

## **Supporting Students During COVID-19: Developing and Leveraging Academic Communities of Engagement in a Time of Crisis**

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As school closures require educators to transition to remote teaching, relevant models for supporting students are necessary. This article discusses Academic Communities of Engagement (ACE), a framework identifying two communities to help support student engagement: (a) the course community associated with course or school (teacher, peers, administrators, counselors) and (b) students' personal community with long-standing relationships (parents, siblings, friends). Within the framework these communities can provide affective, behavioral, and cognitive support in online (remote)

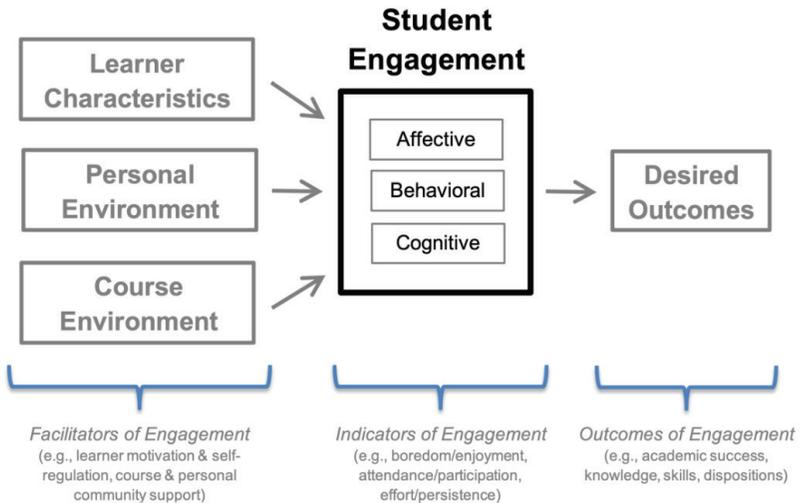
settings. Examples from two schools that had to go remote demonstrate application of the framework promoting student engagement and success.

## **THE ACADEMIC COMMUNITIES OF ENGAGEMENT FRAMEWORK**

With the spread of COVID-19, schools across the United States and around the world moved instruction online. Transition to the online environment can be especially difficult because many teachers are concurrently learning how to teach online. The Academic Communities of Engagement (ACE) framework can help the educational community focus their efforts to prepare teachers on the types of support most likely to promote student success. It centers on increasing student engagement by leveraging support from students' personal and course-provided communities (Borup, Graham, West, Archambault, & Spring, 2020; Borup, West, Graham, & Davies, 2014).

### **Student Engagement**

Achieving desired outcomes requires student engagement, identified by ACE as being affective (feelings while completing tasks), cognitive (development of knowledge and skills), and behavioral (demonstrative effort). Students' ability to independently engage in learning activities depends on personal characteristics, personal environment, and course environment (Figure 1).



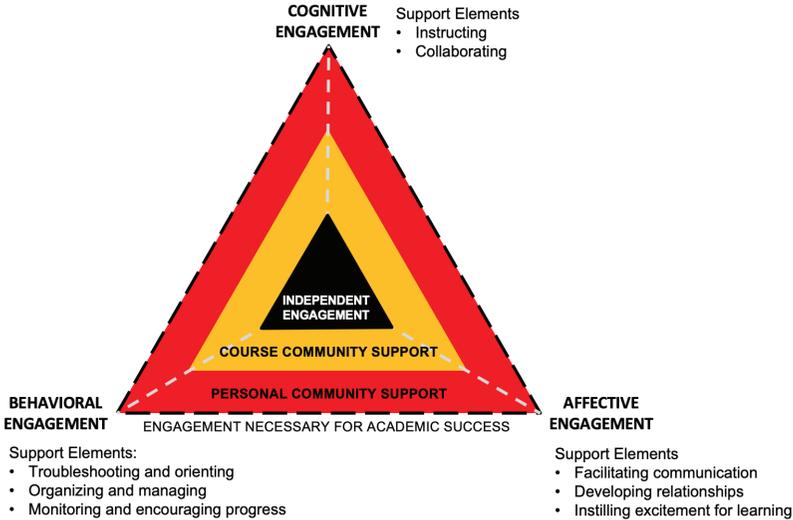
**Figure 1.** Model showing relationship of facilitators, indicators, and outcomes of engagement (Borup, Graham, et al., 2020, p. 811).

## Support Communities

Building on Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development, the ACE framework anticipates that students' ability to engage affectively, behaviorally, and cognitively increases when supported by others. The ACE framework identifies two communities that can contribute to supporting students' engagement:

1. Course community: those affiliated with the course or school (instructor, peers, administrators, counselors)
2. Personal community: those having long-standing (perhaps lifelong) relationships with the student (parents, siblings, friends, social networks)

Students likely require support from both to achieve engagement necessary for academic success. ACE aligns specific support with type of engagement (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** The area between independent engagement and the outer triangle (amount of engagement necessary for academic success) is potential engagement when students are supported by their course community and personal community. ACE framework also identifies support elements aligned with types of engagement (Borup, Graham, et al., 2020, p. 818).

## PROCESS AND EARLY RESULTS

To illustrate potential important ACE student supports, we describe course community supports at a high school and a junior high during COVID-19, along with ways students' course community supported members of their personal community. Both schools, located in a large school district in the Mountain West, were selected via prior working relationships. A district innovative learning coach provided relevant information and examples.

Once the school building closures were announced, the innovative learning coach and two professional learning community coaches began by identifying teachers who had previously shown to be technology leaders. For two days these teachers held small group professional development (PD) sessions to help teachers to create remote learning activities and become better remote facilitators. This PD offered "choice sessions" that focused on specific tools and teaching strategies related to those tools. One principal implored faculty to "LEARN From each other!!...If you are doing something great, please share with the staff so we can all learn from each other how to make this engaging."

The innovative learning coach and two professional learning community coaches worked full time to address teachers' specific needs and concerns. This approach was especially helpful during this stressful and uncertain time where inservice teachers' abilities to effectively teach remotely varied greatly. Not only did coaching allow for personalized PD, it honored the teachers' professionalism by allowing them to identify and address their unique needs. One principal also requested and shared teachers' successes and development, ending one message to faculty with the following statement:

WOW!!! This sounds a lot like we are engaged in deep learning as adults through this pandemic! I'm excited to see how we will emerge better and stronger as teachers individually and collectively as a school because of this experience. Keep striving.

**Table 1**  
Case examples of course community engagement supports

Type of Engagement	Community Engagement Support Examples
Behavioral Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Schools provided family Chromebook access with Internet hotspots when needed.</li> <li>● Teachers monitored student activity within online courses and emailed and/or called to check on students when activity was low.</li> <li>● Schools created a form for identifying concerns with low engagement of specific students.</li> <li>● Counselors and paraprofessionals contacted families where limited access was occurring to assess needs.</li> <li>● Often students simply needed support with access and navigation of courses.</li> </ul>
Cognitive Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Administrators encouraged creative instruction.</li> <li>● Teachers focused on essential standards.</li> <li>● Teachers provided feedback and help virtual office hours.</li> </ul>
Affective Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Administrators posted daily motivational videos.</li> <li>● Teachers engaged with students in social interactions and activities such as Zoom scavenger hunts.</li> <li>● Personal contacts with students and families every other week.</li> </ul>

During the initial shutdown, both schools focused on supporting behavioral engagement. Families were allotted one Chromebook per two children along with internet hotspots as needed. In one shared experience, an administrator drove to a student's home to deliver a Chromebook and help him

log in. Teachers monitored students' behavioral engagement within online courses. If no/little course activity was occurring, teachers emailed and/or called home to check on students' welfare and motivate them to engage. Online forms were provided for teachers to submit concerns about specific students for school counselors and paraprofessionals to contact students/families to determine further needed support. Often access and navigation support were lacking and were preventing student engagement.

Teachers also supported students' cognitive engagement. All grades below C- were changed to pass (P), and students could elect a P for any grades below A. Soon after the closure, administrators gave teachers "full license to try new things" and asked them to cover only essential standards. Teachers supported students' learning by providing feedback and connecting with them during virtual office hours.

Schools supported students' affective engagement, posting a daily motivational video, including music, a motivational quote, a health tip, and a unique challenge, delivered by a sometimes-costumed administrator (Figure 4).



**Figure 4.** Screenshot from one of the administrator's daily motivational videos

Teachers maintained relationships and facilitated interactions with and between students. One parent thanked administrators for a teacher who showed "he genuinely cares for these kids" by staying in contact and asking them meaningful questions. The teacher also conducted a weekly Zoom scavenger hunt.

However, accomplishments had limits. One teacher said, “For every success story I have in encouraging the students to engage, there is an instance where I am not successful.” Another teacher expressed doubt whether “classwide emails . . . made much difference.” Teachers seemed to have the most success by contacting students and their families personally by email, phone calls, text messages, video conferencing, etc. To ensure connection, teachers divided their list of student families and made personal contact every other week.

Teachers and administrators encouraged parents to support their students’ behavioral and affective engagement. If parents were unaware of student inactivity, a phone call or text message usually got them involved. For example, following one text message from a teacher, a parent quickly responded “Ugh. Stinker. . . . Good bye Xbox and phone til done.” School administrators recognized pressures on parents and attempted to be as flexible as possible. Administrators combined as much communication as possible into one weekly email sent in English and Spanish.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

The ACE framework can help course community members understand their responsibilities, the support personal communities can provide, and the support they can provide to personal communities (Borup et al., 2020). Both schools had previously established a strong coaching culture that allowed them to leverage their existing teacher expertise to more successfully shift to remote teaching. Coaches throughout the district are also developing on-line professional development that will be offered during the summer that will include instruction about effective online and blended teaching and supported technology tools.

A central argument of the ACE framework is that each student’s ability to independently engage in learning activities is dependent on that student’s characteristics, personal environment, and course environment. The innovative learning coach explained, “There are vastly different levels of support from a student’s personal community ranging from negative (discouragement and abuse) to extremely supportive.” School districts should carefully consider a student’s personal environment when planning and providing supports.

This is also an opportunity for school districts and colleges of education to partner to prepare teachers for the challenges ahead. Partnerships with districts can also benefit colleges of education and preservice teach-

ers. In our case example, the school district is part of a 30+ year public school partnership with a robust teacher preparation program. As part of the program, preservice teachers complete a one-credit course specifically designed to prepare them for teaching in online and blended contexts. The course's structure takes students from conceptual understandings of online and blended teaching, part of which include the ACE framework, to applying these understandings in the creation of an online module that can be used for online or blended instruction. Preservice teachers then take part in practicum experiences where they have assignment options to apply what they have learned with actual K-12 students. Throughout the experience, future teachers develop four research-based competencies: (1) online integration, (2) data practices, (3) personalization, and (4) online interaction (see <http://edtechbooks.org/k12blended> for access to online curriculum resources and <http://bit.ly/K12-BTR> for a blended teaching readiness self-evaluation). Even though practicum was cancelled during the pandemic, 13 of 28 elementary education majors in one course section reported that they were able to use their knowledge and abilities from the course to assist their mentor teachers (and others) in planning, developing, or facilitating online instruction during the crisis. Some of these experiences happened onsite prior to the partner schools moving to remote learning, while others happened through virtual communications or sharing their previously created modules online. One student even reported that her experiences in the course convinced a partner school to hire her as a long-term substitute, an opportunity that led to a full-time teaching position.

While there have been some bright spots such as the partnership described, the field of teacher education has been slow to prepare preservice teachers for online settings (Archambault et al., 2016). One legacy of the COVID-19 pandemic should be increased efforts to not only prepare teachers to meet the current demands but also a recognition of the importance of creating a teacher workforce that is prepared to support students in blended and online environments. The ACE Framework can be a useful tool in designing opportunities for future teachers to develop skills in supporting students at a distance.

## FUTURE RESEARCH

One benefit of frameworks such as ACE is that they help to focus on factors that matter most (Mishra & Koehler, 2006; Whetten, 1989). The ACE framework can contribute to planning, providing, and researching stu-

dent support systems. Examinations of ACE in specific settings such as the one presented here can help to refine or expand certain areas of the framework. For instance, preliminary findings showed the importance of school administrator support and leadership during a crisis, something not emphasized in the ACE framework but an important area for future research. Researchers should also work to create and validate an instrument that quantitatively measures support elements of ACE. This type of instrument would benefit both the research community as well as school districts to identify and respond to specific student needs.

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