

UBC Okanagan Student Experiences with Online Learning

Focus Groups: Key Findings and Themes

November 23, 2020

INTRODUCTION

Six focus groups (with a total of 41 undergraduate and graduate students) were held to obtain feedback from students regarding their online learning experiences, following an online survey that was administered to all undergraduate and graduate students at UBC's Okanagan campus. The focus groups were conducted on October 27th and 29th, and November 2nd, 2020. Based on these discussions a common desire from students was for more follow-up and check-in opportunities from their faculty members. Students appreciate the timely feedback and the interactions that professors bring to each class. At the same time, they appreciate courses that have a clear structure and active communication methods (e.g., via Canvas) because this reduces the uncertainty and stress of having to constantly check for new assignments they might have missed.

In addition, seven themes were identified from the student's comments:

1. Extra workload and impact on learning
2. Achieving engagement - interaction and follow-ups
3. (In)consistency in communications
4. Canvas: Structure and ease of use
5. Synchronous vs Asynchronous delivery modes
6. Preventing academic misconduct and issues with Proctorio
7. Dealing with internet issues

KEY FINDINGS

Extra workload and impact on learning

Students reported a higher than usual amount of extra work because of the new online learning environment. Students from all year levels expressed this; moreover, students that had previously taken a course in-person said that some instructors had the same expectations as in previous years. Additionally, they perceived a lack of consistency and structure in the design of their courses, with some instructors considered more organized and consistent in how they communicate than other instructors. They attributed this, among other factors, to having affected their mental health. Some students reported feeling as if they are only meeting deadlines and not learning or retaining much information.

- *"Toll on Mental health, profs are giving more work than usual. Meetings for Saturdays. A lot are scheduling more assignments. It is a little all over the place."*
- *"Some of my Profs have been really fair, but one instructor has not, he is focused on having the same expectations as last year."*
- *"I think the profs believe that because they are online they don't consider that 10-minute break to be needed. For my classes I feel like they don't realize that the workload is about double."*
- *"(...) Sometimes it feels like I am not learning, I am just meeting deadlines and that is tough. I know that if I was in class I would have more engagement than that."*

- *"I'm a verbal learner and within Canvas that's not the same. I struggle to maintain the course material and it seems like there is a lot more course material."*

Smaller regular assignments are better for managing workload and for learning.

Students suggested that smaller projects and assignments on a more regular basis would be easier for them to manage than having one larger assignment worth a considerable portion of their final grade. Students indicated that with smaller assignments, they would receive more feedback more often, improving their learning, and they felt that would be less pressure on them for the midterms and finals. They suggested that this approach would only work if they received feedback from their instructors/TAs in a timely manner.

- *"I definitely feel more, smaller assignments are better than huge chunky assignments. I've been given a lot of huge assignments in all my classes and they are all due at once."*
- *"In regards to essays, what I really like is one of my profs has divided the essay assignment into small portions due each week. These are all divided into being worth 5% each and it makes it easier because you have more feedback. I find I like papers to be divided into other sections. But with weekly assignments it only works if you get feedback in a timely manner."*
- *"(...) But if you decide to do weekly assignments you should decide to do weekly gradings. And quite frankly, I am not finding that. In one class she grades them, the day after the assignment and that is not helpful. I could have used that information for my next submission."*
- *"Regarding feedback – from my courses has been extremely limited. By the time we even get feedback, the next assignment is due and I'm not really learning, I'm just guessing what is going on."*
- *"On the topic of weekly assignments, it has been so difficult to stay on top of them and I'm in my 4th year now and talking to friends we are all just trying to get it done. I feel like I am proactive with assignments and I still feel behind."*
- *"One of my classes has replaced a midterm with small quizzes with questions that would be on a midterm. I think it also helps for those who struggle with test anxiety."*

Achieving engagement – Interaction and follow-ups

Students said that they miss the social aspect of in-person classes and the additional communication opportunities that can occur there (e.g., reaching out to other students or the instructors after class). One of the ways in which students suggested this could provide more value to their courses is by facilitating avenues for interaction and engagement (e.g., breakout rooms).

- *"In my first year I had some big group projects and that connection really helped me in the later course years and first year students this year won't get that and I feel bad for them."*
- *"I know lots of people hate group projects but I really like them. And I know it is harder to schedule but I like them to socially connect. In some classes I don't know anyone's name. I really like breakout rooms."*
- *"Constant pauses and check ins from Profs are nice. For a class that is 1.5 hours, it's more engaging when they are stopping."*
- *"A lot of my lectures have these polls and if a lot of the class gets it wrong the Prof can spend more time on that part."*

(In)consistency in communications

Some students said that they feel confused because of a lack of clear structure of the course and not knowing where they can find information for new assignments, deadlines, etc. For example, some students mentioned a discrepancy in the information provided in Canvas compared with the course syllabus. In addition to this, students reported further

confusion when there are sudden/last-minute changes to the syllabus or course schedule. Finally, students reported additional stress when there is a lack of clear communication from their instructors regarding the course, compared with feeling lower stress levels with their courses where instructors communicate well.

- *"The way the communication is with the instructors and students. For example, there is a lot of confusion on the due dates, sometimes they are indicated on Canvas but not on the syllabus. Sometimes the information is overloaded."*
- *"I really want to build on that inconsistency, I have one prof who is very thorough with his Canvas course and sending out regular emails. And on the other side of that there are profs that are not communicating."*
- *"One TA sends emails to the class once a month, to make herself known to the class, not too many of them (the students) are connecting with them. They [the TA's] aren't just an email address."*
- *"I'm finding profs are adding things to assignments and adjusting the syllabus. It's making it hard that the profs are still changing things. I've had deadlines pushed forward too. I have two jobs and I need to pay rent, and it makes it hard when those deadlines change and I need to try and adjust my schedule."*
- *"Talking about being in different faculties - I am in [Program Name] classes and it is going really well - the Profs talk about how they are communicating with one another and that is going really well. I am in 4 courses, and the other 2 in other faculties aren't as consistent."*

Canvas: Structure and ease of use

Students did provide examples of instructors using Canvas in a very organized way. In these courses, they indicated that instructors are using the available tools within Canvas to communicate well, and to keep them engaged with the course material. Students said that having the ability to answer a quiz multiple times in Canvas, and even getting some tips/help in getting to the right answer has helped them learn more than the traditional one-try, no-help quizzes. In some instances though, students found the quiz option in Canvas not ideal for certain types of course examinations.

- *"[Course name] with Prof [Instructor name]: my prof creates these to do lists each week on the order of what you should do (read/watch) and it is really great"*
- *"[Course name]: She will send out a module every week and lays out what you need to do for that week. It also outlines what you will do in the Lab and you can download what you need."*
- *"I took [Course name] course online in summer and it was all outlined very clear and there was announcements each week and it was all very predictive and easy. It took 20 minutes to write a reading response rather than 3 hours. It also didn't have a time restriction (on tests/quizzes) and helped cemented what was really important."*
- *"One of my profs is doing Canvas quizzes, there are some downsides but he has made it with unlimited attempts with no time limit, I find I put a lot more work into it. I think if they are limited in time or attempts - I won't spend the time."*
- *"I've found a lot of the mid-terms are poorly executed on Canvas. A lot have multiple choice, especially in [Program Name] that doesn't make sense."*

Synchronous vs Asynchronous Delivery Modes

Although the majority seem to prefer synchronous classes, some students said that they see the benefit of having a mix of synchronous and asynchronous options. The former for reasons such as being able to interact, for having a fixed allotted date and amount of time for the lecture; the latter for being able to pause, go at their own pace, and go back and re-watch lectures. Additionally, some students indicated that 10-minute asynchronous videos work best for them and that some instructors might be using videos that are 30 minutes longer than they should be. Some students indicated that they would prefer only one delivery mode, for the sake of consistency.

- *"I have a really good class that does both; synchronous is discussion point, asynchronous is like a podcast or video and it is still relevant. The synchronous is where you get to connect and engage."*

- *"(...) the reason I lean toward synchronous so that the prof doesn't go over the time. And when you are asynchronous it becomes more than the time than you can designate to it. So, I am liking synchronous more because they can only say so much during that time."*
- *"What has worked for me is synchronous, the benefits of having us interact in a class forces us to be all in a class at the same time so we don't fall behind. The asynchronous class that really work the best for me is the ones that are checking in constantly with the students."*
- *"Prefer synchronous. Able to stop them, and ask questions. With asynchronous: they [instructors] go over time, like 4 hours."*
- *"I'm in my 3rd year [Program Name] and I think that a lot of the profs are taking advantage of asynchronous and one of my profs has done really great videos like 10 minutes long total which is great, but, another is going 30 minutes longer [over the time] that they should be going."*

Preventing academic misconduct and issues with Proctorio

Students felt that when a professor explicitly states their expectations of what is acceptable and what is not acceptable for a class, all students can better tell what is considered academic misconduct. Additionally, some students thought that open-book type of exams are better for testing one's understanding and prevent cheating. Finally, some students have said that Proctorio should no longer be used because they suggested it has a poor reputation (e.g., they do not know who could be watching them and where/how these recordings are stored), makes them anxious about the data being collected, and as a result makes the exam experience more stressful.

- *"(...) in a few of my courses in the exam outlines professors will specifically outline that this is not a group assignment. In essays we are expected to cite our sources and that is part of the criteria."*
- *"The exams that have worked the best for me are the open book classes that test your understanding that are open for 24 hours and they tell you not to work with someone else. And those have worked for the best for me. People are going to be cheating are going to be cheating in anything they do – those that are going to do well are learning the material."*
- *"One of my courses uses Proctorio, they have a support that doesn't work and it is not a very reputable. It is fine if it is on Zoom and it is a TA that I know watching the camera. But if it is Proctorio, and it is a person I don't know – and the recording is saved on the server for 2 years and that makes everyone anxious."*

Dealing with internet issues

From the online survey, it was identified that one of the most common hurdles that students were facing was internet connectivity issues. For this reason, students were asked to comment on how they had dealt with this issue. Students indicated that they have tried to deal with connectivity issues in different ways (e.g., moving to other locations, getting new routers, switching providers), but in some cases there are no accessible solutions especially for people living in rural areas. Additionally, students who are also TAs feel bad for their students and sometimes feel embarrassed if as a UBC employee they have internet issues while leading a class.

- *"To mitigate the connectivity issue, I have been going to friends houses or coming to campus for reliable internet."*
- *"(...) going to campus is the best solution for internet issues. Most of the connectivity issues are not for the students but for the profs. In a day, at least one prof that has connectivity issues."*
- *"I actually switched internet providers because I was getting kicked out of classes I was running [as a TA] and as an employee of UBC it is embarrassing because this wouldn't be happening if I was in person."*
- *"I returned back to my community in Northern BC, and my internet connection is very difficult to watch recorded lectures. I have recently tried to improve my internet connection but when you are rural it is hard."*