Teaching in Graduate Distance Education: Perspectives on Evaluating Faculty Engagement Strategies

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A 2017 report by Digital Learning Compass estimates that over 6 million students are enrolled in distance education, representing one in four students who take at least one course online. Learning House (2017) cites the 2017 National Center for Education Statistics when they discuss that the number of online degree and certificate programs has grown more than 25 percent between 2013 and 2015, with now more than 25,000 programs being offered among for-profit and nonprofit institutions across a variety of synchronous and asynchronous delivery technologies. Moreover, there is an increasing number of blended learning programs which include a significant distance learning component.

Transactional Distance, a concept coined by Moore (1993, 1997) to articulate the "psychological and communication space" felt between instructors and students, continues to apply to the current online learning environment. In this environment, students are physically removed from their classrooms and their instructors, and, in rapidly growing numbers, from the university entirely. This concept applies to the broad framework of the pedagogy of distance education (Giossos et al., 2009; Major & Sumner, 2018). Compared to traditional face-to-face education, online programs or courses provide the convenience and accessibility that many learners seek. Online learning affords students the flexibility to manage their work schedules, travel obligations, and complicated family and work lives, all while attaining their higher education. Due to the increased transactional distance in online learning, students in distance education programs face challenges not historically encountered by traditional, campus-based students.

Based on the authors' experience working with students at Northcentral University, a fully online university, for over five years, the impact of transactional distance can occur at any point in a student's academic journey. Many learners are unaccustomed to the online learning environment, which may include unfamiliar technology, isolation from instructors and university staff, and a lack of face-to-face interaction with other learners. Students may often enroll in online courses because they think online courses will be more natural and require less time. The anonymous feeling of the online environment, however, makes it easier for students to participate minimally, or completely withdraw, and before the course even begins, some may be prone to disengagement. Without face-to-face contact, faculty cannot observe nonverbal cues that could indicate that students are frustrated, unenthusiastic, anxious, or otherwise disengaged. Also, faculty cannot share their emotions easily and may find it challenging to express enthusiasm, encouragement, or concern. These factors, singly or in combination, may place students at risk of slowing progression or withdrawing from the program altogether. As such, students are often overwhelmed during the initial application and enrollment processes, feel disconnected from faculty, peers, and resources, and tend to become detached and often completely removed from the university culture and traditions, leading to a sense of disengagement.

Student engagement is a concept often discussed in educational literature. While diverse in its definitions and coverage, researchers have reached a consensus that the construct is multidimensional, and encompasses different aspects (behavioral, cognitive, and emotional), which operate together to reflect students' quality of participation, commitment and motivation with regard to their studies, and identification with school and school-related activities, thereby impacting academic performance (Oqab, Huy, & Bing, 2016). Research has pointed to engagement as critical for higher education and its many stakeholders, implying a dynamic participatory

relationship between the individual and the institution, and as a key predictor of student success (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008; Baron & Corbin, 2012; Oblinger, 2014). As reported by Oqab et al., (2016), over the last seven decades, researchers and educators have exhibited a growing interest in the construct of engagement as a way to avert student boredom, enhance and sustain motivation and involvement in school-related activities, increase successful achievement levels, and understand students' overall positive development. Engagement is also a valuable construct for understanding and addressing the gradual process by which students drop out of school (Appleton et al., 2008). Apart from the impact on academic performance and achievement, the results of longitudinal studies have also indicated that the engagement construct is changeable and malleable (Oqab et al., 2016). As such, it is important that researchers and educators consider those factors that might help to foster and promote students' engagement in school and academic-related activities, which will, in turn, have the potential to enhance performance outcomes.

Online students are regularly acknowledged to be adult and non-traditional learners who prefer self-directed learning and experiences and building these aspects into the system is paramount. However, it must also be acknowledged that online students require guidance and support to help them advance in their learning and meet the expected learning outcomes. To mitigate the transactional distance experienced by online students, support structures must be put in place to supplement students' self- directed pathways, thereby facilitating and promoting engagement.

Theoretical Framework

What are the Factors Contributing To and Determining Academic Engagement?

The student population is increasing within the broader contemporary higher education landscape, which now includes a significant number of students learning in online and blended environments. Beyond the challenges of a traditional classroom environment, online learning environments present several additional challenges to keeping students engaged. As such, forward-thinking higher education institutions are increasingly seeking innovative approaches to student engagement, persistence, and retention to effectively and meaningfully meet the needs of their online student populations.

This shift in modality has necessitated thinking about face-to-face pedagogical techniques in new ways, and despite decades of growing experience and expertise in distance education, there is still skepticism about the quality of online education (Allen, Seaman, Poulin, & Straut, 2016). Perceptions of quality deficiencies regarding online education are often based on the assumptions that in face-to-face environments, instructors are better able to engage with students, and encourage more active learning. Topics such as making distance education students feel more connected, student motivation and engagement in online courses, teaching teachers to teach online, best practices for teaching online, actively engaging students in asynchronous online classes, characteristics of successful online instructors, and benchmarks for successful online education, abound in the distance education literature.

To better understand the construct of academic engagement regarding online learning, the authors have attempted to distill key concepts in the literature. Presence, rapport, and ongoing

communication are crucial to building and sustaining ongoing relationships or "learning partnerships," thereby fostering student engagement in the online learning environment. These interrelated concepts discussed below, establish a theoretical framework for this report.

Presence. A critical aspect that is central to promoting student engagement, and in turn student success, is the sense of instructor or faculty presence (Bart, 2011; Boettcher, 2011; Garrison, 2003; Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000, 2001, 2003; Lehman & Conceicao, 2010; Liu, Gomez & Len, 2009; Pelz, 2004). Presence in the online environment is understood as the ability of people "to project their personal characteristics into the community, thereby presenting themselves to other participants as real people" (Garrison et al., 2000, p. 89). As Boettcher (2011) explains, when faculty actively interact and engage students in a face-to-face classroom, the class develops as a learning community, developing intellectual and personal bonds, and the same type of bonding occurs in an online setting. Presence in the online education context includes *student perceptions* of instructor involvement as a central factor, with higher levels of engagement leading to more profound satisfaction, higher levels of student achievement, and a greater likelihood of graduation (Oblinger, 2014). Presence is the result of the dynamic interplay between emotion, thinking, and behavior (Lehman & Conceicao, 2010).

The Community of Inquiry Model (Garrison et al., 2003) refers to three elements of presence that pertain to online learning environments, all of which are interconnected and interactive.

Social Presence. The activity of participants in establishing a personal and emotional connection to the group, thereby presenting themselves as "real" people. There are three forms of social presence: affective (which involves the expression of feelings, emotions, and mood); interactive (communicating, attending, understanding, and considering the responses of others); and cohesive (responses that serve to build and sustain a sense of connection to others, and an impetus to commit to shared goals and objectives).

Cognitive Presence. This relates to the instructor and students being able to construct and confirm meaning through sustained discourse (dialogue and critical reflection). Cognitive presence can be demonstrated by introducing and sharing new knowledge. The value of the discourse will depend upon the clarity, accuracy, relevance, and applicability of the knowledge being shared.

Teaching or Instructor Presence. This relates to the instructor actively interacting with learners, and establishing and maintaining a collaborative and supportive working relationship. Through shared interaction, the instructor serves as a model for the discourse, and a learning facilitator by providing learners with constructive critique and ongoing formative feedback, and opportunities to share their   experiences and insights.

Rapport. Rapport is key to promoting engagement and student success. Research indicates that in classes where teachers established rapport, students were more likely to attend class, pay attention, and enjoy the subject matter, thereby linking rapport with student success, motivation, and engagement (Frisby & Martin, 2010; Granitz, Koernig, & Harich, 2009, Lammers, Gillaspy & Hancock, 2017). Murphy and Rodríguez-Manzanares (2012), refer to rapport as the establishment of a sense of personal connection, with relationships characterized by mutual

understanding and communication. These authors point out that while rapport has been recognized as an essential component of learning in general, less is known about its importance in distance education. They identify the challenges associated with rapport-building in distance education, explaining that rapport can be difficult to establish because of distance, course design, and technological limitations. Additionally, they point out that obstacles to rapport-building also relate to traditions or perceptions of distance education. Murphy and Rodríguez-Manzanares (2012) have synthesized and categorized the indicators of rapport, as articulated in the literature in general and in the distance education literature, specifically to include the following: disclosure, honesty and respect (through support and monitoring); recognizing the person/individual (through sharing, mirroring, understanding, and engaging); interacting socially (through availability, accessibility, and responsiveness, including non-text-based interactions and constant feedback); and caring and bonding (through communicating effectively and ensuring a positive and professional tone regarding all interactions).

Communication. A further significant piece in the development of student engagement in online courses is communication (Khan, Egbue, Palkie & Madden, 2017). Ongoing and sustained communication in an online course is a critical component in the exchange of information, both in verbal and written forms. Most communication is in the written form, hence the writing skills and the ability to communicate thoughts through written messages are critical (Haugen, LaBarre, & Melrose, 2001). Kanuka, Rourke, and Laflamme (2007) compared various modes of communication and found the debate to be one of the modes of learning where students demonstrated the most cognitive presence. As these researchers explain, the key is not only to require class participation within the course but to promote and encourage different styles of participation that engage students, thereby adding value to the course. Khan et al., (2017) in their discussion of best practices regarding design and delivery of online courses, state that it is critical to provide an environment in online classes that allow for a high level of discussion, similar in quality to discussions that take place in traditional face-to-face classrooms. Some benefits of online discussions over traditional classroom discussions include additional time for students to reflect on discussion prompts and responses, increased participation, and a greater sense of community (Dixon, 2014).

Relationship-Building. Finally, with interactivity at the very heart of effective asynchronous learning, a central element in facilitating student engagement is developing early relationships with online students and maintaining those relationships throughout the students' educational lifecycle. In the experience of the authors, both of whom have worked in many contexts within the online environment for numerous years, these relationships or learning partnerships should be intentional, individually tailored, and continuous. Moreover, student engagement should be proactive and just-in-time to meet students' specific needs regarding where they are on their academic journeys. The process of building a relationship facilitates presence, rapport, and communication cultivates a culture of learning, demonstrates a commitment to students' learning, and builds a learning community. Additionally, meaningful working relationships offer a mutual pact or contract between faculty and students, and in constructing this pact, faculty develop their online personas and build rapport with their students (Major & Sumner, 2018). Major and Sumner (2018) explain how in building relationships with their students, faculty set and implement explicit communication and collaborative interaction expectations. Faculty execute this contract through the facilitation of the online learning experience, starting before the beginning of the course, and continuing throughout the course by way of genuine and substantive

guidance, communication, and interaction.

Best Practices for Teaching Online

How can faculty support and enhance student engagement in the online learning environment?

To foster meaningful connections at all stages of the student journey, from first inquiry through graduation, higher education must establish support mechanisms that will prepare students for their responsibilities in meeting learning outcomes. With the growth in online courses, it is essential to ensure that a diverse population of higher education students can learn in flexible ways that meet their needs. If learners' needs are not accommodated, they are likely to experience transactional distance, including feelings of isolation and disconnectedness from an unresponsive environment, possibly leading them to withdraw from their course or program.

The importance of instructional strategies to the success of the online environment has precipitated the creation of benchmarks for successful online education and best practices guidelines for all aspects of the learning experience. The Times Educational Supplement (February 2002) reported that research is producing growing evidence that specific strategies will enhance teaching and learning. The article emphasized that "successful e-learning must involve a mixture of course design issues and pedagogical issues" (Lally & Wallington, 2002, p.23). Reducing transactional distance is critical to online students' success and is accomplished as a joint effort between institutional administrators, instructional designers, and faculty. While it is incumbent upon instructional designers to plan and develop courses that incorporate intentional and deliberate student-centered pedagogies, in the pursuit of actively engaging students in online course settings, it is the role of *faculty* to work toward continuously and intentionally developing and maintaining engagement of their students in the online learning experience *throughou*t the course or program (Khan et al., 2017; Lehman & Conceicao, 2010; Major & Sumner, 2018; Mohr & Shelton, 2017; Riggs & Linder, 2016).

Numerous educational agencies, including the Online Learning Consortium (OLC) and the Institute for Higher Education Policy, have provided general guidelines and benchmarks for online education. In reviewing the literature, it is clear that best practice recommendations and related strategies for the process of teaching in online environments emphasize the need for interactivity that includes teaching presence, student collaboration, and the facilitation of a learning community. Some of the key best-practice reports that incorporate relevant theoretical principles and research-based literature are outlined below.

The Hanover Research Council Report (2011) emphasizes the importance of instructional strategies regarding the success of the online environment. This report reviews best practices for all aspects of the online instructional process, including planning, design, and management, online teaching techniques, and online student assessment and evaluation techniques. The Report outlines Pelz's (2004) three principles of effective online pedagogy, which include student autonomy, interactivity, and striving for presence.

The first principle centers on the importance of students actively engaging in the course

content, along with instructor support and guidance. The second principle promotes the importance of student-teacher and student-student interaction, emphasizing that interaction should extend beyond student discussion to create active participation. This notion becomes evident throughout the best- practice literature. Current distance education technologies and pedagogical techniques offer multiple different opportunities to foster interactivity, including online discussion forums and student collaboration by way of educational technologies that simulate face-to-face meetings. Discussion is a way to encourage and facilitate collaboration, interaction, dialogue, and reflection. This suggests that during the discussion process, it is essential for instructors to continuously encourage active participation and collaboration. Additionally, they should intentionally facilitate and manage ongoing and sustained interaction. The third principle includes a focus on striving for presence. Pelz (2004) refers to social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence, detailing the implications of each type. He further outlines the key components of teaching presence, which include setting a climate for learning, prompting discussion, and encouraging, acknowledging, and reinforcing student contributions.

As reported by Tobin (2004), the Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration's Checklist for Online Interactive Learning (COIL), which serves as a best practice guideline for online faculty evaluation, emphasizes the importance of Pelz's (2004) principles for online teaching: engagement, interaction, and presence. The categories of this best-practice guide include faculty-student interactions, learning environment, behavior criteria, and technological support.

Best practices regarding faculty-student interactions include the following:
- clearly delineated course requirements
- clear and adequate guidance
- multiple communication modes
- continuous, supportive feedback

Best-practice checklist items regarding the learning environment include the following:
- structured activities to provide an effective framework for online learning
- flexible deadlines to motivate students
- discussion forums that encourage group collaboration and dialogue
- opportunities for students to be autonomous about their learning
- opportunities for students to approach instructors
- opportunities for students to communicate and collaborate with each other
- sufficient time for post-course reflection and critique
- an equitable environment to accommodate differences in learning styles
- addressing barriers to participation and communication

A report by Savery (2005) describes how Pelz's principles for online teaching are accompanied by recommendations for the key characteristics of effective online teaching and are captured in the acronym VOCAL (Visible, Organized, Compassionate, Analytical, and Leader-by-example). VOCAL is based on the foundations of best practices regarding the design of online learning environments that foster student autonomy and engagement:

- **Visible:** Visibility is closely linked to the concept of social presence. In a traditional

classroom where students and the instructor meet in the same place at the same time for a shared experience, there is a high degree of two-way visibility. The online classroom differs largely because written feedback replaces face-to-face, verbal communication, often leading students to feel as if the instructor is not actively participating. This makes it more likely for the students to adopt a passive role or become unresponsive, leading to lower levels of meaningful learning. Suggested strategies to counteract the perceived lack of visibility focus on the instructor's visibility being actively demonstrated through public and private communication channels.

- **Organized:** Online learners generally choose to take online courses assuming these will provide more flexibility for their busy schedules. Because of this, they also need to clearly understand what is expected of them so they can plan and organize their time in order to efficiently meet course requirements. This increased time management responsibility on the part of the learner also means that there is an increased organizational responsibility on the part of the online instructor. Given the asynchronous nature of the online environment, there are limited opportunities to be spontaneous. To meet the needs of students, therefore, opportunities for spontaneity must be carefully and thoughtfully planned by offering multiple touchpoints to enhance student learning. The overall purpose is to allow students to progress at their own pace while ensuring that the learning outcomes have been achieved.

- **Compassionate:** Many adults choose an online format because of the conditions and challenges they face in the real world, including personal and professional commitments. Online environments can be somewhat intimate since there is greater use of email communication that might not be as prevalent in traditional education. With this increased frequency of communication, instructors need to be responsive by demonstrating compassion and understanding toward their students' needs. This can be accomplished through providing access and permission to communicate directly in mutually suitable ways; reminding students, if necessary, of expectations related to conduct, and course participation; and responding timeously and directly to unanticipated problems or concerns, and attempting students to resolve these.

- **Analytical:** Instructors are required to manage the online learning activities to ensure that students are completing assignments and achieving course learning outcomes. Management on the part of instructors includes the timely return of assignments and the evaluation and grading of student work. While many learning management systems provide tools for assessment and analysis, it is ultimately the instructor's responsibility to determine whether the assessment is appropriate, meaningful, and relevant. Suggested strategies include clear expectations and detailed guidelines for assessing participation, so the process is understood and fully transparent.

- **Leader-by-Example:** Online instructors undeniably set the tone for student performance, and consequently, instructors should attempt to model best practice

strategies that will most meaningfully and positively engage and motivate students, and guide the overall learning experience. Toward this end, there is a variety of ways in which instructors can model appropriate online learning and behavior. These actions should include an initial synchronous introduction in which the instructor welcomes the student and provides clear and helpful responses to any questions or concerns; modeling responsibility and accountability by returning assignments and grades within the communicated established time period; presenting feedback in a professional and organized manner; and modeling the appropriate and acceptable ways in which students are expected to communicate and interact online.

The concept of active learning to enhance engagement, where students actively participate in learning activities and contribute to lively discussions, has become an essential consideration for best practice research in online education. Active learning pedagogies are widely accepted in face-to-face teaching as a method of engaging students in their learning, and as a way to encourage metacognition and reflection. Whereas traditional pedagogies are teacher-centered, with the instructor as the focal point, active learning places the student at the center of the learning experience (Khan et al., 2017; Riggs & Linder, 2016), and therefore has significant applicability to engagement strategies in online education. Moreover, adult learners who gravitate to asynchronous online courses and programs have an even greater need and desire for active learning because they tend to be older, non-traditional students who expect, and even demand, more agency regarding their own learning (Riggs & Linder, 2016).

Tools and techniques have become modified to accommodate for the lack of physical proximity experienced in an online course. There are several strategies for effectively incorporating and practicing active learning, including the use of well-conceived discussions by using learning management systems, video chat tools, and discussion boards and forums. To promote a high level of student engagement, it is critical to weave active learning throughout the significant components of an online course, which include discussions, assignments, and assessments. Studies have shown that employing such methods of active learning improves both students' learning and their attitudes towards learning (Khan et al., 2017). Aspects that should be considered with regard to best practices for online education that will enhance student engagement include the integration of design elements, accessibility of materials, value of interdisciplinary collaboration, development of community among students and faculty, encouraging valuable discussions, and use of effective assessment methods (Khan, et. al., 2017).

To create a collaborative environment that encourages and fosters a community of learning, Riggs and Linder (2016) suggest a three-pronged approach for conceptualizing active learning in online asynchronous courses: the creation of an architecture of engagement, the use of web-based tools in addition to the learning management system, and a re-imagining of discussion boards as interactive spaces. These authors explain that in the absence of a physical space, the architecture of engagement must be *intentionally created* by instructors so that institutions of higher learning can deliver high quality educational experiences by illustrating and modeling appropriate social

norms including how to navigate the course, how to interact, and what is expected. The adoption of these approaches invites meaningful action and reflection to create active learning activities in online asynchronous programs and courses.

Application

At Northcentral University how do we promote and evaluate faculty engagement?

Students in online programs enjoy many advantages, including the ability to balance work and school commitments, increased scheduling flexibility, convenience, and "classroom portability." However, the potential shortcomings of online coursework can negatively impact the overall learning experience. These shortcomings include limited or lack of student-to-student interaction, student-to-instructor interaction, and misunderstanding of instructors' expectations. A key way of counteracting these shortfalls is to clearly convey expectations and increase student-instructor communication and feedback that is relevant, balanced, timely, and constructive. Universities and colleges use a range of strategies to train subject-matter experts in effective online instruction. Many institutions offer a combination of formal and informal training for online instructors, providing self-paced online courses and modules on a plethora of topics, including how to effectively engage students (Dimeo, 2017).

Northcentral University has developed a unique one-to-one instructional pedagogy, *Teaching through Engagement,* that works to authentically and meaningfully engage online learners in a student-centered environment. As part of a structured faculty development process, faculty are provided with training, coaching, and ongoing support to maintain the high standards of this asynchronous pedagogical model. Faculty are provided with initial and continual training by the Center for Teaching and Learning. Faculty also work with coaches who are committed to supporting faculty members as they engage with their students throughout each course, assisting them to meet program learning outcomes, and guiding them toward success. Coaching at Northcentral University is focused on developing an organizational culture that supports and guides learning for continuous performance improvement (Bloomberg, 2014; 2017).

With research consistently showing that online students are more likely to persist in their studies if they are engaged, the authors of this report have worked on developing a rubric tool, discussed in greater detail and presented in the appendix. This rubric has been revised throughout the past five years to reflect Northcentral University's expectations regarding teaching excellence with our one-to-one model, *Teaching through Engagement.* Revisions of the rubric over the past three years have included formal reviews and input by leadership, Human Resources, and colleagues throughout the Northcentral community. The rubric was also recently presented at the WASC ARC (2018) conference (Bloomberg & Grantham, 2018), and feedback was invited. In its current form, this rubric is provided to faculty to encourage them to self-evaluate and reflect on their practice for purposes of ongoing performance improvement, as well as to understand Northcentral University's performance expectations. The rubric is also used by faculty coaching to evaluate teaching practice with an emphasis on engagement strategies. The hope is that this tool is applicable more generally for use in other online contexts, or that it will at least serve as a discussion point around crucial areas in the evaluation of online faculty engagement strategies. The rubric consists of three broad evaluative criteria:

Criterion 1: Instructional Strategies (based on adult learning principles)

Best practices. Instruction is expected to represent the method and practice of engaging with adult learners to promote meaningful and relevant learning experiences. Faculty should: Treat student as autonomous and self-directed; guide student rather than supply facts; serve as a facilitator rather than lecturer; be conscious of and intentional about teaching presence, rapport, and communication; build strong teaching relationships through teaching; assist the student to meet learning outcomes.

As evaluators and coaches the authors recognize that our students are typically adult and non-traditional learners who prefer self-directed learning and experiences, and that building this concept into our instructional strategy system is paramount. However, we also acknowledge that online students require orientation, guidance, and ongoing support to help them advance in their learning and meet the expected learning outcomes, which is reflective of Andragogy. Andragogy, defined by Knowles (1984) as the art and science of helping adults learn, builds upon the theory of constructivism which suggests that learning is an active process, whereby learners construct meaning based on their own experiences. Knowles' thinking is based on the progressive ideas of philosopher and pragmatist John Dewey (1938), whose ideas remain central tenets of the philosophy of adult education; that is, the emphasis on a learner-centered approach, and the view of education as the *interaction* of experience and the environment.

Andragogy is based on certain assumptions regarding the adult learner, and from each of these assumptions, Knowles drew numerous implications for the design, implementation, and evaluation of learning activities for adults. These implications include the ideas that adults have a self-concept of being responsible for their own decisions and of being able to direct their learning, and that instructors, therefore, must, therefore, be intentional in creating learning experiences in which adults are supported in making the transition from dependent to self-directed learners. Additionally, because adults typically bring a great wealth of life experience, the most productive resource for learning lies within the learners themselves. Instructors must, therefore, make use of and place value on these experiences that occur within the context of real-life situations, and this can be accomplished by making connections to real-world applications and providing clarification when needed. According to Andragogy, when these principles are applied, there is a greater readiness to learn.

In our experience as faculty coaches, we have seen that engaging early and often is essential to creating and maintaining a sense of teaching presence. Engagement starts with our faculty developing a relationship or partnership with each student and sustaining these relationships throughout the course. The University student body is widely diverse and includes students with a vast array of different levels of ability, expertise, and personal and professional experiences and circumstances. Faculty are encouraged to be intentional and strategic about building relationships, taking the time to proactively communicate with students on an individual basis in order to demonstrate an interest in their courses, academic skills, and motivation to succeed. Faculty are also expected to be intentional in working toward enhancing social and teaching presence for their students; that is, developing an *awareness* of interaction and the consequent *experience* of an interpersonal relationship.

Prepare students for learning online. An initial point in the relationship-building process is determining where each student is, and meeting her or him right there. Most importantly, proactively welcoming students into a teaching relationship is the basis for their learning. Faculty are expected to provide each student a welcome message and video, and we also encourage an initial synchronous meeting by phone or another real-time platform such as Skype, Zoom, GoToMeeting, and other face- time technologies, to have conversations regarding educational goals, life circumstances, and specific needs or accommodations. Video introductions not only introduce faculty to their students but are also an impactful way to build a relationship with them. In the online learning environment, it is typical for students to feel alone and isolated, and video is, therefore, a powerful tool to help put a face to a name, making the student feel more comfortable, connected, and supported.

In addition to a video welcome, a welcome letter should demonstrate faculty accessibility by providing contact information, best times to reach out, and the process for scheduling appointments. In order to orient and familiarize new students at the beginning of a course and to help students proceed with their studies, instructors should specify upfront the course expectations, and all relevant departmental and institutional policies and procedures, including academic integrity policies and academic writing policies. Preparing students for the online learning experience also includes providing sufficient orientation regarding guidelines for participation, technology and instructional methods used in the course, tools and terminology used in the learning management system, technical support information, as well expectations regarding standard response times, contact information, and preferred communication methods and online office hours, as needed. An essential component of orientation is to educate students about the kind of feedback that is provided, and how they are expected to address this feedback for purposes of learning and improvement. Additionally, faculty are encouraged to provide appropriate resources and strategies for online learning, including time-management skills, study skills, and writing skills.

Support students to become successful online learners. For many students, this may be the first time they have participated in an online course, and learning online is different in many ways from learning in a physical classroom. In an online course, students will need to be more self-directed, manage their time efficiently, and assume greater responsibility for their learning. Faculty should be mindful of these differences and set realistic expectations with students regarding appropriate timelines, availability for meetings, timeliness of feedback and grading and response time to messages. Students can often feel isolated in the online environment; therefore, it is critical for faculty to be accessible and responsive to students, and to make sure that they commit to the information they provide. Supportive preparation builds rapport and is an indication of teaching presence. Indeed, the ultimate goal is for students to view their activity at Northcentral University as *learning* and not just work or tasks.

Online teaching should foster students' active and constructive participation in the learning experience. This task can be accomplished by faculty who are approachable, personal, and professional, and who frequently interact with their students, thereby playing an active role in the learning process. Faculty should also encourage students to be proactive learners by regularly accessing the course site, completing assignments as required by the syllabus, and submitting assignments on time. Importantly, students should be reminded that questions are

welcome and that the instructor is available for discussion as needed. Flexibility in approach with each student is critical so that all student needs are met, and this is determined by asking what each student needs in order to succeed academically. A meticulous reading of the initial assignment is an indication of how to effectively approach and address each student's academic needs, and incorporate additional support and resources as needed.

Monitor and address student progress. Because students have different needs, learning styles, and academic skill-sets, faculty are encouraged to carefully and continually monitor students and identify those who are struggling or failing. Faculty are expected to use available technology tools within the appropriate course management systems to track student progress in course activities, and to reach out to students who have not completed course requirements. Sustained interaction between students and instructors ensures that faculty can address whether students are experiencing technical difficulties or problems with course content, or whether they require additional support or specific resources to complete required activities. Students who cannot participate due to technical issues are referred immediately to technical support. Students with disabilities are referred to Disability Services and provided with accommodations as needed. Any students who are struggling academically are provided additional resources and support, including referral to the Academic Success Center. Academic advisors and the Dean's office are also notified of all at-risk students so challenges that impede progress can be carefully monitored.

Criterion 2: Application of Clear, Respectful, and Helpful Written Feedback

Best Practices. Written instruction is expected to promote learning and sustain engagement. Faculty should: Provide continuous quality instruction that offers guidance throughout the course to achieve prescribed learning outcomes; ensure that dialogue and communication is established right from the start and sustained throughout the course; use language and grading practices that focus on encouraging a growth academic mindset; use written instruction that is stimulating and engaging in content and tone, and encourages critical reflection and dialogue.

At Northcentral University the primary instructional delivery mode is written feedback on assignments, which creates the foundation for constructive student-faculty interaction. Providing balanced, meaningful, and individualized written feedback is critical to engaging students, thereby creating a comfortable and supportive learning environment, and preparing them to succeed. Indeed, one of the most important factors in enhancing the student learning experience is the quality of the interaction between students and faculty through substantive comments and feedback provided during a course, the results of which suggest that this builds community (Vessly, Bloom, and Sherlock, 2007).

- Weimer (2018) emphasizes the importance of being personable through written feedback and creating personal connections with our students through our writing. At NCU, faculty are reminded always to remain aware of how their feedback is perceived and accepted. Therefore, tone, organization, and presentation are also critical considerations. Connecting with students—being "personable" in our prose—is a matter of writing style, and faculty are encouraged to be sensitive to how they come across in their writing. As a start, each student should be addressed by name.

Presentation and organization of the feedback indicated that the feedback has been written with care, and also models and exemplifies the quality of work that we expect of our students, encouraging them to do the same in their work.

- To sustain student engagement and motivation, and to encourage growth in academic mindset, feedback on graded assignments should incorporate a balance of support and critique. This is achieved by recognizing and acknowledging good work, making suggestions for improvement where needed, and, to the extent possible, incorporating relevant and appropriate resources. Students typically provide many areas for instructors to provide specific correction and guidance for improvement. By commending students, faculty demonstrate acknowledgment and respect for their efforts, allowing them to recognize the positive aspects of their work.

- Balanced feedback also includes addressing grammatical, syntax and formatting errors, but it must also include topic-related comments. This type of balance ensures that students not only improve their spelling and grammar, but better understand and address the primary course concepts so that the content is not underdeveloped, off-topic, or inadequate.

- Research consistently shows that students are more likely to persist in their online courses if the educational experience is personalized. As such, feedback should be customized and individualized for each student. While we realize that our faculty often have a "toolbox" of resources, we stress that they should not overly rely on "stock" or "boilerplate" feedback, but be mindful that they are personalizing their feedback to both the student and the assignment at hand, and that they tailor their tools to meet students where they are currently in order to help them succeed.

- Feedback should typically incorporate resources that are relevant and current, and that will be helpful regarding improvement and success. These resources, including internet sites, links to social media and audio or video material, should be thoughtfully provided as determined by faculty to be of support about students' progress. To inspire participation and learning, students need to be comfortable with the new material, be actively involved, and be able to analyze the material. In line with the key principles of Andragogy, faculty should make connections to real-world applications in their feedback, and provide clarification when needed so that feedback is meaningful and students understand its relevance and applicability.

- Written feedback should include substantive summary comments pertaining to the overall quality of the students work, and the extent to which the assignment meets all completion requirements including academic writing expectations. Also, targeted margin comments about specific aspects of student work is essential and indicates that the feedback is carefully thought-out, focused, specific, and relevant.

- We encourage faculty to incorporate critical questions in their written feedback which provokes deeper thinking on the part of students, offering them an opportunity to reflect on the question, and express or explain themselves if necessary, thereby encouraging

ongoing communication. Moreover, this practice model critical thinking, reflection, and interaction, so that teaching becomes an interactive, dialogic, and collaborative process.

- In addition to identifying performance gaps, useful feedback should include a realistic and relevant purpose and rationale to support the feedback; that is, why the suggested changes will benefit the student's learning, as well as how these changes may promote students' success in both their educational pursuits and long-term goals. This type of feedback is vital as it helps students understand the *underlying purpose* of their work and how it will help them learn. Including this component in the feedback can motivate students and make them more inclined to address the changes that are suggested. Additionally, focusing on the "why" may help students better understand the bigger picture regarding their future learning and become more autonomous and self-directed in their educational pursuits.

- Resubmissions for poor work offers students another chance to succeed by providing an opportunity to apply the feedback and change, revise, or correct the work as needed. This practice captures teachable moments, is supportive of student learning, and positively impacts motivation.

- Grading practices should always be logical, and students are more likely to accept grades that are thoughtfully applied. Consequently, our faculty are encouraged to provide students, to the extent possible, with a grade rationalization that is directly related to assignment requirements and learning outcomes.

- Faculty are reminded that the timeliness of their written feedback is critical, as students are more likely to implement feedback when it is evident that the instructor is "present" and attentive, and also while the work is fresh in their minds.

Criterion 3: Multimodal Engagement

Best Practices. Instruction (verbal and written) is expected to include multiple methods of engagement to create a positive learning environment that encourages motivation and persistence. Faculty should: maintain frequent communication with students; offer opportunities for ongoing interaction to discuss feedback, address concerns, and plan; make accommodations to address learning styles by personalizing teaching and using appropriate tools or modes of instruction.

First and foremost, the Northcentral University pedagogical model, *Teaching through Engagement*, is student-centered. We value each student and strive to accommodate diverse needs and learning styles so that each student can be successful. Therefore, we believe that engaging with our students in as many "touchpoints" as possible is essential to enhancing the online learning experience. Toward this end, our faculty are encouraged to engage with their students by using all available technologies in order to interact in multi-modal ways and thus promote high impact opportunities, elevating the online learning experience beyond the online classroom.

We are cognizant that written feedback is just one way to provide instruction and guidance

in the online environment. With our learning management system, webcams can seamlessly be used to send students recorded video feedback, and a narrated screen capture video can be used to point out various parts of an assignment, along with the recorded verbal feedback. Where needed, especially in cases of struggling or lagging students, faculty should consider discussing delicate or more complex issues with a student over the phone or in a live video medium, rather than using email or discussion forums, and faculty are encouraged to select the most appropriate and suitable communication method for each situation.

While pedagogical strategies and mechanisms are deliberately incorporated into the course design to initiate and enable a high level of student engagement, our faculty are expected to be the *facilitators* of such engagement. Northcentral University faculty are encouraged to help their students explore the many collaborative student engagement tools that are available, and to help them understand the role that these tools can play in creating opportunities where they can actively participate in learning activities, receive support, guidance, and resources as needed, and participate in and become contributors to lively discussions and interaction. In this regard, students should be reminded of the many support resources offered by the University and encouraged to make use of them.

There are multiple support resources available to Northcentral University students: Academic advisors are always available to provide support and guidance; the Academic Success Center offers individual, and group coaching, as well as workshops for developing and improving academic writing skills; the Center for Teaching and Learning offers support for technology and learning management system training, and is the repository for all student resources; Library Services provides all research and literature-related support; the Dissertation Center provides resources for doctoral students including handbooks and rubrics; the Student Technology Resource Center offers access to software and technology services. All courses for Northcentral University use electronic textbooks, which provide study tools including collaboration capabilities and printing and office access, thereby providing a high level of engagement for our students.

Numerous opportunities are also available to engage students outside the classroom in supporting learning. Students are encouraged to participate in interactive webinars based on relevant topics related to their fields of study, and sessions are recorded and easily accessible for those who are unable to participate. Students and faculty are regularly encouraged to listen to and interact with online guest speakers and to participate in online book study groups. Qualified students may attend virtual online meetings such as Delta Mu Delta, the School of Business National Honor Society, and interact with colleagues throughout the world. A Dissertation Boot Camp is available at different times throughout the year. These meetings, which occur in different locations throughout the world, offer supplemental on-site training for students involved in all stages of our doctoral programs, and all students are invited to attend. By bringing students together to collaborate, this experience mitigates some of the isolation that is often experienced in the dissertation research endeavor.

Additionally, the Commons, Northcentral University's academic engagement platform, is an internal virtual space where students are invited to connect on multiple levels with the broader University community, including students, faculty, staff, and alumni. The Commons is available online 24 hours per day, seven days per week for participants to meet, and share ideas and support

each other outside of the classroom, thus establishing "real" personal and professional relationships. Through its many offerings and supportive resources, the Commons continues to grow its membership and usage. This platform has contributed significantly over the years to establishing meaningful ongoing connections among our students and faculty, and instills a vibrant and thriving learning community by engaging participants in university-wide and school-specific communities of practice and shared interest groups.

While ours is a one-to-one pedagogical model, we certainly strive to create a sense of community among our students by encouraging peer groups, peer support, and connections to all available University support systems, including the Commons, which offers numerous discussion forums, course-related groups, and interest groups. Given the diversity of students in the online learning environment, it is critical to foster collaborative learning opportunities where students of different cultures, backgrounds, and ethnicities from varying disciplines can work and learn together. We recognize that one of the most important components of online learning is to provide space for the development of a learning community and a culture of learning. This directly complements the literature that highlights the need for not only instructor presence in the online learning environment, but also the need for student interaction, student collaboration, and the creation of a learning community, all of which contribute significantly to active learning, ongoing motivation, and student engagement.

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Appendix

Rubric for Evaluating Instruction and Engagement in an Online University

Evaluating Instruction and Engagement in an Online University

CRITERION 1: Instructional Strategies (based on adult learning principles)

BEST PRACTICES: Instruction is expected to represent the method and practice of engaging with adult learners to promote meaningful and relevant learning experiences. Faculty should: Treat student as autonomous and self-directed; guide student rather than supply facts; serve in role as a facilitator rather than "lecturer"; be conscious of and intentional with regard to teaching presence, rapport, and communication; build strong relationships through teaching; assist student to meet learning outcomes.

Unacceptable	Approaching Expectations	Meets Expectations	Exceeds Expectations
Teaching includes **none** of the following:	Teaching includes **1-2** of the following:	Teaching includes **3-4** of the following:	Teaching includes **all** of the following:
1. Consistently approaches learners with respect. 2. Instruction addresses strengths of student work. 3. Instruction points out limitations/shortcomings and provides guidance for improvement. 4. Rationale for feedback/instruction is included so students can understand applicability. 5. Instills motivation through a balance of support and critique.	1. Consistently approaches learners with respect. 2. Instruction addresses strengths of student work. 3. Instruction points out limitations/shortcomings and provides guidance for improvement. 4. Rationale for feedback/instruction is included so students can understand applicability. 5. Instills motivation through a balance of support and critique.	1. Consistently approaches learners with respect. 2. Instruction addresses strengths of student work. 3. Instruction points out limitations/shortcomings and provides guidance for improvement. 4. Rationale for feedback/instruction is included so students can understand applicability. 5. Instills motivation through a balance of support and critique.	1. Consistently approaches learners with respect. 2. Instruction addresses strengths of student work. 3. Instruction points out limitations/shortcomings and provides guidance for improvement. 4. Rationale for feedback/instruction is included so students can understand applicability. 5. Instills motivation through a balance of support and critique.

CRITERION 2: Application of Clear and Balanced Written Feedback

BEST PRACTICES: Written instruction is expected to promote learning and sustain engagement. Faculty should: Provide continuous quality instruction that offers guidance throughout the course to achieve prescribed learning outcomes; ensure that dialogue and communication is established from the start and sustained throughout the course; use language and grading practices that focus on encouraging a growth academic mindset (support and critique); use written instruction that is stimulating and engaging in content and tone, and encourages critical reflection and dialogue.

Unacceptable	Approaching Expectations	Meets Expectations	Exceeds Expectations
Teaching includes **none** of the following:	Teaching includes **1-2** of the following:	Teaching includes **3-4** of the following:	Teaching includes **all** the following:
1. Instruction is clear and easy to understand. 2. Instruction is centered on prescribed learning outcomes.	1. Instruction is clear and easy to understand. 2. Instruction is centered on prescribed learning outcomes.	1. Instruction is clear and easy to understand. 2. Instruction is centered on prescribed learning outcomes.	1. Instruction is clear and easy to understand. 2. Instruction is centered on prescribed learning outcomes.

3. Substantive comments address course content or writing as applicable, and are instructional and informative. 4. Focused margin comments are included as applicable. 5. Written justification for grades or assessment is provided so student can understand how this was determined.	3. Substantive comments address course content or writing as applicable, and are instructional and informative. 4. Focused margin comments are included as applicable. 5. Written justification for grades or assessment is provided so student can understand how this was determined.	3. Substantive comments address course content or writing as applicable, and are instructional and informative. 4. Focused margin comments are included as applicable. 5. Written justification for grades or assessment is provided so student can understand how this was determined.	3. Substantive comments address course content or writing as applicable, and are instructional and informative. 4. Focused margin comments are included as applicable. 5. Written justification for grades or assessment is provided so student can understand how this was determined.

CRITERION 3: Multimodal Engagement

BEST PRACTICES: Instruction (verbal and written) is expected to include multiple methods of engagement to create a positive learning environment that encourages motivation and persistence. Faculty should: maintain frequent communication with students; offer opportunities for ongoing interaction to discuss feedback, address concerns, and plan ahead; make accommodations to address learning styles by personalizing teaching and using appropriate tools or modes of instruction.

Unacceptable Teaching includes **none** of the following:	Approaching Expectations Teaching includes **1-2** of the following:	Meets Expectations Teaching includes **3-4** of the following:	Exceeds Expectations Teaching includes **all** of the following:
1. Instruction is personalized and student is addressed by name. 2. Multiple teaching methodologies are incorporated (discussion, videos, internet sites, social media etc.). 3. Instruction includes recommended connection to NCU support resources (ASC, Library, Commons, academic advisor etc.). 4. Students are invited to discuss feedback and/or progress, and/or plan ahead. 5. Instruction includes questions to encourage critical reflection and actively connect/communicate.	1. Instruction is personalized and student is addressed by name. 2. Multiple teaching methodologies are incorporated (discussion, videos, internet sites, social media etc.). 3. Instruction includes recommended connection to NCU support resources (ASC, Library, Commons, academic advisor etc.). 4. Students are invited to discuss feedback and/or progress, and/or plan ahead. 5. Instruction includes questions to encourage critical reflection and actively connect /communicate.	1. Instruction is personalized and student is addressed by name. 2. Multiple teaching methodologies are incorporated (discussion, videos, internet sites, social media etc.). 3. Instruction includes recommended connection to NCU support resources (ASC, Library, Commons, academic advisor etc.). 4. Students are invited to discuss feedback and/or progress, and/or plan ahead. 5. Instruction includes questions to encourage critical reflection and actively connect/communicate.	1. Instruction is personalized and student is addressed by name. 2. Multiple teaching methodologies are incorporated (discussion, videos, internet sites, social media etc.). 3. Feedback includes recommended connection to NCU support resources (ASC, Library, Commons, academic advisor etc.). 4. Students are invited to discuss feedback and/or progress, and/or plan ahead. 5. Instruction includes questions to encourage critical reflection and actively connect/communicate.