

Teaching Professionalism to Paralegal Students



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Student Engagement in Distance Learning Courses



More and more colleges and universities are utilizing distance learning. Through the evolution and leveraging of technology, distance learning has seen a period of growth such that instructors are delivering online synchronous lectures in real-time (Pullen, 2000). There are a myriad of ways to leverage technology to engage students in synchronous instruction, such as audio and video teleconferencing, virtual classrooms, and instant messaging (Ruiz et al., 2006). As a result, distance learning and online education is becoming the standard of practice in higher education (Bernard et al., 2009).

The purpose of this article is to highlight the types of online synchronous instruction that are used to engage student learning and increase student engagement.

Background

More and more institutions of higher learning are providing online learning opportunities for their students. These courses may be in the form of synchronous or asynchronous environments, or they may be a blended combination of both, all of which may supplement traditional face-to-face courses. In a study conducted in 2008, researchers (Shi, Bonk, Tan & Mirshra) found that while there are differing forms of synchronous instruction tools available to educators, the fast growth of online learning has “outpaced” our knowledge of it such that there is a paucity of empirical research examining the world of synchronous learning.

Constructivist Approach To Online Learning

Within the research of online learning literature in general, constructivism has emerged as one of the theories relating to how students produce and process information (Nie & Lau, 2009; Fox, 2001). Constructivist theory was developed by theorists such as Piaget (1973), Vygotsky (1978), and Dewey (1916) and generally means that the student actively constructs new knowledge based on the student’s own individual experiences, where the student is an active learner rather than a passive recipient (Fox, 2001; Gordon, 2008; Knowlton, 2009). This theory is used as a theoretical framework to support the use of online synchronous instruction. Additionally, many researchers have measured student engagement in relation to online learning (Shi, et al., 2008; Chen, Lambert & Guidry, 2010; Robinson & Hullinger, 2008; Oncu & Cakir, 2011; Exeter et al., 2010). For these reasons, this article was written looking through the lens of a constructivist approach to learning specifically in the online learning environment.

Leveraging Technology In Higher Education

The internet has provided society with the means to interact with one another from a distance. Students in particular are able to leverage technology by taking courses in higher education from the privacy of their own homes or office and at times convenient for their schedules (Beard & Harper, 2002). Yet, students and instructors alike have expressed

concerns over the potential lack of direct interaction with professors and with other students (*Id.*). In one quasi-experimental study, researchers sampled 114 postgraduate nursing students over two academic years. The study found students who participated in the online course performed slightly better than students in the face-to-face course, demonstrating the importance of designing learning materials that promote interaction between participants and instructors (Campbell, Gibson, Hall, Richards & Callery, 2008). In another study of nurses (Daroszewski, 2004), students used online journals to share their learning experiences with their classmates, who were then required each week to read and comment on their classmates’ journal entries. The results indicated that the nursing students perceived that sharing experiences enhanced their learning and also promoted mentoring, critical thinking, and socialization (*Id.*).

Student Engagement

Studies investigating student engagement related to instructional technology have found that the online learning environment allows for more time for critical thinking and promotes the use of higher order skills such as problem solving, collaboration, and stimulation (Duderstadt, Atkins & Houweling, 2002; Robinson & Hullinger, 2008). In another study, researchers found a positive relationship between the use of distance learning technology and student engagement and in particular, students in the online setting scored higher than their traditional student counterparts in the areas of collaborative learning and student-faculty interaction, among others (Chen, Lambert & Guidry, 2010). Moreover, researchers have found that distance learners often outperform students in the traditional face-to-face setting when an online learning environment emphasizes learner-centered activities (Zhang, et al., 2004).

Examples Of Engagement In Online Learning Environment

Within the online environment, there are many tools available to instructors to increase and promote student engagement. Indeed, the tools used within the online classroom may affect whether students actually learn the content (Thurmond & Wamach, 2004). Such tools not only consist of email, discussion boards, and chat rooms but also include Web 2.0 technologies such as wikis, podcasts or audioblogs, videologs, and whiteboards (Beldarrain, 2006). Wikis are useful in educational settings in that they support individualized learning, allowing for more socially defined search structures and promote collaboration through group editing and peer review (Alexander, 2006). Document sharing portals, such as Google Docs, allow for knowledge development and collaboration among students (Ajjan & Hartshorne, 2008).

Researchers have found that collaborative learning helps students retain information better than students working individually (Ajjan, et al. citing Johnson & Johnson, 1986). Therefore, it is important for the instructor to facilitate student access to these technologies in order to foster collaboration and sharing of information, which will, in turn, create a sense of community while increasing student engagement (Wilson & Whitelock, 1998).

CONCLUSION

There are many successes in the online synchronous instruction compared to traditional face-to-face courses. In particular, there is a commonality and over-arching theme to most of the cited studies, which is the convenience and increased engagement in the online setting has had a positive impact on students enrolled in the distance education courses. Indeed, the distance learning setting seems to promote higher student engagement and increased collaborative learning. ■

BIOGRAPHY

S. Kristine Farmer, M.S., RP®, PHR®, is a litigation paralegal for the Dallas office of Perkins Coie, LLP and has more than 20 years of experience as a trial paralegal, working in the areas of complex commercial litigation, patent litigation, and labor/employment law.

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