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Smart Home Gym Instruction and What an English Professor Learned from Spinning Her Wheels *Julie Daoud*

The unexpected corollary for online teaching that I arrived at while high-fiving fellow spinners at the conclusion of a virtual ride—a ride atop a stationary bike relegated to a damp corner of my unfinished basement—is that a participant’s *engagement* and, relatedly, *performance* when it comes to online learning is directly linked to two user-perceptions: 1) that the instructor is actively engaged in the virtual session, and 2) that the participant is “seen” by the instructor and fellow participants.

While seemingly disparate purveyors for growth and development, teachers of writing are often metaphorized as “coaches,” a trope that suggests an inherent kinship between academic teachers and fitness trainers. Educational theorists utilize the coaching metaphor because it foregrounds a critical component of successful teaching: the act of inspiring motivation. Unlike teaching metaphors that suggest a medicinal, military or even agricultural relationship between educators and students, the coaching metaphor underscores the importance of external encouragement as an act that helps to empower participants to perform at their highest level. In other words, educators have long recognized that positive encouragement goes a long way as far as engendering a sense of personal responsibility in students and thus, helping students to achieve learning outcomes (Badley & Hollabaugh). Given the value of “coaching” tactics, I believe that many of us in higher education might learn something from the pedagogical practices of virtual fitness instructors who, according to the *Wall Street Journal*, may earn upwards of \$500,000 in annual compensation (Chen). Beyond commanding lucrative salaries, those in the virtual fitness sector (e.g. Peloton, Rebel TV, and Frame Online) seem guaranteed job security: user subscriptions to various online exercise

platforms are expected to continue to grow even as we begin to emerge from the pandemic. In fact, trend forecasters predict that between the period starting in 2020 and ending in 2026, at-home smart gym platforms will grow by close to 10% (Shaban).

So how do these virtual home fitness platforms grow and retain online participation while universities and colleges (also deploying online platforms) seem to be experiencing declining enrollments? As these fitness juggernauts secure their foothold by retaining subscribers, the landscape of higher education has become far less certain. Experts in higher education point to pandemic-related woes as factors causing low persistence rates across academic institutions: for instance, the “zoomers” (AKA the generation succeeding the millennial generation) seem skeptical about the value of the diploma at a time when there is a high demand for labor positions that don’t require postsecondary education. Aside from pandemic-related declines, there is the well documented demographic “cliff” predicted to impact higher education enrollment in coming years; the “birth dearth” of 2008–2011, a period of economic recession, is expected to cause significant declines in college enrollments. As such, colleges and universities must find strategies to win and maintain students. Robust digital learning programs promise one strategy for educational leaders to become more attractive to the shrinking numbers of would-be college students; however, there are so many versions of online learning. And not all of them are effectively working to help combat declining enrollments.

Given these looming challenges, it could be beneficial to look to the tactics of our analogues in virtual fitness instruction who continue to ramp up subscription numbers. The Peloton

platform, to cite one example of success, has a retention rate of 92% of its online user base. For the sake of comparison, data reported by *Higher Ed Dive* indicates that persistence rates for university students hover around 74%. (Schwartz).

While the online educational learning management systems like Canvas or Blackboard contrast markedly with platforms used for virtual exercise, especially as far as the purpose and target demographic for each, I have learned that there is something to be gained from observing the instructor-subscriber connection in virtual fitness realms: the seemingly multidimensional nature of the instructor's support. The "touchpoints" deployed across online fitness classes seem to be effective in terms of promoting and sustaining engagement with users.

Here are some of my takeaways from my study of these virtual coaches—instructors who are credited with offering the "most attended spin classes" as well as with offering the highest rates for "annual workouts that subscribers have completed" (Odell).

- 1) Offer verbal encouragement: A well-timed bit of verbal encouragement such as a compassionate "Stay with me," or "You can do this!" while surmounting a steep climb lets the participant know that the instructor is aware of the struggle and that he/she is working to instill the fortitude needed to push harder and farther. It's akin to letting a student know that despite the rigor of an upcoming test, the instructor is aware that the student is invested and will watch for his/her best effort. By working verbal encouragement into a discussion about an upcoming assignment, an instructor might foster student stamina.
- 2) Be attentive to the "leaderboard" and utilize opportunities for related "shout-outs": This real-time cueing from an instructor to live riders can go a long way in the virtual fitness world. Why not mediate online class time by giving accolades to students who are

contributing meaningfully to the learning experience? This real-time cueing might instill intentionality in the online classroom.

- 3) "See" participants: The phrase "I see you" is a favorite of virtual fitness instructors; I've heard the phrase used across a range of situations in my spin classes. For teachers, its power can be as versatile and effective as it is for fitness instructors: "I see you" might be offered to a student to acknowledge that he/she is struggling; the instructor can use this phrase to offer recognition that the student is finding an aspect of an assignment to be confusing and needs a bit more explanation or support. Knowing that the teacher sees the struggle helps to offer assurance to the student that his/her instructor will make time to intercede to dispel confusion. In using this phrase, an instructor provides a level of validation to the learner-at any level of growth. Through this act of validation, an instructor can help to allay the student anxiety that might otherwise prevent a struggling student from voicing a need for attention. To cultivate a nurturing virtual environment, this affirmation can go a long way toward genuinely engaging with participants, especially those who may, by default, find themselves fading into the margins.
- 4) Smile, breathe, and reflect calm capability: If an instructor manifests a "can-do" presence, he/she will help to instill the same in participants as they work to manage the challenges of the workload. (I know that when I see a virtual instructor spinning with a mouth curved into a smile that the challenge is one that I can surmount.)
- 5) Offer pointed updates: This can be as simple as relaying to individuals an awareness of how they are doing. Virtual instructors may note improved speed across a participant's most recent series of rides; such updates can help a participant to become more deliberate about performance. Pointed updates-conveyed verbally or through chat features or even an online gradebook that students can access to

gauge scoring—can be helpful to students as well. When students are made aware of performance data, they may invest in more effective learning strategies. In other words, pointed updates enable students to track what is working well and what needs more work. As such, the updates allow them to develop mindsets for success. When students succeed, a student’s experience tends to be more likely to feel positively about the pathway to graduation—a factor that might result in higher rates of persistence overall.

Ultimately, these “touchpoints” won’t serve as a curative for all of the challenges of virtual teaching in a pandemic-or even post-pandemic-world. Nor will they do much to mitigate the problem of the shrinking population of high school aged students caused by the economic recession. But academics might be able to improve the connective experience for students if the virtual “guide on the side” is open to the example of the virtual “guide on the ride.”

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Julie Daoud is the Chair of the English Department at Thomas More University. She earned her doctorate in 19th century English Literature, but her academic work and teaching has broadened to support a revised curriculum which provides emphasis on 1) emerging/marginalized writers and 2) the expansion of creativity through the practice of writing that features traditional genres as well as contemporary genres (like instapoetry and “ludic” writing, and 3) the craft of writing for a range of digital platforms/new media and 4) the inclusion of more training for “career-readiness” across our course offerings. Though the curriculum is unlike any that she imagined for students when she first launched her university career, it seems that to emerge from these fraught times, this sort of change is as necessary as it is comprehensive.

