PACS Center Focus Group on Equity in Online Instruction
Considerations for choosing between synchronous versus asynchronous course designations and designs

Takeaways from the PACS Advisory Committee meeting on Wednesday, May 20, 2020 attended by PACS Advisory Committee members and guests: *Angelica Cancino, Chelsea Biggerstaff, Gale Spear, Kerri Pope, Lillian Huerta, Loretta Edelen, Lydia CdeBaca, Marcus McQuirter, Michael-Paul Hernandez, Roberta Weston, Sarah Bowman, Shirin Khosropour, Laila Taraghi, Ramish Nadeem, Sam Echevarria-Cruz, Ted Hadzi-Antich Jr., Charlotte Gullick, Khayree Williams, Roberta Weston, and Tobin Quereau.*

Attendees acknowledged the important role that synchronous learning plays in fostering community, mutual support, accountability, and student success while also acknowledging the need to not penalize students who require the flexibility of asynchronous options for completing course requirements given the abundance of potential barriers or factors that may be at play for them (parenting students, students with shift work, or who lack access to devices with mics and cameras, internet, or a quiet space to video etc). *Kerri Pope* discussed her approach towards striking a balance between synchronous and asynchronous course design through her use of [Sliding Scale Participation Guidelines](), which she has graciously shared with the group.

Shirin Khosropour and *Charlotte Gullick* both referenced and recommended the principles outlined in the [CORA]() webinar, *Employing Equity-Minded & Culturally-Affirming Teaching Practices in Virtual Learning Communities*. A recording of the webinar is available to stream [here]() and a PDF compilation of the powerpoint slides can be downloaded [here]().

Gale Spear weighed in that the choice between synchronous and asynchronous course design will necessarily be informed by individual course objectives that can vary significantly across subjects.

Some general but relevant best practices mentioned by various attendees included:
- Deploying a pre-course survey to gauge students' access and technological literacy to help inform course design, expectations, and requirements.
- Creating a short 20-30 minute introductory video that orients students to the online learning environment.
  - This can be accompanied by a short quiz that helps direct the instructor towards students that may require extra support navigating the course.
- Be mindful that the choices you make in terms of course design can have implications for the mental health and general well being of the instructor as well, which also need to be prioritized/balanced alongside the needs and interests of the students.

- Be considerate around expectations for students' use of cameras. Some individuals experience body dysmorphia, others are uncomfortable having their images included in class recordings, or have other privacy concerns.
  - Multiple participants noted that recording sessions consistently prompted many students to turn off their cameras.
- Add course syllabus to [Lighthouse](#) ASAP and include a list of accommodations you will provide for students in need of asynchronous alternatives to routine synchronous class sessions.
- Consider mailing advanced copies of the course syllabus to students prior to the start of the course.
- Consider elaborating on your expectations for course attendance and participation in the course note that students can view during registration.
- Less to do with synchronous vs asynchronous course design and more to do with equity considerations for course content, *Charlotte* urges faculty to consider mirror texts vs. window texts i.e. texts that reflect students cultural identities vs texts that give peak into dominant culture.
- Take advantage of TLED's training ["Discover Your Blind Spots: Teach for All Students"](#)

The conversation included an exchange regarding prefered online learning platforms for synchronous engagement, and reflections on the pros and cons of various platforms:
- Many participants had favorable things to say about working with Blackboard Collaborate Ultra.
  - Pros:
    - Does not require instructors to send out separate links to students since it is integrated into the course shell platform that students are accustomed to regularly using.
    - Contains a variety of features that help facilitate engagement including ability to create breakout rooms for small group discussion, white board, polling features, ability to record sessions, etc.
  - Cons:
    - The mobile app is not well designed
    - It does not have the option for a gallery view of participants' video feeds, and does not allow you to pin a participant's webcam, which makes it impossible to integrate ASL interpretation as needed.
- The art department and various other departmental instructors reflected on their experience using zoom.
  - Pros:
    - Proven to be a useful platform for interacting with students in studio arts courses.
    - Does allow gallery view of attendees webcams and the ability to pin video feeds to facilitate ASL interpretation.
  - Cons:

- - Known security issues related to zoom bombing and data breaches facilitated by the simple act of downloading the software on personal computers.
- *Lydia CdeBaca* mentioned recent discovery of [Webex Training](#) platform which is distinct from Webex Meetings and apparently features a full suite of tools for robust synchronous engagement that exceed those built into blackboard collaborate and zoom, while offering greater security, the option for gallery view of participants webcams, and the ability to pin a video to facilitate ASL interpretation.
  NOTE: You can *sign up* for Webex Trainings [here](#). If you encounter any difficulties you can email webexadmin@austincc.edu for support.
  - Allows you to add assignments while setting up meeting, chat features, emojis, feedback (e.g. slow down, speed up, I'm confused), whiteboard, screenshare, math functionality
- No one mentioned google classrooms on the call but there are some strong proponents of this platform at the college, and the [numerous apps and extensions](#) that can be integrated into the classroom make it another robust tool for synchronous engagement and one that has built in live captioning as well.