

## Ep. 068: Communication in Asynchronous Courses

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Students don't have to feel like they're "teaching themselves" when taking an online, asynchronous course. Dr. Hulda Black, an associate professor in the College of Business, joins us to highlight ways to make communication work through course design, establishing habits, and timely feedback. She and Jim Gee discuss in importance of creating a "rhythm" through scheduled communications, including announcements through ReggieNet and weekly videos to explain learning goals and give general feedback on student work to the class. They also discuss how to approach office hours using meeting tools like Zoom.

### Transcript

JIM: Hi there, I'm Jim.

HULDA: and I'm Hulda.

JIM: Let's Talk Teaching. Welcome to Let's Talk Teaching a podcast from the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology here at Illinois State University I'm Jim Gee joining me today is Dr Hulda Black an Associate Professor in the Department of Marketing in The College of Business. Hi Hulda.

HULDA: Hello there Jim. How are you?

JIM: I'm great. How are you doing?

HULDA: I'm doing okay. Hanging in there. New year here.

JIM: It is a new year. We are recording this uh a few weeks into January. It's the second week of classes for the spring 2021 semester. It doesn't feel like spring outside but that's okay. And for anyone who's listened to some of our recent episodes towards the end of the fall of 2020 we talked to both faculty members and also students about how their experience was going with the shift to online learning and the whole pandemic situation. And one of the constant themes that came up was communication. The importance of communication, the quality of communication between instructors and students, and vice versa. So, Hulda, we wanted to speak with you today because you're going to be doing a couple of workshops for CTLT, specifically, about asynchronous learning and communication there. So, to start with, I wanted to ask you what are some of the particular challenges involved with communication when we're talking about an asynchronous course?

HULDA: Well, that's a great question Jim, and, you know, with asynchronous communication and with synchronous communication, I think the biggest barrier is that students, and I will say even faculty, are just overwhelmed. Whether we are seeing our students every day in the classroom, or whether we never see them synchronously, or even if we're seeing them synchronously in one zoom class, the challenge becomes there's so many different ways to communicate. So, as a faculty member, as I'm sharing things with my students, there's multiple different ways I can do that. And the students quickly

become overwhelmed with the different ways that they can hear a message. I have asked my students many times what makes the class not go so well, especially in this format since the pandemic with more online classes? And overwhelmingly, the answer is, when the communication or the classroom, “the classroom”, I say that in quotes being in an online setting, is disorganized and they find themselves just hunting for information. So, I think that the communication is really the foundation. If you think about it in terms of a building, if you don't have a solid communication plan in place, the class doesn't have the chance to kind of explode or go up from there in terms of great interaction and learning.

JIM: And we should probably define our terms a little bit in terms of what we mean by an asynchronous class because we kind of think of it as either a binary sort of situation, either the class is synchronous or it's asynchronous, but all classes have some component of both, don't they?

HULDA: Yes, for the most part. So, they definitely all have some part of some component of asynchronous learning. Even if your classes meet 100 face-to-face and what we might want to call the good old days, there still is asynchronous communication going on, meaning there's communication happening between the faculty and students outside of the classroom, outside of that live dynamic communication. So, there's really always asynchronous communication that would be occurring in any type of class. There are some classes that don't have any synchronous components to them. So, I guess, there would be a situation where there would be no synchronous communication going on, but, of course, as faculty, we would always be offering office hours and things, as that such, which means the opportunity for synchronous communication should always be there.

JIM: That's great I'm glad you mentioned office hours maybe we will probably loop back to that towards the end of our conversation, because I think office hours are something that, and having talked to a lot of faculty members, and, and teaching myself, again this semester and last fall office hours kind of took on a new a new meaning. You had outlined you talked a little bit about the organization of an asynchronous course. So why don't we start there and talk about now that we know what some of the challenges are in terms of communication. Let's talk about how to organize a course, to kind of overcome some of those challenges.

HULDA: Absolutely. And I will say that a lot of the stuff I'm going to talk about today can be applied, in really, whether it be in a synchronous format as well, because what I'm going to talk about, I do in basically all my classes, whether I'm teaching them synchronously or asynchronously or combination. One of the analogies I like to give when I'm talking to other faculty is, if you want to think about the, your, grocery store that you love to shop at, and when you walk in that grocery store, you know exactly where the cheeses are and the eggs are and the milk is and the cereal aisle and the baking aisle. So, they're grouped into these nice great categories of where to find things. And now if you imagine yourself walking into, whether it be the same grocery store that they completely reorganize or a different grocery store that you've never shopped at, there's a lot of challenges that go with that. So, imagine yourself, you know, looking for cereal but you're finding it you know, your favorite cereals with the

cheeses. There's just not a lot of organization that goes on there, and what happens? You get frustrated. You continuously, that frustration mounts, and then eventually you might not shop there or walk out because you just don't want to deal with it. And that's what our students are facing. So that's why I say this, the organization or the course design is really the foundation of making that ultimate faculty student interaction happen. So, when I teach different workshops, I talk about the, the, course design. So, I particularly use lessons in ReggieNet, but, and that is the hub I have. I tell faculty you need to have a hub where they can find all their information. Students don't want to be hunting for that information. So, every week there's a page that they go to and everything they need to know for that week is on that page. And then, the next week that page looks exactly the same. It has the exact same feel just like your grocery store would. So, they know exactly where to go to find things, and that's the hub that they need to go to for that. So, really, it's like a physical layout, um, if you want to think about it like a store. So, after we have that foundation of course design in terms of the layout, then the next critical piece there is picking a rhythm for your course, and I like to say pick it and stick it and stick with it that entire semester. So, in my particular courses, I launched my modules for the next week at the same on the same day practically the same time. They're due at the same day, and the same time, every week. We meet synchronously always on Wednesdays, asynchronously always on Mondays, and that's the rhythm. And the students very quickly with our first week of classes, which I kind of call like an orientation, they quickly, get that. Because even that first week of classes, I have stuff due on Wednesdays before we meet. We meet synchronously on Wednesday. So that rhythm becomes very important. And, you might say, well what does this have to do with asynchronous communication, or what I'm talking about with the organization in terms of layout and the organization in terms of communication and when things are due that gets us over the initial hurdle. And once we can get through that, it opens up the doors for everything. But just like you don't want to shop in that grocery store that's totally disorganized, you don't want to interact and engage in that classroom if you have no idea what you're trying to find. So, I really try to emphasize that. Without those critical rhythms and organizational design, you're not going to get to that point of, as a faculty, where you really have that engagement without that. So, it's really the first and foremost foundational piece for your class.

JIM: And not to put too fine a point on it, but we also have to remember that every instructor is going to organize their class a little differently, so students have to not just learn your rhythms they have to learn the rhythms of each of their instructors, and so that's one reason why we have to be explicit about this. We have to directly communicate. This is my intention because they, they may otherwise assume that you're doing it the way the other professor's doing it, and that's not the case.

HULDA: Yes exactly, and that is the challenge that the students face is that they have to learn it how each faculty member does that. So, what I try to preach is let's not have to have the students learn it multiple different ways from the same professor. Figure out your rhythm find your tools you're going to use, find the way you're going to communicate, and really stick with that I try to not change anything in terms of how I communicate, when I communicate, throughout the semester because they just get used to that and I know from student feedback that they appreciate that, when we were teaching in the

spring and had to transition online. Contrary to many of my colleagues, I had a very very smooth transition, because I was already doing these hubs of information and so the students knew exactly where to look. It's just that instead of coming to a class. They, you know, had to watch a video. There was just some real minor changes that happened, so it actually makes sense that they need to happen, very clear to communicate because they know exactly where they should be looking and what they should be looking for.

JIM: You know, I'm smiling as you say this because I remember years ago, um, when I, you know, I always create the grid and the week by grid of what, what, the learning outcomes are, and you know what reading is due and what assignments are due and I added a column to show when in that schedule I was going to be introducing new assignments. Mainly to keep me honest and to keep me on, on task, but students then also anticipated that, okay this is this is something that I should be hearing about when we have our next class. And I've continued to do that even though we're not meeting as frequently, in the case of my class, as we normally would. You've talked about setting that expectation getting them used to the structure. So, what are some of the challenges as far as those individual, those supporting little bits of communication, that you need to have with students when students have questions. Do you, how do you provide opportunities for them to interact with you even if it is asynchronously?

HULDA: So, there's a couple of things that I do that I think are important to keeping up that connection with my students. First, is every week I put out what I call a module. Everybody has different terms, lessons. I call it a module because I feel like that's how I originally learned it. So, it's just kind of stuck with me, but I will always record a three to five-minute video that's the very first thing they will see. Well, actually, it's the second thing they will see on their hub page. Their module page is what I call it. I add a checklist. That has been one of the things the students have said has been, absolutely, one of the most helpful things to have, that I have a checklist for each, each week of what they should be doing which is something that's incorporated right into our ReggieNet course page. And then I will have a video, and while that video, again is asynchronous communication, they're not able to ask me questions in that video. I'm able to just walk through and introduce what they're going to be doing that week. It provides a face and a greeting to what they're going to be doing which, I think, is a little bit more personable. And then in terms of questions, I encourage, anytime I send a communication, I always encourage them to email me with questions. I typically because I taught this class a couple of times now, I don't have a lot of questions, but when I do, I always then make sure when I send regular communications throughout the week, if it was a question that I thought, "Oh wow, I totally missed that boat", I will make sure to then communicate it right back out to everybody. So, in terms of how I send one-way communications. I send two regularly per week. There occasionally would be a reason for another one, but typically, one towards the end of the week where I'm announcing that, you know, our new lesson is live, you can find it on ReggieNet. You know, if there's a couple of things I wanted to highlight from that week, I might do that as well. And then a reminder one about 24 to 36 hours before the, the next module is due. Again, they have that rhythm so they, I don't actually feel like they really need that, but it's in those communications that I would then maybe highlight any extra questions that might have come up. So that I can clarify that for

everybody because I feel like if I answer a question for somebody, I want to make sure I clarify that for anybody else. And with these communications, one thing that the students have found helpful, what I do is I use the announcement function in ReggieNet and I always push it to their emails. And I tell them this very clearly kind of on our orientation day that the reason I do that is because typically what I'm communicating to them is something that has to do with when they sit down to do the work. So, by pushing it to their email, I'm kind of cueing them, and then, of course, if it's something that came up and I had to cancel class, they see it right away. But I know that their emails get lost, and they get pushed down and they get lots of emails, and so, then when they come to sit and do the course, and they sit down to kind of do their work for that week, then I say just hit the announcement function and you can see what I have sent out in the past week that might pertain to that. But I don't expect you to read your email and then remember it when you're working on the assignment 24 hours later. So I, I do it that way because there's really no excuses then that they didn't get it because it's always there. And that's how... I never, I never, send an email to the entire class. I always do it via the announcement function. Um and then I use email for that one-to-one communication where people have specific questions.

JIM: That's a great idea, and um, I, I actually started doing that this semester as well. I always use the announcements' function, but um, I did in the in the fall, have a couple students who were like "oh I didn't see your email", and it's like, well it's here. So, so what you're talking about really doing is not just managing expectations but also building habits. Getting students in the habit of doing things. One other quick point I would make is, just as an aside, that checklist function, that you mentioned it which, is part of the ReggieNet lessons tool is really cool because you as the instructor then can go in and see what they checked off.

HULDA: Yes, it's very helpful as an instructor, I can see that. I don't necessarily tie points to them checking it off or not, but it helps for me to see kind of where people are at. And what you notice is that people do it a lot in the beginning of the semester, and then as they're used to it, I feel like they don't go back and check it off as much because they're again they're so used to that rhythm of the course that they know what they're doing. But initially, it's a great feeling to say, "okay, did I do everything I was supposed to do"? And I just recently, just in my classes last week, I had this kind of brainstorming session for my students, to find, to ask them, you know, what makes an online class more engaging versus not as engaging? And they were in groups and kind of coming up with answers, and I asked what things had gone well in their classes last semester not... And I probably had three or four groups bring up that ReggieNet checklist function. That, that was a way to help them be organized. Um, along with the idea that they don't struggle when they have to hunt for information, and they just get frustrated. And so, that's where that store image comes in. If you're hunting for, you know, where your cereal is you pretty soon just don't want to buy the cereal because you're just so frustrated. Those were kind of, some of, the key things that came out in terms of what would apply more to the asynchronous setting.

JIM: You know one other thing, that um, and this was a couple years ago. Students were asking me to use the calendar function. There's a calendar function in ReggieNet, and it talks to the assignment tool. We're getting a little into the technical weeds here, but

you, you can when you create an assignment, you can also hit a checkbox it will, it will, you can have it send an, a reminder email to them 24 hours ahead of time um, but also it will put it on that calendar tool so they can look at that too. I, I found that the one thing is that if you're going to use the calendar tool, you have to go all in. So, I put in the reading assignments and everything else in there too.

HULDA: Yes, and I have not recently used the calendar tool because I found exactly what you said if everything wasn't on there it became a little bit more of a hindrance. And I actually, and this is again personal preference, for my feedback have turned off a lot of the reminders on assignments, but that's only because they're always due at the same time. And I know students are getting inundated with emails. And so, since I always have, for two of my classes it's Wednesdays at 9am, everything is due Wednesday by 9 a.m. And for one of my other classes, it's due by Wednesday by noon. And so, I just take that one reminder and send it out to them and schedule that ahead of time so that they have that. But there's no other due dates for anything. So, they know that just anything that's in that checklist is due by Wednesday 9 a.m. and that takes a lot of the questioning out of it as well.

JIM: So, on social media especially um over the summer and then into the fall, well actually even last spring, there was a lot of talk especially of parents of students who were talking about they were frustrated when their students had a fully asynchronous course. And they the phrase I kept saying was my students are teaching themselves. I'm, I'm curious I think another point that sometimes gets overlooked when we talk about asynchronous teaching and asynchronous learning is the importance of feedback from the instructor. So, so, you've talked about how you have created this rhythm in terms of when students need to engage with the content and turn stuff in. How do you address the other end of that getting them back feedback? Do you have a set schedule that you tell them you're going to adhere to, or how does that work?

HULDA: So, I try to definitely keep a rhythm for myself, just as I want my students to keep a rhythm for them, as well. So, with weekly lower stakes assignments, I always put the feedback right into ReggieNet. So, with something via the assignments tools typically they have to upload, and typically, what I will do, is maybe the majority of the class, you know, gets it right. These are lower stakes assignments that I'm talking about, and then I will address that in my introductory module as well, like what people did well that really hooked it. Or if there were some common mistakes I saw as well. And then for the larger stakes in most of my classes or upper-level classes we have lots of, I call them almost mini projects, and then one project towards the end. And again, I will do the same thing it takes me a little longer to get the feedback, obviously, to them on those larger projects. But I will put the feedback right into ReggieNet because, again, I just want that hub to be that they find the information in the same place. And then I will either via video or via the class time synchronously because this particular class does have class time, I will address, overall, what the class did really well and what the class needed to improve on. So, each individual student gets their own feedback, but I think, just remembering from when I was a student, I also like to just hear in general like what was everybody catching on to. Or if they weren't catching on to it, then I could readdress it in another maybe mini lecture or video or something to that effect. I definitely try to get myself in a rhythm. All of their weekly assignments uh that are just

part of more of the lower stakes. need to make those are the same thing. Just like their next modules coming up due, that grading is due for me as well. So that I'm not behind on that as well.

JIM: One of the other little tools in ReggieNet, and we've talked about it before on our podcast. Um, when you're in the assignment tool, and you're, you know, you can type in feedback. We have the rubrics tool, but you can also actually record up to a three-minute audio clip which I actually found myself using last semester. When we were doing uh public speaking but not publicly and the students were submitting these, these, video recordings of themselves giving speeches and I found, hey, you know, what I can just go in and kind of I've taken notes while I watch the speech and kind of summarize them. And I think that one of the other things that we talked about earlier, we hinted at were office hours. So, I have a question related to that, but I think one of the goals as teachers is that even if it is a completely asynchronous class, we still need to have that contact. That doesn't mean that that they're just doing, some sort of, some sort of a robotic... They're interacting with a chat bot or something like that, that they, that they know, that there's an actual person on the other end.

HULDA: Yes, I think it's critical to have a face with the class. So, to speak, so whether teaching 100 synchronously or the combination, I think these little videos are important, I think office hours are critical to be offering, and so going back to that I know different faculty have done it different ways. Because of the situation we're in and the flexibility with virtual zoom meetings, I tend to just encourage my students to email me, and we'll set up a time based on whatever schedule works for them. When I have set, set office hours in terms of an online setting, the students typically wouldn't show up because it might be when they had another class, or they might have had something else going on. It's not typically, that, oh that exact time is, exactly when they had the question and they needed to ask me. So, I encourage my students in all of my written communications, to them and then in all of my videos I always end with email me if you have any questions, and I'm happy to set up a zoom, so that they know that I'm really willing to open up and have that conversation with them right away. And so, I have found that just scheduling when they need to be scheduled has been a little bit easier. If we have group projects, I will, I had to go ahead and have them set up a time, or I'll do a sign-up genius where they can select times because then that's a little bit easier. If I know there's something where there's going to be a lot of times, I need to have meet, I will do a sign up genius. But besides that, I've just typically let them set up appointments when they need and that, for me has worked very well.

JIM: So, Hulda, one last question, to kind of wrap things up as we look forward. So, I'm asking you to bring out your crystal ball. Are there things that you have learned over the pandemic? Are there things that you've learned through this experience that you definitely want to reincorp, you want, want to keep when it comes time to teaching face-to-face again?

HULDA: Absolutely, um that's a great question. I think some of the stuff we talked about today with a lot of the asynchronous communication, I will definitely be keeping this moving forward. Because again, a lot of it is setting up what they're doing outside of class. How I'm communicating reminders to them about what's due and even if I got to see them

in class every week or twice a week, these are things that I would want to be communicating to them in some type of electronic format as well in case they missed it, or didn't hear it, or weren't in class. So, definitely, things with course organization and scheduled communication and having those rhythms that the students can expect every week. Those I will be carrying forward easily after the pandemic is over into all of the classes I teach no matter what modality. And then I think the ease of meeting with students via zoom. I think, that, that's a huge thing that a lot of us have realized that maybe we don't need to be trekking across campus to have a quick 30-minute conversation or 10-minute conversation and realizing that there's a time that meeting face to face is very, very important and I think there's, there's, huge benefits to all of that. But if you're just trying to explain a simple concept or ask a quick question, well we can all save a little time then by hopping on a quick zoom meeting versus, you know, them having to walk across campus. Making, maybe I'm not in my office, maybe I had to cancel that day, and ease of communication that way.

JIM: Absolutely, I think it actually kind of takes the edge off of having a meeting with your professor especially if you're newer to campus if you're a freshman or sophomore or something like that and it's not something you're in the habit of doing. Hulda, thank you so much.

HULDA: Absolutely, thank you Jim. This has been such a pleasure.

JIM: And that's all the time we have for this episode of Let's Talk Teaching. You can find out more about the concepts we're talking about, and you can also find Hulda's workshops which are coming up the week of January 25<sup>th</sup>, Go to our website [CTLT.illinoisstate.edu](http://CTLT.illinoisstate.edu). For Dr Hulda Black, for all my colleagues at the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology, until we talk again, Happy Teaching.