

# Teaching Culturally and Linguistically Diverse International Students in Open and/or Online Learning Environments: A Research Symposium

## Rethinking Online Education to Maximize Student Engagement

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### Abstract

*International students face many challenges associated with the differences in their linguistic and socio-cultural backgrounds, and those of the host culture. Scholars have used the concept of communities of practice to elaborate on possible ways to increase international students' engagement in learning and community. Participation in institutionally planned activities, and exploring networking opportunities in the community help these students build learning communities. In online education, however, the opportunities for participation in communities of practice can be burdensome. Adjustments of the course design and classroom activities are needed to increase the students' participation in communities of practice, which can facilitate the students' sense of belonging and identity construction. A set of guidelines are provided at two levels to increase students' involvement in online communities. First, the macro-level guidelines address course design considerations, and micro-level guidelines illustrate practical classroom activities.*

**Keywords:** international education, online education, SAMR model, identity development, student engagement

## **Introduction**

While students can learn about different cultures and experience different educational systems by doing international education, there are several challenges also associated with it. The international students may face challenges from a variety of issues, including adaptation to the new educational system, society, culture, and ways of learning. While gaining experience in a different culture and educational system are some of the benefits of international education, feeling isolated and disconnected from the community are some of the reported challenges (Banjong, 2015; Gillett-Swan, 2017; Mosanya, 2020).

## **Literature Review**

Many students can learn from their peers in their groups. In communities of practice, students collaborate to construct knowledge, form relationships, and build their identities (Merry & Orsmond, 2020; Rahimian, 2018). Online education can pose challenges for group-work activities and student engagement (Gillett-Swan, 2017). On the other hand, course content might become the focal point in online education, leaving the social and emotional components of education out of the equation (Suri, 2021). Therefore, one challenge to overcome, in online education, is engaging international students in group activities using collaborative communities of practice.

## **Methods**

An analytical literature review approach was used for this paper. After the pandemic of 2020 started forcing higher-educational institutions to move to online delivery of instruction, many instructors found various challenges while engaging students in classroom activities. Centres for teaching and learning at many universities and colleges were overwhelmed with many issues and challenges brought to them by the instructors. As an education-majored staff, I found myself in a privileged position of having the knowledge and skills to assist in the integration of online technologies in education. This paper is the result of getting together various educational models and theories through an analytical literature review. The main theories consulted for this paper were the concept of communities of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger, 1998) and its application to second language acquisition (Duff, 2010; Norton, 2013; Norton & Toohey, 2011), the Backward Design Model (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005), SAMR Model (Puentedura, 2014), and identity development theories (Norton, 2013; Rahimian, 2018).

## **Results**

The results of this analytical review show that heavy reliance on substitution of in-person education in an online environment can have negative impacts on students' opportunities to engage with each other and learn from each other. Heavy focus on substitution of in-person instruction with online instruction can decrease the opportunities for students to interact with each other in meaningful ways, which in turn decreases their chances of building communities of practice with their peers.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Overemphasis on the pedagogical content, which can be a by-product of heavy use of substitution for in-person instruction with online education, can decrease the students' opportunities to build communities of practice with their classmates. When students have fewer chances to build communities of practice, they are less likely to learn from each other and form knowledge in collaboration with their peers. In online education, we need to modify the course objectives to maximize the use of technological potentials in service of education. In doing so, we need to consider student engagement as one of the main considerations. When students are more engaged with each other for class activities, they have better chances of building communities with their classmates. When communities of learning are built, students can learn from each other and, together, form knowledge. Additionally, having access to communities of practice is crucial for students in general, and international students in particular, in order to develop their identities in the host culture (Norton, 2013; Rahimian, 2018).

After elaborating on some of the challenges of teaching international students in online education, I show how too much reliance on substitution of the course content in online education can become problematic. Applying the SAMR Model (Puentedura, 2014), combined with the Backward Design Model, I elaborate on how modifying classroom activities can help achieve the desired learning outcomes. There are different practical ways that can be used to maximize student engagement. Using different components of the SAMR model, beyond substitution to both, increase the student's engagement in class activities, and apply technology to its higher potentials in education. Modifying course outcomes and classroom activities can help increase student engagement, too. Another technique is using a two-way task approach, to project work, to increase student engagement. Two-way tasks are tasks in which participants need to share information to complete the task (Rahimian, 2013). In other words, tasks are not completable, without different pieces of information, held by different participants, until they are all put together. Applying the Backward Design Model (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) can help course designers and instructors to first redefine the course objectives to incorporate different components of the SAMR model, and then modify the course content and activities to be reflective of the new objectives.

Techniques to promote international students' engagement in classroom activities will be provided. These techniques will facilitate the creation of communities of practice, promote students' sense of belonging, and nurture their identity development. At the holistic level, the proposition is to create an alignment in the course development by using the Backward Design Model. For classroom-level guidelines, through examples, I will illustrate how to adjust learning outcomes to online education, transition delivery modes by using redefined course delivery techniques, and promote student engagement through group activities and projects, which require students' collaborations to finish the tasks.

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