Chapter 10

Instructional Strategies for Synchronous Components of Online Courses

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ABSTRACT

An effective means of achieving a high degree of interactivity and instructor immediacy in an online course is through the use of synchronous online webinars, herein referred to as live sessions. This chapter outlines the philosophy, techniques, and affordances contained within the School of Professional Studies (SPS) at Columbia University’s model for online course support. Of paramount importance to the SPS model is a strong technical support system and a series of replicable class procedures and processes that draw on the strengths of SPS’s webinar interfaces and support personnel and on the academic prowess of SPS’s instructors. This chapter serves as a practical toolkit of strategies and best practices, with wide potential for implementation, regardless of program size or budget. The authors discuss SPS’s model and technologies, some common issues and solutions, and SPS’s overarching philosophy. Finally, this chapter offers alternatives for schools with differing needs or constraints, with the core goal of increasing instructor immediacy and fostering student interactivity.

INTRODUCTION

Online course offerings at Columbia University’s School of Professional Studies (SPS) have grown substantially in recent years (see Figure 1). SPS is unique in that many of the School’s program offerings are directed towards students who already have undergraduate or even, in some cases, graduate level degrees and are furthering their knowledge bases or pursuing new degrees or certificates. The School’s instructor base is also unique in that it is largely culled from the professional, not primarily the academic, world, with many faculty pulling double-duty as industry leaders and instructors for SPS.
online courses. With a student and instructor base that is largely comprised of working professionals, our courses must be highly flexible and adaptable. These background considerations have informed much of the style and mission of the online team at SPS, specifically tasked with building and improving on these online course offerings. For the purposes of our chapter, this team is herein referred to as either the online team, or just SPS.

While keeping the practical needs of instructors and students in mind, the online team has also sought ways to retain the experience and feel of high-quality course offerings that students expect from a highly visible university with a global reputation. It is this tension of considerations that has led the online team to foreground instructor immediacy and student interactivity as the most crucial elements of online courses at SPS.

Therefore, along with providing a multitude of course offerings, central to the School’s model is an emphasis on the importance of the instructor to the success of an online course. As some institutions have adopted models which increasingly foreground readings and recorded lectures, SPS has continued to pursue ways to enhance and maintain a strong instructor presence as the core of all online classes.

To this end, SPS has developed a strong synchronous component to online courses, referred to as a live session. Live sessions are held weekly, or on another, predetermined schedule, and are conducted in Adobe Connect, a robust web conferencing tool. Within live sessions, students are given the opportunity to interact with their instructors and with each other, through a variety of means, including microphone and video conferencing, instant chat, online polling, and breakout team work. Through a system of training, coaching, and constant feedback, the SPS online team works with instructors to ensure that all of these possibilities for interactivity are utilized during class, providing multiple avenues of interaction for instructors and students.

*Figure 1. This chapter is organized like an hourglass, starting with broad ideas about instructor presence in synchronous online class sessions, narrowing to a specific example, and broadening to widely applicable strategies*