Cultivating Connections: Enhancing Student Engagement in Online Learning

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Teaching & Learning Day Winter 2025 – Cultivating Connections: Enhancing Student Engagement in Online Learning

by Ann Velez, the Teaching & Learning Centre

On February 25, 2025, the Teaching & Learning Centre hosted the Winter 2025 Teaching & Learning Day titled "Cultivating Connections: Enhancing Student Engagement in Online Learning."

With its fully online format, Teaching & Learning Day Winter 2025 was a tremendous success, with hundreds in attendance, including an excellent turnout from our Seneca community as well as guests attending from other Ontario colleges and Amity University in Dubai. We had Dr. Nidhi Sachdeva of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto delivered the keynote, "small bites = BIG GAINS: Harnessing Evidence-Based Microlearning to Boost Student Interaction," and held everyone's attention with her depth of knowledge and infectious enthusiasm for her subject.

Dr. Sachdeva started with a refresher on pedagogical principles. She reviewed Moore's levels of interaction and the idea that the core of knowledge building starts at the level of learner-to-content interaction, is expanded by discussions with others at the level of learner-to-learner interaction, and is guided and scaffolded by the instructor at the level of learner-to-instructor interaction. All the levels are interdependent and non-linear; the more deeply a student can engage with the content, the more significant their discussions with other learners can be and the more deeply they can learn from their instructor. Since the first level is essential to building knowledge which then contributes to the depth of interaction at other levels, it is imperative for instructors to design their course to maximize student engagement at the learner-to-content level. And that is where microlessons can be so useful and effective.

Microlessons are short, focused learning modules (or learning objects) that deliver a very specific piece of knowledge or information or teach a particular skill in a brief and concise

manner. The effectiveness of microlessons in imparting knowledge is based on longstanding research and evidence, and Dr. Sachdeva cited Barak Rosenshine's research and Principles of Instruction, along with other research on how learning happens including cognitive load, dual coding theory, retrieval practice, and distributed practice, to support and enhance the use of microlessons.

Some practical examples of how microlessons can be used in the online environment include the following:

- Short asynchronous quizzes to review previous content
- Brief explainer videos viewed asynchronously to impart concepts that will be built upon in discussion during class
- Focused interactive modules created on H5P or other microlearning platforms that can incorporate imparting knowledge as well as a quiz or review component.

Dr. Sachdeva recommended a number of professional texts for further information on microlessons as well as the newsletter The Science of Learning, which she co-edits with Dr. Jim Hewitt of OISE. Finally, she stressed a last important takeaway: microlessons should not add to teachers' already-heavy workloads. Rather, by designing or improving courses to include a purposeful use of microlessons, teachers can increase their efficiency while also improving their students' learning outcomes.

After the keynote, participants chose to attend 3 out of 18 workshops presented by their peers. Topics covered included

- reviewing pedagogical principles such as the Community of Inquiry, Universal Design for Learning, and Competency-Based Education and their application to the online environment;
- using specific apps or technologies to enhance online teaching such as Mentimeter, Adobe Express, Wix, voice AI, and Microsoft Copilot;
- sharing strategies for non-software-specific online teaching, such as how to create engaging online discussions, how to cultivate a sense of community in the online setting, how to encourage active online participation in class, and how to give constructive feedback on AI-facilitated assignments.

The participants also had time to play games and participate in draws, and the Teaching & Learning Centre was thrilled to give book prizes to five lucky winners!

For more information on the workshops and access to recordings and shared resources from the day, visit the Teaching & Learning Day Winter 2025 website.

Join us on April 29, 2025 for Teaching & Learning Day Spring 2025, in person at Newnham Campus! Want to present? Submit a Call for Proposal!



Header image adapted from ST.Art. (n.d.). [Illustration of people learning together online]. Retrieved March 5, 2025 from https://stock.adobe.com/images/people-connecting-together-learning-or-meeting-online-with-teleconference-video-conference-remote-working-on-laptop-computer-work-from-home-and-anywhere-new-normal-concept-vector-illustration/342077138

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