

WIC WINTER WORKSHOP II: VIRTUAL OFFICE HOURS

Jeff Breitenfeldt, English GTA and WIC Intern
breitenj@onid.orst.edu

Offering virtual office hours before an assignment is due can be an excellent way to answer questions in the context of students' actual work, motivate procrastinating students to get started, and draw out students who would not typically take advantage of traditional office hours.

GETTING STARTED WITH VIRTUAL OFFICE HOURS IN BLACKBOARD

Virtual office hours can be accessed through any Blackboard course page. This means that there is no need for a new account or a separate login. Students and instructors both follow this procedure to join:

- 1) From the course page, click "Communication" in the navigation menu to the left
- 2) Next, click "Collaboration" -- the second option
- 3) Now click the grey box on the right labelled "Join" for the "Session Name" "Office Hours"

A new window should open after a few moments that shows all participants in the chat session. Upon joining the chat, students and instructors can see the conversation that has already occurred. This feature can often help students get up to speed without having to ask a question that has already been answered. The instructor, who is referred to as a "Moderator," has the option to clear the display--either for her/his own window or for all participants. In addition to the standard chat function, controls within the window allow users to send or receive a private message to a participant and to record sessions which can be accessed at a later time.

IMPLEMENTING VIRTUAL OFFICE HOURS

Though the Blackboard interface and the concept of chatting online are both familiar for most students, virtual office hours typically need to be explained--and often modeled--in order to be accessed successfully by everyone in the class. In an enhanced classroom, instructors can walk students through the process of joining a chat; for online or hybrid classes, a series of annotated screen shots and step-by-step instructions (or a narrated screencast) can help students see what links to click.

Virtual office hours can be regularly scheduled and listed on a syllabus--like traditional office hours--or they can be announced in-class/by email for a particular day and time. On the one hand, regularly scheduled sessions offer a predictable means for students to contact the instructor and can always be changed; on the other hand, flexible sessions mean instructors can make themselves available in advance of assignments or after particular class sessions as the need arises.

THE VIRTUAL OFFICE, YOUR STUDENTS, AND YOU

Students may find virtual office hours in the evening before an assignment is due to be particularly helpful. Many seem to prefer instant responses for small questions by chat to sending an email where there is no guaranty an instructor will respond in time. In a similar way, virtual office hours can encourage students to work on an assignment during the time when they know an instructor will be available to answer questions as they might arise.

From an instructor's point of view, virtual office hours can promote a collaborative problem-solving approach if students are encouraged to offer responses to the questions asked by their peers. Also, virtual office hours can make instructors accessible to students who do not feel comfortable asking a question in class and to those who generally would not make a trip across campus for office hours.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

"Professors help students virtually" -- a *USA Today* article from 2008 about the increasing use of VOH nationwide:
<http://tinyurl.com/ykzu33g>