
OVERCOMING STUDENT APATHY THROUGH INNOVATIVE TECHNOLOGY, ENGAGEMENT, AND SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL STRATEGIES

Stephanie West, Grand Canyon University

ABSTRACT

This research project addresses the decline in student engagement, retention, and academic performance in a college Reading 100 course at a local community college in Arizona over a three-year period. Catering to students with low reading proficiency, including international students learning English, the course faced new challenges brought on by the pandemic, necessitating a shift in instructional strategies. Using a qualitative approach, data on drop-out rates, attendance, assignments, and assessment grades were collected for fall semesters in 2020, 2021, and 2022. The study identified concerning behaviors among students, such as apathy, low communication skills, isolation issues, low confidence, and little engagement, exacerbated by the transition to online and live online instruction during the pandemic. To tackle these challenges, the instructor experimented with innovative strategies to boost student engagement and success. Techniques included small and whole group discussions, modeling reading techniques, and leveraging technology to facilitate learning beyond the classroom. Furthermore, the research emphasized addressing students' social-emotional needs, considering the impact of isolation and mental health challenges. Though some improvements were observed, overall success rates remained unsatisfactory, with students still struggling to comprehend college-level texts. Recognizing the need for comprehensive interventions, the instructor conducted further research to explore effective engagement techniques and technology-based learning approaches, aiming to create a supportive and inclusive learning environment. By combining these innovative methods with student agency and an adaptable approach, this study offers valuable insights for educators seeking to enhance student outcomes in college reading courses.

Keywords: *HyFlex, pandemic, strategies in student engagement, strategies in social-emotional learning, and innovative technology techniques, improvement in student achievement*

INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic had a profound impact on the educational experiences of our newest college students, who spent their high school years learning from home. The absence of traditional high school activities, such as

proms and football games, created a void in their social development. More importantly, the lack of in-person classroom learning led to a decline in essential study and communication skills. As Grooms and Childs (2021) observed, learning skills, work ethics, and

accountability both for teachers and students significantly diminished during this period. Basic communication skills were also negatively affected as students found themselves confined to remote learning environments, away from the usual opportunities for face-to-face interactions. These formative high school years, which typically prepare students for adulthood, were characterized by remote learning and limited social interactions, shaping the academic and social landscape for college-bound students.

The rapid transition to emergency remote learning during the pandemic posed several challenges, one of which was the lack of assessment of students' academic levels. As schools shifted to online learning platforms, many educators failed to implement adequate accountability measures to monitor students' completion of readings and engagement with recorded lectures. Consequently, there were difficulties in motivating students to actively participate in virtual lectures, leading to a decline in academic performance. The shift to remote learning also contributed to a rise in mental health issues among students due to prolonged isolation and limited social interactions (West, 2021). The unforeseen consequences of this abrupt change in learning environments underscored the importance of reevaluating teaching approaches and support systems to address the diverse needs of students during such extraordinary circumstances.

As college campuses resume in-person learning, educators are confronting a concerning surge in student apathy, mental health issues, and deficiencies in communication skills. Deniz et al. (2022) highlight that students are grappling with challenges in classroom interactions, particularly in areas like discussion participation and effective collaboration in small groups. The traditional dynamics of lively group discussions and active engagement, characterized by raised hands during lectures, seem to be fading away. Instead, educators find themselves in an era where they must actively encourage student involvement and seek ways to draw out information from students, fostering meaningful interactions with both the professor and their peers. This shift calls for innovative teaching approaches that cultivate a dynamic and inclusive learning environment, wherein students feel motivated and supported to actively participate in academic discussions and group activities.

This research project delves into the issues presented by the pandemic and their impact on student engagement and academic success, using Moore's Three Types of Interaction (1992) as a theoretical framework. Moore's groundbreaking work identified three fundamental categories of interactions crucial to effective learning: (1) interaction with the content, (2) interaction with the instructor, and (3) interaction with fellow students. With the shift to online instruction, the significance of a fourth category emerged, highlighted by Markwood and Johnstone (1994): interaction with the system or interface. This fourth facet becomes particularly vital in the context of online learning environments, where students engage with digital platforms to access course materials, participate in virtual discussions, and complete assignments. By examining these interactions through the lenses of Moore's model, this study aimed to discern effective strategies to bolster student engagement and foster meaningful connections within the virtual classroom setting. Understanding the impact of each type of interaction becomes essential in designing comprehensive approaches to enhance online learning experiences and facilitate positive student outcomes.

As highlighted by Bolliger and Martin (2018), the significance of professor-student interactions in student engagement and academic achievement cannot be understated. Fostering positive and supportive relationships between students and teachers yields far-reaching implications for both their long-term academic progress and social development. Although building such connections alone may not directly result in academic gains, research suggests that students who feel connected to their instructors are more likely to attain higher levels of achievement compared to those who lack such connections. Positive teacher-student relationships play a pivotal role in drawing students into the learning process, igniting their intrinsic desire to learn and grow academically. Recognizing the profound impact of these interactions, this research project sought to explore effective strategies for cultivating strong and supportive teacher-student relationships in the context of online and in-person college classrooms, with the goal of enhancing overall student engagement and success.

As colleges welcome students back to campus, it becomes imperative to thoughtfully implement

new best practices that cater to the diverse needs of both in-person and remote learners. Ensuring that all students are fully engaged with the course content is crucial for their ability to apply their learning in future classes and their eventual careers. The current landscape of education has highlighted the necessity of enhancing student engagement and achievement. As educators, we must strive to be more engaging and innovative, building positive and supportive relationships with our students. Integrating hands-on activities and encouraging student-led discussions can foster a deeper understanding and appreciation for the subject matter. By embracing these lessons and implementing effective strategies, we can create an inclusive and dynamic learning environment that propels our students towards success and fulfillment in their academic journey and beyond.

The impact of school closures went beyond academic challenges; it also brought to the forefront the critical importance of addressing the social and emotional needs of our students (Deniz et al., 2022). Social and emotional intelligence, the ability to understand and manage our own emotions and empathize with others, plays a pivotal role in students' overall well-being and learning experience. Engin (2017) emphasized that learners' social and emotional intelligence is a key factor in their readiness for educational experiences. Students' emotional preparedness significantly influences their success in the classroom. Research conducted by Koç (2019) revealed that students with lower levels of social and emotional intelligence were less likely to be self-directed in both virtual and in-person learning environments. In light of these findings, our research has delved into various strategies to address these needs and integrate them into the college classroom. By equipping educators with effective implementation strategies for social and emotional intelligence, we can foster a supportive and nurturing learning environment, ultimately enhancing student achievement and success.

This research project has been driven by a commitment to better understand and address the challenges that emerged following the Covid-19 emergency closures. Through rigorous analysis of data and ongoing research, our focus has been on achieving three key objectives. Firstly, we aimed to identify the root causes of student apathy that surfaced during the pandemic. Understanding the

factors contributing to this decline in motivation is crucial to developing targeted interventions. Secondly, we explored innovative technology practices that can effectively enhance student engagement and learning outcomes in both remote and in-person settings. As the educational landscape continues to evolve, harnessing the potential of technology is vital to adapt to changing learning preferences and needs. Thirdly, we delved into research-based strategies for fostering engagement and social-emotional development among students. Recognizing the pivotal role of social and emotional intelligence in learning, we sought to implement evidence-based approaches that support students' overall well-being. By achieving these goals, we aspired to create a comprehensive framework that educators can implement in college classrooms, ultimately promoting a more positive and effective learning experience for students.

RELEVANT RESEARCH ON STUDENT APATHY POST-PANDEMIC

The global pandemic caused by Covid-19 gave rise to several secondary crises, including those in higher education. Crises are characterized by their suddenness and the need for swift responses to ensure safety and well-being. Miller et al. (2020) described this crisis as cosmological episodes, where individuals' perception of the world is momentarily disrupted, and chaos ensues. In essence, the pandemic brought about a sense of "vu jà dé" or unfamiliarity, leaving people uncertain about their current situation and how to seek help. This disruption greatly impacted traditional teaching and learning methods, prompting the need for rapid adjustments to restore order. It remains crucial to consider the permanence of these new delivery modes, and instructional communication research can provide valuable insights to inform this decision.

Amidst the economic vulnerabilities and health risks posed by the pandemic, all aspects of society, including the education sector, have been disrupted. Institutions of higher learning, critical for developing a nation's human capital, have faced unexpected and uncertain challenges due to the pandemic. The transition to digital education, necessitated by the global health crisis, has become a daunting task for many educational institutions. According to Edardo et al. (2021) the

shift from traditional classrooms to the “new normal” or “now normal” learning environment poses significant difficulties, primarily due to deficiencies in technological infrastructure, insufficient funding, lack of support, and a shortage of other essential resources.

The rapid closure of educational institutions and the shift to online learning has significantly affected students worldwide, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, female students, minority groups, and individuals with special needs. The Covid-19 pandemic led to incomplete learning experiences for many students, as technological limitations, inadequate internet access, and insufficient training for online education posed significant challenges. Additionally, the disruption caused mental health issues among students. Furthermore, the sudden transition to online education presented difficulties in conducting exams and assessments, creating new obstacles for both educators and learners (George & Biju, 2022).

George and Biju (2022) discovered that the higher education sector faced significant repercussions from both the health emergency and economic downturn. Universities, colleges, and students experienced substantial income loss due to the pandemic's impact. The swift shift from traditional face-to-face instruction to online education required additional spending on health prevention measures, resulting in unplanned expenditures. Moreover, the crisis exposed vulnerabilities in the financial structure of many higher education systems and institutions. Private higher education institutions, heavily reliant on tuition and international students, faced challenges in ensuring financial survival. Therefore, many students with limited resources had to abandon their pursuit of higher education, while others opted for more affordable public institutions as an alternative.

Since the initial detection of Covid-19 cases, governments worldwide have been exploring various measures to combat the pandemic. As a result, traditional face-to-face and self-directed learning systems were replaced by distance learning platforms, which led to significant mental strain while adapting to the new conditions across all aspects of life. Inadequate interpersonal communication further exacerbated these challenges. Distance or online learning emerged as a necessary method to curb the spread of Covid-19, but it has had

adverse effects on the mental well-being of higher education students. Students have encountered various issues, including anxiety, stress, social media fatigue, and depression. It is important to note that these symptoms are not always solely attributed to mental health problems (Wang, 2023).

Wang (2023) found the research findings verified that Covid-19, as a global social phenomenon, has intensified feelings of fear across various aspects of life. Key concerns include the fear of family isolation, apprehension about academic setbacks, and anxiety regarding the erosion of social connections. Notably, modern online learning significantly differs from the emergency distance learning witnessed during the initial pandemic response, leading to a reduction in mental tension and the emergence of adaptive behaviors. As pandemic-related restrictions persist, universities are embracing mixed or blended formats, transforming challenges in distance education into valuable educational opportunities.

BACKGROUND AND METHOD

The impetus for undertaking this research project arose from my extensive experience teaching at a local community college in Arizona as an adjunct in the reading department for two years. During this time, I had the opportunity to closely observe, adapt, and tailor my teaching methods to meet the unique needs of the new generation of students I encountered. My primary responsibility was to instruct Reading 100, a course catering to students with low reading proficiency, including international students learning to read in English. This crucial course aimed to equip students with the necessary skills to effectively comprehend various college-level texts they would encounter in their other academic pursuits, such as textbooks, informational articles, online blogs, and lab reports. Recognizing the significance of this foundational skill, I remained committed to tracking student progress, introducing changes when needed, and maintaining flexibility in my approach to ensure every student had a chance to succeed. This research project became a natural extension of my dedication to improving student learning outcomes and fostering a supportive and inclusive learning environment.

As I embarked on this project, I immediately noticed a range of unprecedented issues within

my students, which my colleagues and I had not encountered before, or at least not to such a significant extent. The classroom presented a concerning array of behaviors that hindered the learning process and academic progress. These behaviors included a prevailing sense of apathy, with students unsure of their purpose in school and lacking motivation to be there. Moreover, communication skills were notably deficient, and many students exhibited signs of isolation, likely intensified by the pandemic's impact on their lives. A pervasive lack of confidence and participation further hindered their learning experience, with minimal engagement and a noticeable absence of study skills. Notably, both enrollment and retention rates experienced a decline, pointing to significant challenges in retaining students. Compounding these issues were odd student expectations arising from the pandemic's disruptions, leading some to believe that minimal effort would suffice to pass the class, a stark departure from the rigor required for success in college-level courses.

Before the spring of 2020, my teaching approach primarily relied on delivering lectures through PowerPoint slides on the Canvas Learning Management System (LMS). During class sessions, I would spend a significant portion of the time lecturing while displaying the PowerPoint slides to the students. Though I occasionally incorporated whole group discussions and in-class assignments, the predominant structure of the course involved students attending class, listening to the lecture, reviewing homework assignments, and addressing any queries before concluding the session. At that time, I perceived that my students were learning effectively since they were passing the courses and progressing to the next level of their academic journey. However, the events of spring 2020 and the ensuing pandemic-induced challenges prompted me to reevaluate my instructional methods and led me to embark on a journey of transformation and improvement to better engage and support my students' learning experiences.

Towards the end of the second year following the pandemic, it became evident that the traditional teaching methods employed in higher education classes were no longer effective. Not only were they failing to yield positive results, but they were also leading to an alarming increase in student dropouts. Grades had significantly declined, and

community college enrollment rates had taken a severe hit. As an experienced educator with 25 years of teaching under my belt, I recognized the urgent need for a transformative shift in my approach to teaching. The evolving educational landscape demanded innovative strategies that could engage and support students in navigating the challenges brought on by the pandemic, ensuring their academic success and overall well-being.

To conduct a comprehensive analysis of the effectiveness of my instructional strategies, I adopted a qualitative approach, gathering data on drop-out rates, attendance rates, assignment, and assessment grades. Ensuring consistency in the research design, I selected the exact same time of the year and the same time of day for the classes, focusing on my Reading 100 courses that were scheduled on Mondays and Wednesdays from 9:30–10:45 a.m. during the fall semesters. The data collection spanned across three consecutive years: fall 2020, 2021, and 2022. The student population in each semester exhibited similar demographic characteristics, comprising individuals of various ethnic backgrounds, including White, Black, Hispanic, and Native American students. Notably, each semester began with an enrollment of 25 students in my courses, providing a consistent starting point for the analysis of student outcomes and engagement. This rigorous and consistent approach allowed me to delve into the trends and variations in student performance over the three-year period, identifying critical factors that contributed to the declining student engagement and retention in the Reading 100 course.

Throughout the duration of the project, I encountered a handful of outliers among my students. Some individuals consistently failed to submit any assignments, despite my efforts to assist them in keeping up with the coursework. Additionally, certain students faced challenging circumstances, such as family and health issues, which understandably impacted their ability to fully engage in the academic setting. Moreover, a few students encountered financial hurdles that prevented them from receiving the necessary aid to continue their studies. These outliers highlighted the importance of acknowledging and addressing the diverse challenges that students may encounter during their educational journey, necessitating

a supportive and flexible approach to foster academic success and well-being.

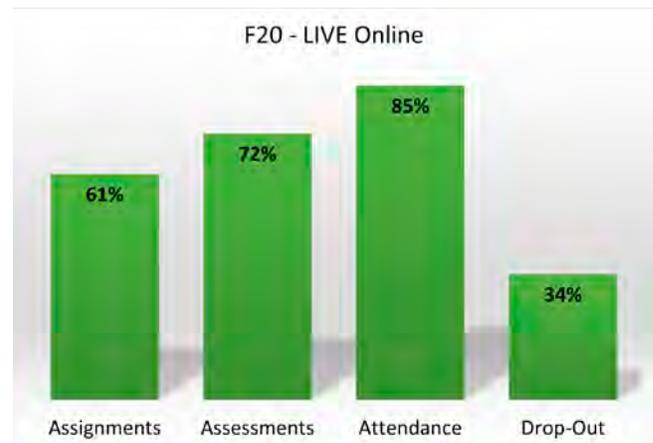
THE PROBLEM

The spring of 2020 brought unforeseen challenges as the pandemic forced colleges and universities to close their doors abruptly. As a college professor, I found myself in a situation where I had to quickly adapt and transfer my in-person courses to an online platform. Being an adjunct at a local community college and an online adjunct for Grand Canyon University, I opted to create an online course similar to the ones I had been teaching virtually. However, it soon became apparent that my students at the community college were ill-prepared for the demands of an online course. Despite being midway through the semester, many students struggled to keep up with the requirements, hindering their ability to successfully complete the semester. A myriad of issues emerged during this time, including inadequate computer skills, poor time management, limited access to technology tools, family concerns, illnesses, and the onset of isolation-related problems in students' lives. As a result, the spring 2020 semester at the community college was fraught with challenges and did not yield favorable outcomes.

During the fall 2020 semester, I attempted to adapt to the new normal by embracing the concept of LIVE Online courses implemented by the community college where I served as an adjunct professor. The format mirrored a traditional classroom setting, with scheduled class times where all students and I were online simultaneously. I expected the students to engage and interact as they had in the physical classroom, but a significant challenge arose when most students chose not to turn on their cameras, leading to minimal interaction and participation. It felt as though I was teaching to a passive audience, and I struggled to establish meaningful connections with my students. Despite my best efforts, the semester did not unfold as I had hoped, leaving me with a sense of disappointment and the belief that I was failing to adequately support my students' learning journey. Table 1 shows the data collected during the fall 2020 semester.

During the spring of 2021 semester, the community college persisted with LIVE Online courses, prompting me to experiment with additional

Table 1.
Fall 2020 Semester Data



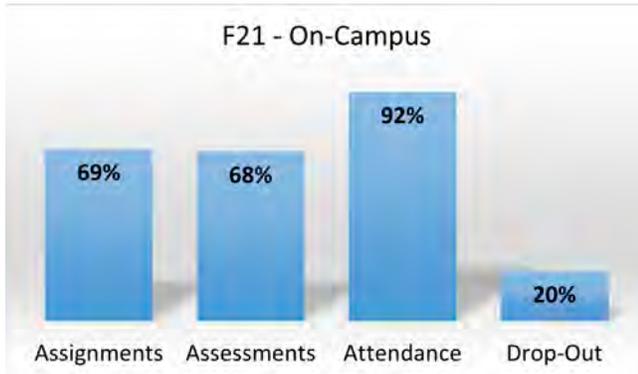
strategies to bolster student engagement. Despite my efforts, I encountered a significant challenge in effectively teaching students how to read college-level texts without being physically present to model the essential strategies they needed. The limitations of online instruction hindered my ability to provide hands-on guidance, impeding the students' comprehension and application of critical reading skills. Consequently, the data from the spring 2021 semester mirrored the outcomes observed in the fall 2020 course, underscoring the pressing need for innovative approaches that could bridge the gap between remote learning and effective reading instruction.

During the summer of 2021, we received news that classes at the community college would resume on campus, subject to specific conditions being met. This development filled me with excitement as I eagerly prepared to return to in-person instruction. For the fall 2021 course, I revamped my teaching approach, incorporating small group and whole group discussions to foster active student participation and meaningful interactions. Additionally, I emphasized modeling essential reading techniques to provide students with tangible examples of effective reading strategies. While I remained hopeful that the transition back to campus would restore a sense of normalcy, the concerning behaviors observed during online instruction persisted and, in some cases, became more pronounced in the in-person setting. The data collected during the fall 2021 semester shed light on the challenges that persisted despite the shift in

instructional format, underscoring the need for a comprehensive and adaptive approach to address the diverse needs of students in the college reading course. Table 2 shows the data collected during the fall 2021 semester.

Table 2.

Fall 2021 Semester Data



Despite the reduction in drop-out rates and improvement in attendance, the students' overall performance on assignments and assessments remained a concern. Despite their continued presence in the course, they struggled to grasp the material effectively, hindering their success in my class. The lack of progress suggested that they might also be facing challenges in their other courses, unable to comprehend the material sufficiently. Consequently, a significant number of students found themselves having to repeat the Reading 100 course, as passing it was a prerequisite for advancing to English 101. This recurring pattern highlighted the critical need for targeted interventions and innovative teaching methods to address the underlying issues hindering students' academic progress, ensuring their success not only in my course but also in their broader academic journey.

As the spring of 2022 approached, I recognized the urgency of reversing the troubling trend of high drop-out rates and low grades among my students. Drawing upon my early experiences and training as a K-12 teacher, I embarked on extensive research to discover innovative ways to foster student engagement with the course content. Additionally, I sought to leverage technology to create inclusive instructional experiences, ensuring students could participate and learn even when unable to attend class physically. Equally

important, I realized the need to address the pressing social-emotional needs of my students. Many of them exhibited increased levels of anxiety and depression, along with diminished communication and study skills. Unlike previous cohorts who had acquired these skills in high school, these students had likely endured prolonged periods of isolation during their formative years. To enact meaningful change, I aimed to design a holistic and adaptive teaching approach that would empower my students to thrive academically while nurturing their overall well-being.

RESULTS

During the spring 2022 semester, I critically examined the structure of my classes and the instructional approach I had been using. Each session followed a similar pattern, starting with a review of the class objectives and then proceeding with PowerPoint-based lessons enriched with visuals and videos. The students would take notes in their preferred manner, and I would lecture for the entirety of the class. Prior to the pandemic, these lectures would stimulate engaging whole group discussions, with students actively participating and sharing valuable insights and questions. However, after the pandemic, I noticed a significant decline in student participation and contributions during discussions. This change in behavior became evident, and it prompted me to reevaluate my teaching strategies. I concluded the lessons with a homework review and provided clear expectations for the next class, but I recognized the pressing need for a more effective and engaging instructional approach to meet the students' evolving needs in the post-pandemic learning landscape.

Upon analyzing the data from the previous two fall semester courses, it became evident that a significant shift was necessary in my teaching approach. The current cohort of students exhibited markedly different behaviors compared to those I had encountered in the past. A sense of apathy pervaded the classroom, and they displayed a reluctance to engage in meaningful communication. Moreover, their demeanor suggested a degree of fear and unease, possibly stemming from the prolonged isolation they experienced during the pandemic. Basic communication skills appeared to be lacking, and they demonstrated little to no proficiency in study techniques and time management.

Recognizing these challenges, I realized that a transformative approach was imperative to address the unique needs of this new generation of learners, and to rekindle their enthusiasm for learning in the post-pandemic educational landscape.

As I contemplated how to adapt my teaching methods to better suit the needs of this new generation of students, I found inspiration in my early years as a K-12 educator. Drawing on Moore's three types of interactions model as a foundation, I revisited the Madeline Hunter lesson plan training I had received years ago. The Madeline Hunter lesson plan model, also known as the Hunter Method, emerged as a widely used instructional design framework developed by Madeline Hunter in the 1970s. Rooted in research from cognitive psychology, this model offers educators a systematic approach to plan and deliver highly effective lessons. At its core, the Hunter Method prioritizes active student engagement, clearly defined objectives, and measurable outcomes, aligning well with the goals of my endeavor to enhance student comprehension and enthusiasm in my college courses. The Hunter method consists of several key components, often presented in a seven-step format:

1. *Anticipatory Set or Focus*: The teacher begins the lesson by capturing students' attention and activating prior knowledge related to the upcoming lesson. This step helps create relevance and prepares students for learning.
2. *Objective*: The teacher will then state the specific learning objective for the lesson. The objectives should be clear, measurable, and achievable within the given time frame.
3. *Input*: The teacher then delivers the content or information necessary for the students to achieve the lesson objectives. This may involve lecturing, presenting visuals, or engaging students in whole or small group discussions.
4. *Modeling*: The teacher demonstrates the skills or processes that students need to learn. This step is particularly relevant for subjects involving problem-solving or practical application.
5. *Checking for Understanding*: The teacher will then use various methods to assess whether students are understanding the material. This may involve asking questions, quizzes, exit tickets, or other formative assessment techniques.
6. *Guided Practice*: Students engage in activities where they apply the newly acquired knowledge or skills with the teacher's guidance and support. This phase allows students to practice and reinforce what they have learned. This portion of the lesson is conducted during class.
7. *Independent Practice*: In this step, students work on their own, applying knowledge or skills they have learned during class. The teacher provides opportunities for the students to practice independently to solidify their understanding.

The Hunter method, developed by Madeline Hunter in 1982, places significant emphasis on essential elements such as clear communication, active student participation, and meticulous planning. Through this approach, educators are encouraged to communicate their instructional objectives explicitly, ensuring students understand what is expected of them. Active student participation is promoted by incorporating various interactive activities and discussions that encourage students to engage with the subject matter actively. Moreover, careful planning is at the heart of the Hunter method, enabling instructors to design well-structured lessons that foster a conducive learning environment and lead to improved student outcomes. As I sought to enhance my college courses and adapt to the needs of the new generation of students, the Hunter method emerged as a valuable framework to guide my instructional strategies effectively.

Drawing upon my ACUE (Association of College and University Educators) training, I revisited the Active Learning Cycle, a pedagogical approach aimed at promoting deep and meaningful engagement among students. The Active Learning Cycle emphasizes an iterative process that involves five key stages: (1) preparation, where instructors design activities and materials to spark interest and curiosity; (2) activation, where students are prompted to recall prior knowledge and connect it to new concepts; (3) demonstration, where instructors model and demonstrate problem-solving or critical thinking strategies; (4) application, where

students actively apply what they have learned through hands-on activities, discussions, or group work; and (5) integration, where instructors facilitate reflections and discussions to help students make connections between new learning and real-world applications. By integrating the principles of the Active Learning Cycle into my teaching practices, I aimed to create a dynamic and student-centered learning environment that fosters active participation and deeper comprehension of the course content (ACUE, n.d.).

After carefully examining and integrating the elements of the Madeline Hunter lesson plan model and the Active Learning Cycle, I devised a comprehensive lesson plan structure tailored to suit the unique needs of my reading classes. To foster student engagement and interest, I initiated each class with captivating engagement activities, such as motivational videos, thought-provoking discussion prompts, and critical thinking exercises. The lessons were strategically organized in chunks, where I would deliver concise 10-minute mini lectures, followed by 10-minute group work or interactive activities. By maintaining this alternating pattern throughout the 75-minute class, I ensured students remained actively involved and motivated. To enhance their note-taking skills, I introduced the Cornell notes method and demonstrated how to use it effectively on the board, modeling the expectations I had for them. By leading by example, students became more attentive and receptive to the material. Additionally, I crafted visually appealing PowerPoint presentations featuring vivid colors, images, and graphics that captured the students' attention. These presentations not only illustrated relevant examples of the content but also incorporated educational videos to enhance their understanding and real-world problem-solving activities that brought the subject matter to life.

To strengthen the students' accountability and active participation, I introduced a dedicated accountability component that was absent in my previous teaching approach. Each student was required to maintain a spiral notebook solely for the course, where they diligently transcribed the notes from the board into their Cornell note templates, which they would draw during each class. To ensure their focus and discourage distractions, I actively monitored the classroom, ensuring they remained engaged and refrained from accessing unrelated websites on their phones or laptops.

During small group discussions and activities, students responded to prompts in the presentation on poster paper placed on the walls by their groups. This allowed me to closely observe their progress, identify any confusions or misunderstandings, and provide timely guidance. My aim was to cultivate a learning environment where students actively participated and learned by doing, fostering deeper comprehension and retention of the material. Furthermore, I allotted sufficient time at the end of each class to address all questions comprehensively and ensure absolute clarity regarding their homework assignments.

Incorporating various technology techniques into my lesson planning proved to be a pivotal aspect of enhancing student engagement and interaction. I integrated interactive tools like Kahoot, Slido, and Pear Deck into the presentations, fostering a more dynamic and participatory learning experience for the students. To ensure accessibility and facilitate seamless learning, I uploaded all course materials, including presentations and notes, onto the community college's learning management system, Canvas. This enabled students to access the content even if they missed a class, promoting continuous learning and keeping them up-to-date with the course materials. Additionally, I was fortunate to have the support of the reading department, which had installed HyFlex camera systems in our classrooms. This invaluable technology allowed students to attend classes from the comfort of their homes if they were unwell or faced any other impediments that prevented them from physically attending the class, ensuring inclusivity, and accommodating their individual needs and circumstances.

Recognizing the profound impact of the pandemic on my students' social and emotional well-being, I made a concerted effort to know each student on a deeper level. Understanding their social-emotional status became a crucial component of my teaching approach during this time. While I had always valued getting to know my students, it took on a new level of importance during this period. Many of them were grappling with profound challenges, such as isolation, loss of loved ones, and unprecedented fear of the world—factors I had never encountered to this extent in my decades of teaching experience. Low confidence and self-esteem issues were evident, alongside

visible signs of anxiety and depression in their faces. This heightened level of emotional distress was unprecedented, and it compelled me to gather as much information as possible about my students: their backgrounds, family situations, and any other relevant details. My goal was to ensure they felt valued both in my class and in the wider world, creating a supportive and compassionate learning environment that acknowledged and addressed their unique struggles.

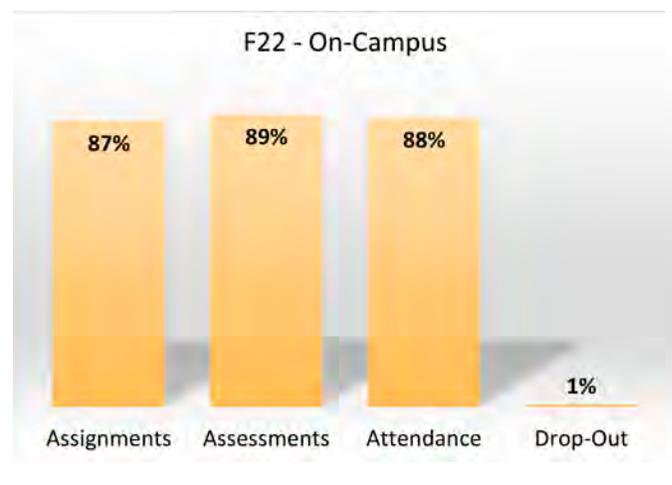
Incorporating student agency into my class and lesson plans became a pivotal aspect of my teaching philosophy. Emphasizing the capacity for students to take charge of their own learning, student agency held immense potential in shaping their academic achievement. Encouraging a growth mindset, I instilled in them the belief that knowledge is not fixed, but rather expands with effort and dedication. By fostering a deep commitment to continuous improvement and setting mastery-oriented goals, students gained a sense of empowerment and autonomy in their educational journey. These skills and behaviors not only enhance their college experience but also pave the way for successful career paths, as they learn to navigate challenges and apply acquired knowledge effectively in various contexts. By nurturing student agency, I aimed to equip my students with the tools they need to thrive academically, fostering lasting success and personal growth.

By the fall semester of 2022, the implementation of the HyFlex systems in the classrooms brought a significant change to the way my courses were conducted at the local community college. The HyFlex approach, a blend of face-to-face and online learning, revolutionized the learning environment. Offering both in-person and synchronous online options for each class session and activity, HyFlex provided students with the freedom to choose how they wanted to participate. This flexibility proved invaluable, catering to individual preferences, schedules, and circumstances. Leveraging technology, HyFlex classrooms seamlessly engaged both in-person and virtual learners, fostering inclusivity and enriching the overall learning experience. As I taught in one of the HyFlex classrooms, I had the privilege of offering students the alternative to attend the class virtually. Through this option, they could observe me teaching in real time and access the lesson presentation. Furthermore, students were

able to witness firsthand how to take notes and actively participate in group discussions through breakout rooms facilitated on the online streaming platform. The virtual attendance option served as a lifeline for students dealing with illnesses, anxiety, or unexpected challenges (like car troubles), ensuring that they could continue their learning journey without disruption. The incorporation of the HyFlex model was a transformative step in my teaching, as it allowed me to better accommodate my students' diverse needs and foster a more inclusive and accessible learning environment.

By the end of the fall 2022 semester, the transformation in my students' engagement and academic performance was evident and rewarding. The implementation of the revamped lesson plans, combined with the HyFlex approach, had a profound impact on their learning experience. Notably, attendance rates improved significantly, and the students actively participated and contributed to the class discussions. It was heartening to witness the growth in their confidence and sense of safety, as they became more comfortable with me as their professor. Their study and time management skills showed remarkable progress, allowing them to effectively manage their academic responsibilities. Equally impressive was the rise in their communication skills, both within the classroom setting and beyond. Witnessing these positive changes in my students filled me with a sense of fulfillment, knowing that the efforts to foster a dynamic and inclusive learning environment had yielded tangible results. The fall 2022 semester reinforced the value of student-centered teaching approaches,

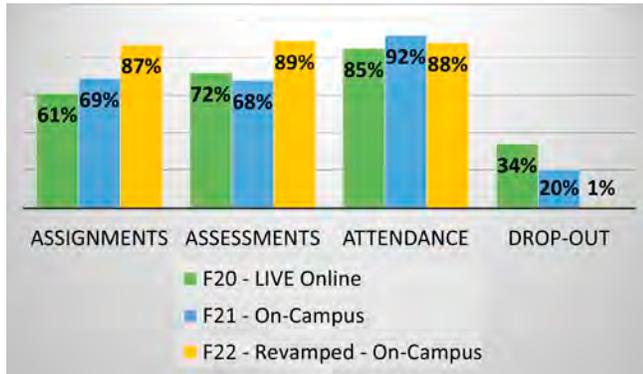
Table 3.
Fall 2022 Semester Data



encouraging me to continuously explore innovative methods to enhance student agency and overall academic success in my courses. Table 3 shows the data collected during the fall 2022 semester.

Table 4 is a side-by-side analysis of the three fall semesters.

Table 4.
Analysis of All Fall Semesters



Throughout this comprehensive three-year study, the transformation in student performance, engagement, and social-emotional well-being is evident. The data shows a remarkable improvement in students' grades and a reduction in drop-out rates, indicating a positive impact on their academic success. However, beyond the quantifiable metrics, the students' overall growth in social-emotional skills stands as a testament to the effectiveness of the implemented strategies. The students not only excelled academically but also demonstrated emotional resilience and self-awareness, fostering a positive and supportive learning community. The following sections will delve into the diverse technology, engagement, and social-emotional strategies employed throughout this research project, elucidating their role in driving this remarkable transformation in the students' academic and personal journey.

TOOLS FOR INNOVATIVE TECHNOLOGY

The Hybrid Flexible, or HyFlex, course format has emerged as a transformative instructional approach that seamlessly integrates face-to-face (F2F) and online learning components. In a HyFlex course, each class session and learning activity are made available both in person and synchronously online, providing students with the flexibility to choose their preferred mode of participation. This innovative approach offers a multitude of

benefits for both students and professors, making it a promising model for modern education. Ongoing research is exploring the effects of implementing HyFlex, examining its influence on students' learning experiences, and evaluating its effectiveness across various academic disciplines.

For students, the HyFlex format grants unparalleled flexibility and accessibility. One of the most significant advantages is the ability to attend classes even when they are not feeling well or facing health concerns that might otherwise keep them from the physical classroom. This ensures that students do not fall behind in their studies during times of illness or discomfort. Moreover, individuals who may be coping with certain illnesses that necessitate isolation from others can still actively engage in the learning process through the online option, without compromising their academic progress.

On the other hand, HyFlex courses bring forth several advantages for professors. Notably, student achievement rates tend to rise as this adaptable format caters to diverse learning styles and preferences. By offering multiple avenues for students to engage with the course content, instructors can effectively accommodate individual needs, enhancing overall learning outcomes. Additionally, the flexibility of the HyFlex approach contributes to higher student retention numbers, as students are more likely to persist in their studies when they have the option to adapt their learning environment to suit their circumstances.

Another practical benefit for professors is the alleviation of attendance concerns. In traditional face-to-face courses, fluctuations in attendance can affect the continuity of instruction and impact students' learning experiences. With HyFlex, attendance becomes less of a concern, as students have the choice to participate in person or online, ensuring that the learning process remains uninterrupted regardless of external factors.

Moreover, the HyFlex model empowers educators to meet their students where they are, ensuring that each learner receives high-quality instruction tailored to their needs. By providing both in-person and online options, instructors can effectively engage with a diverse group of learners, considering factors like individual schedules, learning preferences, and circumstances. This personalized approach contributes to a more inclusive and accommodating learning environment.

In conclusion, the Hybrid Flexible (HyFlex) course format represents a powerful and adaptable approach to modern education, effectively combining face-to-face and online learning components. Its flexibility and accessibility offer numerous benefits for students, providing them with the opportunity to engage in their studies despite health concerns or other limitations. For professors, the HyFlex approach yields increased student achievement rates, improved retention numbers, and reduced attendance concerns, while also allowing them to deliver high-quality instruction that meets individual learners' needs. The study of HyFlex is still in its early stages, leaving room for additional validations and investigations in the future (Sanchez-Pizani et al., 2022). As educational institutions continue to adapt to the ever-changing landscape of learning, the HyFlex model stands as a promising solution that prioritizes student success and inclusivity.

STRATEGIES FOR STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

In modern educational settings, it has become evident that traditional lectures alone may not be sufficient to foster deep learning and active participation among students. To create a dynamic and interactive learning environment, educators are employing various engagement strategies that go beyond the conventional lecture format. The fundamental aspects of student engagement, including active learning, collaboration with peers, and interaction with faculty, do not depend on or necessitate face-to-face instruction. According to Paulsen and McCormick (2020), elements of engagement are not inherently tied to any specific course delivery method, and there is no reason to anticipate significant differences based on the modality of instruction. By incorporating these innovative approaches, students become more invested in their learning journey and develop essential skills for future success.

One effective strategy to enhance student engagement is through collaborative group projects. By envisioning themselves as coaches guiding a sports team, instructors can guide and support students as they work together to tackle challenging tasks. Group projects not only promote teamwork but also cultivate critical thinking, problem-solving, and effective communication skills. As students pool their diverse perspectives and

knowledge, they not only grasp the subject matter more comprehensively but also learn the art of cooperation, vital in professional settings.

Another engaging method is the use of stage presentations instead of the traditional research papers. Students are encouraged to develop and deliver presentations, either in-person or via live webinars, replicating real-world scenarios. This not only deepens their understanding of the topic but also hones their presentation and public speaking skills, valuable assets in their future careers.

Gamification has emerged as a popular approach to inject fun into the learning process. Utilizing features such as leaderboards, badges, and points within learning management systems, educators can motivate students to actively participate and excel in their learning journey. By introducing elements of competition and reward, gamification fosters a sense of accomplishment, encouraging students to take ownership of their learning and strive for continuous improvement.

To bridge the gap between theory and real-world application, educators can pose authentic problems connected to the content area. By challenging students to identify creative and innovative solutions, they gain valuable insights into practical problem-solving. This approach harnesses the diversity of experiences and skill sets within each class, leading to solutions that resonate with their lives and provide meaningful context to the subject matter.

Brainstorming sessions serve as an excellent tool to tap into the collective knowledge of the students. By encouraging open discussions and sharing of ideas, educators can leverage the power of teamwork and create a vibrant learning atmosphere. Students become more confident in expressing their thoughts, while instructors can provide guidance and fill in any gaps in understanding.

Lastly, holding debates can be an intellectually stimulating engagement strategy. Dividing the class into three groups, each assigned different roles, encourages critical thinking and persuasive communication. Students must thoroughly engage with the topic to present their arguments effectively, while the judging group develops a well-rounded understanding of the issue. Whether conducted in person or virtually, debates provide an opportunity for lively exchanges of ideas and foster a culture of respectful dialogue.

In conclusion, moving beyond the traditional lecture format and implementing diverse engagement strategies empowers students to become active learners, preparing them for the complexities of the modern world. Through collaborative projects, presentations, gamification, problem-solving, brainstorming, and debates, educators create an enriched learning environment that nurtures not only subject mastery but also essential skills for future success. As education evolves, these innovative approaches continue to pave the way for a more inclusive, dynamic, and effective learning experience.

STRATEGIES FOR SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

In the pursuit of holistic education, focusing on students' social-emotional development is paramount. Social and emotional learning (SEL) encompasses the acquisition and utilization of essential knowledge and skills by individuals of all ages, including children, adolescents, and adults, to comprehend and regulate emotions, set goals, exhibit empathy towards others, foster positive relationships, and make sound and responsible decisions. In recent times, the definition of SEL has evolved to incorporate an equity perspective, acknowledging that by enhancing our SEL competencies, we can foster better connections and understanding across diverse attributes, such as race, class, gender identity, sexual orientation, learning needs, and age. Nurturing their emotional intelligence, resilience, and interpersonal skills not only enhances academic performance but also equips them for success in various aspects of life (Elmi, 2020). Several strategies can be employed to foster a supportive and conducive environment for students' social-emotional growth.

First and foremost, educators must create a safe place within the classroom where students feel comfortable expressing themselves without fear of judgment or ridicule. This safe space promotes open communication and trust among students and with the teacher. When students feel secure and supported, they are more likely to engage actively in the learning process and develop healthier social interactions.

Knowing the students individually is crucial for addressing their unique emotional needs. Each student possesses distinct strengths, weaknesses, and life experiences that influence their behavior

and learning preferences. By taking the time to understand their backgrounds, interests, and aspirations, educators can tailor their approach to cater to individual needs effectively.

Motivational videos and inspirational stories can be powerful tools to instill a sense of belief and determination in students. By showcasing examples of individuals who have overcome challenges to achieve success, students are inspired to believe in their own abilities and potential. Encouraging a "can-do" attitude nurtures a growth mindset, wherein students view failures as learning opportunities and are willing to embrace challenges.

Modeling the behavior expected from students is essential in cultivating positive social-emotional skills. Teachers serve as role models, and their actions and responses set the tone for the classroom atmosphere. Demonstrating empathy, active listening, and effective communication teaches students valuable interpersonal skills that they can apply in their interactions with peers and others.

Holding students accountable for their actions and choices reinforces the importance of responsibility and self-discipline. Clear expectations and consequences help students understand the impact of their behavior on themselves and their peers, fostering a sense of personal responsibility.

Effective communication skills are vital in building meaningful relationships and resolving conflicts. Teachers can incorporate communication exercises and activities that encourage students to express their thoughts and emotions constructively. These skills not only enhance their social interactions within the classroom but also prepare them for success in future academic and professional environments.

Time management skills are essential for academic success and personal growth. Educators can provide tools and techniques to help students prioritize tasks, manage their time effectively, and maintain a healthy balance between their academic commitments and other aspects of their lives.

Creating classroom expectations as a class empowers students to take ownership of their learning environment. Involving them in setting rules and guidelines promotes a sense of community and mutual respect. This collaborative approach encourages students to internalize and adhere to the established norms.

Lastly, ensuring that students have access to necessary resources is crucial for their social-emotional well-being. Establishing on-campus or online support systems, such as counseling, tutoring centers, and academic and mental health resources, creates a safety net for students facing challenges. Additionally, addressing their basic needs, such as access to a food market, ensures that they can focus on their studies without worrying about essential necessities.

In conclusion, improving student social-emotional skills requires a holistic approach that encompasses a safe and supportive environment, personalized attention, motivation, modeling, accountability, communication, time management, and collaborative expectations. By nurturing these skills and providing essential resources, educators pave the way for students to develop into well-rounded individuals who are academically successful and emotionally resilient, ready to face the challenges of the future with confidence and competence.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Covid-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented disruptions in the education sector, impacting students and educators worldwide. As schools and colleges transitioned to emergency remote learning, various challenges arose, affecting student engagement, learning outcomes, and mental well-being. However, through thoughtful adaptation and implementation of innovative teaching methods, such as the HyFlex approach and the incorporation of SEL strategies, positive progress was observed in student performance and overall well-being. The use of technology, interactive engagement activities, and accountability measures played pivotal roles in enhancing the learning experience, fostering student agency, and facilitating meaningful connections between students and instructors. Additionally, recognizing the importance of attending to students' social-emotional needs and building supportive relationships further contributed to a more conducive learning environment. While the pandemic created initial hurdles, it also presented opportunities for educational institutions to embrace flexible and inclusive teaching practices. As we continue to navigate this evolving landscape, research and ongoing evaluation of these pedagogical approaches remain crucial in

further advancing the field of education and ensuring the success and growth of our students in both virtual and physical learning spaces.

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