

Bridging the Divide in Online Learning

Increasing Course Interest and Engagement Using Care Packages

Anna L. McNab, Ph.D. (amcnab@niagara.edu)

Active learning can be defined as "anything that involves students in doing things and thinking about the things they are doing" (Bonwell & Eison, 1991, p. 2) and is known to address different learning styles, creates personal connection to the course material for students, that can lead to greater motivation to learn the material (Cornell, 2017). It has also been linked to greater development of critical and creative thinking, problem-solving, adaptability, communication and interpersonal skills (Kember & Leung, 2005). Due to these benefits, incorporating active learning in online learning courses is crucial, though it can prove challenging.

Figuring out successful practices for incorporating active learning into online courses is of great importance. While many sources show increasing year-to-year rate of students subscribing to online education, online education is seeing large attrition rates, for huge online courses these go as high as 90 percent, and even smaller-scale online courses see higher attrition rates than face-to-face courses (NYT, 2013). Some evidence shows that courses delivered solely online may be fine for highly skilled, highly motivated students, but they are inappropriate for struggling students (NYT, 2013). Interestingly, students in hybrid classes performed as well academically as those in traditional classes (NYT, 2013) presumably pointing to the importance of having greater contact with the professor and course material.

The challenge then is to create online environments that foster active learning and help students better engage with the course material. The author is currently piloting an effort to bridge the gap between online and face-to-face learning in an effort to create opportunities for greater active learning engagement using care packages containing various course related materials. The course is ongoing, however, anecdotal evidence suggests greater engagement of the students with the course material (average time spent in learning management system is greater than with similar course that did not include these hands-on activities), no attrition, positive outlook, high quality of assignments and documented enjoyment of the course, while also learning a lot. Further research into the effects of such technique are necessary.

References

- Active Learning, 2017. Cornell University Center for Teaching and Excellence. Retrieved from: <https://www.cte.cornell.edu/teaching-ideas/engaging-students/active-learning.html>
- Bonwell, C. C., & Eison, J. A. (1991). Active learning: Creating excitement in the classroom (ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Rep. No. 1). Washington, DC: The George Washington University, School of Education and Human Development.
- Kember, David, and Doris YP Leung. "The influence of active learning experiences on the development of graduate capabilities." *Studies in Higher Education* 30.2 (2005): 155-170.
- The trouble with online college. 2013. *New York Times*. Retrieved from: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/19/opinion/the-trouble-with-online-college.html>