STUDENT QUESTIONS: A PATH TO ENGAGEMENT AND SOCIAL PRESENCE IN THE ONLINE CLASSROOM

Sherion H. Jackson, Grand Canyon University

ABSTRACT

Within the vast search for ways to enhance the online classroom learning environment and to engage students fully, researchers often turn to discussions concerning instructor-student interactions that take place daily in the online classroom. Although students interact with other students and with the content, it is the student-instructor interaction and connection that appears to support the adult student's need to connect with the course content in a personal manner. This article incorporates the Community of Inquiry (COI) perspective to explore the literature for ways in which students' questions and an instructor's artful replies to those questions regarding course clarification can enhance learning and improve social presence. This article also includes strategies and specific information taken from experience and themes in the review of literature that instructors can directly utilize to develop a stronger sense of interaction and connectivity with students resulting in enhanced social presence within the online classroom.

Keywords: online education, student engagement, student questions, teaching online, adult learners, social presence, instructor strategies

INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade Clark and Mayer (2011), Della Noce, Scheffel, and Lowry (2014), and others (Epp, Green, Rahman, & Weaver, 2010; Evans, Steele, Robertson, & Dyer, 2017; Kurt, 2011; Nagel, Blignaut, & Cronje, 2009) have suggested that instructor personalization is key to increasing student engagement and in turn producing a higher level of student learning in the online classroom. Looking closer at the literature regarding the online classroom, student engagement and connectivity are often gauged by written responses to discussions and to other students in online discussion forums with little attention given to direct interactions between instructor and student, particularly regarding student questions (Epp et al., 2010; Nagel et al., 2009). The Community of Inquiry (COI) model indicates that this view needs to be broadened to include all instructor-student communication within the online classroom (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 1999). In providing a conceptual framework related to teaching presence and intellectual curiosity, Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (1999) introduced the framework for the Community of Inquiry (COI) model. Although this model sets the stage for studying learning opportunities and experiences in the online classroom, there are still gaps in understanding the full implications regarding instructor-student interaction within the online learning experience (Kidder, 2015). How instructors pique interest and stimulate intellectual curiosity can take many forms, but in the online learning environment this process involves all student-instructor interactions, including the question-answer interaction outside of direct content (Ekmecki, 2013; Orcutt & Dringus, 2017). The intent of this article is to review the literature in support of the importance of instructor replies to student questions and offer strategies that provide enriched opportunities for

student-instructor interactions and enhanced social presence through student questions to instructors.

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

As a component of student engagement, researchers such as Mahle (2011), Poll, Welden, and Weller (2014), and others (Afolabi, 2016; Evans et al., 2017; Hew, 2015; Kurt, 2011; Nagel et al., 2009; Phirangee, Demmans Epp, & Hewitt, 2016) have studied online courses to pin-point specific key factors that support student connectivity and collaboration. Orcutt and Dringus (2017) further suggest that all communication contributes to teaching presence and a genuine relationship between the instructor and the individual student resulting in further engagement and content connectivity in the online classroom. Student engagement and connectivity within an online course often happens through one of the following types of interaction and connections: student-to-content, student-to-instructor, or student-to-student (Xiao, 2017). While student-to-content and student-to-student interactions play an important role in the student's successful learning environment, interaction with the instructor is key in establishing the learning environment as a positive experience that supports enhanced learning and appeals to adult students (Umback & Wawrzynski, 2005).

While on-ground classes offer opportunities for student engagement such as face-to-face networking, building connections, and inspiring intellectual curiosity, achieving these same opportunities in the online classroom proves to be more difficult for students and depends on developing a sense of community and social connections (Oliphant & Branch-Mueller, 2016). Small changes in how the instructor personalizes student answers, replies, or responses may make a difference in whether students feel connected and may encourage their native curiosity. These changes are also opportunities to engage students in teachable moments in which an online instructor seizes the moment to fill a knowledge gap in discussions or when answering student questions (Marks & Ogden, 2017).

This question-answer interaction between student and instructor can become stronger and clearer when it focuses on instructors' replies to students in content discussions and their answers to questions regarding content, assignments, daily challenges in learning, and so forth. In this manner, instructors support openness and social connectivity to the online classroom and course content. Baylen (2016) states that "without online discussions, students might find themselves drifting from one assignment to another and acquiring uneven levels of content knowledge and skills sets" (p. 1). In this same manner, without instructors' full attention to clarifying student questions, students may struggle with feeling like they are floating from course to course with little anchoring, networking opportunities, or social connections.

STUDENT QUESTIONS AND SOCIAL PRESENCE

Several research projects and researchers (Baylen, 2016; Costley, 2015; Dixon, 2010; Kehrwald, 2008) have attempted to address the question of what factors really make a difference in student engagement to enhance successful learning in the online classroom. Social presence is new to this list. Sometimes referred to along with teaching presence or cognitive presence, social presence simply put is the visibility and activity of an engaged and effective online instructor. In this area in support of Garrison's et al. (1999) CoI, Afolabi (2016), Dixon (2010), and Kehrwald (2008) further indicate that any online presence should be effective and create an opportunity for student engagement. Afolabi (2016) and Dixon (2010) noted that instructors should offer multiple chances for students to interact, not only with other students but also with the online instructor. Additional findings in Dixon's research suggested that varied communication techniques are often related to and correlated with higher student engagement. From the student's perspective this suggests that online instructors have opportunities not only in the discussions but also in answering everyday student questions to make a difference in student engagement, learning, and intellectual curiosity (Garrison, Cleveland-Innes, & Fung, 2010, Orcutt & Dringus, 2017). From the online instructor's vantage point, this means spending a tremendous amount of time answering questions to build that connection with individual students (Ekmekei, 2013). To counter this and to ensure the instructor's workload is feasible, instructors must look ahead of the curve to anticipate those questions that might be asked and work to address these early to clear the way for effective learning (Gregory & Lodge, 2015;

Kennedy, Laurillard, Horan, & Charlton, 2015).

Types of Questions

In the face-to-face classroom, instructors address a variety of student questions dealing with content, assignments, technology, and even personal issues. Student questions for online classroom instructors may seem different because the tone and eye contact is eliminated (Cox-Davenport, 2014; Garrison et al., 2010; Kaufman, Sellnow, & Frisby, 2015). When addressing each of these types of questions (content, assignments, technology, personal issues), online instructors must be fully prepared by knowing the course content, its goals, and the syllabus, plus university policies and resources, and be comfortable with the current learning system, all while having fine-tuned foundational philosophies on each topic. Instructors must answer in a manner that will build student confidence that the instructor will be steadfast, honest, and direct in addressing the students' questions and build a connection to course content. These are all key qualities in student-teacher interactions and connections (Dixon, 2010; Hung & Chou, 2015; Martin, & Bolliger, 2018; Orcutt & Dringus, 2017; Phirangee et al., 2016). Incorporating these key qualities will build trust in the content and the presentation of the content materials and will allow students to make personal decisions based on solid answers (Hung & Chou, 2015; Joo, Joung, & Kim, 2013; Phirangee et al., 2016).

Using our Words

An instructor's first inclination may be to reply with a short, brisk answer in an impersonal manner or avoid a question altogether due to time constraints instead of providing clear and direct information in an affirmative presentation style. While this may provide some adult students with the foundation to move forward through the course content with ease, others will find this frustrating and look upon this as a barrier to their online success that limits the course environment (Ekmekci, 2013; Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). In order to cultivate social presence and to directly and fully address student questions, word usage does matter (Dowell et al., 2015). Using phrases such as "I need you to . . .," "you will want to . . .," and "to have more opportunity to be successful you must . . ." lay a foundation for open communication

and further interaction between instructors and students (Costley, 2015; Cox-Davenport, 2014; Della Noce, Scheffel, & Lowry, 2014; Epp et al., 2010; Kehrwald, 2008). Using I-messages and other pronouns in conjunction with a conversational tone within positive, constructive replies will begin to cultivate a supportive environment for learning.

Limiting the Number of Questions and Replies

There are several ways to address multiple question syndrome in the online classroom, which is a stream of follow-on questions to the student's original question from the student or others in the classroom, and it is the result of not satisfying the student's need for specific information. The first way is to anticipate what might be unclear and provide the information to answer these questions before they are asked. This "getting ahead of the curve" offers students a stable climate and clears the way for course content learning (Afolabi, 2016; Cox-Davenport, 2014; Kurt, 2011). Some course content and portions of the course may generate more questions than others and can provide clues that many areas in the course content are unclear. A quick scan of the course materials and course syllabus will reveal areas that may need clarification and may produce student questions (Poll et al., 2014; Xiao, 2017). For these areas, a predicted look regarding where (syllabus, assignments, etc.) and what (content) in the course might be driving the questions will save time and support student success.

Assignment requirements are one area that often produces student questions, but questions can come from other areas such as the discussion requirements (Lee & Martin, 2017). The two best ways to predict student questions are to identify key concepts and directions. Instructors can clarify both key concepts and directions in the announcements by providing a video that walks students through assignments or giving comments regarding areas that are unclear. In the announcement or the video let students know about the challenges that could occur from each assignment's content and discuss requirements in detail. This will require a thorough instructor review of each assignment in advance of the course start date to locate question areas to address these issues in a timely manner in the online classroom. However, assignment requirements can be expanded to address any student misunderstanding. This is often helpful

to students and allows the instructor to point the student to the new information instead of providing the details again.

The second method to address multiple question syndrome is to answer each question fully and offer more supporting information to answer upcoming and follow-on questions, such as how this information will be of benefit later. This gives the adult student the feeling that the instructor is not only knowledgeable but is also willing to take the student's question as important and spend time clarifying all its components so the student can move forward in his or her thinking process. In many cases these extra few minutes will save several follow-on questions. Just as the answers "yes," "no," "maybe," or "I agree," in student responses will not move any content discussions forward by imparting knowledge, similarly brief answers to student questions may not give the student the tools to move forward or provide adult students with closure. Closure that eliminates follow-on questions comes from meeting the adult student's desire for knowledge, connecting to the students' self-direction and motivation, and developing tools for their success (Clark & Mayer, 2011; Cox-Davenport, 2014).

Satisfying Answers

A good answer restates a portion of the question so the student knows the instructor understands the question, and then it provides a clear and direct answer with a short explanation (Della Noce et al., 2014; Epp et al., 2010). It may include an example or resource and, finally, the answer projects a sense of importance by taking time to fully address each component of the student's question. Satisfying student answers have a sense of comfort and safety, are timely, present a positive tone, and fully address the information requested using clear directions that minimize secondary or follow-on questions. Students assume that instructors will always reply quickly and with sufficient details to address their question (Hew, 2015; Hung & Chou, 2015). This approach sets the stage for improved instructor-student communication, social presence, and student engagement (Ekmekci, 2013; Hung & Chou, 2015; Martin & Bolliger, 2018).

Time Savers

Students can jump in. Instructors can let students know that when they see a question from a peer that can easily be answered, students are encouraged to jump in and answer the question. One caution must be noted: Instructors must check that the answer is on target (usually it is). Then the instructor can affirm the answer and thank the student for jumping in and answering in the instructor's place.

Using FAQs. In courses that may generate several questions in particular areas, instructors may choose to collect the questions and responses, edit them, and including other questions that may apply to generate a complete list of Frequently Ask Questions (FAQ). Once a list of FAQs is created, posting these as an attachment or announcement in the classroom at the beginning of the next course would limit student frustration and save instructor time.

Keep policy handbooks available and current. Many of the questions students ask are of an administrative nature and can be answered directly from a current policy handbook. Generally, it is not suggested that student questions be answered briefly, but in this case a brief answer can drive students to explore the handbook for other unanswered questions. The instructor will want to provide a brief answer to these types of questions because instructors cannot know all the events surrounding the question. In some cases, the student must be referred to another individual or department, such as a student advisor, departmental chairperson, registrar, or bookstore personnel, to find the best answer to his or her specific question. Once the instructor has provided a brief answer, he or she may then guide the student to the section of the policy handbook for more details. This prevents further clarification responses and provides the student with a way to locate other policy-related answers. Students should be familiar with these types of handbooks, but that does not always happen in student orientations due to a lack of time for advanced coverage of the policies.

Using technology. Instructors may choose to add a link or use Jing, a Zoom presentation, or YouTube video that covers several past questions and directs students to the relevant links (Paul & Cochran, 2013). This leaves more time for answering questions related to course-content. There are software programs that help address instructor time limitations and workload by preventing instructors from answering the same question multiple times.

Typeitin and PhraseExpress or similar software programs have proven to be effective in addressing questions or comments that are continually asked (Paul & Cochran, 2013).

CONCLUSION

Much of the contact between students and instructors in the online learning environment is through student questions. From the literature review it can be determined that there is an opportunity for additional student-instructor interaction to enhance social presence and engage students, address in-depth content or gaps in knowledge, and build trust and connections between students and instructors through instructors' replies to student questions. If these questions are a component of the instructors' social presence and include a teachable moment in the classroom, instructor replies can be utilized effectively to enhance the intellectual climate and promote student learning (Costley, 2015; Orcutt & Dringus, 2017). Instructors can provide detailed answers and enhance their own social presence in the online classroom by following a few simple strategies.

Anticipate Questions

There will be questions! During the preparation time for the online course, evaluate areas that might prompt questions, locate the answers, and make notes. Then address these in your announcements, an FAQ list, or a video posted in your classroom. To do this, review all course materials, especially assignments, as if you were the student. Make notes regarding questions students might have concerning completing assignments and post as "thoughts on the upcoming assignment."

Words Matter

Stick to universal language or references that the majority of the population understands. Instructors cannot observe online students to determine nonverbal or facial cues, so writing in a less formal or conversational manner when responding to questions is important. Using cultural references known largely by a small sector of population or other vague wording or language is not recommended since this could lead to further confusion or misunderstanding.

Answer the Question Completely

Take the time to address all components of the student's question. Although this seems to take more time, in the long term, time and effort will be saved through fewer student follow-on questions. This will also promote student satisfaction and enhance instructor social presence. Instructors must take the initiative and time to not only answer a student's question but take the conversation one step further in relating the student's question to the current course objectives or to future student goals such as completing a thesis or life event, which gives adult students the opportunity to connect to their own goals.

Make It Personal

Tone is often missing and more difficult to address in the online environment. Instructors can compensate for this with a softer tone and include details in well thought out replies. It would be easy and quick to write "yes" or "no" replies to student questions, but rarely is *yes* or *no* the full story. To keep follow-on questions to a minimum and personal, engage the student in the thought process by expanding on the *yes* or *no* reply. This will pay dividends in both social presence and in making connections. Instructors can also personalize their message by using appropriate subject line titles and beginning the message with the student's name. Utilizing subject line titles can also save time for other students who might be seeking the same answer.

Applying these structured, student-friendly strategies in online classrooms will enhance student learning, engage students, and minimize the time required to address student concerns in future classes while enhancing the instructor's social presence in the online classroom.

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