

Mindful Connection as Pedagogy: Designing an Institutional Framework for Enhancing Learners' Engagement in Online and Distance Learning

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Abstract

In the evolving landscape of education, especially in the realm of online and distance education, fostering meaningful connection is no longer a supplementary feature—it is central to learner's success. This paper argues that emotional connection and engagement are essential components in driving meaningful learning experiences. The paper, further presents a holistic and actionable framework that places mindful connection at the heart of the student journey, from pre-admission to alumni engagement. Analysing from global and Indian institutional practices, psychological insights, and on the basis of a decade of academic experience in online teaching, the authors of the research paper propose the framework for enhancing learners' engagement along with the touchpoints and strategies designed to address emotional, social, and academic disconnects. Through a multi-phase approach, the framework identifies how students can be made to feel seen, supported, and a part of the institution, even in the absence of physical classrooms.

The paper emphasizes the idea that institutional connection—when personalized and intentionally embedded—drives higher engagement, reduced attrition, and a sense of lifelong belonging. The authors conclude with practical recommendations for phased implementation, including faculty training, alumni integration, and system-wide accountability mechanisms.

The research ultimately positions student-centered connection as a strategic imperative in reimagining the future of online and distance learning.

KEYWORDS

Online and Distance Education, Learner Engagement, Mindful Connection, Emotional Belonging, Institutional Framework,

Introduction

The effectiveness of education done not depend solely on ‘What is Taught’, its rather more about ‘What is Learnt’. With this reality, something which can bridge the gap in teaching and learning is the connection present between student and teacher, student with other students and student with the institution at large. Connection can transform passive learning into active learning. Though learning is an intellectual process, its human process too. Therefore, any type of disconnection can result into the withdrawal of learning interest. On the other hand, due to presence of connection in teaching learning, all the stakeholders in the process feel emotionally connected, developing the sense of belongingness. Therefore, in education, having focused connection is not a matter of choice but it is highly essential.

If we look into the ancient education model of Gurukul system, we will realise that the central ideology of that education system itself was based on staying deeply connected in teaching learning journey. Gurukul, at its core was more than just a place of academics learning, it was the holistic collaborative learning, build on trust, interdependence, and emotional interactions possible through connection. Education should bring transformation in learner, which obviously not possible in isolation.

In case of school students and adult learner, there is one common thing observed in many psychological studies. All types of students flourish when they feel valued, heard and noticed.

Need of Connections in Online and Distance Education

If connection is so important in traditional, offline education, it has got more mindful role in online and distance education. In online education, due to the absence of physical presence, staying connected with your teachers, peers and the institution is more critical. The success of learning in online and distance education, completely depends on the connection felt and experienced by the learners.

Therefore, in online education this connection needs to be established and re-established again and again using multiple simple but effective exercises. This includes- caring voice by teachers during sessions, providing opportunity to stay connected with the peers through shared discussion, and involving or communicating all the students in all events of the institution. Further, encouraging and recognising the students' achievements helps to create a feeling of belongingness. In online and distance education the connection could be further cultivated through personalised learning, teachers' availability and visibility beyond lectures, strong and active Alumni network associated closely with the institution for multiple innovative and knowledge sharing programs.

In online and distance education, there should be intentionally designed system for developing the connection for geographically scattered learners. It is observed that due to this lack of connection, majority of the times the student engagement is not so high in the learning process. Therefore, instead of bringing real transformation, these online courses just become content.

The above justification concludes that the connection is a strategic priority for the institutions in online and distance education. It is as important as technology platforms, content and material shared and teaching learning and evaluation pedagogy. Therefore, these institutes should prioritise the investment in creating inclusive and mindful connections, to create learners who belong, trust and transform.

Higher education institutions across India and the globe are increasingly adopting thoughtful practices to nurture emotional engagement and a sense of belonging among learners in online and distance modes.

Indian institutions such as IGNOU, SCDL, and Amity Online have implemented various learner-centric approaches—ranging from regional meetups, mentorship circles, identity-building activities during orientation, live interactions and digital cultural programs. These efforts promote sustained connections between students and their institutions while addressing both academic and emotional needs.

Global universities like the University of Phoenix, The Open University (UK), and Southern New Hampshire University have established initiatives that prioritize student well-being and inclusive engagement. These include access to emotional support services, peer-buddy networks, faculty-led informal sessions, and recognition of personal milestones through social media or virtual celebrations.

These initiatives of institutions, demonstrate a global shift toward more human-centred distance education that values emotional connection as much as academic achievements.

Literature Review

1. Amanda Kassandrinou, Christina Angelaki [cangelaki@yahoo.com], Ilias Mavroidis [imavr@tee.gr], Hellenic Open University, School of Humanities [www.eap.gr], Patras, Greece (2014) published their paper titled ‘Transactional Distance Among Open University Students: How Does It Affect the Learning Process?’ in European Journal of Open, Distance and e-Learning Vol. 17 / No. 1 – 2014 DOI: 10.2478/eurodl-2014-0002. This study examines the presence of transactional distance among students, the factors affecting it, as well as the way it influences the learning process of students in a blended distance learning setting in Greece. The Study involved 112 postgraduate students of the Hellenic Open University (HOU). Qualitative research was conducted, using information collected via individual semi-structured interviews. Content analysis of the gathered information provided evidence regarding the existence of student-student transactional distance for several reasons, such as geographical and relatively limited face to face interaction. The role of the tutor as well as of the course provider were also examined in this respect. Finally, the study indicated that the

existence of perceived transactional distance among the students has a negative effect on their learning process.

2. Liangliang Xia 1, Lianghui Wang 2 (2024),* and Changqin Huang 2, in their study on 'Implementing a Social Presence-Based Teaching Strategy in Online Lecture Learning', which is published in Eur J Investing Health Psychology Educ, 2024 Sep 21;14(9):2580-2597. DOI: 10.3390/ejihpe14090170. Their research refers to the previous studies which are focused on the design of video lectures to improve students' social presence by enhancing instructor presence for learners in lecture-based online courses; however, there has been limited emphasis on the peer presence in which learning from video lectures takes place. The first objective of this study was to develop a social presence (SP)-based teaching strategy to design online learning activities aimed at improving students' social presence by providing social clues about peer presence and encouraging peer communication. The second objective was to compare students' social presence, social interaction, and academic performance from lecture-based online learning supported by either a conventional teaching strategy or an Social Presence-based teaching strategy. Using a quasi-experiment,

81 Chinese university students were selected to participate in a ten-week online course. The participants were randomly assigned to either an experimental group (EG) (N = 43) or a control group (CG) (N = 38). This study revealed that the Social Presence-based strategy enhanced EG members' social presence in online learning and that EG members achieved better academic performance than CG members. A significant correlation was found between the EG members' academic performance and their social presence. The researchers also identified more concentrated social network sociograms with more cohesive subgroups in the EG members' online interactions. The results indicate the necessity of applying an Social Presence-based teaching strategy in lecture-based online courses to promote students' social presence, social interaction, and academic performance.

Based on the extensive experience in online and distance learning, the justification given in the introduction and the literature review findings, the authors want to propose the detailed phase wise Framework for creating mindful connection in online and distance education.

The framework is based on few observations, by the authors while working with the online and distance education format for more than 10 years duration.

1. When students sense connection with their teachers, there is more possibility of engagement and open interaction.
2. There are many incidents of silent dropouts in online and distance education. The students drop out even without raising the concern for their disengagement. This mainly happens due to the lack of trust and connection either at institution level or at faculty level.
3. On the other hand, if faculty members know their learners personally, they can take continuous feedback on student's concerns, recommend resources, and adapt their teaching style to suite it for the different types of the student.
4. The students who feel emotional connection to their institution, are found connected with their institution beyond graduation. They found re-visiting their institutions frequently through strong alumni programs. They not only advocate the institution brand, but also re-enroll in other courses for further upskilling and reskilling in future.

Before giving the framework, authors want to share the touchpoints identified during their journey as a faculty member with online and distance institution. Touchpoints in this context refer to every interaction, whether small or big, especially during learners' association with the institute. For the sake of clear relevance, these touchpoints are categorised based on the below mentioned phases.

1. Pre-Admission Touchpoints
2. Admission & Onboarding Touchpoints
3. Academic Journey Touchpoints
4. Emotional support and Engagement Touchpoints
5. Administrative Support Touchpoints
6. Post Diploma & Alumni Touchpoints

I. Pre-Admission Touchpoints: these touchpoints should be designed to create easy access to the institute and courses details, enhancing the familiarity, building trust.

1. Reception/Customer care interaction- We all know that the first impression is last impression. When student is contacting the institute for the very first time, they interact either with receptionist or with customer care staff. Students experience during this conversation act as hygiene factor. Though this conversation may not be completely responsible for motivating the callers to take the admission, but it may certainly demotivate if not taken care. Therefore, the detailed training and review of their interactions is very important to deal positively with this touchpoint.
2. Institution Website & Program Pages – the website of the institute is the first virtual touchpoint. The philosophy of first impression also applies to the website. Therefore, the impact created by the institute website play significant role in creating that first impression for the students who visited the website with many expectations. The content, design and layout of the website should be such that the student can navigate to all the related pages without facing any problem. The webpages should include the multiple opportunities to interact either through chats, or strategically developed videos about the institutions, and other contact details.
3. Digital Brochures / Prospectus – should be downloadable even on Mobile and interactive versions of the same complement the student experience.
4. Online Webinars / Demo Classes – Hosted by senior faculty and alumni.
5. WhatsApp or Phone Counselling Support – Quick, responsive, and personalized assistance.
6. Email Campaigns with Success Stories – Featuring actual alumni of the program.
7. Instagram, LinkedIn & YouTube Videos – Behind-the-scenes campus culture, testimonials, and FAQs.
8. One-to-One Pre-admission Counselling Call – the exact student's learning needs should be understood and the relevant career advice to be given.

II. Admission & Onboarding Touchpoints- the purpose of these touchpoints should be to create the feeling of belongingness in the first interaction.

1. Welcome Email from the Director – With a message of pride and encouragement.
2. Digital Student Handbook – Includes academic calendar, LMS navigation, contact list.
3. Online Orientation Ceremony – Includes virtual campus tour and overview of program and teaching pedagogy.
4. Onboarding Checklist on LMS – Easy navigation to complete first-week activities.
5. Digital Welcome Card – Celebrating their entry into the institute family.
6. Know your mentor/Program co-ordinator- one session of mentor/program co-ordinators to strengthen their confidence in the institute selection.

III. Academic Journey Touchpoints: the purpose of these touchpoints should be to maintain the academic support, giving the clarity on learning and setting realistic evaluation system to know the real progress.

1. Weekly LMS Announcements – From faculty with updates and encouragement.
2. Live Interactive Sessions – Real-time engagement opportunities with professors.
3. Recorded Video Lectures – Available with note-taking tools and captions.
4. Assignment Reminders & Tips – Shared via app notifications or email.
5. Discussion Forums – Moderated by faculty, with peer-to-peer learning.
6. Midterm Survey – Collecting feedback on faculty, pace, and clarity.

IV. Emotional & Social Engagement Touchpoints: The objective of these touchpoints is to strengthen motivation, connection and creating opportunities for peer interaction.

1. Faculty informal Sessions – Non-academic, personal sharing sessions with professors. If faculty remember remembers the names and important details like which city the learner is from, where is working and in what position, using those details, while interacting or giving the examples can help the faculty member to make the strong bond with the student.

2. Student Achievement Wall on website – Featuring promotions, toppers or creative contributions by existing students.
3. Birthday and Festival Greetings on student mobile– Automated, yet warm and personalized.
4. Virtual Celebrations – virtual celebration of some important events like Independence Day, Diwali, Women's Day, etc.
5. Talent Showcases – platform to showcase the extracurricular talent like Poetry, music, or painting competitions held virtually.

V. Administrative & Support Touchpoints: to ensure the smooth Communication and single window system for various administrative formalities.

1. Automated Fee Reminders with Support Links – Polite, clear, and actionable.
2. Query Management Portal – Ticket-based system with resolution status.
3. Live Chat on Website or App – Real-time human or AI assistance.
4. Schedule of Exam Notifications – Calendar updates with SMS and email reminders.
5. Helpline Numbers for Tech Issues – For login, exam proctoring, etc.
6. End-of-Semester Feedback Collection – Use insights to refine the next cycle.

VI. Post Diploma/Degree Touchpoints: to Sustain belonging beyond the course and foster loyalty

1. Virtual Convocation or Certification Event – With music, alumni speakers, and director's message.
2. Thank You Note from Faculty or Mentor – Sent via email with a digital memento.
3. Alumni Wall on Website – Featuring career updates, quotes, and photos.
4. LinkedIn Alumni Endorsements – Recommendations given for active contributors.
5. Invitation to Join Alumni Network – With access to job boards or continued learning.
6. Guest Speaker Invitations – Alumni called to speak with current learners.

Framework for Mindful Connection and All-inclusive Engagement:

Preparations of integrating the institutional processes in the Framework.

1. Map touchpoints to each academic phase
2. Assign ownership to departments (e.g., Academic, Tech Support, Student Services)
3. Create facilities to use automation where possible (e.g., birthday emails, assignment reminders)
4. Personalise critical milestones (e.g., welcome, mentoring, farewells) to make each student feel that he is not just a database but he feels seen, supported and a part of the institution.

Below are further initiatives to be taken as a part of Framework.

1. Personalised Onboarding & Orientation to reduces anxiety and build familiarity and sense of belonging.

- Create and use a special welcome video from faculty and other staff to be sent to every student on the first day of that batch.
- The virtual tours of the campus and LMS could also add further to become one step closer to the institution.
- Identify the successful alumni from the recent batches (2-3 from each program); make their interactive videos about their incredible experience during their association with SCDL. Share these videos during the orientation as well as frequently during other events.
- During the student interaction with any teaching or not teaching staff, the inclusivity through language sensitivity can make a lot of difference. Use of few words of regional language is very simple but effective tool during the interactions, particularly in the online classes. But excessive use should definitely be avoided as it may be interpreted as less professional on broader landscape.

2. Faculty as facilitators and Mentors, Not Just Tutors- to Promotes holistic learning environment.

- Allocate faculty mentors/ Program co-ordinators to all programs.
- Prepare the schedule of Weekly/monthly informal non-academic interactions to discuss their experiences, suggestions and challenges.
- Faculty members can share additional inputs of the program related domain trends, career advice and other required skills through periodically scheduled bridge courses, webinars, career continuation programs.

3. Peer Bonding Opportunities – to feel connected with other similar co-learners going through the same experience.

- Virtual clubs like Specific domain specialisation club, case study discussion club, career advice and placement related clubs, etc for formal and informal discussions
- Group assignments or minor projects using tools like Google Docs.

4. Institute-Wide Engagement & Recognition- to create the sense of pride for being associated with the institute's legacy.

- To showcase of students' professional or academic achievements, announcement of important events, or special talents of students, the special issues of monthly or quarterly e-newsletters should be prepared and circulated to all the active students.
- T-Shirts with the institute names could be sent to every student and the students could be motivated to wear it while socialising in their cities or for institute events.
- At institute level the student councils or student clubs like, placement committee, e-newsletter committee, guest lectures committee, could be formed, with real responsibilities, irrespective of any program.
- An inspiring Anthem of the Institute, portraying institute's values and legacies could reinforce the collective mindset.
- Celebrate some important Indian and international cultural festivals, days of national pride like, independence day or republic day virtually, with teachers and students.

5. Use of Technology to Create Proximity – to Enhance and improve the virtual presence in a digital setting.

- Having the all-inclusive single user-friendly LMS for all interactions of academic and non-academic interactions.
- Interactive dashboards communicating progress and feedbacks.
- Learning analytics dashboards can be used to track: Student login frequency, Participation in forums, Video watch time, Responsiveness to feedback. These metrics help identify disengagement early and trigger intervention touchpoints. Learning analytics can be integrated to detect early signs of disengagement, enabling proactive outreach through personalized messages, or mentor support—thus restoring connection before dropouts occur.

6. Alumni Participation- to inspires students, build trust and positivity, give the realisation of challenges in their career journeys.

- Alumni could be frequently invited to speak in even day to day virtual classes as a surprise element to give guidance and practical tips to optimise the outcomes of their learning efforts.
- The network of alumni could be best used by allowing them to organise one grand event annually and small events either monthly or quarterly.

Recommendations for Implementation

While implementing the above framework the institutions can be flexible to accommodate changing requirements as per the institution format on the basis of types of programs delivered, scale of delivery, technology proficiency, etc, that too not everything in the same year but in a phased manner. By analysing their strengths and weaknesses, the institutions are free to decide the sequence and priority of the above tasks.

During implementations there would be lots of Challenges & Limitations which should be understood, evaluated and then resolved depending on its urgency, importance and relevance.

In the process of application of the framework, the continuous monitoring, evaluation and control is needed to sustain the improvements. The institute can form the separate core committee and the sub-committees to divide the work and create accountability. The frequency of these committee meeting could be decided by the core committee, depending upon the current phase of the framework. In the first phase, author advise the weekly meetings to keep the close controls on any deviation in the outcomes. In second phase the meeting could be either fortnightly or monthly and in the third phase quarterly meetings are suggested.

The training of academic and non-academic staff is equally crucial in this overall implementation phase. Detailed training and division of accountabilities and responsibilities should be clear and communicated to all concerned staff of the institution.

The participation of Alumni for the framework needs more strategic approach. They should not be just blindly invited to this game. All the necessary details, background, rationales and expectations from them should be clearly communicated to them. Their agreement of long-term association is the key in this process. Accordingly, the standard processes to be designed. The reciprocal benefits of this association should be clearly informed to the alumni.

Conclusion

As digital education continues to expand across boundaries, the need for institutions to move beyond transactional delivery toward transformational engagement has never been more urgent. This paper has argued that, building mindful connections is not merely desirable but essential in ensuring the emotional and academic success of online and distance learners. The proposed mindful engagement framework offers institutions a practical roadmap to build **emotional proximity and institutional trust**—from the first inquiry call to alumni reintegration. It serves as a strategic guide for institutions to develop personalized, inclusive, and sustainable engagement ecosystems.

Effective implementation of this framework requires systemic alignment, committed faculty members, empowered support teams, and clear communication with all stakeholders, especially

alumni. Ultimately, through these mindful, student-centred connections, the online and distance education institutions can truly bridge the distance and transform lives.

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