

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT, E-CONNECTIVITY, AND CREATING RELATIONSHIPS IN THE ONLINE CLASSROOM: Emerging Themes

**Andree SWANSON
Bill DAVIS
Omar PARKS
Stan ATKINSON
Brenda FORDE
Kunsoo CHOI
Vanessa WASHINGTON**

**The Forbes School of Business at
Ashford University, Denver, CO, USA**

ABSTRACT

As complex as it is for traditional on ground students to return to school, online adult learners have difficulties engaging with other students, faculty, and administrators. With an emphasis on anytime, anywhere learning, students tend to isolate themselves and do not reach out for assistance. As more and more students take online courses, curriculum could be designed with the student in mind when it comes to learning, objectives, and outcomes of the objectives. Considering all the factors of student engagement (points to engage students) is difficult, yet, the researchers engaged in a deep review of peer-reviewed literature on the topic.

Keywords: Classroom relationships, online classroom, e-connectivity, student engagement.

INTRODUCTION

Communicating in the online learning environment is difficult at best. To feel connected to faculty and fellow students is almost impossible. Interpersonal exchanges are "more difficult for online students to engage in the kinds of collaborative peer interactions that often result in the construction of meaning and achievement of learning goals" (Slagter van Tryon & Bishop, 2012, p. 347).

Swanson, Hutkin, Babb and Howell (2010) stated, "online students face challenges with communication and socialization in the asynchronous distance-learning classroom because of a missing face-to-face, nonverbal communications" (p. 1). Swanson et al. (2010) found that students did not feel connected with their faculty. Dr Parks, Washington, and Swanson looked into this lack of student engagement, e-connectivity, and creating relationships in the online classroom.

LITERATURE REVIEW OF ONLINE LEARNING

An in-depth dive into the EBSCOHost, ProQuest databases, and Google Scholar was conducted to identify literature related to e-connectivity or the concept of building relationship and student engagement with students in an online classroom.

Watson, McIntyre and McArthur (2010) conducted two studies that examined various applications of online learning in both design and context. The results of this study highlighted two areas:

- "the impact that fostering positive, interpersonal, interdisciplinary", and
- "transcultural relationships between students and online design education can have upon their levels of trust and the effectiveness and outcomes of their online collaborative assets" (Watson et al., 2010, p. 1).

Encouraging trust through pedagogy. The lack of face-to-face interaction and the prospect of never having the opportunity can bring anxiety to some students. Disciplinary differences, variance in online learning experience(s) and differences in features of online learning are all "potential barriers" to creating "effective collaborative relationships" in the online environment (Watson et al., 2010). Strong interactive skills and the confidence to take risks are essential factors for "effective" and worthwhile "learning experiences" (Watson et al.).

New students registered for a fully online masters program orientation. Students created individual profiles and visual essays to share themselves with others in the class.

By completing the profiles and essays allowed them to open up to one another which increased their sense of intrinsic motivation (Watson et al.).

The visual essays created an initial discussion point as well as assisted students with identifying points of common interests or goals. This initial task also helped students practice their technical skills in the learning environment and helped them become comfortable with navigating the platform. Lastly, students had the opportunity to personally connect and create allegiances while building trust (Watson et al.).

If the technology limited communication opportunities, in turn it could wear down opportunities to build trust. The limitation of communication impacted the ability (or lack thereof) to build collaboration through teamwork. Asynchronous learning environments, specifically discussion boards, can serve as a point of connection for students who are located in various places around the world, but also can create unique issues.

The lack of “facial expressions and body language” sometimes made it difficult for recipients to accurately interpret messages, especially if a student is involved in “high-pressure discussion or teamwork situation” (Watson et al., p. 1). A breakdown in trust could also result when students were put into teams that failed to communicate on a regular basis. When this occurred, the students within the group cannot accurately gauge the other members’ commitment to the group (Watson et al.).

Promotion and engagement in collaborative opportunities created situations where students could communicate regularly and ensure that the foundation is in place to circumvent conflict as doing so increases the chances of trust among students. Students were given the opportunity to participate in reflective end-of-course evaluations to express their experiences and challenges with both the material and the learning environment. Providing this opportunity to the students provides both the students and researchers with an opportunity to modify the necessary details and include revisions as required.

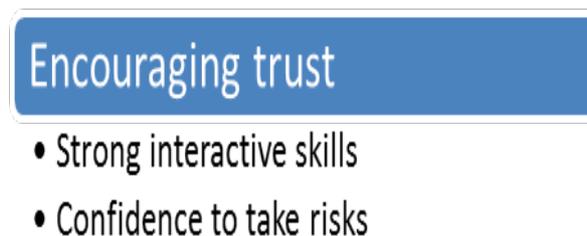


Figure: 1
Watson, McIntyre and McArthur’s Review of Case Study One
This figure identifies the two components identified to encourage trust in the online classroom (Watson et al., 2010).

Online Learning in a New Blended Learning Program. Administrators at a fine arts college introduced a blended learning program that included online. Administrators, faculty, and students felt distrust as this effort was designed to reduce costs and not enhance the learning experience. The stakeholders were concerned that online learning component would lead to isolation. Faculty was considered about a surge in contact hours with the online element (Watson et al., 2010).

Administrators acknowledged their concerns and focused on the online resources. Moving lectures to an online format could provide several benefits for learners. Students could review the online lectures at their own pace and as many times as they need to retain the information.

Foreign students could also benefit from online lectures, especially if English was not their first language. Foreign students could also feel more comfortable asking questions in the online environment (Watson et al.).

Administrators created a blended online community by introducing online galleries that allowed students to upload their work and peer review others.

These components were critical for the art and design programs. Students used the platform to periodically upload their work throughout the design process.

Administrators successfully controlled the mistrust issues and apprehension. The researchers acknowledged that mistrust should be addressed appropriately providing the rationale for the change, specifically highlighting the pedagogical advantages that the change brings to everyone involved (Watson et al.).

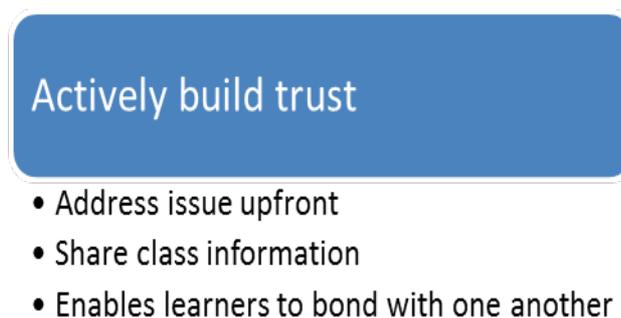


Figure: 2
Watson, McIntyre and McArthur's Review of Case Study Two
This figure identifies the elements of distrust that arose in the online classroom (Watson et al., 2010).

STUDENT RETENTION IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

Naidu (2011) addressed the issue of online student retention. Educators need to address the needs of the many instead of the needs of the few, which is a change from decades ago when higher education was a prized achievement of the rich and bright. Many methods to influence positive student retention exist including a process where students can assess their readiness to engage in the rigors of distance education, in synchronous and asynchronous environments, and develop needed computer and research skills before starting a program.

Alternative learning strategies were recommended by Naidu (2011), but these were not specified. Social presence can be enhanced by rich discussion threads on topics of interest to the students, team assignments, and web-based synchronous teleconferences. One limitation of technological advancements in distance education is that global students who live in remote areas may have limited access to technology. It was not clear on whether Naidu focused on instructor social presence or student social presence or both.

Create a Social Presence

- Rich discussion threads improved social presence

Figure: 3
Naidu's Findings on Student Retention in the Online Classroom
This figure shows the two areas that Naidu discussed in distance education (Naidu, 2011).

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN ONLINE COURSES

Robinson and Hullinger (2008) linked student engagement in online courses to the amount of effort students exert in learning synthesizing the material. Using the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) the researchers measured the engagement of 201 undergraduate students from several universities and several different classes. NSSE measured "level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student interaction with faculty members, enriching educational experience, and a supportive campus environment" (p. 102).

Findings were mixed. The levels of academic challenge in the online classroom were gratifying as students reported the amount of effort to be successful in the class was more than they expected.

Advantages of online learning included having more time to deliberate on theories and their application, various modes of stimulation with multimedia, and meeting high expectations set by the course and the instructor (Robinson & Hullinger).

While many higher level critical thinking and technology skills were enhanced, speaking skills were not improved, which was not a surprise. Student faculty interaction mostly consisted of faculty feedback on assignments. Technology, according to Robinson and Hullinger (2008), offered several communication tools to stimulate interaction. Discussion on reading assignments and career advice from faculty were lower than expected, however, and thus could be improved.

Active and collaborative learning had positive results with most of the participants indicating peer reviews and working with other students on projects.

Most of the students accessed the online library often to complete assignments. This is a measurement of active engagement, according to NSSE (Robinson & Hullinger, 2008).

Part of an enriching educational experience is learning new technology skills, acquiring learning techniques to use in life challenges, and using social interaction to solve problems.

The findings showed men more engaged in memorization, quantitative analysis, and technology while the women were more engaged in synthesis, writing, and collaboration with peers.

The higher achievers of A and B students were more engaged than those students of lower achievement. The younger students (less than 25 years old) were more socially active in online discussions and had to work harder to complete the class successfully.

The older students, by contrast, limited their discussions to assignment completion and used more higher-order critical thinking skills. While many of the outcomes of this study were positive, challenges and potential for improvement included: more discussions on the class readings and career advice, using technology to enhance speaking skills, requiring more synthesis of course material over memorization, and more online presentations and peer reviews.

The NSSE was found to be valid in measuring engagement, and university leaders could use this instrument to gauge the level of student engagement in their online classes.

Encourage students to collaborate

- More time to think
- ~~• Various modes of stimulation~~
- Meeting high expectations set by the course and the instructor
- Active and collaborative learning

Figure: 4
Robinson and Hullinger (2008) Review on Student Engagement in Online Courses
This figure illustrates the highlights of the Robinson and Hullinger study.

USING COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT THEORY TO IMPROVE STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN ONLINE DISCUSSION: A Case Study

Skinner (2009) studied a real-life case where on-line discussion questions, particularly the first introductory question, did not engage students and inspire them to actively participate and become engaged.

The study found that a large percentage of students were late in the discussion and did not fully participate. This was due to a lack of motivation. Skinner explored some reasons for lack of motivation and discussed the difference between active and passive participation. The results identified that instructors need to reach each student and make personal contact. The key is to build questions that truly interest students and entice them. This will in turn motivate students and get them engaged.

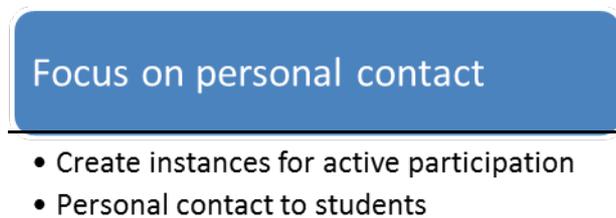


Figure: 5
Skinner's (2009) using Community Development Theory to Increase Student Engagement This figure illustrates the highlights of the Skinner study.

Student Engagement in Pharmacology Courses Using Online Learning Tools

Karaksha, Grant, Anoopkumar-Dukie, Nirthanan, and Davey (2013) defined engagement in great length and discussed how the term has emerged. Karaksha et al. (2013) performed a study on the use of various e-tools including animation and what impact this would have on student engagement.

In general, students like the added e-tools but did not find the e-tools could replace the traditional lecture information but only supplement it.

In the first study, the students did not use the extra e-tools very often. During the second study, the e-tools were promoted through a marketing strategy with reminders and encouragement.

The use of the e-tools went up dramatically. The students found the e-tools engaging and said it help to reinforce the material. The study concluded that if e-tools are properly promoted student engagement can increase.

Use e-tools to increase engagement

- More time to think
- ~~Various modes of stimulation~~
- Meeting high expectations set by the course and the instructor
- Active and collaborative learning

Figure: 6

Karaksha, Grant, Anoopkumar-Dukie, Nirthanan, and Davey (2013) Review on Student Engagement in Pharmacology Courses Using Online Learning Tools
This figure illustrates the highlights of the Karaaksha et al. (2013) study.

Concept of Agentic Engagement

Reeve and Tseng (2011) original work "proposed the concept of agentic engagement ... defined as "students' constructive contribution into the flow of the instruction they receive" (p. 258) as cited in Reeve (2013, p. 579). Reeve's conducted a series of three studies.

The first study produced an Agentic Engagement Scale, the second study measures the validity of the scale in the form of associated scores with assessment of agentic engagement, and the third presents evidence that agentially engaged students possess a perchance to produce an impelling, supportive learning environment for one another.

Agentic Engagement focuses on "The role and function of the teacher in supporting the learner's motivation and academic progress" (Ryan & Deci, 2000 as cited in Reeve, 2013, p. 591).

Agentially engaged students work transactionally with the teacher to create learning conditions that can vitalize their otherwise latent inner motivational resources" (e.g., autonomy-supportive teaching) (Ryan & Deci, 2000 as cited in Reeve, 2013, p. 591).

In completing the three studies there was an indication that agentially engaged students experienced a more positive than those students who were not agentially engaged.

The study provided insight into the connection between student autonomy, the most advantageous learning approaches and the ability to motivate students in a supportive environment.

Consider agentic engagement

- Student autonomy
- Different learning approaches
- Motivate in a supportive manner

Figure: 7
Reeve and Tseng (2011) Review on Concept of Agentic Engagement
This figure illustrates the highlights of the Reeve and Tseng (2011) study.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

In this essay, the researchers reviewed literature on student engagement, e-connectivity, and creating relationships.

Themes of Engagement	
Building trust	Strong interactive skills Confidence to take risks
Actively build trust	Address issue upfront Share class information Enable learners to bond with one another
Create a social presence	Create rich discussion threads improved social presence
Encourage students to collaborate	More time to think Various modes of stimulation Meeting high expectations set by the course and the instructor Active and collaborative learning
Focus on personal contact	Create instances for active participation Personal contact to students
Use e-tools to increase engagement	More time to think Various modes of stimulation Meeting high expectations set by the course and the instructor Active and collaborative learning
Consider agentic engagement	Student autonomy Different learning approaches Motivate in a supportive manner

Figure 8.
Themes of Engagement
This figure illustrates the themes of engagement that emerged from the researchers' literature review.

Although there seems to be many studies reported that document specific situations, no validated instrument exists to measure engagement and e-connectivity in the online classroom. The researchers determined that the key to successful engagement is to:

- build trust,
- create a social presence,
- encourage collaboration, and
- focus on personal contact.

Themes that emerged from the literature review are shown below in Figure 8:. Future research could take place in the online educational setting. Researchers can explore a set of underpinning variables used to build trust (for example, creating a social presence, encouraging collaboration, encouraging personal contact). Exploration could also take place to create a validated assessment to evaluate the levels of connectivity in a particular classroom or program.

BIODATA and CONTACT ADDRESSES of the AUTHORS



Dr. Andree SWANSON is a full-time in the Forbes School of Business at Ashford University. She earned a Bachelor's degree in Business Administration and Management from the University of Maryland European Division, a Masters of Human Relations from the University of Oklahoma, a Masters of Arts in Organizational Management from the University of Phoenix, and a Doctorate in Educational Leadership from the University of Phoenix.

Assistant Professor Andree SWANSON
The Forbes School of Business at
Ashford University, Denver, CO, USA
Phone: 303.506.6449
Fax: 303.260.1059
Email: andree.swanson@ashford.edu



Bill DAVIS is an Instructor in the Forbes School of Business at Ashford University. He holds a MA degree in Organizational Leadership from St. Ambrose University, a Bachelor of Arts in Business Administration from Lewis University, and a Certified Manager Certification from The Institute for Professional Managers. Davis completed sales, human relations, and leadership courses at Dale Carnegie Training. He has over three decades experience working in the beverage industry, specifically for PepsiCo. He has also worked as a consultant for many organizations, advising in subjects like strategic planning, leadership, professional selling, and organizational change. Davis' teaching career began in 2004 .

Bill DAVIS
The Forbes School of Business at
Ashford University, Denver, CO, USA
Phone: 563.321.2739
Fax: 303.260.1059
Email: bill.davis@ashford.edu



Dr. Omar PARKS is in the Forbes School of Business at Ashford University. He holds a Doctorate of Business Administration in Management from Argosy University, a Master of Arts in Education in Adult Education and Distance Learning from the University of Phoenix, and a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Theatre and Dance from the University of Wyoming.

Assistant Professor Omar PARKS
The Forbes School of Business at Ashford University, Denver, CO, USA
Phone: 800.798.0584 ext 6364
Fax: 303.260.1059
Email: omar.parks@ashford.edu



Dr. Vanessa WASHINGTON is in the Forbes School of Business at Ashford University. She has a PhD in Organization and Management from Capella University, a Master of Business Administration from Bellevue University, and a Bachelor's degree in Business Education from the University of Nebraska.

Assistant Professor Vanessa WASHINGTON
The Forbes School of Business at
Ashford University, Denver, CO, USA
Phone: 800.798.0584 ext 6375
Fax: 303.260.1059
Email: Vanessa.washington@ashford.edu



Brenda FORDE, MPA, CPA, is an Instructor in the Forbes School of Business at Ashford University, where she teaches courses in accounting and auditing. She is a Certified Public Accountant and holds a Master of Business Administration from Arizona State University. Before coming to Ashford, Forde served as a Vice President of Finance at American Express. She has many years of experience from working in the corporate world. She lives in Phoenix, AZ with her husband and son. They enjoy hiking and staying active together.

Brenda FORDE
The Forbes School of Business at
Ashford University, Denver, CO, USA
Phone: 800.798.0584 ext 6030
Fax: 303.260.1059
Email: Brenda.forde@ashford.edu



Dr. Kunsoo Paul CHOI is an Assistant Professor in the Forbes School of Business at Ashford University. He holds two Doctor of Philosophy degrees. The first is in economics, from University of Virginia, and the other is in biblical studies from Drew University in Madison, NJ. His undergraduate work was completed in economics at Sungkyunkwan University in Korea. He has served as an ordained pastor for almost 20 years, having served two Korean churches: one in Manchester, CT and the other one in Tucson, AZ. professionally, he has worked for Merrill Lynch and Prudential as a financial advisor.

Kunsoo CHOI
The Forbes School of Business at Ashford University, Denver, CO, USA
Phone: 800.798.0584 ext. 3780, Fax: 303.260.1059
Email: Kunsoo.choi@ashford.edu

Dr. Stanley ATKINSON is an Assistant Professor in the Forbes School of Business at Ashford University, where his areas of concentration are Finance, Economics, and Statistics. He holds a DBA in Finance from Mississippi State University in Starkville and an MBA as well as a Bachelor of Arts in Business Administration from The University of Mississippi. He taught at The University of Mississippi from 1977-1981 and the University of Central Florida from 1981-2004, and, after quickly boring of retirement, began teaching at several schools in Orlando before joining Ashford's faculty in 2010. With over 70 published articles and an award from the Journal of Accountancy in 2005 for the paper of the year,

Stan ATKINSON
The Forbes School of Business at Ashford University, Denver, CO, USA
Phone: 800.798.0584 ext. 4436, Fax: 303.260.1059
Email: stan.atkinson@ashford.edu

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