

Navigating a slippery slope: Blending two types of discussions to meet the unique needs of emerging online learners

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Introduce ourselves

Topics to be covered - We'll begin by sharing a bit about emerging online learners and what the research says about their poor persistence in online courses along with strategies to perhaps improve their success. The struggle and tension (aka "the slippery slope") at this point should be evident. To address the needs of emerging online learners (aka "navigate the slippery slope") we share two different types of discussions that when used in tandem align with the research and better address emerging online learner needs. Finally, we will share our student's experiences with using both types of discussions. t

Chat with emerging online learners



Staci

For starters, it is vital to understand who the emerging online learners are and how they differ from online learners of yesteryear. It seems the iconic distance learner of the 20th Century/early 21st Century who was independent, geographically isolated or bound, an older adult, self-motivated, and goal oriented was no longer the norm prior to COVID-19 hitting in the Spring of 2020. To illustrate, the percentage of undergraduates enrolled in at least one online course increased from 15% in 2003-2004 to 45% during the 2014-2015 academic year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). Today, I think it would be safe to say that nearly 100% of undergraduates are enrolled in at least one online course due to the move to online delivery to address safety issues related to the global pandemic. That's not to say, older students, who once had limited access to post-secondary education due to geography, family, or work schedules still are not taking online courses (Johnson & Palmer, 2015; Ortagus, 2018). Instead, the challenge lies in that the profile of the online learner is emerging and the changing landscape of online learning has been expedited.

If we were to chat with emerging online learners, what would they tell us? Who are they? (Bawa, 2016; Dabbagh, 2007, Raza et al., 2020; Seaman et al., 2018). I've read what the research says they would say and I've personally with several over the years. Here's what I know...

Chat with the experts

Problem	Possible Solutions
Low rates of persistence (Xu & Jaggars, 2011)	Synchronous video conferencing perhaps is the answer to more authentic interactions (Paulsen & McCormick, 2020)
Limited opportunities for student-to-student interaction (National Center for Ed Statistics, 2016)	Blending asynchronous & synchronous tools (Leeds et al., 2013)
Dissatisfaction with text-based discussion boards because lack real-time interaction (Kaufmann, 2015)	Multimodal asynchronous tools – text, audio, and video (Ching & Hsu, 2013)

Staci

We have established that emerging online learners are the predominant consumer of online classes (Seaman et al., 2018) and we've learned a bit about them. If we were to chat with the experts what advice would they offer....what do they say about emerging online learners, the state of online instruction for them, and online instruction that meets their needs.

Xu & Jaggars, 2011 - Students have lower rates of persistence for online courses as compared to face-to-face classes.

National Center for Educational Statistics, 2016 - Part of the reason could be because online classes continue to fall below face-to-face courses in terms of opportunities for student-to-student interaction.

Kaufmann, 2015 - Adds that Instructors often seek to address this deficit through text-based asynchronous discussion boards even though students often report dissatisfaction with these types of discussions because they lack the real-time

authentic interaction and feedback they get in face-to-face courses

Paulsen & McCormick 2020 - Share that some assert online instructors can address the need for more authentic student-to-student interaction through the use of synchronous video conferencing tools - many of which are multi-modal.

Leeds et al., 2013 - Say others suggest that blending asynchronous and synchronous tools can assist with retaining students who otherwise fail to persist in online courses.

On the other hand, some recommend the use of multimodal asynchronous tools that provide more flexibility for online learners yet still allowing for text, audio, and video Communication - voice thread. -asyn preferences - studies show students prefer audio, then text, and finally video because they can experience emotion, personality, and other verbal cues - authentic interactions (Voice Thread)

Instructors say - What are we to do? Because the slope gets slippery when beginning to introduce synchronous tools because now the flexibility and convenience students desire becomes compromised.

Solutions_Discussion Boards

<u>Discussions</u> (before)	<u>Discussions</u> (after)
"Minimum"	Increased engagement (students and faculty)
"Last" minute on deadline days with required # of posts	Occur over multiple days
Text-based	Multimodal (text, audio, video)

Amy - Maybe this would be a way to transition? Then after this para go into discussion boards and how we've used them. Share before/after highlights in table and then link to the guidelines.

Now we will share how to navigate this slippery slope and strive to meet the needs of emerging online learners. Specifically, how we use asynchronous discussion boards along with learning communities that use synchronous video conferencing technology. Both tools provide for multi-modal communication through text, audio, and video that is used to support the development of community, and to facilitate the development of a shared understanding while modeling inclusive practices inherent to Universal Design for Learning. Further, the discussions in tandem, provide opportunities for the authentic student-to-student interactions that emerging online learners need to persist while at the same time supporting the growth of real-world collaboration skills. All while respecting emerging online learners' desire for flexibility and convenience. These two types of discussions can be layered over any content or discipline.

We currently use asynchronous discussion boards across our program. All courses include four discussions that run for 2 weeks each.

In the initial program/course design phase, discussions followed a traditional format: read/watch, make an initial/original post to a specific question or set of questions, then respond to two peers. This was very automatic, almost procedural, and left all of us (students and faculty) feeling very lack-luster. We have made deliberate changes to better engage students and stretch their thinking through the implementation of specifications grading and a review/revision of discussion prompts. Specifications grading and an “all or nothing” approach have allowed faculty and students more flexibility in engaging in the discussions. We have included exemplars for our students that clearly define our expectations, allow us to uphold high academic standards and foster higher-order cognitive development (Nilson, 2016). Our new LMS, Brightspace has afforded all the choice to participate in writing or through voice or video. Students and faculty have expressed the changes have enhanced th

Solutions_Virtual Learning Communities

<u>Virtual Learning Communities</u> (before)	<u>Virtual Learning Communities</u> (after)
Confusion over "purpose" ,expectations, and roles	Clarity through the explicit inclusion of purpose statement, expectations, and roles
Confusion over formatting of "summary"	Clarity through the introduction of a template
Inconsistency in grading-tool many layers	Clarity in grading

We have also integrated Virtual Learning Communities (VLCs) throughout our program. Students connect with each other synchronously using a video conferencing tool. Faculty determine groups; students arrange their days and meeting times. These VLCs are designed to foster and support community in our online program. The sessions also facilitate the development of a shared understanding of course content while modeling inclusive practices inherent to Universal Design for Learning. These discussions, in tandem with the asynchronous discussions, provide opportunities for the authentic student-to-student interactions that emerging online learners need to persist while at the same time supporting the growth of real-world collaboration skills. Students report utilizing their VLC group members as study partners. We have made some adjustments to the rubrics. As with the asynchronous discussions, we have implemented specifications grading and included exemplars. We determined we were already grading in that fashion, so we adjusted the rubric/scoring to reflect that. Students expressed concern/confusion over the format of the final submission document. As faculty, this had not been an area of concern-the goal/purpose of the VLCs was the collaboration and conversations. In order to alleviate student concern, we also developed a template for the submission document. There is still some discussion on how to manage students/grading that do not attend scheduled meetings...

Amy - VLCs and how we've used them. Share a table or some of visual and then link to the guidelines.

rubrics-before/after highlights in table; link new rubrics

What do our emerging online learners have to say?

VLCs	Discussion Boards
"I am loving the VLCs. I did not think I would like them at all but they are so much fun and way better than a boring discussion board. Love getting to talk with my peers."	"I like being able to post a quick video or audio to the discussion board instead of typing up a post. It is less stressful to not have to worry about spelling and grammar and what my peers might think."
"My peers are extremely supportive, and I really enjoy the VLCs. I find that when I have to post to discussion boards, sometimes I just piggyback off of what others have posted. During the LVC, you are honestly forced to engage."	"I don't really like discussion boards but love learning communities. But if I can post a video instead of writing a post, then discussion boards aren't as bad."

Staci

Themes - Majority of students prefer/value learning communities even though they have to give up (cost) flexibility

VLCs - relationships/support

VLCs - answer questions/clarify/ ideas

VLCs - different perspectives/experiences

VLC - back and forth/real time

VLC - fun - enjoy interacting

DB - Choice

What do you have to say?

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Amy

“How will you implement or apply or adapt what we have tried out in this session when you return to your institution?” Comment on this slide or connect on connect with us on social media or via email with this response and/or questions, comments, and reactions - we’ll check in either way and get back to you.