

Student Engagement, Motivation, and Rapport

Errol Craig Sull

They are, in this column and others, in articles and essays, in books and journals, in webinars and workshops, in listservs and blogs, nearly every nitty-gritty piece of advice one can think of relating to being a better distance educator. Yet, as helpful as these are—each will strengthen just a tad more your quality and skills in teaching online—all amount

to nothing if you don't own the three most crucial components of distance education: solid and continual student engagement, a successful ability to motive and enthuse your students, and a strong and growing student-instructor rapport. These three basics form the foundation of any distance learning course, and if any is weak or missing, chances are very strong your students' online learning experience will be tepid.

What follows is a mini-guide to mastering this triptych of distance learning; I have selected those I think are most salient to each category, but this does not mean nothing else can be added. Depending on your student demographic, subject taught, and other facts, you may find additional items you think equally important (in fact, I'd really like to hear from anyone with these—I'll publish them in a future column).

Let me mention two caveats: (1) Any of the suggestions that follow must first be allowed by your school; that is the umbrella of what can/cannot be employed by you, so be sure to check out your school's policies and procedures; (2) A case can easily be made for including some items listed under Engagement also under Motivation, some that are found under Rapport will easily be just as comfortable under Engagement, etc. These are



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designed this way: incorporate the information below and you will find yourself with a strong, dynamic, exciting, and interesting class—all items that translate into a boffo learning experience for your students!

PART I: ENGAGEMENT

- **Your welcoming e-mail sets the tone.** Welcome your students with enthusiasm and interest, always letting them know you are available and eager to help any time. This approach will go a long way in making those anxious students feel less anxious and just generally establish a warm, inviting class atmosphere. And be sure students have your contact info (including your phone number).
- **Incorporate possible student anxiety concerns.** The more you can anticipate, and thus address, possible student problems and concerns in the course the more relaxed the student, thus resulting in students who are more open—and eager—to becoming an active part of the class. (And, as you come across new concerns students send your way each class, keep a list of these and include them in future first class e-mail or announcement postings.)
- **Speak with your students.** No matter how often you write (to the class and individual students), there is always a need for one closer step: the sound of your voice. This can be very reassuring, very motivating, often beyond what you can say in writing. And remind your students of your willingness to speak with them throughout the course: if it's a onetime thing at the beginning of the class, students can either forget it's an option or—worse—think you really didn't mean it. What is also helpful: MP3 (audio) weekly greetings to students and/or individual commentaries.
- **Have resource and contact info at the ready.** Students need to see you are prepared and thorough; when they do, trust in you is established and maintained. So, for those times when there is a tech or support question beyond your knowledge but one the tech department, your supervisor, or some other administrator will probably be able to answer, have those folks' e-mails, positions, phone numbers, and best time to reach on one sheet that you can pull up when needed.
- **Stress the positives of online courses.** This is a big plus in helping students feel more comfortable in your course. Often, students are so focused on what they are concerned about in taking an online course that they forget—or may not even know—all the terrific benefits online education offers. I have a separate posting at the start of each class that begins, "Welcome to the exciting, interesting, and bonus-filled world of online education!"
- **Choose your vocabulary and tone carefully.** It makes no difference what subject you are teaching, the #1 rule of any writing remains you write for the reader. Thus, your vocabulary used in postings throughout the course should be selected with your student population in mind; not being aware of this can confuse or annoy students. And your tone must be inviting, interested, caring, sincere—yet always professional: the best axiom to follow in online teaching is be friendly but never be a friend.
- **The look of your postings gives off signals about you.** Use of red, all caps, bold effect, too informal or too stark font styles, and too large or too small font size can send the wrong message to students. It's fine to be creative in your comments to students, so make your creativity one that says, "Hey—I'm an okay person," not one that warns, "Stay away from me!"

- **Be sure all technical, layout, and organizational portions of your class are working/are correct.** Check out these areas before your class begins—students have a rightful expectation that all links will work, all readings are accessible and the page numbers are correct, and that all makes sense. When they do, students feel comfortable in your class, akin to plopping down in an overstuffed chair.

PART II: MOTIVATION

- **Prior to starting your course, gather as many examples as possible of how daily life is affected by your subject and with which your students can relate.** You will know of many because it is your field. But also go beyond what you know, and especially look into areas of life in which your students may be involved. This allows you and your course to reach into your students' lives, and thus helps make your course important and alive.
- **Immediately get your students involved by asking them to send you examples or situations in which their lives or others' lives were or could be affected by the subject.** This activity helps with student ownership of the course material, which is so important in learning. First, they are telling you what it will be impossible for you to know: how each student can relate the best to your subject; second, by doing this each student has created just a bit more ownership in the course.
- **Send the students fillers from various subject-related journals, websites, newsletters, etc. to add some fizz to their interest.** We've all seen them, taking up just a few lines or a paragraph. They hold our attention for a bit and then we move on, but these "lite bites" of subject-related material are refreshing. Collect them, and throughout the course send these to your students. It's just another way of showing the not-so-lofty side of what otherwise is a very serious subject ... and it also teaches by reinforcing your subject matter.
- **Offer your students a challenge or puzzle that involves the course material.** This could be something you found from another source (colleague, book, Internet, etc.) or that you develop. Whatever you choose, it should force your students to take a subject that was not initially connected to them—at least not in a personal sense—and use their own skills, interests, and experience to solve the puzzle or meet the challenge. It becomes fun, the students are learning—and they are motivated.
- **Give a "casting call" for all websites, great and small, related to the topic.** At least once per course I'll ask my students to send me X number of websites related to a specific aspect of writing (my specialty), to locate websites on writing from other colleges, or to find general websites that focus on improving one's writing. These are made into a master list, then distributed to the students. They truly appreciate this group effort, as it gives them more resources to help with their writing.
- **Search out professional chat rooms and websites with folks who teach what you do—and exchange ideas.** No doubt you know of at least one of these; ask visitors for their most creative and interesting approaches, activities, and strategies for teaching. You'll be surprised at how willing others are to share ... and how much more information you have and how many more resources you have gained to help enhance your teaching efforts.
- **As you come across jokes, anecdotes, and cartoons related to the course material, sprinkle them throughout the length of the course.** These are meant to do one thing: give your students a bit of a chuckle. Not only does this allow for a more casual—and sometimes fun—

learning environment, but scattering these about on occasion also humanizes you a bit more (something very important to anyone who teaches online), which helps in motivating students.

- **Be ever on the lookout for news items that somehow relate to your class—and share them with your students.** Don't merely rest on what has appeared and happened. Be watchful for that which is happening: a piece in today's news, a TV show or movie soon debuting, a major event being planned, and so on—if there is any hint of your subject in something like this, point it out to your students. Our world is always changing, and you want your students to know that what they are learning is something very much alive, very much in use today.

PART III: RAPPORT

- **Be organized.** Staying organized will keep assignments, tests, lectures, and so on, straight; also, make an online file for each of your students to include work assignments, e-mail (that they send and you deem interesting or important), and other items that help you better understand and relate to each of your students. This translates into being able to teach with "ammunition" at hand that allows for a more personal approach for each student, and thus helps establish a stronger rapport with them.
- **For all due dates and promises: keep them.** Students who take courses online rely exclusively on what they read online in terms of due dates for readings, assignments, quizzes, etc., as well as any promises you make (e.g., "I will have the draft of your first paper returned by X date" or "all Chem 101 grades will be posted on Y date") and virtual office hours. They do not have you in a classroom to remind them of such things, nor are you in a class where

they can ask you for reminders. Thus, it is extremely important you adhere to the dates and promises given: do this and students will know they can depend on you.

- **Follow up on all student e-mail and other student correspondence received—and promptly.** E-mail and webmail are the students' lifelines that allow for specific questions to be answered, confusions to be cleared up, and uncertainties to be quantified. Respond to all—if only an acknowledgement that you received it—and in a timely manner. This goes a long way in both earning their respect and in your students seeing you as someone who really does care about them.
- **Use chat rooms, discussion boards, journals, etc.** These allow for spontaneity, for student involvement, for personal commentary by students—all items that make for more ownership of the course on their part. And, by meeting with students in chat rooms and responding to journal entries, they not only get to see a more personal (read: real) side to you, but also can readily see you are sincerely interested in each one of them—so important in establishing a strong teacher-student rapport.
- **Send general and individual positive class e-mails throughout the course.** I call this my "glue," and I do it so the tone I established in my welcoming e-mail can be maintained throughout the semester. These e-mails include compliments on an overall class or individual "well done!" effort on an assignment ... wishing them a happy holiday or semester break ... offering some additional clarification on an item I find many students or a student are/is having difficulty with ... a change in an initial due date, clarification on an assignment, or an attachment of an additional reading. Combined, these postings serve as an on-going positive

connection to your students, strengthening the student-instructor rapport.

- **Offer website assistance, additional handouts, etc.** When I find various websites that I think will help a student better understand a concept, idea, or rule, I'll send it along; I also have made up many dozens of what I call Pebbles and Mini-Pebbles to help explain various aspects of writing. These are what I call my "teacher's aides," and I send them throughout the semester. This translates

into better and more focused information for the students, a stronger bond between myself and the students, and—in the end—students who produce better quality work.

REMEMBER: The Eiffel Tower, the Statue of Liberty, the Taj Mahal, the Partheon, the Great Sphinx, the Vatican—all different in looks yet all surviving for years because each rests on and is built around a solid foundation.

PART I: ENGAGEMENT
PART II: MOTIVATION
PART III: RAPPORT.

that colleges “should proudly—and without apology—offer online courses:

1. We want our students to be actively engaged in learning.
2. We want to reach students with diverse learning styles.
3. We want our students to have a variety of experiences outside the classroom.
4. We want to teach our students how to do independent research.
5. We want to make college more accessible to students.
6. We want to make attending college more affordable.
7. We want to teach our students values and ethics.
8. We want our students’ degrees to be valued by employers.

Once an educational institution is convinced that online education is effective, worthwhile, and mission-oriented, then the eight steps for transforming the organization come into play. These eight steps are:

1. Establish a sense of urgency.
2. Form a powerful planning group.
3. Create a vision.
4. Communicate the vision.
5. Give power to those who act on the vision.
6. Plan for and create short-term wins.
7. Collect successes.

8. Incorporate successes (Simonson, 2005).

Certainly if an educational organization is to adopt—even value—distance education, then much more than procedural steps and processes are needed. However, it is interesting to observe that recently the discussions about distance education, virtual schools, and online learning have moved from publications of the distance education field to the more widely read and more generally influential periodicals of education and training, another indication that distance education is now mainstream.

And finally, the literature now contains eight reasons for offering online courses, and an eight step process for transforming an organization. Perhaps someone will propose an eight step process demonstrating the effectiveness and return on investment of distance education.

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