Student Engagement: How the Right Technology Supports Pedagogy, Personalises Learning, and Keeps Students Engaged
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Student Engagement:
How the Right Technology Supports Pedagogy, Personalises Learning, and Keeps Students Engaged

Using an enterprise-level LMS, universities can effectively address low student engagement while also offering a personalised learning environment and supporting pedagogy.
Introduction

Getting students interested, eager, and ready to learn at the beginning of class is one thing, but keeping that interest throughout the entire course, while they’re doing their assignments, as they complete online lessons, and while they study for exams is an entirely different challenge.

With student engagement considered a key predictor of learning and achievement, locking students into a lesson only to have them “zone out” and lose interest at the halfway point can lead to negative consequences for the student, the teacher, and the institution as a whole.

Research has found an important link between student engagement and learning, including correlation with persistence, satisfaction, and academic achievement.\(^1\) Whether expressed as defiant noncompliance or passive “checking out,” the student who refuses to learn will succeed in that effort. Students who are motivated to learn, on the other hand, can succeed even in less-than-optimal environments.\(^2\)

Student engagement has also been found to be the key to preventing dropout, with research showing that engaged students:

- Earn higher grades
- Perform better on tests
- Report a greater sense of belonging
- Can set and meet personal goals
- Persist on tasks
- Expect success
- Value educational outcomes

Put simply, if we could meaningfully engage all students in their learning and in school, we would be well on our way to solving an international dropout problem.\(^3\)
As educational technology has come to the forefront in the higher education space, many institutions have elected to throw technology at students in the hopes that it will help pique their interest and keep them engaged. Unfortunately, this approach does not improve engagement. In fact, it can create unwanted distractions, put undue loads on to teachers, and require new levels of mastery on the part of both the students and the lecturers.

However, technology that supports curriculum, learning objectives, and pedagogy will provide the right environment for students to engage with learning and achieve higher levels of performance.

“Technology has exerted little overall effect on educational settings and the teaching and learning in them, student achievement test scores remain flat, school completion rates have not declined, and instruction is still mostly teacher-led in classrooms with neatly rowed desks.” [4]

Mark E. Weston in EdTech Digest
The Critical Nature of Student Engagement

Student engagement is the degree of attention, curiosity, optimism, interest, and passion that students demonstrate when they are learning or being taught. It influences the level of motivation they have to learn and progress in their education. This concept is based on the belief that students learn best when they are interested, inquisitive, or inspired. In the same vein, student learning and performance suffer when students are bored or “disengaged.”

An engaged student is also intrinsically motivated to learn — that is, motivated from a desire for competence and understanding, or simply from a love of learning, rather than a desire for a good grade, a teacher’s approval, or a job offer after graduation.

Engaged students exhibit three key characteristics:

1. They are attracted to their work...
2. They persist in their work despite challenges and obstacles...
3. They take visible delight in accomplishing their work.
The Smart Use of Technology

With the goal of improving student engagement, many colleges and universities have adopted technology policies centered on adding equipment, applications, and software to the classroom without considering how that educational technology impacts curriculum, pedagogy, and personalised learning.

In fact, research shows a lack of correlation between computers and learning. “The problem with technology in education is that it is often poorly applied,” writes InfoWorld’s Galen Gruman in Giving Kids iPads Won’t Solve the Education Challenge.

“Managing a classroom full of PCs or tablets, for example, means someone has to set up, administer, and maintain them.” He goes on to say that most technology is designed for IT administrators to manage — not teachers.

“Even if they were designed for teachers, do we really want our teachers doing IT administration instead of teaching?” Galen asks. “Teachers already have a lot of administrative, grading, planning, and development work to do on top of the classroom time.”

Using a Learning Management System (LMS) like itslearning, academic institutions can more effectively integrate technology into the classroom in a way that facilitates personalised learning and enhances student engagement, regardless of what devices are being used. LMS features that involve collaboration, for example, are recognised for their potential to enhance both student learning and engagement.

By providing a single, centralised platform for instructional delivery, lesson development, communication and collaboration, professional development, and reporting/analytics, itslearning supports and empowers student-centered learning and allows instructors to effectively guide students down a path to greater engagement.
Student engagement shouldn’t be a classroom-centric initiative, nor should it vary according to the individual lecturer and his or her teaching style. Instead, it must be an institution-wide initiative that encompasses all students and allows them to effectively “carry” that engagement from course to course throughout the day (and off campus as well).

Effectively supporting such a broad initiative requires a technology platform that not only centralises curriculum management and communication, but also helps improve pedagogy while giving students ownership of their learning. Itslearning provides a solid support structure for these engagement initiatives by allowing higher education institutions to mass-personalise instruction for each student.

Designed for lecturers and how they want to teach, itslearning’s cloud-based learning platform connects teachers, students, and school leaders — both inside and outside the classroom. It gives teachers countless ways to create engaging lessons and resources, makes sharing and collaborating on materials easy, and automates routine tasks so teachers have more time to focus on their students. This, in turn, helps to enhance student engagement and allows students to learn within a very flexible, personalised environment that individual pieces of technology or manual processes simply can’t match.
An end-to-end LMS also supports the use of “voice and choice,” where the single most important thing that a teacher can do to better enable student-centered learning is to let go of control. By providing a vision and goals for learning and allowing students the autonomy to create their own learning experiences, teachers can leverage a systematic approach to helping students understand the content and goals of teaching by:

1. Focusing on understanding the ability for students to demonstrate and apply what they have learned; and

2. Designing appropriate experiences based firmly on learning goals.

By clarifying learning objectives, documenting student understanding and developing efficient and engaging learning activities, school leaders and lecturers provide students with voice and choice regarding how to demonstrate their learning. They also effectively utilise the “Four Cs” of learning: creativity, collaboration, critical thinking, and communication. With collaborative learning, for example, the teacher becomes a facilitator, guiding students to approach their learning in a strategic way.

The lecturer also helps students monitor their own progress and construct meaning from the content and each other. Learning and engagement occur when students are given opportunities to reflect on their own work and the work of others.

They also effectively utilise the “Four Cs” of learning:

- **creativity**
- **collaboration**
- **critical thinking**
- **communication**
Theory:
How Mobile Learning Can Increase Intrinsic Motivation

Intrinsic motivation is driven by interest or enjoyment in the task itself. Through the combination of mobile devices and a learning platform, you can increase intrinsic motivation by giving students a voice in what they learn and a choice in how they demonstrate their understanding.

When completing an assignment with some flexibility, teachers can encourage students to choose how to submit their final work: as a video, audio file, written text or even a graphic. In this context, the mobile device enables the students to work in a format personalised to their strengths and at a time that suits them.

The learning platform enables teachers to easily manage this work, by giving them a digital tool to collect and review the assignments. In addition, teachers can make feedback available though the learning platform immediately after they have reviewed the work, giving students more time to revise their work before final submission.

Autonomy, Competence & Relatedness
Perhaps the most well-known research on intrinsic motivation was completed by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan. Deci and Ryan created the Self Determination Theory, in which they identified three intrinsic motivators: autonomy, competence and relatedness. Educators increasingly agree that when these three criteria are satisfied, students succeed in higher-quality learning. Read more about how mobile learning can be utilised to satisfy these criteria in our Mobile Learning eBook.
Engaging Students with Personalised Learning

As a science instructor, Stephanie Copice spends a lot of her time introducing students to content that they’ve never seen before. Most of the time, she has just one shot at capturing their attention and engaging them in topics that can be notoriously difficult to grasp and absorb. In the past, she used textbooks, classroom lectures, and science labs to achieve this goal.

This structured approach turned a lot of students off from science because it prevented them from exploring natural questions and curiosities. The faster students disengage from the content, the sooner they check out — particularly within the STEM field Trapped in a lockstep pattern, Copice wasn’t able to improve student engagement or help her students truly connect with the content that she was teaching.

Driven by the initiatives introduced by her the technology director at the time, the entire academic institution started using an LMS to support its growing personalised learning goals about nine years ago.

As part of this effort, Copice began thinking about the impact of LMS usage on student engagement, and on how the institution could improve engagement overall.

“Anyone who didn’t ‘get it’ either had to approach me for extra help or wound up floundering as the rest of us moved onto the next lesson,” says Copice. “Conversely, students who did ‘get it’ had no avenues for working ahead.”
“Early on, I noticed that 75% of students were more engaged because the LMS gives them control over their assignments and task-tracking,” Copice says. “I don’t even have whiteboard space in my room for posting assignments or agendas. Using the calendar in itslearning, I write notes, create objectives, post opening activities, and funnel everything else right into the LMS.”

This gives students a lot of control over their timelines — allowing the freedom to review resources over the weekend or around work schedules, for instance, and also the opportunity to complete assignments ahead of time. Others may choose to wait to discuss the content in class and then tackle their work. This is far more engaging and personalised than the old method of writing everything on the board. “Once I erased it,” Copice says, “that information was gone forever and no one could catch up or look ahead.”

Using an LMS has also increased the percentage of work completed by students at the end of each school term. And while on-time completion remains an ongoing struggle, Copice estimates that 90% of her students have 100% of their work completed by the end of the term. No longer dealing with a “binder abyss,” they can look up their assignments on the itslearning calendar and get caught up (or stay on top of them) on their own terms and within their own timeframes.
Whenever possible, Copice uses the itslearning LMS to give students a chance to write up their reflections, record those reflections, or otherwise express themselves — yet another way to get them engaged in technical content. She’s also experimenting with the platform’s goal-setting features, which allow students to set their own goals that she can then monitor and help with.

For the institution’s online courses, Copice says she would like to infuse an even more personalised approach that allows students to select one or two assignments within a specific unit and then access the relevant resources for those assignments. “Knowing that there is a direct correlation between student engagement and ownership over their learning, we want to be able to give students even greater choices,” says Copice. “In small steps, we’re trying to make our online content that much more personalised.”

Copice says her focus will continue to be on online learning — “That’s where my push is going to be over the next couple of years as we continue to explore and add to the list of LMS functionalities useful for creating a very personalised and engaging learning environment.”
Leveraging an Integrated, Engaging Platform

Michele Eaton, a Director of Virtual and Blended Learning, knows that you can’t just plop a computer or device in front of students and expect magic to happen. “The device itself isn’t going to be engaging for very long,” she says. “Students may be interested at the outset, but that doesn’t last forever.”

To overcome those fleeting interest levels, Eaton says academic institutions must focus on the tools and applications that actually transform teaching and learning, and what needs to be different to “connect” with students (i.e. giving them authentic work to personalise the experience) in a “very engaging way that moves beyond just the new, shiny tool.”

Up until this year, Eaton’s school was using a lesson-planning platform that was only accessible to teachers. Teachers used the limited system to find curriculum maps and lesson plans from other instructors. In 2016, the institution implemented itslearning with the goal of moving its entire curriculum — including digital instruction, common assessments, and other materials — onto a single platform that administration, teachers, and students could access with a single login and on a 24/7 basis. Teachers of traditional classes, summer school, and virtual courses are all using the platform.
She says the platform will help the institution think beyond tech-based “edutainment” and support creativity, collaboration, critical thinking, and communication across all campuses.

“As an integrated tool, the LMS helps us meet the needs of individual students while also advancing our digital coursework,” says Eaton, “rather than just hoping that students enjoy using and engaging with technology tools. We’re really excited about it.”

Currently, the institution is setting up collaborative courses for all teachers by department. Science teachers from different faculties, for example, will be able to use the itslearning platform to collaborate with one another and share lesson plans and digital content.

“Eaton says the LMS will support MSD of Wayne Township’s personalised learning goals, which she sees as the “key to engagement.”

“We think this is really going to improve the level and types of collaboration that our teachers and students are involved with,” says Eaton. “We’re hoping that collaboration translates into increased student engagement and better use of digitally enriched content for our students.”
Improving Engagement,
One Student at a Time

Like many academic institutions, Harford County is being asked to do more with less these days. Budgets are tighter than ever and human resources are sparse, yet schools are being asked to continually improve student performance, follow dozens of different standards, and support a more personalised, customised learning experience across all degree levels.

According to Martha Barwick, Coordinator of Instructional Technology, achieving balance in this evolving environment is difficult when you have a myriad of disparate teaching systems that require multiple different logins, a lack of consistent vision, high teacher turnover, and letter grades that don’t provide students with enough feedback or motivation to improve.

Several years ago, Harford County partnered with itslearning to implement a ubiquitous LMS that has helped the institution optimise and support learning outcomes for its nearly 38,000 students. Using the curriculum management system, teachers can access curriculum and learning units via a built-in learning sequence. And because students can also access the content, there’s no need for multiple platforms or logins.

“The LMS saves our instructors time and allows them to focus on more important tasks, like teaching their classes instead of searching for and/or creating digital content to support curriculum,” says Barwick. “We’ve created a strong link among curriculum, assessment, and standards and connected learning to our students’ personal goals, aspirations, and interests.”
That, in turn, has helped improve student engagement across the institution. The platform’s professional development functionalities, for example, helped get all teachers on board and using the LMS in a way that was meaningful and engaging for themselves and for their students.

Harford County has also benefited from itslearning’s centralised curriculum management capabilities, which allow them to more efficiently organise, manage, and update its curriculum by simply “pushing it out” to teachers as needed. This flexible environment helps instructors personalise learning and create an educational environment where students are ready, willing, and eager to learn.

“We don’t want disengaged students sitting in front of their computers or devices,” says Barwick, “so we use the LMS to provide a level of professional development that helps teachers understand the platform, work with an LMS, and implement it in a very engaging way.”

“It’s really exciting to walk into the classroom now and see students engaging with the content,” says Barwick. “Over time, we anticipate that this engagement factor will translate into real impacts on student achievement.”
Taking Student Engagement to New Heights

The three academic institutions profiled in this eBook all share the common goal of improving student engagement through the use of technology that supports pedagogy, personalises learning, and keeps students interested and on task both on and off campus. Whether they are sitting in a lecture, working in a lab, or completing online coursework, students that are engaged in learning have been proven to be the most successful in terms of academic achievement, attendance, and degree completion.

To most effectively engage students and overcome the student engagement challenges that they’re facing, institutions are implementing an end-to-end LMS that consolidates curriculum guides, instructional frameworks, professional development, and other critical resources across the institution and allows teachers to better engage their students in learning.

As a result, students are earning higher grades, performing better on tests, setting and meeting personal goals, and putting higher value on their educational outcomes.
References

About itslearning

itslearning is a leading, cloud-based learning management system that helps teachers make education more inspiring and valuable for today’s students anytime, anywhere, and on any device. As a student-centered learning environment, itslearning gives teachers, students, and school leaders access to course materials, assignments, and communities for collaboration, professional development tools, student progress reports and advanced reporting/analytics. The platform's personalised dashboards give teachers a way to quickly and easily share instructional resources, assignments and activities, and assessments with colleagues and students as a way to target and increase student engagement.