Chapter 12
Student Perspectives on Distraction and Engagement in the Synchronous Remote Classroom

Noah Q. Cowit
University of Colorado, USA

Lecia Barker
University of Colorado, USA

ABSTRACT

Synchronous remote learning was adopted widely due to the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. To many educators and students, this was a new medium through which distraction could take place. The research described in this chapter investigates students' perceptions surrounding their engagement and distraction in the synchronous remote learning environment long after the chaos of the 2020 shutdown had eased. Drawing on 32 one-hour interviews conducted during the 2020-21 academic year of undergraduate students in remote classes, data were grouped into three major themes: social presence, cognitive load, and virtual and physical environments. These themes are described in depth in this chapter through discussion of interviewees' quotations. This study provides a nuanced view of students' experiences with synchronous remote learning and contributes to the theory of role strain.

INTRODUCTION

Engagement can be described as having one's attention occupied by some internal or external stimulus (Eastwood et al., 2012). When students' attention is occupied by stimuli other than the material or interactions through which they are expected to learn, time on task is reduced, in turn reducing quality of learning (Anderson, 1981; Romero & Barberà, 2011). Distraction can occur when another stimulus demands attention, as when a siren goes off during class. Distraction also occurs, however, when one

stimulus fails to occupy one's attention in a satisfactory way. For example, when a student does not understand the lecture material, they may turn to some other stimulus instead. Not all learning environments are the same and different educational environments will have different relationships with engagement and distraction. This chapter investigates distraction and engagement, specifically with respect to synchronous remote learning environments, defined as remote learning environments in which students take classes in real time with their peers and their instructors (e.g., Zoom classes). Most undergraduate students took classes during the 2020-2021 COVID-19 pandemic shutdown through synchronous remote learning environments. Although synchronous remote learning is likely to decrease as the pandemic wanes, synchronous remote learning environments will almost certainly continue to play a role in the undergraduate educational system (Cesco et al., 2021; Schwartz et al., 2020; Singer, 2021). Understanding the student perspective of synchronous remote learning–particularly considering that they are low-power stakeholders and often given no choice of course format–is important in planning for learning outcomes. The study presented here may help to explain findings from other studies of student experiences with remote instruction (e.g., Means & Neisler, 2021), going beyond factors like satisfaction to make explicit specific aspects of the student experience that allow for distraction in the first place.

When synchronous remote learning was implemented as an emergency measure in Spring 2020, many student difficulties with engagement and distraction were likely connected to the novelty of the medium (some authors use violent terms like "turmoil" and being "forced" to go online (Dick, 2021)), and to increased cognitive load from the intensity and fear of the early pandemic. This chapter reports instead on an interview-based study of undergraduate student distraction when students and faculty were much more accustomed to the synchronous remote learning environment during the period December 2020 to February 2021. Below, the theoretical backing of the study is summarized, followed by description of methods and findings.

BACKGROUND

Academic distraction is often blamed on the digital environment (Dontre, 2021; May & Elder, 2018). While many interviewees in this study discussed distractions brought about in the digital space (e.g., social media notifications), digital distraction was only one of several reasons for distraction they discussed. The researchers found three theories useful as interpretive frameworks of student distraction: social presence theory (Short et al., 1976), cognitive load theory (Sweller, 1988), and role strain theory (Goode, 1960). Below, the theories are summarized, and relevant scholarship reviewed.

Social Presence Theory

Social presence theory has been used extensively for exploring interaction in remote learning environments (Lowenthal, 2010; Richardson et al., 2017; Tu & McIsaac, 2002). First conceptualized by Short, Williams, and Christie in 1976, social presence is concerned with the ability of different types of media to effectively and efficiently communicate social cues (Short et al., 1976). Social presence describes participants' awareness of one another in communicative situations, considering both verbal and nonverbal cues. Key concepts include intimacy, which is the perceived closeness and belonging felt by two persons, and immediacy, which is the sense of psychological distance between people (Wiener & Mehrabian, 1967). A large meta-analysis has associated increased social presence with greater student satisfaction

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