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Tips for Meaningful Teacher-Student Engagement

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In 1998, the movie, *You've Got Mail*, cast an unlikely couple, played by Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan, who fell in love over email exchanges. The film brought to the big screen the unforgettable computer-voiced announcement "You've got mail." The scenes were classic and represented many email users who eagerly anticipated hearing their computers say "You've got mail" each time a new electronic mail message arrived. The Hanks and Ryan characters would painstakingly compose an email message, hesitate, and then hit "enter" or "return." On the other end of the dial-up Internet connection was the recipient who sat on the edge of his or her seat, just waiting for something interesting, encouraging, or perhaps inspiring, to arrive from the anonymous love interest.

Much has changed in digital communication since the days of dial-up, AOL, and "You've got mail." One thing that hasn't changed, however, is our eagerness for quick, if not, instantaneous messaging. Whether or not one likes this stage of humanity's relationship with technology, the weight of this cultural phenomenon falls on each of us.

For better or worse, communication at the speed of light has become part of the culture of higher education as well, especially in an online learning space. Picture a married, mother working fulltime for a congregation taking seminary courses online. Her life circumstances offer her limited work hours for furthering her education. While reading through her course

module for the week, she stumbles across a reading that is listed as “required,” but the link is broken. She has just a few hours to finish her assignment, and now she feels lost. The student messages the professor and sits and waits for a reply. How long should she have to wait? What expectations does she have of the professor? How well has the professor been communicating with her so far in the course? These questions are the kinds of concerns that speak to teacher-student engagement in online courses.

In this blog, I offer a few tips for teachers to consider when it comes to online teacher-student engagement. While much has been written about teacher presence, the importance of communication, best practices of when to respond to students and the like, the primary focus of this entry is the importance of communication, meaningful facilitation, and commitment to making an impact on student formation.

Communication

Set clear expectations for yourself and tell the students. If you follow the old 48-hour rule—that is, you plan to respond to students within 48 hours of their questions— then let your students know this is your practice. If you are more of a 24/7 kind of online teacher, let them know that too. I personally don’t respond to anything over weekends and holidays, and I tell students my boundaries at the beginning of the course or before major school breaks. Otherwise, I respond to their questions daily and interact within the course on the days I pre-establish with my classes, normally on or the day after deadlines.

Tell your students how you prefer to be reached. It’s up to you to decide how you plan to be available, but make sure your students know how you prefer to be contacted. I respond to emails faster than any message service in learning management systems; so I frequently remind them to email me if they have a question.

Facilitation

Establish a pattern of engagement with online discussions and forums. If you were in a classroom face-to-face, would you let class discussion fill an hour of valuable class time without your guiding the conversation? Probably not. The same is true for online discussions. Interject comments alongside your students’ posts to provide scaffolding, encouragement, and teachable moments. Remember, if you do not post, you are not present.

Give feedback on assignments that prompt learning. Whether you use a rubric, points system, letter grades, or a combination of these, make sure your students know why they got the grade they were assigned. Frankly, this tip is just good education and not limited to online education, but without non-verbal glances, after class questions, and hallway conversations, online students feel lost if they don’t hear any feedback from you.

Impact

Commit to your online students the same way you would commit to a student who is sitting in your classroom or standing in your office. The demands of higher education sometimes cause us to run from one urgency to another. Too often the students at a distance get ignored, “out of

sight, out of mind,” or something like that. Resist the temptation to think of them as faceless names. They are individuals who, from their perspectives, want to be connected with your school, the course, and with you as their professor. They are also paying tuition and have a reasonable expectation to receive a comparable experience to those who are face-to-face. Try to get to know them. Pray for them. Memorize their names as you would any of your classes. Offer to assist them with course matters outside of class as you might your residential students. The students want to hear from you, and they appreciate all of your interactions with them.

Your level of engagement with students can make or break your course. Communicate frequently and clearly. Scaffold learning through facilitation. Demonstrate how you care about your online students. These three simple tasks will create the learning space your students need for achieving the education they seek.

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