

Three Strategies to Positively Impact Student Success in Asynchronous Education

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Author Biography

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When courses shifted to remote delivery due to the pandemic during the Spring 2020 semester, asynchronous course delivery was my quick-turnaround solution. Students had so many issues—work schedule upheaval, caregiving responsibilities, lack of computers and/or reliable internet connection, unexpected quarantining, and illness—so prerecorded lectures posted for consumption at their convenience seemed the best choice. At the time I considered this to be a stopgap measure and planned to recreate the traditional classroom experience by the Fall semester with synchronous online meetings during regularly scheduled class times. Having an engaged and interactive classroom with multiple active learning opportunities was crucial to me and passive viewing of prerecorded lectures seemed to be the antithesis to the vibrant learning community I work to develop in each class.

I did not understand the best practices of asynchronous learning at the time but dove into the literature to make the most of the situation for that initial partial semester. What I found surprised me and led to my continuing with asynchronous delivery since that initial stopgap decision.

Just as there are advantages of asynchronous over synchronous course delivery, there remain disadvantages. Numerous lists of critical success factors of e-learning include the three processes of student-instructor dialog, student-student dialog, and self-regulated learning (Eom & Ashill 2018). Though each of these three may appear at first glance to favor synchronous over asynchronous delivery, I developed several research-based techniques to overcome disadvantages of asynchronous delivery that was the best solution for students' learning.

Student-instructor dialog

An initial apparent disadvantage of asynchronous versus synchronous delivery is reduced opportunities for student-instructor dialog on the informal level. When these communications are not present, the efficacy of later formal communications (e.g., feedback on course-related content), is lessened (Maíz-Arévalo 2017). Because social presence driven by interactive communication technologies has a significant positive effect on online learning experiences (Park & Kim 2020), I made a conscientious effort to increase informal and interactive communication early in the semester.

With face-to-face or synchronous classes, one can take advantage of those open times at the start and end of class to have informal conversations and build relationships. I have an office located between the classrooms and the bathrooms (glamorous, I know), so by keeping my office door open I would often have students pop in to say hi and ask a quick question. How do I get students to virtually pop in, with an interactive chat session or video call, with technologies such as Microsoft Teams?

I started with forcing interactions before there was course content or feedback to talk about. I would come up with some pretense early in the semester to talk one-on-one via interactive technology. The early effort to open communication when students were not “in trouble” lowered the barriers to communication so when I later used the functionality of our learning management system for detailed content-related feedback, students were comfortable informally popping by my virtual office to discuss the feedback. I have seen a significant increase in students initiating communication later in the semester since I began this pedagogical strategy of artificially opening the lines of communication.

Student-student dialog

Another disadvantage of asynchronous versus synchronous delivery is reduced opportunities for student-student dialog. I know students can learn much from each other, content wise, and by feeling a part of a learning community. Though I recognize the benefits of discussion boards (Covelli 2017), because of the challenge with topics in my field often being black and white, I chose not to incorporate formal discussion postings in my courses. Instead, I opened a discussion board encouraging student-student dialog – the Water Cooler, “[w]here we can talk about class-, school-, job-related stuff. Feel free to ‘ask for a friend’ or answer classmates’ questions here.” Anecdotal evidence suggests students appreciated this opportunity and they actively used these boards to arrange study groups, get clarification on assignments, talk about internship opportunities, and they posted some great memes.

Self-regulated learning

The third critical success factor, self-regulated learning, was addressed by emphasizing empowerment of the students. Watching a prerecorded lecture can still be an active experience for students (Lemov 2020). I built the mindset that they have total control over their own learning by explaining that they own their interactions with the videos. I do this by explicitly introducing them to closed captioning and speed control; some students like slowing down the play speed, others preferred speeding it up. I explain that they have as much time as they need when I instruct them to pause a video to work a problem. Feedback from course evaluations shows that students like the differentiated instruction that asynchronous delivery allowed. They like being able to watch the videos, or parts of the videos, multiple times. They like getting to engage with the material at a time of their own choosing, preferably a time with limited demands on their attention and a time free from distractions. They have the control to achieve mastery of the material at their own pace. They have agency over their experience.

Utilizing these three techniques—forced early communication, the water cooler discussion board, and agency over video interaction—to emphasize critical success factors with asynchronous course delivery resulted in increases in communication, satisfaction, and performance – goals we all strive for.

References

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