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Exploration of online activities that engage New Zealand middle school students

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Abstract

This exploratory case study explores student engagement in an online, middle school context at a New Zealand distance education school. Considering the three dimensions of student engagement—emotional engagement, behavioural engagement and cognitive engagement—an exploration was undertaken in to what types of activities engage students and whether certain aspects of learning activities engage students in different ways. Qualitative data analysis techniques were employed to analyse data collected through a questionnaire, interviews and asynchronous discussion forum comments from both students and teachers within the online classes. Statistical data from the learning management system (LMS) was also analysed to support the qualitative data collected. The study found that engaging students online is complex, with a variety of different activities required to engage students. Carrying out tasks outside of the LMS was considered to be particularly engaging as it enabled personalisation of learning. The students in the study tended to engage behaviourally with all activities. Cognitive engagement was seen to increase where students were able to be creative in their learning experiences. Emotional engagement could be elicited through the design and facilitation of the activities as well as through the ongoing development of a learning community in which the students feel safe to contribute. This case study looks at how this group of students engaged in online activities and provides suggestions as to what teachers can do to engage students online. It makes suggestions as to what schools and teachers could consider in terms of how to engage students online.

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