

## **Using Technology to Enhance Teacher-Student Relationships and Engagement in the Online Higher Education Classroom**

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### **Abstract**

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*Online education is on the rise in higher education institutions. However, students enrolled in online classes have a much higher rate of dropping courses and an overall lower course pass rate compared with students taking face-to-face courses. A primary reason for this underperformance in online courses is lack of communication between instructor and student. Educators must prioritize reaching students and building relationships as well as making learning engaging. This can be done through varied technological tools, including social media. By designing online courses with a focus on meaningful teacher-student communication and engaging lessons, higher education institutions can increase student success.*

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**Keywords:** *online education, teacher-student relationship, higher education, social media*

### **1. Introduction**

In the last decade, the traditional classroom seems to have increasingly taken a backseat to the online classroom as more students enroll in online courses and degree programs to complete their education (Manning-Ouellette & Black, 2017). Online courses are perceived as flexible and convenient and they are particularly enticing for non-traditional students, many of whom may have work or parental responsibilities (Safford & Stinton, 2016). Some educators are skeptical of the online teaching model and question how these courses can effectively implement rigor and support student learning (Brewer & Brewer, 2015). However, online courses are not going away. Even the most reluctant instructor will likely have to move into the online classroom in the future to accommodate institutional demands to increase student enrollment. Therefore, it is critical that instructors realize online teaching involves much more than merely posting lecture presentations and asking students to respond to a few questions in a discussion thread (Thompson, Vogler, & Ying, 2017).

### **2. Importance of Teacher-Student Relationships and Community**

Many higher education stakeholders, including parents, students, and faculty members, are very concerned about the success and pass rate of online courses. Research suggests students enrolled in online courses withdraw at a higher rate and have lower grades compared with students enrolled in face-to-face courses. Building a positive rapport with online students is a way to increase student success. Glazier (2016) made an educated guess that students who had a weaker rapport with their instructors struggled in online classes because they felt disconnected and did not prioritize.

This theory guided Glazier's mixed-methods study of success outcomes for students ( $n=143$ ) enrolled in online classes that integrated rapport-building strategies (video chats, personal emails, and personalized comments on assignments) compared with students ( $n=322$ ) enrolled in online classes without the strategies. Results of mean tests, logit models, and OLS regression models conducted revealed lower attrition and significantly higher grades for students in the classes that embedded rapport-building strategies. Qualitative comments revealed that students in the classes with embedded rapport-building strategies felt these were a significant factor in their success (Glazier, 2016).

Amer and Amer (2018) asserted that teacher-student relationships are critical in all educational environments, as these relationships enhance student engagement and overall success. Teacher-student relationships may be especially critical for online students who are completing a required field experience as part of their coursework. Mentors who typically supervise these students often lack proper training in this area. Most mentors were trained to work with students face-to-face and thus struggle to make the transition to online field experience. More professional development training which focuses on mentor-mentee relationship building is needed in universities today (Thomas & Hadley, 2015).

Although the online platform limits some aspects of instructor-learner and learner-learner contact, it is imperative that instructors strive to build community in their online classrooms (Song, Kim, & Luo, 2016). Ni and Aust (2008) found that sense of community enhances students' satisfaction and academic persistence. Online students feel a sense of community when they are given opportunities to construct understanding, question, and clarify content through discussion with their peers, which allows them to develop support systems. Instructors should talk with their online students early on about the benefits of cooperative learning in the classroom. This peer connection contributes to higher academic achievement as students who are experienced online learners may assist novice learners.

Anderson, Standerford, and Imdieke (2010) found that instructors must recognize the importance of managing a learning community and being a member of that community to be effective in online instruction. Although the researchers used online discussions to present new material, they failed to realize the importance of connecting content with students' personal experiences in order to foster a social context for learning. When students are granted opportunities to make personal connections to content, they feel a sense of belonging and avoid feelings of isolation (Digmann, 2016).

### **3. Technology and Social Media**

Technology has transformed the way education can be delivered and customized for maximal impact in an online classroom. Social media, including internet-based applications and websites that allow sharing and communication, are now prevalent in academic teaching. The aim of social media for online higher education courses is to make it easier for students to communicate and collaborate with peers and instructors, thus increasing their engagement in learning (Cooper, 2013; Salazar, 2010; Shackelford & Maxwell, 2012). Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Pinterest meet students where they are and enable them to connect with new people, discuss ideas, and collaborate with peers whenever it is convenient (Digmann, 2016; Hentges, 2016). Social media is thus a fantastic tool for creating community in the online classroom (Hentges, 2016).

A combination of educational technology and a rigorous curriculum can be a powerful strategy to enhance engagement in the online classroom (Salazar, 2010). Many students in today's classrooms are "digital natives," having grown up consistently using technology. Instructors regularly seek advice for incorporating digital literacies into their curriculum to engage these students (Amaro-Jimenez, Hungerford-Kesser, Pole, 2016). However, some students, including some nontraditional students, may be less familiar with or comfortable navigating social media. These students can also benefit from incorporating social media into academic content, as increased competence in digital literacies is critical to students' future. (Nicholson & Galguera, 2013).

Facebook, created in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg at Harvard University, is a social media network that allows users to create accounts with the simple requirement of an email address. Research suggests Facebook is a promising avenue for students to share information, collaborate on projects, and receive timely feedback from instructors and peers (Davidovitch & Belichenko, 2018; Hentges, 2016). Davidovitch and Belichenko (2018) studied Facebook usage for 150 undergraduate students between the age of 20 and 30 and found the educational use of Facebook groups positively influenced student motivation and achievement.

The researchers concluded Facebook has significant potential when there is positive interaction among group members. This interaction could include students assisting one another to better understand content, expand new knowledge, and deliver and receive feedback (Davidovitch & Belichenko, 2018).

Twitter, a microblogging tool created in 2006, allows students to engage in conversation with various communities by posting “tweets,” brief messages and responses, to other users (Hentges, 2016; Nicholson & Galguera, 2013). An exploratory study of the use of Twitter and blogs in teacher preparation programs found students’ use of the platform diminished sense of isolation and enhanced social presence (Munoz, Pellegrini-Lafont, & Cramer, 2014). One instructor of a graduate public policy course required students to follow key individuals and organizations to stay abreast of current trends, policy, and research. Additionally, students were expected to send tweets or retweet essential information to their followers. Students reported that Twitter allowed them to stay current and receive quick information. Of note, all students expressed an interest in using Twitter for professional purposes after the class concluded (Nicholson & Galguera, 2013). Another instructor collected data over the course of three years on the use of Twitter to support learning in a course focusing on theories and research related to English learners. Analysis of the data suggested Twitter impacted student learning, provided a model for effective teaching, and encouraged opportunities to hear student perspectives. Additionally, Twitter benefited classroom interaction due to the immediacy of distributing information and receiving responses (Amaro-Jimenez, Hungerford-Kesser, & Pole, 2016).

Pinterest, a digital pinboard-style platform launched in 2010, is commonly used to collect and share fashion, decorating, and organizational ideas. This social media tool is of interest to higher education instructors to build relationships and share content with students (Hansen, Nowlan, & Winter, 2012). In Amer and Amer’s (2018) study, students in an introductory computer information systems course were asked to create Pinterest boards reflecting their interests and backgrounds and then share their boards with the instructor outside of class in 10-minute one-on-one sessions. Results indicated the strategy contributed to a statistically significant difference in students’ perceptions of the instructor’s level of care and interest in them, which are key factors in positive teacher-student relationships (Amer & Amer, 2018).

#### **4. Using Social Media Our Way**

As higher education instructors of future educators, we have also begun using social media to better engage and build relationships with our students. Pinterest has become an avenue for our pre-service teachers to begin pinning ideas for their future classrooms. In one of our core literacy courses students create boards that represent the five domains of reading, which enables them to better plan student centers during their literacy block. Our students also use Pinterest as a resource tool to prepare for required teacher licensure exams, as they can pin and easily categorize and retrieve important content for study.

We encourage our students to create Twitter accounts and follow essential educational researchers and organizations. For example, we encourage students to follow the school districts in which they student teach to stay abreast of updates and current trends. Our students have shared that using Twitter has helped them complete their edTPA portfolios as they receive updates and tips through their Twitter feed and instructors can easily disseminate information and content to students in real time.

We also use Facebook in our elementary education program. We encourage students to follow our college and department pages, where we post details about events and professional development opportunities and spotlight student success. We also use this platform to create collaborative groups for students. Our students have reported their Facebook groups enable them to respond promptly when they receive notifications from instructors and when peers need to collaborate about course content.

#### **5. Conclusion**

Our world is ever changing due to the technological revolution. Students constantly access and use social media to communicate, connect, and build relationships. As online course enrollment continues to increase, it is imperative that institutions of higher education embed social media technologies into their syllabi. Of course, it is crucial these tools are embedded in a meaningful way into the online classroom. Instructors must always stop and ask themselves if the students are learning better with the tools than without them (Thompson et al., 2017). Activities such as reading and reviewing lecture notes or presentations should not be ignored in the online classroom; rather, they should be integrated with active learning that helps learners better understand the skills needed to fully comprehend the content (Budhai & Skipwith, 2017, p. 2-3).

In addition, instructors need professional development training on strategies to implement social media technologies to build a stronger teacher-student relationship and increase student engagement and success.

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