

EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR INCREASING STUDENT-TO-INSTRUCTOR INTERACTION IN AN ONLINE COURSE

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ABSTRACT

Student-to-instructor interaction is crucial in online education. Through this interaction, the instructors guide students on contents and create a learning environment that allows students to communicate between themselves. The student-to-instructor interaction is one of the factors that determine student participation and satisfaction. Thus, this study uses a systematic review to discuss the strategies that instructors can use to increase student-to-instructor interaction in online courses. This study highlights four strategies, including the instructor's participation in online courses, the feedback from an online instructor, the availability of an online instructor and timely response, and pre- and during class communications in online courses. The online instructors and instructional designers may use these strategies to improve interaction with the students. These strategies may also assist instructional designers and instructors who develop and teach hybrid or blended courses.

Keywords: student-to-instructor, online course, instructor participation, instructor feedback, instructor availability, and class communication

INTRODUCTION

The main difference between traditional and online learning is that the instructions and learning take place in a virtual environment in online learning as opposed to physical classrooms in traditional learning. Due to the virtual learning environment in online education, there are concerns that online learning may not provide a similar learning experience and quality of education as traditional learning. Allen, Seaman, Poulin, and Straut (2016) surveyed the academic leaders of the higher institutions in the United States based on the enrolment of fall 2014. Among the academic leaders at some institutions with at least 10,000 distance students, 41.7% reported that the quality of online education was superior to face-to-face instruction versus 42.3% who agreed that the quality is the same in both online and face-to-face. In contrast, 16% pointed out that the quality of online education is inferior to face-to-face. The responses of the academic leaders at the institutions that did not offer distance courses were different, with 51% reported that the quality of online education is inferior to face-to-face.

Instructors play a significant role in both traditional and online learning. Teachers determine the content and pedagogical strategies for the students to interact and different ways to communicate with the students. Student-to-instructor interaction in online courses creates an opportunity for other interactions, such as student-to-content and student-to-student. Due to the flexibility of online education, including working remotely and an opportunity for universities and colleges to attract students to increase enrolment, a number of online courses are growing every year (Mucundanyi, 2019). As a result, instructors may be pressured to teach online by converting their traditional courses into online courses. Changing a traditional course into an online course without clear preparation in teaching online affects the quality of the course. Thus, online instructors should be well prepared to teach in the virtual learning environment.

Even though online courses face the criticism of the quality of teaching and student participation, online courses with committed instructors provide a learning experience of traditional classrooms. The online instructors use the pedagogical and technology tools to communicate, interact, and engage students to meet the learning objectives and complete the courses. Online courses with clear communications involve students in learning through proper guidance. However, the lack of clear guidance disconnects students from learning and may cause students to drop online courses. Thus, online instructors must design courses by incorporating interaction strategies that encourage students to communicate with the instructors and engage with their classmates and content.

STUDENT-TO-INSTRUCTOR INTERACTIONS IN ONLINE LEARNING

Online instructors rely on the Learning Management Systems (LMSs) to create a virtual learning environment that allows students to interact among themselves, communicate with the instructors, and reach the learning objectives. These LMSs have embedded tools that facilitate synchronous and asynchronous communications between instructors and students. Instructors must always design courses with students in mind and create

online courses that engage students (Jackson, 2019). Communications of online instructors and students before and during the online courses strengthen the student-to-instructor interactions.

It is a good practice to assume that there are new students to online education. Besides, students need time to understand the course requirements and expectations. In addition, students are required to have the required textbooks before or on the first day of class. Thus, it is always essential to send emails or announcements to the students before classes start and communicate the general objectives of courses and create an opportunity for students to ask questions, including textbooks and dates of publishing the courses. Starting the communications earlier makes students feel comfortable and becomes easier to introduce the course. After publishing courses, students navigate online courses to see the content and classmates. Creating a video on course navigation helps students to understand the course design and requirements. The course navigation video prevents students from spending time familiarizing themselves with the navigation and allows them to reserve more time on content and completing assignments. Online instructors must be consistent in communicating with the students through weekly announcements by providing updates on the courses and reminding the students to complete assignments.

The participation of instructors in an online course is key to student learning and satisfaction. An online instructor participates in a course in multiple ways, including providing instructions on assignments and assessments. It is essential to provide a detailed grading rubric for the students to know ahead the requirements and criteria for grading the assignments. Moreover, the online instructors interact with the students in the discussion boards. The presence of an instructor in an online course is crucial to student participation (Hoey, 2017). When students know that the instructors are participating in the discussions, they follow the assignment guidelines carefully and check their posts to make sure that they respect the standards of the assignments. In addition, online instructors enforce the netiquette rules to create a learning environment for all students to provide ideas in a very respected environment, including the posts of students and comments in the discussion boards (Woodley, Mucundanyi, & Lockard, 2017).

Online instructors also interact with the students in providing clear feedback. This feedback helps the students to understand and see their progress in the course. The clear feedback shows the students what to improve and also guides them to determine the support they need from instructors and classmates (Ward et al., 2019). Through this feedback, students develop strategies for upcoming assignments. In addition, the instructors use the feedback to direct the students to the resources in the course. Finally, online students expect a timely response from the instructors. Online students need to feel that instructors are present to give feedback on time and respond to their questions. The online instructors must specify the response time for emails and the timeline to grade the assignment. Online instructors also should check emails regularly and respond to the students' questions within 24 hours, however, the response time between 24 and 48 hours is more reasonable. Moreover, office hours for the students is an opportunity for the student to ask questions.

As online education continues to grow, it is crucial for the researchers interested in improving online education to examine the strategies of student-to-instructor interaction. Instructors are the center of online education, and the strategies they use to communicate and engage the students motivate and encourage students to feel comfortable, valued, and focus on the learning. Hence, this study uses a systematic review to analyze the strategies of student-to-instructor interaction for the last five years. The following research question guides this systematic review, what strategies can online instructors use to increase student-to-instructor interactions?

METHODS

The author has experience of more than four years in teaching undergraduate and graduate online courses. In addition, the author has more than four years of working as an instructional designer for undergraduate, master, and doctoral courses. Therefore, the author used his experience and existing literature review to conduct a systematic review of peer-reviewed articles published on student and instructor interactions in online courses. The author utilized the digital library of a public research university in the southwestern United States and limited the search on three electronic databases, Academic Search Complete, Education Research Complete, and Education Resources Information Center (ERIC).

The initial search with a combination of keywords, 'student and instructor interactions', yielded 1849 resources. Then the author used the 'AND' option and added another combination of keywords 'online course' to narrow the search and focus on the topic; the new search generated 550 resources. The author was interested in examining the recent strategies on student and instructor interactions and limited the search on the articles published between 2016 and 2020; the new search yielded 152 resources. Besides, the author selected 'full-text and Scholarly (Peer Reviewed Journals)', the new search provided 56 peer-reviewed articles. When the 'exact

duplicates' were removed, the last search produced 37 peer-reviewed articles. Thus, the author downloaded all 37 peer-review articles and read the articles to select the articles that fulfill the inclusion criteria, namely student and instructor interactions, online courses, and postsecondary education'. It is vital to highlight that this study excluded the articles with the studies on blended or hybrid learning, K-12 education, and Massive Open Online Course (MOOC). Therefore, the final list of this systematic review consisted of the following eleven peer-reviewed articles:

Çardak (2016)
Gray and DiLoreto (2016)
Hicks, Gray, and Bond (2019)
Hoey (2017)
Jackson (2019)
Kuo and Belland (2016)
Parks-Stamm, Zafonte, and Palenque (2017)
Rios, Elliott, and Mandernach (2018)
Selvaggi (2016)
Thompson, Ballenger, and Templeton (2018)
Ward, Ward, Lester, and Tao (2019)

RESULTS

The author read the eleven articles and identified the themes in each article. Then the author organized the themes using MAXQDA. After the analysis, the author ranked the occurrence of all themes and selected the four themes with the most occurrences.

Instructor's participation in an online course

The instructor's participation enhanced the communication between online students and instructors and occurred in seven articles (Çardak, 2016; Gray & DiLoreto, 2016; Hoey, 2017; Kuo, & Belland, 2016; Parks-Stamm et al., 2017; Rios et al., 2018; Selvaggi, 2016). Online instructors participate in a course by providing instructional guidance in a course (Çardak, 2016; Hoey, 2017; Jackson, 2019; Kuo, & Belland, 2016). The instructional guidance does not only motivate and encourage students to engage in the content, but it also improves the student perception of learning (Hoey, 2017). Thus, clear instructional guidance shifts the center of learning from an instructor to the students. The instructional guidance can be in different formats, such as audio, video, and text post.

Another way for the instructor to interact with the students is to participate in the discussion boards (Gray & DiLoreto, 2016; Rios et al., 2018; Selvaggi, 2016). The online instructors use discussion boards to create a virtual environment that allows students to interact. The main purpose of an instructor's participation is to guide students on content and motivate them to interact between themselves. The instructors must always be a member in the discussion boards (Gray & DiLoreto, 2016). However, it is essential for the online instructors not to lead the discussions as the students tend to reply to the posts of their instructors instead of focusing on the posts of their classmates. Equally important, online instructors could not correct the students who did not respect the guidelines of the assignments in the discussion boards. According to Hoey (2017), "it may be more beneficial to reserve critical evaluation and redirection for feedback directly with the student, not in the public venue of a discussion forum" (Hoey, 2017, p. 14). The online instructors provide individual feedback on the discussion boards using other communication tools, such as email or requesting a student to meet with the instructor during office house. Even though the instructor participation is crucial to student learning, Parks-Stamm et al. (2017) examined the effect of instructor participation on student participation and found that the instructor participation was only effective in small classes with the students lesser than fifteen.

Feedback from an online instructor

This theme emerged from six articles (Çardak, 2016; Rios et al., 2018; Hicks et al., 2019; Jackson, 2019; Thompson et al., 2018; Ward et al., 2019). The feedback from an instructor appeared in different forms. The assignment was an excellent opportunity for online instructors to provide individual or group feedback based on the type of assignment (Thompson et al., 2018; Ward et al., 2019). Although the feedback on the group assignment is addressed to the members of the group, this feedback also contributes to individual growth and deepens learning. According to Ward et al. (2019), in providing feedback to online students, the instructors must be clear as possible.

Availability of an online instructor and timely response

The theme appeared in four articles (Hicks et al., 2019; Rios et al., 2018; Selvaggi, 2016; Thompson et al., 2018). One of the main challenges of online education is the lack of physical interaction between students and instructors, which is the center of the traditional classroom. However, online instructors create a virtual learning environment that ensures that the instructors are available to support and guide the students to reach the learning objectives of the courses and have the experience similar to the traditional classroom. Therefore, online instructors rely on different tools to increase the interaction between students and themselves, including emails, phone calls, and office hours (Rios et al., 2018; Selvaggi, 2016; Thompson et al., 2018). An email is an essential tool in teaching online, and LMSs may have an embedded email communication system that allows the instructors to receive the emails per class. The instructors could encourage the students to use the email system available in the LMS for efficient communications. The online instructors committed to teaching online check their emails daily and determine the timeline to respond to the emails and commit to the timeline (Selvaggi, 2016; Thompson et al., 2018). Rios et al. (2018) recommended to online instructors to “respond to students’ questions or phone calls within 24 hours” (p. 4).

Pre- and during class communications

This theme emerged from two articles (Hicks, 2019; Rios et al., 2018). The online instructors could communicate with the students before the beginning of the course. Unlike the traditional classrooms where students access the bookstores on and around campus, the online students live in different geographical areas and order the books ahead of time. Hence, online students need to know the instructors and have the required textbooks on time. Besides, the interaction between the online instructors and students before the start of class answers the preliminary questions of the students and makes it more comfortable for both the students and instructors to continue engaging in the communications during the courses. After classes start, online instructors have different ways of communicating with students through emails and announcements (Hicks, 2019). The announcements focus on various issues, such as changes in the syllabus and content, grade postings, and reminders.

DISCUSSIONS

In responding to the research question of identifying student-to-instructor interaction strategies, this study revealed four strategies. First, the instructor’s participation in an online course increases the interaction of students with the instructors. Instructional guidance from instructors explains to students what they are expected to do (Çardak, 2016; Hoey, 2017; Jackson, 2019). Providing clear instructions helps students to spend time on content and working on the assignments. Moreover, the instructor’s presence in the discussion boards engages students to participate. As students may only focus on responding to the instructors’ posts, the instructions on commenting to posts in the discussion boards can include a minimum number of posts between students. This finding is consistent with other studies that emphasized on improving the instructor’s participation in online courses (Woodley et al., 2017; Mucundanyi, 2019).

Second, the feedback from an online instructor helps the students to understand the courses’ requirements and expectations. The instructor’s feedback on assignments is crucial to student learning and progress. Although students are curious to know the grades of the previous assignments, the instructor’s feedback also helps the students to self-assess and improve in the remaining assignments. Assignments also create an opportunity for the instructors to see the level of the students and provide the support needed (Hicks et al., 2019; Thompson et al., 2018). Jackson (2019) recommended using the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) to address the general questions of the students and provide a learning resource that students can refer to for the whole semester. Therefore, clear feedback contributes to student understanding of the content and course expectations.

Third, the availability of an online instructor and timely response allows students to feel the presence of instructors and create a learning environment where the instructors respond to student questions and guide them through the learning process. Online instructors are available to students when they respond to student questions on time and reserve office hours to meet with students (Hicks et al., 2019; Selvaggi, 2016). Even though this study supports the response time to be within 24 hours (Rios et al., 2018), the online instructors need to select the response time they can respect, but not beyond 48 hours without responding to students.

Finally, pre- and during class communications in online courses inform the students what to do and to pay attention to the specific requirements of the course. Instructors committed to online education communicate to students for a quick introduction and information related to textbooks before starting the course. These instructors also allow students to ask questions related to the class. Preannouncement is a valuable tool to prepare the students to be a participating member in a course (Hicks, 2019; Rios et al., 2018). During the course,

instructors continue to build on the preannouncement and communicate to students using announcements, emails, and reminders.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In sum, the student-to-instructor interaction motivates and encourages the students to learn and participate in online courses. This article discusses four strategies for student-to-instructor interaction, namely the instructor's participation in online courses, the feedback from an online instructor, the availability of an online instructor and timely response, and pre- and during class communications in online courses. Therefore, the instructors and instructional designers can use these strategies in designing and teaching online. Although the strategies discussed in this article focus on online education at a postsecondary education, they are also beneficial to hybrid or blended learning as well as online education in K-12.

As many universities and colleges continue to provide online courses, the researchers need to provide strategies for student-to-instructor interactions. Thus, the author recommends further research on student-to-instructor interactions by doing systematic analysis. Moreover, there are three main types of interactions in online learning, student-to-student, student-to-content, and student-to-instructor. This article focused only on one type of interaction, student-to-instructor. Hence, the author recommends further research on the strategies for each type of interaction.

Limitations

This study used the peer-reviewed articles published in three databases. There may be other articles that fit the inclusion criteria published in other databases. Besides, some articles that were not electronically available in three databases were excluded from the study. Finally, this study included the articles published in the year of writing this article; unfortunately, no article was selected in the final list of articles.

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