

# THE DIFFERENTIATED FEEDBACK FRAMEWORK: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF ONLINE ENGAGEMENT AND CREATING COMMUNITY

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*Realizing that after the COVID-19 pandemic learner and faculty engagement is even more critical to learning—as evidenced by ongoing declines in post-pandemic post-secondary enrollment—this paper presents a series of reflections and experiences from the perspective of a student and faculty member. These experiences are understood through an autoethnography, resulting in the creation of a feedback framework fostering community in online environments. Through self-study, critical reflection of educational theory with practice, and lived experiences, both the student and faculty member describe the formative steps leading to the adaptive creation and implementation of community in the online learning setting. The pandemic, coupled with an intentional shift to a new learning management system (LMS), underscored the criticality of adaptations in teaching and learning. The resulting framework is a model for emphasizing the connection between technology, community, and appreciative andragogy.*

**KEY WORDS:** engagement, community of inquiry, appreciative andragogy, course design

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The effects of the devastating appearance and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the educational world are still being revealed. The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2023) identified the continued post-pandemic decline in U.S. post-secondary enrollment sinking 1.11 million students compared to fall 2019. This is 5.8% below the levels of enrollment in 2019. The ongoing declines call for immediate action and the need for innovation, particularly in online education, is apparent (Moody, 2022; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2023). Moving beyond the focus of enrollment numbers, Moody (2022) contextualized that the urgency is exacerbated by the increase in inequities for minority students. Both students and faculty members were thrust into a new learning environment that many were unprepared to execute. What some considered a temporary ad hoc fix, in many cases has remained as sustained operational practice.

Although the modern generation of university students is accustomed to working online, the majority of learners have not experienced participating in all of their classes through remote instruction in place of traditional delivery. Therefore, there is an ever-present need to adapt,

modify, renew, and start anew. Educators must learn to connect with students through online conduits in ways that build community and trust. Even educators who previously taught online courses are forced to consider new ways to leverage technology while addressing the multiple personal and professional needs of learners.

## 2. BACKGROUND

Although the Internet has driven some of the most significant changes in the educational setting, the utilization of technology in this environment can be challenging. Thompson and Johnson (2023) noted that challenges range from overall institutional funding issues to faculty and student use and acceptance. While institutions of higher education continue to commit significant financial investments for instructional technology in the classrooms, these commitments also come with an expectation of improved learning, communication, and interaction (Merchan-Rodríguez & Zambrano-Vera, 2023; Thompson & Johnson, 2023).

Additionally, today's students are primarily the Net Generation (Huang & Wang, 2021), who expect technology to be used in learning and their instructors to exercise a sufficient level of proficiency using technology (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005; Rapanta et al., 2021). The question is not whether technologies will be utilized, but rather how best to integrate them into the learning experience. Problem solving, critical inquiry, creativity, authenticity, and collaboration were needed before the pandemic. Their demand has only become more pressing, requiring a new level of engagement, creativity, assessment, and consideration (Huang & Wang, 2021; Soland et al., 2013).

Universities expect diverse students (e.g., neurodiversity, cognitive diversity, etc.) to learn as well through a screen as with face-to-face instruction. This is not realistic. Many learners need closer attention to fully grasp concepts (Rapanta et al., 2021). In the same vein, Cole et al. (2014) and Palsole et al. (2021) noted that instructors face the challenge of a lack of experience in instructing diverse populations. Whether previously teaching online or in a hybrid setting, the challenge of preparing for a transition was experienced at all levels at the beginning of the pandemic. The unstable nature of the global situation transpired similar feelings in the academic setting. As we navigate through this time of uncertainty and instructional change, the challenge to increase engagement in the virtual classroom remains the main priority in order to satisfy the needs of all students. According to Thompson and Johnson (2023), even today engagement remains a major concern, as demonstrated through its presence on end-of-course surveys and institutional professional development plans.

### 2.1 The Race to Transition

The COVID-19 pandemic's urgency seemed to accelerate overnight as the call for action appeared during the traditional spring break period. The anticipated restful vacation was brusquely disrupted, resulting in a series of ad hoc strategy meetings and mobilization not seen since the 9/11 aftermath. While scheduling extensions were made, educators and staff throughout institutions were engaged in transitional actions to address the unknown consequences of the pandemic and the lockdown timeframes.

The recent decision to use Canvas for current and upcoming courses seemed to be an imminent concern. While best or acceptable practices for online education were known, the focus centered on the immediate transition of content as the priority. This action in itself reflected remote education, not the engaging student-centered approach of most online learning experiences. The transition was to permit instructors to continue their content delivery and live course actions in an online method without much disruption to the faculty member or learner.

Recognizing the need for audio and visual resources, a baseline for standard equipment and usage protocols emerged. Terms such as we don't need to reinvent the wheel and we have never done it that way were frequently employed by faculty and staff alike. This mindset promoted the reapplication of existing multi-media components for the new virtual format. Mediasite, Zoom platforms, and other audiovisual repositories were utilized for this purpose. The critical question from practitioners was how to convert and provide learner access within the Canvas platform. The reliability and quality of these issues were of paramount importance (King, 2016). According to related research and practice, the mere presence of these elements within a course did not automatically justify their appropriateness (Chernosky et al., 2019).

While the dominant use of mobile devices was a form of communication (Lai, 2020), the usage also provided an avenue for academic dishonesty and cheating on exams. Most faculty members new to online teaching were not aptly open to the use of mobile devices due to the time constraints and multiple steps needed to incorporate them.

Frequent fundamental faculty workshops ensued regarding the common tools. These were divided into multiple applications and pathways: Canvas, Blackboard, Zoom, and Google Classroom. While the introduction of skill refreshing for these platforms proved necessary relating to tasks, the essentials to effective learning and teaching practices remained a consistent concern. The transition required a change in mindset, which challenged existing practice and andragogy (Kaliisa & Picard, 2019).

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The authors of this article present the faculty and student viewpoints and reflections at a large Tier 1 research university in the southwestern United States during a worldwide pandemic. Autoethnography was used as the study's methodology. In this approach, the method is considered both a product and a process (Adams et al., 2022). Writers of this particular methodology often refer to epiphanies that arise during or shortly after intense situations (Bochner & Ellis, 1992; Couser, 2009). These intense situations result in reflections of the lingering memories, feelings, and images after the incident has occurred (Ellis et al., 2011). The COVID-19 pandemic is such an incident. The researchers usually, as in this case, do not live through an experience with the intention of research, but rather reflect in hindsight (Bruner, 1993; Freeman, 2004). The researchers may interview others and compile artifacts such as photographs, field notes, and recordings to assist in the recall (Delany, 2004; Goodall, 2006). Creswell (2013) noted the connection between the authors' personal narrative and the greater cultural impact of the story. The researchers reflected upon a few core questions:

- What impact did the COVID-19 pandemic have on faculty and students and our sense of learning?
- How could feedback and the concept of community affect the deficiencies in the learning experience?
- What practices could contribute to the success of online learners?
- What makes me the instructor that I am?

Data were collected through three methods: self-observation, field notes, and discussions. First, both the faculty member and student recorded the major feelings and recollections of activities during the teaching period of March 2020 to May 2022. At the time, no research study had been considered. Cooper and Lilyea (2022) noted that the reflections and recollections made during the initial recording may evolve over time and may change. Later, these memos were documented on a spreadsheet identifying major ideas and concepts. Field notes were constructed in a narrative along with the identification of educational artifacts. These artifacts—such as assessments, assignments, grades, texts between participants, and course Zoom transcripts—represented a rich source of data.

Initially, the data from the self-observations, field notes, and discussions were separate from one another. Later, through a robust discussion, a comparison of the sources was compiled simultaneously by the faculty member and student. Concepts and ideas were permitted to emerge and grow. This inductive approach encouraged the identification of perceptions, which formed the foundation for the new engagement model. The commonalities, known as codes, were compared through triangulation to the self-observations, field notes, and discussions. Ideas and concepts that emerged across the various sources were noted and highlighted. The codes produced themes that represented central concepts. These actions led to a greater understanding of a phenomenon (Patton, 2015).

The data analysis consisted of ordered steps. Tesch's eight steps of procedure were utilized for the collected data (Creswell, 2013):

1. Identify the major ideas by reading the data to visualize the entire scope.
2. One item at a time was selected to review and discover the potential meaning.
3. Develop a list of all topic areas and identify the clusters in columns.
4. Perform another review of the data and create abbreviated codes for the categories and codes.
5. Identify any interrelationships.
6. Alphabetize the final categories.
7. Produce one document containing the analysis.
8. If needed, recode the data.

This article outlines the unique perspectives of an educator's own experience in the discovery of ways to engage students who were not prepared for the transition to the online modality. Conversely, the perspective of a student who was confronted with this change and transition is addressed as well. The following sections describe the environment and offer contextual solutions used by the educator to build community within the virtual world by implementing a new model referenced as the differentiated feedback framework (DF2).

#### 4. TECHNOLOGY BARRIERS

Over three years after the COVID-19 pandemic, certain barriers have formed preventing optimal engagement in remote learning, ranging from the expected technical difficulties to a lack of socialization among students. Concurrent with these events, the utilization of an online meeting communication platform, Zoom, was being leveraged for new purposes. Considering the months of February to April 2020, there was a dramatic increase from 10 to 200 million daily users. What may have been previously considered an infrequent, user-friendly tool for educational and business organizations quickly became a staple (Kominers et al., 2020). Issues started before the first day of classes since more preparation was required for students to properly participate in remote learning.

Students' attention was focused on both physical requirements, such as a microphone and camera for Zoom sessions, as well as increased mental preparation to encounter fellow students and faculty in this newly created environment. Learners who struggled with online coursework were encouraged to make use of any help offered, including office hours with instructors or teaching assistants over Zoom. Since the platform was new for faculty members and students alike, technical difficulties were anticipated. Issues with volume or microphones prevented efficient questions and answers, and the Zoom chat feature was slow and not optimal. However, all students had access to the chat, allowing for some form of communication between them.

Both students and instructors needed to become familiar with particular features of the Zoom platform, including the share screen option and breakout rooms. The former allowed instructors to share slides or other content and had additional features for sharing parts of a screen, video or audio only, and other advanced options. Breakout rooms caused confusion and did not encourage participation as well as expected. While instructors struggled to create the virtual rooms, students found themselves alone with their peers, some more willing to engage than others. Although the feature intended to promote discussion on a more personal level, students could remain inactive with their cameras and microphone turned off. Nonetheless, instructors were able to join any breakout room by choice or if requested by a student. However, depending on class size, not all rooms could be managed, making them ineffective under many circumstances. Zoom offered a way to innovate learning, providing universities with a method to continue education while in a difficult situation. Despite the opportunities created, barriers to success formed due to the nature of the technology, causing problems typically not seen in traditional classrooms.

## 5. AVAILABLE ACADEMIC RESOURCES

Further into the year, technology became easier to manage with fewer technical difficulties beyond the first few classes. However, more issues emerged as others faded. Virtual replacements for in-person activities did not meet the same level of success or engagement for many reasons. With less communication between students and their instructors, expectations were less transparent, only fueling the confusion already established by remote learning. It was noted that some students did not learn well online. These students required additional attention to make the most of their education and meet minimal expectations. Various resources made available to students included one-on-one office hour sessions with instructors or teaching assistants, meetings with advisors, and on-campus tutoring, to name a few. Pushed online due to the spread of the virus, these options for communication were less accessible and convenient for students to use. However, office hours allowed time to interact with an instructor and ask specific questions about course materials. Remotely offered on Zoom, students found themselves entering virtual waiting rooms, where each student had a chance to meet with the instructor in their virtual office space. According to Lowenthal et al. (2017), students generally found virtual office hours helpful, and wished for the opportunity to be more standard in remote education. Although the experiences were mostly positive, the technological barrier still existed, with some students struggling to connect to Zoom. While academic resources were no longer efficient in helping students, office hours allowed for a stronger level of engagement since instructors and teaching assistants could work more closely with anyone needing assistance.

## 6. SYNCHRONOUS VERSUS ASYNCHRONOUS

Before the start of remote learning due to COVID-19, web-based, asynchronous courses were already offered for those choosing to enroll. The format of these courses varied, but no official meeting times were given. This mode of instruction experienced the least amount of change in the shift to remote learning, acting as a model for the rest. Students with experience in asynchronous courses had an upper hand during the move online. Students who were more familiar with the format experienced an increased opportunity for success in the class. Often, in-person synchronous courses with highly restricted scheduling options struggled to accommodate the differentiated needs of the students. The commitment to online learning was a more demanding endeavor, requiring students to log in through Zoom as if they were attending in person. The flexibility of asynchronous courses created accessibility and convenience, with students working on their own schedules and at their own pace.

In an ideal world, this could be an optimal mode of instruction for remote and web-based learning. In actuality, an asynchronous format alone would not work well for a diverse population of students (Nordmann et al., 2020). This is the appeal of a more interactive model, where students can ask questions and receive feedback in real time without the health risk. Synchronous courses online act as hybrids of the familiar in-person and web-based deliveries; attempting to provide a personal, comprehensive learning experience in a remote environment. Still, the format struggles to meet the expectations of students, hindering engagement and success in the classroom.

## 7. THE BEGINNING OF HYBRID COURSES

As the United States grew more familiar with the existence and precautions of COVID-19, universities prompted a return to campus with a new plan of action. To prevent excessive risk, masks were required in the classroom, and courses were offered both in-person and online. This established a hybrid mode of delivery, with some students attending the more traditional face-to-face mode of delivery and others joining over Zoom.

More pressure was placed on instructors to teach in-person students safely while including virtual students with the expected provision of the same level of feedback and assistance. While instructors did their best to accommodate the virtual students, they ultimately could not replicate the traditional classroom in terms of inclusion and experience. Expectedly, students who remained online struggled more with engagement than in synchronous, web-based courses. Technical difficulties caused an issue once again since a microphone had to be used at a volume that worked for both in-person and online students, presentations needed to be visible to all, and questions or input from individuals on Zoom had to be heard in the classroom. Checking these boxes could waste class time depending on the instructor's knowledge of technology, the preparation of the physical classroom, and the capabilities of students at home. These factors contributed to the engagement barrier of students on both sides, although the virtual experience suffered more.

Keeping track of a schedule was complicated for students. This stress intensified depending on how a course was offered: some courses could be strictly remote; others could have a percentage of in-person students, with the remainder of students attending online; and some formed schedules giving all students a chance to participate in person without exceeding capacity. This last option caused more confusion than the others since students had to manage what days they would be attending in person or online. With a schedule of four or more classes, this demand intensified the stress created by normal responsibilities in addition to the engagement issues already formed by the remote format. Time management was even more necessary to succeed, and students had to cope with an unfamiliar form of instruction.

## 8. COMPLICATIONS WITH ASSIGNMENTS

Remote learning offered new challenges that affected the successful completion of courses. Starting with the syllabus, classes were set up to various extents, some less detailed than others. While the concept and practice of transparency were highlighted, the expectations of students dramatically increased. Students were confronted with a new level of responsibility while encountering staggered due dates within the week and vague rubrics that confused more than clarified expectations. Contact between students and instructors decreased a significant amount in the transition to remote learning; therefore, the process of receiving answers to questions became lengthier. Some instructors preferred students to contact them through email, while others opted for a conversation on other platforms, such as Piazza or the Canvas learning management system (LMS). This made clarification even less straightforward and pushed some students to make contact with each other through platforms such as GroupMe—creating more opportunities for cheating and collusion. Discussion boards worked to combat

these issues with an instructor-managed forum, where students could ask questions, write information, and reply to peers. Proving to be a useful alternative to face-to-face class discussions, these platforms acted as a medium to connect students and their instructors without a traditional classroom setting.

Although discussion boards offered a form of engagement, other barriers to student success hindered the proper completion of assignments in many situations. In both synchronous and asynchronous courses directions and rubrics lacked clarity, adding to the confusion, prompting avoidable questions, and slowing the time to complete an assignment. Without detailed directions, multiple students would ask similar questions, forcing the instructor to make an announcement to prevent repeating the same information to individuals. Due dates were pushed back, assignments were completed incorrectly, and expectations were not met. The new form of education created due to the pandemic required detail and direction in order to succeed. Unfortunately, the need for this level of preparation was not foreseen, leading to problems throughout these first few unprecedented semesters. Another issue with discussion boards is the lack of real interaction between students. Participation in face-to-face courses allows for collaboration between students on multiple levels, which is highly correlated to a sense of community (Chatterjee & Correia, 2020). However, in practice, discussion boards do not provide the same levels of interaction. This lack of community could hinder engagement in the classroom and negatively impact student success and satisfaction.

Some courses require students to work together, whether for a singular project or throughout an entire semester. Expectedly, the Zoom classroom and online format would prevent this type of work from running smoothly. Since scheduling was difficult before the pandemic, the issue of coordinating times did not change as drastically as some other aspects of group work. Collaboration and communication suffered more since students could only work online and talk through group messaging or Zoom meetings. Assigning less group work could be a solution to this problem, but for some courses this would not be an option. Classes based around group work were forced to continue despite the situation, causing confusion and complications while completing assignments. Less group work or groups online do not allow for the social aspect of learning, preventing students from a more favorable environment.

Without an option to take tests in person, departments had to use outside utilities such as Honorlock and Lockdown Browser to monitor students while they tested online; courses that required more than multiple-choice questions had to create a way for students to upload their responses and work to be graded. This put more pressure on students in an already stressful testing environment and came with the technical issues associated with all aspects of the remote learning format. Although testing during this unprecedented time was not ideal, the alternatives established by the departments provided an opportunity to continue education and allowed for some sense of normalcy.

## **9. RELATED THEORIES AND LEARNING MODELS**

Adams et al. (2008) and Geng et al. (2019) emphasized the necessity of learners to engage in rich learning experiences that permit the sharing and creation of knowledge by the learner in the design of the educational event. The active involvement of the learner, content, and



educator is essential. The DF2 model emphasizes the inclusion of this engagement throughout the learning process not exclusive of feedback.

When employed in a distance learning environment, Nie and Lau (2010) and Mayer (2019) suggested the sound of a human voice can minimize the sense of isolation often felt in online courses. The application of the human voice coalesces with the need for human contact, the social presence evidenced in the community of inquiry (CoI) (Garrison, 2017), and the appreciative andragogy of feedback components (Amundsen et al., 2020; Cooperrider et al., 2017). The feedback components and posture represent a companion to strategies of a constructivist approach rooted in theories by seminal theorists such as Dewey, Piaget, and Vygotsky (Ng'ambi & Lombe, 2012). Learners' satisfaction tends to favor dialogues with human instructors coupled with opportunities for self-regulated learning (Al-Adwan et al., 2022; Paechter et al., 2010; Saint et al., 2022). O'Callaghan et al. (2015) identified flexibility, mobility, and a learner's ability to reduce cognitive load by controlling the pacing of information as key factors of student satisfaction. Learners can maintain control of their learning experience by regulating their cognitive load. This concept is further defined as the amount of information taken in and processed by learners in their working memory at a specific period of time or point in time (Buschman & Miller, 2022).

Additionally, the elements and employment of technology open new channels for communication and discovery. These new channels are reflective of connectivism. Voskoglou (2022) emphasized that connectivism, first identified by George Siemens in 2004, is an actionable knowledge approach that addresses knowledge outside of people. These multiple opportunities to connect with resources outside of the learner are essential to building community. Knowledge is regarded as a network and learning is the actual process of establishing new connections (Voskoglou, 2022). The DF2 framework initializes in a constructivist posture and then the learner transitions to connectivism as the community continues to grow.

In the Gray and Diloreto (2016) study, the nexuses between learner factors (for example, engagement, interaction, instructor presence, and course structure) were compared in relation to students' perceptions of learning and satisfaction. The student learning and satisfaction in online learning environment, a new instrument, resulted from their study. The study employed 187 graduate student participants enrolled in an online educational leadership program at a regional teaching institution in the southeastern United States.

Some studies have found that when learners believed the eLearning system was useful, their overall satisfaction with the learning experience increased as well (Chen & Yao, 2016; Pangarso & Setyorini, 2023). Not surprisingly, results have indicated that learners want to exert less effort on learning the course navigational aspects and more time indwelled in the content of the actual course (Chen & Yao, 2016). Researchers have further asserted that students who become demotivated in the learning experience also become dissatisfied. Chen & Yao (2016) noted several elements that appeared to increase student satisfaction: schedule flexibility, discussion leading to community building, inquiry assignments, peer-to-peer engagements, and rapid feedback (Bourne et al., 2013; Crawley et al., 2014). Pangarso and

Setyorini (2023) and Cole et al. (2014) also concluded that interactions between students and instructors, as well as student-to-student interactions, realized increased satisfaction.

The research by Gray and Diloreto (2016) emphasized that activities reflective of intentional design and purpose, while being user friendly, were favorably received by the participants. This approval was also demonstrated with concise and understandable objectives and expectations. With a new assertion, Ralston-Berg et al. (2015) highlighted learners' preferences for a definitive course starting point and location. Understandable grading procedures and evaluation expectations were noted as well. While multimedia enhancements held the potential for increased satisfaction, these elements also needed relevance to the content and usefulness to the learner (Ralston-Berg et al., 2015). Interactions with instructors and each other increased both engagement and satisfaction (Ralston-Berg et al., 2015).

The Col affords several opportunities to increase student engagement, equity, and satisfaction (Garrison, 2017). Three presences (cognitive, teaching, and social) exist within the Col. These presences provide an umbrella approach to the various components that interact and engage in successful learning experiences. Additional research and teaching strategies based on this model are explored in the following sections.

## 10. SOCIAL PRESENCE

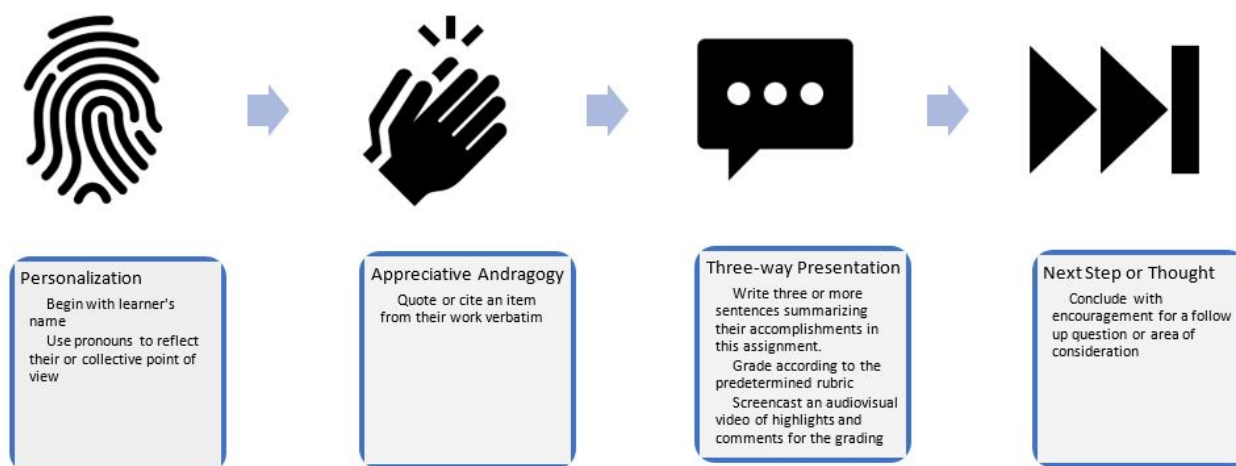
The importance of social connection, illustrated as social presence in the Col, is an essential component of a successful learning experience (Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2014; Norz et al., 2023). Farrell & Brunton (2020) emphasized the impact and need for a sense of belonging. This concept was identified as a structural influence of engagement. More specifically, Simmons et al. (2016) highlighted the importance of discussions utilizing text and synchronous audio discussions with the likelihood of a positive shift in learner satisfaction. A similar study of 3,546 students identified four indicators of social presence. Participation index, completion index, activity, size, and constraint can increase student satisfaction if addressed as a real-time model for continuous improvement (Norz et al., 2023). Rienties et al. (2015) asserted the importance of active learning strategies when 80% of 113,775 students indicated satisfaction with their courses containing elements of text and synchronous audio discussions. Vehicles for this engagement include texting, SnapChat, GroupMeet, Slack, Twitter, podcasting, and similar applications. Examples of synchronous discussions include WebEx, Blackboard Collaborate, Adobe Connect, and Zoom sessions. Social media platforms and multimedia examples are endless.

Fasso et al. (2014) discovered the importance of aligning technology, interactions, and outcomes and proposed a new online learning process, functions, performance, and outcomes (PFPO) design framework. While utilized for course design, its value could also be recognized as a tool for educator reflection focused on disciplinary knowledge, outcomes, and the design of learning materials, learner activities, and pedagogical approaches. If the Bloom (1956) taxonomy is combined with the Dettmer (2005) taxonomy, the result is a blending of the affective and cognitive domains of learning outcomes. The learners' metacognitive processes will be enhanced through the social software of a chosen community overlaid in the LMS. This increases the learners' mobility and flexibility. The PFPO framework embraces the user's

comfort with technology, but does not limit it to a singular institutional-based format. Communication, collaboration, cross-cultural competencies, and immersion into the authentic work/learning environment are incredibly liberating. The learning environment is especially important to first-generation students who encounter multiple distractors in their study environments (Palsole et al., 2021).

## 11. PRACTICING FEEDBACK AND SOCIAL PRESENCE

The DF2 emerged during the worldwide pandemic, and the authors' institutional transition to a new LMS. More specifically, the transition from the Blackboard to the Canvas LMS occurred at a large Tier 1 research university located in the southwestern United States. The unique opportunity created from unprecedented urgency was ripe for innovation. The DF2 is the exclusive creation of the authors based on research, educational experience, and student feedback. The framework is not dependent or connected to any one specific LMS. This new framework aims to enhance a sense of community among online students. The components of the framework are illustrated in Fig. 1. The framework leverages existing learning design factors coupled with the organic creation of a community in an online setting. Learning theory, relevant research on online learning, and teaching practices were combined with the Col, as well as the experiences, teaching, and design of an educator and student during the pandemic. These factors created a multi-faceted lens through which to address learning and teaching.



**Salutation with name + Positive student exemplar + Screen Cast of work and your auditory micrologue | coupled with example/personal reflection + Challenge/encouragement + Rubric = DF2**

**FIG. 1:** The differentiated feedback framework (DF2)

This educator implemented the components of this framework while teaching during the transitory period of the pandemic. However, due to the overall success of these components, this educator continues to utilize them today over three years later. The student evaluation satisfaction rating for this educator has consistently exceeded the university, college, and department ratings. These outcomes are exemplars reinforced by the Alamri et al. (2020) study of motivational factors identified in online higher education courses. The most notable result of the DF2 was a nomination of this educator for Campus Instructor of the Year and a first-place award for the faculty professional development poster contest.

The two factors, the CoI and teaching experience, overlapped to create an opportunity for innovative methods and strategies addressing the specific needs of the learner. The immediate need to transition existing face-to-face courses to a hybrid and/or fully online version appeared to overwhelm the technologies and educators alike. This situation forced an acute critique and reflection upon existing engagement models and the potential dissonance of learners in an online environment (Ng, 2021).

The need to engage learners face-to-face and in the virtual realm simultaneously was a consistent drain. Social distancing, masks, and touchless requirements threatened to significantly diminish creativity and engagement. The easiest and most frequent transition strategy was to simply record the live lectures while changing little else. However, andragogical tactics and technology came to the rescue. The resulting DF2 evolved with four components: personalization, appreciative andragogy, three-way feedback presentation, and the next step or thought.

The DF2 shares similarities with other online engagement frameworks. The trifecta of student engagement model identifies the need for interaction between the content, peers, and faculty (Leslie, 2020). The DF2 is both a constructivist and connectivist model since it views learning and teaching as social activities (Voskoglou, 2022). The model also blends andragogy and technology. This posture is reflective of the blending with pedagogical purpose model (Bosch, 2016). The visible presence of the faculty member is a critical element in the DF2, blending with pedagogical purpose, and CoI models. All of these models consider the course as a learning community. Like Anderson's online learning model, the DF2 asserts that self-paced models are not compatible with community-based online settings (Anderson, 2011).

The new DF2 model is unique in its application. Unlike current models and frameworks that address the concepts of engagement or community singularly, the new model's purpose is holistic. The model is considered both constructivist and connectivist. The model encourages the participation of everyone—students and faculty—in the creation of the learning experience. The interactions are free flowing, facilitative, and iterative with a continuous posture even beyond the set timeframe of the present course. At the same time, all components and interactions connect at nodes, thereby extending the networking capabilities. The potential connections are limitless and frequent. The active elements employed to implement the new model (i.e., personalization, appreciative andragogy, three-way feedback, and next thought or step) are innovative in their own right. However, when combined their impact is magnified. Each element is a catalyst for the others. The model should not be considered a magic formula or a series of checked boxes leading to compliance. Rather, the model should be employed as a holistic experience encountered by a community of learners without traditional limits of time and space.

## 11.1 Personalization

Realizing that the educational experience is both transactional and relational, personalization must initiate any engagement or interaction (Farrell & Brunton, 2020). Simply beginning a conversation with the student's name became a standard and was well received. Beginning all correspondence with the student's name as well as avoiding mass emails to all students

emerged as a best practice. Students receiving individualized correspondence responded promptly and addressed concerns with virtual conferences or phone calls as opposed to the traditional textual method common in online learning.

### 11.1.1 Needs Survey

This educator began courses with a needs survey for students to provide their personal preferences with respect to scheduling requirements for group work and instructor office hours. Additionally, a personalized video was created for each student as a welcome and segue to connect their personal or professional background with the instructor and course content. A similar individualized video was created for each student at the end of the course with the same components. While time consuming, these elements were positively noted in the course evaluations.

### 11.1.2 Groups and Coffee Chats

Following the findings of teamwork composition and value by Bell et al. (2018), rather than icebreakers, learners began courses by forming groups to solve problems with opportunities to discover personalities, strengths, and weaknesses. This replicated the real work world. The connectedness was maintained throughout the course with weekly coffee chats and audio podcasts. The coffee chat format invites students to relax and engage in a casual large group discussion about course content as well as everyday life stressors. Yes, this educator actually drinks coffee during discussions. The format creates a semi-structured social event for the open exchange of ideas and learning.

### 11.1.3 Podcasts

The additional audio podcast is considered a supplementary technology component for reinforcement learning. The course content is explained through the use of real-world experiences from the instructor's own life. The connection between the life experiences and course content forms a fertile platform for further discussions within the course in the following week.

## 11.2 Appreciative Andragogy

With a great degree of negativity surrounding the pandemic and the forced transition to online learning, the educator's role of placing the focus on positive accomplishments proved to be productive. The focus was identified both orally and in written feedback. Simply extracting a sentence or example of the student's correct understanding or assertion can be used to begin the written communication. For example, "Javier, you stated that the best approach to the leadership scenario can be found through servant leadership. I agree that ..." Using the student's own words can create validation (Amundsen et al., 2020). When this is followed by the instructor's opinion or evidence-based reference, the student's confidence can be enhanced and dialogue can emerge. The instructor's frequent comments in course discussion boards increased the instructional presence as well as added to the employment of critical thinking by students.

### 11.3 Three-Way Feedback Presentation

Some practitioners frequently reference learning styles as a matter of pedagogical importance, but few intentionally tailor interactions throughout the learning experience. Universal design for learning encourages multiple pathways for learners to achieve the expected outcomes while empowering students of all backgrounds (Kirwan, 2022; Rao & Meo, 2016). In the DF2, three feedback channels are utilized: a written summary of performance, a tiered rubric with measurable components, and an audio-visual element of the learners' work.

#### 11.3.1 Written Summary

A written summary proved helpful to provide an overview of the more in-depth feedback in the rubric and audio-visual component. Utilizing the tactic described in previously regarding appreciative andragogy (Amundsen et al., 2020), the instructor used three to four sentences tailored for each student. Each summary contained a salutation with the student's name, one to two sentences recognizing that student's effort, and an encouraging challenge or validation. For example:

Tena, I appreciated your effort on this week's assignment. Your references and robust discussion established a firm understanding of architectural styles in London. I challenge you to consider their applications to other cities, particularly Athens. How could they affect sustainability designs in the 21st century? Keep the momentum strong, Dr. St. John.

#### 11.3.2 Rubrics

Rubrics were created for every graded assignment. While students were instructed to read the assignment directions along with the rubrics, few did so. The rubric was used in the grading, which was provided to the students again at that time. This practice did reduce grading complaints and ambiguity, but it did not totally diminish them. The effort to create five various rubrics proved laborious at first. However, the development decreased the time required for the creation of new courses. Five basic rubrics were created for the following course elements: discussion board, written assignment, multimedia assignment, combination project containing written and multimedia elements, and a holistic version for all types of assignments.

#### 11.3.3 Audio-Visual Screencast

As a matter of practice, feedback for assignments was screencast in over 75% of the assignments. The audio feedback was synchronized by coordinating the pages of the assignment and visually highlighting key points along with the audio feedback. The personalization mentioned at the beginning of the DF2 emerges in this component as well. The audio feedback was typical for all assignments, for example, "Hello, Christina. This is Dr. St. John with feedback on your week three assignment. I appreciated your effort and the sharing of your experiences ..." Students remarked on the value found in hearing the instructor's voice and the depth of the feedback. The average feedback lasted for a timeframe of 4–15 minutes. Certain assignments, such as those needing individualized reteaching, proved beneficial for this tactic. Grading required more time, but was more enjoyable for the instructor since it

mimicked a live review, lecture, or office hour discussion. Learners responded well and utilized the complimentary stance to scaffold and reinforce future learning achievement. This intentionality produced an iterative model reflective of continuous improvement without sacrificing standards.

### 11.4 Next Step or Thought

Encouraging higher levels of thought can prove beneficial for students as they grow and focus on the needs of the workforce. The next step or thought emphasizes the application of this tactic in the written component of the three-way presentation component. However, this was not the only place for its usage. The challenge or validation statement(s) can be developed in the audio-visual feedback for assignments and/or the end-of-course personalized video for each student. Students frequently mentioned that the videos added a personalized touch, which made them feel like the instructor knew them and cared enough about them to take the time to create such a video. In an email correspondence, one student thanked the instructor for “being different enough to listen and different enough to care.”

The feedback and social presence as evidenced within the DF2 can enhance the social realm of online courses by humanizing the sometimes isolated virtual world (Mehta & Aguilera, 2020). The tactics create a unique and different learning environment. While innovative, the DF2 does have challenges. Not all students will embrace the new approach. Students may experience a type of cognitive overload when confronted with a model that is different from the status quo. The audio-visual feedback may not always address writing errors and their explanation with exacting clarity. In writing-intensive courses, extra steps may be needed. The utilization of a textual statement or the marker feature of the software to visually highlight the textual errors may be awkward but necessary. Overall, the four feedback channels may stress and overwhelm some students with too many options or suggestions (Conrad et al., 2022). The four feedback channels may not address the learning communication style of every learner. Language barriers, as well as learning challenges and exceptionalities, may represent a need for further study and adjustment. In practice, when all of the components of the framework are experienced holistically, learners responded favorably and welcomed additional communication.

## 12. RECOMMENDATIONS AND APPLICATIONS

This study reflected on the student and faculty perceptions of engagement in an online learning environment. More specifically, the creation of community was explored, which resulted in the DF2 model. The proposed DF2 model is not dependent on any particular LMS or conference platform. The implementation of the described strategies and tactics can be utilized with any LMS as well as learning modality. There is no doubt the transition to remote learning created stress and confusion in and out of the classroom. Addressing the issues can help to better prepare both students and instructors for a future in remote learning. However, this format is not a replacement for traditional delivery methods in the way that is hoped. In-person classes offer students instant feedback and promote engagement; something working behind a screen cannot produce under most present models. Making the most of resources

can lead to success remotely, although not all students will benefit from the consequential changes (Palsole et al., 2021).

Technical difficulties have the potential to be resolved through time and experience with the technology used in the classroom. The largest barrier is engagement, which allows for student success. We recognize that engagement is a major component of all formats of education and contributes greatly to student success. Promoting this factor in remote education is necessary; however, figuring out how to do so is a difficult task. Based on knowledge from four semesters of an alternative format of education, improvements can be made to better the experience for all. Effective communication is essential whether in the classroom or online. Improving the learning experience by starting a semester with a detailed syllabus and instructions for various assignments would prevent questions and confusion throughout the term. This is a major component in the success of instructors, since their competency in communication affects the understanding students have of course objectives and expectations. This deficiency is not the result of a singular action, but rather a series of missed opportunities to modify existing activities to a technology-enabled equivalent.

Faculty teaching online must combine static learning objects with real-time communication dispersed throughout the learning experience (Chernosky et al., 2021). This means not solely completing actions to satisfy weekly office hour requirements, but genuinely incorporating life events, research, and helpful resources. Feedback presents the optimal avenue for engagement since every student is expected to submit homework, assignments, and exams.

The utilization of the DF2 can be beneficial to faculty and learners. However, the framework is not meant to be an all-inclusive solution for social and communication dilemmas in online courses. It cannot be operated without the interaction of both learner and instructor. Delegation of responsibilities on either part would be detrimental. Rather, the model's successful implementation is one recognized approach that is birthed from necessity at the intersection of sound theory and practice. The framework emphasizes the continuous improvement approach to our collective educational lifelong experiences. As we move beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, our challenge as educators will be to promote flexibility and a dynamic community in online learning.

A classroom can be considered a group. Both students and instructors work to reach common goals: understanding the material and success in the course. In any group scenario, effective communication is necessary for productivity and completion of work. To improve communication, one must reduce uncertainty from the initial meeting onward—or, in this case, beyond the first few classes—with intentionality (Conrad et al., 2022; Neuliep, 2012). This consideration is important looking forward since effective communication leads to a connection between students and instructors; this connection is essential to promote engagement and success in the course.

## 12.1 Practices and Strategies

The usefulness of the DF2 can be demonstrated in numerous ways. Table 1 illustrates the specific practices, strategy explanations, and associated applications.



**TABLE 1: DF2 practices**

Practice	Strategy Explanation and Application
Create pre- and post-surveys using the K-W-L method	Identification of students' level of understanding of the topic, what is desired to be learned, and what was learned.
Familiarity	Create a survey to learn the student's preferred name, course and personal goals, availability for group work during the week, preferred time to engage faculty, technology comfort, and course impact/alignment with the learner's future plans.
Rubrics	Create four-level rubrics that outline writing, communication style, APA usage, leadership applications, and theoretical identification. Rubrics should be used as the grading tool before, during, and after the assignment.
Appreciative andragogy	Ensure that all correspondence, verbal or written, restates students' comments and contributions while coupled with a challenging statement that leads to higher-order thinking and critical response.
Community groups	Create a stable, consistent, and casual virtual space to visit with students. This can be referred to as a coffee chat, foundry, hangout, or meet up. The introduction of this strategy will eventually supplant traditional office hours. Encourage students to bring artifacts and open new topic areas extending the learning experience.
Problem-solving groups	In place of traditional ice breakers, students participate in groups aimed at solving real-world scenario-based problems.
One-on-one invitations	Build rapport and extend knowledge through open one-on-one mentoring discussions on the topics that individuals select. Do not structure or constrain these communications.
Audio-visual technology	Using screencasting technology to conduct a visual recording of the student's work along with the faculty's voice creates a personal element that can be comforting and engaging in the online environment. The instructor's comments can serve as mini-lectures to extend the learning.
Audio podcasts	These multimedia elements are provided both inside and outside of the LMS. Their purpose is to create a level of personalization and differentiation respective of learning styles/preferences and provide the human voice of the instructor. The podcasts can market the course, introduce new content, supplement assignments, or review content information.

Note: K-W-L is know, want-to-know, and learned.

### 13. CONCLUSIONS

Our continual self-reflection, both as educators and learners, will flourish with the intentional design of learning experiences. The DF2 is not a conclusive period surrounding feedback or community. The authors intend to continue its use and transformation considering the learners and learning environment. These processes have emerged from real-life teaching and will continue to evolve. The usage of the DF2 will manifest in a realized transition to exceed existing boundaries and thoughts regarding teaching and learning, where reflection, mistakes, and risks can be embraced. The real-world experiences presented in this paper provide

support for the adaptability, change in mindset, and the challenging of the traditional perceptions regarding online education, which have existed since its genesis. The posture should be one of guidance and adaptability progressing toward innovation and learner-centric design and engagement.

As stated previously, remote and hybrid learning methods are not replacements for traditional modes of delivery since they cannot mimic face-to-face interaction and ideal engagement levels. As a result of the remote learning experience, these newly established tools can be used to enhance education in the future. Although the format cannot replace in-person learning, it opens the doors for innovation with tools to improve the current system.

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