

Transcript for Teaching Talk#14: Supporting Students in their Online Learning

Aron Fazekas: So, good afternoon everyone. My name is Aron Fazekas and I'm an Educational Developer in the Office of Teaching and Learning, and before we get started I just wanted to begin today by acknowledging that we are all in various places that are governed by different treaties and relationships to the land and as we consider those relationships, I think it's important for us to remember our collective responsibilities to each other as we consider how we enact inclusion and respect in our daily lives and actions. So just some quick housekeeping things: so, the session is going to be recorded today and we will have a link to that recording posted in a day or so. The session is roughly structured with 20 minutes for our panelists to present and then a good chunk of time for questions and answers after that. You'll notice that your audio and video are turned off and they'll remain off for the duration of the webinar. If you want to ask questions please use the Q&A tab but you'll see at the ribbon at the bottom of the screen, you can type your questions in there during the session or after it's concluded and we will moderate those questions at the end of the sessions with the panelists. So today I have the pleasure of introducing Joannah O'Hatnick and Victoria Fritz from McLaughlin library, and so, I'm going to turn it over to them for their presentation.

Victoria Fritz: Okay, wonderful. Thank you, Aron. So, welcome everyone today, to our presentation entitled motivating students in their online learning. So first off Joannah and I are going to start off with a really brief introduction to ourselves. So, I'll ask Joannah to flip the screen for me. Of course, with Zoom, there's a little bit of lag.

Joannah O'Hatnick: Hold, all things were working just fine. There we go.

Vicotria Fritz: Wonderful so my name is Victoria and I'm one of the Learning Specialists at the McLaughlin Library at the University of Guelph. I'm also a current PhD student myself, this is my first year of my PhD in Family Relations and Human Development, and I'm looking at academic failure. So, all of this online learning and online motivation is quite near and dear to me at this point in time.

Joannah O'Hatnick: My name is Joannah O'Hatnick and I'm an interim manager of Learning Services, which again is part of the library. Just to give you a little bit of context, Learning Services supports students in their academic transitions, whether it's an academic transition from high school to university, the transition from undergraduate to graduate school, a transition from one type of learning to another. So our session today is based on our work with students, we do a lot of work one-on-one with students and helping them manage that transition along with working with instructors and campus partners in supporting students and their academic skills.

Victoria Fritz: Perfect. Thank you, Joannah, for including a description of Learning Services. So, we thought we would start off today with really, kind of, a brief overview to situate all of ourselves in terms of how does learning, and learning online in particular, affect our students. The first thing that we'll quickly go through is just a quick review of the literature and some of the things that Joannah and I have found both in our work for this presentation and in our work as Learning Specialists. The first idea is that multiple mediums are really helpful for students, so things like videos, comics, texts, articles; many different ways to engage the students. This is really helpful to get them learning and really observing that learning. Another helpful strategy is linking to the real world, which I'm sure doesn't surprise anyone, but generally students are more motivated to learn and that learning stays with them if there's some link to the real world. So how does this learning, or this content affect their future careers, how does it affect their daily lives right now, is there any way that you can use things from culture or current media as examples in your content? Another important piece that we found was autonomy and learning. So, the idea that students want some choice. When they feel responsible for their learning, they're actually likely to engage more in their learning, which again probably doesn't surprise anyone, but an important finding. This idea of facilitative learning is important as well. So for me, this came up as the idea between a balance of challenge and support. Students don't want to be lectured to, as just kind of sponges passively absorbing the information, they want to be able to engage with it in some way, but they also need that support. I know for myself, it's really difficult to remember, especially when I work with first-year students, how little they know and how everything is so brand new to them. So, giving them a more facilitative approach where they're active partners in their learning. Overall, we also found an emphasis on this idea about a culture of sharing and learning; so, a culture where knowledge is encouraged and knowledge is shared, both between students with one another, between faculty member or instructor with students, between staff member with students, and with students to faculty member or instructor, however. Creating this facilitative kind of learning in this culture will actually help students be encouraged to learn more. Next Joannah and I conducted a brief survey with some of the students that we work with and we thought it would be a really important piece to gather perspective directly from the students that we're working with. So, the next slide is going to be some feedback from our students, and I'll walk us through some of the main points that our students stated.

Joannah O'Hatnick: Victoria, and our guests here, I'm just having a hard time, for some reason, moving to the next slide over here. Okay.

Victoria Fritz: Okay, so some of the major concerns that our students gave us via our feedback, and also likely those of you are who teaching or doing any kind of instruction during this time you're probably familiar with some of these concerns as well. The first was engagement with instructor and also engagement with TAs, so students were finding it really difficult to engage generally via email. They've mentioned missing seminars and office hours and having those opportunities to have that one-on-one interaction with their instructor. They also talked about a lack of engagement with content. They mentioned that it's difficult sometimes especially with asynchronous content to really engage with it in the way that you could in class.

Victoria Fritz: They weren't necessarily being asked questions or they weren't asking themselves questions as they were processing the content. One thing that stood out to Joannah and I, and this is particular to the work that we do, is all of the students said that they found group work much, much, much more difficult online, because they're trying to connect with so many people in different places, than they found it in person, and I think we all know students generally have frustrations with group work, but unfortunately it seemed to get worse online. Something else these students mentioned they were missing was the verbal and visual cues to help and monitor understanding. So often, and I know when I taught myself, I might say things like "This is important, you want to focus on this", it comes out quite naturally in person, but it doesn't always come out like that online. So, they're missing those cues to help them monitor their understanding. So students mentioned things like no ability to ask questions to peers or have those visual cues to look around them to see if other students look as confused as they did, or if they were they the only one that wasn't understanding the content. They mentioned the lack of clear tangible takeaways that they might get in class, and, again, back to that social monitoring piece, there's no one around them that they can check in to make sure their learning is on the same page. Another concern that came out was this idea about similar assignments across courses. So, the comment in particular that was made was that the student had four different courses and had discussion posts in each of these four courses. I think it's easy to see – we can understand if you're doing four different discussion posts on multiple days, with different content and different expectations for each of the posts, it does get confusing to keep on track of which post is for what course and on what day, and of course you can use scheduling calendars, but it's important to recognize that our students are saying the same assignment across all of their courses gets really confusing for them, especially online. Another concern I think that we're probably all feeling right now is about the length of time on the computer, and it's really, really easy to get distracted online. So, we can chat about that a bit more in motivation and accountability, but it's easy to get distracted online. It's hard on your eyes, it makes you really tired in many ways, and it's hard to stay focused for the eight plus hours that they might have of class per day. Just something to keep in mind. And lastly, the motivation and accountability: those two themes came up a few times in our student feedback.

So, students talking about, again, missing those social cues, and as I mentioned, being online, I happen to have two monitors open right now. Of course, mine is my presentation and then as you on this screen, but students might have a screen with email on it or Facebook or Snapchat or Instagram or whatever social media thing, then they also have their cellphone open, so they're texting. It's really easy to do that when you're in a space where no one's monitoring you in class, and of course, we know students do that in class at times, but it's very difficult to be on your phone when you have an instructor sitting directly in front of you, who's really have their eyes on you, and is focusing on your behaviour. Coming to class is another piece, it's very different, the act of coming to a class online versus physically having to get up, pack your things, and go to a class, and that's not an accountability piece, that students are feeling like it's hard to feel accountable when all you have to do is sit down and clock yourself in front of a computer. It's very different than having to go physically into the classroom where people can see you, your friends are there, there's lots of different connections.

Victoria Fritz: So next, I want to share a particularly well-written quote that Joannah and I have found really struck us. (Webinar streaming service begins lagging) Zoom is really giving us a wonderful build-up before this quote, there should be like a drumroll or something. Okay, so this is from one of our students: "One of the most difficult aspects of online learning is the lack of interaction it offers with classmates and faculty in order to gain a deeper understanding of content in a setting that fosters learning". So, this really spoke to us because we felt that it really highlighted one of the most important things for us to consider in our online teaching and in helping students' motivation, which is that social interaction piece, and I can say from my own personal experience, this one really resonates with me as someone who is used to being around people all of the time and working with students, faculty, and staff. Going from being at home by myself eight hours a day, because my partner works, has been really different. So, we now have students who used to be together with their friends, with their peers making connections, who are now in different cities, in different countries, in different time zones. There's no more of that social interaction in the same way. So, they can't just look to their camera and say, "Hey did you catch what Professor so-and-so said?" or "Did you have the same question that I did" or "Do you understand this?", we can't really do that anymore. There's no one that you can really look over to and say "Hey you want to grab lunch together? Then maybe we can study for a course together". No one really to really just sit and work within the same way, and yes you can set up webcams so that you're both looking at each other, but it does feel like a bit of an artificial interaction when you're used to having someone sitting with you face-to-face. So from this feedback, in this kind of dire picture that we painted that I'm sure we're all well-acquainted with, we want to provide you with some strategies to help our students with their online learning and motivation.

Joannah O'Hatnick: Okay, thanks Victoria. So now we move from the concerns to what are some strategies. So, we wanted to start first with voices from students when we did ask them "Well, what actually helps you?". We really liked this quote from a student: "Weekly quizzes are huge helps. They actually get me to do the readings I need to because I know I'll need it on a weekly basis. Announcements from professors and online courses are also helpful for motivating me to engage with the content and do my readings". So overall, some thoughts which came out from the students that we spoke to listed several things, and again I'm sure many of these are things that you already do in your classes, so we're probably just reinforcing good pedagogy here. Of course, clear assignment descriptions, having unit objectives or learning outcomes, several students mentioned that they use those to study and to assess whether they've learned the material. I think every student that we spoke to appreciated some type of weekly low-risk small assignment, such as a quiz to help keep them on task with the class. Checklists also came up, badges; something to show when you have completed a module was helpful. They all really liked regular announcements, it doesn't mean that they were daily announcements, but certainly an announcement at least once a week, if not more, posted on Courselink from the instructor in their own voice about what was going on in the class. They also said that discussion boards could also be helpful as a way to interact with other students and to think about their learning.

Joannah O'Hatnick: So starting off from what the students told us and what we have observed, Victoria and I have sort of went to the literature, went to our ideas and our experiences and came up with four approaches, in terms of thinking about strategies that can really help students in their motivation in learning in an online format. I think these four approaches won't be too surprising to you, but you'll pick up a few new ideas to try or enhance in your classes. The first approach is, of course, clarity: having very clear assignment descriptions. Students said they really like rubrics, even sample assignments, if you think that's appropriate, can give students an idea of what you are actually looking for when you posted this. Expectations for frequency of engagement: so, by that we mean it might be useful to just be very upfront with students about how often or how frequently you expect them to log on to the class. If a student is taking five courses, they probably are not going to log on to each course every day, I think that would be a bit of cognitive overload, but what are your expectations, do you expect students to log on every other day, once a week, so it might be helpful just for you to think about that and to share that with your students, so that they'll know your perspective. The second approach which we looked at was accountability, and of course, this really ties into student motivation and the idea that students are working, in many cases, in a lot of isolation. They don't have anybody around them necessarily to chat with about their classes, no one to make sure that they are going to class and not on their phone when they should be reviewing course content. So, any little things that you can do to help students without accountability are really helpful. So, we've posted a few ideas here which also came up before. So those weekly quizzes, checklists, rubrics again, scaffolded assignments, and if you are choosing to use group projects, to have contracts. I should note, as Victoria alluded to earlier, I think every student that we spoke to, and it was a small sample size, but they're pretty keen students, they found group projects online to be quite difficult. So, they wanted interaction with other students but not necessarily to receive a mark based on how they can work with students that they don't know very well and have had few opportunities to interact with in the past. The third approach is connection, and of course, that gets into that whole social need, and this is a situation which might be quite new. I think for a lot of us, where in the past we assumed that students would make their own social connections over class simply because they're sitting next to somebody or they have a roommate in the same class, it's now really different, and so as instructors we might want to think about how you can do little things to help foster a sense of connection among our students. So again, regular announcements came up, students really appreciated live office hours, they said it's really difficult to craft an email when you don't understand something. It's hard enough to articulate in a question but to have a dialog via email is much more challenging than to jump into live office hours. They also suggested to have introductions in classes if appropriate, perhaps to use breakout rooms, if it's possible, to keep the same group in the breakout rooms throughout the entire semester to use discussion boards and perhaps to have some study group facilitation, and so we'll get to that in just a minute. The fourth theme which came out was Engagement and I think this is where particularly, Victoria and I, put on our hats as Learning Specialists. This is really important for us as we're working with students. Students have different ways, whether they're online or not, to engage with material and to really learn it. When we're looking at online classes, that really reduces the ways that students engaged. They're no longer walking to a class, sitting down next to a friend, writing out notes by hand, they're sitting in the same space for hours on end, looking at a small screen, and probably reading a lot.

Joannah O'Hatnick: So, anything that you can do to think about how are different ways that students can engage. So maybe it's having different types of assessments or even giving students a choice of assessment topics, again, it really depends on the class. Having content in a lot of different ways, so whether it's live lectures, having videos, having text-based, having students do some work on their own, problem sets, all of those types of things can help. The fourth point here: multiple modes for students to gauge their learning, that's really important. So, students used to use social cues in class, Victoria mentioned, when somebody looks confused and they look around and somebody else next to them looks confused, that helps them learn, you don't have that anymore. So, whether you can encourage students to form online study groups, perhaps having students to create and post their own potential exam questions, or respond to potential exam questions, have students work on creating something like a concept map, working on problems, anything that will get students to check whether they actually understand the material can be really helpful because, again, it's hard to do that if most of your learning is just through reading. We just need lots of different ways to help students assess their own knowledge.

So, we wanted to just mention a few things from us, from our services, that might be useful for your students. You can always tell students about us and we meet with students one-on-one. So, our first link is just how to book an appointment with Victoria or me, or one of our student staff even, and we'll sit down with the student, help them with things like how do you build a schedule, how can you stay motivated. We are currently working on an online resource called Create a Study Group so that you'll be able to post this in your Courselink site, and refer students to it, so it'll give them a few concrete ideas for how they can go about creating a study group. We also have other guides and resources on things like studying effectively, including in an online format. The bottom link is for the Academic Action Program which is a semester long academic coaching program which might be of interest to some students, and then we have our email here in case you would like to get in touch with us. So, this ends the 20-minute lecture part of our webinar and now we're going to open it up to a Q&A.

