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**A Conceptual Framework for Multimodal Engagement  
in Online Higher Education**

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### **Abstract**

Research in the online learning environment supports a clear link between faculty engagement, learner engagement, and learning. While models and frameworks for understanding persistence in the face-to-face learning environment are well established, there is a need for establishing effective ways to monitor and evaluate online learning engagement in light of the unique characteristics of the online environment and the online learner. The framework presented here operates at the implementation level in that it allows for a thorough consideration of the critical elements inherent in the construct of engagement and affords an opportunity for instructors to select and apply the indicators of engagement to their teaching practice. The engagement indicators are encapsulated within eight categories: (1) Teaching presence; (2) Diversity and inclusivity; (3) Working relationships; (4) Facilitation practices; (5) Learner autonomy and empowerment; (6) Sense of community; (7) Access to technology; and (8) Trust and transparency. These categories work in unison to create an optimal online learning experience, providing valuable information regarding the distinct dimensions of the construct of engagement, and can be used to review and improve teaching practices. Each category is accompanied by reflective questions to encourage faculty to think more deeply about their current practice and may also be used as discussion points for faculty development.

*Keywords: Engagement; Online Education; Higher Education; Adult Learner; Learner Engagement; Engagement Framework; Engagement Indicator; Faculty Development; Critical Reflection; Reflective Practitioner*

### **A Conceptual Framework for Multimodal Engagement in Online Higher Education**

As the online teaching environment continues to advance and evolve, faculty have not always managed to keep pace, often demonstrating a tendency to rely on technology to form connections with their learners or to revert to conventional teaching practices that are better suited to traditional classrooms. Being an experienced faculty member and possessing advanced technological skills does not necessarily lead to effective online instruction, and even those who are experienced often find themselves at a loss when their traditional pedagogical methods do not necessarily translate to an online setting. Moreover, with the continual introduction of technological advancements, training and professional development for novice online faculty has not always been able to adequately keep up with the fast pace of the field of online learning, and while useful, technical training and support alone does not necessarily assist instructors with some of the effective online pedagogical practices (Bloomberg, 2021). The shift to online learning requires adjustments to teaching practices associated with traditional learning environments, thereby placing new (and increased) demands on faculty, and understanding the pedagogy of online education, and its inherent challenges, is therefore foundational (Bloomberg, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d; Bloomberg & Grantham, 2018). With the rapid expansion and diversification of online modes of study, especially in the post-COVID era, there is increasing awareness that developing institutional competence for online instruction will require a significant investment in faculty development.

### **Faculty Development in Online Education**

Research consistently recognizes engagement as one of the most significant factors impacting academic performance, supporting a clear link between instructor engagement, learner engagement, and *actual learning* (Khan et al., 2017; Lehman & Conceicao, 2010; Major &

Sumner, 2018; Martin & Bollinger, 2018; Mohr & Shelton, 2017). To mitigate the effects of the sense of isolation that is typically felt in the online environment it is incumbent upon instructors to intentionally and thoughtfully incorporate and implement strategies that will keep learners motivated and actively engaged. Learner engagement and instructor engagement are two sides of the same coin and are essentially reciprocal in nature (Bloomberg, 2021). Learner engagement ensures ongoing motivation and persistence. Instructor engagement implies the idea of being *present* for learners, thereby establishing a sense of *teaching presence* (Garrison et al., 2003). This requires that online faculty embrace the idea of becoming proactive and responsive partners in the educational experience by intentionally and thoughtfully developing meaningful working relationships so as to best support all learners. This starts with understanding what engagement and *teaching presence* imply. Furthermore, the evolution of online technologies enables interaction among faculty and learners to shift from individual approaches to multiple forms of collaborative learning, and as this technological transformation takes place, teaching presence and its influence on learner engagement becomes even more prominent. With attrition rates significantly higher than in face-to-face programs, the development of models to embed and implement strategies to enhance engagement is indeed imperative so that progress can be appropriately monitored and evaluated (Bloomberg, 2021).

### **A Conceptual Framework for Online Learner Engagement**

Reducing isolation is critical to online learners' success, and while it is incumbent upon instructional designers to plan and develop courses that incorporate learner-centered pedagogies in the pursuit of active online engagement, it is the role of faculty to work toward intentionally developing and maintaining engagement of their learners throughout their course or program (Khan et al., 2017; Lehman & Conceicao, 2010; Major & Sumner, 2018; Martin & Bollinger,

2018; Mohr & Shelton, 2017; Riggs & Linder, 2016). However, engagement may not occur spontaneously without instructors' intention and effort. To create a collaborative environment that encourages a community of learning, Riggs and Linder (2016) explain that in the absence of a physical space, an *architecture of engagement* must be intentionally created.

A framework can be a useful conceptual and organizational tool, especially for faculty who are learning to navigate the online teaching environment and incorporate best practices regarding facilitation. Frameworks can be used to describe work at a conceptual level, orienting instructors with regard to what needs to be done, but not necessarily with the implementation element. The framework presented in this paper operates at the implementation level, allowing for a thorough consideration of the critical elements inherent in the construct of engagement. This includes key principles for understanding the online learning experience as well as actionable strategies for engaging and supporting online learners by affording faculty an opportunity to select and apply the indicators of engagement to their teaching practice. Numerous educational agencies, including the Online Learning Consortium (OLC) and the Institute for Higher Education Policy, have provided general guidelines and benchmarks for online education. It is clear that best practice recommendations and strategies for teaching in online environments emphasize the need for interactivity, including teaching presence, effective facilitation, strong working relationships, learner collaboration, and the creation of community.

From a review and analysis of some of the most prominent best-practice reports, the author has distilled key engagement indicators (EI's) which are essentially touchpoints for a successful and productive online learning experience. The EI's incorporate relevant theoretical principles and are grounded in the research-based literature related to online learning. These form a conceptual framework highlighting the drivers of effective online teaching to become

infused in practice by providing valuable information regarding the distinct dimensions of the construct of engagement. Moreover, the EI's can also be used as a means of assessment to measure the extent to which faculty are providing an engaged learning experience. The EI's are encapsulated within eight categories. While these categories are distinct in and of themselves, they do overlap because in reality the online learning and teaching experience is holistic yet complex and multidimensional. All of these indicators work in unison to create an optimal online learning experience; referred to by Bloomberg (2021) as a *construct of multimodal engagement*.

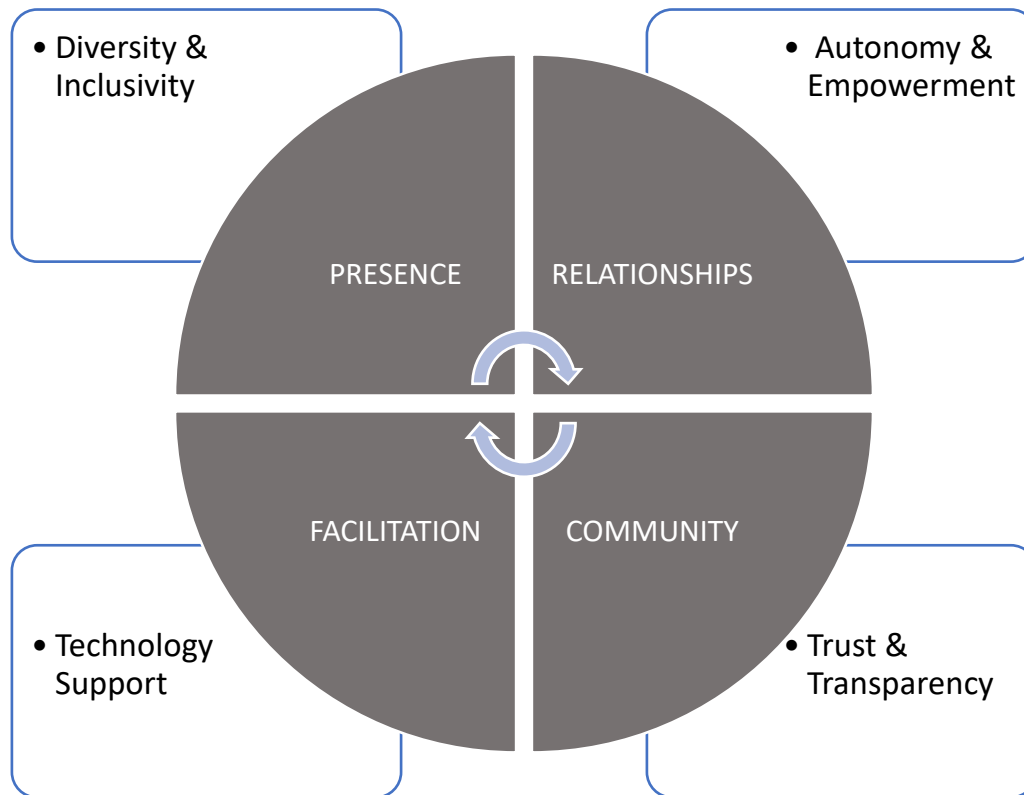
Figure 1 represents the author's conceptual framework for multimodal engagement, indicating eight key categories, each category encompassing charts consisting of multiple touchpoints or *engagement indicators* (Bloomberg, 2021). These categories work in unison to create an optimal online learning experience, providing valuable information regarding the distinct dimensions of the construct of engagement, and can be used to look for, check, and improve teaching practices. It was the basis of the philosophy and work of educational reformer, John Dewey (1916, 1933, 1938) who saw reflective thinking as an integral precursor to thoughtful action. In line with the view of faculty as *reflective practitioners* (Brookfield 1995, 1998; Schön, 1983, 1987), each category is accompanied by a set of reflective questions to ensure reflexivity by encouraging faculty to think more deeply about their current practice, and what might be done differently. These questions may also be used as discussion points for further exploration with colleagues who teach in online environments.

1. Ensure Teaching Presence
2. Address Diversity and Inclusivity
3. Build and Nurture Working Relationships
4. Apply Effective Facilitation Practices
5. Embrace Learner Autonomy and Empowerment
6. Create a Sense of Community
7. Support Learners' Access to Technology
8. Establish and Maintain a Culture of Trust and Transparency

Whether faculty are contemplating teaching online, are relatively new to online teaching, or have been engaged in the field for some time and seek to enhance their practice, this conceptual framework offers key principles for understanding the online learning experience as well as actionable strategies for engaging and supporting online learners. This framework will also be of value to administrators responsible for the training and support of online faculty, as well as to students in instructional design and technology programs. Moreover, this framework is readily applicable across disciplines and institutional types.

**Figure 1**

*Multimodal Engagement: Key Contributing Factors (Bloomberg, 2021)*



*Note.* This figure appears as Figure 7.1 in Bloomberg (2021). Author has permission to replicate.

### **1. *Ensure Teaching Presence***

A central aspect to promoting learner engagement, and in turn ongoing success, is the sense of *teaching presence* (Garrison et al., 2003), which includes being visible, approachable, and available. Research illustrates that learners' positive perceptions of their online instructor's presence, leads to increased motivation, and greater likelihood of course completion (Martin & Bollinger, 2018). Supportive preparation builds rapport and is an indication of teaching presence, which must be ongoing throughout the course. Sustained interaction with learners ensures that



faculty can address whether learners are experiencing technical difficulties, having problems with course content, or whether they require additional support or specific resources to complete required activities. The ways in which faculty communicate and interact with their learners will sustain a strong teaching presence.

**Table 1**

***Ensure Teaching Presence***

✓	Offer supportive onboarding preparation including welcome materials that include clear and current contact information as well as course expectations and institutional policies.
✓	Develop a working relationship with each learner at the start of a course by inviting them to a synchronous introductory meeting.
✓	Facilitate and manage ongoing and sustained interaction by way of available modalities (synchronous and asynchronous).
✓	Acknowledge and reinforce progress and achievement through your feedback on assignments.
✓	Emphasize in your feedback on weekly assignments that you are available for a synchronous meeting if additional clarification is needed.
✓	Participate in online discussions and make timely and thoughtful posts to discussion threads.
✓	Maintain open lines of communication with each your learners throughout the course.
✓	Communicate clearly at all times both verbally and in writing.
✓	Respond promptly to all questions and concerns so learners are not left “hanging.”
✓	Monitor learners’ progress throughout the course, and raise alerts as necessary.
✓	Reach out to those who have not completed course requirements and offer support as needed.
✓	Connect learners with specific needs to appropriate resources and available services.
✓	If you are going to be away let your learners know, and inform them of who will be able to assist them during your absence.

***Reflection Checkpoint: Ensure Teaching Presence***

Think carefully about your current practice and what you might consider doing differently to be more visibly *present* and engage even more meaningfully with your learners.

- In what ways am I intentionally working to ensure teaching presence?
- What forms of teaching presence feel natural to me?
- In what way/s do I find establishing teaching presence challenging or difficult?

**2. *Address Diversity and Inclusivity***

As faculty develop course content and work toward sustained learner engagement, they are constantly reminded of two key considerations: diverse content options and diverse communication options (CAST, 2018, 2022). Designing a course means being cognizant of building in accessibility from the start; making sure that all content supports all learners and ensures equity and inclusion; and that the content provides multiple opportunities for engagement, interaction, and deep learning. To remain inclusive, it is crucial to address and accommodate the diverse needs of learners from different cultural backgrounds (Bloomberg, 2021). To help learners feel valued means offering them voice and choice in their learning so this is culturally and professionally relevant. Creating a sense of belonging includes providing a consistent psychosocial, intellectual, and emotional counternarrative to the microaggressions, imposter syndrome, and stereotype threat that minority learners often experience (Bloomberg, 2021). Overall, the task is to create a safe, supportive, and inclusive learning environment for all learners, by conveying the expectation that every learner can succeed.

**Table 2**

***Address Diversity and Inclusivity***

✓	Consider the ways in which race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, disability status or other cultural factors impact learning and teaching.
✓	Try to understand the ways learners who identify as minorities can feel as they engage with you as their faculty (positionality).
✓	Consider how you “show up” as a faculty member and relate to and communicate with your learners.
✓	Be aware of the ways in which your own biases, prejudices, stereotypes, assumptions, and lack of knowledge and exposure can impact your learners and their learning.
✓	Identify topics and readings that address equity and inclusion in order to offer your learners both a voice and a choice regarding their own learning.
✓	Offer multiple modes of communication so that learners can select what works best for them and suits their purposes.
✓	Make accommodations regarding different needs, and the ways that people learn differently.
✓	Adapt your assessments to recognize a greater diversity of learners’ assets and skills.
✓	Ensure equitable and transparent grading.
✓	Ensure that assignment requirements are not exclusive of any culture or circumstances, and encourage learners to showcase, through their coursework, their own values, beliefs, and traditions.
✓	Remind learners that their personal values and strengths matter by helping them discover the value of the course content to their lives.
✓	Acknowledge and accept the personal and/or professional experiences that learners incorporate in their work.
✓	Be aware of all institutional or organizational policies and processes that are in place to support ADA requirements, and takes all required steps to address these requirements and make accommodations as needed.

***Reflection Checkpoint: Address Diversity and Inclusivity***

Think carefully about your current practice and what you might consider doing differently to engage with all of your learners so that nobody is excluded, ignored, disrespected, marginalized, or alienated.

- Why is it important to move away from the idea that there is a “prototypical learner”?
- What is implied by *culturally responsive teaching*?
- How can I make every learner feel that they belong?
- What are some of the elements of an educational experience that can exclude certain groups of learners, particularly minority groups?

**3. *Build and Nurture Working Relationships***

By establishing a sense of teaching presence and building working relationships with each learner, and actively teaching through those relationships, faculty can provide an engaging online learning experience. Positive relationships create a sense of safety, making it easier for learners to ask questions, challenge ideas, share experiences and engage in thinking that helps them grow and develop. Building positive relationships also enables faculty to learn more about your learners’ backgrounds, cultures, and personalities, and with that knowledge to better address their needs. Building rapport with learners must be intentional and consistent. Being present and engaging in dialogue is the key means of building *intentionally structured* online working relationships, with interactivity occurring through ongoing communication, thereby facilitating the development a learning community (Bloomberg, 2020d).

**Table 3**

***Build and Nurture Working Relationships***

✓	Offer an initial synchronous introduction to welcome and meet each learner and provide clear and helpful responses to any questions or concerns.
✓	Connect with all learners who respond positively to your invitation to meet. Remind those who do not respond that you are available to meet as needed.
✓	Communicate clearly so that learners will understand what is expected of them and be able to plan and organize their time in order to meet course requirements.
✓	Provide learners with access to communicate directly with you in mutually suitable ways.
✓	Show your learners you are paying attention to their progress early in the course by noting achievements and offering support and resources when needed.
✓	If a learner requests a change in the schedule or an accommodation, consider and honor the request.
✓	Initiate conversations with learners and offer opportunities to meet synchronously, especially those who are struggling and need additional support and guidance.
✓	Think of your learners as partners! Convey your role as facilitator, mentor, and co-learner rather than “sage-on-the-stage” by not lecturing or talking down to them.
✓	Model appropriate and acceptable ways in which learners are expected to communicate and interact online.
✓	Model responsibility and accountability by returning assignments and/or grades within the communicated established time period.
✓	Respond timeously and directly to unanticipated problems or concerns and attempt to resolve these.
✓	Seek and be receptive to feedback from your learners regarding ways to make the course material more meaningful, relevant, and accessible.

***Reflection Checkpoint: Build and Nurture Working Relationships***

Think carefully about your current practice and what you might consider doing differently to engage meaningfully by building meaningful relationships with your learners.

- In what ways am I intentionally working to build, develop and maintain working relationships with all of my learners?
- How do I “show up” to my learners?
- What methods am I making use of to communicate with my learners?

#### **4. *Apply Effective Facilitation Practices***

As a facilitator of learning, it is the responsibility of faculty to base their teaching on a learner-centered model, a key tenet of the work of Freire (1970) where he advocated against the *banking model of education*. The role of faculty in this context becomes the *guide-on-the-side* or *learning partner* (Brookfield, 1995, 2015; Daloz, 2012). The facilitator role includes the broader pedagogical tasks that will support learners on their growth trajectories such as promoting critical thinking, active dialogue, interaction, and collaborative learning. Because of the diversity that characterizes the learner population, faculty will also need to carefully and continually monitor progress and identify and assist those who are struggling or disengaged. In the online environment the primary instructional delivery mode is written, audio, or video feedback, which creates the foundation for constructive learner-instructor interaction. Through feedback, faculty will want to foster the *deepest approach to learning possible*, by helping all of their learners engage meaningfully with the material. This includes awareness of any cultural biases embedded in their teaching and presentation styles, and in their expectations, as ignorance of these biases can limit or prevent opportunities for more effective avenues of interaction (Bloomberg, 2021; CARLA, 2009).

**Table 4**

***Apply Effective Facilitation Practices***

✓	Be aware of any cultural biases embedded in your teaching, presentation, and expectations.
✓	Clearly explain all course goals and requirements.
✓	Provide opportunities for critical thinking and reflection. This gives learners space and time to think about their own learning and progress.
✓	Remind learners that questions are welcome and that you are available for discussion as needed.
✓	The technology that is currently available allows you to diversify your instructional strategies to engage learners, so thoughtfully incorporate multimodal tools.
✓	Allow learners to develop products that are meaningful to them, personally and/or professionally
✓	Help learners to construct their own meaning by modeling and explaining when needed, providing options, and using examples or illustrations to clarify difficult points.
✓	Provide prompt and frequent feedback on assignments or drafts or work in progress as needed.
✓	Offer your learners <i>direction</i> on how to improve so the feedback is <i>actually actionable</i> . This means giving credit for good work, and offering constructive suggestions and resources for improvement.
✓	Provide ongoing encouragement by asking targeted questions in your feedback on assignments in order to stimulate critical thinking.
✓	Offer flexible deadlines as needed to motivate learners and accommodate needs.
✓	Monitor progress and utilize support services and resources for those who are struggling, failing, or disengaged (tutoring services, writing center, learning center, career counseling etc.).
✓	Be aware of all policy and processes that are in place to support ADA requirements, and be prepared to address accommodations as needed.

***Reflection Checkpoint: Apply Effective Facilitation Practices***

Think carefully about your current practice and what you might consider doing differently to engage your learners through your instructional approach.

- In what ways is my teaching approach helpful and supportive to my learners?
- How do I describe effective online teaching?
- How can I adopt a multimodal teaching approach in order to engage all my learners?

**5. *Embrace Learner Autonomy and Empowerment***

A key goal of education is to meet the needs of all learners, offering them the ownership, agency, and autonomy to actively engage meaningfully in the learning experience, so that they are *empowered* to become lifelong learners who go on to implement changes in their own personal and professional lives, and ultimately in the lives of others; thereby contributing to the transformation of society. The ways in which power, privilege, and positionality impact the online classroom cannot be overlooked, and integrating the principles of diversity, inclusion, and equity is essential to ensure deep learning, progress, and success (Bloomberg, 2021). Developing an empowered sense of self or growth academic mindset will allow learners to embrace challenges, persist in the face of setbacks, and benefit from constructive feedback. By nature, adults do not want to be viewed as passive receptors of knowledge, but rather as active participants in the educational experience.



**Table 5**

***Embrace Learner Autonomy and Empowerment***

✓	Be aware of your own mindset: A fixed mindset can create an atmosphere of judgement and you may give up on learners who are not performing well.
✓	Be intentional in encouraging a growth mindset in your learners to ensure that you focus your feedback on how they can improve.
✓	Provide the necessary support and motivation to ensure ongoing learning and development.
✓	Instill in your learners a sense of autonomy, whereby they feel as though they are active participants in a working relationship.
✓	Involve learners in setting their own goals regarding their educational journey by creating a big picture and having their next steps in mind.
✓	Encourage learners to draw on their own personal and professional experience in developing assignments and tasks.
✓	Provide opportunities for learners to choose appropriate ways to present assignments and tasks.
✓	Engage with learners to help them actively develop a repertoire of good study habits and thinking/learning strategies.
✓	In addition to long term goals, set goals within the context of immediate assignments to enhance competence and an ongoing sense of achievement.
✓	Ensure that learners are not dependent on external rewards by nurturing their passion for learning and establishing an ongoing sense of achievement and intrinsic motivation.
✓	Ensure that learners develop new ideas and understanding through interaction and collaborative work.
✓	Provide ample reflection opportunities so that learners can better understand their learning and progress, and plan ahead.

***Reflection Checkpoint: Embrace Learner Autonomy and Empowerment***

Think carefully about your current practice and what you might consider doing differently to empower your learners so that they can move forward in making productive changes in their lives and in the lives of others.

- Why is it important to encourage self-direction and autonomy?
- In what ways is my teaching helpful and supportive to learners in terms of empowering them?
- How do I describe an empowered learner?

**6. *Create a Sense of Community***

In the online environment, social belonging and a sense of community are associated with increased engagement and motivation (Berry, 2017, 2019; Bloomberg, 2006; Moore, 2014; Schwartz et al., 2016). Developing a learning community has been at the heart of distance education since its inception, and the need to foster community on the online environment remains a focal issue by implementing strategies that will increase learner engagement not only with the course content and with their faculty, but also with peers. In terms of the natural pursuit to connect, learners will often tend to utilize available forums in the learning management system to connect with each other and share material and experiences. However, faculty should not rely solely on learners making connections for themselves, but rather be intentional in inviting interactivity by embracing all available opportunities for peer-to-peer learning and collaboration. Online interactive technologies, used wisely, can serve to foster meaningful interactivity and connectedness (Bloomberg, 2021).

**Table 6**

***Create a Sense of Community***

✓	Convey a clear message that online learning is not “alone learning.”
✓	Set a positive tone that will pave the way for the quality of the interaction by modeling appropriate social norms and ways to interact.
✓	Be intentional in inviting interactivity and social connections to ensure that learners have opportunities to reach out to instructors, advisors, and peers.
✓	In addition to asynchronous tools, integrate synchronous collaboration tools that are meaningful and accessible.
✓	Provide accessible collaborative learning opportunities
✓	Direct learners to available discussion forums that encourage group collaboration and dialogue.
✓	Facilitate collaboration by creating accessible opportunities for learners to actively participate and communicate with each other.
✓	Encourage collaborative learning opportunities such as peer review, journals, blogs, discussion boards, and appropriate social media platforms.
✓	Consider the wealth of interests and experiences within the classroom and be proactive in inviting learners to find familiar elements in their assignments.
✓	Help learners envision the value of being members of an academic learning community.
✓	Inform learners about all the ways they can share and receive resources and support, including services such as library, writing center, learning center etc.
✓	Engage learners with the program and the institution, thereby creating a broader sense of community. This can include leadership and advisors, and can be remote as well as include onsite opportunities if available.

***Reflection Checkpoint: Create a Sense of Community***

Think carefully about your current practice and what you might consider doing differently to engage your learners in community-building and collaborative learning opportunities.

- How do I conceptualize a learning community?
- What is it about community that encourages and fosters learning?
- What can I do as an instructor to create a sense of community?

**7. *Support Learners' Access to Technology***

Engaging with learners is mostly going to occur within the learning management system that is used to manage their work and provide feedback on assignments. Ability to use technology to build teaching relationships and community depends greatly on the type of technology available, and some platforms can lead to greater interaction and connectivity among users (Bloomberg, 2021). Faculty's familiarity with the technology will help make connecting with their learners both easier and more effective, and since technology is critical for learning and engagement, managing all forms of available support will ensure a successful learning experience. It is also important to remember that not all learners will have access to regular internet service, or top-of-the-line software and hardware. Moreover, many will have connectivity issues, and many may lack access to physical devices like computers, tablets, printers, webcams, or other equipment. While there may be community-based resources to address issues related to access (e.g., free Internet at public libraries and stores), these resources may not be accessible to all learners when they need them or may not be available at all in the event of community-wide closures. Also remember that while synchronous experiences are generally more responsive, these can pose technical and logistical challenges, especially when limited access is an issue. Asynchronous experiences can potentially reduce these challenges and generate engagement since learners can access these at their own time and pace.

**Table 7**

***Support Learners’ Use of Technology***

✓	Right from the beginning, be familiar with your learning management system (LMS) and all the available tools in order to promote meaningful and ongoing engagement.
✓	Stay updated regarding all available technology and seek assistance if needed.
✓	Ensure that throughout the duration of the course/program, all learners have access to appropriate technical assistance and technical support.
✓	Be aware that not all learners have the same technological proficiency or access to materials, resources, and connectivity (the “digital divide”).
✓	Offer flexibility or alternatives to those learners when access is an issue, and ask what they would need in order to participate more fully in the course generally or with regard to specific assignments.
✓	Provide support for all learners who may have limited online experience and who may have limited technical proficiency or access.
✓	Be prepared to intercede on behalf of your learners in cases of need of technical assistance by directing them to appropriate and available support services.
✓	Provide a balance between asynchronous and synchronous tools. Because online learners are situated in multiple time zones, consider the flexibility offered by asynchronous tools.
✓	Some learners will be impacted in ways that they may not want to share. As such, offer all learners additional flexibility to meet deadlines and adjust their workloads accordingly.

***Reflection Checkpoint: Support Learners’ Use of Technology***

Think carefully about your current practice and what you might consider doing differently to remain aware of learner needs so you can support all learners to be successful.

- Why is ongoing technical support so important?
- How can I ensure that I am responsive to learners’ technical needs?

**8. *Establish and Maintain a Culture of Trust and Transparency***

An integral aspect of the role of faculty is gaining and maintaining the trust of their learners as their supporter and advocate (Bloomberg, 2021). Making the path for success seem realistic, doable, and achievable minimizes potential barriers to learning. Being open with learners while still maintaining professional boundaries can help them feel comfortable in

trusting faculty's teaching and in approaching faculty for assistance or support when necessary. Trust ensures that learning can occur in a place where it is safe to make mistakes, and helping learners understand that errors are a natural part of learning creates valuable teachable moments. Transparency is another a critical component in the exchange of information, both in verbal and written forms, including assessment and grading practices. To avoid confusion or anxiety, it is critical that faculty help learners understand their feedback and grading in order to self-evaluate their progress and identify areas for improvement. It is the responsibility of faculty to continually monitor and ensure that all communication and interaction is productive, thereby creating a positive, trustworthy, and inclusive environment. In an endeavor to be fully transparent and gain the trust of their learners, highly effective faculty are open to receiving and addressing it so that they can improve their teaching practice.

**Table 8**

***Establish and Maintain a Culture of Trust and Transparency***

✓	Demonstrate empathy by placing yourself in the shoes of your learners to understand their perspective and reality.
✓	Be aware of any stereotypes and generalizations on your part, as these undermine your credibility.
✓	Encourage those who identify with a marginalized or underrepresented culture to showcase, through their coursework, their own values, beliefs, and traditions.
✓	Maintain open lines of communication with your learners throughout the course, and be consistent and clear in what you say.
✓	Respond as soon as you are able when learners contact you. Leaving learners “hanging” is extremely discouraging.
✓	Let your learners know if you will be away and let them know who will be available to assist them during your absence.
✓	Set clear course goals and explain learning outcomes
✓	Clarify all instructions, expectations, and course requirements as needed.
✓	Indicate that you are always available to discuss your learners’ work and your feedback.
✓	Help learners overcome fear of errors and failures by conveying the message that errors are a natural part of learning and that we learn through correcting our errors.
✓	Carefully review the grading guidelines to help learners understand the grading criteria and therefore plan and complete their assignments to the best of their ability.
✓	Use rubrics whenever possible to make grading more transparent to learners and less prone to bias because you can justify the assigned grades.
✓	Consider and honor requests regarding change in schedule, accommodation, or teaching modality.
✓	Listen to your learners’ feedback and be open to receiving and addressing it so that you can act on the feedback you receive, and use it to improve your teaching.

***Reflection Checkpoint: Establish and Maintain a Culture of Trust and Transparency***

Think back to all of the strategies for engaging and empowering learners, and reflect on what you might consider doing differently to more meaningfully engage with your learners, and provide them with a safe and trustworthy learning experience.

- What am I doing to create a culture of trust and transparency?
- Are my grading criteria clear, thoughtful, and reasonable?
- What can lead to lack of trust on the part of my learners?

**Conclusions and Implications for Faculty Development**

Engagement has been presented as a central multimodal construct throughout this paper, highlighting eight sets of indicators or touchpoints that form a conceptual framework to determine the extent to which engagement has been established and maintained throughout a course. Revisiting multimodal engagement, as laid out in this paper, offers online faculty the opportunity to think more critically about their own practice and the strategies that they employ to maximize their engagement touchpoints with each learner. This is also a chance to consider employing additional engagement strategies to enhance practice. For learners to thrive, faculty must remain attuned to all the multiple ways of meaningfully engaging with their learners. Investing in faculty development, specifically designed to address the challenges of teaching in the online environment, develops a culture of support, providing opportunities to enhance both individual and organizational capacity. Ongoing faculty development offerings will play a significant role in supporting and informing online faculty regarding effective teaching practices and the many ways in which a multimodal learning experience can be achieved. The hope is that as online learning contexts continue to develop and evolve, frameworks such as the one presented in this paper will continue to serve as useful practical tools to embed, reflect on, implement, monitor, and evaluate effective engagement strategies.



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