

Interaction is the Key Element for Online Class Engagement and Retention



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I started teaching online about four years ago and the offer got me by surprise. I was checking the course catalog for the local college in southern Oregon where I lived and Latin Studies caught my eyes, considering I am a Brazilian with a degree in Education, Translation & Interpreting. At the end of my interview, I was offered the opportunity to teach Spanish 101 online. It was a “take it or leave it” situation and I decided to accept the challenge. Honestly, I was in total disbelief I was going to be able to teach a language, that was not my mother tongue, online, and be successful. Not only was I able to come up with an interactive way of doing it, but I also successfully extending it to Spanish 102 and 103. I have an average of 25 students per class and zero percent dropouts. Besides Spanish for that college, I am currently teaching hybrid ELA (English Learning Acquisition) classes and I also advise students in our High School Diploma over 21 program through an online class called Intake Portfolio at Renton Technical College. The aim of this article is to share ideas that have worked along these years not only as an instructor but as a graduate student as well.

Vygotsky, a social constructivist, laid the foundation for the interactionists and he stated that social interaction plays an important role in the learning process where learners construct the new language through socially mediated interaction (Vygotsky, 1978). Although Vygotsky’s theory was applied to children and language development, it can be relevant in a variety of contexts, including online. Online courses have been criticized for the lack of interaction when compared to face-to-face (F2F) courses. What we constantly hear from students is “I’m lost”, “It’s confusing”, “I’m not sure there is a person on the other side”. To refute this reputation, it is crucial to think about how we can promote “interaction” in an online environment. Joseph McClary (2013), a scholar on distance learning, reported that “the majority of students in his study stated the need for distance instructors to provide a personal presence, describing this presence in terms of being engaging, approachable, understanding, patient, and passionate about the subject”. McClary also noted that high-quality online education requires instructors to engage with students on an individual level rather than merely provide oversight as students proceed through the course. Therefore, collaboration entails interaction among the parties involved in the process, bringing about creativity and social skills. This combination results in a much more meaningful learning experience.

The basics

The classes I teach are via CANVAS and the ones I take, via Blackboard. I consider Blackboard much more limited compared to Canvas, but I

have had professors who did an excellent job of adding interaction to their classes.

I am an energetic and enthusiastic person and I do my best to bring my in-class persona to my virtual space. I am very present and although I state in my syllabus I will answer my students back in 24 hours, I usually do much sooner than that. I like to show my human side by sharing my reflections, opinions, successes, and failures. I am a storyteller in a professional and contextualized manner.

My courses are consistent, the modules are short and simple to navigate. My home page has my introductory video and I suggest my students post a video introducing themselves in our initial discussion board. Infographics work great for an engaging syllabus and Google slides for syllabus quizzes. Instructions are simple, clear and if there is a muddy point or question I have to answer, I sometimes do it in a short video specially for the students who asked me the question.

Be mindful of different learning styles

I use the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework and I make sure my online learning environment accommodates my student's needs. I took the Access for All course offered by Renton Technical College and my courses have been accessible since then. I currently have a blind student in my class, and with her help and suggestions, I made the class much more accessible to her. I offer information in different formats, such as videos, texts, visuals or audio. For texts, I use headings and the Alt+Text (Alternative Text) function to describe images. My students have choices and I offer them opportunities to demonstrate their progress formatively, constantly and in a variety of ways. The most important of all, we have to be mindful of their access to technology. Many of our students do not have internet access at home and they usually access their courses on their cell phones.

Give your student a sense of ownership

Listening to what our students have to say has proved to be effective in establishing a trustful relationship. I ask for their suggestions on videos, readings, places to go, places to eat as I would in a F2F class. I value my students' feedback, previous knowledge, collaborations, and reflections. Many times, I open new discussions based on a student's question, concern, opinion or suggestion. I give them a feedback survey halfway through the course and one of my questions is ideas for final projects. As a grad student, one of the most meaningful discussions I had was when my Professor opened a whole new discussion in which she pointed out the golden lines she selected from each of us in the previous discussion. I felt valued and special.

Interactive Elements

There is a variety of tools that can spice up the monotony in our classes. I have used [Prezi](#), [Adobe Spark](#), and [Google Slides](#) for my presentations. [Screencast-O-Matic](#), narrated PowerPoint, [Panopto](#), and [Flipgrid](#) for video interactions. For video conferences, I am a fan of the [Big Blue Button](#) that is available under "conferences" on Canvas. I have also used [Zoom](#), [Skype](#) or even [WhatsApp](#), a very popular App among immigrants. My new discovery and passion is [Easel.ly](#) for infographics that I used to create a simplified and visual version of my syllabi.

CANVAS has many functions in its quiz option that allow students to record themselves or upload voice files, a valuable tool for ELA students. Instructors can also use the same tool to give them voice feedback, making it much more interactive and personalized.

Collaboration

Collaboration enhances creativity, team work, communication skills and increases interactivity and class community. There are several user-friendly options such as [Google Slides](#), [Google Docs](#), [Microsoft Forms](#), and [Padlet](#), for instance.

Share Fair is another idea that not only increases class community but also gives students the opportunity to learn from each other. It is a discussion board in which students post their projects and they can give and receive feedback.

Final Thoughts & More to Explore

No matter the teaching modality, F2F, online, or hybrid, interaction is key in the learning process. Interaction will facilitate learning, increase engagement and satisfaction. I presented at Washington Annual Canvas Conference (WACC) at Tacoma Community in March 2019, and my topic was "[Ten Ways to Make your Online Classes More Interactive](#)". I created a course on CANVAS in which I show ideas and links to the tools mentioned above. You can find that course in Canvas Commons by typing either the title of the course or my full name, *Raquel Poteet*. Feel free to download and use all the activities. Let me know how if it works for you!

References

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