Postsecondary Teachers' Perspectives on Effectively Engaging Learners in Today's Post "Pandemic Pedagogy" Era

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Introduction

While learners can access a multitude of online information regarding any topic on their own, we know that accessing information is by no means the equivalent of learning. The latter is a process that requires conscious learner engagement and practice with feedback to become part of their repertoire. Instruction is thus more than simply providing information—in other words, "telling ain't training"—and teachers can help people learn by applying their expertise to infuse accountability, structure, and guidance to the face-to-face, online, or blended learning process.

This article presents the findings of a recent study surveying and interviewing postsecondary teachers within a college of education at a large, Carnegie "R1" public university in the Midwestern United States with a view to unearthing the latter's perspectives of how to better engage their learners within the hybrid/multiple-modality instructional contexts that represent the new normal in today's post "pandemic pedagogy" era. By this, one is referring to the current age that has dawned following the progressive lifting of the various global lockdowns and "emergency remote teaching" protocols that were instituted to curb the spread of COVID-19 disease during the particularly challenging and disruptive initial years of the pandemic. Within the present-day context of potentially emerging new variants of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and/or other pathogens, this article also discusses key findings related to the aforementioned teachers' views regarding the current levels of institutional support they receive to this end, and their recommendations regarding how said support could be improved.

Key Constructs. Before commencing a detailed discussion of the study's findings, it is important to establish and describe the key constructs—i.e., pandemic pedagogy, learner engagement, and the problematic pandemic-era digital divide—that frame said discussion.

Pandemic Pedagogy. The term "pandemic pedagogy" may possibly have been coined on March 11, 2020, when Roy Schwartzman created a Facebook group with the title of *Pandemic Pedagogy* for stakeholders to share insights, best/worst practices, advice, successes, challenges, and research about converting to fully remote/online instruction during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic (Schwartzman, 2020). This term—which many of us may have been forced to become intimately acquainted with since March of 2020—has usually been perceived as being synonymous with the "emergency" remote teaching and learning to which educational institutions worldwide had to hurriedly resort following the global spread of multiple variants of the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

However, as Bautista (2021) explains, pandemic pedagogy was not simply about the shift in the format of conducting one's classes. The term, conceptually speaking, referred to a mindset in which educators adapted to the sudden, major upheaval of our temporal and spatial agencies, and practically speaking, referred to the problem-solving and troubleshooting mentalities required to

simultaneously: (a) (re)design and adapt curricula to new formats and timeframes; (b) implement measures to alleviate feelings of isolation, fatigue, and anxiety among learners and teachers; and (c) realign performance indicators to measure how technologically-mediated learning platforms are oriented towards achieving teaching continuity and learning inclusion.

Learner Engagement. Within any teaching and learning context—irrespective of whether its modality is face-to-face, hybrid, or fully online—engagement can be characterized as a two-way process in which: (a) learners are primarily responsible for engaging with [i.e., actively interacting with and critically examining the instructional content]; while (b) instructors are responsible for initiating learner engagement—because learner engagement may not happen on its own—and actively engaging learners through effective instructional design (Arghode et al., 2018).

Besides, learner engagement is increasingly seen by scholars as a complex construct encompassing several dimensions of participation in learning activities, because not all engaged learners manifest their engagement in an identical manner (Deng et al., 2019). It involves the learner not only engaging just with the instructional content alone, but also engaging with the instructor/instructional program, and engaging with peers/fellow learners. In fact, Arghode et al. (2018), based on their extensive review of the literature on the topic, enumerate *four* primary, interrelated, and interactive categories—behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and psychological—of learner engagement that each vary along a continuum:

1. Behavioral engagement involves the learner demonstrating productive classroom behavior by complying with rules and classroom norms.
2. Emotional engagement refers to the learner's interest/affinity to engage with the content as indicated by their positive body language and attachment to learning.
3. Cognitive engagement describes the learner's interest in learning not just the expected content but also that which is beyond curricular expectations.
4. Psychological engagement encompasses the learner's sense of identification or belonging and positive relationships with their instructors and peers—this category can alternatively be labeled "social" engagement (see Deng et al., 2019).

Deng et al. (2019) underscore the importance of improving learner engagement by drawing attention to growing evidence of it playing a pivotal role in effective teaching and meaningful learning, with engagement being associated with favorable learning outcomes, and disengagement being linked to adverse effects on academic achievement, including dropout, school failure, and serious behavioral problems.

Meanwhile, Arghode et al. (2018)—referencing "learner engagement theory" (Handelsman et al., 2005), which posits that learning is improved through learners' active involvement with the instructional content both inside and outside the classroom—describe how increased learner engagement improves learning, academic performance, and instructional effectiveness, and characterize it as a way to embrace active and collaborative learning, participation in challenging academic activities, and formative communication with the instructor. They explain how, from the learner's end, engagement involves: (a) actively interacting with and critically examining the instructional content at the cognitive, behavioral, emotional, and psychological levels; (b) devoting more time and effort to focus on learning; (c) being able to transfer their learning to

dissimilar situations; and, (d) taking effort to improve their learning even outside of class. Meanwhile, from the instructor's end, engaging instruction: (a) capitalizes on learners' desire and willingness to actively learn; (b) motivates students to be involved in learning by fueling their passion and inclination to study; and, (c) effectively uses the learners' preexisting knowledge and skills to promote engagement.

Pandemic-Era Digital Divide. Improving engagement by diverse learners within the post "pandemic pedagogy" contexts of the COVID-19 era and afterwards is rendered exponentially more crucial—and, at the same time, exponentially more challenging—by the significant exacerbation of the digital divide since the arrival of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. While the pandemic has hastened the global transition towards a digital economy by accelerating the uptake of digital solutions, tools, and services, it has simultaneously exposed the wide chasm between the connected and the unconnected (UNCTAD, 2020). The pandemic has increased the digital divide—i.e., the inequitable distribution of access to, competencies with, and use of digital technologies based on factors such as age, geography, geopolitics, socioeconomics, and so on—at both macro (e.g., school system) and micro (e.g., individual learner) levels (Eskiadi, 2020).

Study Description

In light of the aforementioned contextual factors, a diverse group of postsecondary teachers within a college of education at a large, Carnegie "R1" public university in the Midwestern United States were surveyed and interviewed to ascertain their views on how to better engage their learners. A brief, anonymous, five-item—two closed-ended and three open-ended—online survey was conducted within the largest of the college's three departments, eliciting participation from 18 respondents.

On the other hand, ten informants for depth interviews were purposively selected to ensure diversity and representativeness along key pertinent variables—viz. academic rank, years of teaching experience, level of curriculum taught, departmental affiliation, gender, and ethnic/cultural background—to enable the inclusion of the widest possible range of professional perspectives regarding learner engagement. These interviews were guided by an eight-item interview protocol following the classic, time-tested structure introduced by Carspecken (1996).

Informants ranged from term instructor to full professor, included recent hires and longtime veterans, were sourced from across all three of the college's departments, comprised both immigrant and native-born individuals, and represented both gender and ethnic/cultural diversity. They featured between four to 16 years of online teaching experience—the median and modal figure being six years, and ranged from those teaching undergraduate freshmen to those conducting doctoral seminars. They used course/learning management systems (CMS/LMS) platforms for asynchronous instruction and videoconferencing tools for synchronous sessions. They were mostly digital immigrants from Generation X, and the vast majority had never experienced taking online courses as K-12/postsecondary students themselves.

The first part of this study focused on the teachers' own performance, featuring a gap analysis to establish the divergence between (a) their current performance with regard to effectively

engaging learners within hybrid/multiple-modality instructional contexts, and (b) their desired future performance in this area. Meanwhile, given the understanding that positive change within organizational contexts is difficult to achieve by individual agency alone, the second part of this study features another gap analysis—this time focused on institutional support—to discover the current levels of support available to these teachers, and to determine the optimally appropriate levels of institutional support required to help them effectively and meaningfully engage learners within the hybrid/multiple-modality instructional contexts that represent the new normal in today's post "pandemic pedagogy" era.

Study Findings

The study description within the previous section of this article should make it apparent that this was primarily a depth interview-based qualitative study, with the two closed-ended survey items administered to teachers within the college's largest department serving a mostly supplementary purpose. That said, it is interesting to start this section by juxtaposing the responses to those two aforementioned items side-by-side to see how they overlap, providing an overview of the situation within the college's largest department from its teachers' perspective.

Figure 1
Level of agreement with the statement, "I am currently successful at optimally engaging students in my online courses."

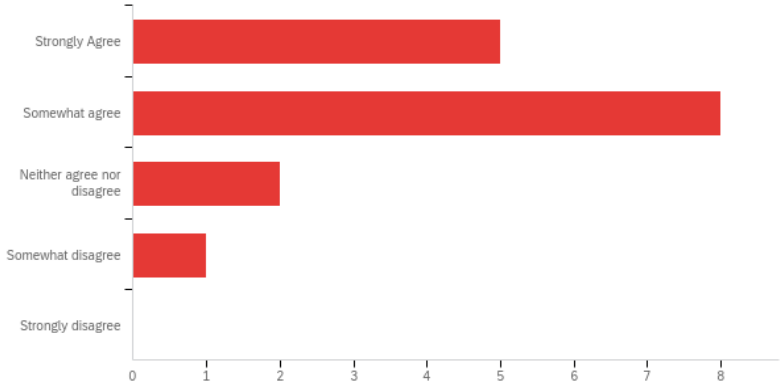
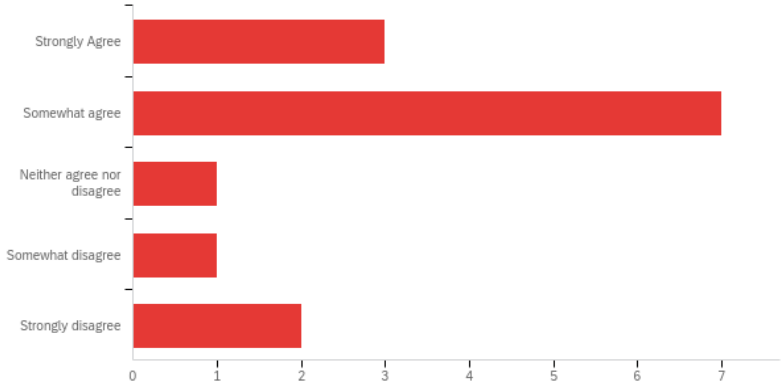


Figure 2
Level of agreement with the statement, "My institution sufficiently supports me in my efforts to better engage students in my online courses."



Comparing Figure 1 and Figure 2 suggests that the vast majority of teachers responding to this survey felt like they were somewhat to very successful at optimally engaging learners within their online courses, and this appears to strongly correlate with the vast majority of said teachers perceiving that they were receiving moderate to firm institutional support towards this end. Caveats that need to be added to the above statement are, of course, that (a) correlation does not necessarily mean causation, and that (b) the implications of said statement are not intended to be generalizable towards any population larger than the sample in question.

However, much more interesting details emerge from the teachers' responses to the survey's three open-ended items, which served as follow-up questions to the aforementioned two closed-ended prompts. The first of these asked teachers to detail the actual measures they were currently taking to optimally engage their online learners, while the second asked them to describe how exactly their institution currently supported them in these efforts, and, finally, the third asked them to explain what additional kinds of support their institution could provide in order to help them in these efforts. But before we encounter their responses to these three items, it would be appropriate to move to the ten depth interviews conducted as part of this study and look at the responses of teachers from across all three of the college's departments to two far more basic, fundamental questions, namely: (a) how they personally define the concept of learner engagement; and (b) how the latter materially differs—in their personal view—between online versus face-to-face (F2F) settings.

Fundamental Conceptualizations. To begin with, key overall themes that emerged from informants' attempts to describe their personal definitions of learner engagement were as follows:

- A multi-dimensional concept (i.e., learners must engage with their teacher, with the instructional content, and with their classmates/peers).
- The primacy of content, as in both content quality as well as learners feeling a sense of ownership over said content, fueling the desire to get maximum benefit out of it.
- Learners actively display critical thinking—curiously exploring key pertinent issues and challenging prevailing assumptions.
- Learners effectively retain instructional content and meaningfully transfer (see Tessmer & Richey, 1997) their newly-acquired knowledge and skills/competencies to real-world contexts.
- Learners actively participate in and contribute to the instructional process, by posing novel questions and putting forward novel perspectives on key pertinent issues.
- Learners demonstrate cognitive constructivist learning, actively transforming received information and constructing personal meanings out of it.
- Learners demonstrate social constructivist learning, actively participating in communities of learning and praxis to advance their own scholarship and help peers advance theirs.

Moreover, multiple informants brought up the idea that teachers should check their assumptions regarding what learner engagement looks like, emphasizing that: (a) it is a phenomenon that is often not overtly observable; (b) different learners have different styles and ways of engagement, and are engaged by different things/activities; (c) within synchronous instructional settings, a learner who is not copiously verbal is not necessarily one who is not engaged; and finally, (d) engagement is risky, and can be especially challenging for learners from historically

underrepresented and oppressed socioeconomic/cultural groups—learners need to feel safe in order to be willing to engage, and can be impeded by communicative barriers and being confronted by socioculturally uncomfortable concepts.

Meanwhile, key points raised by informants while attempting to describe how learner engagement materially differs between online versus face-to-face (F2F) settings were:

- There is likely more accountability for learners to observably engage within F2F settings, because it is relatively easier to "hide" in online instructional settings—with fewer verbal and visual cues, learner engagement is harder to observe online, and said cues entirely disappear in situations where learners are permitted to turn off their microphone and camera.
- On the other hand, an argument can be made that there is a certain beauty to the relative "anonymity" provided by online instructional settings, which can level the playing field by making it harder for certain individuals to dominate classroom interaction based on their physicality—personality and/or linguistic attributes—which could be particularly valuable for learners from historically underrepresented and oppressed groups.
- Within online settings, learner engagement is easier to measure during asynchronous instruction via the generation of documentary evidence and artifacts, while synchronous settings provide more distractions and make it harder for learners to remain engaged throughout session.
- F2F instruction allows for more "on the fly" spontaneity—such as "teachable moments" and informal pre/post-class or "hallway" conversations—while interaction within online settings has to be more intentional, requiring careful planning and premeditation.
- Effective learner engagement within online settings requires a much higher level of trust and faith among all concerned parties—"You have to have faith and trust in things you cannot see!"—than in F2F settings online; and furthermore, building trust takes even more work within asynchronous (online) instructional contexts than within synchronous ones.

As one informant put it succinctly, learner engagement in online versus F2F instructional settings is "in some ways vastly different, and in some ways vastly the same." On the other hand, some informants who had the experience of simultaneously teaching both undergraduate- and graduate-level online courses perceived there to be significant differences between these two groups of learners in terms of "intentionality" with regard to online engagement.

Teacher Performance Gap Analysis. A "gap" in this context refers to the distance between the way things are and the way things could be, and represents both problems and opportunities. Examining the gap between current and desired performance can highlight—often in concrete terms—issues that would otherwise be obscured, thus serving as an instigator of action, steering us towards projects or programs to change the status quo. Gap analysis can help us find ways to improve personal and institutional performance, not so much by telling us what to do, but rather by characterizing the measures we can use to define success (Watkins et al., 2012).

Within the context of this study, this exercise was not conducted under the assumption that the informants' current performance was "bad" or lacking in any way, shape, or form—they were all highly qualified, competent, experienced, and respected professionals—but more with a view to

"taking the temperature" or "taking a snapshot in time" of their activities related to improving learner engagement in online courses in the aftermath of the most critical emergency remote teaching and "pandemic pedagogy" phase of the higher education system's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and trying to proactively figure out—as desired by the dean of the college in question—how to make their performance in this regard even more efficient and effective.

When asked the question "What measures have you been taking to improve learner engagement in your online courses?" during their interview—which was mirrored by the open-ended item "What measures are you taking to optimally engage students in your online courses?" within the online departmental survey mentioned in the *Study Description* section earlier in this article—informants' narratives in response largely spanned the following thematic areas:

- User-centric/friendly online course design—clear and consistent structure; easy and intuitive navigation; logically appropriate sequencing; and multiple media usage as in multiple encoding of information via text, images, animations, audio, video, etc.—to reduce learners' extrinsic cognitive load (see Sweller, 1988) and free up their mental capacity for reflection/engagement. Some informants reported incorporating the aforementioned elements while developing new or revised customized open/alternative textbooks funded by internal grants from the university libraries and the college's dean, and while developing new or revised online courses funded by similar grants from the university's distance and continuing education center—which also provided professional instructional design support during this process.
- Effective communication—Maintaining a reliable online presence via consistent communications such as Monday "welcome" and Friday "summation" emails, and constant monitoring of incoming student communications; being accessible and responsive to learners via multiple means of communication; providing prompt, positive reinforcement to learners when they actively participate/engage, and sincere accolades when they turn in particularly good work, along with sharing said work with their classmates as permitted; sending out frequent reminders to learners regarding the course calendar and forthcoming assignment deadlines; providing enrichment via periodic required 1:1 "check-in" meetings outside of the formal instructional context and/or offering optional "unstructured" 1:1 meetings; improving learners' sense of ownership over the instructional experience by adding student-originated/recommended content to the course curriculum; figuring out ways to make learners feel connected with the university campus and community even while taking courses via distance; and letting one's personality come through across distance (e.g., conducting creative "icebreaker" exercises centered around a variety of themes and using a variety of media).
- Employing multiple instructional strategies—both teacher- and learner-centered—to foster learner engagement by accommodating a wide variety of learning styles.
- Using assessment strategies that promote engagement—providing multiple opportunities for learners to express themselves in a variety of ways; employing "reflective" assignments that foster engagement by requiring creative, original, critical thinking rather than mere regurgitation of facts; employing frequent, "small" assignments with prompt grading instead of the usual "midterm exam and final project" approach; promoting social constructivist learning via plentiful opportunities for reflective, collegial peer review; and providing prompt, detailed, meaningful feedback on learner deliverables. Discussion boards featured frequently in informants' views regarding assessment, with some seeing

it as a "necessary evil" and others being loath to use them; one reported using them only to discuss "experiences" not "content" while another used them only to explore "application and transfer," which leads us to the next point...

- Meaningful transfer context (see Tessmer & Richey, 1997)—fostering learner engagement by ensuring all course-related tasks/assignments easily apply to real-world settings.
- Effective formative and summative evaluation—recognizing that the college's graduate students mostly tend to be highly skilled early/mid-career professional educators with valuable perspectives and feedback to share, and can therefore supplement the university's standard end-of-term course evaluations by soliciting additional learner feedback—in ways specifically tailored to elicit engagement-related data—via "pre-expectations" and mid-term surveys as well as by incorporating extra "customized" items into the end-of-term university-led surveys themselves; and whenever possible, making real-time course/instructional adjustments based upon learner comprehension and feedback/concerns.

Meanwhile, in order to ascertain the gap between the teachers' current and desired performance, informants were subsequently asked, "What additional measures do you think would be helpful for you to take in the future, in order to improve student engagement in your online courses?" during their interview—in response to which the following themes emerged:

- Improving their online course design—enhancements to visual appeal and navigation, making online learning platforms and materials more mobile-friendly—if they had enough time to do so.
- Creating high-quality customized media (e.g., illustrations, animations, videos) to support online learning modules, if they had enough time and support staff to do so.
- Scheduling social "check-in" time into course calendars—so long as they did not need to take away from "instructional" time to do so.
- Conducting periodic surveys and/or focus groups of learners—since engagement is a longitudinal phenomenon—if they had enough time and support staff to do so. This could help to ascertain what measures would improve learners' engagement, and to better understand the particular needs/contexts of today's increasingly "non-traditional" learner populations—starting with their basic orienting context (see Tessmer & Richey, 1997). For example, did they choose online learning because they truly learn better that way, or more out of a desire for convenience?

The reader will notice that each of the desired additional measures above features a certain caveat—teachers want to implement these measures, but are held back by lack of time; implementing some of these measures will also require institutional support. Most informants also mentioned lack of relevant knowledge and skills as a key impediment, and they cited basic questions related to effective online instructional design—How does one enable more "dynamic" reflective interaction with the mostly "static" learning materials at hand? How does one achieve that critical "balance" between asynchronous and synchronous instruction and learning activities within an online course?—to which they were having a difficult time finding answers.

Institutional Support Gap Analysis. Once again, within the context of this study, this exercise was not conducted under the assumption that the current efforts of the institution in question to

support the performance of its teachers with regard to optimizing learner engagement within their online courses was in any way unacceptably poor or lacking, but more with a view to—as desired by the dean of the college in question—proactively figuring out how to make said performance even more efficient and effective, now that the most critical emergency remote teaching and "pandemic pedagogy" phase of the institutional response to the COVID-19 pandemic appeared to be behind us.

When asked the question, "How does your institution currently support you in increasing student engagement in your online courses?" during their interview—which was mirrored by the open-ended item, "How does your institution currently support you in your efforts to better engage students in your online courses?" within the online departmental survey mentioned in the earlier *Study Description* section—informants' narratives in response were varied and contradictory, running the gamut from "plenty" to "hardly any," reflecting Czech writer Jaroslav Kalfař's observation that "Every person lives in a slightly different country than their neighbor."

At the unequivocally satisfied end of the spectrum were narrative and comments that acknowledged and praised the adequate-to-plentiful institutional provision of the following kinds of support:

- Educational/training/professional development opportunities and resources/materials from the university's dedicated centers for teaching and learning and for distance and continuing education, and from the college's office for research and external funding.
- Competent and helpful support staff at the college's technology and media services center and the university's information technology division.
- A noticeable culture of peer support within the college, with experienced online teachers sharing their course designs and materials with beginners.
- Competent graduate assistant teams to help with engaging students in larger (80-100 enrolled) undergraduate classes.
- Generous support and encouragement to attend high-quality educational technology conferences.
- Valuable internal grant funding from the university libraries and the college's dean to develop/revise customized open/alternative textbooks, and from the university's distance and continuing education center to develop/revise online courses with support from professional instructional designers.

Others were grateful what they saw as a suitably "light touch" approach from the institution, where individual teachers were entrusted to be able to appropriately self-direct their own learning and professional development instead of being subjected to compulsory instructional interventions—being "herded into mandatory training sessions and workshops whether or not I had any use for that training"—that some had endured at other institutions. They appreciated the professional freedom they were afforded by the institution: "It is left up to me, I can push it as far as I want, the only limits are my own time and energy." These teachers also acknowledged the availability of "just-in-time" help and support with regard to pedagogical and technological challenges:"I know help is always there if I need something," or "If I had a specific question, I know I could always find someone to ask in our building." As one informant put it succinctly, "I love the hands-off approach here, you get whatever you ask for…"

"But a lot of folks don't even know *what* to ask for!" countered another informant—one of a subset who wished for "more direction" when it came to professional development, for a more intentional push by the institution to get teachers "up to speed" and "on the same page" with regard to effective online instruction. This group provided feedback along the lines of "We [teachers] are willing to improve our [online teaching] performance, but we often do not know where to find appropriate help and support," or "[Our LMS] has so many apps integrated into it, but I do not use 90 percent of them because I have no idea what they do, what they are for!"

Finally, let us pivot to what some study informants felt were the two biggest obstacles impeding their ability to effectively engage their learners, constraints that might understandably require institutional- rather than individual-level efforts to suitably address:

- Lack of time—the notion that even if the institution were to provide an abundance of pedagogical and technological resources, teachers had precious little time to explore and take advantage of said resources. "Time is the enemy of the teacher," as one informant put it. A frequent gripe was that their teaching loads were much too heavy to leave them with sufficient time and energy to devote to improving the quality of their performance.
- Lack of motivation—or, more specifically, the lack of *extrinsic* motivation or incentives to improve teaching performance. There appeared to be a common perception that teaching excellence was not as prioritized and rewarded—in comparison to excellence in scholarly publication and grantsmanship—at Carnegie "R1" doctoral institutions such as this one. "[Student course evaluations] don't seem to matter very much so long as they aren't horrible," an informant lamented, while another felt that, when it came to teaching excellence, the institution offered "few sticks, and even fewer carrots"—drawing attention to the perception that faculty were not being recognized or held accountable for teaching the way they were for research.

This would be the appropriate time within this study report to briefly reexamine and reconnect with its basic intentions. As Watkins et al. (2012) explain, examining the differences between one's current achievements and one's desired accomplishments or the deficits between one's ambitions and one's current performance—what we have been referring to as "gaps" in this article, but are also commonly called "needs"—and using that information to make informed personal/professional decisions is a process known as "needs assessment" within the fields of instructional systems design (ISD), human performance technology (HPT), and others that specialize in the creation of performance solutions. This article has been consciously avoiding using the terms "needs" and "needs assessment" due to a widespread misinterpretation among the educated layperson community of what they mean within the human performance context. Watkins et al. (2012) clarify that "needs" do not include any mention or discussion of computers, training courses, incentives, or any other *techniques* used to achieve the desired results. In other words, "needs" are not synonymous with "wants," and a needs assessment is *not*—as commonly misunderstood—an exercise in merely generating a wish-list of demands from stakeholders.

That said, when asked the question, "What additional kinds of support could your institution provide you to help you increase student engagement in your online courses?" during their interview—which was mirrored by the open-ended item, "What additional kinds of support could your institution provide to help you in your efforts to better engage students in your online courses?" within the online departmental survey mentioned in the article's *Study Description*

section—informants' responses spanned the gamut from what might possibly be unattainable pipe dreams to more realistic, potentially actionable suggestions:

- Adjustments to the institutional culture—to empower teachers to better harness and leverage their collective intelligence by enabling a more cohesive and effective community of practice featuring enhanced levels of peer support and collaboration; and, to promote more widespread understanding of how enhancing learner engagement can help improve teaching effectiveness.
- Administrative measures—specifically aimed at improving teacher performance, such as focusing on measures to improve online teaching and learning rather than on "stuff that could just be in an email;" encouraging faculty who teach within the same specific program—say, a master of arts in teaching degree that is aimed at career-switching professionals—to come together to discuss and collaborate with regard to the particular learning needs and engagement styles of that specific learner demographic; providing more informal forums/opportunities for teachers to talk to each other about practice; and, arranging for more mentoring in andragogy—since "getting a Ph.D. or teaching K-12 doesn't magically make you an expert in adult ed."
- More institutional support in specific areas—more instructional/course "design" help in addition to the available technical support and tool-centric help; providing clear, user-friendly, aesthetic, institution-branded templates for creating online courses on the institution's chosen LMS platform; help with figuring out how to maximize the vast affordances of said LMS; help with designing and back-end programming self-paced interactive learning modules for online delivery; help with designing explicitly "mobile-learning-friendly" online courses; help with teaching learners with disabilities via distance; and, easier access to "just-in-time" learning.
- Additional incentives—freeing up time and energy for instructional quality improvement by reducing faculty teaching loads, which some informants perceived to be currently "too high for an R1 institution;" permitting sabbatical leave to also be used for "making design improvements to [one's] online courses" rather than restricting them to traditional research projects alone; and, allotting more weight to teaching excellence during annual performance evaluations and official reappointment/tenure/promotion decisions, including, for instance, creating a pathway for teachers to present the corpus of customized alternative textbooks they have written as "formal scholarly output" rather than have it "just count towards teaching."

Discussion

The previous section of this article presents a succinct, thematic synthesis of the views and perspectives of ten postsecondary teachers who were depth interviewed and 18 that participated in an online survey with regard to the issue of optimally engaging online learners in the aftermath of the most critical emergency remote teaching and "pandemic pedagogy" phase of the higher education system's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. An attempt has been made to emphasize the commonalities between the interviewed and surveyed teachers' experiential understandings and suggestions—of which there were many—but also to call attention to the myriad contrasts and contradictions therein. While mutually exclusive or opposing views and demands can be challenging for the institution to deal with, its administrators should take comfort in the remarkable absence of groupthink—where a cohesive group accepts a viewpoint

or conclusion that represents a perceived group consensus, whether or not group members believe it to be valid, correct, or optimal—among these teachers, given that its presence would reduce the efficiency of collective problem solving within said group (see Schmidt, 2023).

It must be recognized that, while all ten teachers interviewed as part of this study had varying lengths of experience and comfort with online teaching leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic, the wholesale move to emergency remote teaching and "pandemic pedagogy" in March of 2020, represented a seismic shift in the nature of their praxis and their professional identity itself. The transition was relatively seamless—with emphasis on the word "relatively" since the pandemic created a novel hierarchy of priorities, in which the most important thing was to make sure all stakeholders were doing well and surviving physically and mentally/emotionally—for courses that were already 100 percent online before March 2020. However, for those who were currently teaching mostly F2F or some combination of F2F and online, the wholesale shift overnight to emergency remote teaching was far more disruptive.

For instance, some of the teachers—and many of their students—were initially "leery about teaching and learning via [a popular videoconferencing platform] due to all the horror stories circulating about it." Meanwhile, prior to March 2020, learners often had a choice of whether they wanted to take a particular course F2F or online—since many courses had both online and F2F sections—but once the emergency remote teaching phase went into effect, they no longer had a choice of modality, which was discomforting to some. Both teachers and learners also had to consciously and rapidly grow out of the widely prevalent tendency to "sell online [learning] short"—pernicious deficit perceptions such as "F2F [instruction] is always better than online," or that online learning is only worth resorting to "if F2F [instruction] is not possible." Furthermore, as discussed in the previous section of this article, courses switching overnight from F2F to online delivery required all concerned parties to quickly attain much higher levels of trust and faith. Besides, teachers also had to deal with significant differences between undergraduate versus graduate students in terms of "intentionality" with regard to engaging within online instructional settings, as mentioned earlier.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to ascertain the current collective capacity of postsecondary teachers within a college of education at a large, Carnegie "R1" public university in the Midwestern United States to foster effective online student engagement in the aftermath of the most critical emergency remote teaching and "pandemic pedagogy" phase of the higher education system's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. An appropriately diverse group of said teachers were surveyed and interviewed in this regard as part of the study. In this new post pandemic era, teachers had to be able to competently foster student learning across varied instructional settings and modalities, and—depending on how the SARS-CoV-2 virus decided to behave in the foreseeable future—be able to quickly pivot between said settings and modalities as circumstances required. In this novel scenario with no pre-pandemic equivalent, the issue of being able to optimally engage learners within online settings became starkly foregrounded, inspiring the college's dean to proactively "take the pulse of the college" in this regard.

If there is to be one takeaway for institutional leaders from the findings of this study, it is that a "one-size-fits-all" approach to finding solutions would not be appropriate, given the clearly apparent diversity of individual informants' lived experiences, and of their current and desired performance with regard to optimizing learner engagement within their online courses. As Maslow (1966, p. 15) famously said, "...it is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail." This cognitive bias involving over-reliance on a familiar tool—"the law of the instrument"—can lead administrators to view every human performance problem as something that can be addressed via instruction/training, or—even worse, due to the generally steep potential opportunity costs involved—technology.

However, as one can tell from the scenario described in this study, this does not always hold true. Oftentimes the performance problem at hand cannot be addressed satisfactorily by yet more training. As this author tells learners in his educational technology and instructional design classes, no matter how good your curriculum design and instructional strategies might be, your students will not be able to display the performance you expect them to following instruction if the ambient air temperature in the classroom is at a 120°F—in this instance, a much more appropriate intervention would be proper climate control. Similarly, if your students are coming to class hungry or sleep-deprived, launching a 1:1 student laptop initiative will not magically make them better learners; rather, their performance might significantly improve after some food or nap-time. On the other hand, some performance gaps can genuinely be bridged via effective instruction, as is evident from some of the teachers' responses detailed in this study.

A suitable place to begin the process of figuring out the most appropriate slate of potential interventions would be for administrators to collaboratively work with teachers toward arriving at a collective, consensual definition—both conceptual and operational—of what "online student engagement" means within their specific institutional context. Once this significant step is accomplished, it would logically be feasible to commence work on systemically creating the optimal conditions to foster said engagement via training and/or other means as appropriate.

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