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Motivating Autonomous Knowledge Exploration

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Structuring Autonomous Knowledge Exploration

Inspired by research on student motivation and autonomous learning, I created learning activities allowing students to choose learning paths with increasing freedom, while emphasizing core disciplinary skills and student learning outcomes (SLO).

In an online social history course, I emphasized high interest topics such as how sugar, coffee, and syphilis changed Europe. To understand these topics, students have to explore related but less scintillating topics.

For each topic students read an overview, spent 1-2 hours exploring sub-topics and reported what questions they had formed. Over a two-week period students then discussed their interests and explorations to find answers to their questions.

Adopting this practice

- Emphasize high-interest topics and/or activities within your course SLOs.
- Link these topics explicitly to core disciplinary skills.
- Provide choices for knowledge exploration from a variety of learning materials, including popular media curated for quality.
- Link knowledge exploration to low-stakes formative & higher stakes summative assessments.
- Communicate expectations, including minimum expectations.
- Emphasize that extra work results in more understanding.
- Connect learning topics/activities to students' co-curricular and extra-curricular interests.

Motivating Autonomous Knowledge Exploration

“Amazing”

- Student evaluation of a course using this approach



For more information go to
bit.ly/AutonomousExploration
Or this QR code

Challenges addressed

Students tend to be distracted by devices.

How can I harness this rather than fight it?

Research shows that providing choices increases student motivation.

How can I provide choices & focus on core SLOs?

Discussions in online courses need to engage.

How can I create a structure to motivate students to engage with learning materials and each other?

Evidence this benefits students

Discussion post length & quality increased

Length and quality of discussion posts increased compared to previous courses.

High quality submissions increased

More submissions before the deadline allowed me to create individualized interventions, resulting in resubmissions and a higher number of very high / high quality final submissions.

Positive course evaluations comments

Student commented very positively in anonymous evaluations.

Research on motivation

Scholarship on motivating online learners, neuroscience of learning, and Flow states help explain the positive outcome of my new method. See research references below.

Research

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