

The Virtual Student Center (VSC) – Creating an Online Knowledge Exchange and Peer-to-Peer Academic Support Community for Students: Does it have a positive impact on student academic performance and the unsuccessful course completion rate (UCCR) in online and distance courses?

*Nancy S. Wozniak
Instructional Design Specialist
Information Technology Instructor (Online and Classroom)
Myers University
nwozniak@dnmyers.edu*

Abstract

One of the major arguments against online instruction centers on the misconception that the online format of course delivery is cold and impersonal. Student interaction and engagement are missing; hence, the quality of the learning experience is compromised. The argument contends that nothing can replace the face-to-face interaction between instructor and student experienced within the confines of the brick and mortar, traditional, campus classroom. True, nothing can replace the interaction between instructor and student for stimulating the learning process of each individual represented in the classroom. And, nothing can replace the critical interaction and learning support students share between one another in the classroom. The interaction between instructor and students, along with the interaction among students are vital for engaging students to learn in the classroom. But, the classroom doesn't need physical walls to promote interaction and engagement in learning. Classroom interaction is not a result of the physical structure or instructional format of the course. Interaction is the result of an involved, enthusiastic instructor, and a distance learning program that provides and promotes student interaction outside the confines of the online or distance course. Educational research has proven that the Web-based mode of instruction can be just as personal and engaging as its brick and mortar counterpart, if not more so, due to the anonymity factor the Web lends to the students. Students are more apt to express themselves when freed from the pressures of face-to-face interaction within the traditional classroom. However, the before-and-after class interaction between students, associated with the physical campus setting, is missing. How important is this interaction to a student's academic performance and outcome? Does it make a difference between a student's successful or unsuccessful (withdrawal or failure) of a course? Does general interaction between on-campus students make a difference in student academic performance? If so, can this interaction outside of the classroom be replicated online? These are the points of research the Myers University Virtual Student Center is attempting to study and record. Students enrolled in the Myers University School of Online and Distance Learning (SODL) have access to the Blackboard-based Virtual Student Center (VSC). At this site, students can obtain university information and news, university updates, academic resources and references, direct links to other university Web sites, external links to interesting and compelling Web sites, open and private

discussion board forums and chat areas. Online students are able to converse with one another using various electronic formats. Positive and interesting academic and personal student trends are emerging as a result of the Virtual Student Center and making an impact on Distance and Online learning at Myers University.

Introduction

The Virtual Student Center (VSC) opened to all online and distance students at Myers University in October 2002. Using the Blackboard course management interface, the VSC is designed to create a student knowledge exchange and a true online community in which students can communicate outside the boundaries and limits of their online classrooms. As an immediate result, the School of Online and Distance Learning Department has recognized the formation of a tangible, identifiable, virtual student body at Myers. The positive impact this virtual learning environment is having on student academic performance and outcome and on the unsuccessful course completion rate (UCCR) in the School of Online and Distance Learning (SODL) Program at Myers University will be studied and recorded on a continual basis. The virtual campus concept and study are birthed from the visionary spirit of Myers University President, Paul Feingold (<http://www.dnmyers.edu/visionary.pdf>) and the cutting-edge SODL team, headed by Brooke Scharlott, Director. Members include Kathleen Hyde, LaToya Jackson, Caprice Odom, and Nancy Wozniak.

The Purpose of the Virtual Student Center

For many students, the lack of face-to-face classroom instruction can lead to a sense of isolation, loneliness and frustration, particularly when adding the need for good computer and Internet skills with sound motivational and learning practices required for successful online learning. Learning anxiety can be increased highly over that of the traditional classroom; and, slightly half of the online students successfully complete their course. This is an industry trend. However, when online students form relationships and partnerships in the learning process, the anxiety level is decreased. In many online courses, students must take the initiative and create their own support system by, for example, e-mailing classmates for help. It's a hit or miss situation. The Virtual Student Center provides a central meeting place, outside of the online classroom, where students can find help and support easily. The VSC is a focal point for student interaction and information exchange designed to decrease the learning anxiety experienced by online students as a result of the emotional distance factor induced by the physical distance between students and instructors in online courses.

Objectives of the Virtual Student Center

- **Overcoming Learning Anxiety** – The learning anxiety factor in distance learning comes from the lack of the face-to-face, physical contact with instructor and other members of the classroom. It takes initiative and courage on the student's part, to overcome this fear, take on technology, and try an electronic form of classroom

instruction and interaction. Survival anxiety runs high with the distance neophyte. There also are the student learning anxieties present when trying to anticipate the online instructor's expectations and grading criteria. If the instructor isn't clear and consistent in this area, the level of student anxiety and frustration runs high. These anxieties might contribute to dropout. In the traditional classroom setting, the students are able to hold informal, before-and-after class sessions to discuss instructor and course content issues. The Virtual Student Center provides a means for the online students to meet and informally discuss specific course and general online learning.

- **Addressing the high student unsuccessful completion rate** – The withdrawal and failure rate for online courses are much higher than that of traditional educational programs. The national norm is around 60%. Research has shown that online students tend to feel isolated and alone. Many times this feeling of isolation has been cited by online students as the main reason for withdrawing from a course. The Virtual Student Center attempts to address this issue. The VCR is updated regularly. The site is alive and active. The discussion boards are checked on a daily basis. It is designed to let the online student know someone is here for them; they are not alone. The possible impact the Virtual Student Center has on the unsuccessful student completion rate of online courses at Myers University will be studied.
- **Online Technical Assistance** – A SODL staff technical assistant provides students online help with the technology, and keeps learners involved and the instructor on the teaching track. The online technical assistant enables the instructor to focus on the course content and instruction, while taking care of the students' computer and Blackboard technical needs and issues. The technical assistant provides online technical assistance in the Technical Help forum on the VSC discussion board. Many of the more technical-minded students join in and help students struggling with technology issues. A special help email address is posted for the students to use when in need of critical technical assistance. The student receives an email answer from a staff member within 24 hours, including the weekends. The Announcement area of the VSC posts updates on technical problems or down times experienced within the system. The instructors no longer have to deal with the burden of student technical problems and issues, and know to send the frustrated student to VSC for help. Virtual chats between SODL staff and students are being planned for the future.
- **Learning Partnerships/Relationships** - Unlike the traditional classroom setting, where learning is instructor-led, in online courses the emphasis on learning is the responsibility of the student, or student-led. Research has shown that only 20% of all learners possess the learning style for student-led learning. This attributes to the high unsuccessful course completion rate (withdrawal or failure) experienced, across the board, in distance courses at any institution of learning. However, the unsuccessful course completion rate (UCCR) drops when students partner

together in the learning process. Partnerships or relationships make academic success easier to achieve. There is academic strength in numbers. The Virtual Student Center provides electronic venues of communication for the students to support one another. The Center provides a central meeting place for the students to form casual, relaxed academic relationships that create an “**I’m not in this alone**” sense of security among one another.

All distance learning students must possess good relationship skills. Poor relationship skills often manifests into conflict, problems, frustration and failure for both students and faculty. Students in a distance education course or program who fail to engage and build relationships with students and faculty are more likely to fail than those students who do engage and build relationships with students and faculty. (Tobin 2001) The Virtual Student Center provides place for the online and distance students at Myers to develop their electronic relationship skills in a **relaxed atmosphere** outside of the electronic classroom and form learning partnerships with other students in the program.

- **Learning and Study Groups** – All learners benefit from their involvement in small learning or study groups. Struggling online and distance students are invited to meet in a formal private discussion and chat area within the Student Virtual Center. These groups provide targeted support and encouragement, along with extra discussion and feedback on course material, assignments, and the development of online study and learning skills. Most importantly, the student learning and study groups establish a secure feeling that if help is needed it is available in the Virtual Student Center. The VSC establishes a focal point for help and support for the online and distance learners at Myers University. This lessens the learning anxiety and feelings of isolation and frustration experienced by some online and distance learners at Myers University. The SODL advisors, staff, and a core group of VSC students visit the site on a daily basis and offer direction and help to the online and distance student body.
- **Peer-to-Peer Mentoring** – Most online classes at Myers University are maxed-out at 20 students. Statistics have shown that an individual online student is likely to send a dozen or more emails to the instructor a week. This can be an overload to the instructor with full enrollment, and frustrating to the individual student expecting an immediate and prompt response. Online students tend to expect their instructors to be online whenever they are online. They become frustrated and anxious when they don’t receive an immediate answer. Consequently, the quality of the instruction between the instructor and student could deteriorate.

The Virtual Student Center provides electronic communication venues that foster peer-to-peer mentoring. A core group of VSC online students serve as mentors to other students that are struggling or anxious about their online course. Someone is there for the struggling or anxious online student. Research has proven students

learn best in peer-to-peer learning groups.

- **Knowledge Sharing** – The Virtual Student Center incorporates student knowledge sharing into the online and distance learning environments and creates true online communities in which students communicate and share information outside the of their online and distance classrooms. The availability of private and public discussion forums and chat sessions help create a virtual campus student commons and allows the exchange of information and knowledge among enrolled students within the entire online and distance program at Myers. Establishing interaction and dialogue among the students in the program brings them together and allows them to feel connected to the Myers University student body. The Virtual Student Center serves as a means of unification, and integration of the Myers SODL student body by providing a virtual meeting place that promotes student interaction and the exchange of knowledge. The Myers School of Online and Distance Learning has a tangible, active student body through the VSC.

How important is interaction?

Research has shown that, as traditional classroom learners, distant learners require a combination of student-instructor and student-student interaction for guidance and support to enhance their learning experience (Threlkeld & Brzoska, 1994). Learners are more motivated if they have frequent contact with, not only their instructor, but other students in the course, as well. Students learn best in an environment of friendship, warmth, and encouragement. The Virtual Student Center is designed to provide a relaxed place for students interact, support and encourage on another. This easy, unlimited access to online help and encouragement lessens the likelihood of a frustrated student giving up and withdrawing from the course.

SODL Audience

Online learners at Myers University fall into two groups:

1. Off-Campus Learners:

- are older than the traditional campus student (over 30 years old),
- have outside commitments, such as full-time jobs and families,
- have time constraints and need a flexible academic schedule,
- want an educational experience relative to their chosen career,
- are taking courses in order to advance in their present job or are changing careers.

2. On-Campus Learners:

- are taking traditional classroom courses concurrent with online courses,

- taking an online or distance course because the course is needed for graduation or isn't offered the following semester,
- have an unexpected or temporary time constraint added to their schedule and are unable to attend campus classes the time the course is offered on campus,
- taking an online course because they think it might be easier than traditional classroom course.

In order to be successful, online learners need good time-management skills, good reading and writing skills, good problem solving abilities, to be independent learners with a great deal of self-motivation, able to understand the instructor's expectations, and be computer and Internet literate. Students at Myers University may or may not possess these skills and abilities. It is difficult for instructors and staff to determine the online learning and study skills of students enrolling in online and distance courses at the university. The Virtual Student Center provides an area for students to seek help if they are struggling with their computer skills and online course work. Students are able to discover their learning styles and preferences and learn to make adjustments if their learning characteristics don't match the model characteristics of the successful distance learner.

Developing Regular Student Interaction - The Importance of an Updated Site

Online learners experience an emotional distance factor due to the physical separation from other learners and the instructor. Certain learning styles need the motivation provided by interaction with other students and need to feel part of a learning community. The Virtual Student Center is updated on a daily basis. New announcements and discussion board threads are posted every day. This gives the feel that the community is alive and active. Students will visit and participate on a regular basis if they can depend on someone being there for them. Keeping the site current, updated, and interesting helps calm student learning anxieties and lets them know that someone is listening and is there for them.

Core Student Group and Peer-to-Peer Mentoring

A core relationship group of 20 regular, participating students developed from the discussion board forums at the inception of the Myers Virtual Student Center. The students wandered into the discussion boards and started ongoing dialogue among one another. When other students came into the discussion board forums looking for help and support, the VSC regulars jumped in on their own and provided assistance and encouragement. The group became volunteer mentors for other students in the SODL program. The group also acts as a sounding board for other students on online issues and concerns.

Students in distance education courses and programs often feel isolated and apprehensive. This may be due to lack of student to student and student to faculty contact (Muilenburg & Berge, 2001). Peer-to-Peer mentoring groups can help decrease the emotional distance factor and increase student to student interaction. Such interaction may result in

increased retention rates and provide a mechanism for helping distance education students deal with isolation issues associated with being time and place bound (Boyle & Boice, 1998; Dorn & Papalewis, 1997).

The research and rhetoric on the quality of academic interaction in the traditional classroom format vs. the distance format. Although many distance education courses take advantage of online communication tools, such as email, threaded discussion, and chat, students often have limited face-to-face contact (Perrin & Mayhew, 2000). Students further often fail to establish strong and sustainable relationships with other students and faculty. Perrin and Mayhew noted that distance education might not be able to create the amount of interaction associated with traditional classroom courses. However, Miller and Wester (1997), discovered that distance education instructors can provide students with similar amounts of quality interaction as they do traditional campus students. It's up to the instructor to engage the students to interact.

The Virtual Student Center assists the online and distance instructors by providing an additional place for the Myers online and distance community to interact outside the limitation of their course sites. The peer-to-peer mentoring group within the virtual community provides additional support for online and distance students, and promotes the establishment of strong academic relationships within the online and distance student body. Students They are a consistent virtual presence and add the vital human touch to the SODL program at Myers University. The benefit of this group will be studied and recording on a continual basis.

The Theory and Study

The impact the Virtual Student Center has on student academic performance and outcome and on the unsuccessful course completion rate (UCCR) in the School of Online and Distance Learning (SODL) Program at Myers University will be studied and recorded on a continual basis. The purpose of this study is to examine the influence virtual student relationships in a distance education program has on overall student academic online performance. The study seeks to record and describe the impact student relationships with other students, with advisors and SODL staff, and with faculty has on student retention and success in the SODL program.

The Virtual Student Center also will serve as a proving or test ground for new multimedia instructional formats. Since it is a relaxed, informal atmosphere, students can try demos of the formats and report back on the usefulness and instructional benefit of the multimedia presentation format. Students are able to become comfortable with the Blackboard interface in the relaxed atmosphere of the VSC, and it is hoped this relaxed atmosphere would take the pressure off the student when having to learn new multimedia instructional formats for their online courses. The study will record and describe the experiences of the students in this area of instructional design.

Conclusion

It is a common misperception that the online format of course delivery lacks the “human touch” and personal classroom interaction needed for a successful, quality learning experience. On the contrary, online learning tools introduce a means for creating individualized, highly effective academic environments that enhance and personalize the learning experience (sometimes more so than the traditional classroom), and provide the opportunity for an education to those unable to take part in the traditional on-campus course. The Virtual Student Center will be an ongoing source for study and research in the area of online student interaction.

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