CHAPTER 15.

RETOOLING DECISION-MAKING IN A/SYNCHRONOUS ONLINE LITERACY INSTRUCTION

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In this chapter, the authors describe the intentional development of transferable asynchronous and synchronous professional skills used in both online real-time and any time learning. Specifically, the authors discuss the importance of highlighting student communication modality as part of design-making. In describing a "better practice," the chapter addresses the themes of practices in motion across teaching and learning modalities, and professional learning for online teachers.

FRAMEWORKS AND PRINCIPLES IN THIS CHAPTER

- **PARS Online Writing Instruction, Strategic:** Focusing on the student user experience (UX).
- OLI Principle 1.1: All stakeholders and students should be aware of and be able to engage the unique literacy features of communicating, teaching, and learning in a primarily digital environment (https://gsole.org/oliresources/oliprinciples).

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- Do you have asynchronous and synchronous tools that you prefer to use in your teaching?
- What are technological affordances and constraints of these asynchronous and synchronous tools?
- What are ways in which some students might benefit from the use of some tools, and other students benefit from other tools?

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- Can students achieve the same goals and objectives using different tools?
- What kinds of reflection can be helpful in getting students, themselves, to see the value of the use of different tools to engage specific users in specific content given specific situations and contexts?

INTRODUCTION: RETOOLING DECISION-MAKING IN A/SYNCHRONOUS ONLINE LITERACY INSTRUCTION

Yellow Zoom-hands light up the interface of an online media studies course. Engaged faces populate the screen, floating and bobbing with varied background messiness in each video feed. Initially, there's an awkward overlap of student voices speaking over one another. For those who can't get a word in, the chat box rapidly fills. But there are many points to reply to, affirming a diversity of voices coming through the speakers. Students discuss the course reading questions without too much prodding. The Zoom call with its chat is becoming a space where students feel comfortable contributing through audio, video, text, and emoting. For those who need more time, key points can be added to the discussion board later. They've overcome what some students and many teachers call "Zoom fatigue," because the students are truly engaged. There are many ways to communicate, and students are learning how to do so given the content and situation. They're learning that both the medium *and* the message is important in effective communication, delivering the right message in the right amount at the right time. A community-based, shared netiquette slowly emerges. As we look at this intensive moment of student engagement, we pause to consider: what's really happening here and what brought about this experience?

SCHOLARSHIP, THEORIES, AND PRINCIPLES THAT GUIDE OUR APPROACH

Flexibility and adaptability in asynchronous and synchronous online literacy instruction are critical to effective student-centered teaching, optimizing student-to-student, student-to-content, and student-to-teacher engaged interaction. We must prepare learners for diverse, task-driven communicative situations, sometimes onsite and sometimes online, sometimes live and sometimes not. But it can be difficult to design online courses that intellectually challenge each student, however, due to administrative or logistical requirements. For instance, courses are usually predetermined to be onsite, online, or blended for scheduling reasons; sometimes differentiated tuition rates are used; and instructors may not have much choice in the tools they can use. Pivoting to another modality after a course begins can disrupt expectations and may even be institutionally prohibited. And many students prefer asynchronous courses for scheduling or convenience reasons rather than pedagogical affordances, unwilling to engage in synchronous activities, even if optional.

What if we could, instead, design assignments and courses that give students greater choice in how they communicate with some combination of the asynchronous and synchronous? The hypertext of modality choice by design? For instance, we can encourage students to bounce ideas around in small groups synchronously before presenting ideas in class asynchronously via screencast recordings. Or we can encourage synchronous, collaborative review in addition to asynchronous discussion posts. Or we can use synchronous exchange to test the usability of artifacts produced. Student readiness to move from one modality to another to optimize progress on a task should be somewhat determined by the communication exchange need itself. Our better practice is this: designing variable entry points into communicative interactions and requiring students to select and reflect on what's most conducive given the rhetorical situation.

Workplaces commonly blend a/synchronous practices dynamically, pivoting when needed, especially in multicultural or global contexts. Obstacles abound, requiring communication platforms and approaches to pivot. A recent report from the Pew Research Center points out that even as workplaces reopen, teleworkers often choose to work from home due to the health necessity. Specifically, as of February 2022, 59 percent of U.S. workers work from home all or most of the time, and 83 percent of those working from home reported they were doing so before the omicron variant of the COVID-19 pandemic (Parker et al., 2022). As the pandemic, the economy, technological literacies, and the increasing ubiquity of communication tools continue to reshape work practices, it is critical we prepare students as both content experts and communication design decision-makers.

Teachers, too, must create such opportunities for students to make project management communication decisions because the process of deciding the best combination of modalities to prepare and convey content in the right way at the right time is a critical literacy skill. When so many workplace projects involve collaborative communication in timely ways to complete work effectively, close attention to dynamic communication processes—processes that span the devices they use and the modalities that include text, image, audio, and video—is critical to student professional development. Rather than choosing the easiest or most convenient approach, students must take ownership over how they meet project deadlines, maximize team member skill sets, integrate user feedback, and overcome obstacles. Otherwise, students might graduate from our schools underprepared.

At a time when increasing numbers of students are learning at a distance or in some blended format, it is crucial for teachers to train students in multiple ways to communicate with peers in educational contexts as well as with future fellow employees and employers in workplace contexts. The "distance" in distance learning has less to do with location and more to do with functional literacy. In this sense, "literacy" can be defined as fluency in something or the ability to transact an exchange through language or some facility with media or technology. Literacy is voice and conviction and confidence stepping into an ongoing conversation, using both oral and written communication modes. Nicholas Carr quotes from Walter Ong's (1982) *Orality and Literacy* to detail ways in which relying only on orality or the synchronous is limiting, and how the written word functions asynchronously to liberate knowledge from memory. According to Ong (1982, as cited in Carr, 2010), the ability to write is "utterly invaluable and indeed essential for the realization of fuller, interior, human potentials" (p. 57). Calling attention to what is often practiced in transparent ways, reflecting over the medium and the message is critical to effective communication. By design, teachers can use the oral and written together, in varying ways, through offering a/synchronous communication options to do so. As Stephen Kucer (2014) writes in *Dimensions of Literacy: A Conceptual Base for Teaching Reading and Writing in School Settings*, "limiting our understanding of literacy to the linguistic and cognitive dimensions . . . is to overlook the social dimension of written language" (p. 229).

Similarly, Jessie Borgman and Casey McArdle (2019) in *Personal, Accessible, Responsive, Strategic: Resources and Strategies for Online Writing Instructors* relate social dimensions and strategies to focus instructional design. Teachers must design courses with a user experience for students in mind, including what students might transfer to workplace writing situations. Soliciting student feedback, utilizing that feedback, presenting content in multiple ways, ensuring accessibility—these are all critical processes to effective teaching design and to model ways in which students should pay close attention to technological and communication needs of future workplace projects (Borgman & McArdle, 2019, p. 73). According to Borgman and McArdle, "We can't tell you how many meetings we've attended that could have been handled with an email or went 30 minutes too long" (2019, p. 78). No doubt many of us can concur. Knowing the best modality to use, given specific rhetorical situations, can be as significant as the content itself. Yet, such decision points are often understated in student preparation.

With digital tools, we can facilitate individualized instruction within ongoing collaborations, such as by combining the a/synchronous in designing and presenting information, using the a/synchronous to facilitate meaningful checkpoints, and teaching the value of the a/synchronous as an immediate feature of effective communication. Different combinations of a/synchronous can be used for different learners, just as location and modality must be considered alongside reader, writer, and text when meeting complex needs of varied audiences. As Erica Stone (2021) writes in "Aiming for the Sweet Spot: A User-Centered Approach to Migrating a Community-engaged Course Online" within Borgman and McArdle's (2021) *PARS in Practice*, translating what engages students in different modalities is valuable to produce writers more responsive to user needs. Stone traces changes in her teaching given specific shifts in modality, when "all too often, writing studies departments and writing program administrators will construct one predesigned version of a course for all . . . to teach instead of allowing instructors to incorporate their expertise and located ethos," paying close attention to varied workplace situations (2021, p. 322).

The Global Society of Online Literacy Educators (GSOLE) recognizes the importance of location and modality in pedagogical contexts, working to prepare teachers to be agile and flexible in their approaches as well. GSOLE lists four Online Literacy Instruction (OLI) principles and tenants that aid understanding and praxis. The first OLI principle, for example, is that such instruction should be universally accessible and inclusive. Its first accompanying tenet (1.1) reads: "All stakeholders and students should be aware of and be able to engage the unique literacy features of communicating, teaching, and learning in a primarily digital environment" (2020, para. 9). Outcomes in digital environments, that is, depend on the technological (il)literacies of both teachers and students, as well as their ability to navigate expanded rhetorical landscapes that are shaped by diverse technological, social, institutional, and cultural factors.

The expanded rhetorical triangle includes reader, writer, text, location, and modality, and a/synchronous communication options call attention to relationships between these points, giving students preparation to practice social dimensions of written language for different audience types. If a composition is to be read by a multinational audience (or not really read carefully at all), on different devices, while heading to a meeting with some urgency, consideration of audience and purpose changes. Increasingly, for instance, we tell students most audiences want to accomplish tasks rather than spend too much time reading what has been written (see Tebeaux & Dragga, 2021). Literacy instruction should be situated within the messy communication constructions of society, which are sometimes onsite and sometimes online, sometimes live and often not, and are often task-driven in most workplace situations. If our goal is to prepare students for global, technologically rich environments reliant on the co-existence of asynchronous and synchronous communication, a better practice is to model this in our classrooms.

COURSE CONTEXT AND LESSON

ASSESSING FUNCTIONAL LITERACY

Given the rhetorical awareness and pedagogical dexterity required to cultivate this new kind of functional literacy, it is critical to gauge student knowledge regarding asynchronous and synchronous modalities. Such takeaways are designed for teachers as well as students. They can be easily adapted for different writing and technical communication classrooms. To do so, we administered a survey in an undergraduate online media studies class. The survey is not meant to be a prescriptive exercise, and we suggest administering a similar survey only as a way of assessing your students' understanding of the importance of analyzing audience and purpose carefully to select the right communication modalities. It is crucial to know the level of familiarity students have with various learning modalities to come up with student-centered teaching approaches, modules, and assignments that neither alienate students with inordinate expectations nor confirm the limited perception of synchronous as time intensive and asynchronous as time saving.

In our own case, because the course was originally designed to be entirely asynchronous, student contact usually took the form of asynchronous email exchange, posts and responses in an online discussion forum, weekly recorded video lectures, audio files, and reading materials for students to review at their own pace. However, because synchronous modalities "can provide a vehicle for meaningful student involvement" (Mick & Middlebrook, 2015, p. 146), and since obstacles like the pandemic have prevented effective synchronous interaction for many, we decided to integrate an optional synchronous component. Most weeks, students responded to posted content in 250-350 words. Early in the course, students were given the opportunity to join an hour-long synchronous meeting with the incentive that attendance would exempt them from the usual written response. Less than half took advantage, even though students were informed if scheduling prevented them from joining other times could be made available. The relatively lower number of students who attended may be due to many reasons, but what became clear is that students were not necessarily getting an opportunity to see the value in the difference between modalities. In this chapter, we offer insights into our survey design process—and outcomes—as a better practice for all instructors, in any modality, to think about as an initial way to garner their input and design communication processes that will be effective for all.

First, to gauge ways in which functional literacy changed and to better understand student goals and expectations, we asked the following questions (IRB #c0921.1e-ETSU):

1. Do you know what "asynchronous" means? Yes/No.
2. If yes, describe what asynchronous learning is.
3. Do you know what "synchronous" means? Yes/No.
4. If yes, describe what synchronous learning is.
5. Do you prefer asynchronous or synchronous learning, or some combination of both?
6. What do you like about asynchronous learning?
7. What do you like about synchronous learning?
8. What do you like about a combination of asynchronous and synchronous learning?
9. Describe one class and/or assignment that implemented your preferred method the best.

Of course, as we consider the way we designed this first version of the survey, sharing examples of different technologies or scenarios may make more sense to students than using the terms asynchronous or synchronous. And only one section of students responded to the survey. Nevertheless, the survey and reflective action research allows us to reinforce our teaching practice (offering flexible communication options to better prepare students to use communication tools effectively). Survey responses then informed our teaching practice.

All respondents answered "yes" to knowing what asynchronous and what synchronous means. But when asked to clarify, it became clear that our students' understanding of both is varied, incomplete, and often incorrect. One student, for example, wrote that asynchronous learning is "a class that is 100% online." What it means to interact online is unclear to the student. Other responses focused on negative elements of asynchronous learning (i.e., what asynchronous learning is not or does not facilitate), and not on beneficial communication affordances such as time for extended reflection. For instance, students defined asynchronous these ways:

- "Generally, online classes that do not have scheduled class-collective meeting times but set only work deadlines."
- "All learning objectives are being completed but not at the same time or in the same way, necessarily."
- "Learning entirely virtually, without in-person or Zoom meetings."

Students wrote or indicated asynchronous is "Learning mostly on your own," which implies student-to-teacher instructional interaction is not recognized. Only one response suggested the asynchronous gives unique opportunities for learning, that "online learning [is] on a student's schedule." Still, flexibility is for scheduling or logistical expediencies rather than for valuable communication attributes.

Our students articulated synchronous learning values more directly, but still demonstrated a lack of understanding. Some responses:

- "It's when a class has students attend lectures/class meetings at regular scheduled intervals throughout the semester."
- "Synchronous means real-time learning from different locations."
- "It's a class where you are virtually attending lectures with professors and other classmates."

Students struggled to relate clear understanding. One wrote, "Learning objective[s] are completed together, 'in sync,' and exactly the same way." Another did not seem to realize that synchronous communication in an online course usually indicates a type of online tool: "meeting in-person for class weekly." These and other responses indicate that our students were not entirely clear what asynchronous and synchronous refers to in educational learning. Beyond understanding the value of both communication modalities, students did not discuss using both together and playing an active role in deciding which combination of tools would be most effective.

Still, despite limited understanding or even misunderstandings among students, several insights were presented. Out of the three types of modalities—asynchronous, synchronous, and blended—our students preferred asynchronous. When asked what they like about asynchronous communication, students referenced their schedules and flexibility. "I have many constraints on my time, so I cannot carve out enough time for full-time, synchronous learning"; "It allows for more job flexibility and saves a lot of driving time"; and "I can access information any time I like without having to worry about budgeting time for lectures during my busy days." Students focused on how asynchronous opportunities allowed them to *not do* something such as be somewhere at a certain time, rather than relaying communication effectiveness benefits.

On the other hand, in our courses, as well for experiences we are preparing our students for beyond our courses, focusing on benefits to enhance communication in addition to convenience is important, even if the focus is to free additional time to focus on refining communication. When asked what students like about synchronous learning, answers included, "It provides a personable, tactile and sometimes entertaining college experience"; "More help"; "Benefits of face-to-face instruction"; "Being able to talk with my professors and other students"; and "More in-depth learning, and personal connection." Students identified personal and relational benefits. What is missing is reflection over the combination of the cognitive and the social, which reflecting over combinations of a/synchronous communication options can enable.

When asked directly about combining a/synchronous communication in learning environments, student answers were varied, from "I prefer one or the other, having a combination makes me feel scattered"; to "More help combined with working at my own pace"; to "It allows you to take classes you need more instruction with in-person, while taking subjects you feel more comfortable with on your own time." Responses suggested to us that according to students, teachers have not done a great job of strategically integrating the a/synchronous, or of reflecting on benefits and limitations. One response, though, which albeit could have been along the lines of *let me write what the teacher wants to hear*, supports our better practice directly. The student stated, "The implementation of optional synchronous opportunities creates variety and a more memorable human experience." The survey was valuable for our students to prioritize media tools we have access to use, to consider ways in which the medium and the message are both critical, and to think about how we have choice and must decide which communication tools are most effective given different rhetorical situations. The survey is valuable for teachers in that it can be administered at the beginning and toward the end of a course to see development of this important functional, critical literacy in action.

TILT'ING THE SCALES ON COURSE COMMUNICATION

Though it was a small sample, we were intrigued by what our students offered us. Because our survey results suggest that students are relatively unfamiliar with the differences between synchronous, asynchronous, and blended learning environments—and since they seem to focus primarily on the negative aspects of each modality without recognizing each one's unique positive affordances—we have devised a TILT assignment to address these issues. Originally developed by Mary-Ann Winkelmes (2023), the TILT model (Transparency in Learning and Teaching) is designed to help faculty implement transparent teaching practices. One of TILT's primary goals is to facilitate "workshops for both faculty and students that promote student's conscious understanding of how they learn" (Winkelmes, para. 1).

In the assignment outlined below, we provide an opportunity for students to research, reflect, and write about their understanding of the differences between learning environments; each modality's affordances and limitations, including technological and rhetorical considerations; and how they might navigate subsequent course assignments equipped with this new knowledge.

We recommend that faculty assign this project after administering the survey. Since each class will comprise students who have varying experiences with different types of course modalities, this lets faculty adjust the assignment parameters and questions according to gaps in student knowledge, class scheduling, and other course assignments. Whatever changes the teacher makes because of the survey, the goal should remain the same: to facilitate student reflection and ideation concerning different types of online learning environments.

ASSIGNMENT SHEET

Purpose

Student experiences are increasingly characterized by diverse modes of course delivery: synchronous, asynchronous, and/or blended. The purpose of this assignment is to gauge student experiences with—and understanding of—differences between these three kinds of learning environments, and to teach them how technological mediums affect (and are affected by) their experiences.

Skills

Upon completion of the assignment, students will be able to:

- Clearly define and articulate the differences between synchronous, asynchronous, and blended learning environments;
- Identify each modality's technological/logistical affordances and limitations (i.e., what unique opportunities does each provide, as well as obstacles);
- Rhetorically analyze how learning experiences affect (and are affected by) different modalities; and
- Reflect and write about how they might use this new knowledge to navigate this and future courses.

Knowledge

Upon completion of the assignment, students will be knowledgeable about:

- Differences between the three types of modalities;
- Each modality's technological/logistical affordances and limitations;
- Rhetorical context as it relates to learning experiences within and across modalities, and
- How to dexterously navigate course modalities in evolving educational landscapes.

Task

1. During week 1, administer the survey to establish student knowledge of modalities (subsequent tasks can be adjusted according to results).
2. During week 2, teach students about the expanded rhetorical triangle—reader, writer, text, location, and modality—with specific attention to

how a/synchronous communication options call attention to relationships between these points. Delivery mode can be synchronous, asynchronous, and/or blended.

3. During week 3, prompt students with the following:
   You're tasked with writing a 2500-to-3000-word essay that answers the questions below. To support your claims, you must cite at least 1 reputable source in your response to each question. (Some of these questions are like the ones that students respond to in the survey; the difference is that they'll be responding to these after discussing the expanded rhetorical triangle in week 2. They'll also be responsible for researching these topics to add to their existing knowledge, instead of just gauging existing knowledge like the survey does. Students are encouraged to research, including interview, instructional designers.)
   a. What are the primary differences between online synchronous, asynchronous, and blended learning?
   b. What are a few unique advantages to learning in an online synchronous environment?
   c. What are a few unique advantages to learning in an online asynchronous environment?
   d. What are a few unique advantages to learning in an online blended environment?
   e. What are a few unique challenges to learning in an online synchronous environment?
   f. What are a few unique challenges to learning in an online asynchronous environment?
   g. What are a few unique challenges to learning in an online blended environment?
   h. What are some rhetorical considerations—drawing on terms and concepts from the expanded rhetorical triangle—when considering which modality would be best suited to a given learning context? Give at least one example from your own experience to illustrate.
4. Equipped with your expanded knowledge about the unique advantages, challenges, and rhetorical considerations as they relate to different types of modalities, how might you adjust your learning approach in other courses?
5. Based on student responses to the questions, the instructor can adjust the delivery modalities according to student expectations, strengths, weaknesses, course content, and needed areas of improvement. In that way, the above assignment fosters multimodal competence in students, and at the same time provides valuable data to the instructor who can then construct the course in adaptive ways.

Criteria for Success

The project will be evaluated according to the following criteria:

- How well the student defines and articulates the differences between the three types of modalities.
- How accurately and clearly the student identifies each modality's technological/logistical affordances and limitations.
- The quality of the student's rhetorical analysis about how learning experiences affect (and are affected by) different modalities.
- The quality of the student's reflection about how they might use this new knowledge to navigate this and future courses.
- The quality of the student's writing.

In our undergraduate and graduate classes in composition, technical communication, and media studies, there is always a mixture of students with varied technology skillsets, facility with written and oral communication, understanding of media literacy, awareness of visual representation and data ethics, experience as a major or non-major, and vision for strategies to overcome obstacles. We emphasize these topics as needed by students in our courses. Further, procrastination, family emergencies, technological difficulties, health concerns, other deadlines that must be prioritized—our syllabi detail what students should do when such obstacles arise. Such advice and direction are required for good reason. However, we should also acknowledge obstacles are frequent in workplace environments, and students must know in advance how to make good decisions themselves to optimize quality of work. Obstacles to understanding are the norm, not the exception. Just as good teachers, through instructional design, prepare multiple avenues for instruction given directions students take conversations in, all communicators should be prepared to shift modalities, use different tools, and relate content in different ways by design. If students do not have opportunities to decide which combination of communication strategies should be used to overcome problems, which requires flexible a/synchronous online experiences by design, their preparation for agile communication workplace decision-making is limited.

Knowing how to best determine effective communication practices—as well as which critical literacies need strengthening—varies from student to student. Where one student may need the challenge of presenting information in front of a live audience to explore benefits and limitations, another student may learn by practicing and revising a recorded presentation. Further, this practice allows students the flexibility to make decisions for learning based on their strengths and needs as learners, which can be especially important when considering students with diverse educational backgrounds and accessibility needs. Where one student may shy away from the use of a specific technology due to apparent overuse, another student may value extensive experience as a foundational advantage. And where one student may be a non-native English speaker or a struggling writer who requires more time on task, another student may need a live audience to practice adjusting on-the-fly. What is clear is that every student in each class needs to be challenged in unique and flexible ways to prepare learners authentically for communication in workplaces.

Writing instructors can all relate to classroom examples where individual student strengths were not fully engaged. For instance, in our classes we routinely ask students to give a final, synchronous presentation over a significant project with time set aside for questions and answers. Communication literacy is a key component in our course goals and objectives, because if students can come up with great ideas but do not convey them well, messages miss their mark. Effective communication design is a form of functional literacy, in other words, and our students often must study good examples, refresh technology skills, and perform usability tests in addition to creating content to share ideas effectively. Combining the asynchronous (written) and synchronous (oral) is needed. In terms of practice, combining the a/synchronous addresses and helps mitigate the common obstacle of procrastination, which is often encountered with collaborative exercises or assignments.

For instance, one strategy we employ is breaking students into small groups, and the more tech savvy student might lead in design on small group discussion, with other group members then taking different responsibilities. The "divide and collaborate" approach, teaching individual students how to recognize which skill sets they have that can be combined to best solve problems, then prepares students, as purpose-driven meaning making collaborators, for workplaces. Groups struggle when one or more members do not complete their work in a timely manner. Breaking assignments down into components on a timeline can mitigate the impact of procrastination. Deciding who must accomplish what and by when, whether asynchronously or synchronously or some combination, is a very important workplace skill, employing communication strategies such as checkpoints. When teaching online, our practice must provide participants scaffolding to collaborate in guided, self-determined, meaningful ways that minimize procrastination but make allowances for contingencies.

Assignments leading to live presentations, though, even with many student checkpoints and ample teacher scaffolding, assume presenting synchronously is optimal to convey information or to demonstrate achievement. Can teachers offer more varied options? A second strategy we employ, as one example, recognizes that in many workplaces, presentations may be delivered at a distance where some audience members may be together onsite, and some may be online or prefer receiving the presentation at another time. Preparing a presentation for hybrid delivery requires dexterity in sequencing the a/synchronous. In our classes, students might practice their presentation several times before finalizing a recording, submit their presentation asynchronously, and stand by it synchronously to answer questions. Students record, review, and re-record several times, typically dedicating more time on task than if they prepared to present it live. The additional practice often helps students determine where design and content must be revised. Options can remove on-demand pressures that some students are not ready for, while giving others more time to give attention to different components. The presentation is delivered as if it is live, but it is presented the moment the audience is ready to receive it, which is common in workplace environments. Retooling the a/synchronous by shifting modes of interaction can be more conducive to learning.

A/Synchronous Online Learning instruction

We can better synthesize ways in which the asynchronous and the synchronous work together by providing students opportunities to reflect on decisions guiding their use. A common perception among students is that they spend less time learning asynchronously as they are saving on hours they might otherwise spend attending synchronously. Related to this is the view that asynchronous classes are less rigorous so that students believe they will also save time on learning and assignments. Students must understand that asynchronous modalities, for instance, are not just "less time" (Paull & Snart, 2016, p. 13). One method is to conceptualize ways to do so through assignment and course redesign—focusing on student-to-student, student-to-content, and student-to-teacher interaction—to give each student in every class flexible pathways toward demonstrating achievement. The practice is essential as higher education becomes more expensive and as companies require employees to retrain themselves by acquiring emerging functional literacy skills. Serving the needs of various kinds of learners, this "buffet style of learning" theory suggests using a variety of activities involving the visual, the auditory, and the kinesthetic supported by more individualized attention (Veal, 2016). What matters more than serving one type of lesson is letting learners decide which materials and approaches are needed to achieve learning goals and objectives.

Embracing the idea of combining the a/synchronous, imagine a shared file to write in—such as a GoogleDoc or a Word file on OneDrive—that is accessed by multiple small groups simultaneously. The shared document might serve as a checkpoint for each small group, with teacher prompts and questions provided as needed throughout the course, answered, updated, and revised by individuals and/or small groups asynchronously. During a synchronous class session, a small group chat enables the team to synchronously discuss and update their section of the asynchronous document. The teacher can move from small group chat to small group chat while reviewing each team's work simultaneously in the shared document. Students engage in the space through text, with voice, transacting with video, chat, hyperlinks, and whatever else is required or preferred to take ownership, to maximize skill sets, to integrate feedback, and to plan strategies to overcome obstacles. Students often continue working individually in the document asynchronously after the synchronous class session ends. The document becomes a sort of refined chat space, which is a form of secondary orality. Specifically, this interactive thinking space helps students work through ideas in our courses leading toward individual or small group project generation. The strategy foregrounds reflection over modality decisions made, teaching students skills that can transfer to a variety of interactive communication exchanges beyond the class.

As Steven D'Augustino (2012) points out in "Toward a Course Conversion Model for Distance Learning," effective online learning is facilitated by "high authenticity . . . high interactivity, and high collaboration" (p. 148). Using only one communication modality at a time, such as all asynchronous or synchronous exchange, will not likely achieve high authenticity, high interactivity, or high collaboration by each learner. Likewise, using a predetermined modality without giving students decision-making affordances does not prepare students for types of globalized workplaces impacted by time and distance (Talley, 2017). Whether a course is predetermined to be delivered onsite, online, or in a blended format using primarily asynchronous or primarily synchronous communication modalities, teachers must help students navigate the a/synchronous for meaningful communication purposes for changing educational and workplace environments. Our teaching practice must accommodate these changes to keep pace.

Communication strategies are meaningful to students if benefits can transfer beyond the course to other situations. Just as presentations recorded asynchronously prior to a synchronous delivery can help students better understand strategies to overcome obstacles, integrating synchronous communication as needed in predetermined asynchronous courses can be helpful. For instance, teachers can offer synchronous teacher-to-student conferences during office hours, even in an asynchronous course that usually relies on email exchanges, posts, responses, recorded video lectures, audio content, reading materials, or other largely self-paced work. Such synchronous interaction "can provide a vehicle for meaningful student involvement" (Mick & Middlebrook, 2015, p. 146). If needed, students can choose to meet with a teacher in one modality or another synchronously, at any appropriate checkpoint. However, when asynchronous communication is employed, it should be used intentionally. The choice to engage asynchronously should not solely be based on "it's easier" or "it fits my schedule better"; instead, teaching students to reflect over the value of communicating in one style or another can lead to a better practice where education is not just seen in terms of a grade or convenience. Instead, connecting the choice to transformations in higher education, workplace cultures, and the diversity of learners in terms of location, age, gender, race, occupation shifts the focus from convenience to optimizing communication situationally.

Connie Synder Mick and Geoffrey Middlebrook (2015) note in their chapter "Asynchronous and Synchronous Modalities," "the question . . . is not whether either the asynchronous or synchronous option is intrinsically better" (p. 136), but rather that students consider "when to reverse modalities or when to use both modalities in order to meet different learning styles and objectives" (p. 142). Generally, according to Mick and Middlebrook, the asynchronous modality affords flexibility, more time to increase cognitive participation, more time for processing information, multiple opportunities to read and write, and readily available archival records (2015, pp. 136-137); the synchronous modality affords interpersonal more so than cognitive exchange, helping mitigate miscommunication (2015, p. 137). Both types of communication are needed to limit the potential for misinformation when working with diverse student and workplace audiences. Beth L. Hewett and Kevin Eric DePew offer additional strategies for sequencing the a/synchronous in many teaching, learning, and administrative contexts in *Foundational Practices of Online Writing Instruction*, building on CCCC's *A Position Statement of Principles and Example Effective Practices for Online Writing Instruction (OWI)* (2013; 2016).

Distance learning scholarship on a/synchronous modalities is robust (see Skurat-Harris, 2019, *The Bedford Bibliography of Research in Online Writing Instruction*, 2019; see also Raes et al., 2020, on gaps in the literature). Mary Stewart's (2021) webtext "Student-Teacher Conferencing in Zoom," for instance, documents her shift to online teaching that resulted in enhancing both her online and onsite praxis. She offers two case studies of student-to-teacher conferences on Zoom, examining ways in which the use of the a/synchronous modalities impact what can be taught and learned. According to Stewart, real-time affordances might offer some momentum toward voice for some students and can motivate learners to move toward asynchronous deep reflection and focus. The interface creates a sense of distance that can be helpful for students, enabling them to feel as if they're on the same playing field, a distance that "seems productive for the type of trial-and-error digital literacy" that some students need (Stewart, 2021, "Discussion"). A common problem, though, is that students need to know that they're on track toward achieving course goals and objectives; however, they report that when teachers simply relay what is in a syllabus or assignment prompt, provide asynchronous comments, or give feedback on a scoring guide, teachers are not interactive enough. Students need transactional explanation to understand how the content is personally and professionally meaningful (see Newbold, 1999). Such transactional explanations are best offered when teachers are aware of the educational and workplace goals of their students, and this awareness necessitates asynchronous and synchronous interactions.

We can reconceptualize distance and time by offering students opportunities to design combinations of the a/synchronous. Paul Mihailidis (2019) underscores the idea that such access to valuable tools is a fundamental right, and that teaching students principles of digital media literacy with meaningful participation through a variety of platforms is critical, working toward a classroom of students "engaging in a diversity of voices" (p. 7). Access is a core principle and tenet to ensure stakeholders can engage and interact online (see GSOLE's OLI tenants). As online literacy includes digital reading, writing, and media skills, connecting the synchronous and asynchronous as a form of access may help our students understand they are producing and sharing ideas through meaningful transactional exchange in various communities, what Mihailidis and many media literacy theorists refer to as "civic intentionality" (2019, p. 13). We are co-authors stepping into ongoing conversations that take place a/synchronously in-person and at a distance, both in real-time and any time. Deciding on communication modalities is critical to functional media literacy. To be media literate is to be aware of the impact of bias and subjectivity, the merging of persuasive and informative rhetoric, and the uncovering of information that is reliable yet could remain invalid. Teaching students how to situate communication strategies strategically helps them develop literacy skills critical to effective communication (Newbold, 1999). By using both the asynchronous and synchronous modalities together as a better practice we teach students to embrace converging information flows, leading to engagement and empowerment, practicing empathy, and developing divergent perspectives to compose in an increasingly networked global society (Castells & Kumar, 2014; Robinson, 2009).

REFLECTION ON PRACTICE

To be clear, the survey we administered is action research, one way of gauging student understanding. Its specific value in this instance is that its results allow reflecting and rethinking on our practice of flexible teaching to accommodate students at various life and career stages, motivational levels, and global locations via asynchronous and synchronous means. Our survey's results suggest that most of our students do not value a/synchronous communication affordances for online learning problem-solving. In their responses to the survey, students suggest that the asynchronous modality is usually referred over synchronous modalities due to scheduling (a polite way of saying "procrastination," at least for many) benefits only. Students do not seem to recognize the unique affordances of synchronous learning, nor do they know how to wield them. As we reflected throughout the course on the ways in which choosing modalities or combinations thereof for specific reasons can increase communication effectiveness—project management, clarity of design, reaching multiple types of audiences, connecting the cognitive and the social, and reflecting over archived content for deeper revision through usability testing, for instance—our online learning environment and student success was strengthened.

By deploying the TILT assignment that we outline above in combination with a similar survey at the beginning of the course, instructors can practice data-driven, iterative course design that accounts for students' existing knowledge and skills. Having students research the different kinds of online modalities—and write about the unique traits of those modalities—increases their knowledge of the various affordances and challenges each one presents. Instead of thinking of online modalities in mere logistical or scheduling-related terms, this assignment will help students think critically about each environment's rhetorical context. It will also help them engage with course content, instructors, and classmates in more proactive ways.

Effective communication requires sustained engagement by designing appropriate communication strategies, through close attention to the ongoing conversation, and through weaving all the threads together to make meaning. Skills needed to use technology effectively to express self accurately and responsibly are challenging to teach in any learning environment, and navigating distance requires experience in conveying meaningful thought through virtual environments, practicing how to express voice and opinion empathically without dismissing others' perspectives. Facilitating positive experiences for students in online classes requires constant iteration, dexterity with multiple software technologies, and cultural sensitivity. We suggest here that integrating optional components (be they asynchronous or synchronous) can open doors to creative learning environments that are otherwise difficult to reproduce.

Simply diversifying delivery modalities and making one or more types optional, however, is not enough. We need to be strategic about how to mix modalities. While working with a peer response team on portfolios after some experience focusing on the benefits of both asynchronous and synchronous transactions, one of our students wrote:

> I prefer to just exchange portfolios and send an email with bulleted notes concerning what works and what could use some improvement on my peer's portfolio. However, I am

> open to other methods. Another method I thought of could be a video response. It might be more time consuming, but using video recordings of our portfolio and our feedback for specific areas on the portfolio could be a helpful alternative if live meetings are not an option. Again, I am open to other methods. The main thing is to offer quality feedback and get some quality feedback in return. (K. Goode, personal communication, October 25, 2021)

A well-considered combination is informative, and aids us in predicting potential obstacles, detailing benefits and limitations of different methods, and reflecting on our modalities in ways that benefit the work rather than simply seems easier. Such an approach allows students to remain flexible, makes them more receptive to (and even excited about) receiving quality feedback, and lends opportunities to develop and practice skills useful in workplace environments.

Because bridging distance between perspectives online requires some knowledge of audience awareness and facility with technological literacy, a value system and skillset that varies widely amongst students, time is needed to scaffold distance. Just as distance is more about functional literacy, "time" in online teaching and learning environments has less to do with the progress of events from past to present to future than it does offering students opportunities to work at their own pace with their own tools to arrive at a satisfactory level of understanding and achievement. What is important for teachers is that students achieve the goals and objectives of a lesson, unit, or course. How students go about doing that matters less, but each must be cognizant of options and decide to use media to deliver content purposefully. Students must reflect on the values of the a/synchronous in strategic ways, deploying tactics attuned to the expanded rhetorical triangle.

Students are, we contend, going to find themselves in a new kind of functional illiteracy if they graduate our English courses with skills in persuasion, with an understanding of grammar and style, with some attention to good research and audience, but without such media literacy skills across locations and environments. Students must be taught how to determine what is reliable and valid across many different media modalities and platforms, which in turn will help them reflect over the dangers of sharing information when some environments appear to be more informal than others. Such informed and situated literacy embraces an understanding of the expanded rhetorical triangle, including relationships between reader, writer, text, location, and modality. As we strengthen our teaching by embracing digital technologies in different ways, reimagining how distance and time can work in our classes, reflecting over how to combine asynchronous and synchronous strategies can give learners many and flexible opportunities for engaging with content, with other students, and with teachers; doing so underscores the idea that effective learning and communication steps into an ongoing conversation.

MOVING BETTER PRACTICES ACROSS MODALITIES

- *In-Person, Real-Time Learning:* prioritize a/synchronous modality decision-making processes, offering options for communication exchange in informal and formal composing processes, and introducing those options as early as possible while limiting them to just what is needed.
- *Online, Real-Time Learning:* offer a/synchronous opportunities for sustaining communication on projects for learners who have ideas to contribute immediately and for those who need more time.
- *Online, Any Time Learning:* provide flexible project management internal deadlines to offer team members opportunities to engage in projects using self-selected a/synchronous tools at their own pacing.
- *Hybrid Learning:* document transcripts and recordings of synchronous meetings to capture engaged thinking as "text" requiring further analysis as key contribution to projects, enabling students using different tools to contribute apart potential time and space restrictions.

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