Engaging Students in an Online Course

Planning for engagement and interaction at the design phase is crucial. Following through on that intent and facilitating engagement during course delivery is equally essential.

Engaging Students in the Classroom

Consider a face-to-face classroom-based course. Whether it is delivered as a traditional lecture or a more interactive "active learning" course, you have many ways to keep students actively engaged with material:

- You can challenge them with Socratic style questioning.
- You can include discussions at different points during a class.
- If you are presenting to a class and notice a student "zoning out," you can call upon him to pull his mind back to the topic.
- You can incorporate student presentations into the course so that students learn from each other.

You may be able to bring in guest speakers, or to go on field trips.

Engaging Students Online

The need to keep students engaged is just as great in an online course, but the methods available vary from those used in the classroom. Facilitating engagement begins during course design, when you implement strategies such as including interactive activities and varying instructional techniques. It continues during course delivery, where some ways to engage students include:

- Actively facilitating online discussions and chats. Creating these when designing the course is only the first step. They are excellent tools for encouraging student-to-student interaction, but in most cases they don't run themselves. You don't want to dominate students' discussions, but you will likely need to spend some time guiding them.
- Providing feedback to assignments and other activities that stimulates thought and discussion.
- Checking in with students individually via e-mail to ask how things are going, especially if you observe warning signs that they may be having difficulty (e.g., a student misses an assignment deadline or is not meeting participation expectations in a discussion forum). This personal attention reminds students that the course is being led by a real faculty member who is interested in their success.
- If you add or edit content to the course while it is in progress, keep in mind the principles that guided your initial course design, such as:
    - Limiting the length of recorded presentations. Research shows that students "zone out" when watching long recorded lectures. Instead of recording an hour-long presentation for your course, break it down into three 20 minute segments. At the very least, pausing between segments gives students an opportunity to get away from the computer for a minute to recharge. It is even better if you can include an activity between segments, such as a "test your knowledge" question that helps students gauge their grasp of the segment they just viewed.
    - Minimizing the amount of scrolling on each page of online readings. Some experts advocate keeping chunks of text short enough to eliminate all scrolling, but with students using various devices with different sized screens, that is difficult to ensure. A more moderate goal is to keep scrolling to one and a half to two screen lengths on a mid-sized screen.
    - For long readings, because many students are more comfortable reading printed materials, consider a format that gives students the option of printing, such as a Word document or PDF.