Chapter 9
Building Connections for Doctoral Students Through Asynchronous Learning:
Discussions and the Flipped Model Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Compared to other graduate programs, online doctoral degree programs have the highest drop-out rate. This chapter presents a case study for engaging doctoral students in asynchronous online learning using a flipped model classroom designed to combine degree advancement, student-centered learning, communal learning, and cognitive readiness for the 21st century. The theoretical frameworks for this single case study were constructivism, connectedness, and andragogy. The participants included 12 doctoral students and the author. The student participants selected the topics of study. Data were analyzed by reviewing responses to an open-ended survey to determine the efficacy of this model. Five themes emerged: promoting meaning and reflective thinking, inspired camaraderie and collaboration, enhanced scholarship and progress, and supported degree advancement. Providing a means to connect doctoral students with each other and their mentor in a meaningful way can make the difference between dropping out of a program and obtaining a doctoral degree.

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INTRODUCTION

In summer 2021, students at universities around the world are preparing to return to traditional in-person learning on campuses after more than a year of closures. Many of the technologies and pedagogies that helped higher education survive during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic will likely become permanently embedded in modes of delivery, shifting from predominantly instructor-led to more student-centered learning. In student-centered learning, students determine what to study and the best way for them to study. This is in sharp contrast to the traditional emphasis on instructor control and coverage of academic content through didactic teaching. Despite the fact that many students will return to traditional in-person learning, online learning is likely to continue to play a major role in every aspect of learning.

Online learning can take place asynchronously or synchronously. In an asynchronous mode, learning occurs at times and places chosen by the learner, whereas synchronous learning occurs at the same time for all learners, whether virtually or in person (Hrastinski, 2008; Stewart et al., 2011). One of the negative educational consequences from COVID-19 was that students and educators who had previously relied on on-campus learning were left without a strong sense of community. Synchronous Zoom learning fell short of meeting the need for a community (Wasik, 2020). Using synchronous Zoom learning presented logistical questions regarding students' ability to access the technology and to be available at a time decided by the instructor. Synchronous Zoom learning also raised concerns about equity, especially for frontline and essential workers. During the pandemic shutdown, essential workers were those who performed a range of operations and services necessary to continue critical infrastructure operations, such as health care personnel, pharmacists, and grocery store workers. Essential workers who were also students found themselves in situations where jobs, family, and health concerns took priority over schoolwork. One of the principal advantages of asynchronous online learning is that it offers more flexibility than synchronous learning by allowing learners to set their own schedule and work at their own pace at times and locations of their choosing (Stewart et al., 2011).

Lessons learned from the pandemic include the increased need for student-centered learning and the need to prepare students for cognitive readiness in complex and unpredictable situations and environments. The objective of this chapter is to present a model for engaging doctoral students in asynchronous online learning using the flipped model classroom (FMC) with the intent of combining degree advancement, student-centered learning, a clear sense of communal learning, and cognitive readiness in the 21st century.