Beyond Discussion Boards: Engagement Methods in the Online Classroom

**Abstract** *(100 words Max)*

Student engagement has assumed broader significance and importance as a result of the increasing level of online teaching and learning. The purpose of this Roundtable Discussion is to create a forum where we can discuss how to move beyond discussion boards, and bring the “sync” back to the Asynchronous learning environments. We will facilitate and gather thoughts on how online instructors engage their students in the asynchronous classroom. The ultimate goal is to compile these discussions and share amongst participants.

**KEYWORDS: ONLINE, STUDENT ENGAGEMENT, TEACHING PRESENCE**

**Introduction.**

Engaging students to enhance learning has been a subject of discussion for scholars of teaching and learning for decades. And, while still an intricate area of research it has assumed broader significance and importance as a result of the increasing level of online instruction. Whereas there is a vast array of literature and empirical research on how to engage students in the traditional classroom, there is limited guidance for online (hybrid or fully asynchronous) teaching and learning. It becomes even more so if one considers the fully asynchronous online classroom.

The purpose of this Roundtable Discussion is to create a forum to discuss engagement in the Asynchronous learning environments, which may include synchronous elements. We will facilitate and gather thoughts on how online instructors currently engage their students in the asynchronous classroom and brainstorm new methods of engagement. Discussions will be compiled and shared amongst participants. The target audience is everyone who teaches online or plans on teaching online classes.

**Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications.**

With the rapidly increasing trend toward online business education, there is a corresponding increase in the general information available about teaching online, as well as growing information on transforming traditional on-ground classroom business courses to an online delivery form (Henrie, Halverson, & Graham, 2015). Yet, little experiential information has been published about engaging students in the asynchronous online classroom apart from the use of discussion boards.

Student engagement has been defined as “investment or commitment or effortful involvement in learning” (Henrie et al., 2015, p.37). Pellas (2014) describes student engagement as a “learning task or a value to refer the cognitive process, active participation, and emotional involvement of students in specific learning procedures.” In the teaching and learning scholarship, various terms have been used to define engagement, including student engagement, academic engagement, school engagement, and learner engagement (Henrie et al., 2015; Reschly & Christenson, 2012). We use the term student engagement, as our interest is in academic learning in the online space.

Collaboration in the online space is seen in the literature as a means of achieving effective student engagement. An interactive and cohesive environment that includes group work, regular assignments, and reliable feedback is needed for successful student engagement (Dixson, 2010). Active learning is also noted as a way of achieving student engagement (Donovan, 2005; Johnson & Aragon, 2003). However, as collaboration and active learning are broad and encompass different aspects of learning it is necessary to find specific types of active learning or collaboration in online courses that students find engaging.

Instructor presence is also discussed in the literature as influencing student engagement (Baker, 2010; Dixson, 2010; Gaytan & McEwen, 2007; Robinson & Hullinger, 2008; Sheridan & Kelly, 2010; Wise, Chang, Duffy, & Valle, 2004; Young, 2006). Social presence theory (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976) is the most directly related theory to instructor presence in an online classroom (Baker, 2010). Described as the perception participants have that they are communicating with people instead of impersonal objects (Baker, 2010), social presence has been extensively studied in both online and on-ground interaction (Arbaugh & Hwang, 2006). . Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2001) have described three components of instructor presence in an online course: instructional design and organization, facilitating discourse, and direct instruction. According to Arbaugh and Hwang (2006), “ to establish an online presence, instructors can develop consistent patterns of interaction, communicate accessibility, provide consistent and substantive feedback, moderate discussions effectively, and provide content expertise through discussion posts to restart stalled discussions” (p.10). However, the literature regarding instructor presence has shown mixed results. While some found positive relationships with student engagement and learning, others did not (e.g., Dennen, Darabi, & Smith, 2007; Wise et al., 2004). Although the majority of investigations of instructor immediacy and presence have shown a positive impact on student engagement and learning, there is the need for further research to substantiate its importance in online learning environments.

In the online asynchronous classroom, discussion boards and clarity of course design within the learning management system tend to be emphasized as primary means of student engagement with little consideration for synchronized or quasi-synchronized methods of engagement. In this session, we seek to introduce a discussion of instructor presence by exploring the “synch” in “asynchronous”.

**Session Description.**

We were drawn to develop this session because of our experiences in adding synchronous elements to our respective online classroom, and the positive response from students.  In an effort to expand this connection, and based on our highly successful discussion of online discussion boards, we have designed a roundtable discussion to understand how (and if) others are developing other synchronous measures in the online space. We will use a semi-structured discussion to network with other online instructors and develop a broader understanding of the use of synchronous elements online in the asynchronous space.  This discussion would be good for both first time online instructors as well as experienced:

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