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Going Live:

Adding Nodes of Synchronicity to Asynchronous Online Learning

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he flexibility of online learning has always been a primary reason

for its success. The ability for a student to work wherever (distance learning) and whenever (asynchronous learning) is incredibly convenient for adult learners. Integrating opportunities for students to interact together and with instructors in real time can help bridge the gaps in space and time that are a factor in online learning programs.

This white paper suggests that what I call "nodes of synchronicity" can be embedded into the structure of asynchronous online courses and programs to engage learners in the online classroom, and provides recommendations for how to do so. As instructors and administrators in online programs, many of us entered education to provide and experience learning in an interactive fashion. Our students learned face-to-face with us in real time, and we got to see those "light bulb" moments occur when new ideas sparked deeper thinking in our students, as well as in ourselves. As education has advanced toward online models and platforms, we still seek to interact with our students in real time. Yet, even that real-time classroom model is shifting: Students cite the flexibility of scheduling as one of the primary reasons for selecting online learning over a physical classroom. This flexibility permits online learners to balance their busy lives with the demands of coursework. The primary source of this flexibility is asynchronicity.

asynchronous

adjective

(of two or more objects or events) not existing or happening at the same time.

synchronous

adjective existing or occurring at the same time.

Asynchronicity in online learning refers to non-live learning experiences that occur with time delays between interactions among instructors and students. In other words, students do not have to attend scheduled lessons or lectures. In asynchronous learning, instructors might offer lessons in various formats to be viewed or read by students at their convenience. Students then respond to these lessons whenever it is convenient for them, as long as they meet the stated deadline. Interactions between students and professors therefore occur with gaps of minutes, hours, or even days within conversations. Conversely, synchronous learning refers to experiences in which instructor and learners participate together in real-time interactions, which can prove difficult to coordinate with online learners.

As university writing center directors Connie Mick and Geoffrey Middlebrook argue,¹ the combination of asynchronous and synchronous learning strategies can result in increased learning engagement. However, the implementation of asynchronous learning techniques far outpaces the use of synchronous strategies in online learning, with the vast majority² of online courses being offered in entirely asynchronous formats. Some of the reasons for this are obvious:

- If on-site learning is synchronous, then online learning should be asynchronous.
- Distance learners select that format because of its asynchronicity.
- Live synchronous learning limits engagement with course materials to specific dates and times.
- Other reasons persist as well, based both in pedagogy and practicality.

Given that most courses and activities utilize asynchronous online interactions, this white paper addresses the opportunity to inject asynchronous online learning with nodes of perceived synchronicity to increase engagement and interaction.

¹Mick, C. S., & Middlebrook, G. (2015). Asynchronous and Synchronous Modalities. In B. Hewett & DePew, K. E. (Eds.). *Foundational Practices of Online Writing Instruction.* (pp. 129-148). Fort Collins, CO: The WAC Clearinghouse and Parlor Press. <u>http://wac.colostate.edu/books/owi/</u>

²For example, Mick & Middlebrook reference a CCCC's study in 2010 that reported 93.8 percent of classroom discussions occur in asynchronous formats in online classes



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The Value of Live Interaction—Real or Perceived

Live interaction is not a regular feature of asynchronous learning. In online courses, instructors and students are typically used to and adept at polishing their classroom interactions. Each video is produced, cut, spliced, or (at least) shot repeatedly until its creator finds it acceptable. Text-based discussions are written, reworked, edited for errors, and submitted as demonstrations of complete thoughts. Assignments are submitted as final products, having been reviewed and revised for accuracy and completeness.

Being live is something quite different. Live interaction is unedited, unfiltered, and less scripted than asynchronous interaction. Live communication involves the feedback, missteps, hiccups, and stutters of face-to-face discussions. This paper is not suggesting that teaching and learning in online classes should be live. Rather, instructors and program administrators can inject moments of live synchronicity into online classes.

In addition, as noted in McArthur & Bostedo-Conway (2012), the perception of being live might even be more significant for students than actually being live,³ meaning that merely the opportunity to interact with a professor in a live setting adds value to the learning experience. See the following examples of course-based and program-level opportunities for live engagement.

³See McArthur, J. A., & Bostedo-Conway, K. (2012) Exploring the relationship between student-instructor interaction on Twitter and student perceptions of teacher behaviors. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 23 (3), 286-292.

Course-Based Opportunities for Live Engagement

Facebook Live posts:

Facebook Live offers a unique type of engagement for live posts when used in the context of a course Facebook page. When the instructor "goes live," every member of the page is notified on their mobile devices through the Facebook app. They can choose to tune in and participate in the conversation through text and emojis in real time. Each live event can be archived on the Facebook page for later viewing. If the conversation is consequential for the class, the instructor can also see which members have viewed the post and which have not, and direct the stragglers to the video.

For example, recognizing that students were not applying feedback left for them in the gradebook, I held a Facebook Live session on finding instructor feedback in discussion forums. I saw who participated live, who watched the video within 24 hours, and who had not seen it. I commented on the video, tagging those students who had not yet viewed the video to alert them of its importance for their work. Facebook Live videos can also be used for student presentations, weekly posts, or just-in-time help for assignments or examples of applied concepts.

Online office hours:

These can be useful for distance learners and campus-based learners alike. One semester, I decided to offer both campus office hours and online office hours, and I was shocked that all but one of my students across both modalities chose the online option over campus office hours.

Since that semester, I have published online office hours each semester, and they have been used by students far more frequently than the hours in my physical office on campus. In my case, students choose a preferred connection between FaceTime, Skype, and phone, although some have arranged meetings on other platforms such as Google Hangout, Zoom, and GoToMeeting.

Scheduled group and individual conferences:

Meeting with students outside of class is one of the foundations of faculty student interaction in campus-based learning. Although writing-intensive courses seem to be increasing requirements for instructor-student live conferences, in general, instructors may overlook individual or group conferences as opportunities for live interaction.

In online courses, self-scheduled instructor conferences can be beneficial for large projects, individual research plans, and for last-minute explanations of core course concepts. I have used mandatory instructor-student conferences for undergraduate and graduate thesis projects, semester-long research projects, and by request for individual students who either need additional help or desire more face time with an instructor. This strategy works particularly well for non-distance-learners who choose to enroll in an online course rather than a campus course.

Program-Level Opportunities for Live Engagement

In addition to live instructor-student interactions, program administrators can also use live announcements at key points in the program and throughout the academic year. Examples of these opportunities might include:

- Orientation events
- Special campus-based events
- Announcements for program-wide distribution

- Midpoint check-ins
- Graduation announcements



Course and Program Administration Concerns

As Mick and Middlebrook rightly note,⁴ the successful implementation of synchronous learning events in online courses requires meeting three criteria:

- 1. inclusivity and accessibility
- 2. technical viability through IT support
- 3. and the presence of a strong pedagogical rationale

The implementation of nodes of synchronicity in online learning highlights several areas where course administrators should focus their attention.

Accessibility:

All students in a particular course must have the ability to access the technology used for synchronicity. This paper mentions Facebook Live, FaceTime, Google Hangouts, Zoom, and Skype as potential (and free) online spaces for interaction outside the course LMS. As new applications are designed and learning management systems incorporate new features, this list will grow. Any technologies used outside the LMS should be listed in the syllabus, and the instructor should be prepared to address any student concerns related to accessibility and disability or other personal factors impacting student adoption of technology.

Notification during registration:

Any required synchronous activities or mandatory full-class interactions scheduled to occur at specific times should be noted in the course schedule prior to registration and in the course syllabus provided to students. This does not include self-scheduled one-on-one or group meetings that the students arrange at their convenience. Noting mandatory times at the point of registration ensures that students will be available at the time specified for full-class synchronous discussions. (Note that this paper does not describe full-class synchronous discussions, but rather nodes of synchronicity that are optional and can be archived for asynchronous viewing as needed).

Technical proficiency:

Students (and instructors) unfamiliar with the technology of choice for synchronous conversations will need to learn to use it. Help or support pages for selected platforms can be listed as resources in either the course syllabus, the unit learning readings, or both. In addition, technical proficiency in interactive conferencing technologies can and should be added as a desired learning outcome for online courses.

Privacy:

Some students may voice concerns about their personal privacy when using social networking platforms outside of the school's LMS. This seems to be less common with video conferencing applications and more common with video or text embedded in social networking sites. Privacy issues can be addressed by using private groups, posting links to videos used in these sites to the LMS, or encouraging apprehensive students to create a new account inside the chosen social media channel solely for use in the course or program that's separate from their personal account.



Implementing Nodes of Synchronicity

When used wisely throughout a course or program, nodes of synchronicity offer online students and faculty the benefits of real-time contact. Even if these interactions are brief, they can be meaningful.

Some online programs already have residency requirements that involve on-campus visits and interaction, but online tools can offer additional opportunities for synchronous interaction. The ideas discussed here are appropriate given the technology available at the time this paper was written and published, but social tools change constantly. The key to moving forward is to use tools that are either embedded in the program or course site or that are widely used by students in a particular course. In the cases discussed here, one-to-one video chat (Skype or FaceTime), one-to-many live chat (Facebook Live), and user-selected platforms (digital office hours) provide students with a variety of options for interaction, bringing faculty and students together in time when they cannot come together in space.

About John A. McArthur

Dr. McArthur is a member of the fourth cohort of <u>Wiley Faculty Fellows</u>, a select group of distinguished faculty from the network of Wiley Education Services partner universities. He is an associate professor in the James L. Knight School of Communication at Queens University of Charlotte, where he also serves as Director of Graduate Programs. He is the author of <u>Digital</u> *Proxemics: How Technology Shapes the Ways We Move* (2016, Peter Lang).

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