

In Two Minds

Written by Dylan Kissane

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DYLAN KISSANE, OCT 2 2013

The POL 210 course at CEFAM is being offered online this semester and is running into trouble. Not with regards to the course itself which, being refreshed, updated and remoulded for 2013-14 is as tight as you'll find. Rather the problem seems to be with maintaining the engagement of some of the students in the course, a problem that – if not resolved – might well lead to those students failing the course altogether.

Sensing a lack of engagement in a regular face-to-face class is not difficult for a professor. The typical signs of boredom and of students wishing they were anywhere else but in your classroom are easy to identify: heads tilted down, eyes looking heavy, daydreaming, and the standard response 'I don't know' being offered in response to any and all questions, including (when I'm feeling like having a little fun) the question of whether the student is present or absent that day.

Addressing this in-person lack of engagement is a task in classroom management and there are a number of strategies a professor can employ to try and turn the non-engaged student around. Pulling examples from the daily headlines is one that works well, particularly when such examples revolve around non-resolved situations where some speculation and games of 'what if' can restore interest. Similarly, shifts in body language, changes in tone and the pace of delivery of the class, video and audio aids, not to mention small group discussions that force the less engaged to contribute can all help to promote a more engaged classroom.

But a lack of engagement in an online course is a different sort of problem. A student who refuses to log in to the course website, who does not access the reading, who does not complete any of the reading or assignments and who, by their lack of engagement with the course and the material, sets themselves up for a fall cannot be motivated in the same way.

On the one hand, then, I am open to ideas and strategies to reach out to these online students and help them to engage with the material in the course. Yet, on the other hand, I am also aware that online courses are meant to demand from the student the sort of commitment and engagement that they, as young adults, are meant to display on their own. The students in an online course give up the face-to-face time with a professor in favour of managing a course at their own pace, in their own time and fuelled by their own determination to succeed. Perhaps, then, it is not the role of the online professor to force students to be engaged but rather the role of the student to use their own motivation to complete the course material.

I took online courses when I was completing my undergraduate degree in Australia and found that I had the motivation and enthusiasm for the subject material to work through the course without hassles. Indeed, I did some of my best work in my sociology sub-major in online courses where the freedom to set my own schedule allowed me more time for the sort of reading and reflection that that field demands. I worry sometimes, though, that this experience with online courses has caused me to carry a bias of my own; that is to say, as I found that I was personally motivated, enthused and engaged enough to complete courses with minimal intervention from a professor, perhaps I am expecting my students to have a similar experience in my course. Is this fair? Am I expecting too much of a group of students who seem to vary in engagement from one who logs in to the course site daily to another who has yet to even log in once?

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Online courses, then, are not just challenging for students but also present challenges for faculty, too, if of a very different sort. I spent a few days in two minds about what to do to deal with the lack of engagement on the part of the students. In the end my best options came down to either letting the students continue and likely forcing them to learn an expensive but necessary lesson in staying engaged when they earn an F for the course or, alternatively, finding a way to reach out to them and encourage them one last time in the same way I might in a face-to-face classroom. In the end I've gone with the second option and will be meeting with the less-engaged students individually to encourage them to get into the course, to determine why they haven't so far engaged with the material, and to see where I can help, if at all.

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Read more from Dylan Kissane in his e-IR blog [Political Business](#)

About the author:

Dylan Kissane is Professor of International Politics at CEFAM in Lyon, France. He is the curator of The Ivory Tower blog on E-IR.