



Can technology be the link to bridge the gap between student/faculty well-being and engagement?

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Abstract

This article explores creative, technology-based options to support student, staff, and faculty wellness while focusing on engaging and connecting with students. While not exhaustive, the information presented provides an opportunity to share ideas and engage in conversation for those struggling to find ways to maintain well-being while keeping students engaged in the learning process.

Keywords: technology-based, student engagement, faculty well-being, social connections

Introduction

The COVID pandemic has highlighted the human need for social connections for both mental and physical well-being. For many students, faculty, and staff, the pandemic has exasperated social connections as many communal activities now happen at a distance. Office work and classroom study are now being conducted from home in a type of virtual isolation. Social and sporting events are happening without fans in the stands. Faculty meetings, conferences, training sessions, and graduation events have all been relegated to virtual meetings via Zoom or similar platforms. The shift to online learning/distance education brings additional challenges for those who are new to the online education space and those already established in distance learning pre-pandemic. During the COVID pandemic, resources had to be quickly diverted, technology had to be upgraded, and communication methods had to be changed with little strategic pre-planning. While most of those in the education realm were already using technology before COVID, we are now finding ourselves using it differently. The rapid shift to only online instruction has strained faculty, students, and administration resources as they try to circumnavigate the new normal.

Navigating the enormous amount of emails and phone calls, the influx of requests for additional office hours, and rapidly developing live synchronous sessions have stressed many in the education space beyond comfortable limits. Additionally, those engaged in distance learning pre-pandemic must contend with on the fly schedule adjustments and competing demands for resources such as computer and Internet bandwidth. Many instructors were already holding virtual office hours and offering live tutoring sessions via phone, Zoom, Skype, or other collaboration tools. However, as competing demands factored in, faculty and staff began to see their schedules being changed rapidly with very little notice. Online faculty are used to advising students using video conferencing tools. Many institutions have instituted technology-based communication systems, so it might seem that there is no room for additional technology implementation. As an industry, online education has been focused on the process tools necessary to deliver online

instruction. We must also consider how these same tools can foster engagement and well-being for both the faculty and the students.

Students attend college for a myriad of reasons. Beyond the potential financial and career progression rewards, they also want to experience new social situations. College allows students to connect with their peers and faculty while finding ways to relate to and apply the content of their courses in their day to day lives. Students want to see how the classes they are taking (and the concepts they are learning in those courses) will help them progress in their academic and professional careers while also building networking and social connections. The question becomes, how can we, as course facilitators, help fill this social connection gap online while fostering student well-being and maintaining our health and well-being? We know that many technologies are available that are designed to help bridge these classroom connections, but figuring out where to start can be challenging. This article explores technology alternatives to support student, staff, and faculty wellness, encourage student engagement, and promote a sense of connection with students. The information presented in this article offers an opportunity to share best practices and engage in conversation for those struggling to find new ideas in the online environment while also maintaining their health and well-being.

Technology Supports Active Learning

Research established the social nature of humans well before the current COVID pandemic (Delaney, 2001; Regan, 2011; Lappe, 2020) ^[3, 4, 9], and evaluating technology as a tool to support active learning is not a new concept. We suggest that we need to focus on the positive correlation between the two while also considering how we can use that technology to bridge the social connection gap. A growing body of research supports the concept of technology strengthening student engagement and learning leading to improvements in academic education. Active learning is associated with improved student academic performance (Shernoff, 2013; Ames, 2018; Clinefelter, Aslanian, & Magda,

2019)^[16, 2]. By its very nature, online college requires students to use some sort of technology to access their courses. The COVID pandemic has led to many students navigating fully online learning for the first time. Many students started their learning on campus only to be shuttled into online course work which was not their preferred learning approach. It is noted that many college students had likely taken an online course at some point in their academic career. Research by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2018) found that almost 26% (or over 5 million college students) have taken at least one online college course. However, many of these students have now found themselves scurried into fully remote student status. The same is valid for faculty; they may have used Blackboard or a similar learning management system (LMS) to augment their class or have taught a fully online course in the past. However, now they find themselves working in a completely remote capacity. Fortunately, many of these students (online and traditional) grew up in the digital age and are comfortable with various social media and technology tools. Most faculty have at least some technical knowledge to be able to adjust to using and implementing these tools rather quickly. As instructors, we can capitalize on this by integrating various technology options to help students stay engaged and connected and improve their digital citizenship skills. Faculty can use technology to strengthen student connections while also bolstering technical literacy (Gomez, Sherin, Griesdorn, & Finn, 2008)^[5]. As educators, we can use technology to improve student outcomes, completion rates, and student satisfaction while also improving their technology and critical thinking skills (Haber, 2020)^[6].

Social Connections and Well-being

Stable and reliable social connections and support can improve health and well-being (Weir, 2018)^[20]. Research has demonstrated that people who have social support are typically happier, have fewer health problems, and live longer than those who do not have support (Lyubomirsky *et al.*, 2005; Waldinger, 2017)^[10, 19]. Research has also shown that the converse is true: Those who lack social ties are more likely to be depressed and experience cognitive decline and could have an increase in mortality (Novotney, 2019; Halverson, 2020)^[12]. Not all social connections are created equally. The quality of our relationships matter. It is not surprising that positive relationships lead to positive consequences, while negative connections do the opposite (Tee, 2018). With this in mind, faculty must remain aware of what is happening within the online classes they facilitate and assist students (where possible) make those meaningful connections. We want to look for opportunities to help students engage with the material and others in the class. We know the online modalities can be a struggle for some, and anything we can do to support students (or one another) maintain well-being is essential. Many of us have experienced disruptive behaviors in the online class or live remote sessions due to the stress some students feel. It is not unusual to hear of students being rude to their instructor and peers in the live sessions or by leaving disrespectful comments on the discussion board. When we notice this, we have to assess the best way to address the issues while still engaging in the class. These disruptions can occur during a live session, offline, or via phone or email. If the disturbance is severe, it needs to be addressed per the school policy, but less severe offenses may be a cry for help. We can

support these students (if the opportunity allows) by giving them some time to “unplug” for a portion or even the entire class session enabling them a chance for wellness time. Sometimes merely acknowledging the students’ need to step away from the environment, which is causing angst, can get them back on track. Letting students know they have been heard (even if they never explicitly verbalized or stated this), and giving them a little time to re-focus, can help reduce stress and increase the students’ coping mechanisms. Faculty can use this time as well for the same issues. The benefits of temporarily removing oneself from a situation extend in both directions. There is not a one size fits all approach. The hope is that faculty can be flexible and adjust based on a case-by-case basis. Of course, this adds to the growing list of demands and responsibilities faculty have in the classroom. Addressing these issues brings us to the idea of using technology to bridge these classroom connections and ease some of the burden instilled by trying to navigate the distant landscape many are being forced to endure.

Technology Bridging the Gap

The goal is not to add more work to students or faculty but to give us tools to help faculty and their students re-focus and re-energize. Many of us may find ourselves stuck in a loop of using tired and overused methods to build connections in the online classroom with limited success. It can feel more like we are going through the motions than actually building relationships and rapport with students. It can be refreshing and motivating to change how we do things. If it inspires us and makes us feel more connected to the students and the classroom, chances are it will encourage students to do the same, creating a sense of well-being for everyone. For example, instead of a static and boring PowerPoint display, we can make these more interactive by embedding audio or video or using exciting transitions. We can also replace a PowerPoint with an infographic or other visual representation. It is not about presenting different information; it is about presenting information differently. Students have likely seen more death by PowerPoint slide decks than they can count and might tune out as soon as they see the first slide. Presenting the same information but in a shorter, more visually appealing infographic could entice students to take a second look. We can encourage students to collaborate in real-time on slide presentations by sharing ideas and facilitating discussion around a set of slides using Google Slides or other collaboration tools. Google slides integrate with PowerPoint to allow students to submit questions without interrupting the presentation. The presenter includes a URL to Google slides, and students can use their smart device to ask a question, access the other questions coming in, and even vote on the relevancy of the question. Adding a level of student engagement to a presentation using technology allows the instructor to include the student in the discussion versus talking at them.

Those of us who have used discussion forums in a traditional or online class know that the discussion forums often get stale by mid-week. Part of this is due to the development of the discussion questions. They typically do not focus on critical thinking and analysis but more on reading and repeating. One way to address this is to focus future iterations of the discussion forum design on interaction. However, for those questions already implemented in a course, we can often revive the tired discussion by using technological tools to support student learning outcomes. For

example, if the discussion prompt asks students to discuss various leadership traits, we can expect by the fourth or fifth day the discussion is open, most of the leadership characteristics have been covered ad nauseam. At this point in the discussion, it would be a good time to ask a different but related question in the existing forum to spur further discussion. The instructor could throw in a short leadership quiz found online or in the textbook, posting their results and asking students' to do the same. Consider responding to students' written discussion responses with a mix of audio or video responses. After the student answers the question posed in the forum, a follow-up question could be posted using the audio or video record function which is embedded in most existing LMS. Another simple way to revive a discussion is to add a poll on the topic, show the results, and invite further discussion. The data is then collected and analyzed from the discussion posts and included in chart form, visually illustrating the percentage of students who responded in a certain way. Students' could be asked to engage as a peer instructor and can take turns leading the discussion. The instructor could encourage students to include technology in their facilitation. We can learn a lot by watching how our students choose to do this. Each day can 'belong' to a different student, and they will be in charge of moderating the discussion forums and responding to classmates' posts similar to what the instructor is expected to do. Simply attaching a photo, video, and adding a new voice, Tweet, or meme that addresses the content can add new life into a dying discussion. Infusing the discussions with appropriate humor is a great way to engage students. Use an Emoji to highlight the humor or you can state directly that it is meant to be funny, as humor can sometimes get lost on the discussion board. If using written text, consider using an appropriate video clip to convey humor. Humor allows the faculty member to project their personality and connect with students in a more personal manner (Smith & Wortley, 2017) ^[17]. Students report they experience a higher engagement level with course content, other students, and the instructor, when humor is incorporated in the online classroom (James, 2004) ^[8]. Inserting a Dilbert cartoon or an Office video clip in a business discussion forum is likely to generate some lively comments.

There is much discussion about social networks and the rise in online communication leading to the decline of person to person connections. There is some truth to that, but virtual social networking is often the only choice we have to build social connections in today's environment. Research has shown a positive correlation between social media, feeling a sense of social support, and increased well-being (Pornsakulvanich, 2017; Gilmour et al., 2020) ^[13, 4]. Social networks can enhance social support when users feel perceived usefulness, enjoyment, and perceived ease of use (Gilmour et al., 2020) ^[4]. These online connections can be a positive force and can complement and augment (although not replace) in-person communication. Email, instant messaging, social networking, and video chats can help maintain existing relationships and also allows us to expand our social connections. Technology can open new communication channels that transcend time and space. Technological tools can be used by both faculty and students to build lasting relationships. Technology can provide a comfortable space in which to interact. It does not have to be revolutionary or cutting age to be sufficient. Using the comment feature already built into the LMS, creating a screencast of your mark-ups on a students' paper, audio notes, or

even producing a class blog summarizing and reflecting on the previous week's work by the class can be effective. We can use feedback on an assignment to incorporate a connection by including personal anecdotes. For example, suppose a student writes a persuasive paper about the benefits of cooking with an instant pot. In that case, the instructor can start by identifying with the ease of use of the product and how they use the product to prepare meals, perhaps even embedding a video of their favorite YouTube cooking show before jumping into critiquing sentence structure and APA formatting. Technology is a great way to incorporate anecdotes and storytelling within the online classroom to help transfer some of those in-person engagements to the online space. By giving students and faculty, freedom to explore new avenues of presenting and learning the same material, we can support both in-person and online instruction while promoting wellness and social engagement. The simplest thing we can do to facilitate this is to be present, engage in the course several times across the week, learn by trial and error, and be kind.

When we notice a student not participating or their engagement has started to lag, a simple email or voice mail expressing our concern can be enough to trigger re-engagement. Simply acknowledging that we have noticed a student's change in behavior can be enough to reignite the student's participation in the class. We can also minimize disruptions caused by our impatience or negative feelings by hitting the pause button before reacting to a situation. Technology allows us the opportunity to do that. For example, suppose you have a student responding late to every discussion board. In that case, you can provide a personal email or phone message that may inspire the student to share with you why they are having difficulties with time management. A personal response allows for a teaching moment opportunity where the instructor can share some of the time management tools available via the LMS, computer, Smart Phone, or through various Apps. While a quick and efficient way to reach students, one note about email is to think before you hit 'send'. When reacting to a student's negative response, take advantage of the time technology affords, compose the response in draft mode, and walk away from it for a few minutes. When taking another look at it, you might have a different perspective. The same would be true for allowing student calls to go to voice mail, so you have time to think through your response. Use technology, such as a timer on your phone or engage with a 30-second mediation app, to give yourself time to take a deep breath before addressing contention, whether it is in an email, discussion forum, or a video chat. Additionally, show presence in the online classroom by giving prompt feedback on assignments and responding quickly to student inquiries. Something simple such as setting up automatic notifications when an email is received or an assignment is submitted, stating that students will receive a response shortly, is often enough to keep the student engaged and motivated. Use the sandwich method when communicating with students and faculty members. Start with praise, get to the issue, then end the feedback with praise. For example, if a student goes off on a tangent in the discussion forums, instead of chastising them for not answering the question, try to nudge them back on track. For example: "Hi John, thank you for starting off the discussion this week. You had some interesting insights on NASCAR drivers. The assignment this week was to complete a PESTEL analysis. I am looking forward to seeing your next

response where you tie your research and knowledge of NASCAR drivers with the PESTEL analysis concepts we covered this week. Here is a short video that outlines the key components in a PESTEL analysis. What are your thoughts? Dr. T.” Technology and most LMS allow for easy incorporation of the rubric into grading feedback. Consider how the above example might be used in conjunction with the rubric. For example, feedback could be provided in the comment section of the electronic rubric, and make reference or highlight sections of where the rubric and assignment align (or do not align). Another possibility might be to attach the rubric with detailed feedback at the end of the graded assignment or as a separate document. Regardless of the tool, the sandwich method can be used to motivate, offer suggestions, and move the student forward in their studies. Another good option is to use an old fashion method, the telephone. Telephone conversations can be the most direct method to connect to students and provide a safe space to share concerns. The key is to connect often and use multiple forms of communication. Holding virtual office hours for drop by students is great, but offering opportunities for small group connections can encourage students to connect in a more meaningful way.

Conclusion

We are not suggesting adding to your workload, but to think about how we can incorporate readily available technology into our work-flow to help support student learning and maintain well-being. The general tips to improve well-being and bridge the social connection gap in higher education are relatively simple. Allow time for yourself and your students to pause from work periodically. Encourage and practice positive self-talk making a list of the things that feed your heart, body, mind, and soul. Put these on your personal calendar and/or on the LMS course calendar to block off self-time every day. Go for a short walk leaving the computer and Zoom behind. The emails will still be there when you get back. Log off at the end of your workday and avoid the temptation to check one more thing. Help one another to maximize resources when possible. There is no sense in re-inventing the wheel. Create a folder on a cloud-based service that will allow you to share announcements, discussion prompts, and resources you have found useful with colleagues and ask for help when you need it. We are not suggesting a Pollyanna approach, but rather using and controlling the technology that already exists to make your life easier while maintaining the high level of outcomes you are accustomed too. Using these tools and maintaining a positive outlook can help preserve balance. It is time to give up the guilt when we take time for ourselves. We live in challenging times, and there is no denying that things are difficult right now and may continue to be so for the foreseeable future. It is a struggle for all of us, but the tools are available to help us work smarter, not harder while, building and nurturing social connections in the online classroom environment.

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