Engaging Faceless Students

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Student engagement is a core pedagogical objective in college instruction, whether online or in the classroom. Students who are engaged will learn better than those who are not. They will be more motivated and more involved with the course material, the instructor, and with other students. Yet, online instruction presents a novel challenge to faculty who seek to engage students as fully as possible in the learning process. Online students usually do not meet face-to-face with their instructors and generally will know few, if any, of the other students by sight. Practices, techniques, and technologies, however, exist that help to meet the challenge of engaging the students in online college courses at Penn State. They might possibly lead to even more success at engagement than some classroom courses.

This presentation will discuss feedback and proactive communications—some of which are built-in to the course and some of which were triggered by events, interactions, or timing—with individual students and with the entire class in a course titled “Jewish Civilization” offered regularly since the Fall 2006 semester. This is a survey course, taught entirely over the Internet, that covers a great deal of material. On a continuum between student- and instructor-directed, the course falls toward the instructor-directed end. The course takes a perspective (on Jewish history) and requires students to grapple with, and demonstrate an understanding of the material presented.

Staying in touch with students has helped to keep them motivated and on schedule, even in a course that requires them to step outside of their points of view and to absorb information that may have a low priority for some students. It has built good-will between students and the instructor, and seems to have reduced complaints, misunderstandings, and procedural questions. It may even have aided in the learning process, as one student wrote at the end of the fall term, “I learned a lot in your class, about the Jewish people, the religion, and the people who interacted with them. And also, I
learned a few things about life in general.” It seems that faculty efforts to engage students in online courses may facilitate higher-order learning. This presentation will discuss the ways an instructor proactively communicated and provided feedback to students. Faculty time spent on such activities has significant pedagogic value.