ENGAGE!
THE NEXT-GEN OF ONLINE INSTRUCTION

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Online learning, the final frontier. Whether instructing an attorney or student, all librarians are faced with the challenge of keeping their audience engaged. This is especially true in the online learning environment. However, keeping the “on” in online engagement doesn’t have to be as taxing as originally thought. By understanding various learning styles, structuring content to meet learner needs, utilizing opportunities to create engaging material, and implementing techniques to encourage participation, sustained engagement has become an essential component of the next generation of online course development and instruction.

Who Are You Engaging?
There is no standard definition of a learning style. According to an article by Susan A. Santo, “Relationships between Learning Styles and Online Learning: Myth or Reality?” scholars struggle with differentiating between a person’s preference in how they learn versus the manner in which they learn best. While instructing adult learners, instructors will find a spectrum of learning behaviors that comprise a course’s student population. One method to define the various types of online learners is the Grasha-Riechmann Student Learning Style Scales. Each of the styles identified in the Grasha-Riechmann model presents its own opportunities and challenges in
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In an online setting, according to Grasha-Riechmann, there are six primary learning styles:

- **Participant.** This learner is eager to take part in course content and asks questions.
- **Avoidant.** This learner does as little work as possible or waits until the last minute.
- **Independent.** This learner prefers to work independently and makes few requests for help.
- **Dependent.** This learner needs detailed instructions and lots of help.

- **Collaborative.** This learner works well with others and enjoys group work.
- **Competitive.** This learner tries to do better than others in the course.

When most people refer to learning styles, they are usually referring to visual vs. auditory learning or applied vs. conceptual learning. Another model, the Schellens and Valcke Learning Styles, encompasses these more commonly referred to learning styles and explains how they relate to one another. Schellens and Valcke contend that “the demands of the learning environment can be consistent with the actual learning styles of the students.”

Schellens and Valcke determined learning styles based on the following dimensions:

- **Auditory vs. Visual.** Students with an auditory style prefer learning by listening; students with a visual style prefer learning through reading text or looking at diagrams.
- **Applied vs. Conceptual.** Students with an applied style prefer learning through examples and cases; students with a conceptual style prefer concepts and theories.
- **Spatial vs. Non-spatial.** Students with a spatial style prefer learning in context; students with a non-spatial style are more abstract in their preferences.
- **Social vs. Individual.** Students with a social style prefer teamwork; students with an individual style prefer working alone.
- **Creative vs. Pragmatic.** Students with a creative style prefer using their creativity to solve elaborate problems; students with a pragmatic style prefer to work on simpler problems.

**How Are You Engaging?**

To maximize online engagement for the various learning styles, there are several best practices. First, online learning should be adjusted based on students’ needs and wants. One of the benefits of using an online discussion board early on in a classroom setting is that it helps you discover what your learners need. When teaching a course, this is easily done by adjusting assignments based on student interests. In a firm setting, examples in video recordings and trainings can be selected based on the types of research questions typically asked. An instructor can arrange assignments to complement different styles of learning. For example, to accommodate collaborative learners, create a discussion board that requires student engagement with another student’s answer. Assign short-answer quizzes for those independent learners who want to apply the skills they have learned.
Post videos where learners are walked through the various approaches to a research problem.

Another way to encourage engagement with online materials is to give clear goals, both regarding anticipated completion time required and learning outcomes for the materials. For online courses, having a to-do list each week with learning objectives is extremely helpful. Students can work at their own pace, checking off each required reading, video, and assignment, as they complete them. For online video instruction, having a road map of the materials covered at the beginning will set the user up for success. Make sure to couple this road map with short videos, no more than 20 minutes each, to ensure users stay focused. A busy online learner is more likely to complete materials if the length of the material is known and the learner can split the work up into multiple sessions as needed.

There are a number of technologies that make creating engaging online materials easier. The most important factor is to use the resources that are available to you. For example, green screen software allows you to record lectures and add visuals (e.g., charts and graphs) to the background later, in a manner similar to how weather forecasters present their reports on TV. Websites such as Lynda.com provide tutorials for learning software, such as Camtasia, which is a video-editing program that improves and enhances online lectures. Regardless of the format used, establish a basic technology competency requirement for your eLearners. To accomplish this, create assignments or how-to quick-start guides so learners have the basic skills required for viewing and interacting with your online materials.

**Providing Meaningful Feedback**

After users engage with your materials, providing them with quick and responsive communication is key. By being responsive both in communications as well as feedback, students will be more engaged. Particularly in a classroom setting, students want to know how they did and where there is room for improvement. Because face-to-face interaction is limited in most online learning situations, providing timely feedback is a way for the user to feel the instructor is engaged with their work. Often feedback will spark related questions or concerns that can also be addressed. Based on our experience, we have found having multiple avenues of communication can help with different users’ needs. For example, a combination of emails, phone calls, video conferencing, discussion board posts, assignment feedback, and recorded video announcements can be used to communicate ideas. This is particularly helpful when learners are scattered geographically and subject to various extraordinary circumstances, such as natural disasters. These extenuating circumstances can make one form of communication preferable over another.

**Tying It All Together**

The last step is really the first step. Evaluate methods and structures employed for the eLearning environment. Create surveys before giving instruction to create a baseline. What skill levels do they have with technology? What is their preferred learning method? What do they expect to get out of these trainings? After the instruction is complete, survey your audience again to find out what worked and what didn’t. If they didn’t understand a concept, find out why. Academic librarian instructors should use both formal student evaluations and optional evaluations, such as an informal discussion board, where students are asked what concepts worked best and why. Learn from the learners so you can continue to improve created content. Once you understand your audience and their various learning styles, creating different instruction techniques will make everyone’s online learning experience richer and more productive. Now go forth and make it so!

**READ**

Taryn Marks and Rachel Licona’s article “Enhancing the Online Learning Environment,” from the March/April 2018 issue of AALL Spectrum at bit.ly/MA18online.

Rebecca S. Trammell’s article “Improving Student Outcomes in Online Learning,” from the March/April 2018 issue of AALL Spectrum at bit.ly/MA18outcomes.