

The Impact of Social-Academic Experiences on In-Class Engagement

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Introduction

Innovations in education technology are enabling the classroom to become more globally diverse through the use of varied instructional design (Aragon, Johnson, & Shaik, 2002). As the demand for more synchronous and diverse learning environments increases, the lack of connection between on-campus graduate students and those enrolled as working professionals at a distance remains an issue (Park & Bonk, 2007). In a study to understand the avenues of communication among undergraduate students, Emanuel et al. (2008) discovered listening and speaking accounted for 71.5% of engagement in communication while reading and writing only accounted for 28.5% of the engagement among students. This suggests that face-to-face communication and engagement may enhance the learning environment.

To increase engagement academically, involvement within academic-related discussion and community is necessary (Salanova, Llorens, & Schaufeli, 2011; Strauss & Terenzini, 2007; Wilson et al., 2014). A lack of a sense of community and feelings of disconnectivity often have been expressed as challenges to online learning among students (Park & Bonk, 2007). Creating the connection between on-campus and distance students in an academic setting is important to increased self-efficacy, particularly among graduate students (Strauss & Terenzini, 2007; Wilson et al., 2014).

Not only does connectedness increase the self-efficacy of students, but it can increase academic performance as well because students are involved within an academic learning community (Wilson et al., 2014). Within the University of Georgia, a disconnect between graduate students enrolled in online courses has been noticed. Social-academic activities aimed at remedying the disconnect among students seem to be enhancing graduate student performance and engagement in distance-delivered courses at the University of Georgia. However, additional evidence is needed.

Methodology

Initially, a pre-existing connection between a small contingency of graduate students (five to seven students) was necessary. These students championed the effort to create the social-academic environments and even recommended that this model be shared at a professional conference. These students reached out to other graduate students via email and connected them onto a GroupMe message. The use of this application is common on college campuses and allows for instant brief communication. Following the initial communication from the pre-

existing group of graduate students, the group planned out-of-class group activities aimed at developing discussion and invited any on- or off-campus graduate student to attend.

Results to Date

Prior to the first out-of-class social-academic activity (a trivia night with graduate students on- and off-campus), graduate students enrolled in various synchronous learning courses appeared to be less engaged and uncomfortable introducing diverse discussion topics that have the potential to damage their online reputation. Based on observations, how students are perceived in an online format is greatly impacted by the inability to put a 'name to a face' for other students in the class. This seems to have resulted in a lack of trust and increased vulnerability that has prompted disengagement and poorer quality posts in response to each assignment. After the first social-academic activity, students appeared to have more interaction on discussion boards. This increase in engagement was both in the depth of discussion and in the range of responses to multiple peers.

Future Plans

In depth interviews are planned with faculty who teach online, synchronous and asynchronous courses to on-campus and off-campus students. These interviews will provide additional data useful to uncovering whether social-academic activity participation involving students at a distance meeting face-to-face with on-campus students influences academic growth beyond the depth of discussion board posts. Interviews with students will also help to better understand why their posts get more elaborate and whether they feel more comfortable communicating with their peers online after meeting in person. Furthermore, the distance education technology will be used to track how often students are posting and for how long they spend online engaging with their peers before and after participating in extracurricular, social-academic activities. Similar graduate programs with on- and off-campus students are encouraged to use existing departmental or college-level Graduate Student Associations to facilitate social and professional development events for graduate students. While faculty participation in such events is never prohibited, graduate students often respond more favorably to events in which only their peers are in attendance.

Costs/Resources Needed

Minimal costs are associated with this innovative idea. The primary methods for communication are face-to-face, GroupMe, and Email, as necessary. These communication methods are free to use. Specific social-academic activities are not monetarily sponsored by the respective institution or department and are the sole financial responsibility of those graduate students participating.

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