

Personalizing Online Classes to Reduce the Students' Feeling of Isolation

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Abstract: Due to the busy lives of many people, online education has grown in popularity. One issue with online courses is the environment. Students tend to feel isolated from their peers and professor. In a traditional in-class course students are able to see and hear their instructor and interact with him or her as well as his or her peers. Can an online course offer such interaction in the cyber world environment? This paper will look at online isolation in higher education and methods to reduce such isolation. There are many available technologies that are easy to use to personalize online courses. This paper will also discuss the use of the chat and discussion forum tools, so students feel “in touch” with their classmates and professor.

Key words: online instruction, isolation, effective online instruction, cooperative environment

1. Introduction

Dixson (2010) states “online courses are here to stay and growing so we need to do them well” (p. 1). The feeling of isolation in an online course may lead to decreased student engagement and success. How can instructors make an online class less intimidating to students and reduce the feeling of isolation? There are many great videos available to use in online classes, however students tend to feel isolated and do not feel they “know” their instructor. Students feel more connected with the course and professor if there are some personalized videos included. This paper will cover the feeling of isolation that the online environment presents to many students and ways to decrease that sense.

2. What is Online Isolation?

Many students taking online classes feel alone or isolated from their classmates and their instructor. McInerney and Roberts (2004) describe isolation as “the feeling of aloneness that many students may feel is the hardest symptom for educators to combat.” It was also noted by McInerney and Roberts the issue of isolation is important for student satisfaction with online courses (2004). The feeling of isolation is often based on the separation of the student and instructor. In an online course this is evident due to not physically meeting for the class. It is easy for students to feel they are alone and have no one to turn to for help. This feeling of “isolation can influence a student’s attitude toward online learning, and as such needs to be given greater consideration when

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designing web-based courses” (McInnerny & Roberts, 2004, p. 74).

Wegerif (1998) used a quote from a student to show how students can become frustrated easily and feel alienated: “It is a cold medium. Unlike face to face communication you get no instant feedback. You don’t know how people responded to your comments; they just go out into silence. This feels isolating and unnerving. It is not warm and supportive.” (p. 74). Many students feel this way.

According to Shackelford and Maxwell (2012) it is possible to create “a welcoming and accepting course in an online environment by making available to students multiple ways to interact with the instructor” (p. 7). It is important students know they are not alone in the online environment. Instructors can help in this by being an active part of the course. Requiring participation between students and instructor can help with building a social community (Shackelford & Maxwell, 2012).

3. How can Instructors Decrease Students’ Feelings of Isolation?

Dixon (2010) noted there are three conclusions that offer effective online instruction: “Online instruction can be as effective as traditional instruction to do so, online courses need cooperative/collaborative (active) learning and strong instructor presence” (p. 1). The focus for this paper is the latter, strong instructor presence. Students need to know their instructor is present in an online course. Williams (2014) discusses strategies to engage students in an online classroom environment. One of these includes posting a video to introduce yourself to allow them a chance to get to know you. Using the announcement and discussion forum features of a particular learning management system (LMS) are excellent ways to communicate with students. It is important to require students to interact with each other and their instructor. Instructors need to be actively involved in their students’ learning (Dixon, 2010). According to Dixon (2010), McInnerney and Roberts (2004) it is imperative to include active learning assignments, particularly required discussion forums to help with “a sense of social presence which leads to a greater sense of community” (p. 75).

Asynchronous methods of communication are great ways to communicate with students, however there are limitations. Students do not receive immediate feedback. Normally, there is a time gap. Synchronous communication is a great way to create a sense of community within an online class environment. The chat tool is a great way to have synchronous with students (McInnerney & Roberts, 2004). Students have stated the chat room is like being in the classroom engaged with a study group. Conversations are being shared with the instructor and classmates in real time.

Including videos created by the instructor adds a personal touch to instruction. An introduction video is a great way to start the course with students seeing and hearing their instructor (Williams, 2014). Johnson (2016) noted that students are under the care of their professor. “Failure can be avoided if instructors are willing to take the time necessary to monitor and coach their students, and students do their part by accepting accountability for their involvement in the learning process and develop a positive belief about their capacity to learn” (Johnson, 2016, p. 4).

4. What Tools are Available to Create Personalized Videos for Online Courses?

There are many tools available to create personalized videos for online courses. Tools that have been used and found helpful are: Lensoo Create: <https://create.lensoo.com>; Educreations: <https://www.educreations.com>; and Screencast-o-Matic: <https://screencast-o-matic.com/home>. These are all free tools available to anyone. They do

have pro-versions at a cost, however basic videos can be done with the free version. Lensoo Create and Educreations are both recordable whiteboards which can be used with Android and Apple products such as tablets and phones. Educreations does have a Windows compatible app. Screencast-o-matic is a screen capture product which are used with a PC in order to create instructional videos. It records everything on the screen and allows the instructor to save and upload video to YouTube and/or save in the MP4 format. YouTube has the capability to create closed captions and allow editing.

5. Methodology

This paper made use of literature reviews, students remarks in course evaluations and actual reaching out by students as a result of online real time chats.

6. Findings and Discussion

The literature review consistently discusses the importance of instructors to be an active part of an online class, so students do not feel isolated.

Personalized videos are a great way for students to feel a sense of connection with their instructor. Even though there are great content videos available online, students tend to like videos created by their professor. Frequently students remarked in their course evaluations how much they enjoyed the videos created by their professor. It gave them a sense that they were in the classroom, and their professor was covering material with them. They hear their professor's voice and feel less isolated in the online environment.

Course introductions via discussion forums are great to allow students to introduce themselves to the class. It allows students to get to know each other. The chat tool is also a great synchronous method of creating a comfortable classroom environment.

Statements from students in course evaluations:

"The class participation was a huge help. It was very different than my last Math class; I enjoyed this one a whole lot better. I really like the professors making us introduce ourselves too. That certainly made it more personal."

"He made distance learning feel like a face to face class."

"You can tell he truly cares about his students and their success."

"We did not use software for our homework, which allowed us to really focus on critical thinking and problem solving rather than worrying about input errors".

"..... provided excellent feedback and was always willing to answer any question us students had, and she was very engaged compared to other math courses I took here. I would highly recommend this course to anyone."

"She truly cares about her students. She has taken the time to participate in chats throughout the ten weeks, and provide feedback...she is very encouraging with her teaching style. I would definitely recommend her as an instructor."

"The class was not hard to follow. The instructions were laid out by the professor in a very clear manner. The volume was challenging at times...However, it was engaging and I appreciated the direct feedback and interaction with the instructor."

"I enjoyed the videos my professor created. They made more sense to me and made me feel like she was there with me. She would even send videos just over a question I asked and always replied quickly, sometimes

within 10 minutes. I appreciated that as an online student.”

“The textbook videos were good, but I like my teacher’s videos better. I felt like I was in the classroom with my teacher teaching.”

A professor shared a personal experience:

“While conducting an online real time chat in my Research Methods class last fall, I noticed that three of the twenty students present were named Jennifer. In a very kind and personal manner, I inquired if any of them ever went by Jenn. One replied yes. I am from the seventies. Another replied Jenny from the eighties and the third said, “Just Jennifer” for me from the nineties. For the remainder of the chat I replied to them as Jenn, Jenny and Jennifer. For the duration of the chat and the following weeks of the session, both Jenn and Jenny became and remained much more engaged than they had ever been before that revelation. They sent me regular email questions and posted on the discussion board much more than before this personalizing of names during the chat. I had always pursued this practice in my face to face classes, but never thought about its power in online isolation therapy until that chat.”

7. Conclusion

As Dixon (2010) noted “online courses are here to stay” (p. 1). Research is still being compiled regarding student isolation, but early reports show online learners are more successful and enjoy the course more when actively engaged with their teacher. Using outside resources such as publishers’ videos, software packages, and/or videos from Khan Academy or YouTube are great, however students still like to feel connected to their instructor. Many applications and programs are available free or at reasonable prices. This paper discussed a few used by these instructors to personalize their online courses. Feedback from students has been overwhelmingly positive. Online courses can be as successful as traditional courses if steps are taken to personalize the course and use available tools, such as chat, discussion forums and personalized videos, to connect with students.

More research is needed to extend the data collection of students’ views of the importance of connection and engagement with their instructor in an online course beyond literature reviews and two professors’ experiences. With the changing student demographics and technologies, it is imperative educators keep well versed in what is happening in education, especially educational research delving into instructional strategies that enhance successful experiences for the online learner.

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