

## STRATEGIES FOR THE ADULT LEARNER IN NON-CREDIT CLASSES

# Building Engagement into Online Classes

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*Imagine two classrooms of adult learners. In one, the participants enter, are seated and nobody speaks. The teacher lectures, no questions are asked and there are no contributions from the learners. In the second classroom, participants are greeted at the door by facilitators. They are asked to introduce themselves and encouraged to contribute what they know about the subject. Lecture is minimal to nonexistent, especially as participants go deeper into the content and share what they are learning with others. Educators are well aware the latter classroom has the edge in creating a sound learning environment.*

*Teaching online is no different. Adult learners come with prior knowledge of a subject and feel engaged when they have opportunities to contribute to a learning community. This paper contains strategies learned by the authors, academically and through experience, about what it takes to intentionally create an engaging online experience with adults in non-credit settings.*

## WHAT IS AN ENGAGING LEARNING ENVIRONMENT?

In an online learning environment, a feeling of engagement for participants doesn't just happen. Offering an engaging online class requires intentional efforts during both development and delivery of a course.

Interaction is the foundation of engagement. Doering (2006) describes this further with an "adventure learning content" model. The model illustrates how synchronous and asynchronous interaction should be intentionally encouraged and facilitated between the course participants, and between the participants and course facilitators. It is also important to engage participants, facilitators and experts to involve them in interacting with course content.

Engagement is also critical to the level of learning achieved. Participants who report that they are engaged in learning are able to recall the content and remember information for a longer period of time (Newman & Scurry, 2001). Engaged learning involves collaboration among the participants which fosters an online learning community, otherwise developed in a face-to-face environment through small group discussions and projects (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004). Online learning is enhanced by giving learners control of their interactions with media and prompting reflection of their learning with the other participants (Means, et. al., 2010).

This research-base was utilized to implement engagement strategies during the development and delivery of *Youth Work Matters: the online course*. *Youth Work Matters* is a curriculum that provides an in-depth exploration into the foundations and theories of positive youth

development. The highly experiential and interactive nature of a face-to-face class naturally leads to engagement. However, transforming a course to an online format takes intentional efforts to build an engaging environment that will mirror the small group conversations, collaborative learning, and collegial relationships that occur face-to-face. Following are engagement strategies facilitators suggest might be helpful in the development and delivery of an online course.

## **ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES**

Start with a social interaction model that drives both course development and delivery. Social interaction means just that--opportunities for participants to interact with other adult learners. They should be able to make contributions to course content based on their own experience and share how they will apply the new information. Participants can also comment on each other's posts, ask questions of one another, and reasonably expect that their own posts will receive attention and response.

Define clear facilitator roles. During delivery, plan for specific facilitator roles. Who will take overall leadership? What role will facilitators play in discussion forums and live presentations? Who will cover technology issues? Identifying these and other roles leads to a more balanced work load and helps participants feel their comments and questions are addressed in a timely manner.

Communicate time expectations to participants. Be clear in publicity, at registration and in pre-class correspondence of how much time participants need to set aside to complete the class. Help adult learners identify office interruptions and other distractions to prevent those from being barriers to participation. Participants with a clear understanding of expectations may be more likely to follow through if they have planned sufficient time to devote to the class.

Build online community. Give opportunities for participants to introduce themselves and get to know each other at whatever level is comfortable. In a face-to-face class, this happens during the registration and ice breaker activities. Building a foundation of connections and familiarity will enhance interactive activities during the course.

Address technical difficulties. Expect that things will go wrong. Inform participants that technical challenges may arise and will be addressed. If you as a facilitator handle it with calm assurance, participants will adapt to that tone. A "Help Central" forum is a place for participants to flag issues that might otherwise go undetected. Make sure at least one facilitator is identified to receive notices.

Utilize a variety of learning strategies. Use a variety of tools for people to share what they have learned and how they will apply the content. Just as in a face-to-face class, participants come with their own learning styles and preferences. Synchronous and asynchronous strategies appeal to more learners. Mix synchronous webinars and phone calls with asynchronous forum discussions, VoiceThread© and other technology tools to appeal to multiple learning styles.

Acknowledge participation levels. Some learners will jump into the material with enthusiasm. Others may not be sure how to start or even if they want to start. Watch participation and contact the "slow to start" participants. Make a personal phone call or send

a “we miss you” note to let them know you are paying attention. For the active participants, send them a message to thank them for their participation.

Participate strategically. Just as in a face-to-face class, facilitators can easily dominate an online discussion. Generate discussion when necessary, but let participants lead when possible. For example, facilitators may need to model forum participation by contributing leading questions and comments, rather than a simple “I agree” or “that was interesting” that some participants may tend towards.

Provide incentives for completion. Incentives for participation may motivate adult learners in a non-credit environment. Offer Continuing Education Units (CEU), certificates with credit hours or even small resource gifts for completing class activities. Example activities include completing all evaluations in the course, contributing to every forum discussion, participating in at least half of the online coursework, etc.

## HOW DO YOU KNOW IF YOU’VE ENGAGED YOUR AUDIENCE?

Measuring reported feelings of engagement will help assess whether the intentional strategies that you implemented were effective. Consider evaluating participants *attention* to the learning tasks and activities (time on task), demonstration of *effective cognitive processes* (applying what they are learning to what they already know), and a *social context* in collaboration and collaborative learning activities (feelings of collaborating and learning in a community) (Ingram, 2005).

Examples include:

- Keeping track of forum discussions. Count the number of participant posts (quantitative) and/or assess the content of posts (qualitative).
- Asking about “feeling a part of learning community”. Did participants feel like they were part of a group?
- Assessing how much time was spent on lessons. Did participants spend more or less time than expected?

Gathering this data will allow comparisons between modules in a course or from one offering to another of the same course. This will help monitor successes and identify where to focus attention to improve engagement.

*Don’t expect your first foray into distance delivery to be a model of perfection. It’s okay to fumble and learn as you go; everybody starts somewhere. To help you learn, recruit some experienced coworkers to assist. If possible, take an online course, co-facilitate a course and generally just get accustomed to the online environment. Give it your best shot and learn from your experiences, both what you have done well and not so well!*

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