

ENGAGEMENT IN ONLINE LEARNING: IT'S NOT ALL ABOUT FACULTY!**KATHY BISHOP, CATHERINE ETMANSKI, M. BETH PAGE**

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ABSTRACT:

In this chapter, we, the authors Bishop, Etmanski, and Page, argue for the need to disrupt the traditional notion of faculty as expert and redefine the online faculty role to be that of a facilitator who creates the space for students to engage with both content and other students in the class. We discuss the adult learning principles behind our practices and our attention to building community. To illustrate what our online teaching work looks like in practice, we begin by providing a creative script on what online learning could look like. We then speak to utilizing the specific strategies of online forums, behind the scenes outreach, synchronous meetings, and assignments to create rich engagement in the online environment for higher education and learning.

We place a strong emphasis on building community among our students from the start of course and throughout. Recognizing that people respond differently to different scenarios and have different learning preferences, we seek to offer a diverse range of options for experiencing community, with the intention of offering the possibility of belonging for everyone. The intention to create space for engagement in online learning has challenged us to continually ask ourselves how we can adapt or create new activities and experiences for the online learning environment, so as to enhance engagement.

KEYWORDS:

(Please supply up to 6 keywords for your Chapter)

1. Learning communities
2. Adult learning
3. Constructivism
4. Belonging
5. Omnidirectional mentorship
6. Creativity

Engagement in Online Learning: It's not all about Faculty!

Kathy Bishop, Catherine Etmanski, M. Beth Page

Introduction

Online or blended (online and face-to-face) graduate degrees are becoming increasingly popular options across the globe. As in the title of this collection suggests, these distance options not only have the potential to, but are already disrupting traditional notions of education and learning. Although these distance degrees are increasing in popularity (Christensen & Erying, 2011, p. 8), the attitude that online learning is a lesser alternative to face-to-face classrooms remains part of the common discourse in higher education. This belief may be bolstered by non-credentialed organisations offering non-legitimate credentials via spam email messages. However, we argue that in cases where dedicated educators from verified degree granting Universities (or other institutions of higher education) are involved in teaching, the myth that online learning is a second-class option is no longer valid. Furthermore, we concur that the time is “ripe for disruption-and innovation” (Christensen & Erying, 2011, p. xix).

Drawing primarily from our experiences teaching in various university settings and in particular, a Canadian Master's of Arts in Leadership program where we three authors teach, in this chapter we speak to creatively cultivating engagement in online learning environments. To creatively cultivate engagement in online learning, we argue for the need to disrupt the traditional notion of faculty as expert and redefine the role to be that of a facilitator who creates the space for students to engage with both content and other students in the class. Similarly, Featherman (2014) identifies that in this time of disruption, successful universities enable meaningful degrees through focussing on student-centered education (p. 13). Therefore, as faculty, we seek to skillfully raise the quality of student experience through creatively cultivating engagement and community online.

To illustrate what our online teaching work looks like in practice, we begin with an engagement script of a presentation we offered at the Western Association of Management (WAM) conference in March 2016. In this presentation, rather than giving a standard lecture on the topic of

engagement in online learning communities, we made a conscious choice to disrupt the traditional notion of a conference presentation in the same way that this book suggests that online learning has disruptive potential. To this end, we created a theatrical sketch (Belliveau, 2006) of an online teaching experience in our virtual classrooms. This script highlights both tips and lessons we have learned about how to engage learners in an online environment, for example through a range of discussion forums, activities that elicit heart-felt responses, the ways in which the instructor responds to the needs of different learners both on the online Learning Management System (in our case, Moodle™), and behind the scenes through personalized email correspondence. Just as we intentionally disrupted the usual approach to giving conference presentations, we are similarly intentional in our choice to include a script as the introductory part of this chapter. Just as online learning can disrupt education and calls upon our creativity for better engaging learners, alternative writing styles can also be powerfully disruptive to the ways in which we understand scholarship. We draw from scholars such as Cynthia Chambers, Erica Hasebe-Ludt, Carl Leggo, and Anita Sinner (2012) who promote creative and/or narrative writing as a way of knowing that “comes from the body, the heart, and the imagination, from having our feet planted in the humus of day-to-day, lived experience” (pp. xxiii–xxiv). This approach also appeals to readers who learn from more expressive ways of knowing, as described by Jacqueline Davis-Manigaulte, Lyle Yorks, and Elizabeth Kasl (2006).

Following our engagement script, we discuss the adult learning principles behind our practices and our attention to building community and then speak to utilizing the specific strategies of online forums, behind the scenes outreach, synchronous meetings, and assignments to create rich engagement in the online environment for higher education and learning. The following is our collective narrative account of our approach to online learning and teaching.

2. ENGAGEMENT SCRIPT

2.1 Week 1 Online Forum: Welcome/Orientation

Instructor (played by Kathy) *typing into computer*: Welcome to “Engagement in online learning 101: It’s not all about faculty!” It is not all about faculty but faculty do have a critical role to play in

cultivating engagement with and between learners in online learning. I am your instructor and I am delighted to be teaching this course and share in this stage of your learning journey. **You will notice we have a variety of discussion forums. For example, Our Weekly Posts Forum. Our Learning Community Forum, and our Q&A Forum.** If you run into a question regarding anything during the course, feel free to first post it to Q&A Forum. For those who may find online learning challenging, since it is a different way of being and doing, I have prescheduled a few Collaborate™ sessions for us to spend some real time, face to face time dialoguing; albeit in cyberspace!

In this forum, please take a moment and introduce yourself to our community.

Student 1 (played by Catherine): Hi everyone. My name is AAA and I'm a student of life and a lifelong learner. I'm delighted to be joining this online course and I look forward to learning with you all.

Student 2 (played by Beth): My name is BBB. I teach on contract at our local University as associate faculty. I'm interested in belonging. I think learning is easier face to face.

Student 1: Hi BBB! Great to e-meet you! I love to face to face learning as well, but this is my fourth course now and I'm getting into the swing of online learning. I hope we can engage in some great conversations throughout the course.

Student 2: *(No response, but thinks to herself: "Oh brother, what a keener!")*

Instructor: Beautiful all! What are some of the benefits of online learning?

Student 1: I love that I can login at any time of the day or night and fit this coursework into my busy schedule.

Student 2: The benefits of online learning are, I get on when I can because I do a variety of consulting work. And I love that I can post in my pajamas.

Learning Community Forum

Instructor: Welcome to the Learning Community. The Learning Community Room is a place to discuss the activities and course assignments. For me, it is another space which creates a real opportunity to grow our learning community. I invite you to consider: How do you want to show up here in your learning? How will you support others in their learning? I am sharing a link to a three min YouTube video:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kZIXWp6vFdE>

To me, this video epitomises so many belonging values: inspiration, overcoming obstacles, determination, responding in the moment, servant leadership, support, ... found in Olympian Derek Redmond's story. This may also give you a glimpse into a bit of how I think and what moves me. What might this video tell you about who I am as an instructor in this course?

Student 1: Wow! What an incredible story. I admit it brought a tear to my eye. The agony on his face was so hard to see. I wonder how the other athletes felt passing him by, seeing that he was in pain, yet needing to stay focused on their own race. Sometimes competition can push us toward our own personal best so there is an opportunity to love our competitors for their role in bringing out the best in us.

Also touching, of course, was the incredible support from his father. Even though he lost the race, I think the crowd witnessed an amazing victory for humanity! I love stories like this that remind us of our capacity as humans to truly support and love one another in our moments of vulnerability as well as our moments of strength. I think this video shows that you will break through security to help me across the finish line, even when I'm struggling!

Student 2: It was a powerful moment of persevering to the finish.

Instructor: Awesome! I love hearing your responses, and seeing the different lenses we can view one story from, and love the connections to human capacity and the value of support and persevering. Indeed, I am here in support of your learning and am committed to supporting everyone finishing strong in this course!

I tend to be on online courses daily to see how things are going. If things are going fine, I may just smile and revel in your individual and collective capacities. Alternatively, I may offer thought provoking questions or coaching suggestions to deepen your learning. I am conscious, though, to allow you the space for you to grow your learning community rooted in omnidirectional mentorship and support.... Enjoy a super day of learning!

Week 2 Online Forum: Learning and Belonging in Community

Instructor: Welcome to this Week's Forum on learning and belonging in community. Please read the assigned readings and make 1 online post and 2 responses to your colleagues around, the question: Why is belonging important in online learning? Note: This is a great opportunity to practice referencing skills for your first assignment. Please be sure to refer to your American Psychological Association (APA) publication manual, sixth edition (2010).

Student 1: Peter Block suggested that community cannot exist without people experiencing a sense of belonging. Moreover, Stallard and Pankau identified that "people have six psychological needs that they expect will be met in the workplace: respect, recognition, belonging, autonomy, personal growth, and meaning" (p. 20). Furthermore, Pearce and Pearce noted that in belonging to community, people gain an (a) understanding that one's own stories and (b) [realise] the value of remaining in the tension between standing one's own ground and being profoundly open to the other. As a result, the act of belonging is co-created through people sharing their stories and expanding their self-understanding.

Student 2: *thinks to herself, "Wow! That was articulate! Hmmm, I don't know what to say. . ." She does not post anything.*

Instructor: Excellent point about belonging! I wonder, what are your thoughts about how this understanding of self-in relationship to other-enables effective online learning? Just a quick note about referencing too. According to APA (2010) authors are cited followed by the year. So correctly you would say, Block (2008) suggested . . . and Stallard and Pankau (2008) identified . . . and Pearce and Pearce (2003) noted. Make sense?

Instructor continues to look through the course site then says: Hmmm, Student 2 has not been online posting. She's been online but no posts ... (*Looks at watch - Pauses*¹) 10 hours, still no post. (*Looks at watch - Pauses*) 20 hours still not online posting. (*Looks at watch - Pauses*) two hours past deadline. I think I'll drop her a private email. (*Begins typing*)

Dear BBB, I'm just checking in. I have noticed that you have been online, but you have missed the deadline to complete this week's activity. I know that it can sometimes take students time to understand the Course site and also to rearrange their work/life schedule in order to have enough space to engage in the online learning community. So I wanted to check in and see how you are doing? Participation is critical. Sharing your reflections on readings, responding thoughtfully to others posts and participating in building our learning community are all important aspects of online learning. Looking forward to hearing from you.

Student 2: Thanks so much to reaching out via e-mail. To be honest, I'm not sure what to say in response to this week's activity. AAA is so articulate and I feel a little intimidated sharing my ideas in this online forum. When I speak in class I can just go with the flow of ideas, but typing seems so permanent. I feel as though the limitations to my knowledge will be on display for all to read! That said, I signed up for this course so I will muster up some courage and give it a shot.

Instructor: Thanks BBB. I know that it sometimes takes students time to get used to the online learning environment. Many students feel the way you do. I appreciate how you are willing to muster up the courage and give it shot. I am hunching that you are a deep thinker, and I am interested in what you have to say. Without a doubt others will too. Perhaps there might be some strategy you could put into place, such as you talking into a tape recorder to let your ideas flow and then transcribe it with the caveat that your ideas are still in process. It is in the dialogue that we can

¹ Note this is Staging direction within this performance script to show the passing of time.

really learn and grow! I encourage you to have fun with this new form and let me know if there's something I can do to support you. See you online!

Student 2 *writing in the online forum*: Hello all, I guess what I've been thinking about this week is that in order to really feel like I belong, I need to feel like people accept me as I am, *warts and all!* I'll take a little risk here and say that I'm really feeling out of my comfort zone in this online learning environment so I'm feeling quite vulnerable. When I watched that video the instructor posted last week I thought to myself, "oh no, I don't want to be seen hobbling across the finish line on anyone's shoulder—especially not in front of all these strangers online!" But I guess if I'm going to learn, I need to be willing to fall (metaphorically speaking). Maybe belonging means finding a place where it's OK to fall. P.S. No APA this time, but I'll try again next week!

Instructor *continuing the thread in the online forum*: I appreciate your honesty and openness BBB, and indeed this is a place where it's OK to fall! I love how everyone is showing up, authentically, questioning, wrestling with the content and deeply thinking about belonging. As we wrap up the week, please post an image of what belonging in community looks like to you.

Student 1: *I'm not sure what the instructor means. I think I'll her an email.* About this week's Learning community activity, I wondered is it a personal picture I have or is it one from the internet?

Instructor: Hi AAA. Thanks for your email. Great question! It's your choice, any image you would like. Also, this is a great question to post in our Q&A forum because if you have the question likely others may have it as well. Could you please post it there and I will respond for us all to dialogue on it? Thank you!

Student 2: I love this activity! My image is of a carrot. There's a great quote by Paul Cezanne that says, "The day is coming when a single carrot, freshly observed, will start off a revolution!" After struggling all week to figure out how to join this conversation, I now feel as though I'm seeing online learning differently and think there might be a place for me to belong here. There's hope for me yet!

Student 1: Thanks for your patience. I was a little uncertain about where to begin this week. Here is a picture of our farewell party for a colleague who had been with the organisation for 10 years. I love this picture because we are all so happy, celebrating this person's next move and honouring how much we are all connected.

Instructor: Excellent work this week. I appreciate AAA's question in our Q&A forum, and such great images on Belonging. Very striking! As Kouzes and Posner noted "you can't get extraordinary things done by yourself". Onwards in our learning journey!

PS. I have been calling you on APA this week, and for a bit of fun, I thought I'd let you call me on it too. Did you notice what one APA mistake I made?

Student 1: *I'll take a stab at this.* Is it that you didn't follow Kouzes and Posner with the year (2012)?

Student 2: And, shouldn't you have included the page number (p. 242) after the quotation marks?

Instructor: *What? Two mistakes? I said I only made one!*

3 ONLINE TEACHING PRINCIPLES DEMONSTRATED IN THE SCRIPT

Once the role-play aspect of our Western Association of Management (WAM) conference presentation was over, we debriefed with the audience for deeper dialogue around the topic of engagement in online learning communities. We asked them which strategies were modelled through the script, what they learned, and what other strategies they themselves use. The debrief questions centered on strategies for co-creating community and engagement for both students and faculty.

During this dialogue, we drew upon our individual and collective experiences teaching in different University settings and in particular, in the Master's of Arts in Leadership program at Royal Roads University (RRU). In 2016, the School of Leadership Studies in which we work celebrated its 20th year of offering leadership degrees for professional adult learners in a blended format (which combines face to face and online learning). Created as a special purpose University for working professionals, RRU primarily offers two-year graduate degrees that include at least two on campus learning experiences (typically one to three weeks in length) with the remainder of the learning happening online. Having refined its learning and teaching model over the past two decades, scholars at RRU have now identified several principles that underpin the success of this model (Grundy et al., 2016; Royal Roads University, 2013). These include, but are not limited to creating learning communities (i.e., students stay together as a cohort to support one another through a whole program) and fostering engaged learning (i.e., employing learning techniques that require active participation of students) (Royal Roads University, 2013, p. 15). In addition, this learning and teaching model recognises that adult learners bring a wealth of knowledge and experience to the classroom and therefore applies constructivist notions to co-create knowledge between and among faculty, learners, concepts, and theories.

Because the program in which we teach is blended, members of the audience during this conference presentation raised important questions about whether or not a sense of engagement and belonging to community was possible in a strictly online setting. Since all three of us have taught in online only classes, we do indeed believe that it can along with other scholars (Austin, 2013, Luppicini, 2007). Underpinning our belief in cultivating engagement in online learning is the desire to disrupt the traditional notion of faculty as expert as advocated by Freire (2005) and redefining the role to be that of facilitator who creates the space for students to engage with both content and other students in the class. We will now showcase examples of how these ideas are put into practice and demonstrate successful strategies for cultivating engagement. We begin by discussing the adult learning principles behind our practices and our attention to building community and then speak to

utilising the specific strategies of online forums, behind the scenes outreach via e-mail, synchronous meetings, and assignments (individual and team) to create rich engagement in the online environment for higher education and learning.

3.1 Applying Adult Learning Principles

Students frequently come into the online classroom environment with notions of learning based on a more traditional, top-down, teacher-centred model of education, (i.e., Freire's infamous "banking model"; see Freire 2005). However, they quickly find that our classrooms, involving adult learning principles and experiential group processes, create bonds among student colleagues and enable them to engage more deeply with the material and one another. From our experience, successful online classrooms are rooted in the principles of andragogy. Specifically, Malcolm Knowles (1970) introduced the European term andragogy in 1968 as adult educators focussed their attention on theory building and learning for adult education, which was a field in the process of differentiating itself from the theory associated with how children learn. According to Merriam (2001), several principles underpin andragogy which include someone who: can direct their own learning; comes with life experience and learning needs; is seeking immediate application of their learning; and is motivated from their own internal source. As a result, we seek out ways to enable personally meaningful application within the classroom.

We have found that constructing online learning activities according to Kolb's (1984) experiential model of learning is a way to engage students in personally meaningful ways. Course activities are designed to address all four components of Kolb's experiential learning cycle, namely, concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. Students are asked to consider a particular experience, reflect on it by discussing their thoughts and feelings, draw connections to theory, and, put new behaviours into practice and report on their experience. Therefore, in addition to requiring students to read and apply theories, we also require

them to actively learn from their experiences throughout the course, which enables them to engage deeper with the course materials.

Furthermore, as adult educators, we are always seeking to find new and innovative means to engage learners. McLeod (1988) observed that there are five major ways of making meaning: through number, word, image, gesture, and sound (as cited in Norris, 2000, p. 40). In education we tend to privilege word, whereas in the arts, image, gesture, and sound are recognised as different ways of coming to understand and know the world. Therefore, wherever possible, we tend to blend in creative and/or arts-based practices into the online environment. Arts-based practices are not simply for engaging in artistic processes, but are also different ways of knowing that we can draw upon to engage learners. We might suggest activities that incorporate music, photographs, poetry, or drawings. Symbolism is utilised to elicit meaning and engage learners in rich conversations. We start with the symbol and elicit meaning that way, rather than starting with the written word alone (e.g., an article or book) to generate meaning.

3.2 Building Community

In addition to creating a personally meaning learning environment as a way to engage students, we also recognise the importance of building community as a way to engage students. As two of us have discussed in a previously published chapter (see Page, Etmanski & Agger-Gupta, 2016, pp. 159–160), in the existing literature, the concepts of Communities of Learning (CoL) and Communities of Practice (CoP) are frequently conflated. Although CoLs are at times narrowly defined in the educational literature specifically “as a formal cross-disciplinary approach, involving the restructuring of the curriculum to enhance active, collaborative learning” (Wastawy, Uth, & Stewart, 2004, p. 333), they are typically associated more generally with the sharing and co-creation of knowledge. Likewise, the concept of a CoP is typically associated with Wenger’s (1998) work (see also, Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 2000; Wenger & Snyder, 2000). Described as “groups of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise” (Wenger & Snyder,

2000, p. 139), CoPs have become part of organisational and educational discourse for the past two decades.

The concept of CoP has become more nuanced over the years as new technologies have emerged and the body of related literature has expanded. However, in his original association of *community* with the idea of *practice*, Wenger (1998) claimed that the association of these two words “yields a more tractable characterization of the concept of practice – in particular, by distinguishing it from less tractable terms like culture, activity, or structure [and] ... defines a special type of community – a community of practice” (p. 72). Wenger went on to assert that the three characteristics of CoPs were mutual engagement (i.e., people doing things together in the midst of complexity and diversity), a joint enterprise (i.e., in the context of heterogeneity, mutual responsibility, and diverse interpretations), and a shared repertoire (i.e., of stories, artifacts, historical events, concepts, and discourses) (pp. 73–85). Moreover, Hyde, Kvalshaugen, and Breunig (2014) have added to Wenger’s original conception to assert that “a view of CoP that extends beyond the local understanding to consider relational ties in terms of spatial and relational proximity is needed” (p. 610). In other words, the more traditional understanding of community as only comprising a place-based group of people has evolved and communities are now understood to exist in virtual settings as well. As such, the Learning Communities (both CoL and CoP) we discuss in this section extend beyond place-based communities of more typical, localised classrooms and into the online setting.

The Learning Communities we seek to create are rooted in omnidirectional mentorship (Clapp, 2010). Omnidirectional mentorship can be thoughtfully introduced to students so that they realise that they can learn with and from each other as well as the faculty. Furthermore, this can create a sense of belonging in the classroom. We recognise that people learn better and engage more when they feel that they belong. As Block (2008) suggested, community cannot exist without people experiencing a sense of belonging. For this reason, we continue to place, a strong emphasis on building community among our students from the start of course and throughout. Recognizing

that people respond differently to different scenarios and have different learning preferences (Kolb, 1984), we seek to offer a diverse range of options for experiencing community, with the intention of offering the possibility of belonging for everyone.

3.3 Strategies for engagement

In the opening script above, we demonstrated several strategies for facilitating online engagement, namely through online Forums and behind the scene outreaches. In addition to expanding on these strategies, we will also elaborate on synchronous meetings, and course assignments (individual and team).

Online Forums

We highlighted three key forums in our script: weekly forum, learning community and Q&A.

3.3.1 Weekly Forum

Within the first week, we immediately set our role with some type of activity or video which engages learners and demonstrates that in this classroom environment we will be learning from one another and that students need to step up to contribute to make it a personally meaningful experience for all. For one of the authors, Beth, when onboarding people into the course, whether a brand new course or into a pre-existing class, she asks students “what is the contribution that you are making to our new community to create an inclusive learning environment?” Also at the beginning of a course, we might extend individual welcomes to each student, connecting some element of their introductory post to something we have experienced or something that they have suggested that relates to the learning. This strategy allows us to connect individually with each student and models the way for others to see how they might show up in community. Other strategies that we employ include, posing a curious question that will deepen or further dialogue. In another author, Catherine’s online courses, she will often assign students the role of facilitator for the week. This means that students themselves (individually or in pairs or small groups) will be responsible for facilitating the discussion around the week’s assigned readings. She often asks them to engage their fellow students in a creative way and this has opened the door to all kinds of

possibilities. For example, in their role as weekly facilitators, students have asked their colleagues to post a photograph or come up with a tweet that summarises the article assigned to that week. Sometimes students have used a word cloud generating online tool called, Wordl™ (see: [www.
http://www.wordle.net/](http://www.wordle.net/)) to summarise the week's discussions. Regardless of the strategy they use to engage their classmates, the very fact that the conversation has been designed by their classmates creates a sense of accountability to one another and a desire to participate in others' activities so that others will likewise participate in theirs when the time comes.

3.3.2 Learning Community Forum

Participation in this particular forum is not mandatory, and acts as a communal space for the class to connect and continue to engage with and among one another in an informal way, thus, fostering further means to engage and co-create community. Students can utilise it to discuss the activities and course assignments, and/or explore different ideas above and beyond course material. As identified in the script included at the outset of this chapter, the author Kathy has used it as a place to speak to her role as online instructor through posting the Redmond video (URL included above as part of the script). Often after hearing different people's perspectives, she will identify some of the common themes among the students. She will also reiterate her role to create a space for learners to run with the course material and that she will be on the side lines watching and waiting to offer support and guidance, and cheering them on. In the past, the author, Beth, has invited students to adopt a 30-day challenge related to some aspect of the course. We have witnessed students offer a variety of resources, such as TED Talks™ (a free speaker series where videos of short, powerful speeches are posted online; for more information, see: <https://www.ted.com/talks>), relevant websites or literature, along with quotes of encouragement, cartoons to offer humour, and invitations to post pictures of their favourite work spaces, personal adventures, or family fun.

3.3.3 Q&A Forum

The power of this forum is that students feel they have access to the faculty member as the need arises. Often students will complain that a faculty member is not online and so this is a way to ensure that their needs are met. More often though than not, another student has the answer and responds in the forum before the faculty member. Often students express that they were glad someone posted the question as they had wondered about the same thing and no longer feel alone.

3.3.4 Behind the Scenes Outreach

As shown in the vignette above, we email students behind the scenes. In the first week of a program launch, a check in email will be sent to students who have not shown up online, to reinforce the value of participation and contribution and to offer support if the student is struggling. We do not offer the possibility that anyone will be an outlier. We make sure to round everyone up, and do so sooner than later. If students are not online every few days, we email. If students miss a deadline, we send a personal email checking in. Essentially, the thread of being in community and belonging gets pulled through everything we do.

3.3.5 Synchronous meetings (formal and informal)

Technology, such as Collaborate™, Skype™, and Zoom™, allows students to connect virtually through both formal and informal means. Both formal and informal methods are necessary to operate successfully as an organisation (Hydle et al., 2014, p. 620). We as faculty organise virtual synchronous sessions at strategic points, but we also leave our course site Collaborate™ rooms open so students can self-organise as well. For example, we tend to set a synchronous session in the first two weeks of a course to have a virtual face-to-face with the class as a way to get to know one another, go over the course expectations or assignments, and answer any questions that students might have. With the open Collaborate™ rooms, we have witnessed students at their discretion booking informal synchronous check-ins throughout the online portion of their coursework. Catherine once coined this kind of a check-in call as “a Collaborate Wine and Cheese”, which students enjoyed and the term stuck (informal). As well, one of our colleagues sets up an Open Space dialogue, which allows students to experiment and go into different rooms, depending on

their topic of interest. Finally, in many online courses, we encourage a synchronous meeting where students can celebrate their learning and completion of the course.

3.3.6 Assignments (individual and team)

Online there is also the opportunity of building of engagement through assignments both on an individual level and as a team. Similar to the example of author Catherine's example above who assigns students to be weekly facilitators, author, Kathy, builds engagement by requiring learners to implement a student-led seminar as one of the course assignments. For this assignment each student is expected to lead one asynchronous seminar, by offering a one page synopsis of a selected topic from a particular textbook and engaging the class in whatever creative means to engage in dialogue (e.g., video, presentation, sound bite, creative questioning). Upon completing the seminar, each student is expected to submit a two page reflective paper summarizing the key learnings resulting from her/his seminar presentation and the class dialogue. Thus, although an individual assignment it requires engagement with other students. Likewise, we build in peer review as part of individual assignments. We ask students to post a draft of their assignments and engage in a discussion with learning partners or triads where they are to pose curious questions and give substantive feedforward (Goldsmith, 2002) to deepen their own learning and that of others. After they engage in this process, they polish and submit their final assignment to faculty for review. Another way of creating more structured engagement is through setting team assignments. Team assignments are created to offer the opportunity for learners to engage with others, either in partners or small groups. A variety of different technological tools can be built into the team assignments as a way to foster different ways to engage with others. For example, a team assignment can be set up for groups to put together an annotated bibliography by using a Wiki™, which is a tool that can be added to the online Learning Management System similar to a Google Doc™, which everyone can edit.

4 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, our online students have benefitted from our intentional disruption of the traditional view of faculty as expert. This intention to create space for engagement in online learning has challenged us to continually ask ourselves how we can adapt or create new activities and experiences for the online learning environment, so as to enhance engagement. In this chapter, we contended that engagement in on online learning is about how educators create a space for learners to engage with one another by cultivating engaged learning and communities of learning. Grounded in adult learning theory principles and drawing primarily, but not exclusively, from our experiences teaching in a variety of university settings we shared case study examples and strategies for engagement—namely through online forums, behind the scene outreaches, synchronous meetings, and assignments. This chapter promotes the possibility that online learning has the potential to disrupt traditional educational approaches through creatively cultivating engagement online and building community. In doing so, online learning may continue to grow and thrive as a viable alternative mainstream option for education in the 21st century.

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