Defining, Creating, and Assessing Social Engagement in Virtual Communities

The "fiercely social" virtual community

We know from the research that engaged students persist better in online programs than students who are not engaged (Savvides, Ye, Verdine, & Kampa, 2019). For this reason, Noodle Partners works with our campus partners to create "fiercely social" learning environments. A learning environment that is fiercely social is one in which students, faculty and staff consistently engage with one another, by thinking, talking, debating, and interacting, resulting in greater achievement of learning outcomes, a stronger sense of identification with the institution/program, and a higher retention rate. This document provides guidance on how to foster a fiercely social learning environment and assess engagement in virtual communities.

Introduction

Vygotsky argued "that language is the main tool that promotes thinking, develops reasoning, and supports cultural activities like reading and writing" (Vygotsky, 1978). Students learn best by interacting collectively with other people (learners, experts, etc) about ideas, concepts and processes. In the absence of collaborative design, learning online can be a solitary activity--and therefore not an effective experience. When we partner with a university to take a degree program online, we create fiercely social learning environments.

Engagement, as depicted in Chart 1, occurs among people or between people and content (the "what"); engagement also occurs during courses, or outside of courses (the "when").

Chart 1. Student Engagement

When	People/Social	Content
During Courses		
Synchronous	- Ask for or provide help with coursework - Arrange a study group - Collaborate on a presentation - Active learning exercises during live sessions leveraging break out rooms like think-pair-share.	
Asynchronous	- Group project or presentation collaboration - Optional special interest discussion threads e.g. current event relating to course content - Ask for or provide help with coursework - Arrange a study group for a course assignment	- Share and comment on articles, videos, either provided by the professor or provided by students - Search question forums for an answer - Post/provide a resource for others - Comment on a resource - See announcements from the program
Co-Curricular		
Synchronous	- Faculty research presentations - Student study groups - Group advising sessions - Connect with classmates instantly - Organize and/or participate in a campus event - Attend a campus event or group meeting - Attend aegional or discipline-focused in person mee	Find classmates instantly
Asynchronous	Make an appt with staff/professor/classmate/prospective student	- Access the university library/articles - Schedule an advising appt - Check financial aid status/grades/univ bills, etc. - Search campus events

Student engagement is about students putting time, energy, thought, effort, and, to some extent, feelings into their learning. Dixson (2016) expands this definition by stating, "Student engagement is, generally, the extent to which students actively engage by thinking, talking, and interacting with the content of a course, the other students in the course, and the instructor" (p. 2).

Social engagement refers to an individual's participation in a community. In the context of an online student experience, social engagement includes interaction between students and faculty, other students and school administration in the virtual environment. Social engagement in virtual communities ranges from in-classroom collaboration with peers and office hours with faculty, to participation in student life and leadership activities, professional networking, friendships, and partnerships that take place as a result of bonds fostered online. It can be thought of as occurring curricularly, co-curricularly, and recreationally.

Forms of social engagement in virtual communities

Students in an online program need to have the tools to engage with their academic community in many of the same ways as their on-ground peers. These ways include:

Connecting with others

Students need a way to talk with each other (for example through text or instant messaging), to know who is online when they are, to meet virtually, and to share events/information with others. They should also be able to access all student services virtually, set appointments and attend meetings with faculty or staff.

Participating in or organizing events

At the most basic level, online students should be able to view all campus events as they are streamed by the institution. A better strategy is to create avenues for students to actively participate in those events — ask questions, interact with other participants. It is especially important for students to be invited and included in commencement ceremonies. Students should have the tools to host their own virtual events, and host or attend workshops (career building, for example). Finally, they should be able to join groups — formal and informal — with other students, faculty and staff.

Finding, generating, and sharing information

At a minimum, online students should have access to a virtual bulletin board for posting and reading announcements, requests for help, books for sale, meetups and other campus events. They should be able to contribute to and access a library of resources that is searchable, such that they can curate it, and create their own set of resources.

Collaborating in documents

Students should be able to collectively annotate content, such as research articles, sharing their reactions and ideas with other classmates reading the same article. Similarly, they should be able to upload interesting articles and videos, and within the videos, be able to make comments about the content that are time stamped and viewable to others.

Strategies for creating an engaging virtual environment

There are really only two big buckets of work to create an engaging virtual environment: (1) provide a robust platform through which people can connect with ideas and with each other; and (2) remove barriers/add facilitators to participation. Let's address each.

A robust platform

A **social-first approach** to the online student experience can lead to increased social engagement, improved sense of belonging, greater retention, improved perception of value in the program and increased popularity/ranking. Some programs have a Learning Management System (LMS), where students find course-related information, and a separate social portal where students find information about events and access to university services. A social-first approach plays into a user's likeliness to make a habit out of returning to the virtual community. Participating in a virtual community should be easy. We need to make the virtual community (e.g. Virtual Student union) and the online learning environment all part of one ecosystem -- seamless, easy, intuitive and useful.

The virtual community should be accessible, flexible and easily adoptable (simple interface and easily navigable). If a social platform becomes a utility for students and can integrate many of the tools that students access on a regular basis, there will be greater usage and increased satisfaction.

Remove barriers to engagement

Barriers come in a variety of forms: policies, messaging, and practices. Left unaddressed, each of these can make it harder for the virtual community to take root. Noodle Partners' RISE rubric is a guide for creating an inclusive environment for online students and includes specific components associated with creating an engaging environment for online students. Some of those rubric components address some of the barriers we explore next.

Audit your policies

When was the last time you checked what different university offices require of students trying to get things done? Sometimes a policy lingers long after its usefulness has been maximized, and hasn't been updated as the campus has evolved. For example, some offices may require students to appear

in person (to have a campus photo ID picture taken, or to register for classes for the first time, for example). For online students living far away, that creates a barrier to becoming a part of the campus (and virtual) community. Review your policies with an eye towards students not being physically on-campus and find alternatives.

Audit your messaging

If we want online students to feel a part of the community, we need to ensure that they "see themselves" in all our materials. It's difficult to feel a part of a community when one has to always "read" themselves into the language used by the university. For example, although it may be a welcoming message to say, "Come by our office any time," the student attending virtually most likely can't physically come to an office. They could, however, visit the website, chat or video conference with a staff member, and find the forms they need online. Making that "drop by" language inclusive of the ways online students connect will help them feel seen and part of your campus, rather than an afterthought, or worse, not really a student.

Audit practices

Consider how accessible campus events are — do you have streaming capabilities, or even better, can you use a tool to facilitate remote participation, not just passive viewing? Look at office hours — are your services accessible for students in different time zones?

Add in facilitators to encourage engagement

In the guide to creating a robust Virtual Student Union (also available in the resource library), Noodle Partners describes a number of strategies to facilitate engagement. We've summarized a few here.

Engage student leaders to jump-start participation

A virtual community will take hold more quickly if student leaders(student volunteers) or community managers (often a paid position) help facilitate conversation and networking. In the online community, these ambassadors can be people or they can manifest as AI bots programmed with information that helps frequently asked questions.

Incentivize student-to-student engagement

Get creative! Think of fun competitions or discussions with students. During special on-campus event weeks, mirror the festivities online and encourage students to participate. Consider social media posting challenges, participation in spirit day (e.g. wearing university apparel throughout the week), participating in fundraisers or campus events via a live stream. Some campuses also do photo challenges; they create a weekly photo challenge online and encourage students to participate. As a bonus some programs offer swag for students who participate in the challenges. Some run gentle

competitions between cohorts in a program, and encourage students to comment on other's photo posts.

Don't overlook off platform/in person opportunities (networking, recreation)

A student's likelihood to connect outside of the virtual environment is an indication of the success of the online experience. Campuses/programs should look for opportunities to facilitate attendance at regional events, co-working spaces, and in person campus events. Information about face-to-face get togethers can be found in the document "Getting together," also in the resource library.

How do we measure success?

Kirkpatrick 4 level approach

At Noodle Partners, we use the Kirkpatrick 4 level approach (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2016) to evaluation as the basis for assessing student engagement.

Level 4: The ultimate outcomes

The first step is identifying the goal of engagement, and in our case, we have identified the goals as: satisfied students who successfully complete their programs (on time), develop a sense of identity with the institution, and feel a sense of belonging. We want our students to feel their time in the program as the best educational experience, as being life changing, and one that they would highly recommend.

Indicators could include:
- % employed in their desired field within 6 months of graduation
- Employer ratings of graduates of this program vs other programs
- Alumni ratings of their sense of identity and belonging with this program vs their undergraduate program
- Net Promoter Score for the program from alumni

Level 3: Application of skills

Students at this level move from being passive participants to being creators of engagement opportunities. They initiate student groups and events, create new ways of using engagement tools (for example, some students created a Craig's List type of resale forum within the Virtual Student Union to resell text books, clothes and other items).

Indicators could include:
- Number and percent of organizations that were created by online students
- Number and percent of events (online and on-ground) created by online students
- Number of synchronous sessions originated in the virtual community

- Number of conversions (Conversions = number of in-person interactions whose genesis was the virtual community)
- Frequency of informal, co-curricular interactions between students, faculty and staff
- Number of responses to posts in discussion boards or forums organized outside of a course
- Number of posts created in discussion board organized outside of a course
- % of cohort participating in a social discussion
- Number of new groups created
  - % of cohort participating in a group
- % of students participating in the event
  - % of participants staying for an entire event vs leaving early

Level 2: Acquiring skills, changing behavior

At this level we would expect to see institutions initiating reviews of practices, policies and procedures to make them more accessible. Students attend events and contribute to discussions created for them (vs creating them, themselves). Students, faculty and staff schedule and attend meetings online with one another.

Indicators at this level could include:
- Number of course based discussion posts by students and faculty
- Number and percent of university events made accessible to online students, and number and percent of online attendees
- Baseline interactions: Frequency of formal course-based interactions with peers, faculty, and staff
  - Number of views of discussion boards in courses
  - Number of visits to faculty or staff office hours
- % of cohort participating in a social discussion
- Number of new groups created
- % of cohort participating in a group
- Number of live streams by viewers in the virtual community
- Student self report of engagement with peers and faculty?
  - Connection with peers, faculty, or staff outside of scheduled live sessions
  - Connection with peers, faculty, or staff in person
- Amount of time a student spends in an activity
- Length of synchronous meetings
- Sharing of content/ideas with others (content of posts, for example)
- Content analysis of posts for sharing of links, resources
- Number of file uploads or downloads (daily, weekly, monthly) sharing ideas/content

Level 1: Satisfaction, participation

At this level, a good measure of success is the students' sense of belonging--indicative of a positive student experience. It includes a student's willingness to commune with and support other students, their likelihood of extending their bonds in the learning environment to their personal and professional lives, and how frequently a user seeks out this community also indicate a positive student experience.

Indicators at this level can include:
- Time in the VSU (if it exists)
- Pageviews of discussion posts
- Attendance (or absence) in live sessions for courses
- % of participants staying for the whole thing vs leaving early
- Student satisfaction surveys about their sense of community, satisfaction with opportunities for engagement

Conclusion: Opportunities are there

It is a mistake to think that online students have no interest in engaging with their learning community outside of the classroom. Students, even graduate students, want to feel like they belong. To place all the responsibility for developing that sense of community on what happens in class is to miss a potentially enormous, organic resource.

No two virtual communities will be the same. The cultures and practices of their host campuses as well as the needs and characteristics of the online students will shape how students connect. Provide them the resources, see what works, change and adapt based on their feedback, and your program and its students will be rewarded with an even richer environment in which to learn.

Resources

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