



# ENHANCING THE ONLINE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Strategies for increasing  
student engagement.

BY TARYN MARKS & RACHEL PURCELL

In an online educational learning environment—whether it is an academic law school course, a law firm training session, or a pro se seminar—it can be challenging to engage students and foster their contributions to exercises, demonstrations, and other activities. Fortunately, Bloom’s Taxonomy and the Dreyfus Model (described below) provide several techniques that can help motivate active participation by students. Using these theories as the basis for changing behavior in an online learning environment, we propose the use of several helpful tools and strategies, such as scaffolding, creating highly engaging assignments, and using live conferences and creative discussion boards, to increase student engagement. Our proposals are based on adaptations of successful in-person exercises that we have done in our own classrooms.

### Developing Skill Mastery: Bloom's Taxonomy and the Dreyfus Model

Benjamin Bloom first proposed the concept of mastery learning in 1968, and his ideas have since helped to change methods of instruction into the practices commonly used today. In mastery learning, instructors develop specific learning outcomes and objectives to teach students a subject, and then create assessments to measure whether students met those outcomes and objectives. Student learning should progress up from Bloom's Taxonomy, and instructors must design challenging curriculums to push students up the rungs of the Taxonomy, from the bottom (simply recitation of knowledge) to the top (the ability to apply knowledge in a flexible and fluid environment). By applying Bloom's Taxonomy to online legal research instruction, instructors can create confident student-researchers

---

The Dreyfus Model continues Bloom's examination of learning by explaining how a student's skill level moves from novice to expert.

who can address and accomplish any research task.

The Dreyfus Model continues Bloom's examination of learning by explaining how a student's skill level moves from novice to expert. The novice thinks in rigid, frequently fragmented terms, while the expert thinks creatively and holistically about the subject. Novice students envision new material in a simplistic way. Expert instructors must create projects that simultaneously teach the material and require students to apply previously learned material, pushing them to think beyond the novice level.

### Techniques to Encourage Student Engagement

Using this understanding of Bloom's Taxonomy and the Dreyfus Model, along with our experiences teaching in-person legal research, we make the following proposals for increasing student engagement in an online setting.

#### Scaffolding and Highly Engaging Assignments

In scaffolding, students are first taught the ideas behind a new concept. They then learn the individual components of a broad learning objective, and

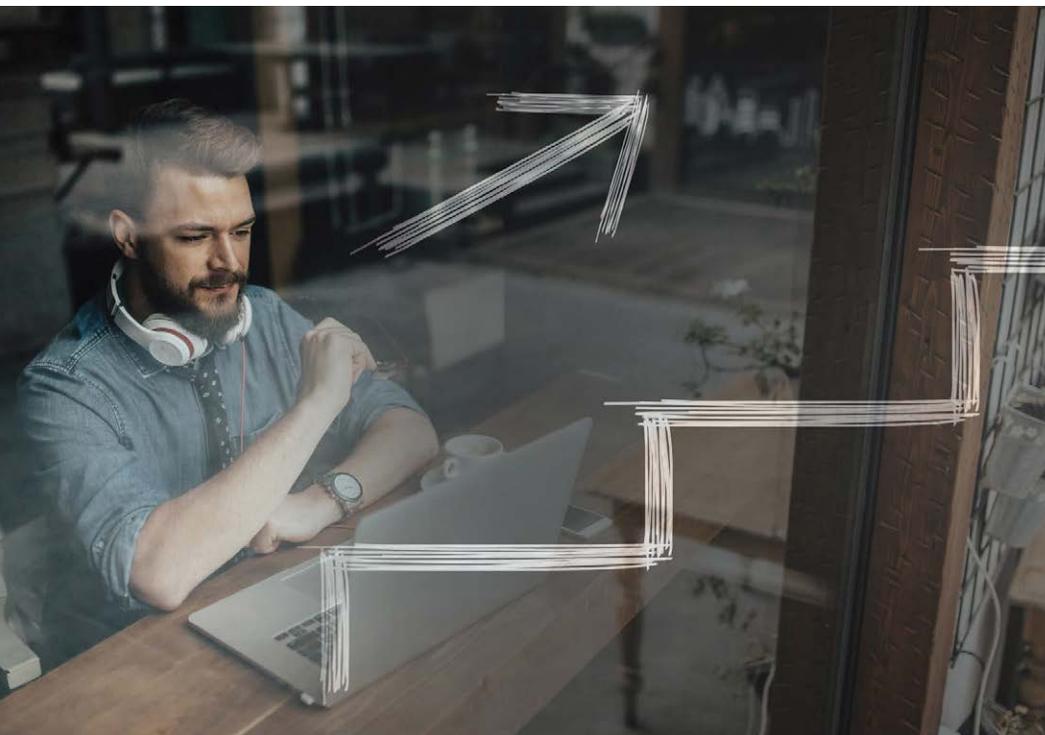
each successive lesson builds upon the knowledge learned in the previous lesson. In online legal research instruction, scaffolding can be used to create assignments that require the student to continue to apply the lessons of the first assignment to the second assignment, the lessons of the first and second to the third assignment, and so on. Scaffolding creates discrete goals for students, prevents them from initially being overwhelmed by the learning process, and allows us to steer students in the correct direction during each step of the process—all of which encourages student success.

For example, in our current in-person legal research class, we teach legal research based on a five-step process. Students are given five assignments over the course of the semester; each of the assignments focuses on one of the five steps, using the same hypothetical fact pattern for all five assignments. The first assignment requires students to create a research plan for the fact pattern; the second assignment has them locate secondary sources using their research plan; the third leads them to primary sources by having them revise their research plan and utilize the secondary sources found in the third assignment; the fourth has them use citators and updating tools that should ultimately lead them back to their original secondary and primary sources; and the fifth requires them to put everything together to provide an answer to the original fact pattern.

These assignments could easily be adapted to an online environment by either creating a short video to accompany each assignment, or by drafting the assignment to function as a detailed guide that walks the student through each phase of the assignment. Rather than relying on in-person lectures, the student would learn from the assignment itself.

#### Live Conferences

Research shows that face-to-face classroom interactions can increase learning. One way that a fully online course can reap the same benefits of live, face-to-face discussions is by using live



conferencing. Oftentimes, the lack of interaction, both emotional and cognitive, hinders engagement in online learning. Live conferencing builds a social network and a feeling of shared purpose among students. This sense of community can improve online discussions, teamwork, and most importantly, learning capacity. The benefits to students cannot be overstated. Further, many learning management systems have live conferencing capabilities, making it easier than ever to incorporate this technology into your online courses.

There are several ways in which an online course can incorporate live conferences as part of its curriculum. First, in the few days before an assignment due date, an instructor can set live conference times, allowing students to video in and discuss the material with each other, ask the instructor questions to clarify the assignment, and generally obtain the benefits of a study group prior to the assignment's submission date.

Similarly, after the assignment's due date, the instructor distributes an answer key and hosts a live conference for students to discuss their individual processes, analyze their mistakes with each other, and compare different results or answers. Live conferences should be facilitated by an instructor (or, if available, by a teaching assistant well-versed in the assignment) and should have between six and 10 students. Research indicates that live discussions work best with that number of students—enough to have sufficiently different viewpoints, but not so many that a quieter student can hide behind the others.

### Creatively and Effectively Using Discussion Boards

Discussion boards are a necessary evil of online courses: they try to simulate the in-person classroom environment in which students engage in thought-provoking, interesting dialogues. Research, however, (and our own personal experiences) indicates that trying to force students to use them effectively feels like pulling teeth.



Therefore, we offer a few suggestions. In developing these ideas, we relied on the highest tier on Bloom's Taxonomy, that of generating new content.

One possible use of discussion boards is to require students to take on the role of an instructor, or as the "expert" for a topic. In the last assignment of our legal research course, our students must develop, research, and answer a hypothetical fact pattern of their own choosing. We could modify this assignment by having students post to the discussion board and "teach" the class how to research their hypothetical.

Another possible discussion board could be a core competency question analysis board. At the end of the year, our 1Ls have to take a 40-question multiple-choice exam that addresses nine core competencies related to legal research (examples include reading and finding citations, using finding aids, Boolean search terms, etc.). By posting an extremely difficult question with several traps (one that would never be on the actual exam) and requiring students to wrestle through it, figure out the traps, and discuss how to attack this type of problem, the students become the experts on that issue.

Obviously, these are only a few examples of discussion boards. We hope that students will engage with discussion boards in a way where they actively create research content rather than having to respond to traditional "discussion board" questions.

Live conferencing builds a social network and a feeling of shared purpose among students. This sense of community can improve online discussions, teamwork, and most importantly, learning capacity.

### Continuing the Discussion of Online Learning

Encouraging online engagement in a learning environment is a constant battle. The physical distance between participants and the lack of live human interaction causes a natural detachment. Here, we have proposed a few suggestions for encouraging active online engagement, and we welcome any additional thoughts and new suggestions for the future. ■

#### READ

Rebecca Trammell's article "Improving Student Outcomes in Online Learning" on page 18.

Kurt Meyer's article "Teaching Legal Research to Today's Digital Natives," from the March/April 2017 issue of *AALL Spectrum* at [bit.ly/MA17Natives](http://bit.ly/MA17Natives).



**TARYN MARKS**  
**FACULTY SERVICES LIBRARIAN & PROFESSOR OF LEGAL RESEARCH**  
Lawton Chiles Legal Information Center  
University of Florida  
Gainesville, FL  
[tmarks@law.ufl.edu](mailto:tmarks@law.ufl.edu)

© 2018 BY TARYN MARKS



**RACHEL PURCELL**  
**INFORMATION MANAGEMENT LIBRARIAN**  
**PROFESSOR OF LEGAL RESEARCH**  
Lawton Chiles Legal Information Center  
University of Florida  
Gainesville, FL  
[purcell@law.ufl.edu](mailto:purcell@law.ufl.edu)

© 2018 BY RACHEL PURCELL