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# Technology Review: Personalizing the Online Enterprise of College Learning Through Synchronous Activity

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*The integration of technology into community college education should offer students access to a plethora of experiences and opportunities beyond both the textbook and the classroom. Likewise, the advent of eLearning has spawned great excitement among distance educators as the “self-study packet” gave way to communities of networked learners. Still, many students still suffer from text-based courses and continue working in isolation from one another. Through partnerships made possible by online communication and technical tools in both learning management systems and third-party software, educators are addressing the challenge of providing a more personal experience for both the local and the distant student.*

Distance learning continues to grow as an option for college students, offering flexibility in scheduling with a promise of lower costs for a degree (Loken & Mullins, 2015). Still, online learning often fails to provide just-in-time personal attention to community college students. Most online courses are built around a text-based structure with primarily noncollaborative, asynchronous activities where students participate at different times. According to Jaggars (2014), online courses have lower levels of instructor presence, requiring students to *teach themselves*. With a feeling of isolation, the students’ inability to interact in real time or to get immediate feedback could result in not fully understanding the assigned work, falling behind the assigned course work, or dropping out of the course.

From early dial-up modems to today’s mobile devices, the potential of online learning to connect

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learners across time and distance continues to improve. Although most of the learning management systems have chat options built in for real-time “synchronous” interaction, they may lack the interactivity of a face-to-face class. Still, there are a number of conferencing solutions available to provide explanation of an idea, clarify assignments, or elaborate on assignment instructions using basic options such as whiteboard, hand raising, and microphone. Most of these solutions provide a way to record sessions which can be later added to the course for students who either could not make it to the session or would like to refer to them at a later date. These conferencing tools can help to bring back the personal learning experiences that a student can have the benefit of in a traditional class. A new section on the use of web conferencing or webinar solutions of the *2014 ITC Distance Education Survey* (Lokken & Mullins, 2015) indicated 80 schools out of the total 136 responses are currently offering this service to online students. Another 16 schools indicated they plan to either offer it in the next year or in the coming two or more years.

Several webcasting teaching tools are available to teachers today, using products like Adobe Connect Pro (<http://www.adobe.com/products/adobeconnect.html>), Blackboard Collaborate (<http://www.blackboard.com/online-collaborative-learning/>), Zoom (<https://www.zoom.us/about>), and others. The individual features may vary but all work to bring the online student into live experiences with faculty, external experts, and other students.

Other options for synchronous activities also exist and may be more familiar to the student. Facebook’s closed group tool offers instant messaging which now includes videoconferencing. Skype—best known as a one-on-one “video phone”—can handle small groups of up to five live participants. Google Hangouts and Google Circles also offer places for students to interact.

So, how are schools using the tools? The most obvious place and perhaps the best break-in option for teachers is using a webcasting or live chat tool for office hours. Students can come in by video for 10-minute prescheduled appointments or during an open time period predetermined by the faculty member. The same format is useful for tutoring, again, either on an individual basis or in small groups.

Class web meetings can be built around special assignments, for external speakers, or to gain access to external materials. One of the better examples of utilizing external resources in this manner is a joint project sponsored by the American Association of Community College’s Instruc-

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tional Technology Council in partnership with the National Park Service and with Internet2's U.S. UCAN project. The project has provided local college faculty and students access to park resources, including individual park rangers, park websites, and existing park video or other media tools for integration into their courses.

Described in more detail in the ITC Fall 2015 newsletter (Mullins, 2015) the project currently has three active college or university partners. The first, Mid-State Technical College in Wisconsin, is allowing marketing students to examine and develop marketing materials created by and for the NPS to promote the Ice Age National Scenic Trail, which stretches 1,200 miles across the state of Wisconsin. Instructor Debra Wallner is creating live opportunities for her students to meet with the park's superintendent to learn how to develop promotional media for a client.

Composition II students at St. Petersburg College in Florida get to build their research paper around a national park or monument. Through synchronous and other learning tools, they will have the chance to meet with National Park Service archivists, educators, interpreters, researchers, and scientists to ask questions for their research. If possible, some of the students may be able to make an "in-person" visit to the park. On-site or through online tools, though, instructor Shelbey Rosengarten is designing a park overview scavenger hunt, and working with the students on their research questions and focus, so that they can conduct live activities to add life to their eLearning experience.

With many similar options available, what would keep faculty from taking advantage of the synchronous options? Like their students, many faculty want the convenience of teaching when and where they want (just like students) so prefer to keep classes asynchronous. Others are concerned about time zone issues, although few community college offerings span more than one or two time zones.

Technology issues provide another common barrier, with concerns that home-based students may lack the needed devices and software. Likewise, public institutions may lack the funds or the training resources to incorporate top-notch video conferencing and desktop sharing, and many faculty are uncomfortable initiating the technology on their own.

In conclusion, the challenges related to real-time, synchronous instruction are legitimate. Nonetheless, creativity by faculty, use of existing learning management systems and currently used student tools, and some investment by institutions can add a new dimension to the online enterprise of student learning.

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## References

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