Taking the Fear Out of Synchronous Learning

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**Activating and Engaging**

Since my course that I am assisting with is only in its second week, I was worried I would not have a significant event to reflect upon for the mid-term activity. However, just prior to the first week of the course, there was an optional live synchronous event using Adobe Connect (with no video) which I attended. I was asked to talk about my instructional design project that I had completed for the ID course one year ago. I was nervous about speaking and wanted to say the right thing. I started speaking, but my microphone was having issues. So I ended up having to type what I wanted to say in the chat box. I am a good typist, but between my nerves and trying to respond to people’s questions quickly, my answers were short and not as thought out as I would have liked. One of my comments was misunderstood by the course instructor. I quickly clarified, “No, no, no, that is not what I meant” ---madly typing away. I followed up with an email to the course instructor, but still spent the night worrying about my synchronous typing version of “open mouth put in foot.”

The event caused me to think about the importance of being prepared for online learning. I evaluated my preparedness for the evening, and other than purchasing a back up pair of headphones with microphone to have on hand, there is no way I could have been fully prepared for this synchronous event. I did not know that I was going to discuss my project or what questions I was going to be asked.

I am comfortable in the classroom when questions arise. Why my discomfort with online synchronous events? For one thing, I have been teaching in the higher education classroom for over fifteen years. Prior to that, I have several years experience teaching in elementary and junior high classrooms. I thought I had learned how to handle the unexpected. But with my experience teaching in the online world, I have always had time to prepare. I have taught online for about ten years, and most of my online teaching has been asynchronous through discussion boards and emails rather than live synchronous events. I am used to taking my time to think and rethink my responses to students or directions for assignments.

However, in certain circumstances, in online learning, one cannot always be prepared. With synchronous live events rather speaking or typing, one needs to be able think on his or her feet. My immediate feeling about the event is that I like asynchronous learning better. I have time to prepare my thoughts and to go back and re-read for content as well as grammar and spelling. My own natural personality type as an introvert leads me to prefer asynchronous options. Asynchronous learning gives me the time I need to think about my thoughts.

Synchronous learning is live. Why do I find it so difficult? I am an effective speaker and give presentations in the classroom and for training or community events regularly. I was not confident during this recent event. I also have a very strong natural desire to do well in my internship. I do not want to fail, but on the other hand, I am here to learn and expand my comfort zone.

Factors that influenced the event are my own personality, my lack of confidence, and the fact that with texting or speaking in a chat room, with no video, one does not have the visual clues and cues one has in a classroom. I was typing as fast as I can. I am a good typist and very comfortable with the keyboard, but felt rushed to enter my response since my microphone was not working.

I do have strong emotions about this event. I am concerned about my emotional response, the response from my internship supervisor, and the response from the students. Since I clarified my response right away, there did not appear to be any significant response on the students’ part. I clarified my comments with the instructor right away and also followed up with conversation after the event. The larger issue is my discomfort with synchronous events. A related issue is being able to clarify misunderstands in a timely manner and effectively. Clarity is of the utmost importance but even with clarity, one can be misunderstood. Even with my preferred asynchronous methods with great details and time given, learners can still misunderstand directions.

**Exploring and Discovering**

One specific thing I can do is to focus on improving my online communication skills for synchronous events. I can make sure I lead an optional synchronous event before the course is over. Prior to the event, I can research the topic and plan what I am going to say. This should increase my confidence and my need to feel prepared. I can anticipate what questions learners might ask prior to the event and practice responding. I can also ask for feedback about my communication skills as I participate in both synchronous and asynchronous events of the course.

I see that miscommunication or misunderstanding can exist in online learning for learners and instructors alike. If I am at one point and perceive things one way, my hearer may experience another way. In this event, the misunderstanding was between instructors. If instructors can misunderstand each other, so can students. If I can be misunderstood online, so can my learners.

This event has helped me to walk in my learners’ shoes. The instructor needs to check for clarity and practice active listening with discussion boards, email, etc. In my face to face classes, I frequently do weather checks to see if they understand a concept. It might be through a group quiz or even a simple,” O.K. nod your head or grunt if you’ve got it.” If I see heads nodding, that gives me feedback that the concept is understood. If I still see quite a few faces with puzzled looks, perhaps they did not “get it.” In the face to face word, I have face to face contact. Hmm, would I like a synchronous chat with video capabilities better than one without?

Another pattern I see is that I can assume too much. I anticipated that typing would not be as difficult in a synchronous setting. I also had assumed my microphone would work. I also assumed that others would understand what I was saying because I did. I felt rushed and could not explain things as clearly as I wanted. Feeling rushed or tense can lead to a lack of clarity. If I can take time to prepare or at least anticipate what might happen, that will help offset my anxiety when the unexpected happens or I feel rushed.

**Organizing and Integrating**

What have I learned?

**Synchronous learning is not to be feared:** I admit I have been prejudiced and preferred asynchronous learning over synchronous. The benefits of asynchronous learning were clear to me. Learners can work whenever they want, so it is convenient. Learners have time to prepare their thoughts. Surely the benefits outweigh the negatives.

However, an asynchronous world is not a perfect world: “Students feel constrained at the permanence of the postings and try to create a finished product rather than a work in progress. Students also express admiration of the other people’s postings and often feel intimidated in participating via this medium, although required to in most classes.” (Haythornthwaite 2000, p. 205).

Haythornthwaite and Hrastinski believe synchronous learning levels the playing field and is more like the real world. They believe synchronous learning is necessary to create a sense of community. Haythornthwaite (2002, as cited in Hrastinksi, 2007, p. 31 ) suggests that there are three types of exchanges necessary for building community and learner support in online learning. The first level is Information exchange in which basic questions related to course content or other factual information is shared. Level two is Task Support and includes those type of responses involved in deciding how others will work together to complete tasks. It also involves evaluating work and giving feedback. The third type of communication is social support. This type of communication occurs when giving advice or emotional support. The content of social support communication is often non-class concerns, or if class concerns, frustrations with technology or class assignments. There is some emotion involved with the second type. There may be conflict but with the third, social support, emotion is part of it, both positive and negative. However, it is through this third type of communication through which community forms. Therefore, synchronous learning is necessary.

**Prepare, anticipate, and practice:** I am more comfortable having time to prepare but realize that the unexpected does happen. It also reflects the value of practice and experience. The more one does something the more he or she will become comfortable with it. I will practice and engage in synchronous sessions. The more I do it, the more comfortable I should become with expecting the unexpected.

**Model Good Communication: Ask for feedback**: Follow-up and ask if someone understood your point. As an instructor I can ask if someone understands directions just as I would in a face to face class. **Clarify misunderstandings right away**: If misunderstandings occur, clarify them right away.

**Provide a variety of methods**: I realize that I prefer asynchronous options. However, there are others who due to learning styles and personalities may prefer synchronous. To create the optimal learning environment, I need to make use of both synchronous and asynchronous methods in course design whenever possible. I can also provide directions in a variety of ways. For example, present assignments in text form as well as through graphic organizers and audio instructions.

**References**

Haythornthwaite, C. (2000). Online personal networks: Size, composition and

media use among distance learners. New Media & Society, 2(2), 195-225.

Hrastinski, S. (2007). Participating in synchronous online education. Department of Informatics, School of Economics and Management, Lund University, Sweden.