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Real-Time Learning in Online Courses

Live discussions or presentations can enrich our online courses. They can help students feel more connected to one another and make the course seem less impersonal. Real-time (synchronous) discussions are an extremely important tool in building rapport between the students and the instructor. The earlier in the course the first live discussion occurs, the better the results will be. Ideally, the course will contain several of these sessions, which can be either formal or informal. They usually take place through tools embedded in the LMS or via external services or applications such as Skype, GoToMeeting, or Zoom.

However, live events can be difficult to schedule for maximum participation. Many students prefer online learning because of its flexibility. This is especially true for students who have challenging schedules and commitments, so online learning can be ideal for working adults, parents of young children, or students who just prefer to work at odd hours. However, these students' need for flexibility makes it more difficult for everyone to attend a live session when scheduled. This is why we should provide students with an alternative learning experience if they can't be present in real time, or record the session so that they can view it at a later time and still earn credit for their participation.

We should also remember that not all of our students have access to high-speed internet sufficient for participation in these online meetings. Public Wi-Fi, such as we might find at a library or coffee shop, is not always adequate, either. Furthermore, our students may lack the equipment necessary for streaming the live meetings we want them to attend. When these factors hinder their best intentions to participate, we can provide a recorded copy of the session that they access through our online classroom.

I don't believe that any online student should be expected to call in sick to work or miss out on a family commitment (their child's parent-teacher conference, for example) to participate in a real-time online class session unless there is an exceptionally compelling reason for them to do so. Likewise, if inadequate internet service or equipment hinders their participation, we should not penalize them. It's much better to exercise compassion and allow some alternatives for students who experience problems that make it difficult to meet our expectations, rather than imposing an arbitrary penalty for "missing class" that day.

Online learning can feel very isolating. Building real-time interactions into our courses helps minimize students' sense of working in a vacuum and strengthens their learning, provided we also take an empathetic and understanding approach towards those who cannot attend a live online meeting.