

PARTICIPATION IS THE “SECRET SAUCE” OF E-LEARNING: OBSERVATIONS AND STRATEGIES FROM THE FRONT LINES.

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ABSTRACT

The What, Why, Who, How, Where, and When of student interactive participation in online classes is discussed from the perspective of a business professor who herself was an early adopter of online pedagogy. With 25 years of online teaching experience at the undergraduate, masters and doctoral levels, the author shares her experiences and strategies and makes recommendations for those who might be newer to online learning.

The author, who has used everything from HTML to WebCT to Blackboard to Moodle, posits that regular, robust student interaction is the “secret sauce” to creating an engaging, vibrant learning community.

Keywords: *online classes, student engagement, learning community, participation, interaction*

1. INTRODUCTION: THE AMAZING GROWTH OF E-LEARNING

Few would deny that the pandemic that unfolded in 2020 had major repercussions on all aspects of work, school, and even daily life. K-12 schools were thrown into online classes with little preparation, forcing many teachers without experience or training into an unfamiliar learning environment. Sixty-five percent of households with K-12 students reported using online learning with online resources while another 15% had online classes with paper materials sent to the home during the pandemic. (USA Facts, 2020). Compare this to U.S. Department of Education statistics that in the 2017-2018 school year, one in five public schools was offering at least one online course while only one in 20 offered a majority of their courses online. (USA Facts, 2020).

Likewise, the growth of online classes at the tertiary level was progressing steadily before the explosion of Covid 19 in 2020. Statistics for the fall of 2018, for example, showed that almost 7 million students were taking at least one online course. This included 16.6% of all students who were exclusively taking online classes and 35.3% of all students who were taking at least one online class. The numbers were even more impressive at the graduate level where 30.7% of all students were 100% online. (NCES, 2018) Nor were degree programs the only ones represented. Prestige universities such as Harvard, Princeton, Cornell, MIT and University of Chicago added to the trend by offering free college courses through EdX which boasts a slate of over 2500 online courses (Leighton, 2020).

When Covid hit in early 2020, more than 1300 colleges and universities migrated many, if not all, of their classes to an online modality (Smalley, 2020). By fall, universities were struggling to find a combination of online and in person classes that would meet the continuing crisis. A study of almost 3000 institutions by the College Crisis Initiative found that about 1300 were delivering classes in a full or primarily online modality while another 600 were using hybrid classes (College Crisis Initiative, 2020) These numbers reflected a dramatic increase over the previously slow but steady growth in online classes. Those professors who already taught online classes continued on without interruption while their faculty colleagues who had resisted the lure of cyberspace until this time, either by design or because the online classes simply were not available, found themselves obliged to take the plunge. While some schools offered training to prepare faculty for online pedagogy, others for lack of expertise, time, or the necessary budget reverted to the old “sink or swim” mentality.