Synchronous Office Hours in an Asynchronous Course: Making the Connection

Beatrice Gibbons-Kunka, Robert Morris University, Pittsburgh, PA, USA

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 twenty years, the researcher experimented with online synchronous office hours as a means of making a connection with her online doctoral students. This paper 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.

KEYWORDS

Asynchronous, Distance Education, Synchronous, Virtual Office Hours

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). Online courses and degree programs are particularly popular with adult students who are employed full-time and have the added obligations of family and community service. Typically, the delivery method of these courses is asynchronous, where both the professor and students participate in the course anywhere and at any time. 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 particular time during the course. Having taught higher education online asynchronous courses for twenty years, the researcher experimented with online synchronous office hours as a means of making a connection with her online students.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

While this study cannot be considered to be a strict research study due to the limited number of participants, a survey was administered to the author’s students in order to ascertain the challenges, benefits and best practices of integrating synchronous office hours into an asynchronous course.

DOI: 10.4018/IJICTE.2017100108

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Survey 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?

Operational Definitions

Asynchronous course: A course where students work on their class activities on their own time. These activities can include participation in discussions, blogs, group projects completed via wiki pages, narrated PowerPoint presentations on the part of the professor and students, readings, reflective journals, and research papers. There are weekly due dates for assignments, but students and the professor do not meet at the same time online.

- **Blackboard**: This is a Learning Management System (LMS) used in many universities to deliver courses in asynchronous and synchronous instructional environments.
- **Blog**: A blog offers the ability to store a discussion thread in one place where team members can post questions and comments to an ongoing interactive dialogue (Cascio & Shurygailo, 2003).
- **Collaborate**: According to the Blackboard website, Collaborate is a simple, convenient, and reliable online collaborative learning solution; it delivers a level of engagement that makes learners feel like they’re together in the same room via collaboration and conference tools (www.blackboard.com/online-collaborative.../blackboard-collaborate.aspx). In this study, Collaborate is used to facilitate virtual office hours.
- **Discussion Board**: This is also known as a threaded discussion board. The professor provides two discussion prompts per week that relate to course concepts and readings. Each student posts an initial thread response. Within this thread, course peers and the professor respond repeatedly over the course of one week. Students are required to monitor their initial post, responding to those who comment on their response. In order to engross the students in the weekly discussion, the professor requires that students participate at least three different days of the week and to respond to at least two of their peers.
- **Email**: Email (electronic mail) is a method of exchanging digital messages from an author to one or more recipients via the Internet. Email servers accept, forward, deliver and store messages.
- **Face-to-Face**: Classroom instruction that takes place within a brick and mortar institutional environment. Both the students and teachers meet in a designated classroom at a pre-scheduled, specific time. There is no asynchronous instruction outside of the classroom.
- **File Exchange**: A file exchange is an area within the virtual communication site that allows team members to post files or documents that the team is working on. It may be a written description of the task to be accomplished or other pertinent files for the completion of this task.
- **Learning Management System**: A learning management system is a software application for the administration, documentation, tracking, reporting and delivery of electronic educational technology (also called e-learning) courses or training programs.
Learning Programming Patterns Using Games

Implementation of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning through an On-Line Masters Program
Klara Bolander Laksov, Charlotte Silén and Lena Engqvist Boman (2014). *Teaching Cases Collection* (pp. 258-295). www.igi-global.com/chapter/implementation-scholarship-teaching-learning-through/80348?camid=4v1a