

Connecting with Students in an Online Classroom

by Dr. Cristina Salinas-Grandy

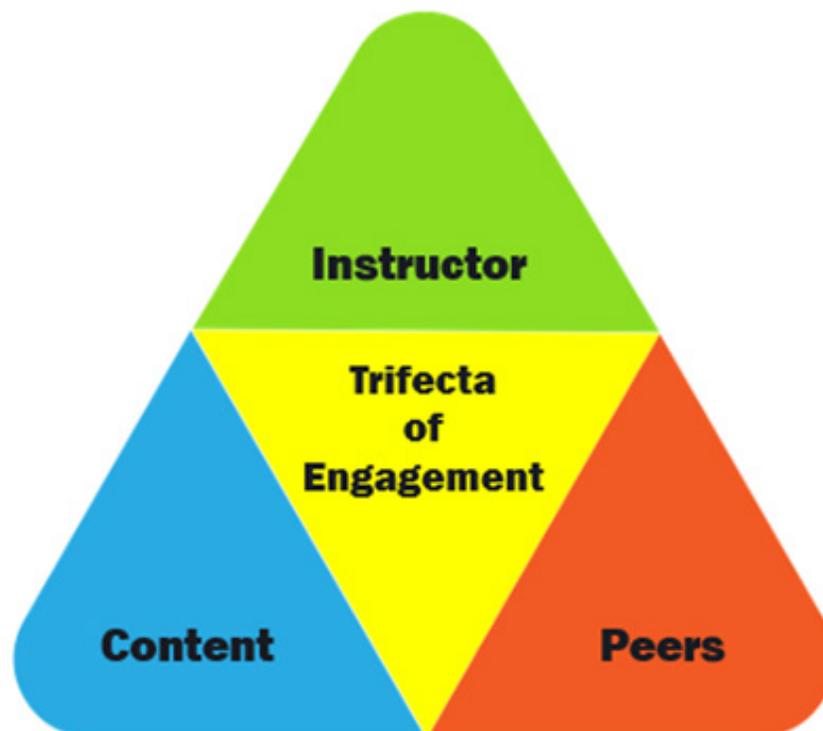


Dr. Cristina Salinas-Grandy, Assistant Professor in SCOE

Professor Salinas-Grandy participated in the Online Teaching Professional Development program as part of the National University System Innovation Grant. In this program, faculty participants piloted a course called Enhanced Teaching & Learning Strategies that consists of engaging online teaching practices using Blackboard tools.

The course presents teaching strategies using the Trifecta of Engagement model in which students, in order to be successful, need to be engaged with: (1) their course content, (2) their peers, and (3) their instructor.

Faculty provide evidence of how they applied the Trifecta of Engagement model when teaching a real course through case studies and presentations.



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Abstract

National University faculty understand that online education has grown tremendously over the past ten years. The increased accessibility of the Internet and the World Wide Web has created vast opportunities for non-traditional education through this medium (Karber, 2003). This paper reviews what the author learned during an in depth professional development course for faculty in order to improve education for the adult learner in the online classroom at National University. Online education and its attractiveness, benefits, and challenges are addressed. The author will also discuss the ways in which she plans to aid adjunct faculty to improve their teaching strategies in the courses they teach. Some concerns and recommendations are also shared.

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My responsibility as a faculty member at National University is to teach courses in an online format, using Blackboard. I am the program director for the Elementary Program for the Henderson campus in Nevada. It is also my responsibility to ensure that the adjunct faculty members I oversee teach the courses in the program to the best of their ability.

When I was asked to participate in the Enhanced Teaching and Learning Strategies (ETLS) course pilot, I was at first apprehensive but still excited at the chance to learn how to better connect with my students and learn new teaching strategies for the online classroom. I was apprehensive because I sometimes feel challenged working in the online platform. I do not consider myself tech savvy. As a student I came from a traditional face-to-face setting. As a teacher and now professor I am very comfortable in a face-to-face setting. Working at National University where a majority of the courses are held online, I have had to adapt to the online classroom environment.

In my experience I have found that teaching online made me feel empty as a professor. I was not connecting with my students like I had when I would teach face-to-face courses. I did not feel that the online platform allowed me the opportunity to make meaningful connections with my students. I also felt that students really did not get an opportunity to connect with the content as well. It was my opinion that students who were in a face-to-face setting gained a richer experience than those in an online setting.



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Even with these feelings, I recognize there are many benefits to taking a course online. Accessibility is one of the most essential benefits reported by Coyner and McCann (2004). Students can gain access to information including syllabi, course assignments, scoring guides, Power Point presentations, and supplemental materials 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Online education provides opportunity and access for those students from various backgrounds and age ranges. People who are not able to have access to traditional classrooms because of time, geography, financial considerations, family, and work constraints can have access to the resources online (Davison, 2005; Karber, 2003; Taylor, 2003). After participating in the ETLS course it truly opened my eyes to so many different ways we can enhance our courses online to help these students connect with each other, the content, and us, the professors.

Online Teaching Professional Development

The professional development program consisted of three webinar sessions by experts who used strategies to connect with their students in the online format. I enjoyed how the sessions were done online in much the same format that we can use to teach our students. I felt these techniques were effective. As a teacher who teaches teachers, I always try to model what I want my teachers to do in the classroom. Each speaker had a different focus and provided insightful strategies that help connect the students to the content as well as the professor to the students. I really found one of the speaker's ideas intriguing. He suggested having students choose how they wanted to be graded on their projects. It reminded me of how important assessment is for learning. Stiggins (2004) discusses the difference of assessment *of* learning and assessment *for* learning. Using assessment to help students learn is assessment for learning. The assessment is not just having the students tell you what they did or seeing if they can answer certain questions. The assessment is part of the learning. Having students take ownership of their learning and choose how they will be assessed gives them greater connection to the content. This also gives the students the opportunity to choose how they are going to work with the content. In having the students work with the content they are in fact gaining a better understanding of the content.

In ETLS you had to go through a staged sandbox course and enhance the course using the techniques and strategies we were taught. This part of the program really helped me practice using the tools and techniques we were taught.



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Trifecta of Engagement

When I finished ETLS I had to teach a course and decided to do an introduction video. I also conducted my first Blackboard Collaborate Ultra session. In addition, I held virtual office hours. The students knew that I would be online for them to drop in and ask questions at their convenience. This gave them the opportunity to meet with me face-to-face without having to make an appointment with me to visit the campus. The virtual office hours were great. I didn't have to go to campus, and I could be cooking dinner getting ready for my family to arrive home. Students would pop in ask a question or discuss something further from the discussion boards. I even helped a student with ideas for an assignment in another course. I really enjoyed having that connection with them. Some of these students email me now asking for advice for how they should proceed in the program, or ask about furthering their education with National.

Students seemed to respond really well to the Blackboard Collaborate Ultra sessions. We were able to discuss some of the questions they had in the course and they gave me ideas of what worked and didn't work in the course. I found it very useful to have a lesson plan prepared for how the session would go. I learned how to put together the lesson plan in ETLS and it helped me stay focused and keep the session engaging for students.

My first experience using these techniques went well. I made sure to use them in the following course I had to teach. In my next course, I am creating my intro video and my lesson plans for the Blackboard Collaborate Ultra sessions. I also include quick assessments in the sessions asking students to give me thumbs up, or a quick answer on chat. In order to have students connect with each other I have them work virtually in pairs. They have to work together and brainstorm ideas for projects and presentations. I have really worked on having the students make the important connections between themselves and the content as well as connections with other students and myself, their professor.

Teacher Showcase

While participating in ETLS I saved copies of all of the job aids that were given to us. These job aids helped walk one through everything from creating an intro video to scheduling Blackboard Collaborate Ultra sessions. In order to aid my colleagues and adjunct faculty I plan to have a training session for our adjunct faculty on using these tools.



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My colleagues and I hold a meeting twice a year for our adjunct faculty at the Henderson campus. Each meeting has a different focus. I plan to make our session with our adjunct faculty about making connections with our students in the courses online. I want to teach our adjuncts the strategies and techniques I learned to enhance their courses and teaching.

Concluding Thoughts

Online education has the ability to provide an education to individuals who once did not have access to a traditional education. An education at the learner's own pace and learning preference is now obtainable. As professors at an online university, we have the ability to help these students achieve the dream of obtaining their education. We must understand that the online platform can provide many opportunities to allow the students to interact with the content, their fellow students, and their professor.

Completing this faculty development program has given me many options and ideas to improve the courses that I teach. In using several of the techniques and strategies I learned I feel more fulfilled as a professor. I am making greater connections with my students and I am eager to engage the adjunct faculty and my colleagues in some techniques and strategies that I learned in the ETLS course.

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