

Ensuring student success in asynchronous online learning

Asynchronous online courses are not structured around live class meetings, so they present a challenge for students who must navigate learning in these courses on their own using parameters provided by the instructor. Asynchronous online learning provides greater flexibility for students and instructors, and it can also help meet challenges of accessibility for students. However, it's important to recognize that this does not simply mean self-paced learning: while asynchronous courses provide students with some flexibility, they should also provide well-communicated parameters and structure to guide their work. Not all students have developed the self-regulatory strategies and behaviors that will help them learn effectively in this mode, so it is crucial that their work is carefully structured to help them manage their time and their work well.

Below are several key principles for effective asynchronous design.

Students need structure to help them navigate your course.

When students enter an online course, they need to have a clear way to move through that course and find the materials and assignments they need to complete their work successfully. This means that when they land on your course content page, they should be able to find a clearly-labeled folder for each sequence or unit of the course that contains all the work for that sequence or unit. This high-level organization helps ensure that students know where to locate their work each time they log into the course.

Students need a predictable rhythm to guide their work throughout the course.

In a typical face-to-face class, students' work is often driven by and structured around class time. For example, when students know that preparatory work (reading, homework, problem sets, etc.) is due by class time, for example, that gives them a schedule and a set of benchmarks to help guide their efforts. Similarly, the regularity of a face-to-face class meeting also helps guide instructors' preparation and decision-making. When a course is offered in an asynchronous format, we don't have regular class meetings to guide us, so we need to create a regular, predictable structure with benchmarks that will help students stay on track with their work. This works best when every week of a class has essentially the same work rhythm. For example, lectures and readings are made available every Monday, homework/practice and discussion posts are due every Wednesday, discussion replies and quizzes are due every Friday, etc. Larger assessments, like papers, projects, or major exams, may take place less frequently but should be integrated into the rhythm of coursework in a thoughtful way.

Students need careful communication to help them manage their work.

In addition to providing structure, we also need to make sure that we clearly communicate that structure to students. In a face-to-face class, we often rely on a combination of written and verbal instructions to help students navigate through a course. For example, we typically provide a syllabus with a full outline of assignments, but we may also give oral reminders in class or offer clarification of assignments or expectations as work is due. In an asynchronous environment, we don't have those same informal opportunities to clarify due dates or expectations, and we don't necessarily have the benefit of responding to student questions in the moment. This means that

students need explicit written instructions to guide them through their work for each part of the course. Instructions should also be redundant in the course, meaning that students can access instructions for work in multiple places. Once you have established the structure of each week of the course, you need to create a guiding document that describes that rhythm to students, including due dates and times. Then you need to repeat that information in the instructions for each individual activity. For example, if you are using the structure of work described above (Monday/Wednesday/Friday), you would include a guiding document for each week that carefully lays out the rhythm of students' work with clear deadlines:

1. By Tuesday at 11:59pm, complete this week's readings and watch the lectures. These will be available by 8am Monday morning. Please email me with any questions.
2. By Wednesday at 11:59pm, submit your homework assignment. Full instructions are available in the assignment.
3. By Wednesday at 11:59pm, make an initial post to your group's discussion board. Full instructions for your post are available in the discussion forum.
4. By Friday at 11:59pm, post a reply to at least two of your group members in the discussion board. Full instructions for your reply are available in the discussion forum.
5. By Friday at 11:59pm, complete this week's practice quiz. The quiz will be available at midnight on Friday, and you will have 30 minutes to complete the quiz. Full instructions are available in the quiz.

When we provide this kind of structure for students, they not only have a way to plan their coursework, they also have a clearer sense of what is expected of them and how they can be successful.

Students need structure to guide their interactions with each other throughout the course.

Many of the interactions that take place in a face-to-face class happen spontaneously or develop organically. In asynchronous courses, we aren't in the same place as our students, and they aren't all interacting with us or with each other at the same time. This means that they need parameters to guide when and how they will respond to each other or to us. If you are using asynchronous discussions, for example, students will need the following to help them navigate an effective discussion:

- *A clear sense of purpose:* Students need to know why they are interacting with each other and what they should learn from the experience.
- *A focused prompt that explicitly requires use of course concepts:* The best discussions begin with the potential for disagreement or debate. Simply asking students to recap what the textbook says or what the main ideas in a lecture were won't give them the opportunity to engage with each other in a meaningful way. Instead, give students a prompt or question with more than one reasonable answer and ask them not only to give their answer but also to explain their thinking and how they used course concepts to arrive at that answer.
- *Clear expectations for what an effective post will do:* Face-to-face class discussions tend to be spontaneous and informal, but students may not really understand how instructors expect an online discussion to unfold. Make sure you communicate how long posts should be and

how they should be written. For example, should they be carefully edited? Should students use citations? Should they be written for a formal audience?

- *Clear guidance on how to respond to each other's posts:* If students don't know how or why they should respond to each other, they will revert to replies like "I agree" or "Good post." If you want the discussion board to be a space for genuine dialogue, students need to have a specific purpose for their replies. For example, you might ask students to respond to a post that extends or completes their initial thinking in a new way, requiring them to articulate clearly how their classmate's answer uses course principles in a different way and how that answer can be integrated into their ideas. Another strategy is to ask students to respond to a post that contradicts their thinking, requiring them to defend their initial thinking using course principles or explain how their thinking is changing as a result of how their classmate used course principles.
- *Sufficient time to develop and articulate their thinking.* While a face-to-face classroom discussion unfolds in a matter of minutes, an asynchronous online discussion needs days or even weeks to develop. Students need time to carefully write their initial posts, and they need time to reflect on the different kinds of thinking they see articulated by their classmates. Make sure that the structure you provide builds in this time.