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Engagement through Grading

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“I feel like I’m constantly grading now.” My colleague’s comment was offered as a lament over so much more assessment now that our school had transitioned to an online curriculum. That online courses required more grading was a surprise, and a mystery, to me at first too. Why should the delivery format make such a difference to how a course gets graded? There is an answer to that question, and the nature of learning provides the answer.

Online learning is learning mediated by distance and time. It doesn’t have the same social component, or the immediacy of interaction, that learning in class does. Going to class—and therefore, presumably, learning—constitutes the primary blocks of a residential student’s day, but learning done by students in an online school is often piled onto or squeezed into a daily schedule that is not otherwise centered around education. Online learning, therefore, occurs in isolation from many of the reinforcements to comprehension, inquiry, and creativity provided by face-to-face environments, e.g., shared space, informal conversation, direct and immediate access to professors, and even simple sensory aids like handouts, refreshments, show-and-tell objects, and rituals used to begin and end class. These sorts of things all contribute, in face-to-face education, to creating a learning environment that marks the moment of learning: “*Now, here*, learning is happening,” they convey.

In other words, they help sustain student *engagement*. Online instructors must find other ways to achieve what going to class achieves for residential students. We have to design our online

courses in ways that grab our students' attention and keep them motivated as they progress. We learn to employ strategies that encourage students to log on frequently, help them feel present within the online space and online community, provide them with frequent opportunities to verify their understanding of course content, to ask questions, to participate in discussion, to receive feedback, and to see their progress.

Frequent, small assessments constitute one of these strategies. They play a role in a larger ecology of learning that has many points and modes of engagement. Certainly, instructors can overload a course with too many little tasks and activities, but, generally speaking, lessons that are chunked into multiple small assignments keep students more engaged than do lessons consisting simply of reading and discussion—leading up to a big test or paper at the end of the course. In addition, when those smaller chunks are graded, students must complete them in order to succeed in the course. Grading creates a point of connection between student and professor, especially if it includes feedback and not just a number. As they accumulate, grades can provide students with a visual picture of their progress.

This is the reason why online education can involve so much grading. It's about engagement. It isn't necessarily about the need to measure or evaluate every single thing an online student does. One does not even have to award numbers or letter grades each time. (Continually having to decide where student work falls on a grading scale is what tires instructors like my colleague.) The larger point is that *student engagement and motivation are keys to successful learning* in general, no matter the delivery method. And this is what teaching online, with its seemingly endless assessment, has taught me about learning.

There are many studies proving the connection between engagement and learning. Since I cannot do justice to them here, I will close by reflecting on my own experiences as a learner. Like many future academics, motivating myself to learn was never particularly hard and I got to study things that naturally aroused my curiosity. I did not need bells and whistles to make me interested. But there are always exceptions. When learning is obligatory or seems irrelevant, it's been the graded assignments that have spurred me on. Several years ago, I had to take a course in driver safety to be allowed to shepherd students on field trips. The course didn't involve any actual driving but, rather, watching videos and taking a test. I was largely bored and disengaged until it was time to be tested. Then my competitive nature kicked in. When I passed with a nearly perfect grade but did not receive 100%, I wanted to take the course over again! To this day, I still remember the driving rule that I got wrong on that test.

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