

# CONNECTING WITH STUDENTS USING “CODE WORDS”

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## **SOTL PROBLEM:**

A common problem that impacts online instructors is finding ways to get students to view and interact with content (Lister, 2014, Steele; Nordin, Larson, & McIntosh, 2017). Specifically, to ensure that students can navigate to key resources for the course (Steele et al., 2017). In online learning especially, instructors often refer students to resources (inside or outside of the Learning Management System), but have no idea if students are actually accessing these sources. The instructors of two university introduction courses (Information Literacy and Critical Thinking) had both created additional resources to help with the course assignments. The instructors noticed that many students were not utilizing or sometimes even aware of the supplemental resources that they were referring to throughout course announcements and discussions that could be beneficial to student's success on assignments and mastering important course objectives.

## **POTENTIAL SOLUTION:**

To find a solution to this problem, instructors focused on the concept of gamification. Gamification involves the use of gaming elements to motivate and engage learners (Doney, 2019). The instructors brainstormed ways of using gamification to help guide students to the important resources. The instructors decided to use a “code word” activity to guide students to the websites that housed key resources and create an extension activity from it to help students connect with the instructor or university. This use of gamification can be a fun and effective way to guide students to the key resources and engage them in an activity to build connection to the instructor, course, and university.

## **STEPS TAKEN TO ADDRESS THE PROBLEM**

### *“Code Word”*

The “code word” strategy can be used by

placing any word the instructor chooses in a video, assignment feedback, or message to the student. If placed strategically, the code word can require students to pay close attention to the content. While this does not infer that the student watches the video or reads all the feedback, it does ensure that students are at the very least guided to the correct place. One instructor placed the “code word” at the very end of a short introductory video (embedded in the classroom with a link) which explained the website resources and detailed the class guidelines. The other instructor placed their “code word” in the introductory video that was located on the external website which forced students to navigate to the page with the resources to get their “code word.” Again the strategy did not ensure that students explored the websites or videos but it did ensure that they navigated there which was the solution to the problem.

## **EXTENSION ACTIVITY**

Each instructor also created an extension activity for students to participate in after finding their “code word.” One instructor created an extension activity that guided the students to the course eBook, taught them to use the CTRL + F (find) feature to report back about a specific course related term hoping this would help students feel more comfortable with content and vocabulary. The other instructor created an extension activity that guided students to the University website to learn more about the University climate and culture. While these activities were all optional, the students did earn participation credit for their efforts.

## **STUDENT SURVEY**

The next step was for the instructors to create a survey to harness the usefulness, satisfaction, and connection from student's experience with the code word activities. The instructors have already completed an exploratory study and collected data on the following research questions:

- R.1** Did students find the “code word” activity useful and easy to complete?
- R.2** Are students satisfied with the “code word” activity?
- R.3** Did the “code word” activities help students feel more connected to the instructor, content, or university?
- R.4** Were the external resources helpful?

## RESULTS

A total of 134 participants participated in the “code word” survey. 94% of the participants found it easy to find their “code word”. While 78% of participants noted that they found the external resources that they were guided to in the activity either extremely or very helpful. From the 117 participants who completed the extension activity, 35% were very satisfied and 38% were satisfied with the extension activity. Only 17 students who completed the “code word” activity decided not to participate in the extension activity. The most important finding was that nearly 71% of students surveyed indicated that they felt more connected to the either the university/course/instructor after participating in this activity.

## POTENTIAL NEXT STEPS

Gamification can be a very beneficial tool to use since it can be adapted to different subjects or content. The online applications of gamification are vast. Code word use could be extended in a variety of ways. For example, this technique could be used to ensure students are viewing and applying feedback in the online classroom. Additionally, using an ice breaker can be a great way to “break the ice” early in a course to connect with students. Future research could be conducted to determine the impact of the supplemental resources on student achievement. Finally, more thorough research could explore the effectiveness with ice breakers to build connection in the online classroom and/or how it compares to the traditional class setting.

## References

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