Where's Walter?

Adjunct Outreach Strategies to Bridge the Virtual Distance and Increase Student Retention

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Abstract

There are hundreds of studies that address "no significant difference" in the quality of online versus on-ground instruction, yet it is clearly the instructor who makes the difference. While there is considerable research on student retention practices for university recruitment and enrollment departments, there seems to be little written on student outreach and retention strategies for online adjuncts. This paper is based on existing research on the philosophies of adult education, a review of current literature related to online education and the writer's own eight years of experience teaching online at for-profit universities as a baseline for offering online adjuncts five adjunct outreach strategies to bridge the virtual distance and increase student retention.

Introduction

Student retention in the online environment can be challenging. Without face to face contact some students may feel they are in isolation and drop out of school. There has been a great deal of concern at the many for-profit online universities. Loss of students can mean lost revenues. Most recently, student retention efforts have become pushed downstream to the adjunct level based on the rationale that adjuncts in the trenches have more contact with their students than enrollment counselors. When students go AWOP (absent without permission) online adjuncts are being asked to phone students in an effort to reach out to the student before he/she becomes a "lost sale." Hence the title of this article: "Where's Walter?"

As a cost-saving measure, reducing the number of enrollment counselors and asking adjuncts to participate in a phone-a-thon on the surface might seem smart. This is a bit aiken to the short-sighted business strategy of driving revenue, but not watching overall profitability. There are however, several simple outreach strategies that can be implemented proactively before a student becomes MIA (missing in action). And while there is considerable research on student retention practices for university recruitment and enrollment departments, there seems to be little written on student outreach and retention strategies for online adjuncts.

There are hundreds of studies that address "no significant difference" in the quality of online versus on-ground instruction, yet it is clearly the instructor who makes the difference. This paper is based on existing research on the philosophies of adult education, a review of current literature related to online education and the writer's own five years of experience teaching online at for-profit universities as a baseline for offering online adjuncts five adjunct outreach strategies to bridge the virtual distance and increase student retention.

> "Online learning is not just an electronic correspondence learning experience, but rather a technology-mediated, interactive learning environment" (Blocher et al., 2002, p. 1). This environment is related to the Humanistic Adult Education

philosophical approach. The key concepts of the humanistic approach include "freedom and autonomy, trust, active cooperation and participation, and self-directed learning. The goal of humanistic education is the development of the self-actualizing person. The selection of content is subsumed under the goal of assisting learners to grow and develop in accordance with their needs and interests" (Elias and Merriam, 1995, p.76). The nature of the online learning environment provides for the sharing of ideas and concepts where learners are presented information and receive valuable feedback. The implication for educational practice is that collaborative and group interaction is actively supported to promote learning (Teles, 1993, p. 271).

(1) Instructor Immediacy

Providing timely feedback is the first critical strategy in reducing the feeling of isolation that leads to lower retention rates for online students. Online adjuncts must respond within 24 hours to student needs. A daily presence in the message boards or newsgroups is highly recommended. "Students expect instructor-led interaction and become aware of the instructor's level of commitment, and relevant and timely feedback" (Deubel, 2004). Online universities must train adjuncts on "instructor immediacy" as a preventative measure. This is the nature of proactive planning rather than reactive response – AKA the request for adjuncts to make phone calls to students MIA halfway through the course. This also aligns with the nature of the humanistic philosophical perspective.

> First described by Meharabian (1969) as behaviors that enhance closeness and nonverbal interaction with another, "instructional immediacy" was extended by Gorham (1988) to include verbal interaction that increased psychological closeness between instructor and student through the use of humor, frequent use of student name, encouragement of discussion and following up on student-initiated comments, encouraging future contact with students, and sharing of personal examples; nonverbal immediacy includes smiling, eye contact, vocal expressiveness, open gestures and body movement behaviors by the instructor. (Hutchins, 2003).

Research by Freitas, Myers and Avtgis (1998) suggests verbal immediacy is more relevant to web-based instructional settings as the instructor is not physically present to provide non-verbal cues. Arbaugh (2001) explored the extent to which instructor verbal immediacy behaviors are (statistically) significantly aligned with student learning and satisfaction in web-based MBA courses. A factor analysis produced two factors (1) classroom demeanor, which reflected the instructor's use of personal examples, humor and openness toward the encouragement of student ideas and discussion; and (2) name recognition, referring to the extent to which the instructor was addressed by name and vice versa. *"Walter, what is your definition of public relations?"*

Arbaugh (2001) reasoned that instructors who readily used verbally immediate behaviors in a face-to-face classroom should find it fairly easy to do such in an online format, as many strategies should be the same. For instructors unaware or simply not using verbally immediate behaviors, Jensen (1999) demonstrated that faculty could successfully learn to use such after participating in an immediacy training program, increasing their use of verbal immediacy behaviors by 42 percent and student participation by 59%. (Hutchins, 2003). These same practices can be extended to online learning formats and increase the student retention rate.

(2) Talk Tech and Use the Technology

Technology skills limited to opening emails? There is little doubt the Internet has changed the way we communicate. Email has replaced snail mail and even voice mail as the primary choice for

communication in the learning environment. "Every day, billions of e-mail messages are sent out. E-mail has been the most rapidly adopted form of communication ever known. In less than two decades, it has gone from obscurity to mainstream dominance" (www.howstuffworks.com, 2005).

A second strategy for increasing student retention involves the use of technology. Online adjuncts have a responsibility to be as tech savvy (or more so) than their students. Online adjuncts need to understand live links, Spyware, Virus Protection, PDFs, IM (instant messaging) and Chat. Online adjuncts also need to recognize that technology can be intimidating for some students like Walter, an older adult who did not grow up around personal computers. Just because Walter has a laptop, does not mean he understands the software and technology that drive online learning. While online adjuncts can (and should) refer their students to "tech-support" for major issues, responding to the student with some degree of understanding and empathy will ease student frustration and the fear of isolation. Every online adjunct should know how to provide direction on uploading attachments for email and embedding links into emails and discussion board postings; two very common questions from the online learning environment.

In our 24/7 world, sometimes even the rapid response of e-mail is not fast enough. IM allows one to create a list of people to interact with, like Walter. One can send messages to any of the people on your list, often called a buddy list or contact list, as long as that person is online. Sending a message opens up a small window where the instructor and the student can type in messages that both can see. AIM (AOL Instant Messenger), MSN and Yahoo Messenger are three of the more popular IM clients. The service is free and simple to use.

Using IM, online adjuncts can "hold office hours" where they are available to take IMs from students. The adjunct's IM name and online office hours should be posted in the syllabus and on the discussion board. IM can reduce the fear of isolation and open up a friendly dialogue when the student knows they can "talk" with the instructor one on one. For adjuncts worried about a barrage of IMs from "needy" students, take heed, one can "turn-off" IM after posted office hours are over.

Real-time chat sessions are another opportunity to connect with the student. Some online universities require students to attend weekly chat sessions where the class can discuss a previously posted discussion question for the week. Live chat sessions spark dynamic debate to further reinforce learning and bridge the virtual distance. The adjunct serves as the facilitator of the content and poses reflective questions. Students receive immediate feedback from the instructor and fellow students.

(3) What's In a Name?

Where's Walter? Addressing a student by name in the newsgroups, message boards and postings is similar to establishing eye contact in the onground classroom. Acknowledging the student by name sends a message that the student's comments are recognized and supported. "Names are an important key to what a society values. Anthropologists recognize naming as one of the chief methods for imposing order on perception" (Slawson, 2005). Use of student's first names in the classroom is a third strategy for increasing student retention. *"Great point Walter, can you share with us an example of the use of public relations in the nonprofit field?"*

Students and the adjunct should post personal bios in the chat rooms. This gives students an opportunity to get to know one another and gives the adjunct a way to determine if students can access the course and post information. Adjunct bios should be personable and friendly, with

focus on the curriculum vita facts, but also on interests in teaching and other activities. Adjuncts should respond to students by name and comment on how their experience or interests will be of benefit to the class. Students must feel like they are a member of the learning community and it is up to the instructor to create community and bridge the virtual distance. *"Thanks for posting your bio Walter. It appears several of us in the class have an interest in baseball."*

(4) A Sense of Place – Stoking the Bandwidth Bonfire

Meyrowitz (1985) offers a fitting passage in his book, "No Sense of Place" to capture the notion of student isolation… "Our world may suddenly seem senseless to many people because, for the first time in modern history, it is relatively placeless."
Bridging the virtual distance involves creating a feeling of community, a sense of place, in an online class. One is not required to sing "Kum-ba-ya," however, there are some very simple methods for creating a feeling of warmth and support through the bandwidth.
Online instructors must promote interaction and collaboration through required participation or discussion questions with a minimum number of words required for each question. Adjuncts should require students to also respond to each others' postings as part of the participation grade. Further, adjuncts should require students to use real world examples in their discussion question response and summarize what they learned.

Adjuncts should also establish learning teams or learning groups early on in the course. The adjunct should establish a separate chat area for each learning group. Students can be grouped by time zone for convenience. The adjunct should monitor learning group chat areas to make certain all team members are contributing to the learning process. Shrivastava (1999) described learning communities as "knowledge ecosystems" where groups of people engaged in collective inquiry to enhance their personal knowledge and application of the knowledge to work situations" (Shrivastava, 1999 p. 694).

Social rapport building activities are critical to reducing the feeling of isolation.
Adjuncts should create a designated chat area for students to use. According to Alley and Jansdak (2001), such a "cyber café" assuages feeling of isolation, helps to minimize a student's potential frustration and is an application to help maintain student motivation" (Alley and Jansdak, 2001).

(5) Recipe for a Good Online Personality

Finally, adjunct must be personable. This is not the grammar teacher's behaviorist environment which emphasizes "control, behavior modification, learning through reinforcement and management by objectives (the teacher's objectives, not the student's)" (Elias and Merriam, 1995, p.47). Adjuncts serve as coach, not the lord of the discussion board. Behaviorists beware! Kearsly and Lynch (1994) suggest that an instructor who wishes to maintain tight control of a course, may not be suited for online course delivery.

The recipe for good online personality is an understanding of andragogy with a smackeral of Dewey, a pinch of radical adult ed philosophy and a dash of liberalism for good measure. (Humor never hurts either and if you are known at cocktail parties as the "conversation starter," extend that skill to the online classroom.) "Where interaction, collegiality and collaboration are a valuable part of the <course> culture, there is a better exchange of ideas and development of problem solving skills" (Deal & Peterson, 1999).

Wallflowers, never fear. News stories, good online references and graphics can always get

conversation started. Find a current event that relates to the course material. Post a link to the article and have students discuss the issue. Stumble across a handy link for writing papers, doing research or something related to your class? Share it with the student. As their coach, adjuncts should be on the "look out" for information that can help students further engage in the learning process.

There's common expression, "A picture is worth a thousand words." In the online environment, animated graphics can speak volumes. Animated graphics, commonly referred to as "Gif" files can help increase readability and decrease eye strain in online lectures. Animated graphics can also convey emotion, humor and a friendly personality. Two very good sources for animated graphics are Animation Factory (www.animationfactory.com) and Digital Juice (www.digitaljuice.com) "Graphics should be appropriately sized to be clearly read, relevant for course content and used widely to support, explain and/or clarify content" (Zhu &McKnight, 2001).

Successful online student retention starts with the instructor outreach. "Online adjuncts fill multiple roles: instructor, social director, program manager and technical assistant" (Hootstein, 2002). Successful online teaching is more than just moving course materials to the web. Adjuncts must make a commitment to building a dynamic, interactive learning environment through such strategies as instructor immediacy, knowledge of technology, name recognition, creating community and developing online personality. Adjuncts make the significant difference in bridging the virtual distance and increasing student retention.

"Hi Walter! I found you. I read in your chat room bio that you are a Sox fan. Before the Boston Red Sox won the World Series (breaking the bad luck that plagued the team since the last time they won in 1918), Nike had a 60 second television commercial ready to go to celebrate the victory showing fans in four seats cheering for another elusive World Series crown. We're going to talk about the impact of endorsements in our public relations class this week. Your expertise as a Sox fan would be invaluable on the discussion board."

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