Teaching with Technology: Reaching Out in the Digital Age

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ABSTRACT

In this article, the authors discuss how technology can enhance online teaching and student engagement. As the number of adult learners increase and the continuing use of online teaching increases, it is important to keep students engaged during learning. If the adult learners are engaged, they will most likely remain the duration of the course, ensuring retention in online courses. Currently completion rates for online courses can be significantly lower than those of the traditional classroom based on studies by a number of authors for a variety of reasons (Diaz, 2002; Lorenzetti, 2002; Murray, 2001). Students will also be more likely to sign up for future online classes when engagement strategies are used. By incorporating the type of technology students use in their everyday life will encourage engagement and relevance. When educators use technology effectively and efficiently in their classes, this increases engagement and provides a positive learning experience for the student. The article reviews literature that outlines different types of technology and the ways technology can complement an online class.

Keywords: Adult Learners, Avatars, Blogs, Online, Podcasts, Technology, Wikis

INTRODUCTION

Due to the increasing number of adult learners returning to higher education (Kazis, Callahan, Davison, McLeod, Bosworth, Choitz, & Hoops, 2007), it becomes imperative to offer courses that meet this population needs and keep them engaged so that they receive maximum educational information and benefit from the learning experience. These courses and programs are offered in three different formats (1) face-to-face, which require students attend classes in person; (2) hybrid, which uses a combination of face-to-face and online tools; and (3) fully online courses which uses the internet and other digital tools as the sole medium to deliver instruction, this medium is also called distance learning (DL). DL can be either synchronous or asynchronous. Because a common concern when delivering instruction is how to keep students engaged, many instructional methods are utilized to serve adult learners. These methods may be experiential, problem-based or collaborative so students can associate curriculum concepts to beneficial knowledge and skills (Kazis et al., 2007). Student engagement refers to students participating in class by studying a subject, asking questions, interacting, obtaining feedback and analyzing problems (Kuh, 2003). Not surprisingly, engagement plays an
important role to motivate students to remain in the course and can serve as an accountability indicator for e-learning.

DL can be lonely and frustrating for individuals who are not techno-ready and are taking courses that do not offer challenging and engaging activities and lack supportive instructor guidance. Some adult learners may not feel comfortable with the technology used in DL; therefore careful instruction and assessment planning should happen before delivering content (Ellington & Bryan, 2010). At times students may feel lost and confused in cyberspace. Therefore, a skilled instructor is needed to incorporate creatively technology into active learning exercises, so students are engaged. This article outlines how the appropriate use of electronic and online tools can enhance DL and assure success with the courses. Diaz (2000) reports conservative online drop rate of 13.5 percent compared to 7.2 percent for traditional students. Strategies to prepare students for the rigors of learning at a distance increase the probability of retention and success (Chang, 2005). A smorgasbord of interactive technology options to complement teaching is discussed in this article as well.

OVERVIEW OF DIGITAL TOOLS

Researchers and practitioners support the effectiveness of using technology when teaching online. As adult learners face the use of more digital tools in their daily lives, their familiarity to these tools increases and that makes instructors incorporate these tools into the learning experience (Olesen-Tracey, 2010). Digital tools refer to any electronic interactive tool or application used to enhance the online learning experience, e.g., wikis, podcasts, blogs, whiteboards. By using interactive and digital tools, educators can not only individualize and provide a quality learning experience for the adult student, but also boost student engagement if used appropriately (Manzo, 2010). Since there is an increasing number of adults returning higher education, it is vital to keep students engaged hence they can complete their coursework and degree (Fincher, 2010). Without the creative use of digital tools in an online course, educators run the risk of their students feeling isolated and confused. Consequently, students may drop out of the course and not enroll for future courses and have a negative perception of online learning. Poorly designed online classes may eventually be a barrier to learning and risk the existence of the online program if the turnover rate of students rises.

ADVANTAGES OF DIGITAL TOOLS

The literature discusses various methods educators can incorporate these tools into their online classroom to foster students’ collaboration, engagement and use of higher level thinking skills. The use of these tools together with educational pedagogy can create learning and teaching methods more efficacious and successful (Coles, 2009). Therefore digital tools can have both cognitive and affective benefits. For instance, a key advantage of using these digital features is the use of higher thinking processes. Robinson and Hullinger (2008) found that the more digital tools are available for students, the more opportunities students will have to use higher thinking processes. When students are offered opportunities to respond, use critical thinking and provide feedback through instructor or peer exchanges then they are using higher level thinking skills. When taking online classes, interaction between students, peers and instructor is virtual, the personal contact may be lost if suitable techniques and tools are not made available.

A second advantage refers to online collaboration. Digital tools can play a role facilitating the creation of online learning communities (Robinson & Hullinger, 2008) and student collaboration. Online learning communities can advance learning and processes of inquiry by facilitating forums of discussion and online exchanges and by mirroring what happens in the workplace, i.e., using virtual teams (Holt &
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