

Chapter 4

Virtual Office Hours: Improving an Asynchronous Course

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ABSTRACT

The notion of synchronous office hours in an asynchronous course seems counterintuitive. After all, one of the tenets of asynchronous education is to not require students to be online and participating at any time during the course. Having taught higher education online asynchronous courses for 20 years, the researcher experimented with online synchronous office hours as a means of making a connection with her online doctoral students. This chapter outlines the challenges, benefits, and best practices of incorporating a synchronous element into an otherwise purely asynchronous environment. Additionally, it offers strategies to enhance communication between students and the professor, as well as developing a community of learners in the asynchronous classroom.

INTRODUCTION

The availability of university courses via the Internet has revolutionized learning for local and global learners while simultaneously empowering students and professors with new possibilities to interact (Kee, Sarkis & Perumalla, 2014; Lei & Pitts, 2009). Traditional university courses are offered in a synchronous manner where the professor and students are in one classroom and communication takes place simultaneously (Roberts, 2010). Other examples of synchronous communication are videoconferencing, text-messaging, telephone calls, computer-facilitated discussion using cameras, microphones, and/or speakers, and face-to-face teaching and learning (Baker & Woods, 2008; Berkley, Beard & Kaplan, 2012; Cox, 2008; D'Augustino, 2008; Reynolds & Brannick, 2009; Yiping, 2009).

Synchronous communication enables an immediate 'conversational' dialogue, as if the professor and students were together in the classroom (Cox & Hollyhead, 2008; Hall, Culler & Frank-Webb, 2016; Gold, 2009; Journell, McFadyen, Miller & Brown, 2014; Zinger, 2016). However, the absence of visual cues and development of conversations are factors that can limit synchronous discourse. In addition, students must possess the discipline to daily check synchronous discussions (Lowenthal, Snelson

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& Dunlap, 2017). The Learning Management System (LMS), Blackboard, has a tool that facilitates immediate relay of information through synchronous communication. The professor and students can share documents via a white board feature that allows all participants to post documents and write comments (Rickards, 2016). This chat room and virtual classroom technology is called Collaborate Ultra; it facilitates visual and verbal communication in real time (Jones & Alba, 2016). Rather than wait for the professor to respond to an email or telephone call, Collaborate Ultra allows students to receive the answer to questions immediately (Golubski, 2008).

The objectives of this article is to answer the following questions:

1. Will the use of synchronous virtual office hours in an asynchronous course improve communication between students and the professor?
2. Will synchronous virtual office hours help create a community of learners in an asynchronous course?
3. What are the challenges of using virtual office hours in an asynchronous course?
4. What are the benefits of using virtual office hours in an asynchronous course?

BACKGROUND

Synchronous vs. Asynchronous Courses

Haslam (2016) offers the following definitions for synchronous and asynchronous courses:

Synchronous online classes are those that require students and instructors to be online at the same time. Lectures, discussions and presentations occur at a specific hour. All students must be online at that specific hour in order to participate. Asynchronous classes are just the opposite. Instructors provide materials, lectures, tests, and assignments that can be accessed at any time. Students may be given a timeframe – usually a one week window – during which they need to connect at least once or twice. But overall, students are free to contribute whenever they choose. (Haslam, 2016)

Synchronous courses provide a tele-presence: “Real time interaction that builds a sense of social presence and involvement” (Corbell, 2006; Hrastinski, 2008). This type of delivery mode occurs when a traditional face-to-face classroom isn’t available, or when the students in the course reside in different geographical areas (Tonsmann, 2014). There is immediate feedback, spontaneity, familiarity, and an emphasis on listening and speaking. Communication between the professor and students, as well as student to student, can be accomplished via Blackboard Collaborate Ultra and other conferencing tools, blogs and wiki pages. Student group seminar discussions can be facilitated through Blackboard Collaborate Ultra breakout rooms which enhance student understanding and assimilation of concepts (Corbell, 2006; Hrastinski, 2008). The newest version of Blackboard now includes blog and wiki page features to enable group collaboration.

Pedagogical strategies present in traditional courses and other teaching modalities are also present in synchronous courses. These include student attendance, narrated PowerPoint presentations, group work, problem solving activities and homework assignments (Tonsmann, 2014). A problematic issue is that students choose to be engaged in the synchronous course in a myriad of locations that have an internet

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