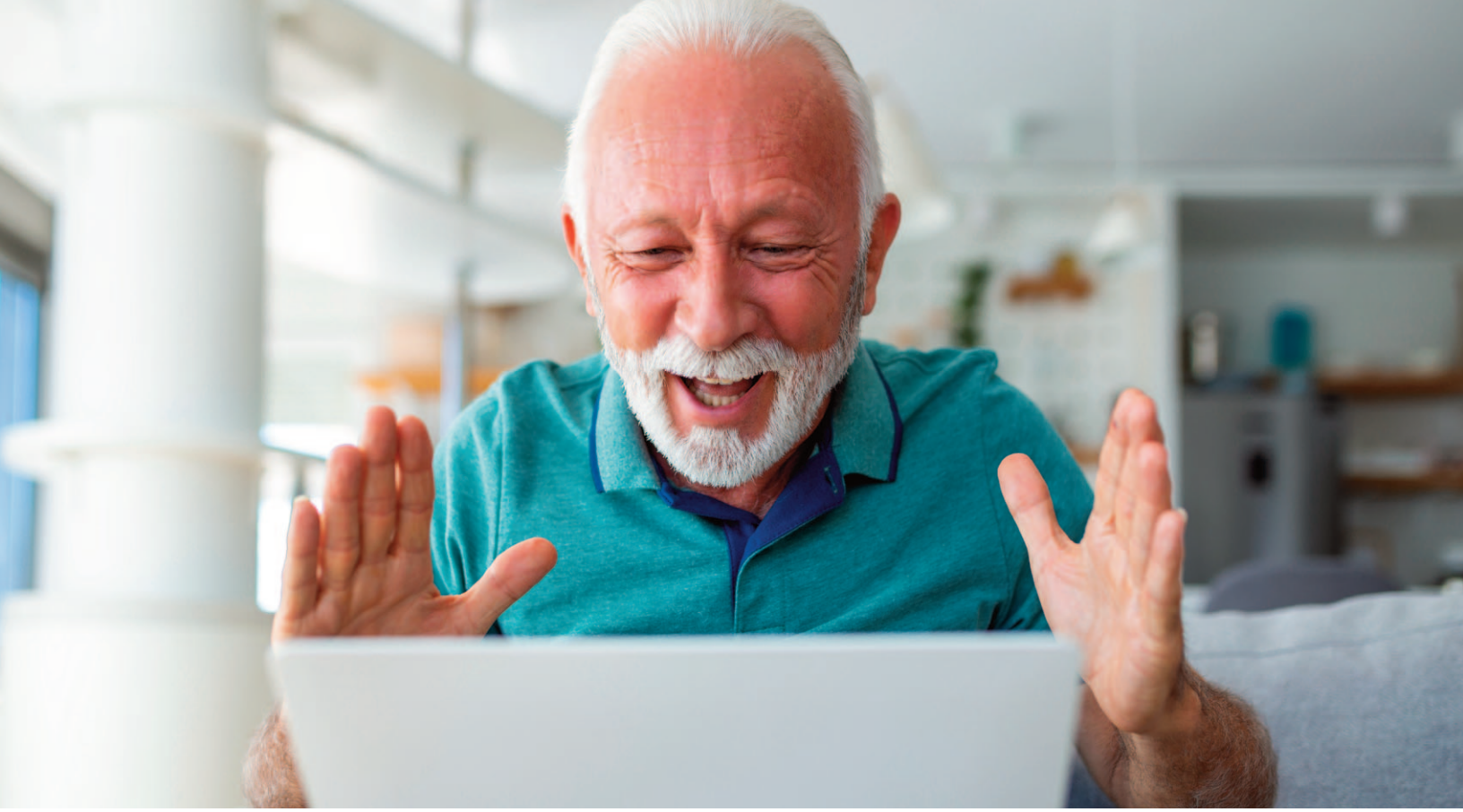
CATHOLIC VIRTUAL ONTARIO

CVO – GROWING TOGETHER IN FAITH

ENGAGEMENT AND INTERACTIVES IN ONLINE LEARNING

Catholic Virtual Learning Resource

Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association



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MIRACULOUS INVOCATION TO ST. THERESE

O Glorious St. Therese,
whom Almighty God has raised up to aid
and inspire the human family,
I implore your Miraculous Intercession.

You are so powerful in obtaining every need
of body and spirit from the Heart of God.
Holy Mother Church proclaims you "Prodigy of Miracles…
the greatest saint of Modern Times."

Now I fervently beseech you to answer my petition
(mention in silence here)
and to carry out your promises of
spending heaven doing good on earth…
of letting fall from Heaven a Shower of Roses.

Little Flower, give me your childlike faith,
to see the Face of God
in the people and experiences of my life,
and to love God with full confidence.

St. Therese, my Carmelite Sister,
I will fulfill your plea "to be made known everywhere"
and I will continue to lead others to Jesus through you.

"Be who God meant you to be and you will set the world on fire."

— St. Catherine of Sienna

A SHARED WORLDVIEW

As teachers in Catholic schools, we share a unique worldview grounded in service and community. Through our professional practice, guiding students with our hearts and minds, the broader community, both present and future, also benefits. The learners we empower will eventually contribute to society through their own endeavours, continuing a pattern of flourishing and love.

"Peace be with you!
For the sake of the Lord,
I will seek your good."
(Psalms 122)

A SHARED COMMITMENT

Regardless of the specific role we have in education at any given time, we are all educational leaders. Educating youth unites responsibility with service, a transformative element of our vocation. In fact, teaching is a profession that fosters all others, motivating students to apply learning meaningfully as life-long, engaged and contributing citizens.

Grounded in Gospel values, Catholic education nurtures an inclusive learning culture of high expectations for all learners across all learning environments. Diversity is championed as a strength, so that students with different backgrounds and experiences are collectively inspired to achieve to their unique potential and promote the common good. Created in God's image, all learners matter.

Knowledge and learning humanize; they are communal and social activities. Assessments should reflect this humanity.

"My Novena Rose Prayer. O Little Therese of the Child Jesus, please pick for me a rose from the heavenly gardens and send it to me as a message of love. O Little Flower of Jesus, ask God to grant the favours I now place with confidence in your hands. (mention in silence here).
St. Therese, help me to always believe as you did in God's great love for me, so that I might imitate your "Little Way" each day. Amen."

ENGAGING STUDENTS IN ONLINE LEARNING

As the demand for online learning opportunities grows in Ontario, so do the concerns of Catholic leaders regarding the quality and authenticity of Online religious education. Many students are opting for online courses and teachers are doing their best to apply lessons learned from the pandemic to address the needs of their students.

Some in religious education have expressed concern over a lack of face to face opportunities to foster spiritual growth and awareness. Other concerns include:

- Loss of authentic community
- Sensitivity and support for difficult topics
- Lack of relationships

These concerns can be addressed using techniques, tools, and pedagogy to foster an authentic spiritual learning experience. Additional guidance on how to achieve this using the principles of Differentiated Instruction, Universal Design for Learning and Social Emotional Learning can be found in CVO publications located on the CVO website.

It is a misconception to believe that learning online equates to learning in isolation. The experience of the pandemic has taught that there is an opportunity to feel spiritually connected and united with others even in virtual settings. Authentic online experiences can be rich, engaging and effective in the absence of face to face interactions.

> On 27 March 2020, while still in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, Saint Peter's Square was empty but full of presence. A televised and live-streamed transmission allowed Pope Francis to lead a transformative global experience: a prayer and message addressed to a world in lockdown. In the midst of a health crisis that took the lives of millions, people around the world, quarantined and in isolation, found themselves profoundly united with each other and with the successor of Peter.[6]

Online learning has the potential to include opportunities for spiritual connection and fellowship, but it falls on the teacher to provide these opportunities. Just like any course, online or face to face, it is important for the teacher to foster opportunities for students to engage in the learning and not simply expect them to. Research has identified three levels of interaction that influence engagement:

- **Student to student:** discussions, group activities, peer evaluations
- **Student to teacher:** communication of announcements, reminders, grading rubrics and expectations, providing feedback
- **Student to content:** any interaction between student and the course content

"Jesus has no need of books or teachers to instruct souls; He teaches without the noise of words. Never have I heard him speak, but I feel he is within me at each moment. He is guiding and inspiring me with what I must say and do. I find, just when I need them, certain lights that I had not seen until then, and it isn't most frequently during the hours of prayer that these are most abundant, but rather in the midst of my daily occupations." — St. Therese of Lisieux

Among these interactions, student to student interaction is the most important in terms of student engagement in the course. *Frontiers | Engagement in Online Learning: Student Attitudes and Behavior During COVID-19* (frontiersin.org)

Online Teachers face an additional challenge of providing these engagement opportunities in an online environment. It requires the teacher to create activities designed to get to know their students and to continue to maintain contact via discussions, meetings and feedback.

The following framework has also been developed to identify different levels of engagement. Schlechty's framework outlines five levels of Student Engagement *(Source)*:

1. **Authentic Engagement:** This is the highest level of engagement, where students are genuinely interested in their learning. They are intrinsically motivated, find personal meaning in their tasks, and are willing to invest extra effort to achieve their goals. Students at this level often take initiative, demonstrate creativity, and view challenges as opportunities to learn.
2. **Ritual Compliance:** At this level, students follow the rules and complete tasks because they are required to do so, not necessarily because they are deeply interested in the material. They may comply with instructions but lack enthusiasm or personal connection to their learning.
3. **Strategic Compliance:** Students in this level engage with their tasks to achieve a specific outcome, such as earning a grade or avoiding punishment. They focus on completing assignments efficiently, but their motivation is still primarily extrinsic. They may exhibit minimal interest in understanding the broader concepts.
4. **Retreatism:** At this level, students become disengaged and disinterested in their learning. They might withdraw emotionally and mentally, showing little effort or commitment. This disengagement can result from feelings of inadequacy, lack of relevance, or previous negative experiences.
5. **Rebellion:** The lowest level of engagement involves active resistance or rejection of learning tasks. Students in this category may exhibit disruptive behavior, openly challenge authority, and refuse to participate in activities. Their engagement level is extremely low, and they may struggle to find value in the educational experience.

Schlechty's framework serves as a tool to evaluate and enhance student engagement, aiming to move them from lower levels to higher levels of engagement. This is where learning is more meaningful, self-directed, and fulfilling. For the purpose of this document, we have aligned with five characteristics that can help support and engage students.

"No doubt, it is a great grace to receive the sacraments. When God does not permit it, it is good too! Everything is grace!"
— St. Therese of Lisieux

THE 5 C'S OF ENGAGEMENT

Now, let's delve into the "Five C's of Engagement:" Consistency, Connection, Content, Community and Compassion. *(Source)*

CONSISTENCY

"Do everything for love. Thus there will be no little things: everything will be big. Perseverance in little things for love is heroism."
– St. Josemaría Escrivá

Many of our students are unfamiliar with the workflows, tasks, and expectations required of them in virtual environments. As a result, simply being in these spaces can cause significant strain on their cognitive capacity. For this reason, it is important to be consistent with how we are asking them to engage in our virtual classes.

"Having a daily routine and regular habits supports cognitive function and may even free people up to be more creative. [Routines allow us] to spend less cognitive energy on recurring tasks, which can support focus and creativity for more complex tasks." (Source)

By being consistent with the mechanics of the workflows, tasks and expectations we have of our students, we make it possible for them to devote more of their limited resources to engaging with the substance of our courses — rather than its structure. This helps democratize learning opportunities for all of our students, especially those who may not arrive with extensive experience with digital spaces.

CONNECTION

"Let us always meet each other with a smile, for the smile is the beginning of love."
– Mother Teresa

We sometimes take for granted the relationships we are able to form in physical spaces. These connections often develop organically through our daily interactions with students. However, this cannot be taken for granted in virtual spaces. Relationships and connections must be formed with intention. It is essential that students come to understand that we care about their wellbeing, and academic performance, and that this is not predicated on anything.

Research shows that students who believe their educators care about them as people are more likely to be engaged in their work, emotionally attached to their school, and experience higher levels of well-being. *(Source).*

Spiritual Communion Prayer

"My Jesus, believe that You are present in the Most Holy Sacrament. I love You above all things, and I desire to receive You into my soul. Since I cannot at this moment receive You sacramentally, come at least spiritually into my heart. I embrace You as if You were already there and unite myself wholly to You. Never permit me to be separated from You."

CONTENT

"A Reflective, Creative and Holistic Thinker: Adopts a holistic approach to life by integrating learning from various subject areas and experience." – Ontario Catholic School Graduate Expectations

In order for students to meaningfully engage with the content of a course, it must be appropriately levelled, and reasonably authentic. Many of our students have limited exposure to virtual learning, and as such, it is essential that their experiences of it are consistently valuable and relatable. When students feel that the content of their courses hold little relevance to their lives or projected pathways, they begin to move down the engagement continuum and begin to form habits that, at best, support modes of Ritual Compliance.

"Online instructors should not assume students will automatically transfer knowledge from the classroom into real-life application scenarios, even in cases that might feel obvious. As such, educators should foster application opportunities to drive home the relevance of content and skills being learned." (Source)

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We must consistently reflect on both the real and perceived utility of the material/tasks we present to our students. When students believe that what they learn and do will improve themselves, they are much more likely to engage completely.

We must reflect on our content as it relates to the students we have before us. We must also communicate the 'why' of our courses and content to our students.

COMMUNITY

"No one is saved alone, as an isolated individual, but God attracts us looking at the complex web of relationships that take place in the human community. God enters into this dynamic, this participation in the web of human relationships." – Pope Francis

We are a Community of Catholics, and we are called to form connections with each other — to greet others as our neighbor and to love them. This is the foundation of the connection we need to form with, and between, our students. By creating a welcoming, and loving, space for our students, we are able to create an environment they want to participate in.

This sense of belonging and safety is required for students to extend beyond Ritual and Strategic Compliance. It allows them to take the risks and express the creativity that is at the core of true engagement. (Source)

"We must grasp firmly the challenge of providing a kind of education whose curriculum will be inspired more by reflection than by technique, more by a search for wisdom than by the accumulation of information."
— Pope Saint John Paul II

COMPASSION

"Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience." (Colossians 3:12)

Many online students face responsibilities. This can result in late assignments or the need to make up missed work. We cannot know for sure the personal challenges our students face. They may be struggling with their own health, or that of a family member, unpredictable work expectations, or challenges in their personal relationships. These students not only require empathy and understanding but also classroom support and guidance to help them balance their responsibilities.

By weaving compassion into the fabric of our virtual spaces, we acknowledge the unique challenges our students face. Through this, we actively extend a supportive and guiding hand that nurtures students to meet their potential. This approach fosters an environment where students can thrive and succeed, even amidst personal difficulties. By recognizing and being cognizant of potential personal difficulties students may be going through, we exemplify our commitment to be Caring Community Members and provide students with equal access to learning opportunities.

STUDENT SUCCESS ELEARNING

Five Most Important Elements in Course Design (from Award-Winning Instructors):

- Authentic and relevant course materials that connect to practice
- The use of multimedia resources
- Student creation of digital content individually and collaboratively
- The Instructor's explanation of the purpose of activities, technologies, and assessments in the online course.

– Kumar, Martin, Budhrani, Rithaupt

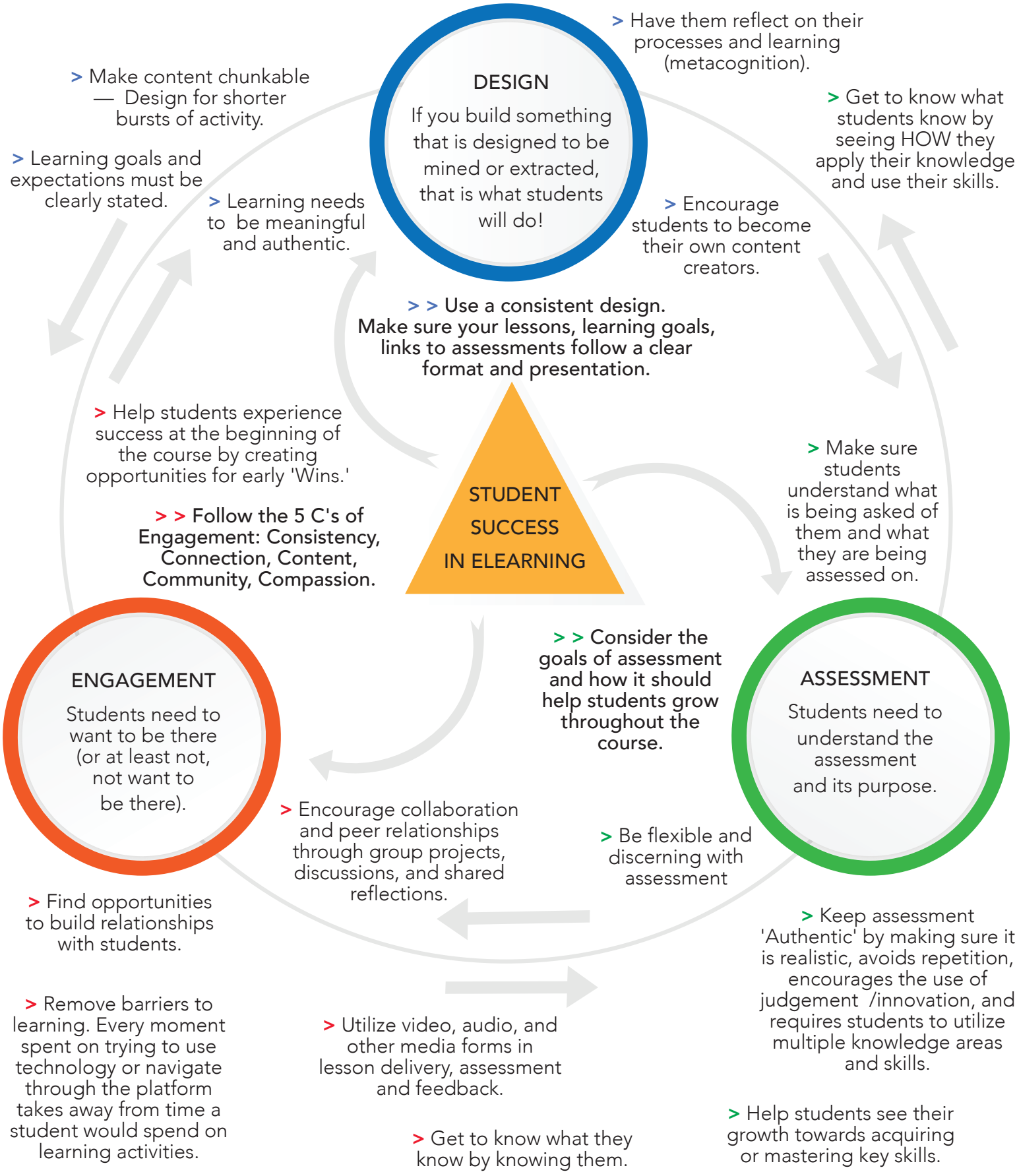
"Instructors cannot simply move course materials or instructional strategies from a face-to-face setting to an online environment." (Fayer).

Student perceptions of most valued course design elements:

Organization — time management, chunking Instructor Feedback — timely, improves understanding, builds confidence, allows for resubmission.

Course Relevance — coursework and feedback is authentic (Fayer)

STUDENT SUCCESS ELEARNING CHART — USING THE TOOLS IN YOUR VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT



"Catholic schools are places where children and young people may find solid and enduring values to give hope, meaning and purpose to life through an authentic relationship with Jesus Christ. This relationship, and the certain knowledge of God's unwavering love for us, provides a firm place to stand in shifting times." — *Renewing the Promise*

USING THE TOOLS IN YOUR VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Using the guiding practices described above, we can transfer these concepts to our Virtual Learning Environment. The following chart provides some examples of how different tools can be used to support and engage students.

Tool	Description
Activity Feed / Announcement Tool	Used to communicate and/or post information to students.

Examples:

- Communicate daily messages to students.
- Remind them of important information.
- Outline the expectations for the students.
- See the Examples of a Online Classrooms Weekly Posting Schedule in the appendix

Discussion Tool	Used to allow students to share thoughts and course material with their peers or their teacher. Forums or topics can be created for various items in the course to allow students to work together.

Examples:

- Student led Question and Answer section
- Homework help discussion where peers can ask for help from other peers
- Discussion space with the teacher to support a culminating task
- Educators and students can provide personal connections to course content.

Check List or Graphic Organizer	Created by instructor to provide an organizational aid for students completing a course.

Examples:

- Account for tasks to be completed in a particular order, allowing learners to check the tasks off as they are completed (i.e., like following a lab experiment)
- Allow for review of completed course content (i.e., completed unit one, two and three readings)
- Allow for assignment-based checklists to ensure that the appropriate items are covered in the assignment (i.e., used minimum number of resources, used appropriate citation format, included a works-cited section, etc.)
- Allow for a method of assessment by evaluating and self-assessing with checklists (i.e., listing a set of sequential behaviors arranged in categories to determine if a learner exhibits competencies).

Beginning with the end helps ensure that all students, regardless of individual entry points, reach an enriching and rewarding destination. If students are to meet with every opportunity for success, they need to be equipped with the corresponding learning and given multiple opportunities to demonstrate understanding in multiple ways.

Tool	Description
Awards and Certificates	Students are awarded with certificates or awards for completion of tasks or meeting goals.

Examples:

- Gamify your course.
- Provide an award for any grade over 80% on selected assignments.
- Provide an award when a student is half way through a course to keep them motivated and on task — providing instant feedback.

Content	The material that students engage with in a course.

Examples:

- Use videos and text together to engage students.
- Create interactive content using accordions, click and reveals, or other interactives that are available in your virtual learning environment.

Video Tools	Applications that allow for the creation of video content.

Examples:

- Create videos of yourself explaining and reviewing the content for students. This can build a connection with them.
- Allow students to demonstrate their understanding through the use of video.

Assignments / Dropbox	A place for students to submit artifacts of learning.

Examples:

- Provide voice and choice in assignments, allow students to complete the work in multiple ways to demonstrate their understanding of the curriculum.
- Provide individual descriptive feedback for the students.

Email / Chat	Any tool to send messages to communicate with the student.

Examples:

- Provide personal feedback on how the students are doing in the course.
- Keep students and parents/guardians informed of a student's progress. Start early with positive communication.
- Automate base communication and progress with Intelligent Agents.

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Our Mission

Catholic Virtual Ontario provides equity of access for Catholic secondary students to take secondary credits developed and taught by Catholic teachers.

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