

Nurturing the human connection: increasing student engagement and personal connection in an asynchronous language course

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Abstract

Based on course evaluations, student needs and expectations regarding asynchronous courses have changed during and after the COVID pandemic. With the goal of meeting, understanding and responding to the needs of the post-COVID student, intentional modifications were made to an online, asynchronous course to ensure attention to the student as a whole. While respecting the need for asynchronous offerings, designing increased opportunities for human face-to-face interaction in the form of guided personal and language goal setting sessions, orientation sessions, chapter check-ins and exam preparation sessions were all implemented. Initial feedback results show a positive shift and satisfaction in learning, resilience and growth not only for students, but also for instructors.

Keywords: *Asynchronous; engagement; F2F interaction; goal-setting; needs assessment; online.*

1. Introduction

The recent worldwide pandemic forced a shift to online learning in higher education for a significant period of time. While instructors and students retooled courses and transformed learning, it has been through experience in recent months that we acknowledge the need for increased human connection not only within face-to-face courses, but also in traditionally asynchronous online courses. During the fall 2022 semester, our university family suffered an increased number of student deaths. This sparked additional, increased focus on student and faculty psychological well-being, which led administrators to expand, at an accelerated rate, access to mental health care, to initiate wellness days, as well as assess and adjust associated administrative and crisis-response policies. As instructors, we have observed that the post-COVID student population, while more adept at technology than ever before, has a greater need for one-on-one, meaningful human engagement to facilitate success in life and learning. As noted by Booker et al. (2022), the pandemic has been an “enduring, thoroughly disruptive, and as yet unresolved, phenomenon—impacting social life, academic and employment opportunities and demands, physical and mental health, and financial standing for many young adults, their families, and their communities” (p. 1946).

2. Course Modifications

Having offered distance and online courses over the past 24 years, we recognize that gone are the days of plug and play, grade and graduate. Over the years, our introductory Spanish course has gone through many technological and instructional transformations. In this most recent iteration, through months of assessment, trial and discovery, we have reassembled our asynchronous course with several key features to enhance and celebrate the teacher-student connection. Incorporating a needs assessment, increasing student choice through gamification and meeting the needs of each student through one-on-one personal check-ins with an instructor on a regular basis has led to a student/teacher relationship that is not only beneficial to overall positive student outlook and personalized learning, but has also increased instructor job satisfaction.

Regular and intentional modifications to the online course have been a constant in response to a world of ever-changing needs and technological progress. The course was originally taught by one instructor, streamed live, recorded for later access and testing was conducted on campus, in person with the instructor (Despain, 2003). Full-class-length videos were later replaced with brief video segments, the coursemate element was modified, testing became remote or in-person at local testing centers, an additional instructor was added, graduate student support was incorporated, language-engagement projects were added and removed. Keeping delivery technologically up-to-date, relevant and generationally current has been a characteristic of our course. While some may argue that the answer to increasing student

engagement is to limit asynchronous course offerings, registration statistics at our institution show that students seeking higher education degrees have a continued interest and need for online asynchronous courses.

3. Needs Analysis

Our most recent modifications have been based on results of an informal needs assessment conducted through a course format survey. This survey has been pivotal in being able to ensure that students who truly need a face-to-face course are directed to that format well in advance of the start of the semester. Acknowledging that students may not fully understand the value of face-to-face versus a virtual language learning experience, we have outlined the benefits and challenges of virtual language courses in a very transparent manner. Another informal needs assessment that we employ comes in the form of one of the most foundational connections we make with students--the mandatory orientation. Not only is this gathering the first time students meet instructors, students meet their potential coursemates as well. After a few minutes of welcome and informal introduction, instructors guide students through each element of the course, answering any questions posed along the way. This interaction gives all in attendance an opportunity to connect on a personal level and helps make sure that the course format placement is accurate. Instructors guide students through the technological aspects of the course to ensure that technology will not be a hindrance to their language learning. The orientation also provides the opportunity for instructors to be extremely clear about the expectations of the course.

One of the first assignments for students is designed to activate students' background knowledge of language learning as well as to introduce them to the world of second language acquisition along with researched learning strategies so that they might understand that language learning can and should be personalized. Students then use this knowledge to develop three SMART goals (goals which are specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and time-based). In many ways, what we see in our classes is not unlike what we might see in society at large. We have students who are, as Carroll et al. (2013) describe as being, "delinquent" in not fully participating in the class or meeting student learning outcomes, as well as students who are "at-risk" of not learning the material or passing the course, and we have students who are "not at risk". According to Carroll et al. (2013) intervention programs should focus on assisting students to "develop clear self-set achievable goals and support them through the process of attaining them, particularly if the trajectory towards delinquency is to be addressed" (p. 431). Obviously, we are especially concerned for students who are challenged or at-risk of not meeting the learning standards set for the course. Research suggests that students who engage in active goal setting and self regulated learning and who receive guidance from others in achieving their goals, tend to belong to the not at-risk group (Carroll et al., 2013). Committing students to evaluate their purpose for taking the course,

personally designing action items and periodically reporting their progress is another effort at assessing and reassessing students' needs on a regular basis.

4. Student Needs

Identifying students' needs is pivotal in offering course content in a personalized way. Respecting and offering student choice within a course is another significant element of engaging students. As Wang et al. (2015) note, student choice in learning leads to increased motivation to learn. Recognizing the connection that exists between student choice and motivation, elements of gamification were added to the course to increase student interest and involvement. Offering meaningful yet optional language application and culture experiences with a reward upon completion, adds an element of friendly competition that resonates with a significant number of students. With the successful completion of each activity, students earn badges or “chapas” which have the potential to positively impact their overall score by deleting low participation, homework or recording scores. Including this element of fun, freedom and competition within a framework of discovery, target language application and student choice has led to a positive shift in engagement.

Expanding on the concept and practice of respecting students and their choices, as well as rededicating ourselves to student success as modeled by student affairs professional James C. Hurst's (personal communication, March 10, 2020) mantra, *Each Student – A Person*, we were led to develop increased opportunities for instructor/student interaction, while maintaining the asynchronous model. In previous years we had offered TA Café sessions - essentially drop-in online office hours, during various times of the day, where students were welcome to visit, practice their new language skills, ask questions or review performance with the graduate teacher assistant. While modestly attended, the Café did not engage students on a level that was making a positive difference for the majority of students. Consequently, we retooled and developed the Chapter Check-in. During the Chapter Check-in, a graded element of the course, students have the opportunity to visit one-on-one with an instructor on a regular basis (roughly once every three weeks) throughout the semester. In coordination with the chapter conversation project, the student signs up for an appointment slot with an instructor and is prepared to ask and answer questions regarding their performance in the course. The session begins with simple yet personal questions. How are YOU doing? What is working for you as you study and learn Spanish? What are you finding challenging? Students then take the initiative to evaluate their progress with their three SMART goals, their progress in the course and they are guided as they review and modify their language goals as well as their process of learning. Time is then designated for a student Q&A about current content and then the instructor leads a look-ahead which briefly introduces upcoming themes, grammar structures and associated vocabulary. The Chapter Check-in culminates in a five-minute conversation wherein the student initiates a

conversation with the instructor in the target language, demonstrating their acquired and practiced skills in the learned concepts and structures according to preassigned academic parameters.

5. Student/Instructor Engagement

As Zhou (2020) asserts in research regarding online courses during the COVID pandemic, online instructors should “communicate with students through multiple channels and ways” (p. 1488). To encourage increased student/instructor engagement, use of the target language, and to support recently learned concepts, we established virtual F2F exam preparation sessions. Students benefit from attending the student-led sessions that last no longer than 1 hour. Time is spent on addressing student generated questions about course content, but more importantly instructors have the opportunity to listen to students’ general feedback about the course or life experiences. While this interaction is couched in the framework of language learning, the extended and likely most important benefit is offering another human connection with mentors who are working to guide, support, and foster resilience. This ensures both personal and academic success on the challenging path of learning and growth.

Lastly, while the recent adjustments that were made in the course were initiated to address the student learning experience, one of the unexpected benefits resulted in greater job satisfaction for the instructors. Having taught an online, asynchronous course for decades we were used to the rather impersonal nature of the format. As an instructor, while it was natural to recognize a name and to be able to recall the academic challenges or progress of a current student, having an opportunity to connect with students on a more personal level has resulted in deeper and more meaningful relationships. A legitimate partnership has been forged in the asynchronous realm. Early feedback to these course modifications indicate that both students and instructors benefited from increased interaction and the resulting personal connection. Results from a student survey administered at the end of the semester are included in the next section.

6. Survey Results

An attitude survey regarding the Chapter Check-ins was conducted following the final Check-in session of the course. Nineteen students were enrolled and 13 responded to the brief, anonymous, volunteer survey (68% return rate). Quantitative results of the survey are found in Table 1. A majority of students looked forward to the Chapter Check-ins and they felt both seen and heard by their instructors. They also found it helpful to review upcoming content during the Chapter Check-in. A majority also indicated that having regular check-ins helped them feel connected and that the check-ins motivated them to be more engaged in the asynchronous class. Students were asked to self-report their predicted final grade, with 69%

predicting a grade of A or B, 15% predicting a grade of C and 15% predicting a grade of D or F.

Table 1. Student Survey Results.

Question	Agree or Strongly Agree	Disagree or Strongly Disagree
I looked forward to having a one-on-one personal conversation with my instructors during the Chapter Check-ins.	62%	38%
Creating and regularly revising my 3 SMART goals had a positive impact on my success in FLS 101-601.	46%	54%
I felt seen and heard - knowing that my instructors would be asking about how I was doing, about my SMART goals and if I had any questions.	85%	15%
I found it helpful to review the content of the upcoming chapter	77%	23%
Having regular Chapter Check-ins helped me feel more connected with my instructors	69%	31%
Having the regular Chapter Check-in motivated me to be more engaged in this online asynchronous class.	69%	31%
When scheduling the Chapter Check-in, I could easily find a day/time that met my needs.	62%	38%

Regarding the SMART goals a slight majority of the students felt that the creation and regular revision of goals did not positively impact their success in the course. Positive student comments included, "very helpful," "great way to maintain progress," "helped me hold myself accountable," "a good idea," "a helpful tool." Ambivalent or negative comments were, "had no impact on my experience," "I didn't find them very helpful," and "weren't as helpful as the projects." Student responses to the open-ended prompt, the best thing about the chapter check-ins included, "seeing and being able to ask questions directly," "talking to an instructor about my progress throughout the class," "being able to practice verbal skills," "interpersonal interaction with my instructors," "encouraged interaction," "I can talk to my instructors and that helps me feel more comfortable," "checki[n]g in with your instructor is nice," and "getting to know the professor." To the open-ended prompt of other thoughts or feedback regarding the chapter check-ins, student comments included, "very informative if you are confused," "the chapter check-ins did not make me feel any better about the exams," "keep them going," "asking about mental health each time may be good, considering all that has

happened this past semester," "I have missed [some] chapter check ins because I have anxiety."

7. Conclusion

Based on student feedback and instructor experience, we will continue to incorporate a regular needs assessment, student choice through gamification and goal setting and chapter check-ins within our asynchronous online language course. We have found that striking an appropriate balance between the convenience of asynchronous online learning, and developing and nurturing the human connection between student and instructor can be achieved by responding to a thorough needs assessment and ensuring proper placement both in proficiency level as well as course format. Additionally, thoughtfully crafted student-driven goals facilitate the student's responsibility and accountability for the learning process. Furthermore, providing options for student choice in learning not only communicates respect for the student as a unique individual but also engages student motivation and customizes learning. And finally, for many learners early and regular student/instructor synergistic interaction solidifies success on the scaffold of learning.

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Appendix

Student Survey

Thank you for being awesome students! We are interested in your feedback regarding the new addition of the Chapter Check-in and its components (life check-in, 3 SMART goals, class content review) for this semester. Usernames and emails are not being collected as part of this survey. Your responses are anonymous.

1. I looked forward to having a one-on-one personal conversation with my instructors during the Chapter Check-ins. (1-4, Strongly disagree ... Strongly Agree)
2. Creating and regularly revising my 3 SMART goals had a positive impact on my success in FLS 101-601. (1-4, No impact ... Positive impact)
3. I felt seen and heard - knowing that my instructors would be asking about how I was doing, about my SMART goals and if I had any questions. (1-4, Ignored ... Seen and Heard)
4. Feedback or thoughts on 3 SMART goals (Open-ended)
5. I found it helpful to review the content of the upcoming chapter. (1-4, Strongly disagree ... Strongly Agree)
6. Having regular Chapter Check-ins helped me feel more connected with my instructors. (1-4, Disconnected ... Very Connected)
7. Having the regular Chapter Check-in motivated me to be more engaged in this online, asynchronous class. (1-4, Strongly disagree ... Strongly Agree)
8. When scheduling the Chapter Check-in, I could easily find a day/time that met my needs. (1-4, Strongly disagree ... Strongly Agree)
9. The best thing about the Chapter Check-ins...(Open-ended)
10. Any other thoughts or feedback about the Chapter Check-ins? (Open-ended)
11. What grade do you expect to earn in this course? (A or B | C | D or F)