor is to ask all students to recite the posting requirements by responding to a discussion forum post. This simple formative assessment is an excellent way to check for understanding and eliminate any grey areas that may exist within the posting requirements. Requisites such as the posting word count and the number of days needed to be active in the classroom can be standard formative assessment questions posed by the instructor. However, it is the final question or two presented that really elicit the engaging responses. At the end of these basic formative assessment questions, one may ask the students to share their favorite music group or musician or possibly their favorite restaurant or city they have visited. Yes, this question has nothing to do with posting requirements, but the level of excitement and engagement experienced here takes this mundane learning time full circle and brings everyone together. There is something magical about music, food, and travel, and it seems nearly everyone has a favorite in each category that they love to share with others in class. It is amazing how this simple question can light a spark for the week's discussion and connect students and teachers with each other through common interests. Asking noninvasive personal questions and allowing students to share interests is a very simple and effective way

to quickly establish a collaborative tone for any classroom (Ahmad et al., 2017).

Provide an outlet for them to share their lives. Showing interest in the lives of students is incredibly powerful among the adult-learner community at the university level, but it can be equally as effective for students of all ages (Hittie, 2000). Simply provide an outlet for the students to share photos or stories about their spouses, children, parents, pets, or jobs—really anything that is important to them. Every online classroom environment is different, but most provide a class wall or other forum for students to share non-course related content. The instructor should begin this conversation by sharing something about him or herself. Perhaps the post topic is Share Photos of Your Family. The instructor may begin by posting two or three photos of his or her family to share with the class. Sharing information about their pets is also a popular topic in these discussion forums, as many students do not have children but they enjoy posting photos of their pets. In the social-media-driven world where many of these online students live, this is a very natural thing for most to engage in, and the majority in class will take advantage of this opportunity. Of course, these posting opportunities are always optional, and students are asked to post only what they are comfortable sharing, but it is amazing to watch how quickly students respond to each other's photos and shared experiences within discussion forum posting threads. Students naturally want to share and feel a part of a community (Hittie, 2000). Providing them the opportunity to do so is a simple, effective way to engage the online student and continue to build this all-important virtual relationship.

Videoconference Calls

Reading a syllabus or trying to decipher a rubric can be very complicated for even a seasoned student. Confusion and questions will often remain and emailing or posting a question to the teacher may not be enough to clarify the instructions. While the next step for most instructors may be to pick up the phone to talk, a more effective strategy with the online student is to set up a videoconference call to cover material or logistical questions. This often requires an additional step above the simple phone call, but the opportunity to deepen the student-teacher relationship through a face-to-face video call cannot be equaled.

There are several free options that may be used for these video calls. While the Facetime feature built into iPhones today may be tempting to use, it is advised not to do so because of privacy concerns. There are several other viable options available. Zoom is a powerful, professional platform used by many universities and companies that allows multiple users to meet in a focus-group setting to discuss class topics, or it may be used in a one-on-one setting between the instructor and students. It can easily be accessed by those with any webcam, or it may be used with any tablet or smartphone through the use of an app. Many online professors use this platform to conduct weekly study sessions with students who need help reviewing material prior to an exam or a benchmark essay. Of course, there are many other videoconferencing options available, and nearly all can easily be adapted to meet the technological requirements and needs of both students and teachers. Google Hangouts (hangouts.google.com) and Skype (www.skype.com/en/) are other popular, free videoconferencing tools where an account can be created and used by the professor without any privacy concerns. The important factor here is the face time experienced between those in the group. The instructor is continually building a stronger relationship with his or her students, and the students are feeling more connected and engaged with their online community. Both of these phenomenon result in higher quality work being submitted and a higher level of satisfaction experienced by the online student (Ice, Curtis, Phillips, & Wells, 2007).

Personalized Video Feedback

One of the newer engagement strategies being utilized by online educators is providing embedded video feedback in their students' papers. Rather than the basic textual feedback students are used to seeing, providing an embedded video with both the instructors' face and voice explaining the strengths and weaknesses of the assignment delivers a powerful reinforcement for the concepts that need to be learned (Underdown & Martin, 2016). Loom is a video platform that is geared toward educators and is built to allow a professor to record him- or herself through a webcam while walking the student through the paper and the needed adjustments and corrections. It is much easier and more likely a teacher will fully explain the details of how to build an effective argument through talking into a

camera than it will be to take the time to type a paragraph or two for the student's feedback. Loom also allows instructors to record short video clips covering some of the most repetitive errors, such as Thesis Statements, and save these links in a separate document to embed in as many student assignments as necessary. These corrections do not need to be customized for each student; however, the resulting effect is the feeling by the student that the teacher is wholly engaged in his or her work and is going above and beyond the basic teaching requirements.

This instructor-created video content is very powerful on several different levels. The student-teacher relationship grows when video is used in the classroom (Underdown & Martin, 2016). The feedback is much easier to understand when explained audibly instead of simply through text (Cela et al., 2016). The likelihood of the student implementing the suggested changes in the next assignment is much greater because the student feels the teacher is truly engaged with his or her learning in the classroom. This additional layer of feedback separates the mediocre online instructor from the truly exemplary.

Additional Technology Tools to Increase Engagement

While evaluating every education-related technology tool is an impossible task, there are several worth mentioning that are being used regularly in the higher-education setting. FlipGrid (flipgrid.com) is a web-based video message board that allows students to record short responses to teacher's questions through using a smartphone application. Additionally, students can post questions and responses to others in class and create a video discussion board like those found in most online classrooms. FlipGrid is the leading video discussion platform used by millions of pre–K through university students in over 150 different countries (FlipGrid, 2018). Another very popular tools that has evolved over the years and is found in more than 70% of the public classrooms in America is Remind (www.remind.com). This tool allows teachers and students of all ages to interact in a safe, private text message exchange through the Remind servers. Remind can be used to send a quick message of encouragement to all students before an important assignment or test. It can be used to blast out a note about an article found

by the instructor or a link to a video. Students can respond back to the teacher through the app while never revealing their personal cell number or other indentifying information. Each of these are examples of the amazing tools available to the online instructor. Keeping in mind the objective of bridging the gap and building a meaningful relationship with their online students, instructors can use these and many other tools to increase engagement, satisfaction, and performace in their virtual classrooms.

CONCLUSION

Where online education will be ten or 20 years from now is anyone's guess. With thousands of new students enrolling monthly in higher-education programs worldwide, there is little doubt these institutions will continue to see significant changes and positive improvements in both the delivery and absorption of online content. How online instructors and professors manage these changing requirements and demands from this wave of online students will determine the effectiveness of the instruction and the satisfaction of the students. Building meaningful relationships with online students will continue to be a challenge for most instructors, but these relationships have been shown to increase engagement levels and, thus, improve the overall satisfaction of the student (Martin, 2017). Through the use of a few simple strategies and tools, online education can be as engaging and meaningful of a process as experienced by the traditional student. Satisfaction levels within the student-teacher relationship have typically been key indicators in the engagement and production output level of the online student (Miller & Redman, 2010). Any online instructor or professor, with a modest amount of effort, can implement a series of simple, yet extremely effective, strategies to build meaningful relationships with their online students and increase the satisfactions levels and quality of work produced by the student. It is all about the relationships.

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