Why not just meet in Zoom/Collaborate/Teams/the classroom?

Resetting Expectations about Learning: Asynchronous Engagement in Online Learning

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, UCL was quick to recommend asynchronous interactions in online courses, such as pre-recorded videos, forum discussions, and a variety of other individual and group activities that do not require learners to meet at a specific time or place.

We asked distance learning experts from UCL and IOE why they recommend prioritising asynchronous online activities to live web meetings and even face-to-face classes.

Professor Diana Laurillard, Chair of Learning with Digital Technologies at the UCL Knowledge Lab, is keen to bust two myths of online learning: that it is second rate compared to the face-to-face experience, and that it is cheaper to provide. Indeed, the cheap option would have been to simply transfer face-to-face sessions to Collaborate or Zoom, at the risk of leaving some users behind and dissatisfied. Instead, UCL invested in pivoting to an online learning model based on a substantial body of evidence, and academics spent a considerable amount of time designing learning journeys with active learning at their heart.

Diana developed the Conversational Framework to address the question what counts as high quality learning, based on a wide range of research studies and teaching-learning theories. Testing several pedagogic strategies, the framework questions the pedagogic value of popular face-to-face methods such as lectures: They frequently lack fundamental exchange opportunities between teachers, learners, peers, concepts and practices – components that are essential for meaningful learning. Well-designed asynchronous activities can address these exchanges better and tend to lead to more two-way student-teacher contact time, gently pushing learners to take on a more active role.

Think about a typical live lecture, face-to-face or online: How many questions can you actually ask? How intensely can you discuss with peers? How much time do you have to articulate your thinking? Live lectures have their place; their nature of a ‘spectacle’ brings people together, establishes an instant social connection, and provides a motivation boost that sustains concentration. Brainstorming and group work is easier to organise when you can interact spontaneously. But that does not mean that this format helps you learn better.

Dr Guy Durden, Associate Professor at the IOE Department for Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment observed that messages may get lost in busy or rushed live sessions, and a clear advantage of asynchronous methods is the opportunity to revisit information more coherently: Asynchronous modules tend to be more structured, which makes them potentially easier on cognition. This is particularly useful for non-native English speakers or students who are new to expectations of increased agency, or ownership of the learning process at university.

Dr Alexandra Mihai, one of two Learning Designers in UCL’s Digital Education team, emphasises the potential of asynchronous approaches to facilitate “deep learning”. While the communication channels may seem limited due to lack of body language and
immediacy, this reduction can be a trigger for creativity: Expressing thinking by producing audio, video, resource collections, visualisations or different genres of text changes the engagement with the topic, which opens up different insights and perspectives.

In these contexts, the function of the teacher changes from a *deliverer of information*, which works just as well in a video, book or static text, to a *facilitator of learning*, where the teacher provides feedback in response to learner actions not just once per week to a limited set of questions, but to more fine-grained steps in the learning process. The quality of the feedback is also enhanced, as teachers have more time to consider their response.

We already receive reports from UCL lecturers without much pre-pandemic asynchronous online teaching experience, who are positively surprised by the engaged participation and the quality of student contributions, and who find that their teacher role expands to a wider set of tasks, which in their view more than validates the approach. Jo Stroud, Head of Online Learning at UCL Digital Education, puts it down to two components: *time* and *self-direction*.

Having *time* to think about formulating a response generally increases the depth of thought, so it is unsurprising that the quality of student responses exceeds expectations for those used to synchronous communication. This particularly benefits learners who may be less confident in raising their voice in a classroom, and non-native English speakers. While some learners may still be reluctant to engage, extending the response period to several days instead of just moments tends to be enough to build up the courage to contribute, or to double-check and fine-tune the response before putting it ‘out there’.

*Self-direction* is a life skill that we want all UCL learners to develop and enhance. In an asynchronous scenario, learners need to take more ownership of how they learn: Learning is for example not tied to specific attendance times, the home workspace needs to be organised, and activities tend to leave freedoms on how to approach the task. Ironically, asynchronous teaching includes *more* direction, in the form of explanatory text and more detailed activity instructions, than would ever be communicated in a module that relies on weekly face-to-face sessions, to compensate for the lack of spontaneous clarification questions. But learners also have more freedom, and consequently responsibility, to organise their schedule, environment and approach – daunting at first, yet rewarding in the long term.

Heather Serdar, also a Learning Designer at UCL Digital Education highlights that asynchronous methods do not just facilitate the development of independent learning skills, but wider freedoms of asynchronous teaching accommodate a more diverse range of learners who “may think in a different way”, or who are constrained by very pragmatic reasons, such as bandwidth, firewalls or access to hard- and software: Forums are much more reliable than live web meetings, which depend on time zones, internet connectivity, compatible machines and applications, accessibility issues with the user interface, skills, and other personal or wider factors that are frequently outside of the control of learners or the University, or difficult to use for some.

Therefore, asynchronous teaching also means playing it safe: Safe for UCL, to guarantee functioning infrastructure with a low technological barrier, safe for teachers to guarantee
straightforward provision of resources, diverse communication channels and inspirational activities, and safe for learners to be active and responsive regardless of their location, time zone and assistive needs.

These are some of the reasons why we at UCL decided to follow the evidence to provide a learning experience that may not feel comfortable at first, but that is meaningful, fair, inclusive, reliable, creative, and engaging. While we introduced this approach as a response to a pandemic, we expect that some of the methods will prevail beyond.

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