



Building Relationships Through Learning Design as Signature Pedagogy: Re-connecting Mature-aged Online Students with Educators

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The Commencing Student Success Program (CSSP) comprises 13 evidence-based strategies for online engagement underpinned by the Universal Design for Learning principles of inclusive access to improve learner retention and engagement (Sasson et al., 2021), promoting first year student engagement and retention at the tertiary level. The program's impact has led to it being adopted across the University's School of Education as its signature pedagogy. The University's unique regional context provides education to a high number of students studying by distance; often rural, mature-age, or first-in-family. Applying these strategic elements into online course design ensure a sense of support and connection is embedded, and reducing sense of isolation, throughout their studies.

This presentation explores three of the core design themes underpinning the project's 'Basic Elements' that support and enhance meaningful student-educator connections:

1. Social presence: For students, especially those studying purely online, feeling a sense of belonging and connection within the learning environment is imperative for positive learning experience and development of relationship-rich education philosophies (Felten & Lambert, 2020). High quality use of asynchronous Moodle videos produced by the Unit Coordinator welcome students; and walk-through assessment screencasts provide deeper explanation of task expectations, in addition to synchronous engagement via Zoom, assists student educator connections. Teacher presence, through 'putting a face to the name', builds positive relationships and presents Unit Coordinators in a human light (Stone & Springer, 2019).

2. Student voice: In addition to multimodal materials, student presence with others also plays an important role in building their engagement in online spaces (Reilly et al., 2012). Opportunities for learners to provide real-time feedback on each assessment task allows them to have an impact on unit design during their own studies. Utilising feedback functionality directly within the LMS embeds this feedback capture in situ, not as a separate, disconnected process. Academic staff can adjust and tailor content to meet the needs of current students. This in-unit opportunity promoting student voice, also provides ongoing de-identified student testimonials about their experiences with the task, which can highlight their value in a way that is authentic and formative for other learners.

3. Cognitive load: Meaningful and consistent design enabled clear navigational paths and sources of information. This allows students to prioritise focus on deep engagement with learning tasks, rather than problem-solving navigation of the online environment. This is critical for all students, especially those who are time-poor, mature-aged, and managing multiple responsibilities beyond study (Hoi & Le Hang, 2021). Students can access a 'Flexible Portal' to self-manage their assessment due dates by choosing a one-to-three-week automatic extension that suits their circumstances, providing them with agency in their learning by reducing pressure in typically heavily loaded trimester schedules. Freeing up both staff and student time on lower-order requests, allows space for richer interaction.

Since the CSSP's 2019 conception, the project team has been able to ideate and iterate the nature of the Basic Elements and their underpinning learning strategies via feedback from academic staff and students across the more than 65 teaching units the CSSP has been applied to so far. A central focus on reconnecting relationships through technology guides this process and is transferable in part or full to other institutions.

Keywords: Belonging, cognitive load, flexibility, online, retention, social presence, UDL, video

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