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**Rita-Marie Conrad, J. Ana Donaldson, *Engaging the Online Learner*,
Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 2011, 139 p.**

In this period of rapid adaptation to life within a pandemic, most teachers have had to move their classes online, despite having little to no experience holding courses in such an environment. For just such an endeavor, a great resource may be *Engaging the Online Learner*, written by Rita-Marie Conrad, an award-winning digital learning consultant who has worked at such prestigious universities as Duke and Berkeley, and by author J. Ana Donaldson, who updated the book to its 2011 version. Even at a first glance, it is clear that this book aims to give quick answers to pertinent questions. At just 139 pages, this is not a text meant to debate and analyze the validity of online teaching. Rather, it is a step-by-step guide to setting up and running an online course, which is great for the busy teacher that has to quickly reshape their classes.

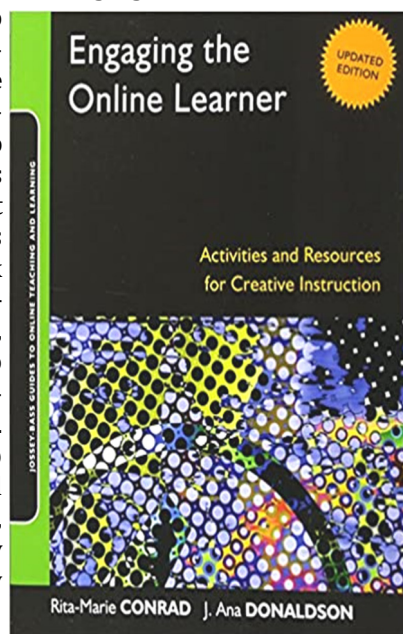
Structurally, *Engaging the Online Learner* is divided in two main parts – ‘Part One: Constructing Activities to Engage Online Learners’ and ‘Part Two: Activities to Engage Online Learners’, which could also be viewed in terms of theory and practice. There is also

a previous section entitled ‘Learning in an Online Environment’, which serves as an introduction. At the same time, the book is also divided into ten chapters, where the introduction coincides with Chapter 1, Part One includes Chapters 2-4, and Part Two covers Chapters 5-10.

As mentioned, Chapter 1 is also the introductory section.

This part should be of particular interest to the teacher that has so far been accustomed to face-to-face classes, as it illustrates the differences in approach when it comes to creating class materials and getting information across to the student. An example of how online classes differ from face-to-face ones is that, in an online class, student interactions are more important than the content that is delivered because, unlike in a traditional setting, there might be little to no socializing among

students outside the class setting. Thus, “the most important role of the instructor in online classes is to ensure a high degree of interactivity” (Conrad and Donaldson 2011:5). The teacher still plays a key role in managing the course, but



student participation takes precedence. Beyond illustrating differences, the authors also conveniently present a general outline of how a teacher might set up a successful online class, with an emphasis on what to focus on every week.

With Chapter 2 'Designing Online Engagement', Part One begins. In this chapter, the authors dive deeper into methods of adapting in-class activities to an online environment so as to ensure that student interest is captured and held. This chapter also touches upon what digital tools (e.g. chat, email, Skype) work best in various situations, a subsection which has the inevitable drawback that certain technologies that were popular at the time of writing may be considered out of style today (CD-ROM, fax). Nevertheless, even here the information that the authors provide regarding synchronous and asynchronous activities make for an interesting read regardless of the digital tools of the day.

Chapter 3 'Measuring Online Engaged Learning' touches upon how both the teacher and students might assess an online activity in order to determine whether it aids in the educational process or not. For this, the authors present a rubric system for this endeavor which, while visibly off-putting, they assure is nevertheless highly useful and informative. This chapter also dedicates several pages to peer-to-peer assessment and self-assessment of student work, which could prove especially practical when dealing with a large class, where the instructor might not be able to properly assess the work of each individual.

Chapter 4 'Learning to Use Online Tools' discusses an issue that remains important regardless of the technology of the day: how well students understand

and know how to utilize the tools and platforms that you as the instructor wish to employ. As with the previous chapter, Conrad and Donaldson waste little time before providing a means of identifying any lapses in the student's digital capabilities. Their solution is an easy to use list of recommended tasks that the students might be asked to complete, including a questionnaire that tests their previous experience with online learning and a non-graded scavenger hunt meant to see how well they are able to find information online. Although the students that the authors have in mind are adults, we should keep in mind that, even when they fall under the category of so-called *digital natives*, there is no guarantee that the students are familiar with the particular online tools that the teacher wishes to use, making the information in this chapter especially relevant.

Part two moves us away from theory and towards a practical illustration of what can be done online. Thus, each subsequent chapter offers six categories of activities, such as 'Peer Partnerships and Team Activities' (Chapter 6), 'Reflective Activities' (Chapter 7), 'Authentic Activities' (Chapter 8) or 'Games and Simulations' (Chapter 9). For each category, Conrad and Donaldson offer step-by-step explanations of how to set up the overall tasks, as well as a varied list of specific examples that a teacher can choose from. As an example, Chapter 8 includes the exercise 'Case study', where "each student will work up one case study within an assigned group of three students (Conrad and Donaldson 2011:95). Chapter 10 'Learner-Led Activities' is meant to present the pinnacle of a successful online course. Here the authors point out that this category allows the student to see

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himself as an active contributor, since “it is at this point that learners recognize that they are of knowledge generators” (Conrad and Donaldson 2011:114). As with the other chapters, the author provides easy to follow instructions on setting up the activities and the conditions for them to be possible. Nevertheless, it is difficult to imagine how these learner-led exercises could work in a medium to large class, since time management may be an issue. Of more general interest might be Chapter 5 ‘Online Icebreakers’. Here we find exercises that help compensate for the lack of social connections that naturally form in face-to-face classrooms, without which students will soon lose interest in the course content.

Perhaps the only real drawback to this book has to do with its target reader. Conrad and Donaldson make it quite clear

that *Engaging the Online Learner* is meant primarily for instructors of online courses with a small number of adult students. For this reason, several of the activities found in Part Two are unusable in their given form for a teacher of a large group of teenagers or young adults. Still, the overall structure of an online course, as provided in Chapter 1, is worth considering regardless of circumstance and the exercises can always be adapted to fit student needs. Whether you teach many students or few, old or young, and especially if you are new to online teaching, *Engaging the Online Learner* is a must-read book. The theory is solid, the explanations clear and, all in all, Conrad and Donaldson provide all the tools necessary in order to get a successful online course up and running.

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