Creating Student Connections in the Online Classroom

Glen (2018) shares a review of trends in online learning, "*overall academic preparedness has declined, and academic disengagement has increased at the collegiate level, citing weak academic skills, personal circumstances, and other potential challenges in adapting to college as the reasons for at-risk students who fail*" (p. 382).

How does this connect to students at South Louisiana Community College (SLCC)? We understand that many students bring unique challenges to the classroom, including personal, financial, and academic readiness issues. Additionally, the accelerated classroom pace often does not mesh well with students who are insecure, inexperienced, or not as well-equipped to be successful in this type of classroom environment. This combination of factors can be discouraging for students, leading to lessened motivation, failing grades or even withdrawal from class.

Although we might not have the ability to fix these challenges, there are strategies that can lessen the impact. Students working online have special motivational needs that we must directly address if we hope to retain them and achieve true learning:

"*The convenience of online classes needs to be measured against the rigors of a well-designed course that challenges students, as well as motivates them to want to learn. To do this successfully, students need to understand and remember that they are more than an anonymous entity at the other end of a computer screen*" (385).

An intentional focus on connection in the online environment can be a powerful way to motivate your students and keep them engaged in learning despite their challenges. Below are a few engagement strategies:

Get to Know Your Students

Create a space in your classroom for students to share a short introduction. This allows them to give their educational and professional goals as well as any personal information about their lives they are willing to share. Not only can this open a conversation about what they hope to gain from class, it can also connect them to other students who might have similar goals or experiences.

Let Your Students Get to Know You

As you set the stage for learning, it is equally important to share information about yourself – not only your credentials and professional experience, but also personal information that makes your human and relatable. As class progresses, share fun facts about what is going on in life outside of the classroom within reason. This creates an upbeat tone in the classroom and invites others to similarly share.

Go the Extra Mile to Reach Out to Students

What if students are not engaging in introductory activities or seem to have quietly settled in the "back row" of class? It is simple. Reach out to them. Send a private message, pick up the phone, or even send a text to check in with them. As instructors, this might not be our preferred method of interacting with students. However, a little phone conversation or message can go a long way to let the student know that you care about them and their success in class. This can be particularly useful with struggling students as it can help to clarify confusing points or provide helpful tips for improvement. Do not overlook these students as they are probably the ones who need connection the most.

Create Opportunities for Personal Engagement

Find ways to help students personally engage with the classroom or course material. Creating short videos or presentation to explain assignments and clarify expectations can help students to understand what you are looking for in their work at the start of class.

Take it one step further and host live chat sessions, share a mini-lecture on challenging course concepts and/or preview upcoming assignments, weekly teleconferences, or virtual office hours. Giving students the opportunity to hear the information and ask questions via a "real time" interactive platform can make a significant impact on the quality of their learning experience.

The bottom line is this: the nature of the online classroom as well as the typical student working online requires special motivational strategies. Practices focused on establishing and maintaining a real connection may require a little extra effort, but can make a positive difference in your students' educational journey.

References

Glenn, C. W. (2018). Adding the Human Touch to Asynchronous Online Learning. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice, 19*(4), 381-393. SAGE Premier 2016.