INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF MULTIDISCIPLINARY: APPLIED BUSINESS AND EDUCATION RESEARCH
2023, Vol. 4, No. 11, 4101 – 4112
http://dx.doi.org/10.11594/ijmaber.04.11.27

Research Article

Engagement and Learning Success: Evidence from Three Years of Transformational Teaching Strategies in Online Event Marketing Education

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Article history:
Submission November 2023
Revised November 2023
Accepted November 2023

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ABSTRACT

This study is part of an ongoing teacher-led initiative in understanding the co-creation of a transformative learning experience in the online event marketing classroom. The study measures the impact of student engagement on student-defined learning success in online learning. Using a mixed methods approach, it investigates data collected through a survey questionnaire in three different years from students who enrolled in two course subjects.

This study demonstrates that student engagement is significantly correlated with and predicts learner-defined learning success in online learning. Furthermore, it finds that there were statistically significant differences in levels of student engagement and learning success among different cohorts, particularly when compared to cohorts who took the course subject in the later year. The differences may have been a result of the development of skills appropriate for online learning, and in improvements in course content and delivery.

Keywords: *Event Marketing Education, Transformative Learning, Transformational Teaching*

Introduction

The pandemic opened opportunities for the wider use of online learning. While many educational institutions have since shifted back to the traditional onsite learning modality, there are still others that have continued with online learning or alternative learning modalities that feature online learning, such as hybrid learning. In the Philippines, there are many higher education institutions (HEIs) that offer courses and classes using online and hybrid learning modalities. Furthermore, there is the matter of

How to cite:
Vergara, K. C. S., Santo, J. E. N., Blasa-Cheng, A. C., Balatbat, M. S., Vergara, R. A. G. (2023). Engagement and Learning Success: Evidence from Three Years of Transformational Teaching Strategies in Online Event Marketing Education. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary: Applied Business and Education Research*. *4*(11), 4101 – 4112. doi: 10.11594/ijmaber.04.11.27

the responsibility of HEIs to develop employability skills and competence in students (Asonitou, 2015; Salas Velasco, 2014). Learning online helps develop important skills required in remote working environments (Bowen, 2020).

This study is part of an ongoing teacher-led initiative in understanding the co-creation of a transformative learning experience in the online event marketing classroom (Vergara, 2022, 2023a & 2023b; Vergara & Vergara, 2023a & 2023b), the goal of which is to understand how to adapt to the changes brought to the classroom by the pandemic to ensure successful learning outcomes. The teacher employed a transformative teaching approach (Slavich & Zimbardo, 2012), applying experiential lessons and contextualized communication strategies to co-create a fun, engaging, and meaningful online learning experience that enabled student-defined learning success.

An important aspect of the transformative teaching approach is to enrich student engagement in the online classroom. The previous studies (Vergara, 2022, 2023a & 2023b; Vergara & Vergara, 2023a & 2023b) focused on explaining how to adapt event marketing education to suit learner needs and expectations in the online learning modality. They explored how transformational teaching strategies, such as collaborative challenge-based activities and storytelling lectures, engaged learners. Furthermore, those studies used a qualitative approach to understand learning expectations, experiences, and outcomes.

This research, on the other hand, extends previous studies by measuring the impact of student engagement on student-defined learning success in online learning. It investigates data collected in different years from students who enrolled in two course subjects: Marketing Events (MarkEve) and Advertising Events (AdEve). Both subjects are electives offered in the business college of the university where the authors teach and were exclusively taught online during the period of study. AdEve is a subject specifically offered to advertising majors, while MarkEve is a subject offered primarily to marketing majors but is open to certain majors in the college. This research asks the following questions:

1. Do students from different cohorts experience different levels of student engagement and learning success in the online classroom?
2. Is there a relationship between student engagement and learning success in the online classroom?
3. Does student engagement predict learning success in the online classroom?

Review of Literature

Despite numerous definitions for student engagement in academic literature (Axelson & Flick, 2010; Coates, 2007; Fletcher, 2015; Groccia, 2018; Kuh, 2009), they remain unclear (Balwant, 2017). The diversity definitions for student engagement demonstrates that it requires a multidimensional perspective (Groccia, 2018). However, just as definitions are diverse, so are dimensions provided in academic literature (Balwant, 2017; Burch et al, 2015; Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Groccia, 2018). To date, there is no universally accepted definition for student engagement; neither is there a universally accepted framework to describe its multiple dimensions. Nevertheless, student engagement is described as what students think, feel, and do (Groccia, 2018) that are related to learning inside and outside of the classroom.

Engagement, in its broadest term, applies to many fields and is seen as an essential aspect of achieving success. In academic literature, learner engagement is essential to learning and achieving learning success (Axelson & Flick, 2010; Coates, 2007; Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Fletcher, 2015; Groccia, 2018; Lin et al, 2019; Luo et al, 2023; Kuh, 2009). In organizational behavior literature, employee engagement leads to organizational effectiveness and success (Nienaber & Martins, 2020). Balwant (2017) used the organizational behavior approach to develop a framework to identify student engagement dimensions, specifically using emotional, behavioral, and cognitive dimensions of employee engagement to define and describe student engagement dimensions.

Groccia's model (2018) describes student engagement in three levels of doing, feeling, and thinking in relation to six dimensions of the academic experience: in teaching, in learning, in research, with faculty and staff, with other

students, and with the community. Zimmer and Finn (2012) identify four components of engagement. Both the academic and social components are observable behavioral dimensions (what students are doing), while the cognitive dimension is associated with what the student is thinking. Affective, as the name applies, is the emotional response of the student and associated with how they are feeling. On the other hand, Burch et al (2015) proposed a conceptual framework for student engagement, differentiating among 4 dimensions and distinguishing where the engagement takes place: emotional, physical, in-class cognitive, and out-of-class cognitive engagement.

In online learning, fostering engagement requires that students feel engaged and supported to take responsibility for their learning (Conrad & Donaldson, 2012). Lin et al (2019) describe online learning engagement in the performance of class activities: engagement in watching pre-recorded video lectures, in performing asynchronous learning activities, in attending synchronous class sessions, and in performing synchronous learning activities. Their study shows that students who demonstrated high levels of student engagement were more likely to have high levels of learning and to obtain high grades.

Lin et al (2019) also demonstrate that the teacher's pedagogical approach influences the level of student engagement in the classroom, particularly in the online classroom. The teacher plays an important role in fostering student engagement in the classroom. Freire (1970a & 1970b) argues that the teacher's role is to transform learning perspectives, that instead of merely transferring information to students—or what he refers to as the "banking method," students should be encouraged to think for themselves and take on a larger responsibility for their learning. Freire's pedagogy is considered as a precursor to Mezirow's (1978a, 1978b, 1991 & 1997) transformative learning theory (Kitchenham, 2008). Mezirow (1978a, 1978b, 1991 & 1997) argued that learning is about transforming perspectives, attitudes, and behaviors. Transformation results from a disorienting dilemma, typically manifested by change and which results in positive change.

Slavich & Zimbardo (2012) formulated a transformative teaching approach that defines teacher roles and learning goals. They define it as "*the expressed or unexpressed goal to increase students' mastery of key course concepts while transforming learning-related attitudes, values, beliefs and skills.*" Using this approach implies that the teacher's role is to help students acquire knowledge and mastery of concepts, develop learning strategies, and promote positive learning-related attitudes, values, and beliefs by employing one or more of the following core methods: (1) establishing a shared learning vision, (2) providing modeling and mastery experiences, (3) challenging and encouraging students intellectually, (4) personalizing attention and feedback, (5) creating experiential lessons, and (6) promoting preflection and reflection. These core methods work on fostering and enhancing student engagement, which leads to learning success.

Conceptual Framework

Extant literature posits that student engagement is a significant factor in learning success. Based on the research objectives and using extant literature to define and operationalize constructs, the hypotheses of this study follow below. Figure 1 illustrates the variables and the relationships that will be tested.

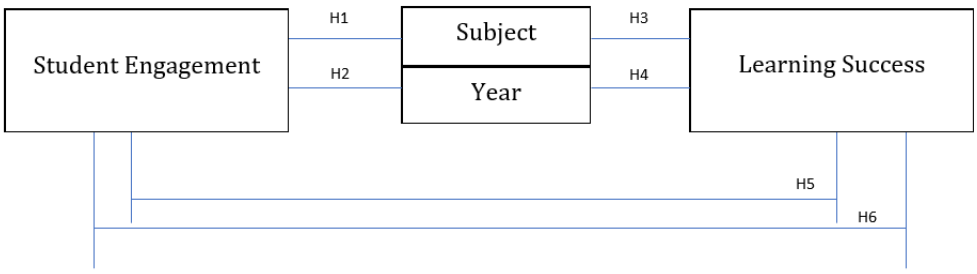

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

H1: There is no significant difference in the level of student engagement between cohorts who took different course subjects.
H2: There is no significant difference in the level of student engagement among cohorts who took the course subjects in different years.
H3: There is no significant difference in the level of learning success between cohorts who took different course subjects.
H4: There is no significant difference in the level of learning success among cohorts who took the course subjects in different years.
H5: There is a significant relationship between the cohorts' levels of student engagement and learning success.
H6: The level of student engagement predicts the level of learning success.

This research aims to understand whether certain characteristics, such as differences in course subjects taken or when the course subjects were taken, influence the students' level of student engagement and learning success. It also investigates whether there is a significant relationship between engagement and learning success, and whether student engagement predicts success.

Table 1 summarizes how the constructs are operationalized. Student engagement is operationalized using extant literature, specifically from student engagement definitions and dimensions from Balwant (2017), Burch et al (2015), and Finn & Zimmer (2012). The study does not differentiate between the multiple dimensions of student engagement, and instead incorporates all dimensions in a single category. Learning success is defined by student respondents. At the beginning of the term, students taking the course were asked to define what learning success in the course means to them. These definitions were coded and categorized, and summarized by the following statements:

1. I learned important lessons from this course.
2. I developed important skills after taking this course.
3. I was able to apply what I learned in the activities and requirements in this course.

I feel that I am a better person after taking this course.

Table 1. Construct Operationalization

Construct	Operationalization
Student engagement	Adapted from Balwant, 2017; Burch et al, 2015; and Finn & Zimmer, 2012
Learning success	As defined by student respondents

Methodology

This study forms part of a teacher-led initiative that began in 2020 and which received grant funding. The research-developed survey questionnaire used to collect data in this study underwent a review and validation process through the grant's research committee.

The survey was administered at the end of the term to five different classes or cohorts in three different years, from 2020 to 2022. In the survey, students were asked to rate a series of statements describing their engagement in the course and learning success using a 5-point Likert scale. They were also asked open-ended questions to describe and explain their learning experience in the course.

Student respondents are from De La Salle University Manila taking the following two course subjects: MarkEve and AdEve. Participation in the survey was voluntary. Table 2 is the matrix shows the respondent composition. Please note that in 2022, the course subject advertising events was not offered during the term of survey.

Table 2. Respondents (N) Matrix

	MarkEve	AdEve	TOTAL
2020	29	22	51
2021	21	11	32
2022	32	0	32
TOTAL	82	33	115

Data was analyzed using mixed methods.

1. Quantitative methods

   Results of the Shapiro-Wilk test show that data from the survey was not normally distributed. The Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis tests were used to investigate whether there is a significant difference between cohorts grouped according to course subjects and the year they were attended. Spearman's Rho was used to measure the significant relationship between student engagement and learning success. Finally, a simple linear regression was used to determine whether student engagement predicts learning success.

2. Qualitative methods

   The responses to the open-ended questions were coded and categorized for analysis. These responses were used to correlate with quantitative results to provide context and nuanced exposition.

Results

The results show that students have high levels of student engagement (M= 4.4751, SD= .57402). Overall, almost all students enjoyed taking the course (M= 4.820, SD= .5484) and found it easy to communicate with the professor (M= 4.834, SD= .5033). However, not everybody found taking virtual classes enjoyable (M= 3.877, SD= 1.1522) nor did they find it easy to focus during online synchronous classes (M= 3.081, SD= .9847). Table 3 summarizes the results.

Table 3. Student Engagement

Construct 5-point Likert scale (5 = strongly agree, 1 = strongly disagree)	**Mean**	**Standard Deviation**
Student Engagement	4.4751	.57402
I enjoyed taking this course.	4.820	.5484
I enjoyed taking virtual classes.	3.877	1.1522
I enjoyed accomplishing the individual activities required of me in this course.	4.507	.8416
I enjoyed accomplishing the group activities required of me in this course.	4.630	.7469
It was easy for me to focus during synchronous classes.	3.081	.9847
It was easy for me to grasp the lessons discussed in class.	4.498	.7891
It was easy for me to participate in class lectures.	4.336	.8313
It was easy for me to participate in group assignments.	4.621	.7026
It was easy for me to participate in the online class e-vents.	4.469	.7386
It was easy for me to communicate with the professor.	4.834	.5033
It was easy for me to communicate with the members of the group I was in.	4.559	.7685
It was easy for me to communicate with other members of the class.	4.469	.8004

Table 4 shows that there is a high level of learning success (M = 4.7773, SD = .53799). Almost all students claimed that they succeeded in the course using parameters they defined—that they learned important lessons (M = 4.806, SD = .6363), developed important skills (M = 4.801, SD = .5675), applied what they learned (M = 4.768, SD = .5921), and felt that they became a better person after taking the course (M = 4.735, SD = .5901).

Table 4. Learning Success

Construct 5-point Likert scale (5 = strongly agree, 1 = strongly disagree)	**Mean**	**Standard Deviation**
Learning Success	4.7773	.53799
I learned important lessons from this course.	4.806	.6363
I developed important skills after taking this course.	4.801	.5675
I was able to apply what I learned in the activities and requirements in this course.	4.768	.5921
I feel that I am a better person after taking this course	4.735	.5901

The study tested reliability of constructs using Cronbach's alpha (Roldan & Sanchez-Franco, 2012; Kock, 2015). Table 5 summarizes the results and shows that both student engagement (.906) and learning success (.918) satisfies the criterion of 0.7 or higher for reliability tests (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Nunnally, 1978; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

Table 5. Construct Reliability

Construct	**Cronbach's Alpha**	**Number of Items**
Student engagement	0.906	12
Learning success	0.918	4

The study also finds that there is no significant difference in the level of student engagement between cohorts who took different course subjects. Table 6 summarizes the results of the Mann Whitney U and Wilcoxon tests.

Table 6. Student engagement: MarkEve vs AdEve

Cohort	**N**	**Mean Rank**	**U**	**W**	**Z**	**p**
MarkEve	82	57.10	1279	4682	-.459	.646
AdEve	33	60.24				

However, the Kruskal-Wallis test revealed that there is a significant difference in the level of student engagement among cohorts from different years (X^2 = 15.949, df = 2). Table 7 summarizes the results.

Table 7. Student engagement: 2020 vs 2021 vs 2022

Cohort	**N**	**Mean Rank**	**X^2**	**df**	**p**
2020	51	52.99	15.949	2	< .001
2021	32	46.52			
2022	32	77.47			

The Kruskal-Wallis Post Hoc Test using pairwise comparison was used to identify where the significant differences in levels of student engagement among 2020, 2021, and 2022 cohorts. To Bonferroni correction was established (alpha = 0.05 divided by 3 comparisons or 0.0167) to avoid Type I errors

building up to more than 0.05. The findings revealed that there is a significant difference in levels of student engagement between 2020 and 2022 cohorts (*U* = 459, *W* = 1785, *Z* = -3.355, p = .01) and between 2021 and 2022 cohorts (*U* = 246, *W* = 774, *Z* = -3.589, p < .001). Table 8summarizes results of the post hoc test.

Table 8. Kruskal-Wallis Post Hoc Test

Comparison	*U*	*W*	*Z*	p
2020 & 2021	714.5	1242.5	-.952	.341
2020 & 2022	459.0	1785.0	-3.355	.01*
2021 & 2022	246.0	774.0	-3.589	< .001*

The study also finds that there is no significant difference in the level of learning success between cohorts who took different course subjects. Table 9 summarizes the results of the Mann Whitney U and Wilcoxon tests.

Table 9. Learning success: MarkEve vs AdEve

Cohort	N	Mean Rank	U	W	Z	p
MarkEve	82	57.47	1309.5	4712.5	-.325	.745
AdEve	33	59.32				

However, the Kruskal-Wallis test revealed that there is a significant difference in the level of learning success among cohorts from different years (X^2 = 9.092, df = 2). Table 10 summarizes the results.

Table 10. Learning success: 2020 vs 2021 vs 2022

Cohort	N	Mean Rank	X^2	df	p
2020	51	54.70	9.092	2	0.011
2021	32	51.00			
2022	32	70.27			

A post hoc test using pairwise comparison identified where the significant differences in levels of learning success among 2020, 2021, and 2022 cohorts. The Bonferroni correction was established (alpha = 0.05 divided by 3 comparisons or 0.0167) to avoid Type I errors building up to more than 0.05. The findings revealed that there is a significant difference in levels of student engagement between 2020 and 2022 cohorts (*U* = 592.5, *W* = 1918.5, *Z* = -2.653, p = .008) and between 2021 and 2022 cohorts (*U* = 343, *W* = 871, *Z* = -2.864, p = .004). Table 11 summarizes results of the post hoc test.

Table 11. Kruskal-Wallis Post Hoc Test

Comparison	*U*	*W*	*Z*	p
2020 & 2021	761	1289	-.583	.560
2020 & 2022	592.5	1918.5	-2.653	.008*
2021 & 2022	343	871	-2.864	.004*

Table 12 shows that results from Spearman rho analysis indicate that student engagement is significantly correlated with learning success (r = .631, p < .001). The correlation coefficient indicates a positive relationship between the two variables.

Table 12. Relationship between student engagement and learning success

	Spearman's rho	p
Student engagement	.631	< .001

Table 13 shows the results from the simple regression model. The R-square = .643 indicate that about 64% of the variability in learning success can be explained by student engagement.

Table 13. Predicting learning success

Model	Coefficient	p	R-square
1 (Constant)	1.416	< .001	.643
Student engagement	.752	< .001	

Discussion

To provide a nuanced discussion on how student engagement might look like and how students define learning success in the online classroom, this section will focus on two significant results from the quantitative analysis: (1) the relationship between student engagement and learning success, and (2) the difference in student engagement and learning success among certain cohorts.

1. Student engagement is significantly correlated with and predicts learner-defined learning success.

The teacher used transformative teaching strategies to foster and enrich student engagement, specifically the use of experiential lessons. These lessons took the form of storytelling lectures and collaborative challenge-based projects. These lessons allowed the students to be involved and participate in the learning process, resulting in an engaging learning experience. Regardless of their cohort, students claimed to enjoy listening to and participating in the storytelling lectures.

> *I loved listening to all [of my professor's stories] that [the class] didn't feel like a traditional class. All the lessons were great!*

> *I enjoyed the lesson about the Disney guest experience and events …; it felt like I virtually toured Disney.*

Many students from different cohorts claimed that they enjoyed fulfilling the requirements of the course. Furthermore, the experience of organizing their event, whether they were successful in doing so or made mistakes, provided them with important and useful first-hand knowledge.

> *I liked the classroom activity. Even though the outcome wasn't as I expected, I learned a lot, such as how [to make the event] better. Failure is the best teacher, so I guess it made me wiser in a way.*

> *The classroom event was fun to do and execute. It surely made me learn a lot of things about event production and the many different factors that must be considered in order to make an event successful.*

> *The fundraising event is the [activity that delivered the] most significant impact because it challenged me to think of ways to make our events successful.*

The experiential lessons provided opportunities for the students to fulfill their learning objectives of acquiring knowledge, developing skill, applying what they've learned, and/or becoming a better person. They defined these objectives in the beginning of the course, but which they continued to use to motivate them in their participation and involvement in the learning experience.

> *My goal before I enrolled in this class is to be involved and organize an event*

that not only benefits me but also other people. I also felt rewarded after the event since we received positive feedback from our participants and an appreciation video from our beneficiary.

This class gave me [a lot of learning] experiences on how to handle, plan, and organize events. I would like to think that we were able to create enjoyable events despite the circumstances and limitations. And even if [our event didn't achieve our expectations], I still [feel that I] succeeded because I learned and [I now know how to] organize future events. More than this, I learned to communicate with other people even if I am not totally familiar with them!

In my opinion, every group activity and class lecture delivered significant lessons to me, especially the lessons our professor shared with us and our experiences (in fulfilling the projects), since those are the things that I can't learn through books.

The course was very great because the professor was very hands on and very encouraging. He taught me so much especially with handling events that no book or theory can ever teach me.

It gave me lessons that I can carry outside the classroom since this course was not dependent on PowerPoint decks or books which I am very happy about.

2. There is a significant difference in the levels of student engagement and learning success in cohort 2022 when compared with cohorts 2020 and 2021.

There are a few reasons that might explain why there is a difference in the levels of student engagement and learning success among certain cohorts. One important reason may because both the teacher and students have adapted to the online learning modality, developing important skills and behavior that lend to a better learning experience online. For example, respondents from the 2020 cohort acknowledged that the learning experience helped developed important and transferrable skills, such as communication and collaboration, which are well-suited for learning online.

It showed me how challenging it can be to work with others especially online. With the knowledge I have now, I think I will be able to work with others online a little bit better.

Since everything is going virtual, it helped me gain experience on how to successfully do events online and collaborate with people online.

Another reason is that the teacher continually reviews and revises the storytelling lectures and project-based requirements to suit learner needs and expectations. One other motivation for these post-course assessment surveys is to understand learner expectations and experiences and to use data collected from these surveys to develop and enhance course content and delivery. Evaluating learning experiences is a transformative teaching strategy, as the post-course assessments provide opportunities for the student to reflect on their learning experience and course performance, which is an important aspect in transformational learning (Mezirow, 1978a, 1978b, 1991 & 1997; Slavich & Zimbardo, 2012).

Furthermore, the teacher uses feedback from surveys to improve communication with students, allowing maximized use of learning management systems and alternative social media channels. Communication is an important aspect of the learning experience and crucial in building rapport between teachers and students.

Conclusion

The results of this study offer two important implications. First, student engagement is significantly correlated with and predicts learner-defined learning success in online learning. Transformative teaching strategies foster and enhance student engagement (Slavich & Zimbardo, 2012), which lead to learning success. The use of these strategies, particularly storytelling lectures and collaborative challenge-based projects, were crucial in engaging students in the online setting.

Second, there were statistically significant differences between the levels of student engagement and learning success between cohort 2022 and the earlier cohorts. The differences may have been a result of teachers and students developing skills appropriate for online learning, which lends to better student engagement. This may also result from improvements in course content and delivery through the years as teaching strategies were continually reviewed and revised based on student feedback.

Implications and Future Research

This study provides evidence transformative teaching strategies foster and enhance student engagement in the online classroom. While there are technological, pedagogical, and social challenges to online learning (Ferri et al (2020), the results of this study demonstrate that these challenges may be addressed by enhancing student engagement. This is particularly important as there is opportunity to use the online learning modality in HEIs, as this modality provides a distinct learning experience while offering a level flexibility that may suit certain types of learners (Gardner et al, 2021). Furthermore, online learning develops unique skills that are important and suitable for the remote and/or hybrid workplace.

This study analyzes the learning experience of cohorts of students taking specific course subjects. Furthermore, it is limited to understanding the impact of student engagement to student-defined learning success. It does not attempt to identify other variables that may influence or determine learning success. While we can glean from the results of the survey that the teacher has some influence over student engagement and learning success, the study does not attempt to measure how much of the teacher's efforts and actions contribute to these variables. Future studies may focus on these areas, as well as understanding how to sustain student engagement in a fully online learning environment in the long term.

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