

Chapter 23

Asynchronous Teaching and Learning in IB English A: Literature

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on the benefits of incorporating asynchronous tasks, activities, components in the teaching of IB English A: Literature Yr. 1. Taking into consideration the unique challenges of the new syllabus, the author shows how asynchronous teaching/learning may enable teachers to cover in depth many literary texts, by running concurrently F2F/synchronous and asynchronous classes. Particular emphasis is placed on how low-immediacy and low-bandwidth tools may contribute to teacher-student and student-student collaboration. The author also reflects on how the use of asynchronous components smoothed the transition to an exclusively online learning environment after the closing of the schools due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

INTRODUCTION

One of the biggest challenges all IB teachers face is the enormous syllabus they have to cover in three semesters. Taking also into consideration that teachers could not exclusively focus on content but should also help students develop various skills as well as prepare them for many external and internal assessments, teaching an IB course looks like a Herculean task. To continue with the allusions to ancient Greek culture, the aim of this article is to show how a bit of Odysseus' cunning and ingenuity in the form of asynchronous teaching/ learning may make this task far easier and less intimidating than it originally appears to be. To do so, I shall present how I incorporated asynchronous components while designing and teaching the new IB English A: Literature Yr. 1 syllabus. These asynchronous activities enabled me to run two classes concurrently: a traditional F2F class combined with an online asynchronous one during the first semester of the 2019-2020 academic year; and two online classes, a synchronous and

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an asynchronous one, during the second semester, after the closing of the schools due to the Covid-19 pandemic. I shall also show how the use of online asynchronous activities during the first semester smoothed the transition to an exclusively online learning environment for both me and my students during the second semester.

BACKGROUND

My definitions of synchronous and asynchronous learning derive from Hrastinski (2008): “*Asynchronous e-learning*, commonly facilitated by media such as e-mail and discussion boards, supports work relations among learners and with teachers, even when participants cannot be online at the same time” (para. 4); while “[*synchronous e-learning*, commonly supported by media such as videoconferencing and chat, has the potential to support e-learners in the development of learning communities” (para. 5). My previous experience with asynchronous teaching/ learning derived from the implementation of the i²Flex learning methodology. While teaching the previous IB English A: Literature syllabus, I included many guided research activities that led to F2F interactive oral presentations as well as forums that further expanded on F2F class discussions. Following the definition of the i²Flex teaching methodology by Avgerinou and Gialamas (2016), these asynchronous components provided multiple opportunities for inquiry-based, independent learning as well as for student-content, student-student, and student-teacher interactivity. Moreover, by enabling flexible e-learning, these activities helped me appreciate the benefits of low-bandwidth and low-immediacy edtech tools (like forums), whose potential has been eloquently examined by Stanford (2020). Reflecting on my practice, I came to the conclusion that flexible, low-immediacy asynchronous learning can effectively complement the F2F teaching of literature in innovative ways. However, although guided research and reflective forum posts after major assessments and after finishing the study of an author enabled independent, inquiry-based, and interactive learning, I now realize that these asynchronous activities could be removed without significantly affecting the structure of the course. In other words, they were conceived and employed in a more decorative than organic manner.

What radically changed my attitude toward the use of asynchronous teaching/ learning was my training for online course design and the actual design/ teaching of an online English Literature course for ACS Athens Virtual in 2019. Studying the material for my training, the following quote intrigued me: “[w]hat online learning did was to broaden the definition of communication and interaction ... supporting a change in the role of the teacher from all-knowing sage to facilitator or coach” (Fowler & Wheeler, 1995; Hiltz, 1995, as cited in Smith, 2007, p. 180). We all know from experience that this change was groundbreaking, revolutionizing our F2F teaching practices. However, since my online course was originally conceived as an exclusively asynchronous one, I was worried that facilitating and coaching could not effectively replace more traditional teacher-student interaction, at least in the teaching of literature, whereby a charismatic content expert can function through lecture, discussion, and Socratic seminars as source of identification on an intellectual and linguistic level. By identifying with the way a teacher thinks and speaks, students rapidly develop through conscious or unconscious imitation the higher-level synthetic skills and the advanced academic discourse that sophisticated literary analysis presupposes. How could a disembodied facilitator reveal the “aspirational” power of language, its ability to inspire one to become a better version of themselves, simply by restructuring their linguistic patterns? Finding the answer to this question was my main focus, while developing my online literature course. A more organic use of discussion forums was extremely helpful in creating a strong and distinct online

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