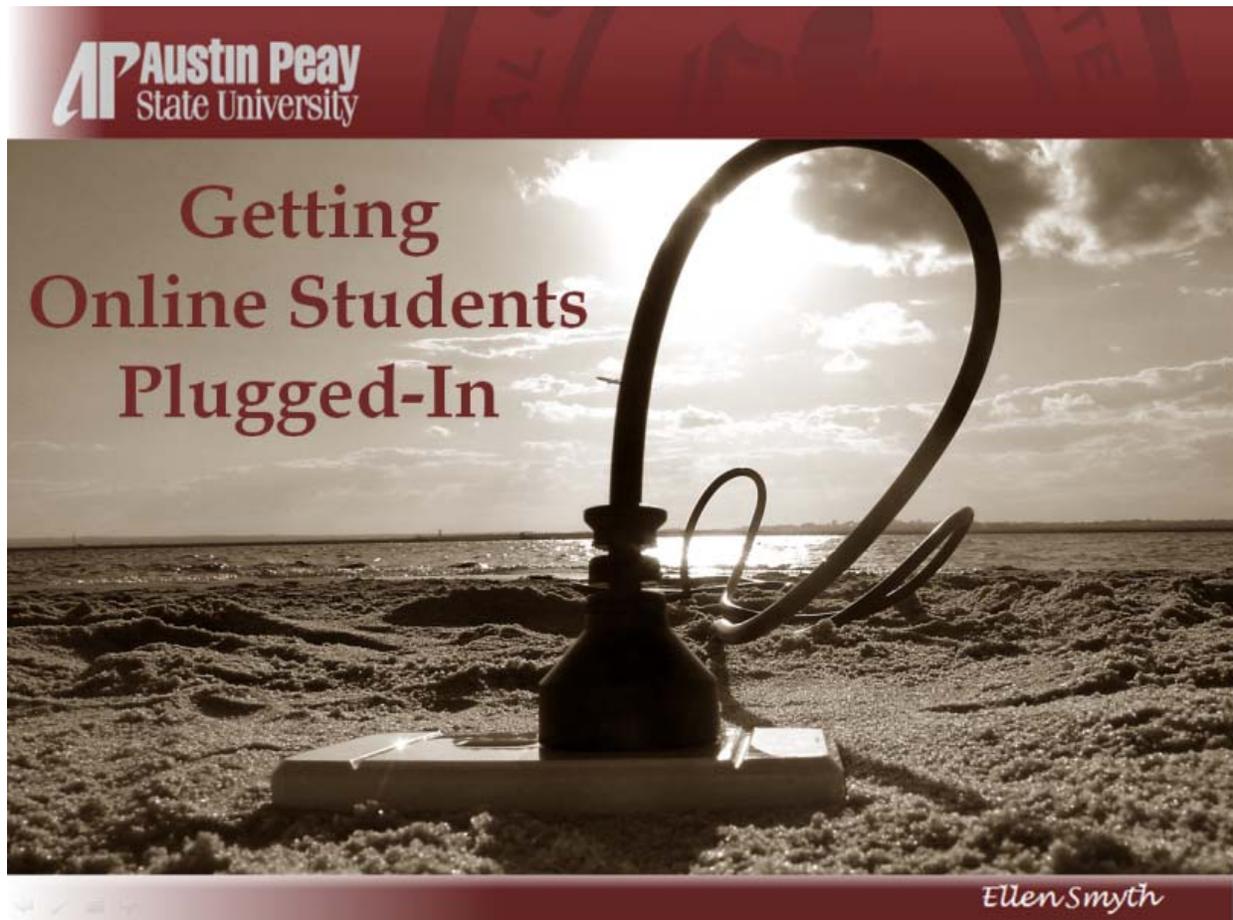# Getting Online Students Plugged-In
Engaging Students Online

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TxDLA 2010 Conference Breakout Session

Perhaps the greatest weakness in online education…

With current technologies and access, online education has so much to offer today's stay-at-home mother, soldier, or workforce employee. Earning a college degree while staying at home, staying at work, or travelling across the world has become commonplace. But there is one big hole….

We lose 20 to 50% in the first year, and 10 to 20% more than that in online courses.

-Frankola, 2001
-Diaz, 2002, via Herbert

Student Retention

Today's online programs are losing most of their students in the first year alone! Roughly one- to two-thirds of the entire class, 30% to 70%, will drop out in the very first year, well before that elusive online degree is even in sight. Why are we losing half our students in the first year?!

University of Phoenix graduates 16% overall and 4% online

Strayer graduates 14%

-NY Times
-Strayer

Graduation day, the Holy Grail of college life, is statistically improbable for the average online student to reach. Graduation rates for online colleges, universities and programs are, without a doubt, the lowest in the nation – abysmally low. Phoenix and Strayer are far from alone in their online rates. So how do we fix this retention and graduation crisis?

What do we do to keep students? How can we help our students find the Holy Grail?

The secret to keeping students is engaging students. Students who are actively engaged and excited about school rarely leave. Instructors and programs that engage have much higher success rates. Because it is easier to engage face-to-face, the brick and mortar students have that retention advantage, but we can try to close the engagement gap and jump start our online courses with a few key strategies.

If we want to help students make it to graduation, and we should, and if we know that engaging is germane to keeping students, then seeking ways to successfully engage students must be a high priority, especially in the virtual realms of education. So, what can we do? How do we, as professors, engage?
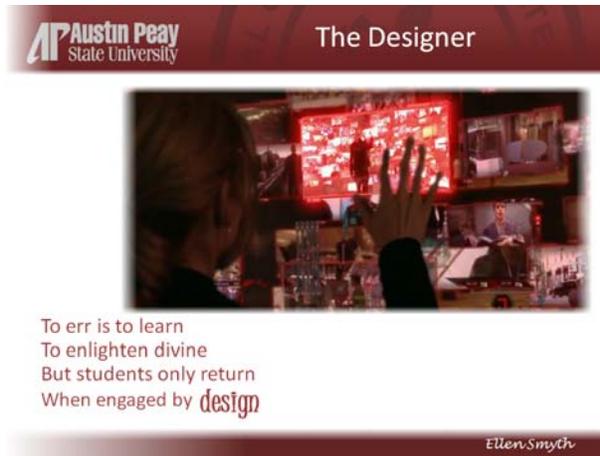

Online professors actually have two jobs: designing and facilitating. Both course design and facilitation can be optimized to foster engagement. We will explore key course design elements and facilitation strategies that will motivate and enliven our students.

When poorly designed, online courses can be extremely frustrating and difficult to maneuver, leaving students without clear instructions of where to start, where to go, what to do, and how to seek help. We lose countless students by design, but we can fix that!

One of the best ways to find design strategies that capture and motivate students is by turning the tables and imagining yourself as the student. What would you want to see? What would make your life the easiest? What would help you waste the least amount of time on course navigation and motivate you to spend the most amount of time learning the relevant course material? You are the student. What do you want to see?
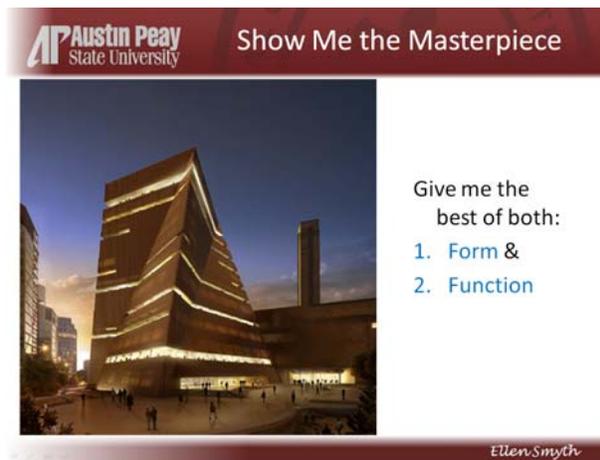

I'm an idealist, and I want the best of both worlds: give me a course that is beautiful, fun, easy to use, and useful. In all design from clothing to hair to architecture, good design is marked by a careful marriage of form and function. We want beauty, we want alluring, we want to be stimulated, and we also need to be practical, helpful, and useful. Our courses need to be both beautiful and practical, intriguing and useful, inspiring and helpful.
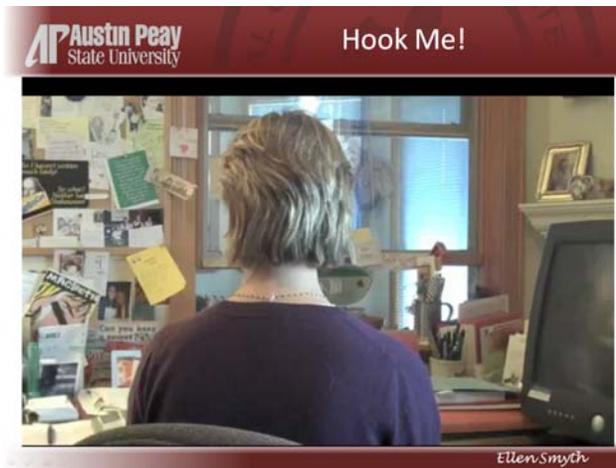
With songs, plays, movies, and books, you "gotta have a hook" to snag listeners, viewers, and readers and to keep 'em coming back. Even though online courses are more utilitarian in nature, hooking me with a warm and intriguing welcome message increases my chance of staying.
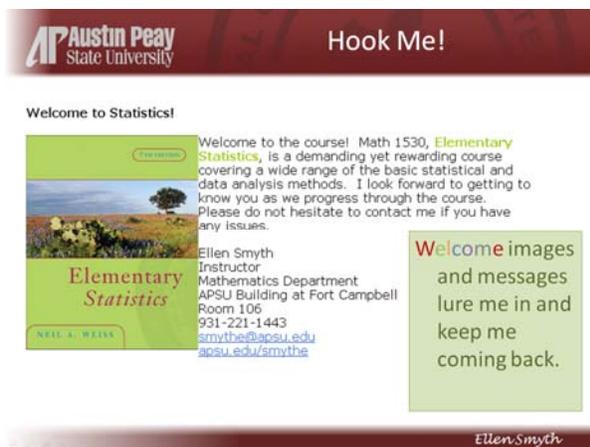
Welcome messages that contain images related to the course, such as a picture of the course text, make me feel wanted and appreciated and give me a great visual first impression for the course. These messages give help me identify with the course. Messages also set the tone and level of enthusiasm.

Most of us get driven away the first week because courses are just too hard to figure out. We are thrown in without knowing where to go, what to do, how to get around, and where our assignments are. We are sent on scavenger hunts just to find our assignments! And instructors expect us to read their minds! I need to be told, in clear, concise steps, what to do and where to go – first, second, third, and so on. An orientation video or post on the main first page would be wonderful!

Bless me, but I do have a very short attention span, and online learning is hard, especially if all we have to look at are black words on a white screen. I need more diversity. Give me a variety of pictures, videos, colors, podcasts, fonts and words. You will be surprised at how effectively pretty pictures and cool videos can wake a class up and make us pay attention and respond.

I'm overwhelmed by the gargantuan nature of the course and the work I will have to do. Break down information, tasks, and assignments into bite-sized bits I can easily digest, and I can better stay on task and know where I am supposed to be. Making me hunt all over the place to find what I need to be doing and where I need to be going is a great way to lose me.

On the other hand, a great way to keep me is to give me constant feedback on how I'm doing, so in designing lots of little modules with lots of little assignments, I have an opportunity to learn quickly from my mistakes and correct them as I get feedback from these assignments. And you will have constant feedback from me on how I'm doing in the course – telling you who is succeeding and who isn't, and doing so early enough to turn things around.

Even though I complain about group work, I'm be much more likely to stay in the course when I make a couple of friends and have people depending on me. I will open up more in small groups than a large class discussion board. Groups tie me to the course and to the school.

If you expect nothing from me then that is exactly what I'll give you. The more you expect from me, the higher your demands are, as long as they are reasonable, the better I will perform in class. The harder I have to work for a grade and the more I learn in a course, the more I will actually appreciate the course and feel that I've truly accomplished something.

Give me assignments that will have me reflect on what I'm learning and how I'm progressing so that I know the course has meaning and benefit to me personally. Not only will these sorts of exercises help me retain the material better, but they will make me care about the material more because I have related it to myself.
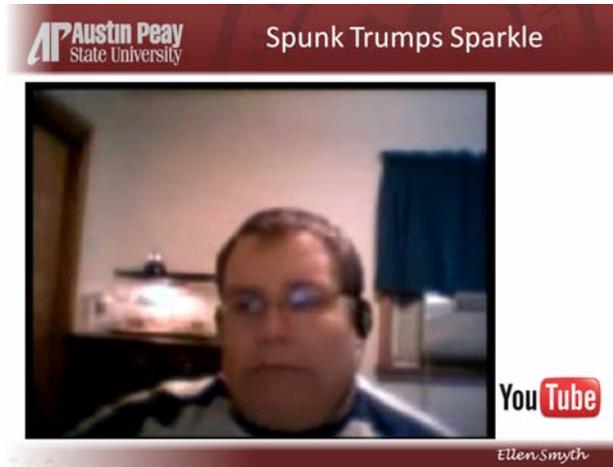
The Numa Numa guy on YouTube gathered a ginormous following by being insanely charismatic in his lip syncing of the Numa Numa song. He didn't have a decent camera, a fancy backdrop, or a unique message. But he did have tremendous enthusiasm.

The best way to get me excited about the course is to show me your enthusiasm. I'm not looking the savviest course ever – what I really want is someone who will show me their fanatical love for the course, the material, and the students. Show me how crazy you are about math, English, psychology, economics, and so on. Your love may just be contagious.
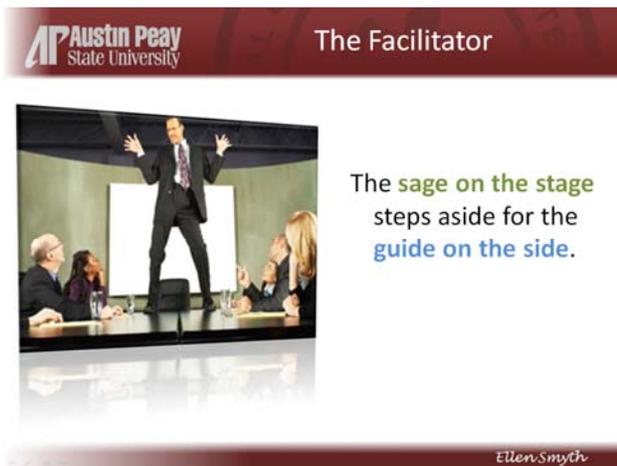
When moving from the classroom to the online course, instructors are often at a loss because the role is so very different. In the classroom, you are the lecturer and students are the audience. Online, the learning process is much more of a two way street with collaboration happening every step of the way. Even though short instructional videos are helpful, full out lectures are often not as effective online – the message gets lost in the virtual translation. Instead of lecturing, the online instructor is most beneficial as a guide to self-discovery: helping students learn how to learn and gently correcting and guiding when they are stuck. We are an aid, a resource, a support.
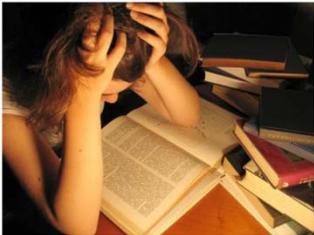
I know when instructors genuinely care about me, and I work harder in the courses where I am truly appreciated.

One of the most beloved online professors I've ever known used this as her secret: she acted as an academic cheerleader for her online students, constantly encouraging, reassuring, and giving advice. Sometimes all it takes to save a sinking student is a few kind words and putting your confidence in him and his abilities. Encouragement probably has more influence than anything else in keeping students.

In online courses, I am much more nervous about where I stand, how much I am learning, and how well I am doing in the course. Because I am figuring out assignments on my own, I need instant assurance that I have completed the assignment correctly. Also, when I have questions to ask the instructor, I want my questions answered that day. I need constant feedback. Feedback is the most common request/complaint from students in online courses because feedback is so essential.

Pester Me!

Email and call the moment I drop off.

Ellen Smyth

Most of us drop away without a word and without a good reason, other than the fact that we aren't self motivated enough. Often times, an email or a phone call will be enough to draw me back into the course. Knowing that my instructor cares enough to call me on the phone can make a huge impression and the difference in staying or leaving.

Know Me!

Get to know who I am, where I've come from, and what I'm like. I'm a real person.

Ellen Smyth

I know you can't see my face, but if I am just a number to you, then I have no accountability to you or the course. But if you take the time to know my name, know who I am, I will not slip away easily. And even when I do leave, I'm much more likely to come back to the teacher who cared enough to know me, even in an online class.

Befriend Me!

I'll tell friends things I would never tell professors.

I'll be much more likely to stay in class and in school if I have one faculty friend.

Ellen Smyth

Statistically speaking, I'm much more likely to stay if I have made a friend of at least one professor. I will have someone to go talk to when things get tough, someone counting on me to do well and succeed, and someone to be proud of me when I do. I will have someone to get advice from when I think I'm out of options. And what do you get in return? I will tell you the secrets of what you did well in the course and what didn't work so well. I will also tell you what the other professors are doing well and not so well. So you get the

inside scoop on the student's perspective, something you may have lost touch with.

If you can give me personal feedback on exactly what I am doing wrong and what I can do to get a better grade, I will listen. If you use my name when you respond, I know that you are talking exclusively to me instead of giving me a canned response. I will know you are watching, I will know you care, and I will work harder to fix my mistakes when I know exactly what they are.
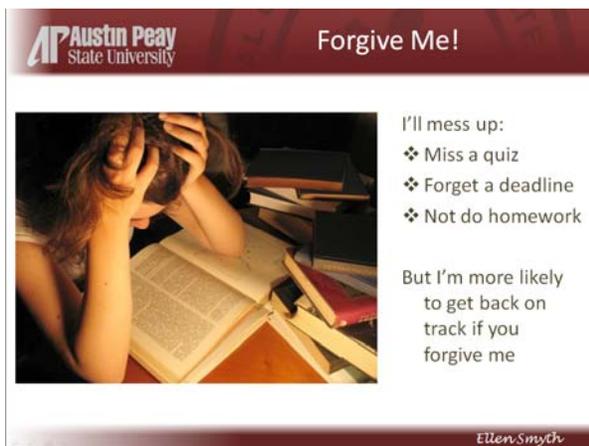
Online classes are a lot more responsibility than campus courses, and I know that it is very much my fault when I mess up. But most of the time, I will mess up. You don't have to give me another chance, of course. I don't deserve another chance. But if you do happen to be gracious enough to have mercy on me, I will be more likely to stay

in the course and finish.

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