Keeping online students engaged in an environment filled with distractions is one of the chief problems in distance learning today. Online students attend class in their living rooms, in coffee shops and at the park. Many students work via smart phones while on the move.

Ultimately, one of the main differences between taking a class online and in a lecture room is the degree to which other aspects of life remain in close proximity to the student. Distractions abound. Online instructors can help to solve this problem by incorporating student engagement strategies. Here are five techniques that work well.

HOW TO INCREASE ONLINE STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

1. MICROCAST

A microcast is a short podcast of no more than 5 minutes. Microcasts can be parts of longer lectures, broken down and made into a series so that students can listen in short bursts, or they can be designed to be independent, concise discussions of specific parts of your online course content.

Many college students today do their homework while commuting. A microcast fits into commuting time well. Even the most tech-savvy students like to hear their instructors’ voices. It is the educational equivalent of getting a human on the phone.

One of the reasons that students constantly contact instructors for answers that can be found on the syllabus is that students feel disconnected from the classroom environment. Asking the teacher directly provides a sense of security. Microcasting can have the same effect. It can energize online students and keep their level of engagement high.

2. GAMIFY

Gamification, whether through badges, rewards or other means, motivates students to engage with the subject matter outside textbook theory. Using games, students have to apply the skills and content they are learning in the course in order to be successful. They must navigate through content knowledge to reach a goal. Rather than grade students on their game play, have them discuss the thinking methods and content that they learned. This allows you to assess growth in analytical and writing skills as well as content. Students almost always have fun and find these learning games engaging, even when the game may seem simple.
3. RESPOND

Answer student messages as quickly as you can. The more the instructor is involved, the more online student engagement will increase. This can be a daunting task. However, you show students that you see them as important simply by answering their messages. If you answer right away, even with an “I will find out,” students will be patient because they perceive that you have given them the same priority as someone who catches you outside your classroom.

Online, needy students often send multiple emails, which can take up much of your time. However, answering all of these questions early in the semester will pay off later in reduced complaints, and a likely reduction in the number of messages. Students want to know the instructor is there. Like a small child in the dark, they will poke us a few times just to be sure. When they are sure, the poking subsides and they go to work confidently.

4. GIVE FEEDBACK

Use the online grade book tool provided by your course management system and grade as quickly as possible. Students in an online classes check grades regularly, and they read much more into them than do students in the physical classroom. They see the results of their own efforts, but they also can tell if the instructor is putting a low or high priority on the class.

Quick feedback, even if negative, can encourage students to continue their solitary efforts online because they know that they are accomplishing something—and that someone is listening and watching. Leaving the grading of exams for a week or two has the effect of discouraging online students from participating. The Internet is an environment of immediate feedback. We have to acknowledge that when students are online, they expect immediacy as a part of their learning environment.

5. ADMIT MISTAKES

When a student asks you about a missing grade, or a potential error in grading, admit to the possibility of a mistake. Then follow up quickly. On the Internet, students have respect for their instructors, but they don’t feel the intellectual distance that is so common in a brick-and-mortar college setting. If you are unwilling to admit to an error, it looks to them like you don’t know. By admitting to errors, you place yourself in a position of greater authority when it matters. Students will know that when you are wrong you admit it; situations in which you do not admit mistakes are more likely to be the fault of the course management system or students themselves. Immediately admitting to errors where they occur reduces complaints, increases student morale, gives your credibility as a teacher and scholar a boost, and thus increases online student engagement.

Incorporating these five techniques in your online courses will help online students better engage with you and their education. They are not universal solutions to attendance and study problems, but these student engagement strategies will help boost retention and motivation.

ORIGINAL ARTICLE: