Leveraging Multitasking Opportunities to Increase Motivation and Engagement in Online Classrooms: An Action Research Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Newer social media have brought about attention deficits brought on by a flood of distractions, such as text messaging, blogging, and browsing on mobile devices and laptops brought into the classroom. It appears that online learning places the same demands on learners’ ability to remain on-task and focused. While following up on assessing the benefits of live satellite broadcasts from remote areas of the world, the researchers made several interesting discoveries about the nature of the design of the content management system that delivered the classroom experience. The interface included a means by which students could synchronously chat during the live broadcasts. The ability to multitask appeared to increase participants’ engagement in the class and their sense of social presence. The researchers present their results based on the results of a pre and post participant questionnaire to determine how best to sustain student engagement and interaction in a distance-learning environment.

Keywords: Instructor Immediacy, Live Satellite Broadcasts, Social Media, Student Perception of Learning, Synchronous Chats

INTRODUCTION

Since distance education began, the definitions of and perceptions about “distance” education have slowly evolved (Valentine, 2002). The major paradigmatic shift has really only occurred in the past few years, as ubiquitous social presence has redefined what it means to ‘be at a distance’. Until recently, distance learning generally implied that students were utilizing the Internet to take a class. Over time most students have learned to adjust to the varying...
conditions associated with each generation of distance educational delivery systems to the point where they become relatively comfortable with using the then-current technology—the most recent of these being those technologies afforded by the arrival of Web 2.0. But newer, social media have become easier to use and popular to the point where they have intruded in great numbers into face-to-face classrooms. The pervasiveness of these newer technologies has brought with it an unintended consequence: attention deficits, and the ever-present temptation to become distracted and disengaged from the content being delivered by their instructor. To be sure, these distractions are not limited only to face-to-face classroom situations. Research into the usage habits of online learners indicates that a large percentage of them engage in simultaneous multitasking activities in their online coursework (Bowman, Levine, Bradley, & Gendron, 2010; Junco & Cotton, 2011; Levin & Arafeh, 2002; Rosen, 2008; Wanstreet, Stein & Glazer, 2010).

It appears that online learning environments can place high demands on a learner’s ability to remain focused and remain ‘on task’. Research has shown that many of the even more successful of the traditional instructional strategies employed by instructors who now face the prospect of teaching online become ineffective (Valentine, 2002). Many students have reported that they can easily become disengaged and disconnected due to many factors: (a) their not being able keep up with the pace of instruction, (b) an inadequate understanding of the materials being presented, (c) an inability to complete assignments on time, (d) an inability to effectively interact with their peers, among other things (Tao, 2008). In effect, a student’s tendency to multitask while attending online classes creates an undesirable environment that can add to one’s sense of isolation and distance to a growing population of disenchanted online learners.

**ASSESSING MOTIVATION, SOCIAL PRESENCE, AND INSTRUCTOR IMMEDIACY**

We suggest that assessing student motivational levels early in the semester can be a strong predictor of their success in a course, regardless if it is taught face-to-face or online (Baynton, 1992; Cavanaugh, 2003; Coggins, 1988; Gunter, 2007; Miltiadou, 2000). We have found through our own research and our review of long-standing practices reported in the literature that two practices appear to have the most significant positive impact on motivation, regardless of modality: social presence and teacher immediacy (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997, authors’ names removed, 2007; Rath, 2012). Students need to know that their presence in the class matters and that their instructor and peers recognize their standing and contributions to the intellectual discussions. We further suggest that, while studies that assess the relative importance of the demand for social presence and instructor immediacy in online learning environments are somewhat incomplete, the former appears to be the more significant need of the two.

Some investigators have reported that they believe that students’ engaging in multitasking activities during their lectures is a major distraction, indicating a general lack of motivation (Cronin, 2010; Mays, Pazur & Samuels, 1999). But we suggest that these activities also can indicate a desire to become engaged—but, perhaps, simply not with the content being delivered by their instructor. A review of our own personal reflections of our classroom teaching experiences caused us to discover that sometimes our students were actually becoming more actively engaged in our course material. Many times they were using their laptops and other social media devices to delve deeper into the content we were presenting. Often they would add to our presentation during the lectures with relevant facts and figures and/or specific citations from the literature. Similar findings were discovered in the literature—that students and instructors...
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