Virtual Education Dilemma: Scheduled Classroom Instruction vs. Anytime Learning

By **Mark Lieberman** on March 30, 2020 3:15 PM

With schools **shut down across America**, K-12 teachers faced with a question many likely thought they'd never have to ask: When and how often during the school day do my students need to see me?

Distance education can be broken down into two broad approaches: synchronous and asynchronous. The former consists of the teacher offering a lesson to the class of students at the same time; the latter provides the student with tools to complete the work on their own time, and direct involvement from the teacher can happen anytime.

(For more details, check out **this guide** from Wisconsin educators, such as Diane Doersch, the technical project director for Digital Promise and a former chief technology officer in public schools. And read this **guide from Educause** about research on the two different approaches.)

The bottom line: Neither approach is sufficient all on its own, but there are situations and subjects that do tend to favor one of the two strategies. Experts say the best recipe for success is to mix the two—but in what proportions? And for which students?

Education Week put this dilemma in front of longtime practitioners and observers of online learning. Here's what they advised.

Don't waste students' time.

Asynchronous communications, like emails and text messages, can be useful for teachers setting deadlines, offering instructions or even launching a discussion question. Synchronous communication works better for brainstorming or more spontaneous conversations, said Susan

Patrick, president and CEO of the Aurora Institute, formerly the International Association for K-12 Online Learning.

"It doesn't make a lot of sense to do a 15-minute lecture live," Patrick said. "Make a slide-deck, do a voiceover—have that delivery of content be done asynchronously so that you're actually using your time together in a videoconference to interact and share ideas and build off each other's ideas."

The added benefit of delivering a lecture in this way is that students can watch it at their own pace, rewinding if necessary if they feel like they missed an important point, or watching the lecture multiple times to make sure they understand the content of the presentation.

Don't go overboard with synchronous teaching.

It won't be possible for most K-12 schools to replicate the traditional classroom experience under the current chaos, but they can take lessons from it. Too much synchronous teaching—a lengthy Zoom meeting teachers expect students to attend in full, for instance—could be "overstimulating" for students and maddening for teachers alike.

Teachers also need to keep in mind the unusual logistics of the COVID-19 outbreak: Expecting students to be glued to their computers all day is especially unrealistic in households with more children than devices. So relying too much on this approach could contribute to equity gaps, with students who have easy access to technology getting an edge over those who don't.

Asynchronous learning offers pacing flexibility.

Fully asynchronous education can give students "ownership of their own learning" that isn't possible in a more traditional classroom environment, said Megan O'Reilly Palevich, head of Laurel Springs School, a private fully online K-12 institution in California.

Jennifer Kolar Burden, curriculum director for the Illinois Virtual School, believes "almost every single piece of content can be delivered asynchronously," but it's ideal for the content to be presented in multiple ways: an interactive game, a practice quiz, a supplementary video. A wide range of optional activities will help cover students with diverse learning needs.

"You're going to have a lot of students who typically may not pay attention very well in class, and now they're supposed to pay attention to a recorded video?" Burden said. Some might, but others won't, she said.

This format can also be helpful for students who tend to take longer to complete exams, says Molly Yowell, an online educator and former digital learning specialist at the Indiana Department of Education. She has a 6th grader at home during the outbreak. "I think he's really enjoyed

being able to take his time at home and not feel rushed by his peers as they all sit and wait for him to finish a passage or a math quiz," she said.

Give parents clear direction.

When making the case for asynchronous learning, O'Reilly often tells parents that, instead of spending roughly seven hours in a school building each day, students at her school can be learning 24/7. A student could choose to do all their English work on Sunday and all their math on Monday, for instance.

Parents will likely need to be more involved with students in lower grades. Asynchronous exercises for those students could be practicing their handwriting, letters, and numbers: "You don't want a kindergartener to be in front of a computer all day."

Synchronous learning can be a little more informal.

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Real-time video or text chatting can also be useful for keeping tabs on individual students-- "checking in on them, how are they, do they need help with something?" she said.

Synchronous experiences, even for less than half an hour, also allow students to check in on their fellow classmates and get assurance that their teacher is doing okay, Burden said. Particularly for younger students, it can be useful to maintain the rhythm of a traditional school day with an introductory chat, mimicking the transition from getting off the bus.

Some subjects work better in one mode than the other.

O'Reilly Palevich thinks English is the easiest subject to teach online because so much of it involves students thinking and writing on their own. Math is tougher, and might require the most synchronous periods for students to ask questions and see problems worked out at the pace that works best for them. It also gives students opportunities to ask questions in the moment, if they are confused by a teacher's explanation of a concept, saving them the frustration of having to wait hours or longer for a teacher to clarify a concept.

Complex subjects that tend to prompt immediate questions or dynamic discussion among students—like AP math or computer science, or world-language courses—also lend themselves to synchronous instruction, Burden said.

Asynchronous doesn't mean absent.

Online videos can help supplement a teacher's synchronous lesson and vary what students are experiencing throughout the day. Science lessons benefit from those video supplements to reinforce demonstrations of lab exercises.

Students might be hesitant to "bother" a teacher with an email or a call if they have a question, unless the teacher proactively offers opportunities for students to get in touch. Younger students might also never have considered that their teachers exist when they're not physically present with them in a classroom.

Yowell suggests teachers plan to meet one on one with students by phone or video chat "a handful of times a month."

Those communications are more effective if they're more personal than rote, O'Reilly Palevich says. Teachers can create a goofy video or use Bitmojis to keep the mood light.

Tailor instruction to your students' needs.

Some students are more prepared to handle asynchronous instruction than others. Montana Digital Academy, the state's K-12 online learning unit, provides an **online readiness assessment** that anyone can use, with several scenarios that help determine whether a student is likely to thrive asynchronously or needs more support.

Effective synchronous teaching can be powerful, approximating the experience of being in a classroom without the physical environment, said Bob Currie, executive director of Montana Digital Academy. But it's not foolproof. Some of Currie's colleagues who have taught via videoconference have "found it difficult sometimes to really keep people engaged. They may be listening but they may be kinda checked out."

Teachers: Don't get frustrated.

It will be tempting to get frustrated if students aren't paying attention during a live meeting—but Currie recommends patience, particularly during a time of heightened stress and anxiety.

Teaching asynchronously can be an adjustment for classroom teachers who are used to getting the instant feedback of students either appearing engaged in an assignment, or getting bored and misbehaving.

Online teachers serve more of a facilitator role, Burden says. Teachers accustomed to in-person instruction will get more comfortable with this role over time, whether they're teaching synchronously or asynchronously.

"You're not leading through the learning process, you're guiding them, you're pointing them in the right direction, you're letting them explore on their own," she said.