

REQUIRED COVER PAGE



APPLICATION FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT GRANT

**All questions must be completed to be considered for grant award.

Choose one: <input type="checkbox"/> Creative Activity <input type="checkbox"/> Research Activity <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Professional Enhancement Activity	Application Deadline Date: <u>FEB 1</u> (i.e. October 1, February 1, or April 15)
	Date of Last PDG Award (Semester and Year awarded): <u>Spring 2016</u>
	Date of ATU Faculty Appointment (Semester and Year): <u>Fall 2012</u>

- Project Title: Promoting Engagement and Community in Online Courses: It's all about the Writing
- Name of Principal Investigator/Project Director: Jeremy Schwehm
- College (abbrev): eTech 4. Department: PS 5. Campus Mail Address: 715 N El Paso Ave
- PI/PD Campus Phone: 356-2095 7. Amount Requested: \$ 986.30 8. Total Cost of Project: \$ 986.30
- Will total funds awarded be expended by June 30th of the current fiscal year: Yes X No _____
- If not, what is the total to be expended this fiscal year: \$ _____
- What is the total to be carried over to the next fiscal year: \$ _____ (if approved by the VPAA)
- Project Completion Date: 03/10/17 13. Travel Dates: 03/08/17 – 03/10/17
(if applicable)
- Does this project involve:
Yes No
 human subjects?
 animals/animal care facility?
 radioactive materials?
 hazardous materials?
 biological agents or toxins restricted by the USA Patriot Act?
 copyright or patent potential?
 utilization of space **not** currently available to the PI/PD?
 the purchase of equipment/instrumentation/software currently **available** to the PI/PD?

NOTE: If the answer is "yes" to any of the above questions, the investigator must attach appropriate documentation of approval or justification for use/purchase.

SIGNATURES

Department Contribution (if applicable): \$ _____

Account Number: _____

Chairperson Date

College Contribution (if applicable): \$ _____

Account Number: _____

Dean Date

This Section to be completed by the Office of Academic Affairs

Previous PDG Award final report received: Yes _____ No _____

PDC Committee Award Recommendation: Yes _____ No _____

PDC Committee Proposal Rank: _____ of _____ Total Proposals.

Recommendation of VPAA: Yes _____ No _____ Recommendation of President: Yes _____ No _____

Award Date: _____

B. Restatement of the Professional Enhancement Activity

The Adult Higher Education Alliance (AHEA) is a leading organization in research and practice on adult students in higher education. I am a tenure-track faculty member in the Department of Professional Studies, which serves a significant number of online, nontraditional learners. I requested funding to cover travel expenses to the 2017 AHEA national conference held in Orlando, Florida on March 8 – 10, 2017, where I presented on the use of writing in online courses to increase student engagement. In this presentation, participants were introduced to matching writing assignments with learning management system tools to increase online adult student engagement. Participants also workshopped ideas and best practices for online course design and administration. The strategies gleaned from this presentation were used to inform my own practice in course design and instruction. I also published a paper on the topic in the conference proceedings.

C. Review of the Professional Enhancement Activity

The purpose of this presentation was to explore innovative teaching and learning strategies to increase adult student involvement and engagement in the online classroom. Student involvement, engagement, and sense of belonging have been theoretically and empirically linked to positive educational outcomes (Astin, 1984; Bollen & Hoyle, 1990; Pascarella & Terezini, 2005; Tinto, 1993). Specific to adult students, engagement in the classroom through relationships with faculty, staff, and peers has been linked to positive outcomes (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Rovai, 2002). Although online degree programs can mitigate various obstacles and meet the accessibility needs of adult learners, online courses can lead to a lack of interaction and engagement (Chen, Kuh, & Gonyea, 2008; Hill, Song, & West, 2009) and feelings of isolation if not designed correctly. There are ways to increase the engagement and sense of belonging of online adult students through other services, such as academic advising (Giroir & Schwehm, 2013), but the central path for adult student engagement is the classroom (Graham, Donaldson, Kasworm, & Dirkx, 2000; Philibert, Elleven, & Allen, 2008).

Kearsley and Shneiderman (1999) argue that to be engaged in the online learning environment, students must be “meaningfully engaged in learning activities through interaction with others and worthwhile tasks” (p. 1). Online courses designed with increased interactivity components positively impact student engagement (Poniatowski, 2013). These can include collaborative writing assignments (Fredrickson, 2015), thought

provoking discussion forums (Mason, 2011), online narrative writing (Annamalai & Tan, 2014), the use of Wikis (Neumann & Hood, 2009), and the recognition of online status and online learners being treated as equals to face-to-face students (O'Shea, Stone, & Delahunty, 2015). In application to the adult online learner, the online experience must include interaction among students in a community of learners, individual student engagement with content through the utilization of learner past experience, engagement in worthwhile tasks to facilitate knowledge construction, and online learner engagement in communities of place, practice, and learning.

Outline of Session:

I. Introduction

- a. Welcome
- b. Purpose of the presentation session (why engagement is important)

II. Types of Engagement, Types of Writing, Types of LMS Tools

- a. Engagement (content, peers, instructor, self)
- b. Writing (persuasive, expository, narrative, descriptive)
- c. LMS Tools (discussion, journal, wiki, blog)

III. Implementation Strategies

- a. Instructor readiness
- b. Student readiness
- c. Technological considerations

IV. Small group discussion

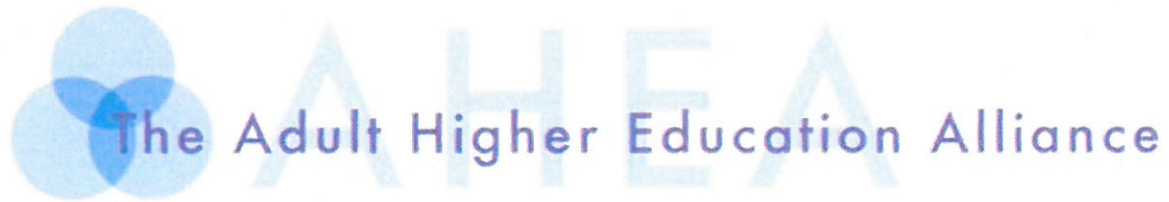
- a. Participant best practices
- b. Participant concerns

V. Conclusion

- a. Question/Answer Session

D. Summary of the Experience

I presented best practices on the use of writing to increase course engagement for adult students in online programs at the 2017 AHEA national conference in Orlando, FL. Approximately 25 individuals in attendance at the presentation. The presentation began with an overview of engagement, theory supporting practice, and models of online learning. This was followed by an in-depth discussion of planning for different types of engagement by matching specific types of writing with specific learning management system tools. Lastly, best practices for implementing specific writing assignments to increase engagement was discussed. Based on discussions that took place after the presentation, I was able to compile a list of best practices for increasing engagement for online adult learners by the strategic use of writing assignments. Additionally, I was able to publish a narrative description of the presentation in the conference proceedings (attached at the end of this report).



Conference Proceedings
Adult Higher Education Alliance
41st Annual Conference

Writing Our Way:
Giving Voice to Adult Learning

Edited By:
Kemi Elufiede
Bonnie Flynn
Joann S. Olson

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**Promoting Engagement and Community in Online Courses:
It's all about the Writing**

Jeremy Schwehm, Jennifer Saxton & Annette Stuckey

Abstract

For adult learners in online courses, writing is the predominant means by which all interaction takes place. As those participating in online education rely heavily on engagement with content, peers, and instructors, special attention should be given to include various activities that promote written communication to foster a positive and engaging classroom experience. By providing engaged writing assignments for online adult learners, instructors can increase student learning, promote a sense of belonging to the institution, and increase persistence. In this interactive session, the presenters introduced attendees to online learning strategies that match types of writing (expository, persuasive, descriptive, narrative) and assignments with learning management system tools to enhance adult student engagement with course content, peers, the instructor, and self.

Keywords: adult learning online, adult learner engagement, engaged writing online, online classroom community, online classroom engagement

**Promoting Engagement and Community in Online Courses:
It's all about the Writing**

Student involvement, engagement, and sense of belonging have been theoretically and empirically linked to positive educational outcomes (Astin, 1984; Bollen & Hoyle, 1990; Pascarella & Terezini, 2005; Tinto, 1993). Specific to adult students, engagement in the classroom through relationships with faculty, staff, and peers has been linked to positive outcomes (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Dill & Henley, 1998; Kasworm, 2003; Rovai, 2002, 2003). Although online degree programs can mitigate various obstacles and meet the accessibility needs of adult learners, online courses can lead to a lack of interaction and engagement (Chen, Gonyea, & Kuh, 2008; Hill, Song, & West, 2009) and feelings of isolation (Song, Singleton, Hill, & Koh, 2004) if not designed correctly. There are ways to increase the engagement and sense of belonging of online adult students through other services, such as academic advising (Giroir & Schwehm, 2013), but the central path for adult student engagement is the classroom (Graham, Donaldson, Kasworm, & Dirks, 2000; Kasworm, 2003; Philibert, Elleven, & Allen, 2008).

Kearsley and Shneiderman (1999) argued that to be engaged in the online learning environment, students must be “meaningfully engaged in learning activities through

interaction with others and worthwhile tasks” (p. 1). Online courses designed with increased interactivity components positively impact student engagement (Poniatowski, 2013). These can include collaborative writing assignments (Fredrickson, 2015), thought-provoking discussion forums (Mason, 2011), online narrative writing (Annamalai & Tan, 2014), multimedia tools (Sun & Rueda, 2012), the use of Wikis (Neumann & Hood, 2009), and the recognition of online status and online learners being treated as equals to face-to-face students (O’Shea, Stone, & Delahunty, 2015). In application to the adult online learner, the online experience must include interaction among students in a community of learners, individual student engagement with content through the utilization of learner past experience, engagement in worthwhile tasks to facilitate knowledge construction, and online learner engagement in communities of place, practice, and learning.

For adult learners in online courses, writing is the predominant means by which all interaction takes place. In this interactive session, the presenters introduced attendees to online learning strategies that match types of writing (expository, persuasive, descriptive, narrative) and assignments with learning management system tools to enhance adult student engagement in the online classroom. The presenters also discussed how the use of a variety of writing assignments can help online adult students build confidence in their writing ability.

Practical Application

By providing engaged writing assignments for online adult learners, instructors can increase student learning, promote a sense of belonging to the institution, and increase persistence. To promote engagement in an online course, the instructor should consider the type of engagement, the style of writing, and the appropriate learning management system (LMS) tool (Table 1) when designing writing activities. While it is rare that a single writing activity fits in a single category, most writing assignments influence multiple types of engagement, and by utilizing specific LMS tools, instructors can better utilize types of writing to promote engagement.

Table 1

Types of Engagement, Writing, and LMS Tool

<u>Type of Engagement</u>	<u>Type of Writing</u>	<u>Type of LMS Tool</u>
Content	Persuasive	Discussion
Peers	Expository	Journal
Instructor	Narrative	Wiki
Self	Descriptive	Blog

The four types of engagement discussed in the session were engagement with content, peers, instructors, and self. Engagement with content includes linking learners' past experience with course content and/or facilitating the application of course content. Peer engagement refers to engagement with fellow class members in group settings, as well as engagement with the entire class. Engagement with the instructor implies meaningful, one-on-one interaction with the instructor. Engagement with self requires purposeful self-reflection.

Effective forms of writing include expository, persuasive, narrative, and descriptive. The purpose of expository writing is to inform or explain. Expository writing can be matched with multiple LMS tools, but is perhaps best suited for the discussion forum and the wiki. For example, to facilitate engagement with content, a student could be asked to use expository writing in the discussion forum to explain a specific theory or concept in relation to their work experience. This would require students to use past experience to illustrate key components of a concept.

Engagement with peers can be achieved using any writing style. Narrative writing is used to tell a story, and expository writing can be matched with a wiki for group exercises in which the end goal is to create original content based on course learning. This can be in the form of group portfolios, learning module summaries, or study guides. Descriptive writing is similar to expository writing, because it incorporates imagery and sensory detail. It can also be used to encourage engagement with peers in discussion forums. The use of descriptive writing allows students to explain concepts in more personal, relatable terms.

Engagement with the instructor and self might best be achieved through the use of narrative and expository writing activities that seek to provide meaningful interaction and ongoing conversation/discourse with the instructor, as well as self-evaluation or reflection resulting in a deeper meaning for the student. An excellent engaged writing activity might revolve around a capstone project journal, a critical book review, or a service-learning reflective exercise. The dialog among instructor and students must be meaningful to the student. By involving them in real community problems, service-learning provides students with a need to know, a desire to enhance their skills and a commitment to solving problems of importance to them. Journals are particularly effective since they are private-only dialog between the student and instructor and allow the student to feel included, respected, and safe.

Conclusion

The theoretical framework of engagement (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitte, & Associates, 2005), social construction/learning (Bandura, 1986), engagement theory for technology-based learning (Kearsley & Shneiderman, 1998), perceived cohesion (Bollen & Hoyle,

1990), and connection classroom (Graham et al., 2000; Kasworm & Blowers, 1994; Philibert, Allen, & Elleven, 2008) supports the purposeful use of writing styles with specific LMS tools to increase engagement for adult learners in the online environment. The conference presentation focused on providing examples of the identified writing styles (narrative, expository, persuasive, and descriptive), introducing engaging activities that incorporate those writing styles, and discussing various learning management tools available in most learning management systems (LMS) to teach those principles. The session opened with a discussion of why engagement is important, introducing the audience to the difference between involvement and engagement and examining how students' experience increased learning, sense of belonging, and persistence to completion when they are engaged in their learning.

Whereas traditional-aged students divide their time between classroom engagement and campus activities, the classroom is central to the adult student experience, therefore suggesting that faculty members and course developers focus on incorporating engaging activities into the online classroom setting. As those participating in online education rely heavily on engagement with peers and instructors, special attention should be given to include various activities that promote written communication to foster a positive and engaging classroom experience.

A meaningful discussion took place where each practitioner was able to glean valuable information and resources to take back to their respective classroom or program. The presentation closed with a discussion of best practices that should be considered when implementing activities which promote engagement in the online classroom. One should consider the type of engagement and determine the best type of writing to match with the most appropriate LMS tool. Regardless of the activity, sometimes the level of engagement depends on the involvement of each individual instructor, and the more complex assignments tend to mean less engagement. Also, learning outcomes are assessed to determine if what you are doing is successful.

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