Keeping Your Sanity While Keeping Your Students: How Teacher Engagement Can Increase Student Persistence When Teaching Students during Their First College Course

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Abstract

Student persistence is a common concern for online educators. Previous research has shown that student persistence rates are effected by instructor presence, creating a sense of community in the classroom, and varying classroom activities for students (Croxton, 014). Based on the authors’ experiences, there are three strategies for increasing student persistence among students taking their first college course. Using Web 2.0 tools (Zoom, Loom, Remind, and Flipgrid), increasing discussion board posts containing personal experiences, and using effective time management tools can allow instructors to increase student persistence rates. This article provides a brief literature review regarding student persistence and an explanation of the authors’ experiences for increasing student persistence, as well as suggestions for further research in the area of student persistence and instructor strategies.

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Introduction

A common concern in online instruction is student persistence, or a student’s continued enrollment in a program at the end of each course. Student persistence is often influenced by a variety of factors, including student engagement, student-instructor interaction, and delivery methods of content (Croxton, 2014). Research has shown that faculty members can increase student persistence by using strategies such as being accessible to their students, incorporating a variety of activities into their classrooms, and providing personalized feedback on assignments (Gazza & Hunker, 2014). The following article provides a review of previous literature discussing the best strategies for retaining students in programs followed by the authors’ experiences of incorporating these strategies into their classrooms while teaching students in their first course of college.

Literature Review

Student persistence, or continuation, in a college program is a priority for online instructors. Student persistence in online programs is lower than student persistence in traditional, face to face programs (Croxton, 2014). While there are many factors that contribute to whether or not a student chooses to continue in a program, there are many ways that the online instructor can influence student persistence rates. According to Croxton (2014) there three ways that an instructor can influence student persistence: creating an active and social environment, providing a balance in activities, and forming a sense of community in the classroom.

One way that instructors can increase student persistence is by creating a classroom environment that is active and social. Active and social online environments might include discussion forums, cooperative learning opportunities, debates, and problem based learning activities (Croxton, 2014; Glazer & Murphy, 2015). According to Croxton (2014) giving students opportunities to participate in a variety of ways is essential for increasing students’ motivation to continue in their programs.

It is imperative that instructors create a sense of welcoming for students by getting to know students’ personal needs and abilities (Croxton, 2014; Gazza & Hunter, 2014; Glazer & Murphy, 2015). Students also feel this sense of community through personalized feedback from the instructor (Rodriguez-Keyes, 2013). Studies show that there is a direct correlation between when students feel recognized as individuals and their performance in the course. Personalized instructor interaction led to higher levels of motivation and interest in the field of study (Glazer & Murphy, 2015; Rodriguez-Keyes, Schneider, & Keenan, 2013), which in turn leads to higher retention rates.

Student persistence can also be increased through the use of varied technologies within the online classrooms. Varied technologies give students more opportunities for interaction and a better sense of community and instructor presence (Dimeo, 2017; Foronda & Lippincott, 2014; Glazer & Murphy, 2015). These technologies can also be used for providing specific, individualized feedback, another factor that is directly related to student persistence (Rodriguez-Keyes et al., 2013, Ma, Han, Yang & Cheng, 2015). The following section details the authors’ strategies for maintaining persistence among students following their first college course.

Authors’ Experiences

The authors found that there are many strategies for raising student persistence rates among students following their first college course. Strategies for maintaining high student persistence rates can be broken down into three categories: using Web 2.0 tools, sharing personal experiences in discussion boards, and having effective time management tools. These strategies align with research regarding student retention (Dimeo, 2017; Jones, 2013; Sandercock, 2014)

Utilizing Web 2.0 tools is an effective way to increase student persistence as they allow for increased instructor presence and personalized feedback. Tools such as Zoom, a video conferencing website, allow instructors to meet with students synchronously, thereby increasing instructor presence (Basko & Hartman, 2017). Other tools such as Loom and Flipgrid allow instructors to create videos for providing personalized feedback, personal discussion board posts, and explaining assignment details. Remind.com allows instructors to communicate with students via text message, and therefore give students information more efficiently. The authors’ have found that integrating these tools into their classrooms has led to higher levels of student persistence.

In an online college classroom the teacher is a computer screen. Without engagement from the professor, students in the online modality will never know who their professor is nor anything about them. Some professors may believe that all a student needs to know is the curriculum that is presented in the course, but research shows that this is far from the case. According to Dimeo (2017), it is important for students to understand that their instructors are real people. John C. Maxwell (n.d.) said it best when he stated, “Student don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.” One way to increase this engagement is through personalized discussion board posts. These posts can include descriptions of the instructor’s own experience in the field, connections to how the instruction relates to the field of study (Sandercock, 2014), and humorous content to help the instructor and students make a personal connection (McCabe, Sprute, Underdown, 2017). These personal posts increase engaging and learning, which then leads to student persistence.

Having effective time management tools is another strategy that leads to higher student persistence, based on the authors’ experiences. Student persistence is effected by timely instructor feedback and instructor interaction (Gazza & Hunker, 2014; Jones, 2013) and having good time management allows instructors the time to meet these needs. Strategies such as using a weekly checklist for tasks and early grading have allowed for effective time management, in the authors’ experience. Tools such as TypeItIn also increase instructor efficiency in grading assignments and providing feedback. Using these tools also allows for instructors to be more accessible to students as they have more time for phone calls, emails, and discussion board interactions.

Suggestions for Further Research

In their experience, the authors have found that using Web 2.0 tools, sharing personalized experiences in the discussion boards, and using effective time management strategies can lead to student persistence. Further research should be conducted to further support the use of these strategies. It is also recommended that the use of additional Web 2.0 tools be explored in regard to student retention rates. Research in these areas will help increase rates of student persistence in online classrooms.

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