# Virtual Office Hours: Bridging Student Isolation in Online Learning

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Across the nation, colleges and universities are under intense scrutiny to recruit more students, improve academics, and offer a wide variety of programs for diverse learners, all while dealing with funding cuts (Finkelstein, Conley, & Schuster, 2016), an aging faculty (Kaskie, 2017), and fewer resources (Bowen & Tobin, 2015). Higher education administrators have offered online programs as a solution, promising students efficiency, flexibility, and 24/7 access to courses. Yet, online course attrition remains a challenge on a global level (Boton & Gregory, 2015, Park & Choi, 2009), with some withdrawal rates as high as 90% for massive open online courses (Daniel, 2012).

Lack of student engagement, including disassociation from peers and instructors, is seen as a major contributing factor to continuing attrition (Choi, 2016). As a means to bridge the isolation gap, it is prudent for faculty to consider establishing live, virtual office hours as a way to re-connect with online students (Gregori, Martinez, & Moyano-Fernandez, 2018). It has been recommended that live, virtual office hours be pre-set, announced to students, and held using videoconferencing technology (Lowenthal, Snelson, & Dunlap, 2017). By offering live, virtual office hours, students can receive personalized attention, ask questions, obtain extra help, and get clarification of assignments. By scheduling virtual office hours on a regular basis, students have the reassurance of being able to see and hear their instructor while voicing concerns and sharing information, thereby establishing a stronger sense of understanding and community. The development of this bond should help ensure that online students feel less isolated and alone.

A recent study looked at obtaining more effective ways to use live virtual office hours in predominantly online asynchronous courses (Lowenthal et al., 2017). Over a two-year period, the researchers studied methods of increasing learner attendance and boosting satisfaction, while simultaneously gaining insight into how students perceive live virtual office hours. The study was conducted with three different graduate-level student courses in a fully-online educational technology program at a metropolitan research university in the United States.

The initial virtual office hour design used by instructors in the Lowenthal et al. study (2017) was comprised of optional weekly meetings held on Saturday mornings throughout the semester. The instructor's first redesign of the virtual office hours included "rebranding" the sessions as "Happy Hours," scheduling the sessions four times per semester on Wednesdays, listing the sessions on the syllabus, and sending student's reminders (2017). The second redesign kept the first design intact, added an instructional lesson, solicited questions from students who could not attend, and allowed students to earn participation points for attending (2017).

With the second redesign in place, students reported that attending virtual office hours was a good use of their time and a way to get to know peers, which promoted a feeling of community in the class (2017). They also stated that their principal reason for attending virtual office hours was to become more acquainted with their instructor, followed by learning course material, understanding course requirements, and determining answers to course questions.

Post research, and based on student responses over time, Lowenthal et al. (2017) released twenty-one design recommendations in order to support the effective initiation and successful use of live, virtual office hours. It is hoped that future researchers will continue to explore and test these and other methods to help instructors further engage online students.

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