Chapter 6
Leveraging Online Collaboration to Optimize Faculty Efficiency, Student Engagement, and Self-Efficacy: Self-Directed Learning at Scale

Sidneyeve Matrix
Queen’s University, Canada

ABSTRACT

Using two large, blended communications courses as case studies, this chapter suggests that designing online courses that prioritize asynchronous collaboration and self-directed learning is key to increasing the productivity, efficiency, and wellness of students and faculty alike. Informed by insights from student feedback and research on social teaching strategies, the chapter discusses how to use technology to implement active learning opportunities that encourage and engage students. The chapter includes actionable ideas for leveraging the campus learning management system as a collaborative learning platform, to help online faculty manage the many demands on their time.

INTRODUCTION

It is not an easy process to develop effective learning communities that will facilitate meaningful interactions particularly in online and blended settings — J.W. Gikandi (2011: 2334)

Professor Gikandi is absolutely correct. Designing and delivering courses that provide students with active learning opportunities to engage with their peers and professor is not easy. When we add the additional hurdles of teaching online and facilitating large-enrolment classes, the challenges multiply (Orellana 2006; Raffo 2015; Roby 2013; Bettinger 2014). “The more technology you have in your class,” John D. Moore writes, “the more you will have to manage” (2014: np). As a result, many faculty opt-
out of teaching online altogether, due to legitimate concerns about balancing multiple roles, managing increased workloads, and bridging steep technical learning curves (Betts & Heaston 2014; Windes & Lesht 2014). “Using a new technology is challenging,” one faculty member told researchers, “You need time, commitment and, more importantly, confidence to implement it” (Ocak 2011: 697). Certainly, there is a wealth of research indicating that certain aspects of teaching online require significantly more time per student than teaching face-to-face in the traditional classroom environment (Tomei 2006; Voytecki & Engleman 2010; Van de Vord & Pogue 2012; Mandernach 2013). This is the case regardless of the instructors’ level of experience and technological skill, since faculty members generally find interacting with students online to be more time consuming than connecting with them in brick and mortar classrooms and during office hours (Chabon, Cain, & Lee-Wilkerson 2001; Smith, Ferguson, & Caris 2002; Christianson 2002; Herrmann & Popyack 2003; Sheridan 2006; Van de Vord & Pogue 2012).

It’s also true that online teachers routinely work many hours of overtime answering email, troubleshooting technical issues, posting to online discussion forums, developing or digitizing course content, and trying to stay on top of the latest software and gadgets (Diaz 2010; Mandernach & Wise 2013). Understandably then, instructors considering online teaching worry they will need to spend so much time mastering new educational systems, that they’ll have far less time to spend promoting student learning (Ocak 2011). How then can faculty manage the time investment required to teach high-engagement, online and blended courses at scale, while avoiding burnout? In this chapter, the author will share how the campus learning management system (LMS) can help to manage the many demands on faculty time. Instructors should consider how they might turn the LMS into a genuine social teaching and learning platform, rather than using it as simply a document delivery service and digital gradebook. By leveraging the LMS to host a high-engagement, cooperative, student-centered learning experience learners have the opportunity to become increasingly self-directed and enmeshed in a vibrant classroom community, with a sense of shared purpose (Gikandi 2011).

Some of the canonical books on adult self-directed learning (SDL) were published in the 1970’s (Knowles 1975; Tough 1971), but the concept can be traced back to the nineteenth century (Craik 1865, Smiles 1878). Definitions of SDL vary, but it is generally understood as a process whereby students take responsibility for and manage their own learning process, by identifying goals, locating resources, making strategy decisions, executing and then evaluating the results, and critically self-reflecting on possible improvements for next time (Knowles 1975; Mezirow 1985). In this atmosphere, as independent learners work collaboratively with peers toward a common goal, their need for interaction and feedback is largely met by peers. We know that self-regulated learners are more adept at self-assessment and thus less dependent on instructor support (Zimmerman & Schunk 2004). Because they are more confident, resourceful, and persistent, such autodidactic students are more apt to demonstrate leadership skills, taking the initiative to offer advice and technical support to fellow students (Pintrich 1995; Zimmerman & Schunk 2001). All things considered then, this chapter will suggest that designing online courses that prioritize asynchronous collaboration and self-directed learning activities is key to increasing the productivity, efficiency, and wellness of students and faculty alike.

**Case Study: Teaching with Moodle**

The insights in this chapter are framed within the author’s experience of teaching three online communications courses, each with between 200 and 650 participants, at a Canadian university in 2014 and 2015. In large classes it is challenging to provide students with timely, personalized feedback on their