

Distant, Not Absent

Keeping online learners engaged can help them reach the finish line.

BY ANN MCCLURE

November 2007

PICTURE THE DISTANCE LEARNING STUDENT, ALONE IN A room, bathed by the glow of a computer screen. During the fall 2006 term, nearly 3.5 million students took at least one online course, according to the 2007 Sloan Consortium report "Online Nation: Five Years of Growth in Online Learning." Although students did so because they wanted an education, that desire alone might not carry them to completion. As online courses grow in popularity, providers are starting to take steps to ensure student persistence. "In some ways, the idea [that] programs are growing is not surprising, even if good practices aren't being followed," says Ken Udas, executive director of the Penn State World Campus and Online Programs. "If the sector is matured you will have people taking programs and maybe not being satisfied." The student's emotional investment, faculty engagement, and technology are all contributing factors to completion.

Emotions in Motion

"As administrators we can pull all the levers that influence course completion," says Martha Cleveland-Innes, associate professor at the Centre for Distance Education at Athabasca University (Canada). External pressures such as family and work are the same for online and on-campus students. But on-campus students can have a strong connection to the institution because it is where they live and where their friends are, which can help with persistence. Online students are usually only connected by a fiber optic line, so strengthening that connection can sometimes increase student satisfaction. Cleveland-Innes points out that one way to foster engagement is by minimizing issues students might have with technology, the admissions process, and access to materials, while increasing contact among and between students and faculty. "We have preliminary data that suggests that an enhanced sense of community will enhance completion," she says.

'We have preliminary data that suggests that an enhanced sense of community will enhance completion.' -Martha Cleveland-Innes, Athabasca University

George Saltsman, the director of Educational Technology for the Adams Center for Teaching and Learning at Abilene Christian University (Texas), points to research showing that when students form learning communities, they hold each other accountable for the success of the entire class. "If you can foster a connection, students will be more persistent over all," says Don Smith, manager of distance learning programs and support at Sinclair Community College (Ohio), who also promotes discussion forums and team activities. "It helps them feel they are part of a class and not flying solo."

The University of Phoenix uses learning teams as a first line of support for students, explains Marla LaRue, dean of education. Learning groups are a cohort of students progressing through a program of study together. Learning teams are composed of three to six members of the learning group who meet weekly to study and work on group projects together. When a class starts, students are instructed on how to work in a team and then are free to form them on their own. The learning teams allow students to form connections and draw on each other's strengths. Close

friendships often develop. "It's funny, at the beginning of the program students will say they aren't crazy about the learning team, but by the end the satisfaction is 98 percent," she adds.

Although many students are attracted to online learning because of the flexibility of the asynchronous format, Great Basin College has found success through adding a synchronous component to some classes using Wimba's Live Classroom. During a "LiveNet" class, the instructor and students meet online at a set time and communicate via headsets. Since the community college serves practically the entire state of Nevada, the technology enables students who don't live near a campus or service center to attend.

Lisa Frazier, curriculum development specialist, says online retention is around 79 percent and retention in LiveNet classes is 84 percent. Students have started taking advantage of the fact that LiveNet classes are open 24/7 by setting up study groups, Frazier adds. Students aren't just seeking a connection to their classmates; some are also looking to connect to the institution. "I've met with students who just want to get educated and get out," says Heather Chakiris, associate dean for advising and retention for Penn State's World Campus. "But more and more I see students who want to be engaged."

Sometimes that engagement can reach extremes, such as when Penn State's football team traveled to Illinois and Chakiris was asked to get information about a pep rally and tickets for a World Campus student who lived there. Just like their brick and mortar counterparts, distance students are looking for branded merchandise from their alma mater, and some have even taken time during their vacations to tour campus. Because of this feedback, Chakiris has started to include information about all the sports teams' schedules, as well as events on campus that have streaming video, in materials sent to students.

Faculty Factor

But no matter how nice the hoodies are, success in distance learning still comes down to the classroom experience. "I don't think there is anything that can help retention as much as an engaged faculty member," says Penn State's Udas.

Because online students are not receiving visual clues from the instructor, they can feel isolated. An engaged faculty member can overcome those feelings. "Students want feedback. They don't want to sense that you are teaching online so you don't have to go to campus," says Kaye Shelton, dean of online education at Dallas Baptist University. Teacher presence is a cornerstone of online learning, along with social presence and cognitive presence, she says. Saltsman, who coauthored *An Administrator's Guide to Online Education* (Information Age Publishing, 2005) with Shelton, says online faculty play the part of a "guide on the side," as opposed to the "sage on the stage" role of those on campus.

Teaching online involves a different dynamic, with the workload spread out during the week rather than concentrated in one lecture period. Shelton says it's important for the instructor to set boundaries with students, who can have an expectation of the professor being online constantly. Typically, instructors are required to respond within 24 to 48 hours of a student's posting.

Because time spent uploading a document is time lost from interacting with students, Shelton believes IHEs must reduce the administrative burden for online faculty. Using support staff to assist in loading content or using templates to speed common responses are some ways to ease the burden. Class size can also influence an instructor's ability to engage with students. Saltsman cites research that suggests online class enrollment should be capped at around 20 to 25 students. Faculty are often the first step for outreach efforts and can notify administrators if further intervention is needed, too.

The extra effort has its rewards. Frazier, who teaches live and online classes, says she gets to know more of her online students better because of the regular contact. Every student in an online class has to participate in a discussion, whereas more vocal students can dominate live classes. Shelton feels that online discussions can be more robust because they continue all week instead of being confined to a two-hour lecture.

Designed for Success

Adult learners especially are bringing a consumer mindset to online learning and will shop around for programs. "And because they are savvy consumers, they'll stop their credit card if they aren't happy," says Udas. One way Penn State keeps students happy is by assigning an online advisor to be a single point of contact through graduation. "The advisor is a key to retention by providing meticulous customer service," Chakiris explains.

"The first few weeks are critical," says Joeann Humbert, director of online learning at Rochester Institute of Technology (N.Y.). "If you don't engage them or aren't welcoming, they can drop off really quick." RIT is on a quarter system, so students who miss the first few weeks won't succeed. To prevent that, during the first three weeks faculty perform student assessments, which are shared with the student, the advisor, and the department chair. After the drop/ add period has closed, retention is 95 percent, she says.

'I don't think there is anything that can help retention as much as an engaged faculty member.' -Ken Udas, Penn State World Campus

"We're here to serve and we don't forget it," says Smith. His department reaches out to Sinclair students regularly, updating them on campus events and reminding them to log in to their class. He has found that a more structured class with deadlines and clear expectations can keep students moving forward. Because of course development and outreach efforts, Smith says, "our online success rates rival face-to-face courses."

Udas has also noted this fact and says that Penn State has changed all the classes offered through the World Campus from rolling admissions to a semester structure. Because of this, completion rates that were in the 70 percent range have increased to around 90 percent. The semester structure allows for more group projects and faculty engagement and enables the school to offer more coherent services. Udas points out it is harder to track learner progress when students join a class at different times. A good description of the course and how it fits in the curriculum can also help keep students motivated.

The Elephant in the Room

Despite the fact that technology enables online learning, "it doesn't really impact [completion] in a positive way," says Smith.

If anything, he adds, a student can be driven away from a program, or online learning in general, if he or she has a bad experience with the technology. Smith says that after trying several course management systems, Sinclair chose Angel Learning.

Sister Carroll Isselmann, vice president for academic affairs at Immaculata University (Pa.), points out that technology is self-eliminating because students who don't have computers won't apply. She adds that software companies have addressed many of the interface issues that existed in previous years, and universities are better at addressing technology issues as well. To combat any remaining issues, students usually have access to live or archived orientation sessions for the online environment and ways to test their home system.

"At the end of the day," says RIT's Humbert, "it's about a good teaching environment, clear expectations, timely feedback, and using the technology to get to those things."

TYPE IT WITH FEELING

Martha Cleveland-Innes, associate professor at the Centre for Distance Education at Athabasca University (Canada), offers the following suggestions to faculty for enhancing emotion in online classes.

1. Don't try to be in the business of fostering certain emotions. It's too complex and idiosyncratic. We can't know for sure that an action will create the same emotion in all students. Emotion needs to be managed in the sense of acknowledging it but not fostering it. It should be in the hands of the students to emote what their situation creates.
2. Be emotionally present. Being transparent about your experience as a teacher in an online environment also gives students a chance to be emotionally present. Use emotional language.
3. Make emotion explicit.
4. Course designers, student tech support, and instructors can offer insight about emotion and learning. Emotion can be a distraction or an enhancer. It is important to remember that emotion affects how we process information.
5. Faculty should set structures and the climate in which emotions are properly expressed. The students can help design the rules at the beginning of an online course. When this is done, you as the instructor can say explicitly that because the course has such rules about emotions, it will be safe to express them.

MANAGING EXTERNAL FACTORS

Flexibility is one of the draws of online learning. Students can fit school into their busy lives when it is convenient, but since they are in charge of their own schedule it can take an extra level of motivation for them to succeed. Northeastern University (Mass.) is helping them meet the challenge by providing life coaches through InsideTrack.

"It's very hard to earn a degree part-time in the evening as an adult," points out Christopher Hopey, vice president and dean of the School of Professional and Continuing Studies. He explains that Northeastern's academic advisors can help students navigate the school, but the life coaches can help them with organizational skills and articulating their goals. "Coaching helps them work through problems and persist," he adds.

Every student is assigned a coach and has the option to use the service. Hopey says some students are hesitant at first because they feel they don't need help, but then they realize they can turn to the coaches for honest feedback. Hopey says the program also benefits from information about classes the coaches gather from the students. The feedback the coaches hear is more nuanced than what is recorded on standard teacher evaluation forms. "When I brought them in I was focusing on the student experience, but I didn't realize the valuable raw data I'd get," Hopey says.

Another, less intense, form of guidance is Your Online Learning Success Plan from Cengage Learning. Students log in to the web-based tool and complete a brief assessment. They receive personalized information about their strengths and challenges and strategies for success in dealing with them. On the other side, administrators can build aggregate reports from the data to assist them in determining whether to offer global or targeted help.

<http://www.universitybusiness.com/viewarticle.aspx?articleid=933&p=1#0>