Keep Teaching Demands Human Connections

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Rationale:

There is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic has led to several challenges such as alienation due to sudden closure of campus or asynchronous teaching during remote instruction, low motivation and low sense of belonging. Many students need to be influenced to stay engaged and to continue to produce quality work. This depends on faculty providing personalized feedback, conducting Zoom or live Conferences, holding virtual office hours, integrating learning assistants or peers in chat/lecture/recitation, being flexible with due dates, adopting engaging assignments that allow students to learn from peers and other classmates, and having an easy to navigate course with complete content. The Learning Management System, or Canvas, is used as the environment to foster those connections. Here I'll focus on personalized feedback that literature demonstrates has a powerful motivating effect on students; and share artifacts of feedback and engaging assignments that allow for student – student and student – peer interactions.

Description:

The two parts I focus on for this human connection tool are personalized feedback and engaging assignments. Although they can be used over the weeks there is a simple way to consistently implement it. It is a 3-6-9 plan. Those numbers stand for weeks during spring and fall terms, or about 20% - 40% - 60% of the term length. It means to provide feedback to students about their progress and how to help them move forward at the 3rd week, 6th and the 9th, tracking their performance over those weeks. Executing feedback can be through Canvas from Gradebook by using Messaging Students Who, posting Comments on grades, posting comments on Speedgrader. Use Message System, use invitation to private Conference or Zoom during virtual office hours with authentication and waiting room enabled.

As far as the engaging assignments, they can follow the same pattern or a 2-5-8. For example, a student has an engaging assignment and a high-stake assignment by a third week. The engaging assignment here is defined as any assignment that brings a discussion between learning assistants (hired undergraduate or graduate peers) or between students and their classmates. Assignments can be discussions delivered in Canvas or recitations that start as Zoom meetings and students have to make individual submissions in Canvas Assignments. I found that it is better to alternate these assignments because of grading challenges. I suggest using rubrics for guidance.

Personalized feedback is information given to students about their performance that guides future behavior or performance. Consequently, it is an important step that comes between observing a student performance and guiding the student for better practice or behavior. Wiggins (2012) identifies feedback essentials as follows:

1. Goal-Referenced, as feedback is an action to achieve a goal.

2. Tangible and Transparent, to have tangible results related to the goal.

3. Actionable, as it provides specific actionable information.

4.   User-Friendly, so the receiver sees its value and understands it.

5.   Timely, so it is not too late to adjust: "the sooner the better."

6.   Ongoing, by providing opportunity to performer to apply feedback and reshape performance.

7.   Consistent, so standards are communicated correctly and trustworthy.

The first main component of personalized targeted feedback is to have students used to an effective communication, for examples, weekly announcements, so they check their Knightsmail. The second main components is to include in the course mini assignment that brings the student to the course few times over the week. This shows that the instructor is available to listen to concerns, while at the same time, students's efforts to learn and complete assignments are necessary to meet the course expectations. Lastly, personalized feedback is targeted at three components:

1.   What is the current student performance?

2.   What actions students should take in near future?

3.   What is a long-term goal a student should aim at?

Appraisal:
Although I did not conduct a formal evaluation students' response were mainly positive toward the strategies and the efforts. Those were reflected in anonymous surveys conducted in the course and Students Perceptions of Instruction from spring 2020. The weakness that it is time consuming when technology is not used effectively. Additionally, there is need to research different ways of reaching out to students who do not respond, and to deal with students who are inactive.

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