The Importance and Use of Virtual Office Hours

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Blog Series: Praxis: The Responsive & Expanding Classroom
April 27, 2020
Tags: online teaching | online learning | asynchronous teaching | synchronous teaching

Staying connected to students will be very important in the coming months–for their sense of well-being, for their academic success, and for their persistence. Managing student needs and expectations while teaching remotely can be more challenging than in the traditional classroom where students might catch you before or after class. Students might be in different time zones, have responsibilities that make it hard for them to participate in synchronous activities (in real time), or they may lack the technological capability necessary to connect. You will want to consider both **synchronous and asynchronous** options to make sure that all students have equitable access to your support.

Asynchronous Options

Despite the asynchronous nature of communication in many online courses, students often expect an immediate reply to their questions without considering the time of day they posted, or the possible complexity of the reply. One method for effectively addressing this concern is to clearly establish virtual office hours *and* a policy on when and how you will respond (e.g., within 24 hours).

- • **Forums** are a good way to respond to students if questions are relevant to more than

one student and do not require confidentiality. On Canvas, you might occasionally post a discussion prompt such as "What questions do you have about the upcoming assignment?" You may just tell students that you will respond within a certain period of time. This reduces multiple email responses to the same question and also archives the questions and responses for later access.

- • Toward the end of a challenging unit, you might ask students to submit to you their "**muddiest point**"–what is it they still do not understand or are confused by. You could ask them to email you or answer anonymously through a Qualtrics survey. This allows you to respond in one post, video, or email to address the biggest challenges students are having with the material.
- • You can also ask students to post their questions about the material in a **Google doc or discussion board in Canvas** and let them respond to each other's questions if they know the answers. This helps create connections and increases peer learning. In this strategy, you may want to wait to chime in until a pre-communicated period of time has passed so that you don't inhibit participation.
  • **Email** can also work quite well, though you may want to designate a specific, consistent subject line (e.g., "Question about CHEM 100") to keep track of the topics. You may be able to respond to the common questions or concerns at one time in a Q&A format.

Synchronous Options

Zoom, WebEx, and the good old-fashioned phone can work for real-time meetings. However, you will want to poll your students to determine possible times for everyone.

- • Synchronous office hours are sometimes an individual affair, but they also can be for groups when the focus is a need common to many students. This can be more fun and will save you a lot of time! In Zoom you have the option of **setting up a waiting room** where you invite students in one-by-one. You can have students make individual appointments with you, or in the case of a larger class, assign them to come in groups. You can also create "common concerns office hours" where all students can elect to join.
- • One way of determining common concerns: At the end of a virtual class, you can ask students to post their "**muddiest point"**using the **whiteboard in Zoom** or through **Qualtrics** to preserve anonymity. Or you can give them a few minutes to put their questions in the chat. You can then offer virtual office hours to respond to themes that emerge. You can also meet with groups about projects, conduct reviews before an exam, or host a drop-in Q&A–remember to record the session for those who can't make it.
- • Providing a **contact telephone number** is another option, although instructors should clearly designate appropriate calling times, as well as how and when they will respond to voice mail messages. For some students, this might be their best way to join you. Students will often be working in the virtual classroom at all hours of the day or night, so maintaining clearly understood communication channels is essential for the ongoing success of the online course.

Some additional things to plan for

- • The times during the semester when students will need more support, e.g., a week before an assignment is due or an exam will be held.
- • Whether you want students to drop in or schedule an appointment (in Zoom there is a virtual waiting room, and you can let a student or group of students in at their scheduled time)?

https://wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2020/04/the-importance-and-use-of-virtual-office-hours/