

**Promoting Engagement and Community in Online Courses:  
It's all about the Writing**

Jeremy Schwehm, Jennifer Saxton & Annette Stuckey

**Abstract**

For adult learners in online courses, writing is the predominant means by which all interaction takes place. As those participating in online education rely heavily on engagement with content, peers, and instructors, special attention should be given to include various activities that promote written communication to foster a positive and engaging classroom experience. By providing engaged writing assignments for online adult learners, instructors can increase student learning, promote a sense of belonging to the institution, and increase persistence. In this interactive session, the presenters introduced attendees to online learning strategies that match types of writing (expository, persuasive, descriptive, narrative) and assignments with learning management system tools to enhance adult student engagement with course content, peers, the instructor, and self.

*Keywords:* adult learning online, adult learner engagement, engaged writing online, online classroom community, online classroom engagement

**Promoting Engagement and Community in Online Courses:  
It's all about the Writing**

Student involvement, engagement, and sense of belonging have been theoretically and empirically linked to positive educational outcomes (Astin, 1984; Bollen & Hoyle, 1990; Pascarella & Terezini, 2005; Tinto, 1993). Specific to adult students, engagement in the classroom through relationships with faculty, staff, and peers has been linked to positive outcomes (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Dill & Henley, 1998; Kasworm, 2003; Rovai, 2002, 2003). Although online degree programs can mitigate various obstacles and meet the accessibility needs of adult learners, online courses can lead to a lack of interaction and engagement (Chen, Gonyea, & Kuh, 2008; Hill, Song, & West, 2009) and feelings of isolation (Song, Singleton, Hill, & Koh, 2004) if not designed correctly. There are ways to increase the engagement and sense of belonging of online adult students through other services, such as academic advising (Giroir & Schwehm, 2013), but the central path for adult student engagement is the classroom (Graham, Donaldson, Kasworm, & Dirkx, 2000; Kasworm, 2003; Philibert, Elleven, & Allen, 2008).

Kearsley and Shneiderman (1999) argued that to be engaged in the online learning environment, students must be “meaningfully engaged in learning activities through

interaction with others and worthwhile tasks” (p. 1). Online courses designed with increased interactivity components positively impact student engagement (Poniatowski, 2013). These can include collaborative writing assignments (Fredrickson, 2015), thought-provoking discussion forums (Mason, 2011), online narrative writing (Annamalai & Tan, 2014), multimedia tools (Sun & Rueda, 2012), the use of Wikis (Neumann & Hood, 2009), and the recognition of online status and online learners being treated as equals to face-to-face students (O’Shea, Stone, & Delahunty, 2015). In application to the adult online learner, the online experience must include interaction among students in a community of learners, individual student engagement with content through the utilization of learner past experience, engagement in worthwhile tasks to facilitate knowledge construction, and online learner engagement in communities of place, practice, and learning.

For adult learners in online courses, writing is the predominant means by which all interaction takes place. In this interactive session, the presenters introduced attendees to online learning strategies that match types of writing (expository, persuasive, descriptive, narrative) and assignments with learning management system tools to enhance adult student engagement in the online classroom. The presenters also discussed how the use of a variety of writing assignments can help online adult students build confidence in their writing ability.

***Practical Application***

By providing engaged writing assignments for online adult learners, instructors can increase student learning, promote a sense of belonging to the institution, and increase persistence. To promote engagement in an online course, the instructor should consider the type of engagement, the style of writing, and the appropriate learning management system (LMS) tool (Table 1) when designing writing activities. While it is rare that a single writing activity fits in a single category, most writing assignments influence multiple types of engagement, and by utilizing specific LMS tools, instructors can better utilize types of writing to promote engagement.

Table 1

*Types of Engagement, Writing, and LMS Tool*

<u>Type of Engagement</u>	<u>Type of Writing</u>	<u>Type of LMS Tool</u>
Content	Persuasive	Discussion
Peers	Expository	Journal
Instructor	Narrative	Wiki
Self	Descriptive	Blog

The four types of engagement discussed in the session were engagement with content, peers, instructors, and self. Engagement with content includes linking learners' past experience with course content and/or facilitating the application of course content. Peer engagement refers to engagement with fellow class members in group settings, as well as engagement with the entire class. Engagement with the instructor implies meaningful, one-on-one interaction with the instructor. Engagement with self requires purposeful self-reflection.

Effective forms of writing include expository, persuasive, narrative, and descriptive. The purpose of expository writing is to inform or explain. Expository writing can be matched with multiple LMS tools, but is perhaps best suited for the discussion forum and the wiki. For example, to facilitate engagement with content, a student could be asked to use expository writing in the discussion forum to explain a specific theory or concept in relation to their work experience. This would require students to use past experience to illustrate key components of a concept.

Engagement with peers can be achieved using any writing style. Narrative writing is used to tell a story, and expository writing can be matched with a wiki for group exercises in which the end goal is to create original content based on course learning. This can be in the form of group portfolios, learning module summaries, or study guides. Descriptive writing is similar to expository writing, because it incorporates imagery and sensory detail. It can also be used to encourage engagement with peers in discussion forums. The use of descriptive writing allows students to explain concepts in more personal, relatable terms.

Engagement with the instructor and self might best be achieved through the use of narrative and expository writing activities that seek to provide meaningful interaction and ongoing conversation/discourse with the instructor, as well as self-evaluation or reflection resulting in a deeper meaning for the student. An excellent engaged writing activity might revolve around a capstone project journal, a critical book review, or a service-learning reflective exercise. The dialog among instructor and students must be meaningful to the student. By involving them in real community problems, service-learning provides students with a need to know, a desire to enhance their skills and a commitment to solving problems of importance to them. Journals are particularly effective since they are private-only dialog between the student and instructor and allow the student to feel included, respected, and safe.

### ***Conclusion***

The theoretical framework of engagement (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitte, & Associates, 2005), social construction/learning (Bandura, 1986), engagement theory for technology-based learning (Kearsley & Shneiderman, 1998), perceived cohesion (Bollen & Hoyle,

1990), and connection classroom (Graham et al., 2000; Kasworm & Blowers, 1994; Philibert, Allen, & Elleven, 2008) supports the purposeful use of writing styles with specific LMS tools to increase engagement for adult learners in the online environment. The conference presentation focused on providing examples of the identified writing styles (narrative, expository, persuasive, and descriptive), introducing engaging activities that incorporate those writing styles, and discussing various learning management tools available in most learning management systems (LMS) to teach those principles. The session opened with a discussion of why engagement is important, introducing the audience to the difference between involvement and engagement and examining how students' experience increased learning, sense of belonging, and persistence to completion when they are engaged in their learning.

Whereas traditional-aged students divide their time between classroom engagement and campus activities, the classroom is central to the adult student experience, therefore suggesting that faculty members and course developers focus on incorporating engaging activities into the online classroom setting. As those participating in online education rely heavily on engagement with peers and instructors, special attention should be given to include various activities that promote written communication to foster a positive and engaging classroom experience.

A meaningful discussion took place where each practitioner was able to glean valuable information and resources to take back to their respective classroom or program. The presentation closed with a discussion of best practices that should be considered when implementing activities which promote engagement in the online classroom. One should consider the type of engagement and determine the best type of writing to match with the most appropriate LMS tool. Regardless of the activity, sometimes the level of engagement depends on the involvement of each individual instructor, and the more complex assignments tend to mean less engagement. Also, learning outcomes are assessed to determine if what you are doing is successful.

## References

- Annamalai, N., & Tan, K. E. (2014). Social presence of the community of inquiry (CoI) model on an online narrative writing platform via Facebook. *Malaysian Journal of ELT Research*, 10(2), 1-18.
- Astin, A. W. (1984). Student involvement: A developmental theory of higher education. *Journal of College Student Development*, 25, 297-308.
- Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Bean, J. P., & Metzner, B. S. (1985). A conceptual model of nontraditional undergraduate student attrition. *Review of Educational Research*, 55(4), 485-540.
- Bollen, K. A., & Hoyle, R. H. (1990). Perceived cohesion: A conceptual and empirical examination. *Social Forces*, 69(2), 479-504.
- Chen, P.-S. D., Gonyea, R., & Kuh, G. (2008). Learning at a distance: Engaged or not? *Journal of Online Education*, 4(3). Retrieved from [http://cpr.indiana.edu/uploads/Learning\\_at\\_a\\_Distance.pdf](http://cpr.indiana.edu/uploads/Learning_at_a_Distance.pdf)
- Dill, P., & Henley, T. (1998). Stressors of college: A comparison of traditional and nontraditional students. *The Journal of Psychology*, 132(1), 25-32.
- Fredrickson, J. (2015). Online learning and student engagement: Assessing the impact of a collaborative writing requirement. *Academy of Educational Leadership Journal*, 19(3), 127-140.
- Giroir, B., & Schwehm, J. (2014). *Implementing intrusive advising principles for adult learners in online programs*. Retrieved from <http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/Resources/Clearinghouse/View-Articles/Implementing-Intrusive-Advising-Principles-for-Adult-Learners-in-Online-Programs.aspx>
- Graham, S. W., Donaldson, J. F., Kasworm, C., & Dirkx, J. (2000). The experiences of adult undergraduate students—What shapes their learning? Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA.
- Hill, J. R., Song, L., & West, R. E. (2009). Social learning theory and web-based learning environments: A review of research and discussion of implications. *American Journal of Distance Education*, 23(2), 88-103. doi:10.1080/08923640902857713
- Kasworm, C. E. (2003). What is collegiate involvement for adult undergraduates? Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, IL.
- Kasworm, C., & Blowers, S. (1994). *Adult undergraduate students: Patterns of involvement*. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee.
- Kearsley, G., & Shneiderman, B. (1998). Engagement theory: A framework for technology based technology-based teaching and learning. *Educational*

- Technology*, 38(5), 20. Retrieved from <http://home.sprynet.com/~gkearsley/engage.htm>
- Kuh, G. D., Kinzie, J., Schuh, J. H., Whitt, E. J., & Associates, (2005). *Student success in college: Creating conditions that matter*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Mason, R. B. (2011). Student engagement with, and participation in, an e-forum. *Journal of Educational Technology and Society*, 14(2), 258-268.
- Neuman, D. L., & Hood, M. (2009). The effects of using a wiki on student engagement and learning of report writing skills in a university statistics course. *Australian Journal of Educational Technology*, 25(3), 382-398.
- O'Shea, S., Stone, C. & Delahunty, J. (2015). "I 'feel' like I am at university even though I am online." Exploring how students narrate their engagement with higher education institutions in an online learning environment. *Distance Education*, 36(1), 41-58.
- Pascarella, E., & Terenzini, P. (2005). *How college affects students: Vol. 2*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Philibert, N., Allen, J., & Elleven, R. (2008). Nontraditional students in community colleges and the model of college outcomes for adults. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 32, 582-596. doi:10.1080/10668920600859913
- Poniatowski, K. (2012). Getting students ready to write: An experiment in online teaching and learning. *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator*, 67(2), 120-133.
- Rovai, A. (2002). Building sense of community at a distance. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 3(1).
- Rovai, A. P. (2003). In search of higher persistence rates in distance education online programs. *Internet and Higher Education*, 6, 1-16.
- Song, L., Singleton, E. S., Hill, J. R., & Koh, M. H. (2004). Improving online learning: Student perceptions of useful and challenging characteristics. *Internet & Higher Education*, 7(1), 59-70.
- Sun, J. C.-Y., & Rueda, R. (2012). Situational interest, computer self-efficacy and self-regulation: Their impact on student engagement in distance education. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 43(2), 191-204. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8535.2010.01157.x
- Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* (2nd ed.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

**Dr. Jeremy Schwehm** is Assistant Professor of Professional Studies at Arkansas Tech University where he teaches in an online degree completion program for adult students. Dr. Schwehm's research interests are in the academic and social adjustment of adult students in higher education, adult student engagement, and building sense of community in the online environment.

**Jennifer Saxton** began as an Academic Counselor with the Department of Professional Studies at Arkansas Tech University in 2007. After earning her Master of Science in College Student Personnel, she was promoted to Instructor of Professional Studies in 2011 and has been teaching for the Department since that time.

**Annette Stuckey** has served Arkansas Tech University in various professional roles including Instructional Technology Specialist, Visiting Instructor, and the Director and Assistant Professor of Professional Studies. She also holds an Arkansas Teaching License in Secondary Business Education and is certified as a CAEL Prior Learning Assessor. Her research interests include scholarly activities that focus on prior learning assessment and the development and use of electronic resources and curricula to facilitate or enhance teaching and learning for non-traditional students in distance education.