



Episode 7: Finding the Missing Piece: How to Help Your Students Who Are Struggling with Online Learning

SPEAKERS

Tierney King, Brian Udermann, Tom Saleska, and Flower Darby

Tierney King 00:01

This is the Faculty Focus Live podcast. I'm your host, Tierney King, and I'm here to bring you inspiration, energy and creative strategies that you can utilize in your every day teaching. This week's episode is sponsored by The Teaching Professor Conference. This year, join us in-person or virtually and pursue your passion for teaching. Today, we're going to talk about your students. Are some of your students struggling with online learning? Have you seen a decrease in motivation or engagement? If the answer is yes, that's okay. It doesn't mean you're a bad teacher or instructor. It might just mean there's a missing piece. And today, we're here to find that missing piece. The piece that recognizes that maybe one, two, a handful or all of your students are struggling with online learning. We're here to find the piece that helps incentivize, helps empathize, and helps motivate those students both in the online realm and in-person classroom. To start, Brian Udermann provides us with some tips for helping students who are struggling with online learning in his 20-Minute Mentor.

Brian Udermann 01:11

Some things you can think about. One would be to just think about things from a student's perspective. You know, I don't know how many years ago it was, but I finally started to think about things like, What's it like being a student? I mean, I was a student that went to college for 11 years, but then I was a faculty member for a number of years after that. And sometimes I would get kind of critical of my students. But I think it really helped me when I just kind of took a step back, and started considering things from the students perspective. So they might have three or four or five classes, they might be working, they might be stressed out, they might have social things, or relationship issues or family scenarios going on. You know, many times students are stressed, and they're overwhelmed. And they're busy. And, you know, it's just helpful when someone like their instructor is a little bit flexible, or understanding. Or at least they feel like they know what they might be going through. You know, I like to talk about this idea of being empathetic with students and not punitive. So if a student misses an assignment in my class, I don't immediately get angry and say, or feel I need to punish that student.

Brian Udermann 02:32

You know, we're just wrapping up the first week of classes in our new semester. And I had a student who didn't turn an assignment during week one. So it took me 30 seconds, maybe 45 seconds, maybe a minute to email the student and say, "Oh, hey, I noticed you didn't do this assignment." And the student was just kind of overwhelmed and said, "Oh, thank you so much." It was the first week of classes, and they were focusing on their synchronous courses. Mine happened to be asynchronous. And they said, "I totally forgot about your class. But the reminder was very, very helpful."

Brian Udermann 01:11

The next idea is to help students take corrective action. So again, this is something where I've heard instructors say, "I just don't think it's my duty or my responsibility. I don't have to." So this is not something maybe you have to do. But I think as a faculty member in higher education, at least for me, that if I have the opportunity to help my students to take corrective action, in some way or another, with something that they're struggling with, I'm always going to attempt to do that or try to take advantage of that. You know, I sometimes think that faculty don't fully realize the impact that they have on their students. I mean, students, for the most part, look up to professors and look up to their instructors. And you know, if I'm sharing advice with one particular student, or maybe multiple students in my class, it could be related to study skills, it could be related to mental health, it could be related to time management, it could be related to a lot of different things, I think students pay attention to those things. So again, I do think faculty underestimate the impact that they sometimes have with their students. So one thing that I like to try to do is help students kind of identify like, why they might be struggling, why they might be getting low grades, or why they might be turning things in late or not at all. And it does help to have a conversation with students about that and to really ask them questions more than tell them what they might be doing wrong.

Tierney King 04:52

In addition to this added element of empathy in the online environment, you may also have students coming to in-person class, some students joining live, and some students viewing your class video later that night. This makes it extremely hard to gauge all of your students and how they're doing. Sarah Lovern and Tom Saleska provide tactics in their 20-Minute Mentor on how to better get to know your students so that students feel comfortable disclosing if they're falling behind, if they don't understand something, or if they have an emergency come up.

Tom Saleska 05:22

One of the issues that I've found that it has really popped up in this virtual experience is accountability, or responsibility. And of course, anytime you have a teaching experience, you have students in front of you, you want them to be responsible for their learning. But I think in a face-to-face environment, it's just easier to judge and gauge whether students are learning. You've got this non-verbal, you've got people raising hands, you've got asking questions. So it's just easier to see that, hey, they're learning and students are responsible for it. But last spring, I was just really surprised at how many good students got lost in the virtual land. They wouldn't check in for a week or two and, and all of a sudden, I checked the gradebook, and there were no assignments from them good students. And so I decided that this semester, I need to find ways to make them more responsible, more accountable for their learning both when they're in class and when they're not. And so what I do after every lecture, is give

them a five to seven question, online quiz. And it's part of their Blackboard experience. They have all day to do it until 1130 at night, and what it causes them to do is to retrieve the information or review the information that I've given them during the day, which is a great learning tool. It causes them and forces them to go back over the information and answer some more questions. I encourage them to work with another student. So even though they're not next to someone, they could Zoom another student or a friend, they could FaceTime and work on the quiz together, because my goal is then for them to learn it. And I think that's a powerful way to make that happen.

Tom Saleska 07:22

What I did this past fall was developed an assignment that I want to tell you a little bit about, which I thought was very interesting, and it's worked very well for me. So day one, here's what I asked my students to do. I asked him to go through their phone and pick three current pictures, their favorite pictures, from their phone. I tell him, I don't want you to go out and take pictures, I want you to go to your reservoir of pictures. They have 1000s on their phone, pick their three favorite, put them on a document, size them, and then tell me a story. Tell me a story about why they picked those three pictures. And it's just amazing. The pictures that they select and the stories that they tell hobbies and friends and travel and just a wide variety of such interesting stories. I had one young man tell me a fishing story. And I like fishing. And he said that he went fishing one weekend and lost a fishing pole. He came back the next week and caught the same pole and fished the pole out. That sounded like a miraculous sort of story. But it's that sort of interaction that I find really starts to build rapport. This semester, I took that even a step further. So I printed all their stories from all the students. And I highlighted one fact that I really wanted to respond to and then for each student, I was sitting watching TV one Sunday, for each student, I selected a student's story and a little quote that I wanted to highlight and then just kind of wrote them a response. Well, it's amazing how these kids want to talk about those experiences further and even four weeks later I am still replying to these instructions about their lives. And it gives me a chance to build rapport, to communicate with them, and to get a little feedback and really build a connection, which I think is really important.

Tierney King 09:24

So you build rapport. You're empathetic to those who need it and even those who don't. But how do you really help your students succeed? In Flower Darby's Magna Online Seminar, she explains how she uses emotion science to increase engagement, persistence and success in her online classes.

Flower Darby 09:43

How do we acknowledge this isolating and therefore a challenging experience that our online students may have when they click into our classes? Not only acknowledge that, but what can we do about it? What can we do to help our students feel welcome, more supported, more connected with us. And that's what really informed my thinking for today's presentation is how do we help our students feel more engaged, and to be honest, ourselves too. Many of us are still learning how to teach online effectively. Sometimes we don't find it quite as satisfying or rewarding as we might when we're teaching in-person, but emotion science can help us as instructors as well. What we know from the research is that emotions help us connect with the people in our classes, and help students to connect with each other. And that's really important. Once again, the more I've thought about it, the more I think the main barrier to online student success is, in fact, that isolation and that distance that is inherent with online

classes. And again, if we pause and think just where we are right now, in this season, where we're all experiencing greater degrees of isolation, and a certain lack of socializing and freedom to go out and do the things that we want to do. I think this is a key moment in time to reflect on the impact that this level of isolation can have on us and how it's easy to feel disengaged, but emotions help. So when we care about the material that we're working on, when we feel emotionally connected to it, it helps us to choose to use all of our working memory resources for the task at hand. Now, again, it's really easy. Even when students are working on a thing, maybe they're watching a video, reading a textbook chapter, solving math problems, it's really easy for students to think that they can also be paying attention on Instagram, or I even caught my own school aged daughter last week watching a movie while she was doing her math homework. And I said to her, "What are you doing? Focus on the task at hand!" But it's really easy for students in these remote times to not fully pay attention to the past. But when they care about the past, when they see the emotional relevance, it helps them choose to keep all their memory and working resources focused on that particular task.

Flower Darby 12:19

Emotions also maximize long-term memory. And all we have to do is to think again about the example of September 11, 2001. To recognize that emotions tag events and circumstances and situations as important to remember and hold on to. So emotions help students hold on to new information for longer so that it is more vivid and easier to get to when they need it in that deep storage in their memory. And finally, emotion steers our decisions. Now I find this one really interesting. So emotions guide our thought process and the decisions that we make, almost like a rudder on a boat. They help us decide which way to go. And that is because we associate, again, our emotional response to our experiences. And so this example is from Immordino-Yang's work. And she argues that if a student raises a hand in a class and says, "I just have a quick question," based on the instructor's response and the student's emotional reaction or the emotions the student constructs in that moment, that will inform whether or not in the future that student will be willing to raise their hand and ask that question. If they have a negative experience, perhaps an instructor is stressed out and rushed for time and doesn't fully give time and attention and a positive reinforcement to that particular student, that student might associate negative feelings with having raised their hand and they might be very unwilling to do it again. If the student has the experience where the instructor is really kind and supportive and empathetic and really wants that student to feel able to be successful, then in that case that student might have a much more positive association with that action, with that decision to raise a hand and ask a question and therefore be more willing to do so in the future. The emotional experiences that are associated with academic tasks in general help students decide in the future whether they're going to engage in that behavior again or not. This even comes down to the really nitty gritty like as a student is working through the steps to solve a math problem. Every step that the student is trying to decide what to do in that particular step of the equation, that thinking and that decision about what to do is steered by emotions to help the students think about is this going to benefit me and move me closer to a solution or is this going to be the wrong choice that is less pleasant and then makes me go astray and get to the wrong answer. The emotions during the decisions I find really, really interesting. Again, I just want to come back to Immordino-Yang one more time here. She says that it's impossible to think about things that you don't care about. I think if we resonate on this just a little bit, if we think about, that that really makes sense. That's what our strategies are about today—is helping students care about the class

material and each other and us too because those connections will really help them persist and stay engaged as well.

Tierney King 15:48

From emotion science to corrective action and online activities, we hope we've helped you find the missing piece to help your students succeed, both online and in the classroom. Whether you're driving to work, or you just need a 15-minute think session, we hope the Faculty Focus Live podcast will inspire your teaching, and offer ideas that you can integrate into your own course. For more information on the resources included in this episode, please check out the links provided in the episode description.