Chapter 15
Strategies for Online Instruction

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ABSTRACT

With diverse options for teaching and learning, continued professional development is requisite for instructors in order to meet the needs of a growing online population of students. In online learning settings, if students are not engaged through various instructional techniques, students become easily distracted and miss valuable content necessary for learning. In traditional classroom settings, instructors can easily check for levels of engagement via a visual scan of the class. In an online environment, without the use of video, a visual scan is not possible. As a result, a productive way to ensure student engagement in asynchronous or synchronous courses is for instructors to implement modeling, graphic, manipulative, and simulation strategies into the online environment. This chapter reviews a variety of best practice strategies for engaging students in an online learning environment as part of faculty professional development to improve their teaching and learning. These practice strategies will be discussed, along with examples of how they can be implemented.

INTRODUCTION

Today’s students represent a culturally diverse population seeking flexibility, active engagement and a stimulating learning environment for their online educational experience. To meet this growing need, instructors are pursuing a variety of best practice strategies to enhance knowledge and skill levels regarding online learners. As this chapter identifies and defines a variety of best practice strategies that are applicable in both synchronous (instructor led) and asynchronous (individually paced study) environments, it will also outline the rationale, aims and objectives for successful implementation of these constructs.
The online environment is created in a non-traditional setting and designed without barriers to learning. Essentially, online instructors, in the role of lecturer, facilitator, or guide-on-the-side, provide a model of behavior they want their students to emulate. These behaviors include effective time management, good organizational skills, a collaborative attitude, and professional, interpersonal communications. Online instructors who incorporate interactive strategies, such as modeling, graphic, manipulative, and simulations, along with social networking components for online literacy, can encourage students to interact with course materials through various multimedia applications. Through this constructivist milieu, students cannot be passive learners. Carefully architecting e-learning content design is a foundational component of effective teaching and learning in our global society.

Vygotsky’s (1978) theory of Social Educational Learning posits that social interaction has a fundamental role in the cognitive development process. This approach to constructivism demonstrates that each learner will bring to the environment prior knowledge and will begin to construct new knowledge from the perspectives that are shared by others through dynamic social interactions. Clark and Mayer’s Segmenting principle (2008) would have the asynchronous learning process broken down into phases or manageable chunks where the students could practice independently and then synchronously interact with their group members. It is the student’s ability to build upon their prior knowledge and internalize new information that will meet their psychological learning requirements and keep them engaged in an e-learning environment.

As noted by Clark and Mayer (2008), “….in asynchronous e-learning, you always allow learners control over pacing. Pacing control allows participants to progress forward or backward at their own rates. Learner control is one of the features that distinguish asynchronous from synchronous forms of e-learning” (pp. 289-290). According to Mayer (1998), there are several areas that influence problem solving and enhance critical thinking skills: (a) Cognitive skills – the facts, concepts, and guidelines unique to a skill field; (b) Metaskills – the ability to plan, monitor, and assess actions associated with problem solving; and (c) Motivation – an investment of effort to persist and solve the problem.

By subsequently increasing the potential for deep learning, interactive online environments may increase creativity, critical thinking and more effective problem solving skills for students ultimately enhancing their interest and insights as actively engaged learners. The pedagogic application of these social software tools provides a forum for students to engage in critical thinking, problem solving, ethical debates and social responsibility. In this context, learners are in control of the method of information discovery, its distribution, modification and socio-cultural collaboration in “content creation over content consumption” (McLoughlin and Lee, 2007).

**MODELING**

In order for students to obtain the best possible experience while participating in an online environment, it is critical for the instructor to have an established set of guidelines and instructions for students to follow. In the synchronous classroom, the guidelines and instructions establish how communication takes place. The instructor, as a demonstration, should concretely model this interaction for students. A few examples of online interactivity include making use of private and public chat functions, encouraging participants to use mark-up tools, such as agree/disagree buttons, hand raise functionality, emoticons, polling questions, etc.

Students will take cues from the instructor on how to respond and participate in this environment and adhere to the “tone” set at the beginning of the course by the instructor (Savery, 2010). The