Chapter 4
Synchronous Learning in an Asynchronous Environment for Orientation, Intervention, Interaction, and Students Retention

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ABSTRACT

This chapter demonstrates the author’s perspective, practical experience, and personal reflection on effective practices in hosting the synchronous sessions in the asynchronous (online) courses offered at a large public university in the USA. The author hosts the web-based video sessions (webinars) using the Blackboard Collaborate Ultra™ to orient the students at the beginning of the course and motivate and guide the students at regular intervals throughout the semester. The author describes how the online video sessions helped in enhancing students’ learning experience which in turn helped increase the students’ retention in the courses. The author also describes the challenges in hosting the synchronous webinars and suggests possible ways to overcome them.
INTRODUCTION

The author brings years of teaching experience. The author has been teaching conventional face-to-face on-campus Astronomy courses since 2002 and started teaching online Astronomy courses in 2012. The conventional on-campus courses that the author teaches are synchronous, interactive, engaging, and student centered in nature. The author spends time in the beginning of the semester to make the students familiar and comfortable in the course by going over the syllabus, explaining the structure of the course, format of the material, nature of the assignments etc. The author takes regular opportunity to provide instant feedback and motivate students by observing students verbal and non-verbal reactions to course material and assignments. On the other hand, the online courses that the author had developed were completely asynchronous in nature in the previous years. The online courses have different elements for interaction and assessment such as reading assignments, chapter quizzes, online labs, tests, discussion forums, videos summaries, final exam etc. Students can work on each element at their own pace within the given time frame.

According to the Quality Matters Rubrics for online courses, there are three types of important interactions. These are student-student interactions, student-content interaction, and student-teacher interaction (http://facultyecommons.com/three-types-of-interaction-that-foster-student-engagement/).

The author’s online courses were heavy in students-content interactions and allowed some students-students interactions in the structured discussion forums. The students-teacher interactions were primarily via emails, written feedback on assignments, and comments on discussion forum.

Online instructors play a central role in creating an academically dynamic and effective learning environment for students. Palloff and Pratt (2001) state “the key to success in our online classes rests not with the content that is being presented but with the method by which the course is being delivered.” Research literature (Conaway et.al. 2005) continues to affirm that the role of the instructor is extremely important in building a learning community of students to create an interactive environment as students do not automatically provide supportive feedback, express appreciation, or agreement.

This chapter presents the author’s reflection on efforts to incorporate synchronous video conferencing sessions (webinars) in order to provide more human interaction in the online courses to increase students-students and students-teacher interactions. Video conferencing technology is a tool to bring the teacher and students face-to-face virtually in real time. It also enriches the distant learning process “in ways that cannot easily be achieved by other means” (Arnold et al, 2002). Literature has shown

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