Digital Learning Discussions Webinar Wrap

Real-time online learning vs asynchronous: which is better?
Webinar Date: December 3rd, 2020

Panelists
- Theresa Rouse, Superintendent, Joliet Public Schools District #86, Illinois
- Dan Mahlandt, Principal/Hybrid Learning Specialist, Valor Preparatory Academy, Arizona
- Marie Hanna, Superintendent, Ohio Connections Academy

Five findings

1. Remote learning in response to pandemic school closures tends to use real-time video much more than experienced online courses and schools, which rely much more heavily on asynchronous instructional modes.

2. The difference in instructional strategies make sense for a couple reasons:
   - Online and hybrid schools have had years to develop systems, content, and technology platforms that are largely built to provide asynchronous instruction.
   - Mainstream districts, in contrast, had to switch to an entirely new approach. Live-streamed video more closely mimics onsite classroom instruction, even if asynchronous tools and strategies may be more successful over the long term.

3. Students and families in mainstream schools that have gone hybrid or remote have different needs and expectations than students and families in hybrid and online schools:
   - Online and hybrid school students often chose their school at least in part for scheduling flexibility which is better provided by asynchronous instruction.
   - Mainstream students learning remotely (and their families) often have expectations about teachers being available throughout much of the school day via live video.
   - School boards, policymakers, and media are often more comfortable with live-streamed lectures because these mimic face-to-face instruction.

4. Experienced online schools and course providers—and districts becoming more comfortable with remote learning—use live-streamed video in certain specific ways, including:
   - To allow students and teachers to "connect" on a social, emotional, and supporting level.
   - For teachers to provide targeted instruction and tutoring to small groups of students.
   - In particularly challenging subjects, especially math
   - For school-wide activities and events, including game nights and yoga.

5. Regardless of the instructional mode, student engagement is a key goal and should be front and center in all school/teacher/caregiver plans, both academic and in terms of student support.

Key quotes

Dan Mahlandt: "We leverage our online curriculum to provide a baseline level of instruction for our students—and for some students in some areas, that may be enough. That instruction may include communication from teachers by email or in discussion boards. We use synchronous instruction—both online and f2f here at our hybrid school—for when we need to go deeper on a certain topic that may be challenging to a student, or a group of students. We rely on our teachers to do what they do best—create and leverage great relationships with students to help them through their most difficult times."

Theresa Rouse: "The reality of taking a traditional brick-and-mortar district to remote is a huge learning curve, for both the staff and the students. At the start of the year, we set goals for mostly synchronous instruction, because we needed to build relationships with students, we needed to build student skills so they could understand how to learn in a remote setting. Students may be on live for five hours, which seems like a lot, but they're not at their computer that entire time. But we don't want to lose them because we don't know if they will log back in. Our attendance during remote learning has been very similar to our (pre-COVID) attendance."

Marie Hanna: "Because we are an online school, we have been thinking about these issues for a long time—and it's not easy! We are constantly thinking about the best uses for live video, and the best uses for asynchronous. Even though we've been doing (online learning) for many years, we upgrade our platforms, and have to continue training our teachers. It's an evolving process and we are still learning. The most important thing is that we continue to find ways for teachers to connect with students."

Comments from attendees
- "When each student has a unique role in a group, particularly if that role has a unique task list and/or unique set of materials, then there is a stronger incentive to collaborate, and there is also a way for the teacher to hold each student accountable for fulfilling their role. As a result, you find that student engagement is higher in these well-designed groups. If students are simply grouped and given a shared task in a typical breakout room, some students may not engage/contribute, or there may be conflict about how to attain the learning goal. This creates the possibility that the group experience may be negative, both academically and socially."
- "I work with [online] schools who provide optional in-person activities (pre-COVID) like field trips or fitness classes."
- "Connection before content!"

Links and resources from panelists and attendees
Joliet Public Schools Remote Learning Guides
Valor Prep Arizona
Connections Academy: Ten Ways to Engage and Instruct Students Remotely
Online Learning Guides from the Alberta Provincial Government