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Reimagining the Online Learning Experience for Peak Performance

Karolina Kopczynski[1], Cynthia Silvia[2*]

[1]American Public University System, School of Arts, Humanities and Education, American Public University, Charlestown, WV, USA
[2]American Public University System, School of Business, American Public University, Charlestown, WV, USA
Email: *cynthia.silvia@mycampus.apus.edu

Abstract

Reimagining online learning is critical to achieving peak academic performance in higher education. Since the pandemic, online learning has increased in popularity, providing accessibility and allowing students to attend classes from anywhere at any time. As online education grows, online learning will likely become an increasingly important component of education at all levels. Higher education contributes to economic development and experiential learning opportunities that advance knowledge and engage students in critical thinking in their field of study. Online discussions provide a means for student reflection and contribute to their overall success and performance in their academic and professional communities. While online learning has challenges, increasing online learning indicates that the positive changes during COVID-19 are here to stay.

Keywords

Online Learning, Higher Education, Leadership, Gamification, Coaching

1. Introduction

The pandemic has resulted in the closure of schools around the world. Since then, education has changed dramatically with the rise of e-learning and remote and digital platforms. Recent research suggests that online learning increases information retention and takes less time (Li & Lalani, 2020). An increase in online learning indicates that the changes that resulted from the coronavirus may be here to stay.

According to Li and Lelani (2020), more than 1.2 billion children in 186 countries are still affected by the pandemic. In Denmark, schools are starting to reo-

pen; however, in South Korea, schools remain closed. Before the pandemic, the growth and adoption of educational technology and educational investments reached an all-time high of $18.66 billion in 2019 (Li & Lalani, 2020). Language apps, video conferencing, and online learning have increased significantly since COVID-19 began. Online learning is expected to reach $350 billion by 2025 (Li & Lalani, 2020).

Many universities have successfully transitioned to an online learning platform. A key example is Zhejiang University, which added 5000 new courses to its online repertoire in just two weeks. Even professors such as Dr. Amjad from the University of Jordan stated that the online learning platform enables him to teach more efficiently and effectively through chat, video conferencing, and sharing documents with students, even online (Zhu et al., 2020). Many universities have even implemented hybrid courses incorporating classroom and online learning into the learning environment. Some believe that the rapid use of online learning without proper training results in poor user experience, while others believe that a new hybrid online learning model will emerge and eventually become a key component of education at all levels (Zhu et al., 2020).

2. Advantages of Online Learning

Online learning has become more popular since the pandemic began. The online model is often more cost-effective than traditional classroom settings in terms of instructor training, and delivery costs, as well as the cost of materials, travel, and accommodations (Obringer, 2023). Online learning is also self-paced allowing learners to move through the training in smaller modules at their own pace before moving forward. E-learning takes place at a 50% faster pace than traditional classroom learning and can take place from any location worldwide (Obringer, 2023).

Online courses can lead to increased retention rates. This is due to the many elements that are woven into the classroom such as videos, audio recordings, exams, forums, discussions, assignments, and interactivity between students. Students also have the option to go back to review any elements of the course that are not clear. Online classes can accommodate large groups of students. Faculty can track student progress and results and identify students who may need additional instruction.

Online learning has many advantages as well as disadvantages which can all be managed with a well-designed course. The most obvious benefits are flexibility and cost savings with students having the ability to hold a job.

2.1. Embracing Online Learning

Many colleges and universities use the online model as it provides many advantages to learners and other employees who can perform their duties from home (Chidi et al., 2021). Li & Lalani (2020) shared that one-third of university students take at least online courses, which increased to 15.4% in 2017. Online learners must display self-motivation and dedication.

Learners can take classes and earn degrees while having full-time jobs or military service. In addition, they can be there for their families and friends. Learners can also take classes that are hybrid, synchronous, and asynchronous (Mashau & Nyawo, 2021). Learners can decide on their preferences depending on their learning needs and other factors. Online learning is convenient since learners can complete their assignments at any time of the day.

The research by Zhu et al. (2020) revealed that learners learning online displayed positive attitudes when enrolled in online courses and the desire to continue online education. Online learning also accommodates the diverse needs of learners by implementing blended learning and promoting student retention. In addition, the research revealed that students who learn online enjoyed learning due to the quality of courses they took, services and accommodations, and interaction with professors (Zhu et al., 2020).

2.2. Encouraging Student Participation

Student participation is imperative for their success and learning experience. Student participation can be encouraged in many different ways. One of the most effective ways is feedback. It can motivate learners and improve the learning experience when personalized and delivered effectively (Li & Lalani, 2020). Timely and personalized feedback in online classes is essential to stimulate learning and serve as an intrinsic motivation to learners.

Feedback is a learning tool for learners and helps instructors make a teaching presence, foster a learning community, and encourage participation. The instructors can also build online learning communities by maintaining a social presence (Zhu et al., 2020). Social presence can be demonstrated by engagement in discussion forums where instructors acknowledge students' posts and ask more questions, providing more opportunities for student learning.

They can also share resources in daily or weekly announcements. Offering more opportunities to learn encourages students' participation. Social presence can also be established by promptly answering emails and empathizing with students' unforeseen circumstances (Zhu et al., 2020).

2.3. Encouraging Online Learning Success

The research conducted by Zhu et al. (2020) surveyed 94 university students' online learning attitudes and experiences. The data revealed that a positive online learning experience and student satisfaction could be achieved by instructor's knowledge of the subject they teach, their knowledge of students and their needs, designing and personalizing the content of the classes they teach with opportunities and activities that spark curiosity and stimulate learning, social, teaching and cognitive presence and personalized feedback allowing growth.

Online learners look for classes where instructors foster self-regulated learning, motivate students differently, differentiate instruction, and create activities that stimulate learning (Zhu et al., 2020). Yao et al. (2022) suggest specific inno-

vative techniques for students to succeed when learning online.

Some of the strategies are self-awareness of learning preferences. Other strategies may include setting a specific schedule to complete a required assignment, participating in many discussion forums with peers to learn about different perspectives, identifying the motivation sources and focusing on it, applying what you learn as much as possible, staying positive, being empathetic and ask for help if needed (Yao, Wang, Jiang, Li, & Li, 2022).

3. Factors That Contribute to Online Learning Success

Student success in online learning takes place when instructors engage students in online discussions using technology and course design to assist in the professional development of students. An advantage of online learning is that this type of learning offers unique tools not available in the traditional classroom setting such as creating a sense of community and belonging, allowing instructors to focus on engagement and their role as subject matter experts. Establishing a community of inquiry allows instructors to adapt their level of personalization to the different learning styles and needs of the students.

3.1. Peak Performance Techniques

Becoming a successful student is a perfect example of performance mastery. Many predictable mental elements are present when a student is in the middle of an outstanding performance. These components create an internal environment that enables peak performance to take place. This internal state fuels motivation and encourages authentic learning. Mastery means attaining a level of skill that goes beyond technique. Mastery is when the student becomes involved in the learning process. An awareness of these performance techniques is essential for a student's success, and that same internal awareness is essential for a person's success as an instructor. Instructors must fuel that internal environment to encourage student success to enable peak performance.

If a student is not enjoying the learning experience and having fun, then there is no way that the student will achieve peak performance. Several principles can be incorporated into the classroom to fuel that performance and achieve that internal environment within the student. Fun is one of the most essential principles for achieving peak performance and motivation (Goldberg, 2016). Fun allows the student to keep the learning experience in perspective while at the same time maintaining focus on the learning environment (Goldberg, 2016). Fun is what keeps the student focused and motivated to achieve success.

There is a definite correlation between self-esteem and peak performance success (Goldberg, 2016). The higher the students' confidence levels, the better their performance. Lifting a student's self-esteem dramatically improves performance levels. A lack of self-esteem fills the student's mind with doubts and fears, affecting the concentration needed to perform at peak levels (Goldberg, 2016). Encouraging self-esteem allows the student's mind to be free of any burdens and

to focus on the present.

A student has control over the learning process; however, there is little control over the outcome. When students focus on what they can control, this keeps them in the present and boosts their confidence levels, resulting in a positive outcome (Goldberg, 2016). When a student's focus is distracted by worries or failure, he sets himself up for failure.

When a student is in the middle of peak performance, he is free from worries about making mistakes and can stay focused and relaxed. These students use their skills to live up to their potential. Students who are free from worries about making mistakes see mistakes as feedback, where feedback is provided as an opportunity to learn and make improvements (Goldberg, 2016).

Instructors who challenge students use this as a form of intrinsic motivation. This form of motivation is powerful and calls upon the student's inner desire and passion for achieving a meaningful goal (Goldberg, 2016). Rather than stress, a challenge triggers an inner drive for personal accomplishment.

For students to achieve their maximum potential, they must approach the learning process with an optimal level of learning versus nervousness. Once the learning process starts, he must be physically and mentally relaxed so as not to hinder the learning process. The more a student can do to stay relaxed, the more precise the student's mind stays, setting him up for peak learning performance (Goldberg, 2016).

3.2. Encouraging Peak Performance through Effective Leadership

Effective leadership can increase student productivity rates, improve retention of students, and increase student satisfaction. Whether you are a new or experienced online instructor, there are ways to implement strategies that can be useful to students and fellow instructors. Becoming an effective leader and motivating students involves teaching by example. Leading by example allows one to set classroom guidelines, encourages open lines of communication between students and faculty, and sets the students up for success by encouraging participation. By holding oneself to the expected standards in an online classroom, the students will follow accordingly. Whether you are new to your role or a seasoned instructor, implementing effective strategies can motivate students to perform beyond their expectations. The practical strategies listed below can improve your effectiveness as a leader.

1) Leading by example can motivate students to perform to a higher standard. Holding yourself to high standards sets the stage by giving your students something to mirror. Motivation can be a morale booster and result in a positive attitude even when faced with challenging times (Indeed Editorial Team, 2022).

2) Keep the lines of communication between students and faculty open and honest. Being transparent encourages students to be open and feel connected between faculty and students. Open and honest communication ensures students know what is expected of them in the classroom (Indeed Editorial Team, 2022).

3) The key to effective faculty is to guide students. It is critical that putting the student's needs and goals first lets them know that you have their success at heart (Indeed Editorial Team, 2022).

4) Faculty need to be accessible when students face challenges in their academic careers. Faculty should set aside time to prioritize the students' needs and allow faculty to showcase their communication and interpersonal skills (Indeed Editorial Team 2022).

5) It is essential to let students know they can connect with faculty should they have questions or concerns. Cultivating this connection makes you approachable (Indeed Editorial Team, 2022).

6) As an educator, letting students know that you are invested in their success allows students to develop their skills and grow new ones. Faculty must strive to optimize their leadership skills to promote student success (Indeed Editorial Team, 2022).

Effective educators must take the time to understand their strengths and skills to target their students' potential and improve their growth. Focusing on positive solutions and recognizing success boosts student morale and helps them achieve their goals by fostering a spirit of innovation.

4. Challenges for Teachers in Terms of Online Learning

The COVID-19 crisis presented many challenges to colleges and universities around the world in terms of online learning and best practices in higher education settings. Online learning can be challenging for faculty in terms of providing clear instructions to students that promote understanding, technical issues that disrupt the classroom, a lack of engagement and interaction with students, a lack of expertise in managing online interactions with students, difficulty tracking student progress, and providing constructive feedback.

Interactions between faculty and students are critical in asynchronous settings. Instructors must establish a rapport with students as well as between students (Richards & Thompson, 2023). This can be accomplished when faculty ensure a connection between course learning outcomes and the student's professional goals. Faculty should display competence in their knowledge of the field, technical know-how, organization of course material, and their ability to promote classroom engagement.

4.1. Encouraging Peak Performance in an Educational Setting through Gamification

One of the strategies that help students achieve success is gamification. Gamification includes game-like elements in a non-game context to increase learners' engagement and retention. The variety of games offers students opportunities to learn new material or review previously studied material in a fun way. Learners can play independently as often as they wish and compete with their peers (Puig et al., 2023).

The effects of gamification have been investigated by many, and in most studies, it was determined that gamification is an effective learning strategy. In addition to providing fun activities and opportunities to learn and self-assess, gamification also reduces the stress of online learning (Park, 2021). In her study, Park researched the effect gamified online learning programs have on learners' motivation and understanding of educational content. The study's data revealed that gamification is an effective traditional and online learning tool.

4.2. Improving Learning Through the Use of Effective Coaching

It is often thought that effective teaching is lecturing; however, lecturing has very little to do with effective coaching. A University of Maryland study found that right after a physics lecture, many students could not answer the simple question, "What was the lecture you just heard about." Another professor asked students about the material presented just 15 minutes earlier, and he found that only 10 percent of those students recalled what the material was about (Freedman, 2011).

With these results in mind, we must ask ourselves what effective teaching is and how to achieve meaningful results. Hattie (2009) compared results from more than 180,000 studies to find that feedback had the highest effect on student learning. Most faculty provide margin comments like "vague" or "needs further synthesis." Unfortunately, to the student, these comments are not helpful, leaving many students to wonder what is meant by "vague" (Israeli, 2020). The student then questions themselves, "What is vague about it?" It is not vague from my perspective. The student who did not include a synthesis may not even know what a synthesis is. Pointing out errors is not helpful to students; however, most instructors provide feedback to justify the grade. Instructors then subtract points and leave comments in the margins.

We need to look at feedback differently from grading. Separating the two is the key to effective teaching (Orlando, 2014). Grades are backward-facing because they evaluate past performance (Orlando, 2014). Feedback is forward-facing as it aims to improve the future performance of the student (Orlando, 2014).

To increase our effectiveness as educators, we must think along the lines of being a coach (Wiggins, 2012). A coach does not just tell a student what they did wrong; they show the student the proper way to do it. As instructors, we must spend more time showing students how to do it properly—a good coach models good work. Modeling good work is a crucial component of effective feedback needed to improve student performance. A good coach does not give students 20 things to focus on simultaneously. The instructor knows that improvement comes sequentially by focusing on one improvement at a time. The best way to encourage improvement in student performance is to focus on one or two major issues at once when providing feedback. Focusing on processes instead of the product can help the student perform better in the future.

Today, many students are too obsessed with their grades. As faculty, we reinforce that thought by creating grading systems that preserve errors. As instruc-

tors, we should encourage students to make mistakes and learn from them. Providing good feedback and allowing students to correct their mistakes is the only way to see real improvement in student performance.

4.3. General Strategies for Self-Awareness of Learning Preferences

As faculty, self-awareness is an important part of our behavior, satisfaction, and performance in the classroom (Carden, Jones, & Passmore, 2021, Chon & Sitkin, 2021). Faculty self-awareness is a key contributor to better decision-making that results in improvements in student performance. Faulty self-awareness impacts student outcomes such as self-confidence and self-identity. As levels of self-awareness rise in faculty, they become more resilient and better at analyzing uncertainty and stressful situations in the classroom. Faculty with high levels of self-awareness generally perform better and are better able to adjust their behavior resulting in improved student performance (Carden, Jones, & Passmore, 2021, Chon & Sitkin, 2021).

5. Conclusion

Reimagining the online learning experience for peak performance is complex and multifaceted. Designing an effective learning environment takes into account the goals required for learning and goals for students. Collaborative studies of the learning environment have brought knowledge about learning and teaching as they take place in higher education. Additional learning occurs when successful teachers with experience share their knowledge with colleagues and students. Students' learning goals constantly evolve as new technologies create a more effective environment that engages students. The end goal of learning is to inspire learning environments that are diverse and adaptable, inspiring student engagement (Gautam, 2020).

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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