

Resource Guide

Overcoming the “Third Shift” Problem in Online Courses

Students regularly cite convenience and flexibility as reasons for taking online courses. The asynchronous, self-paced format is appealing to students who work full-time, have family responsibilities, or wish to avoid transferring credit when scheduling conflicts arise. The twin benefits of convenience and flexibility, though, can be overshadowed by what educational scholar Michelle Miller (2014, 40) dubs as the “third shift problem,” or the tendency for online courses to be of secondary importance to work (first shift) and travel, childcare, or other personal commitments (second shift). On one hand, online courses afford students access to learning 24/7; on the other hand, online courses regularly become an afterthought in daily life calculations. This begs the question: what design choices and teaching strategies can we adopt to ensure our students are motivated to tackle the difficult task of learning when juggling multiple responsibilities, roles, and identities? Below are potential tips and strategies you can consider to help your students overcome the third shift problem:

- **Specify time commitments early and often.** Conveying time commitments associated with individual tasks, such as completing a discussion board post, blog, Wiki entry, or reflective journal, helps your students plan and pace their work and avoid falling into the third shift trap. You might consider including a table with learning activities and assessments in one column with another column detailing the suggested amount of time necessary to complete those tasks (e.g., a journal entry is expected to take 30 minutes to complete) in your syllabus or instruction prompts. This helps provide a sense of “time” to your students in an otherwise self-paced learning environment.
- **Consistently structure work and due dates.** Another strategy to help your students overcome the third shift problem is to consistently structure their work. Instead of assigning due dates at the end of a learning module or lesson, stagger due dates by having discussion posts due every Thursday or blog entries due every Sunday. After going through the motions the first week or two, students acclimate to your course and associate given tasks with given days, which conditions them to log in often and regularly. This also helps combat motivational barriers, including procrastination, and establish good study habits your students can replicate in other courses.
- **Early intervention is important.** Be proactive with students who fall behind, especially early on in your course. An easy way to check whether your students are logging in regularly (however often you envision) is to utilize the gradebook and statistics tracking features in your course, which allow you to see the last date of attendance as well as specific “hits” (i.e., clicks) associated with individual students. Although faculty would rather be “teaching” rather than “tracking,” utilizing these built-in features allows you

to be proactive and help your students have meaningful participation and engagement with course material and activities from start-to-finish.

- **Incorporate formative assessments and utilize adaptive release functions.**
Formative assessments, such as a reading quiz or class poll on a given topic, allow you to scaffold learning and condition regular participation by asking your students to complete activities and reflect on what they are learning at strategic points. Adaptive release functions also allow you to create individualized learning paths for your students by asking that they complete one learning activity or assessment to unlock subsequent content, activities, or assessments. This provides incentives for regular and consistent engagement rather than waiting until the last minute to complete coursework.

Resources

Miller, M. (2014). *Minds online: Teaching effectively with technology*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: University of Harvard Press.

For more information or to discuss how you might incorporate these ideas into your courses, contact the Reinert Center at ctl@slu.edu.