

CREATING ONLINE ENGAGEMENT

Getting students engaged

Engaging students at the start of the course has the biggest impact on retention of students as it is in the early stages that the largest dropout occurs. Two major types of strategies have been identified as being important: Primers for getting students interest and creating an appropriate social context.

1. Primers for getting student attention: Curiosity, relevance.

The literature identifies two possible approaches, curiosity and relevance. Students experience curiosity when they become aware of a gap in their knowledge and are motivated to find the answer. Curiosity has been associated with optimal arousal for learning. One interesting aspect of curiosity is that it grows as knowledge grows, which suggests that teachers may need to prime curiosity early in a course. When students see a subject or topic as having personal relevance they are more likely to experience an optimal level of arousal for learning.

2. Social presence and belonging: Teacher enthusiasm and immediacy, and an inclusive environment.

The social context seems to play an important role in encouraging student engagement. Students who feel a part of the class and a part of the subject discipline are less likely to feel alienated or isolated and are consequently more likely to become engaged. Two useful options for fostering a sense of belonging are cohort or group activities and real world authentic experiences that provide students with a sense of being a part of a particular discipline.

An important aspect of the social context is the teacher, particularly in the online environment. Impersonal environments are more likely to alienate students. Teacher immediacy, a sense of the imminent presence of the teacher is reassuring to students. Having the site reflect the teacher's style is one important way of achieving this but other more pragmatic ways include using a photo, contact details in a prominent place and/or having a video welcome message. Associated with this is teacher enthusiasm, both online and in the classroom. Enthusiasm for the subject matter is contagious.

Maintaining engagement

Maintaining student engagement through the course requires three types of strategy: A well-organised course with a clear structure and guidance; challenging, authentic learning tasks; and quality feedback to students.

3. Clear content structure

When students start a new course most of the material will be uncharted territory for them. The constants they expect in a course are a clear course outline that includes the content structure and other organisational features. Students become very disgruntled with disorganised courses and changes to the expected programme.

4. Clear, unambiguous instructions and guidelines

Students are intensely interested in assessment instructions and guidelines. They may experience high levels of anxiety associated with this part of the course, which increases the need for clarity in these matters.

5. Challenging tasks

Challenging tasks are those that make the student stretch to their limits of performance. Learning happens when students make a sustained effort and the greater the effort, the greater the sense of achievement and motivation. Students are not motivated when given high marks for simple tasks, but nor are they motivated when the task is far beyond their ability. Making this judgment is an important teaching skill.

6. Authentic tasks

Students are further motivated when they engage in tasks that they perceive as preparing them for the 'real world'. They understand that effort now has a later benefit. Transfer of learning occurs when learning tasks are structurally similar to real world tasks.

7. Timely feedback

Generally, the weight of evidence strongly suggests that in most circumstances immediate feedback is more effective than delayed. Immediate feedback allows students to correct errors quickly, making learning more efficient.

8. Elaborated feedback

Studies consistently report that highly specific feedback that elaborates on the ways students can improve their performance results in better learning.

Re-engaging students who drift away or fail to engage

In most courses a proportion of students will procrastinate at the start of the course, or stop engaging, usually at key points such as assessment. The literature identifies two critical strategies for re-capturing the engagement of these students.

9. Monitoring and early identification:

Early identification through monitoring student engagement is essential to recover these students. The earlier the identification, the greater the chance of success. Ideally, this could start in the first week. Stream makes this a very simple process. Taking rolls at class is also recommended. Students who are performing poorly are at risk of dropping out and should also be monitored.

10. Personal contact and negotiated conditions for re-engagement:

Having identified students who are not engaged, the most effective strategy for re-engaging is personal contact with the student from the teacher. A personal email to each student is one simple option. Follow up contact for students that do not respond initially is also important. Such contact is most effective when the teacher works with the student to provide help and support for problems the student may have.

Further reading

Source: Jeffrey, L. M., Milne, J., Suddaby, G. & Higgins, A. (2012). *Strategies for engaging students: Help and hindrances in a blended learning environment*. Ako Aotearoa: Wellington.