

Embracing Synchronicity in Distance Education: Unraveling the Paradox

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Abstract: In this paper, I describe the challenges of introducing synchronicity in distance education in which the flexibility for students to learn anywhere and anytime has been most valued. With the wide diffusion of web conferencing systems such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Google Meet during the COVID-19 pandemic, it has become natural not only for traditional on-campus institutions, but also for distance education institutions to utilize synchronous communication tools for instructional delivery. There are advantages to utilize such tools while there are certain disadvantages especially for distance education institutions. This paper presents the results of synchronous web class trials at the Open University of Japan.

Keywords: synchronicity, online education, distance education, live web classes, open education

1. Introduction

Distance education predates the pandemic, shattering time and space constraints to offer accessible learning. As technology advances, distance education has evolved, enabling learners to engage with content, collaborate, and interact remotely. Yet, beneath this convenience lies the paradox of introducing synchronicity in this context. Synchronicity, fundamental in traditional classrooms, involves real-time educator-student and student-student interaction. Replicating this in distance education is challenging.

This paper explores synchronicity's interplay with distance education as integrating real-time elements into asynchronous learning is innovative yet challenging. Benefits of real-time interaction, like community building and immediate problem-solving, are significant. However, challenges like time constraints, connectivity, and overwhelming learners must be addressed.

This paper examines the Open University of Japan's (OUJ) case, initially adopting synchronicity due to COVID-19, and then realizing the significance of synchronicity. It also presents survey results focusing on the factors that hinder students from taking synchronous online classes. The paradox of introducing synchronicity in distance education embodies both an opportunity and a challenge. As we strive to embrace synchronous elements, we must carefully weigh the benefits against the practical constraints and design innovative solutions that harness technology's potential without sacrificing the flexibility that makes distance education so empowering. By unraveling the complexities of this paradox, educators can pave the way for a more holistic and enriched distance learning experience, poised to meet the diverse needs of learners in an ever-changing educational landscape.

2. The Open University of Japan

2.1 Pre-pandemic Era

The Open University of Japan (OUJ) has been a stand-alone distance education university and the only university in Japan (and probably in the world) with a fully operational broadcasting station with dedicated television channels. All of its broadcast programs are produced and pre-recorded at the studios at OUJ before being broadcasted and OUJ has

never had a live broadcasting facility. In 2007 some of the radio broadcast programs were first made available on the Internet for the registered students, and in the following year some of the television broadcast programs were made available on the Internet for the students. Although those broadcast instructional programs were made available on the Internet for the students, only in 2016 some courses started to be offered online using the learning management system, Moodle.

Therefore, besides those face-to-face classes offered at the study centers across the country before the COVID-19 pandemic, OUJ offered no synchronicity in its instruction and all its distance education courses were offered asynchronously allowing students to take courses anywhere and anytime. For the broadcast courses, the instructional video or audio programs and text materials are all created prior to the start of the courses, and for the online courses, all the learning materials and assignments are created before the beginning of the course, which are made available to students at the beginning of the semester after a thorough checking. No real-time interaction had occurred between teachers and students or among students remotely. The synchronous interaction with teachers was possible only for those who registered for senior thesis credits in which students could seek real-time advising and instruction from their teachers.

2.2 During the Pandemic

In April 2020, it was decided that all the face-to-face classes at the study centers had to be cancelled due to the pandemic. For substituting the cancelled face-to-face classes, 70 out of 92 full-time faculty members at OUJ volunteered to offer a total of 80 online synchronous classes. As for the students, 2,704 (17%) out of 15,900 students who had registered for the face-to-face classes registered for the emergency online synchronous classes. For those students who registered for the face-to-face classes, but decided not to take emergency online synchronous classes, the refunds of the fees were made. For many professors at OUJ, it was the first time to offer online synchronous classes and there was some confusion and difficulties in materializing what they planned to teach. According to the survey conducted to the professors who taught the emergency online classes at OUJ, 16 out of 69 respondents said they would not want to do it again and 26 were neutral though 44 of them said such online synchronous classes could be an important educational mode to be considered for the future of the university.

2.3 From Pilot to Permanent

After the experience of offering emergency online synchronous classes described above, the need of online synchronicity at OUJ started to be recognized especially as the on-campus universities also started to offer such online synchronous classes during the pandemic. The taskforce to discuss the measures for implementing online synchronous classes permanently was set up in May 2021 in which the author was assigned as the leader.

To further identify the issues that need to be considered in providing online synchronous classes on a permanent basis, in the second semester of 2021 and the first semester of 2022, the online synchronous classes were offered as trial bases. For the trial offerings of online synchronous classes, volunteers were sought among the full-time faculty members at OUJ. Nine faculty members (six of them were the taskforce members) volunteered to offer synchronous online classes in the second semester of 2021 and 16 faculty members did in the first semester of 2022. The low volunteer rate of faculty members has raised the issue of the teaching load as teaching online synchronous classes was an additional burden, which was not part of the main job descriptions of the faculty members at OUJ.

3. Surveys

3.1 Methods

To answer the research question surrounding the significance of online synchronicity within the educational framework of OUJ, a series of online surveys were conducted to the students who took the online synchronous classes as well as those who have never taken such classes. This paper focuses on the results of the last survey conducted to those who haven't taken online synchronous classes, providing valuable insights into the perceptions and preferences of students who had not participated in online synchronous classes, and shedding light on the factors influencing their decisions not to take such classes.

The methodology involved the careful selection of participants from the university's registered undergraduate students, with a total population of 76,251. By excluding 639 students who had already taken online synchronous classes, a representative sample of 7,500 students was randomly chosen from the remaining 75,642. This approach ensured a diverse range of perspectives, enhancing the generalizability of the findings. With a response rate of 5.6%, as reflected by the 422 completed survey questionnaires, the study achieved a reasonable level of engagement from the selected participants. The responses revealed insightful patterns concerning the factors inhibiting students from enrolling in online synchronous classes.

3.2 Factors for Not Taking Online Synchronous Classes

Notably, the primary reasons for abstaining from these classes were consistent. A significant percentage cited the inconvenience of class timings (36.7%), underscoring the challenge of accommodating diverse schedules in synchronous learning environments. Another substantial group expressed a lack of interest in available class topics (36.7%), highlighting the need to align course offerings with the varied preferences of learners. Moreover, apprehensions about adapting to this novel style of learning were prominent, with 35.3% of respondents feeling unsure about the new method.

However, the future outlook for online synchronous classes remains optimistic, as 46% of respondents expressed intent to explore these classes, while 37.4% remained undecided. The reluctance to commit to a specific timeframe emerged as a predominant deterrent (54.8%), indicating the value placed on the flexibility inherent in asynchronous learning. Additionally, a considerable portion (35.1%) remained uncertain about the instructional approach, emphasizing the need for clear communication and guidance regarding this educational modality.

4. Conclusion

In closing, this research has unveiled valuable insights into the paradoxical nature of introducing synchronicity in distance education. The study's findings underscore the importance of addressing scheduling flexibility, diversifying course offerings, and transparently communicating the benefits of synchronous learning to enhance student engagement and participation. As distance education continues to evolve, bridging the gap between synchronous and asynchronous modalities presents both challenges and opportunities that demand innovative strategies to craft a truly enriched learning experience.