Teaching Through Engagement

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Section One: Teaching Through Engagement at Northcentral University

Northcentral University (NCU) uses a model of Teaching through Engagement (TTE). The goal is for all NCU students, faculty, and team members to be actively engaged in the University community. Engagement is more than just grading and giving feedback, it is an active relationship between faculty and student, a give and take of ideas and information which helps grow students from novices to experts.

Imagine for a moment that you are at a conference for your profession, and a colleague asks you to explain how Northcentral is able to provide a top-notch quality graduate education online and using the one-to-one model? How might you answer? How would you encapsulate all that we do, all that we are able to provide, in just a few short sentences? The goal of this guide is to give your insight into how our model, Teaching through Engagement (TTE), helps build the connection between faculty, students, and the university at large. It is hoped, by the time you reach the end of this guide, you will be able to summarize for yourself, and others, the effectiveness of our TTE model.

Our online format provides a unique environment for how our students and faculty can engage in learning together. Brick and mortar universities use the physical space of campus and classroom as a conduit for engagement. Faculty can meet students in hallways, on the quad, in the coffee shop. Faculty and students exist together in the same physical space, but in a virtual learning environment, engagement needs to look different. Some may posit that students seeking a degree from an online university are not as interested in connections to faculty and the broader university. But this does not seem to be the case. As our world becomes more interconnected using online platforms, there is not a decrease in the desire to share a connection with others. The rise of social media platforms like Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram are evidence that we can connect virtually even if we do not share a physical space. "We accomplish many of our communications and transactions via the Web without even noticing. As a result of this omnipresent feeling, we tend to want to be together with others even though we can't see them" (Lehman & Conceicao-Runlee, 2010, p.2). As a faculty member, it is essential to consider how you can harness our model of one-to-one teaching to provide an individualized

connection with students. Given that many faculty members teaching here at NCU may not have experience as an online learner, considerations on how to connect are particularly important. Faculty tend to teach how they were taught, and if this is the case, faculty may not have an online teaching benchmark to model (Schmidt, Tschida, & Hodge, 2016).

At NCU, engagement involves the idea of being "present" for students. Being present for students requires faculty to reimagine their role, moving from a more passive and quiet background presence to a more proactive and responsive partner in learning. Being an engaged faculty starts with understanding what engagement is and how faculty can proactively develop relationships with their students.

What is Engagement?

The term "engagement" implies a meeting of the minds, which is an apt metaphor because good teaching requires reaching beyond the assignment to the student's mind and heart. It is easy to fall into the trap of merely interacting with students by grading assignments. But the assignment is a product of the student's thinking, beliefs, understanding, skills, and emotions. We teach students, not assignments, and teaching requires improving student thinking.

"'Engagement is simultaneously about students' investment in educational activities and also about the intentional structuring and facilitation of students' involvement in enriching learning experiences" (Kinzie, 2010, p.140). Student engagement and faculty engagement are two sides of the same coin and are reciprocal in nature. From an institutional perspective, engagement can be understood as an overarching behavior which takes into consideration sociological, social networking, organizational, psychological, cultural, pedagogical and economic perspectives (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006). Zepke and Leach (2010) addressed engagement from this whole range of perspectives: for example, student agency and motivation, the way educators teach

and relate to their students, the roles of institutional structures and cultures, the socio-political context in which education and engagement take place and the impact on students of environmental factors such as family background and economic status.

In practice, this means viewing the student as on a growth trajectory, and the assignment as a measure of the student's progress on that trajectory.

> 66 **Instead of just grading one assignment after another, the instructor should focus on how they can help the student grow** 99

The assignment is a window into the student's thinking, and the instructor uses it to understand the deeper issues in student thinking that must be addressed for the student to develop expertise.

At NCU, the hope and expectation is that engagement is an authentic interaction that uses technology to facilitate genuine, systematic, and substantive dialogue before, during and after the creation and/or application of scholarship. Engagement can take many forms, but in this context, it specifically relates to interactions among faculty and students in either

faculty-to-student or student-to-student forums. Engagement requires faculty to think beyond the micro-level of a specific assignment and to focus on the path of the student, prior to, moving through, and even after the course the student is taking. In short, engagement is everything that happens before, during, and after the assignment submission from the student.

TTE is a philosophy that elevates the faculty/student dialogue from merely discussing the particulars of a single assignment, and instead helps faculty guide students along a path towards specific course and program learning outcomes and connects these outcomes to the career path of the individual student. TTE at Northcentral strives to be multifaceted and individualized for

each student. Faculty are asked to think more broadly about the lessons students should be learning from assignment to assignment. TTE is more than just the student experience of the assignments and materials and more than just the faculty experience of grading and giving feedback. It is the circular nature of the relationship between student contribution and faculty contribution. Swan (2001) looked at how faculty could help create the most engaging atmosphere in courses where there were varying levels] of student interaction with peers and with faculty and concluded that "interaction with instructors seemed to have a much larger effect on satisfaction and perceived learning than interaction with peers" (p. 322–323). This helps support the notion that our presence in the course room matters to the student. Since our students are not interacting with peers in a formal way, the need for a clear faculty "fingerprint" on the course is even more important.

Importance of Engagement

Northcentral University faculty are first, foremost, and deeply, teachers. The goal of all NCU faculty is to help our students grow and change, becoming experts in their field as a professional, practitioner, and scholar. Promoting engagement at NCU is an important part of NCU's long-term success and strategic plan. Every communication you make to a student is a form of teaching. Every communication moves a student closer or further from meeting his or her learning outcomes. Your level of interest in your students and course topics influence a student's motivation, sense of self, commitment to learning, and ultimately success in school.

Grading and correcting work is an important part of our job because it is one way we can help students transform into scholars. However, it is only one part of the bigger job we have—that of engagement with the student. Ultimately, an engaged student is a successful student and professional! In an online environment interaction from faculty to student is seen as communication with the intent to influence thinking in a critical and reflective manner. It can be argued that in higher education, it is valuable and even necessary to create a community

where interaction and reflection are sustained; where ideas can be explored and critiqued; and where the process of critical inquiry can be scaffolded and modeled (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005).

And it is important to remember that engagement is a two-way street and the benefits are not just for students. Faculty gain as much from having engaged relationships with students as students do. Faculty often cite personal satisfaction from the interactions they have with students as one of the things they like most about teaching here at NCU. One faculty cited the connection she had with a student in that they discovered they shared the same high school (though many years apart) and this helped the student feel connected to her. The student sent an email citing this as one of the reasons she appreciated the faculty's engagement with her in the course.

Engagement as Presence

Thus far, engagement has been discussed as a guiding philosophy for teaching at NCU. It is important to note that engagement is only a piece of what teaching at NCU can and should be. Engagement is the act of interacting with someone, and this can be quite powerful. But in some ways, it is also a passive action. Someone can demonstrate being engaged by simply responding to an email promptly or showing up for a meeting on time. In order to take TTE to the next level, it is important to add the concept of presence. Presence means not just engaging but truly "being there" in the interaction. Let's consider the following example.

A student emails his faculty member with a question about this week's assignment. The student also discloses that he is struggling with the readings because they are very long and technical in nature, but that he will get the work done. The faculty member can respond in the following ways:

Engaged
Address the student's question and thank him for reaching out for help.

Present
Inquire if the student would like to meet face-to-face to discuss the assignment.
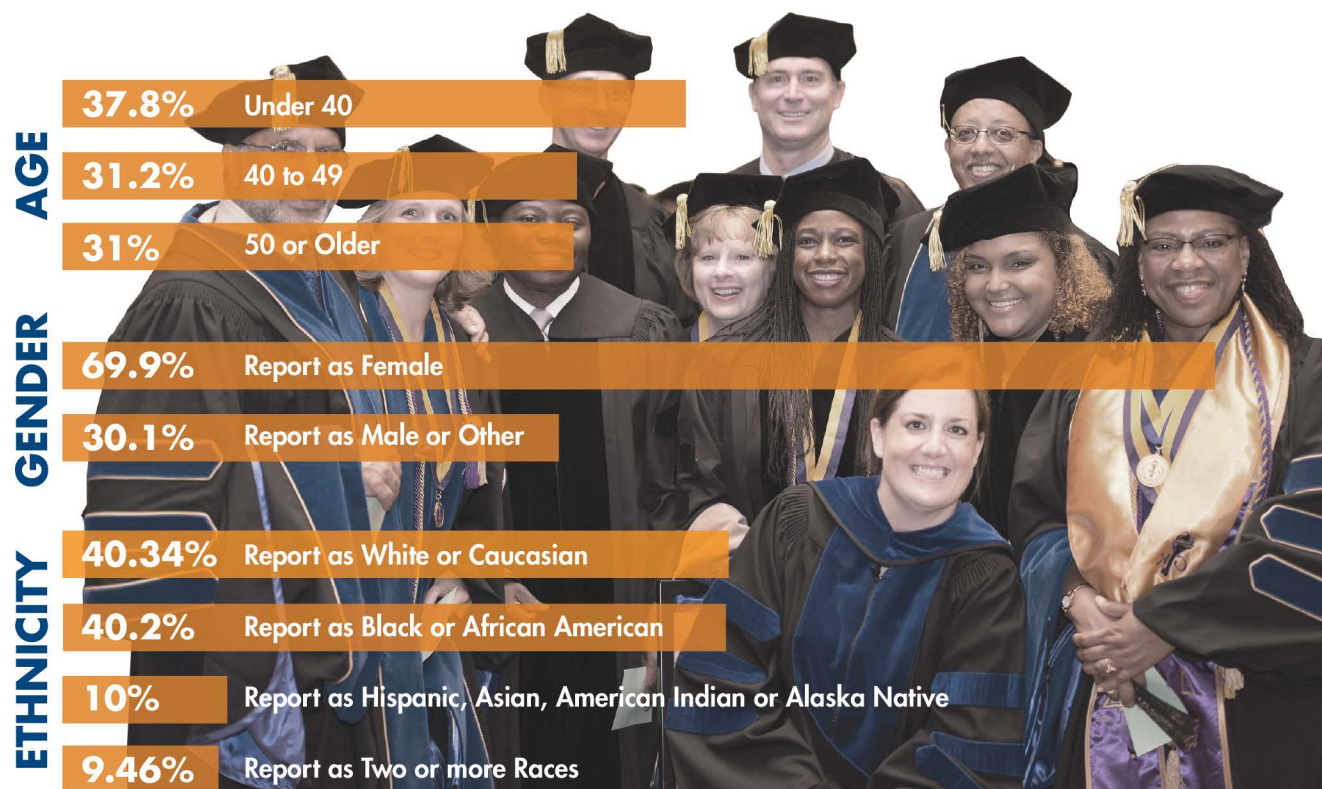
Engaged & Present
Address the student's question, give some insight into the readings making the readings easier to understand, provide support and reassurance that the student is on the right track and that the material is difficult for many students, and invite the student to connect live in some way to help the student feel more comfortable with the assignment and the readings.

In a study by Bloomberg and Grantham (2018) the idea of presence in an online learning format is discussed and broken down into three types (social, cognitive and instructor-based) and the important take away from this work is that students do better when they feel like they are being recognized as real people with real thoughts, feelings, and concerns. Students have more investment in the material when they perceive their faculty members to have a genuine investment in them as learners. These interactions need to be "intentional, individually tailored, and continuous" (Bloomberg & Grantham, 2018, p. 5). Faculty can be present for students by anticipating issues, being ready to address problems and offering a hand of support and normalization of the feelings a student may have (frustration, fear, trepidation, overwhelmedness, etc.).

A faculty member can be engaged without being present, but we can't be present without first being engaged. Our students bring a wide variety of experiences and motivations. They have unique narratives, and each is here for a distinctly unique reason. Being present with our students' starts with recognizing that our students bring their whole lives to bear on the learning experience. Invest in those narratives with your students, and you will find that students will not only respond by being more invested in the material but also invested in the relationship between the faculty member and themselves.

Section Two: Understanding our Northcentral Students

It is important for faculty to understand the types of students that are part of our NCU family. Understanding where students come from, what their strengths and experiences are, and what challenges they may have faced in the past—or are currently facing—will help faculty build a relationship with and tailor their interactions and feedback with students, allowing for the best learning environment for the student and faculty alike.

AGE
- 37.8% Under 40
- 31.2% 40 to 49
- 31% 50 or Older

GENDER
- 69.9% Report as Female
- 30.1% Report as Male or Other

ETHNICITY
- 40.34% Report as White or Caucasian
- 40.2% Report as Black or African American
- 10% Report as Hispanic, Asian, American Indian or Alaska Native
- 9.46% Report as Two or more Races

Owing to its mission and graduate focus, the NCU student population is different than the typical university. Our students' trend older with about a third in the 40-49 age group and another third over the age of 50. Seven In 10 NCU students self-report as female. NCU students are ethnically diverse as well. More than four in 10 NCU students self-report as Black or African American, while another 10% self-report as Hispanic, Asian, American Indian or Alaska Native, while nearly one in 10 self-report affiliation with two or more races.

Respecting Diversity and Working Towards Inclusion

As you can see, our students are diverse in many ways. Our student's backgrounds will be reflected in how they approach their schooling. It is vital for faculty to be aware of how a student's lived experiences, as well as their cultural context, may shape their relationship with learning and with faculty at NCU. Our students often come to NCU because the online learning format works well with their life and learning needs. Many of our students work full time, have family obligations, and are deeply rooted in their communities. The very things that make NCU attractive to students are also the things that can challenge a student's success in their coursework.

When a student enters a course, they are entering into a relationship with their faculty that builds a community of inquiry. "A community of inquiry is more than a social community and more than the magnitude of interaction among participants. A community of inquiry is the integration of cognitive, social, and teaching presence. Considered together, the three presences address the qualitative nature of interactive inquiry consistent with the ideals of higher education." (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005, pp. 134-135). Garrison and Cleveland-Innes (2005) suggest that students may employ a variety of approaches to learning: surface, achievement, and deep approaches.

Surface learning employs the least amount of effort toward realizing the minimum required outcomes. Surface learners are motivated to complete the task rather than assimilate the learning. While we might hope for more from these students, we need to recognize that they might not be interested in deeper interaction or meaning. Achievement learning reflects an orientation to the external reward for demonstrated learning. Achievement learners are motivated by grades. These learners focus on activities that will result in the highest marks. Such students will often be high achievers and may have anxiety around grades and feedback. It is important to

recognize that these students may be challenged to accept critical feedback and may need more support in terms of accepting this feedback and integrating it into their work. Deep learning embraces and digests course material in the search for meaning. Deep learners will likely reach out to faculty independently, ask questions, and seek connection.

In our model of TTE, we want to foster the deepest approach to learning possible, by helping students engage with the material at the level that is most meaningful to them. When students see themselves in the readings, when students can relate the assignments to their real-world career paths, and when interactions with their faculty raise the level of critical thinking about the material, we create an environment for this deep learning to happen. "It is important for instructors of students in higher education to clearly communicate the value of each learning experience in order to facilitate engagement, regardless of the modality in which the learning activity occurs" (Manwaring, Larsen, Graham, Henrie, & Haverson, 2017, p. 29).

In our ongoing efforts here at NCU to be attentive to issues of diversity, cultural sensitivity, and inclusion, it is important for us to highlight the ways students of color and others who identify as minorities, can feel as they engage with faculty and staff at institutions of higher education. Engagement and presence can take on special meaning when we look at educational endeavors through the lens of inclusivity. Biwas (2019) wrote on her experiences as a faculty member and a woman of color. In her article, she provided some interesting insights first as a graduate student and later as a faculty member, being one of the few women and one of the only persons of color in both experiences. She made some important suggestions for faculty members in terms of understanding and engaging with students of color and others who have minority identities. These suggestions are summarized as follows:

We want to be sure that we acknowledge that our students may feel frustrated by a lack of examples and research which reflects their personal experiences and viewpoints.

We also need to be careful not to make assumptions about what those experiences are. We need to recognize that no one individual shares exactly the same beliefs, values, identities, and viewpoints as anyone else in the group or groups that the individual identifies with.

We may find that students will be hesitant to approach us, even if we are very overt about our own cultural identity. There are still significant power dynamics at play when a student attempts to engage a faculty member. No matter how open and approachable we might profess to be, it is important to recognize we still have both advanced education and power.

Being open with students while still maintaining boundaries can help students feel more comfortable in approaching you for assistance. Faculty can accomplish this giving the role of expert, at least in terms of the student's lived experience, over to the student. We want to emphasize to students that we are curious about their lives, viewpoints, ideas, and impressions. We want to engage in a learning dialogue with them that helps them feel comfortable with us and gain their trust as their allies and advocates.

In order to achieve this connection with our students, it is important to move away from the idea that there is a prototypical higher education student. Many of our faculty have trained at universities where admissions criteria include minimum standardized testing scores, GPA requirements, letters of recommendation, and research experience. Northcentral University is an open enrollment university, which means that anyone with a qualifying degree can seek to enroll. With this stance, NCU seeks to reduce barriers to graduate education through online programming. Our intention is to provide a high quality of education to all of our students no matter their background or past educational experiences. We believe that we can work toward a more inclusive educational experience when we take the time to understand our students' contexts and unique needs through building relationships with them.

The gift of this perspective is that in broadening our understanding of the needs of our students, we welcome in a group of scholars who can and will do life-changing and groundbreaking work. "By including, instead of marginalizing scholars, higher education will enjoy richer data analysis that combines contextual and theoretical knowledge with empiricism to facilitate greater analytical insight and relevance of the field. In addition to being valuable in its own right, this scholarship propels narrowly construed, theoretically unsophisticated concepts and relationships into more appropriate and dynamic ones" (Reid & Curry, 2019, para 11).

1 Which social identities are the student most connected with?

a) Do they identify with a marginalized population, and if so, how might you work better to understand how this affects their educational experience? *(For example, are they a first-generation college or graduate student? Do they have a disability? Are they an English language learner?)*

b) What kind of mentoring have they received for success in graduate school? Do they know anyone who has a graduate degree? Do they have anyone in their life that has attended an online university? As you think about their social identity, consider how the student has multiple intersecting identities that might impact their experiences as a student. (For example, how do race, class, and gender come together in ways that are impactful in the school setting?)

c) Is the student coming from a Western educational background? If not, what experiences in their education might be different than what we might assume a student has had exposure to?

2 What strengths does a student have that can help us in providing feedback that can speak directly to those strengths?

If a student identifies themselves as a voracious reader, faculty can create a list of further suggested readings that can deepen the level of understanding of the material. Also, if the student states that they are very active in their community, faculty may use feedback as a way to further the students' connections by suggesting local organizations they can connect to or ways to use their education to advance social causes they are passionate about.

3 In what ways does race, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, socioeconomic class, disability status, or other cultural factors impact the faculty/student dynamic?

This goes not just for the student but also for the faculty member. This requires faculty to be self-reflective. We must be attuned to the ways in which our own biases, prejudices, and lack of knowledge and exposure can affect our students. We also need to own our own experiences and identities and help model how a student can do the same.

4 How would students like to be addressed, and how can faculty be attentive to their identities?

Northcentral University is striving to be a leader in higher education in terms of how we approach equity and inclusion. "Equity-minded leaders are aware of the historical context of exclusionary practices in higher education and recognize the impact of this history. They recognize the contradiction between the ideals of democratic education and the social, institutional, and individual practices that contribute to persistent inequities in college outcomes. Equity-minded leaders also reject the ingrained habit of blaming inequities in access, opportunity, and outcomes on students own social, cultural, and educational backgrounds" (AACU, 2015, p. 4).

Being equity-minded does not mean lowering standards. In fact, it is quite the opposite. When we communicate to students that we understand they have limitations and we sympathize with those, we can send the message to students that they shouldn't expect more from themselves, which can lead to students having greater self-doubt and experiencing poorer performance as a result (Rojas & Liou, 2017, p. 29). Instead, faculty should approach students with an understanding that students bring with them a history that impacts their academic work, in both strengthening and challenging ways. Faculty can be empathetic and supportive and still work with students to raise their skills and critical discourse to the level of undergraduate- and graduate-level work. The goal

is to recognize where a student is and use all of the tools in our collective tool box to help them get where they need to be. So, it is not about lowering expectations. It is about understanding the extra work needed by both parties to help students achieve the high expectations given the inequity. Holding ourselves as faculty accountable to ensure those high expectations are met (maybe even redefining for ourselves what that high expectation is) and supporting our students' learning and educational journey every step of the way to help them achieve it. It is about showcasing student success and learning in innovative ways that are meaningful to the student and building on a strengths-based model rather than a deficit-model.

Building relationships with our students

As you can see, engagement is more than just grading and giving individualized feedback. In a way, engagement is everything leading up to the student submitting their work.

> ❝ **Engagement is the foundation of the faculty-student relationship** ❞

A solid foundation enhances faculty feedback and grading, such that it is meaningful and enriching to the student. Now that we understand what faculty engagement is and who our students are, we can begin to discuss how to lay the foundational building blocks of an engaging relationship.

Responsiveness and Availability

Students can often feel isolated in the online environment; therefore, it is critical for faculty to be readily available and responsive to students. Demonstrate your availability in your welcome letter by providing contact information, best times to reach out, and the process for scheduling appointments. Rather than listing when you are not available, provide details for when you are available. Make sure you commit to the information you provide.

Faculty should also be clear of their location time zone within their welcome letter. Students may assume that faculty are in Arizona and therefore on University time, but this is not often the case. In your welcome, clarify what time zone you are in, and you may find it helpful to post how your time zone compares to the time zone of the University (i.e., "I live in Atlanta, which is in the Eastern time zone. During the fall and winter, this means that I am three hours ahead of University time, and in the spring and summer, I am two hours ahead. My office hours are 10am-12pm Eastern so this would mean 9am-11am Central, 8am-10am Mountain, and 7am-9am Pacific).

When students contact you, you must respond within 48 hours. Leaving students "hanging" can be extremely discouraging. This is also why it is important to regularly check your email, even on the weekends. If you are going to be out of town and unable to check email, let your students know through email and the course news section. Point them in the direction of someone who will be able to assist them in your absence.

Mindset and its Application to Teaching Through Engagement

Carol Dweck (2006) has conducted a great deal of research on what she calls mindset. Mindset is a mental attitude that strongly influences how we interpret situations. According to Dweck, all of us have either a fixed or growth mindset, and often we are not consciously aware of which mindset we hold. Those with a fixed mindset hold the attitude that intelligence is static. This leads to a desire to look smart and a tendency to avoid challenges, get defensive or give up easily in the face of challenge, and ignore useful, constructive feedback. Those with a growth mindset hold the attitude that intelligence can be developed. This leads to the desire to learn and the tendency to embrace challenges, persist in the face of setbacks, and learn from constructive feedback.

When students have a fixed mindset, they believe their intelligence cannot be developed, they either already are, or are not, a good student. Their abilities, and therefore, the evaluation of their performance, is part of their identity – who they are. This is one reason why students with a fixed mindset react so negatively when they do not

FIXED MINDSET VS GROWTH MINDSET

perform well – it is a reflection of who they are. When a teacher tells them they did poorly on an assignment, it is interpreted as "you are a bad student" or "you are not smart." They feel they are being judged. For those with a fixed mindset, constructive feedback harms their self-esteem. Believing your abilities are already established means there is no point in trying to do better. In fact, effort is looked down upon because it is for those who are not smart – if you're smart, you don't need to try hard. When these students struggle academically, they are significantly more likely to give up so they can avoid the negative feedback that harms their self-esteem (Dweck, 2006).

On the other hand, when students have a growth mindset, they believe their intelligence can be developed. Such students develop their intelligence by working hard, practicing repeatedly, and looking for honest, helpful feedback on how to improve. These students look at a bad grade and think, "I haven't learned this well enough yet" instead of "I'm a failure" or "I'm not smart." These

students try harder (because effort is valued), ask for help when they need it, and implement feedback when they receive it (Dweck, 2006). Of course, struggling or failing is difficult, even for those with a growth mindset (who likes to fail?!), but it doesn't define you.

So, is all lost for those with a fixed mindset? The good news is, no. According to Dweck (2007), mindsets are just beliefs. Even better news is that faculty members can help play a role with students desiring to develop or change their mindset, especially as it relates to discipline-specific subject matter. Zepke (2013) discusses the notion of threshold concepts as a way to understand the need for student-faculty discourse and interaction to create growth opportunities for the student. Threshold concepts, as outlined in the work of Meyer and Land (2003), are transformative in that once understood, lead to a significant change in students' understanding of the subject. Once a student has crossed the threshold, the concept becomes part of how the student understands new material going forward. A threshold concept is

also integrative in that it enables students to knit dissimilar elements of a subject together. Threshold concepts can be watershed moments for students, but they also can be ones that are some of the most challenging for students to fully understand. This is where TTE can be most helpful. Meeting a student where they are in their journey towards conquering these threshold concepts and guiding them through that process to the other side is how we can demonstrate engaged teaching.

Bain (2004) discusses several important concepts as it relates to the student-faculty relationship and one of which is trust building between professor and student. This was borne out in a study by Towns, Edwards, Migliarese, and White, (2016) where they found that a teacher's belief that students want to learn and can learn is important for student success. Students must trust that the instructor is there for them and is concerned about their welfare and their grasp of the course material. This trusting approach allows for a more "user-friendly" attitude where students understand that the professor is more interested in them understanding the material, rather than just getting a good grade on an exam

Students with a growth mindset tend to view constructive feedback from teachers as helpful. These students might say something like, "They are just doing their job by pointing out what I need to work on, and now it is my job to work on those things." Meeting a student where they are at, conquering threshold concepts, helping guide them toward understanding, and building trust underscores why being present and TTE is so important at NCU. Having a growth mindset is powerful – it can raise grades and student motivation, particularly among struggling students (Rattan, Savani, Chugh, & Dweck, 2015). Research by Claro, Paunesku, and Dweck, (2016) found that students' academic mindset predicted

academic achievement as strongly as family income and other socioeconomic factors.

We shouldn't just be concerned about the academic mindset of our students, though. The mindset faculty adopt is equally important. In fact, faculty may be saying things to students and framing their feedback in a way that could actually encourage a fixed mindset! If faculty believe that students' abilities are fixed, then they are probably

less motivated to work with students and provide supportive and encouraging feedback. It's not uncommon for faculty to say things like, "It's so nice to work with students who really seem to get it. They seem to be born for this kind of work," "It's clear this student just doesn't have what it takes to be successful in the field," or "I can't imagine this student will ever be a good writer." All of these statements portray a fixed mindset. Faculty with a fixed mindset, create an atmosphere of judging and they tend to give up on students who are not performing well. These faculty do not believe in improvement, so they do not try to foster it.

> **❝ Faculty should take some time to reflect on their mindset. Being mindful of this may help us reframe our expectations and our approach with students ❞**

Being mindful of this may help us reframe our expectations and our approach with students. Additionally, being attentive to the concept of mindset and considering our students' mindset may encourage us to approach our feedback differently. Being conscious of encouraging a growth mindset in our students may result in focusing our feedback on how students can improve and providing support and motivation.

Section Three: Engaging with our Students

Let's recap what we have learned so far. Section one introduced what engagement means at NCU and why it is important. Section two ensures we fully understand our diverse student body and realize that respecting diversity and working towards inclusion helps us start the faculty-student relationship on the right foot. Section three will build on these sections plus reinforce the idea that engagement is more than just grading and giving individualized feedback; engagement is everything leading up to the student submitting their work as well.

As noted in section two, engagement is the foundation of the faculty-student relationship. A solid foundation enhances faculty feedback and grading, such that it is meaningful and enriching to the student. Your relationship with each of your students starts with your course welcome announcement, welcome letter, and welcome video and continues as you provide weekly assignment feedback, more on this in a moment.

First, let's pause and consider the role of an athletic coach and how faculty members embracing a coaching mentality can help build a strong, engaging, relationship with students. In a sporting event, the role of a coach is much more than X's and O's. Coaches assist their athletes in develop-

ing to their full potential. Coaches are instructors, assessors, mentors, facilitators, advisors, supporters, motivators, counselors, friends, and etc. Coaches create the right conditions for learning to happen and seek ways to motivate their athletes.

All the same can be said of an engaging instructor at NCU. In a teaching event, the role of an instructor is more than grading and providing feedback. Faculty can help grow students from novices to experts. Faculty at NCU are also instructors, assessors, mentors, facilitators, advisors, supporters, motivators, counselors, friends, and etc. Our engagement goal at NCU is for our faculty to create a safe and vibrant learning environment, one in which our students are motivated to learn and thrive as a result.

Getting Started: The Welcome Letter, Welcome Video, Course News, and Week One Communication

Perhaps you have heard of the term players' coach? While definitions vary, there is agreement around the idea that a player's coach is all about the team, and the individuals on the team. This type of coach may well be interested in knowing about their players off the field. Knowing about players' families, hobbies, and interests, along with current and future goals, helps a player's coach lead in a personable and individualized manner.

The same holds true for NCU instructors and their students. Getting to know your students prepares and positions you to serve them well. Your relationship with your students starts with your course welcome announcement, welcome letter, welcome video, and week one communication and continues to grow as you provide weekly assignment feedback.

There are several ways in which you can engage with students using the NCUOne platform. Learning how to use NCUOne effectively will make connecting with students easier and more effective. All faculty are required to post a welcome letter and a welcome video in every course they teach. The tools within NCUOne allow faculty to set up their welcome announcement, letter, and video via

the News widget. Upon completion, course welcomes are available for all students taking the course from that point forward.
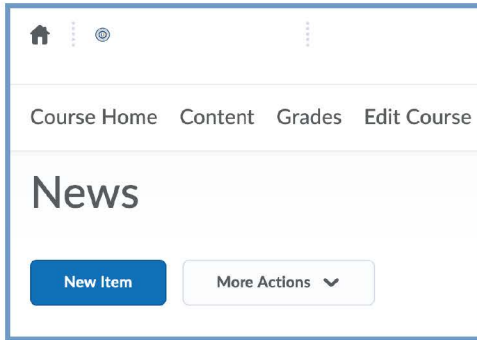
Welcome Letter. Your welcome letter may be the most important communication you make to your students. It establishes expectations, informs of vital information, and most importantly, welcomes students into a teaching relationship that is the basis for their learning. Take care to compose it carefully and thoughtfully. The Center for Teaching and Learning page in The Commons has job aids to assist you in composing and posting your welcome letter.

In your welcome letter, begin to educate students on how to use feedback. TTE asks a lot of students, as well as faculty. It's very important to educate students on the kind of feedback you will give, why you give it, and what you expect them to do with it. Welcome letters should be customized for each course. It may be helpful to include a small description of the course, where it fits in the overall program that the student is pursuing, and the overall goals for the course. It is also important to include information on how to contact you, your office hours, how to make appointments and policies like the late assignment policy.

Welcome Video. In addition to the welcome letter, faculty are required to record and embed a welcome video in their courses. The video is intended to provide students an opportunity to see you, hear your voice, and get to know you a little better. The video is intended to be less formal than the welcome letter and should show you in the light of being a person as well as a faculty member. Many faculty members record these videos in their home office so that students can see the surroundings of the faculty member. The videos can include information about your professional background, your research interests, your professional experiences and some small personal information. Share what you feel comfortable

sharing, but realize, giving students some insight into your hobbies, interests, and life outside of the university can help students connect with you. Welcome videos can be generic and not specific to each course. You can make one video and insert it into each course.

Course News. The News Widget is a significant area for connecting with your students. Your welcome letter and video will be posted in the News area and will stay there for all students to see. The News widget is also the place where faculty can post information for all students. Examples of uses for the news area are:

Full-time faculty posting when they will be on PTO.

All faculty posting changes to office hours or availability.

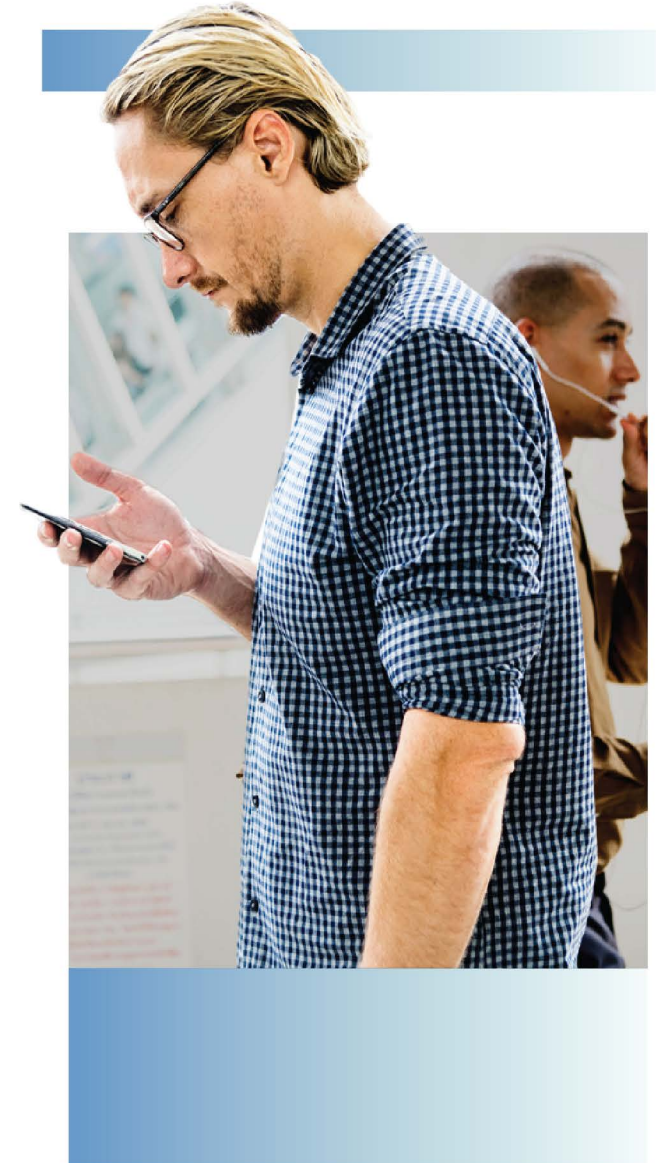Posting common issues with a particular assignment as a heads up to students.

Posting articles or information which may be of interest to students or will enhance the learning experience.

Connecting students to professional organizations or networking opportunities.

Week One Communication. Another powerful way you build a relationship and teach is through synchronous communications—e.g., phone, Skype, chat—especially during your first week with a student. Some students will be very anxious to set up a time to meet with you during the first week; others may not be interested in doing so. It is never mandatory for students to connect with their faculty during the course, so remember that a student may not see this as a priority. However, letting students know we understand such a call may be intimidating, yet informing them that most find value in a synchronous connection, might help students see the

benefit of a week one communication.

We can do our best to connect with students who want a week one call, all the while reminding uninterested students we are here to help them throughout the course and will be available to connect when they need us.

Here are a few tips for making your first conversation productive and engaging:

Build a relationship

Share something of yourself

Encourage the student to use your feedback

Talk up your course!

**Be approachable
Be personal
Be professional**

During your initial conversation, focus on building a relationship. Welcome the student to your course. Thank the student for taking the time to talk to you. Get to know the student's motivations and interests, concerns, self-assessment of strengths and weaknesses, and so forth. Ask questions about the student's educational and professional aspirations and talk about how your course fits into this picture. Use the conversation to help the student envision being a member of an academic community.

You might share with the student what getting a Master or Ph.D. degree meant to you and how completing the degree helped you professionally.

Encourage the student to use your feedback. Explain that the student will be working hard on submitting assignments, and it is your role to provide feedback that will help build the student's skill set. Students should see the value in reading and taking the feedback to heart as a way to really learn the material and how it will contribute to their continued path to their degree.

Students may be nervous, intimidated or even unsure about the course they are taking with you. Students will feed off of your excitement for the course material, so make sure you highlight what you like about the course and how you have seen the material be of value for other students.

You may encounter unhappy students who are quite vocal about their displeasure. Although it might not always be easy, it is imperative you always respond professionally and respectfully. If you can help solve the student's problem, please do so. If you can't, please point the student to resources or someone who can help.
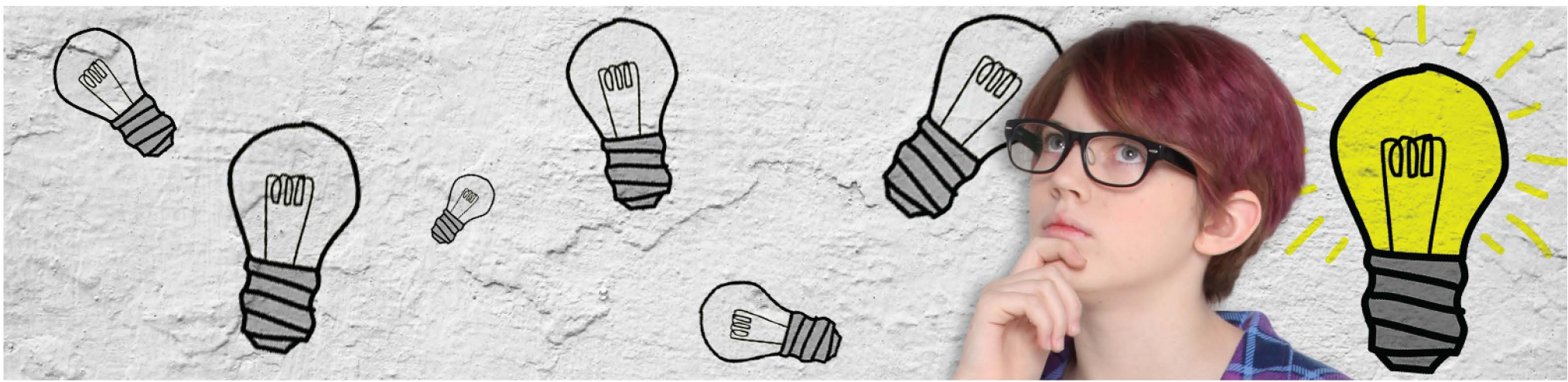
Going Deeper: Engaging as a Coach Via Weekly Assignment Feedback

Earlier, we learned "engagement" implies a meeting of the minds, an apt metaphor because good teaching requires reaching beyond the assignment to the student's mind. It is easy to fall into the trap of merely interacting with students by grading assignments. But the assignment is a product of the student's thinking, their beliefs, understanding and skills. We teach students, not assignments, and teaching requires supplying knowledge and improving student thinking.

In practice, this means moving from a grading-based orientation of teaching to a coaching-based orientation. A grader merely goes down an assignment, mentally subtracting points, and justifying the grade with brief comments such as "vague." A student seeing such a comment might think, "Why is this vague? It's not vague to me; why is it vague to you?" The instructor has not taught the student anything with this comment.

By contrast, coaches are performance oriented. They are evaluated by the performance of their players and are focused on improving their players' performance. An effective coach would not say, "You get a B- because your swing is wrong" and walk away. A players' coach wants to improve his player's performance, and instead shares, "Your swing is wrong because you are dropping your elbow, which causes you to lose power and chop at the ball. You need to raise your elbow and swing like this. Now you try it."

Likewise, teaching from a coaching-based orientation, an effective instructor would not solely write, "Vague" on a student's paper and walk away. Instead, they would invest time helping the student understand how improvements to their assignment will dramatically improve their output, and why that makes a difference—in both their academic activities and their career aspirations. This will help enhance thinking for future assignments, and beyond.

Teaching from a coaching-based orientation means viewing the student as on a growth trajectory, and the assignment as a measure of the student's progress on that trajectory. Instead of just grading one assignment after another, the instructor should focus on how they can help the student grow. The assignment is a window into the student's thinking, and the instructor uses it to understand the deeper issues in student thinking that must be addressed for the student to develop expertise. Issues to address could include understanding and articulating course content, commanding APA formatting, improving writing convention, structure, and synthesis, integrating literature, and demonstrating critical thinking, simply to name a few.

Conclusion

Remember, at the beginning of the guide, you were asked to consider how you might explain our teaching model to a colleague unfamiliar with our model? Hopefully, by now, you have a robust understanding of TTE and how it is used here at NCU. But what might be a sound answer to your colleague's question? How might you be able to encapsulate what is present here into an "elevator speech"? Some ideas follow:

> TTE is the guiding philosophy of faculty here at NCU.

> It involves understanding who a student is, both personally and professionally, and tailoring our interactions to meet them where they are at, and get them to where they want to be.

> TTE speaks to the importance of being authentic in our interactions and intentions towards our students.

> TTE is more than just giving feedback and grades; it is genuinely teaching in an engaged and holistic way, providing for a reciprocal feedback loop to develop between faculty-to-student and student-to-faculty.

Teaching through engagement is the model of faculty-student interaction that NCU utilizes to foster learning in our online environment. It is essential that faculty embrace the TTE model and find ways to make the experience of learning positive and successful for each student. Faculty members at NCU are diverse in terms of professional experiences, research agendas, and scholarly goals. But as diverse as we are, what joins us is a passion for teaching and a desire to engage with our students to help them move beyond the course material at a surface level, to gain and hone critical thinking skills, and to use those skills to excel in their chosen degree plan and career. TTE is a philosophy that uses an understanding of best practices in teaching, sensitivity to diversity, a quest for inclusion, and the harnessing of technologies to provide a first-class graduate learning experience for our students.

This guide focuses on the philosophy of engagement, and underscores the idea that engagement, and possessing the appropriate growth mindset, begins well before the first assignment is submitted or evaluated. This is not to minimize the continued application of TTE once the course has started and beyond. We now understand that teaching from a coaching orientation should yield better results, because we are providing better feedback. Another guide will follow this one, dedicated to providing examples and resources to help strengthen our feedback and enhance our student engagement.

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