

How Do I Structure Virtual Office Hours to Promote Student Use?

Presented by:

B. Jean Mandernach, PhD

Executive Director, Center for Innovation in Research and Teaching,
Grand Canyon University

B. Jean Mandernach is an active presenter and consultant in the field of online education. She explores strategies for integrating efficient online instruction in a manner that maximizes student learning, satisfaction, and engagement. In addition, she has interests in the development of effective faculty evaluation models, perception of online degrees, data analytics, and faculty workload considerations.



Editor's Note:

This is a written transcript of an audio recording. Our policy is to edit only the occasional unintelligible phrase. Everything else appears as it was spoken.

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I'm Jean Mandernach, Executive Director of the Center for Innovation and Research and Teaching at Grand Canyon University. Office hours are a staple of higher education. Traditionally, it's just a time that faculty members have set aside, where they commit to being available in their office, so students can drop in. They can ask questions. They can connect. They can just have informal conversations.

So, it makes sense that in the shift to online education we've looked to replicate this experience. In fact, research finds that when students will attend office hours, they report higher levels of satisfaction, of community, of a sense of belonging. They even report they enjoy the experience and that they have an increased perception of their own learning.

The bad news is research also finds that students don't tend to take advantage of office hours. They simply don't use them. So, today, what we're going to talk about is how we can create virtual office hours that really tap into students' needs, preferences, and schedules without overwhelming instructional workload.

The good thing about virtual office hours is they're much more convenient. They're flexible. Because we don't both have to be in the same location, students don't have to come to my office, they're actually more likely to utilize them. And with it being virtual, we have two options. We can either have synchronous office hours, where the faculty member and the student are interacting in real time. Or we can have asynchronous office hours in which that interaction happens at the convenience of both the faculty and the student.

So, what we're going to do is explore how to make the most of this, depending on how you structure your office hours, what you can do to really maximize students' engagement with and satisfaction in their office hours experience. Now, when you're choosing whether to do synchronous or asynchronous office hours, it's important to think about the inherent value of each.

In a synchronous interaction, we get that off the cuff, one-on-one, back and forth, really personalized kind of conversational type experience. In contrast, in asynchronous office hours, we have an opportunity to think about things, to reflect, and to respond with more resources and things that are available to us. Synchronous or asynchronous is not inherently good or bad. It really depends on what you're trying to accomplish with your office hours.

What students tend to prefer is often based on what they can do, what's amenable to their schedules. So, even those students will often tell you they would rather talk to you and have that synchronous experience, they aren't always able to schedule it based on their busy lives, and their work schedules, and their families, and all the other things they have going on. What I've found works best is actually to offer a combination of both, to have some synchronous office hours that allow students to take advantage of

that real time experience and the dialogue that comes with it, but to also have asynchronous office hours that allow students with really busy schedules or maybe students that are less comfortable reaching out for the one-on-one time to be able to also get their questions answered in a one-to-one environment.

So, if we start with asynchronous office hours, what this really is your commitment to answering questions within a certain timeframe. What I like to do in my online classroom is set up a question for instructor thread. And students can post to this at any time, just like they could email me at anytime. But I tell students I will respond to all questions at least during my virtual office hours, if not sooner. And then I tell them exactly when that is.

So, I tell students, I am at the computer Monday through Friday. I will log into our classroom between 8:00 and 9:00. And I will answer any questions that have been posted by 8:00 AM, anything that pops in between 8:00 and 9:00. So, during that one-hour timeframe five days a week I'm available to answer your questions.

In addition to that, I let them know if you email me, I'll email you back as soon as possible. But at the latest you will possibly wait for an email is that next designated asynchronous office hour timeframe. Now, the value of these asynchronous office hours is students know when to expect a response. And so it kind of takes away that pressure of, I have to answer as quickly as possible. And I still answer students as soon as I'm able.

But at the worst-case scenario, they're waiting for that next available asynchronous session. And so students know what to expect. They know when they need to post a question if they want a quick answer. And they also know that they don't have to keep coming back into the online classroom to find the answer to that question.

You can do this like I do in email and using a questions for instructor. You could also use a frequently asked questions area. And I've even had some professors tell me that they like to use out of classroom things, like Slack. So, they'll set up a Slack account for their class. And anybody can go in and ask those questions. And they'll just commit to that certain timeframe in which they're willing to go in there and make sure that all questions have been answered.

Synchronous, on the other hand, takes a little more schedule juggling. Because a synchronous implies that you're going to be available live to answer student questions and comments. So, available live means you could either be on a video conference. So, it might be something with Zoom, or Google Meets, or whatever video conferencing platform you prefer. It might simply mean you're available for phone calls. And I've even found a lot of my students just want to know when they can text me. They don't necessarily want to call. They don't necessarily want to set up an appointment. But they want to be able to text me without worrying that they're bothering me or to know that they can get a really quick reply back.

Along those same lines, many students just want to chat. So, they want to know when you're going to be available in the online classroom, so that they are able to post questions in the chat and get an immediate response back to them. Synchronous office hours open a host of possibilities for how you can set these up. And it really depends on a combination of your preferences along with what the student's needs are.

And you can talk to your students to really figure out what kinds of things they're looking for in an office our experience. On one end of the continuum is doing office hours just in a scheduled format. Students sign up for a time to talk to you one-on-one. They can tell you whether they want that to be via video conference, or a phone call, or whether they just want to text. But they have an actual individual scheduled appointment with you.

The next kind of step down that continuum is to have a combination of kind of open drop in that also has the possibility of an individual time. What this would often look like is that you might say, I'm available on Zoom from 8:00 AM to 9:00 AM. And I'll just be sitting on Zoom available. But you'll implement the waiting room on Zoom. So, if somebody pops in, you have to let them in.

What that allows for is that they don't have to make an appointment in advance. But they can have an individual one-on-one time, where other students aren't available. Another option is actually to use a themed or group kind of an office hour. So, in many cases, we can anticipate the questions, problems, and challenges that our students are going to have. Sometimes we can anticipate them before the students even experience them.

So, rather than saying, I'm just available from 8:00 to 9:00, you might say, I'm going to be available from 8:00 to 9:00. But from 8:00 to 8:15, I'm going to be really kind of focusing on questions about x. It might be an assignment. It might be a topic or a concept. It doesn't matter what it is. But you give a theme for that 15 minutes. And then you say, for the next 15 minutes, this is what the theme will be.

Well, what this does is, first of all, it allows students who may not be interested in just setting up a time to talk to you to pop in. Because they know they have problems. But they might not be able to articulate what that problem is. But they can just pop in and get that information.

At the same time, it starts to develop a community of learners. So, now they can pop in. And even if they don't have a specific question, they can take advantage of the questions that other people might have in that context. And it encourages people to join. Because they feel like there might be a purpose that they're going to miss out on, if they don't already log in for that theme.

So, you can have some office hours, where students don't necessarily come to talk one-on-one. But they can talk to you, asking their questions and a group environment that you're able to answer it. And then on the far end of the continuum is just a public drop in. So, now, you're going to set up your Zoom. And instead of having like a waiting room

enabled, it's just going to be wide open. And students can come in or out whenever they want.

So, let's take a closer look at each one of these options. The real value of the scheduled individual is it's probably the closest approximation to what we do with face-to-face office hours. When we have office hours face-to-face, we open our door. And if a student shows up, they come into our office. And we shut the door or do something else that gives them a private conversation. This is really valuable if students are maybe apprehensive, they don't want to be embarrassed about their question in front of their peers, if they want to talk about something private, if they want to discuss their grade or something else that might have a FERPA implication to it.

These scheduled individual office hours are really valuable for those kinds of opportunities. As such, it's super important that you offer individual office hours at some point. Students do need an opportunity to talk about grades or private matters without having other people in the class. The downside of doing scheduled individual appointments is it often can take time on your part to figure out the schedule. It can be a back and forth between you and the student, figuring out what works for them and what works for you. And depending on what their questions are, it might be something that you would have benefited as the instructor having a little bit of prep time.

So, if they were going to have a detailed question about the content or they were going to need a resource, you don't really know what their questions are until they show up. So, it can be harder to prepare for that.

Now, if you're looking to do this kind of a scheduled office hours, you can use pretty much any platform. The difference is going to be you're going to want to generate an individual invitation link that goes with each one of the schedules. So, rather than saying, here's the Zoom link, you're going to set up the appointment with each student, and then give them a personalized link, so that nobody else is able to enter into that meeting with that student. And again, it doesn't have to be Zoom, whatever the video conference is. But it's going to take a little bit of a workload to be able to manage that back and forth with the student to schedule that.

So, then if we go back to the idea of having the kind of combination, students would get the benefit again, of having that one-on-one time. The other advantage here is they don't have to set the appointment up in advance.

So, whereas the scheduled individual, each person reaches out, sets an appointment with you. In this kind of combination time, you could say, I'm available. And anyone can pop in. But just like my campus space hours, if somebody is already in my office with me, you might have to wait your turn.

So, it gives every student that opportunity to just drop in. They didn't have to think about it in advance. They didn't have to set up an appointment. They didn't have to schedule

it. They can pop in at their convenience. But they still get the one-on-one. So, they get that time to talk to you.

The disadvantage of this is depending on how many students you have, it may be hard to actually get to everyone. So, if you suddenly have 25 people show up and you only had an hour scheduled, you might not be able to get through all 25 of the students, which could lead to increased frustration for the student.

So, easier to schedule, but depending on how much use of your office hours there is, it could be a little problematic trying to get through it all. So, it might just be a little less efficient for you and at the same time, might be intimidating for a student. If they show up at this Zoom meeting and they're very unfamiliar with it and they get a message that says you need to wait, will they wait? Do they know? How does this work? It's just not a super familiar environment for students. So, you might lose some students there.

Now, if you are wanting to try this kind of an environment, you could use something like Zoom. And you just enable the waiting room. So, now, every time somebody enters, you have to manually add them to your office. So, you could just add each student as you are ready to talk to them. You also can send messages to people in the waiting room. So, you could tell somebody, your time's coming up, or you're next in line, or whatever it might be. So, there are ways to manage that.

Another program that does a similar thing is Doxy. And you can use Doxy, which was actually designed as a telehealth program. But it does the same thing with a waiting room. And then you invite people in from the waiting room. But they don't have to have appointments in advance. So, it makes it easier for students that maybe aren't on top of things to set their schedule.

The next one down that continuum again, was the themed group. And the real advantage is it takes the pressure off the student. No longer do they have to be the one to initiate the informal conversations. By the fact that you've created the themes, you have the topic of what you're going to talk about, the student might be more likely to say, well, I'm going to pop in, because I don't know if I'm going to have any questions about the assignment. But I want to hear what questions other students have. And I want to benefit from that interaction that other students get.

The downside is if you don't identify themes that they need, you might not meet all the students' needs. And likewise, because it's group and it's about a theme, students might not feel that they're getting kind of the individual attention that they're seeking in an office hours experience. If you want to do the themed kind of group ones, the easiest way to do it is just to set up an open Zoom room, or whatever video conference platform you're using, and just to tell students here's the link. You can come in at any time. You can leave at any time. But here's kind of how I'm going to structure the time within that office hour. And you're going to give them the themes and when you're going to focus on those themes within that office hour.

The furthest end of that continuum then is just that wide open public drop in. And the nice thing about this is, again, it takes very little preparation time. You just simply say, I'm available. And you send out a link. And you open up that link. And you sit in front of your computer and wait. The bad news is you might spend a lot of time sitting in front of your computer and waiting for no reason.

And so hopefully, if you don't have other things to do, you figure out a way to fill that time and make it productive. There also might be privacy issues. So, if you're not also using some opportunity for it to be individual with a student, there might be students that show up for this public drop in and then immediately start talking about their grade or how you graded them. And if other students pop in, you could have some FERPA issues with trying to keep people's individual information just private and confidential to them.

Again, if you're going to use the public drop in, any video conferencing platform will allow you to do this. Now, as I mentioned this, I said one of the biggest challenges if you're going to do anything individualized is with scheduling. What I really recommend is when you start to think about your office hours, you have some combination of scheduled individual appointments and some of open.

The value of open appointments and students being able to take advantage of other people's questions, and comments, and thoughts really helps to build community. But it doesn't meet the need for that individual one-on-one attention. And it doesn't address the privacy need.

So, for the individual appointments, there's lots of different opportunities for that too. You can either say I'm going to have a consistent schedule. Here's when I'm available each week. Students can email me within that schedule to set up their appointment. But it's only going to happen in these consistent times. It's much easier for the instructor to manage. But it doesn't always meet the student's needs. Because if their own schedule doesn't align with that, they're never going to be able to take advantage of your office hours.

Another opportunity is that you have a varied schedule. And you say, any given week, I have different times available. So, people can take advantage of these different times. It's much more amenable to students' schedules. But it can sometimes be harder from the instructor point of view if you're still trying to manually juggle and manage that kind of a who's coming when and has my spot been filled, and do I still have times available?

Or you can go strictly by appointment. And by appointment has the benefit of you knowing exactly when people are going to come. You can make arrangements ahead of time. You can block it off on your calendar. You know that it fits everyone's schedule. But it's a lot more manpower to juggle.

What I really recommend is using some sort of a scheduling tool. There's a lot of scheduling tools available. My absolute favorites are the ones that have automatic

calendar integration. So, I can take my calendar. And I can simply block off times in my calendar. And I can do this on a consistent schedule. I can do it on a varied schedule. It makes absolutely no difference.

But I block off these times. And then I let the calendar tool, something like Calendly. You can use Office 365's Booking Tool. The program YouCanBook.me is also really great. But now students can go to that scheduling tool, schedule themselves within your available block. And it will automatically update your calendar. It just removes all that back and forth.

You can also set up a designated sign up times, if you don't want students to have access to your calendar, where you set up designated times. And you could use something like Sign Up Genius. You could just use a Google Doc. And every week, you could put out sign up times. And students could sign themselves up. And depending on what LMS you use, there's also some that have calendar appointment features that will automatically sync right with whatever video conferencing tool is used within that LMS.

If you really want to be efficient with office hours, a combination of group ones, where you might say if I have three hours available a week, I'm going to do one group hour, and here's the link if anybody wants to drop in, combined with here's the two hours that I'm available that people can sign up for their one-on-one appointments.

If you're going to use scheduling, it's really important that you give them some guidelines. Tell students how long in advance do they need to sign up? Is it fine to sign up five minutes ahead? Or do they need to give you 24 hours? Do they need to let you know what they want to talk about? Or are you completely fine with it being wide open? Students are much more likely to take advantage of office hours if they feel like they get it, and they know what they're supposed to do, and they know how it's going to work, and they know how it's supposed to be structured.

You're also going to want to think about whether there's limits. While we would love to have lots of communication with students, you might want to tell students like, no, you can't sign up for a full hour every week. Because that's really tutoring, which is somewhat different than office hours. And if you only have one hour available, you would have to be cautious about dedicating that to the same student every week.

So, you would need to just think about what kind of limits you might want to place on the office hours you have available. The other thing you want to think about is really keeping students' schedule in mind as well as yours. In my examples, I keep saying 8:00 to 9:00 AM. But we actually know for most students that's the time they're going to be the least likely to take advantage of office hours.

So, if you're able to vary your office hours and have it at different points throughout the day, maybe even offering some evenings or some weekends, students are going to be much more likely to take advantage of that. Now as I say that, you have to be really

cautious to avoid over scheduling yourself. Just because you have 20 hours open on your calendar doesn't mean you should make 20 hours available to students.

And you also want students to know if I'm going to dedicate this time, you need to be accountable. So, talking to them about how you have dedicated this time to them and it's important that they show up and really take advantage of that time in a meaningful way. To get the most out of your office hours, you're going to want to really make sure students feel comfortable reaching out to you. Be welcoming. Be inviting. Tell them how to use the office hours. Give them some guidelines on what to talk about, things that are appropriate, things that are inappropriate, what should go in group office hours, what should go in individual office hours, and really giving them ideas about how to connect, telling them, feel free to come and talk to me about career options, or I'd be happy to talk to you about the curriculum or other opportunities with clubs that are outside of our class.

Students are more likely to use office hours if we repeatedly invite them in, remind them, welcome them, and let them know that we're here for them, and that is the purpose of an office hour.

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