Chapter 43
Live Sessions and Accelerated Online Project–Based Courses

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ABSTRACT

This chapter assesses the incorporation of synchronous and asynchronous instructional techniques in two project-based graduate level courses in an online public administration program. These courses are eight weeks long and taken sequentially, and have a variety of assignments requiring synchronous and asynchronous interactions with instructor and peers. It evaluates the application of synchronous instructional techniques and asks if synchronous sessions result in higher student engagement and collaborative activity. Further, the study examines if synchronous sessions matter to online graduate level students. Results indicate that synchronous sessions complement asynchronous assignments by enhancing interaction with instructor and peers, and assisting with course concepts. Students benefited from these sessions and were greatly in favor of having them. However, these sessions are challenging to schedule requiring intensive pre-implementation planning and instructor engagement. It was found that both synchronous and asynchronous techniques add value to online learning.

INTRODUCTION

Online education (a subcategory of Distance Education) is becoming very popular due to the changing nature of students' needs, pressures on educational institutions to reach out to more students, and advancements in educational technologies (Allen & Seaman, 2013; Archer, Garrison, and Anderson, 1999). Online education provides flexible alternatives for educational accomplishments and life-long learning opportunities to people who may not be able to access traditional educational settings such as physical classrooms due to a multitude of factors including geographic limitations, work schedules, and personal obligations. In order to address these limitations, educational institutions around the world offer a wide range of online courses in various disciplines. In such educational services, both synchronous and asynchronous tools and techniques are quite commonly applied (Hrastinski, 2008). Due to the increasing costs of tuition and fees of higher education in traditional campuses, reduced scholarship opportunities,

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-7540-9.ch043

and a relatively low cost of computer technologies, online education has seen a tremendous growth with new models and forms of content delivery. Furthermore, advancements in communication technology and internet supported the growth of online education. For example, Lewis, Snow, Farris, Levin, & Greene (1999, p. vi) found that "among all higher education institutions offering any distance education, the percentages of institutions using two-way interactive video and one-way prerecorded video were essentially the same in 1997–98 as in 1995. The percentage of institutions using asynchronous Internet based technologies, however, nearly tripled, from 22 percent of institutions in 1995 to 60 percent of institutions in 1997–98." With advancements in educational and communication technologies that work on multiple platforms (for example, handheld mobile phones, video conferencing), the methods of online instruction have also evolved significantly (Olt, 2018).

In the United States, high schools and community colleges are following an increasing number of universities in offering online courses. Universities are also collaborating with business corporations in establishing online universities that offer a wide variety of online courses in various disciplines (Allen & Seaman, 2013; Miltiadou & Savenye, 2003). An example is the Western Governors University, a joint venture of 19 western states and 16 corporate partners to create a virtual university (Miltiadou and Savenye, 2003). Another company is Blackboard Incorporated, that partners with educational institutions and provides learning management systems for online education. Similarly, other companies such as edX, Coursera, Khan Academy, and Udacity collaborate with higher education institutions and offer free online courses in various disciplines.

Online educational programs generally apply asynchronous tools and techniques of content delivery, where lectures and assignments are prepared in advance and uploaded to the learning management system. Students review the lectures, complete their readings and assignments at their own pace and time. Lately, online programs also include synchronous sessions, where students are expected to interact with the instructor and peers in real time and often using technologies such as video-conferencing, chats, and instant messaging (Olt, 2018; Gregory, 2017; Salmon, 2013; Hrastinski, Keller, & Carlsson, 2010). This is done to increase student participation and engagement, as well as to increase higher order thinking skills (Brierton, Wilson, Kistler, Flowers, & Jones, 2016). In this chapter, we discuss and review these synchronous and asynchronous instructional techniques applied to graduate level online courses in nonprofit management and program evaluation.

The purpose of this chapter is to evaluate the previous literature pertaining to instructional techniques in online education, apply research conducted on incorporation of synchronous instruction in graduate level courses, and highlight the learning points as well as recommend ways to address challenges and enhance student interaction and engagement. This chapter specifically analyzes the use of synchronous and asynchronous instructional techniques in two project-based courses taught at a graduate level Public Administration program. The specific objectives of this chapter are:

1. To examine the effectiveness of blending synchronous and asynchronous instruction in an online program,
2. To identify measures to increase instructor and student interaction and engagement, and
3. To recommend ways to enhance student learning in accelerated online programs.

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