

Fall 10-31-2017

Creating The Learning Environment for Limited English Proficient Students Online

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Recommended Citation

Thomas, Lisa H.; Brizuela, Francisco; Mott, Michael S.; and McClelland, Susan S. (2017) "Creating The Learning Environment for Limited English Proficient Students Online," *Journal of Contemporary Research in Education*: Vol. 5 : No. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/jcre/vol5/iss1/2>

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Abstract

When offering online program options for higher education students, one of the primary concerns for institutions of higher learning program administrators is achieving high quality learning experiences for students. To achieve this goal, faculty must understand how to employ new and innovative technologies in a manner that ensures all students have positive learning outcomes. Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students are not missing in this equation. Institutions offering online courses have discerned that developing these courses requires an understanding of technologies with which many faculty are unfamiliar. As a result, administrators must create "pedagogical models that enable educators to capitalize on the potentials afforded by online learning technologies" to best meet the needs of all students (Norton and Hathaway, 2008) by providing quality professional development which ensures an understanding of how to use technologies effectively and how to develop a sense of instructor presence.

The current case study deals with the analysis of practice within a graduate online program at a small private college in the Midwestern region of the United States. Specific identification of practices is identified via pattern recognition related to mentoring and facilitation of best practice within the online program to meet the needs of the LEP student. The foundation of all good teaching at the college level is based on specific assumptions of effective teachers (Bain, 2004).

Best Practices in Teaching

Traditional Mode of Teaching

Effective teachers within the online educational community intuitively respond to curriculum design and implementation considering that knowledge is constructed and not just a process where students receive information. Secondly, mental models for individual students change very slowly over time with much reflection. In addition to students requiring time to change their thinking processes or ideas, a crucial part of learning is to be able to identify and investigate good questions.

Through these questions, the student can move to a deeper level of learning experience. Finally, effective teachers must communicate with the students taking a given course in a manner that they demonstrate knowledge of the course content while as well as high interest in their learning processes (Bain, 2004).

As teachers examine their own teaching practices, it is important for the traditional instructor to maintain ongoing strategies throughout the different learning experiences. To accomplish all levels of learning goals, teachers must begin to develop a natural critical learning environment (Brinthaupt, Fisher, Gardner,

Raffo & Woodard, 2011). Managing and facilitating a learning space involves ensuring that the students are comfortable with that space while they feel free to move around, as well as the provision of specific consistencies that enhance a comfort level within that space. Additionally, it is important for the teacher to snare and harness the attention of the students throughout the learning experience (Moeller & Reitzes, 2011).

One method effective teachers employ is keeping the curriculum as a primary teaching and learning focus while making it meaningful to their students' lives. These strategies must begin and end with the student. Most practitioners agree with the strategy of making learning experiences meaningful to students since they result in stronger student involvement in the learning process, and consequently, higher students' success and academic achievement. All these take place through a learning environment where students work collaboratively in groups, as they become efficient players within different learning communities (Rhea, 2010, Bain, 2004).

To motivate the student to seek a more rigorous path of learning, the teacher must create expanded learning activities where students are challenged through more rigorous questioning strategies while gaining motivation to become more involved and challenged in the learning process. Throughout this process, diversity must be considered from the teacher and student's points of views. A lot has been said about teaching diverse populations in traditional settings but not enough in higher education programs. The main concern should be geared to attending the needs of an increasing Limited English Proficient (LEP) student population.

Practitioners should be concerned with the fact that "many institutions of higher education... accept and matriculate LEP students at the undergraduate and graduate levels without providing effective programs" (NYSTESOL, n.d., ¶ 1). This reality leads to frustration due to the limitations or inability of this group to communicate with peers and teaching faculty.

Best Practices in Online Learning

According to Billings and Connors, (2009) online instruction and design must give consideration to the students. The seven best practices as stated by these authors are: creating a focal point of time on task for both the faculty and the students; setting and communicating high expectations from the faculty member; incorporating rich, rapid feedback to ensure consistent motivation to move forward; encouraging active learning environments where students are actively engaged in the learning outcomes; engaging students, faculty and peers in constant interaction; and incorporating a genuine respect for diversity.

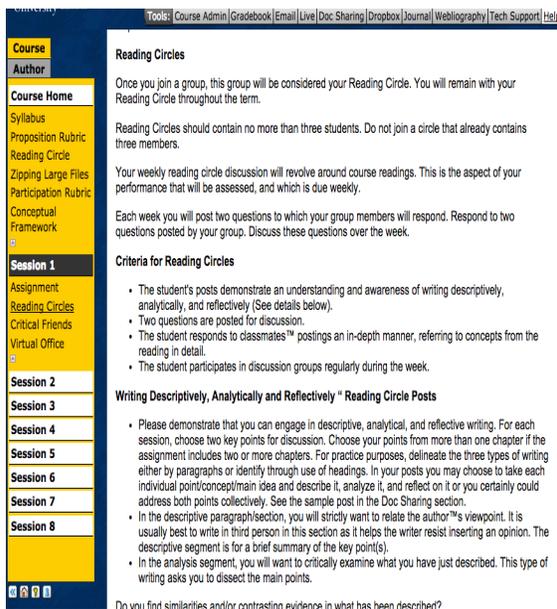
Offering quality professional development for faculty teaching online courses is essential for supporting high-quality learning experiences. Since teaching online courses is more complicated than simply transferring face-to-face content online, Smith (2005) asserts that faculty must acquire "a specific set of skills and competencies" (p. 1) with which they are historically unfamiliar. Institutions providing effective professional development using a collaborative teams model or workshop model (Schmidt, et. al., 2013) afford opportunities for faculty to improve online teaching effectiveness. These methods of

professional development require strong institutional support due to the intense structure and time commitment. To ensure faculty acquire the needed skills, they must gain an understanding of how to use various technologies effectively to engage students as well as how to plan activities that are interesting, motivating and self-directed (Orr et. al., 2009). A well-designed online course must have clearly defined learning outcomes and clearly stated learner expectations (Dykan & Davis, 2008).

Professional development should enable professors to become experts in utilizing the university's course management system (CMS). This type professional development provides professors with the needed skills not only to load a course in the system properly and professionally but also learn how to develop dialogue and community with the students. According to Dykan and Davis, "A well structured and documented course with clearly specified requirements and expectations gives students the confidence and grasp to engage actively in the online course setting" (2008, p. 287)

Figure 1. Online learning environment promoting instructor and peer to peer interaction

While there is a growing demand for creating online learning courses for students which deliver quality instruction and positive learning outcomes, most university faculty do not have the training or skills to develop an instructor presence online. Institutional leaders subscribe to Smith and Mitry's work (2008) which asserts that student learning and satisfaction are positively correlated with the quality of the dialogue that the teacher situates among students and between students and the professor (p. 149). As a result, institutions seek to develop opportunities for faculty to design online environments that lend themselves to engagement and dialogue. In a face-to-face environment, student engagement and dialogue are easily orchestrated by professors who are more comfortable with the structure of the classroom and interacting with individuals and groups of students within the confines of their classroom. However, in an online environment where students are isolated and working in an artificial environment, meaningful dialogue "can be a daunting task" (Dykman & Davis, 2008). In this environment, the professor's ability to create conversations and a sense of community can be the lifeline for students. According to Marcia D. Dixon (2010) online courses need cooperative/collaborative (active) learning and strong instructor presence. Dixon refers to this as the "social presence of instructors" - the "phenomenon that helps translate virtual activities into impressions of 'real' people." (p. 2 - 3). Through effective professional development, faculty learn how to create a presence with their students by communicating regularly



with them, guiding their learning and conversations, sharing information, and maintaining a sense of community within the course (Palloff & Pratt, 2003).

Online Learning for the Limited Proficient English Student

Limited proficient students (LEP) can experience: “loss of identity, friends, and culture, an inability to express themselves in their native language, and familial expectations for academic success” (Glencoe/McGraw-Hill, 2005). Additionally, Boettcher (2008) supports similar learning environmental modifications. She further advocates for the provision of a supportive online educational learning environment. To accomplish educational harmony, specific strategies must focus on students as members of learning communities rather than as entities lost in an individual and self-driven learning endeavor. The instructor can elevate the student’s experiences by setting expectations for the entire class as well as alternating group size experiences.

Whether the students are in a synchronous or asynchronous learning activity, they can work in different group settings in order to reach a common goal. Through real world connections students can become enmeshed in meeting cognitive learning experiences that are closely centered to their own schema as it evolves into new learning outcomes. Vygotsky (1962, 1978) theorized that because humans are complex beings, even though learners are presented with knowledge often times in a linear process, they process it as a “cluster” in which current and previous knowledge melds while the concept is acquired through a non-linear cognitive process. For students

with LEP backgrounds, this “cluster” has to be approached through intentional and real world engagement activities (Svedkauskaite, A. Reza-Hernandez, L. & Clifford, M., 2003).

Situation based learning is a pivotal issue for online curriculum designers. Designers need to understand that faculty as well as students can and will feel isolated within the online learning environment if attention is not paid to establishing many avenues of communication (Palloff & Pratt, 2007). This understanding is a call for clear communication with multiple outlets for discourse that can include: videoconferencing, chat rooms, discussion boards and email. Without these types of communication forums students and faculty can and will likely “drop out or away” from the class.

The need for human interaction is pervasive in online learning and it cannot be possible unless the teaching practitioner provides a learning environment that is inclusive and embraces all learners’ needs. According to the Community College Research Center (CCRC), students have a high failure rate when they do not have applications and adaptations made for specific learners (2013). Students who have limited access to technologies, students who have lower GPA performances, students with secondary language skills and students of color tend to have a more difficult time in an online environment. In addition, the performance and non-performance achievement gap can be greater for these populations.

Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students are those who mostly speak “other language at home and their limited English abilities slow down their learning

in school” (Scott, n.d., ¶ 1). Providing for the needs of LEP students is as demanding as teaching any other student population. While online facilitators must make sure to providing materials that are relevant and meaningful to the learners, encouragement and motivation, as well as minimizing the affective barriers that may prevent students from learning are equally important.

Schleppegrell (1987) stated, “Affective outdoors such as motivation and self- confidence are very important in language learning” (¶13). For that reason, online facilitation must put into consideration the provision of a learning environment where the facilitators must be able to identify diversity and respond to diversity. Ehrmann, Gilber, and Story (n.d.) recommend that online facilitators can address the needs of LEP students through course content and media, assess in the learning, and program activities that are meaningful to the learners (p. 2). This can be accomplished through an online learning environment where students have different alternatives within the learning process and activities from which they can choose. Having said that, online facilitators need to provide "reasonable expectations for their students in order to avoid disappointment and frustration on both sides” (Beck, n.d., ¶2).

Method

Participants and Setting

The participants for this research were 8 graduate online faculty and faculty associates from a small private university in the Midwestern region of the United States. The faculty along with faculty associates was participating in the mentorship and mentoring program within

the program design and based on selective sampling. In addition, course designers were also selected to conduct observations. The ages of all faculty members were 40 – 65 years of age with little to no experience teaching in an online environment.

Measures

For the purpose of this study, the ethnographic method of case study was employed to be able to identify methods to meet the needs of the LEP student within an online course design and mentorship (Lee, 1989). The ethnographic, or “natural” approach was selected to construct meaning by identifying themes, establishing patterns of behavior and using data from multiple sources to identify themes in course interaction with the unit of analysis consisting of student narrative exchanges responding to peer and teacher prompts (Yin, 2009 & Yin, 2012). Boundaries, or the select information of focus and collection of dialogic data, consisted of student questions, queries, responses and critiques in response to course readings and presentations (Tight, 2010). According to Ware, Tugenberg, Dickey and McHorney (1999) Among other things, ethnography elicits and represents "insider points of view", insiders being the "subjects" of study. Representation takes the form of explaining the meanings that insiders ascribe to their experiences—the ways they make sense of the world (p. 50).

Two groups were identified: Faculty with faculty associates and course designers. Faculty and faculty associates were mentored through a dialogic approach with the program mentor. The researcher was also the program mentor and lead course designer. Each week, the

mentor would meet with the faculty and faculty associates to discuss issues and techniques within the online classrooms. Prior to the meeting, the mentors would have observed the techniques being used within the classroom by the participants. Specific written feedback would be provided to the faculty and faculty associates with opportunities for faculty and faculty associates response.

Analysis

For the purposes of this study, data sources of field interviews and observation were collected and analyzed. Weekly observation and interviews were conducted in a dialogic fashion between mentors and faculty for eight weeks. Narrative data from the observations, the interviews and field notes were coded for emerging patterns. Triangulation of data to note emerging themes occurred across data sources. The researcher was in the role of Mentor during the entire period. All data was collected and analyzed by the researcher.

Data Source	Frequency	Faculty	Faculty Associate
Field Notes/ narrative	8 week period, 2 times per week.	2 faculty members	6 faculty associates
Observations/ performance evaluation form	8-week period, daily online classes		
Interviews/ narrative	1 time per week/8 weeks		

Observation data was collected through a observation checklist.

Faculty Associate:

Term/Course:

Evaluation Conducted By:

	Met With Strength	Met	Suggested Improvement	Comments
First week: Bio/Introduction/Welcome is posted				
Announcement section: Used to communicate important information to students.				
Responding to Questions: Within 24 hours				

Providing Feedback Participation: Comments address rubric indicators	Providing Feedback-Weekly Assignments: Comments are Personal, relevant and challenging. Clear expectations are communicated if improvement is needed.	Providing Feedback: Timely –Weekly grades are posted by Wednesday

Logging into course: User activity reflects opportunity to stay abreast of occurrences in course	Posting in Reading Circles: Postings by Wednesday of each week are continually reflecting that faculty member is aware of the conversations occurring in the discussion board. Faculty responses strive to affirm, extend and challenge the thinking of individuals and the group.

Results and Discussion

Through the lens of accountability, the curriculum-designing faculty maintained that standards had to be addressed initially. All learning objectives are met as per the advanced program standards for Council for Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) (2014), National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) (2014) and International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) – T standards (2008). CAEP is formally known as National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) (2008).

With a philosophy embedded in the assumption that all curricula must be embedded solidly in best practices and standards by educational accrediting boards, curriculum designers further adhered to the School of Education's (SOE) conceptual framework focusing on reflection, leading, caring, and collaborating. Given an understanding of how the curriculum should be grounded, the program designers conceptualized how the design of the program and design of the faculty could be accomplished. Through consensus building, the online curriculum designers began brainstorming the pivotal aspects of teaching behaviors that must be present in the online environment.

These behaviors became the Tenets for Online Instructors and identified specific attributes expected for all SOE's online instructors. Through consensus of the design team, it was determined that effective online facilitators must believe that students have a right to faculty who are: committed to candidates and their

learning, know the subjects they teach and how to teach those subjects to their candidates, responsible for managing and monitoring candidate learning, think systematically about their practice and learn from experience, and members of learning communities (Faculty and Supervision Handbook. 2014).

The graduate program provided a program with an online structure that provides for the needs of diverse students. The online platform established the precept that all students, including LEP students, can be part of the program without fear of inability to communicate with their peers and online facilitators. The program maintained six rubrics based on all of the graduate level standards expected for all of the program's courses. Each rubric focused on different learning outcomes specific to each artifact to be created within the course.

Furthermore, the platform includes two components that are crucial to student success - Reading Circles (RC) and Critical Friends (CF) groups. Within the RC and CF course discussion boards, multiple intentional outcomes are expected. As members of the RC group, the students read and respond to their colleagues concerning their reactions and connections to the content. These connections are further elevated through probing questions and lengthy discussions. Additionally, in the CF groups students are consistently providing a secondary lens to their colleague's work through providing critical feedback. This feedback engages the learners in a purposeful examination of the practice of the teacher as he/she is assimilating new content with practice. These components provide different

options and opportunities to students from all language backgrounds to participate, dialog in English, access the different concept models, and collaborate with classmates in a manner that both language is developed and learning takes place.

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