In the Classroom 53
Virtual Office Hours Best Practices

SEE THE SHOW NOTES AT: *http://tubarksblog.com/itc53*

Stan Skrabut: Well, thanks so much for taking the time to listen to this podcast. It certainly means a lot. I know you could be doing other things. Maybe you are doing other things, but you're still hanging out with me and I really appreciate it. I am getting ready to dive into a new term and as I'm working on my syllabus, one of the things that I am looking at is holding virtual office hours. I teach an online class and I have been experimenting for the past couple of terms on how to do virtual office hours that works for me and my students.

In getting ready for this upcoming term, I'm going to make some modifications to how I have been doing it and I want you to come in and take a deep dive with me as I explore this topic so let's get started. First of all, why should we spend so much time focusing on this idea of virtual hour?

Well, according to Dr. Margaret Walls, most faculty schedule in about 2,700 minutes of office hours per semester. If you're holding office hours at least three times a week for an hour, over a 15-week term, you're coming up to about 2,700 minutes. That's a lot of time.

We want to make sure that we are using it as effectively as possible and getting the best results because it is helping students if they come to office hours and participate. With that said, let's talk a little bit about office hours in general. Once upon a time, the only way to get additional support from a faculty member or a professor was to physically go see the professor in their hour, in their office, and they would have hours set up that they physically could do that. Well, as technology involved, suddenly email that opened the door a little wider and it provided a different type of access to the professor.

The number of physical hours that students would show up started to decrease, but there was still a need and now the need hasn't changed but we have additional tools that allow us to be more flexible. These virtual meeting tools have opened the door even further with an increased capability of providing synchronous ways of meeting with professors when you cannot physically meet and when it's not possible. Well, this idea of physically meeting it was a lot easier when colleges were strictly residential. Students would travel and they would set up residence at a college and then they were forced to meet physically with the professor if they wanted additional help.

Well, that's changed a lot. Now, we are doing a lot more with online courses and college students are not spending a lot of time on campus because of other requirements. They're going to class and when they're not in class or going to work, they have families. There's all things that they're doing that they just weren't doing in

the same way 15, 20 years ago. Things have significantly changed and we have to take this into consideration when we're doing office hours.

Office hours, why do we have them? We have them because this is a time to mentor students and according to the research, this is a really valuable time simply being available to students. It's more significant when you're dealing with certain generations or certain cohorts of students such as first-generation, minorities that office hours are increasing retention, student satisfaction, engagement, a sense of belonging, overall academic performance. By simply meeting with a professor, we are increasing the quality of life for those students and it's making them want to stay in college and it's also increasing their ability to succeed in college. That's why office hours are important.

The research is showing that going in and doing these things are improving what students are able to do in return. Professors should be not only holding traditional face to face office hours physically, but they should also extend this to virtual office hours. You can do both at the same time that you can patch it and students and meet with them virtually as well as face to face at the same time. This is what I typically do. While I teach mostly online, but every once in a while I have a face to face class at the college that I'm working at. When I'm meeting with my students or online, typically when I'm out grading discussion boards or when I'm grading homework, then I will also put my virtual office hours, make that available to students and have them come join me if they want.

That's the kind of strategy that I'm working with right now and I'm trying to figure out how to formalize that just a little bit. Is this office hour, definitely important? There is an article out there by Lee and Pitt called *Does it Really Matter? Using Virtual Office Hours to Enhance Student-faculty Interaction*. They did a lot of research in this article looking at how well students performed and what their satisfaction was in their classes simply if professor offered virtual office hours.

Participants in classes that offered virtual office hours reported higher levels of satisfaction with office hours and students in classes that offered only traditional face to face office hours. Having this flexibility where you are offering both will increase your students' levels of satisfaction. Also, in their findings, they suggest that participants, in general, were not satisfied with traditional office hours citing that convenience and accessibility as the most common reason. When it was also increased the virtual office hours, this satisfaction rose.

One of the discussion points of their article was that when we do office hours, thinking in a traditional mode, extending that also to virtual will increase satisfaction because students have a choice and when they have a choice they tend to appreciate that more. There's another article from Doctor Tasha Davis called M*aking the Most of Virtual Office Hours.* Some suggestions on how to do that. Some of the advantages that she noted were virtual office hours benefits students in distance learning courses, but also students who work and our school schedules conflict with the instructor's availability.

That by having these virtual office hours that you can get a timely response where they don't have to send an email so this also reduces in the number of emails that students will provide simply because they have this choice. For instructors, this adds a little bit of flexibility that you may have a time like I do where you're grading at night and you can put in double duty where you say, okay, well, I'll have virtual office hours and make myself available to students at the same time that students are working on their assignments. When they need you, then you're available to them. There's a win-win there that you're able to increase this connectedness with students, but also at a time when they need you most.

This all results in better relations with instructors because the instructors are having this mentoring role for students that students will likely complete their degrees. There's increased retention that I had already mentioned and also this is higher for the underrepresented group.

I noted that students can just pop online during your virtual office hours, ask a question and go back to work. This is going to save you time. It's going to save students time because they can get the help they needed when they need it most.

That's if you're holding it outside your normal traditional office hours that you schedule during the day, which is one of the things that you really should consider trying to schedule this in when it's really more convenient for the students that benefit them, certainly. When should you have office hours? When should you conduct them? Well, based on the number of articles that I have recently read on figuring out when to hold virtual office hours and how to better do that, one of the things that came across over and over is you should consult with your student.

That asks the students. There's lots of different ways that you can do this. That you can have them turn in their calendars or create a Google calendar and subscribe to them so you can overlay them and see how their schedules look. You can send out surveys, Google forms, poll everywhere, lots of different ways that you can do this, but, but ask your students when is the best time that you should hold virtual office and try to pick and choose on multiple days. You're going to have this on different days but also on different times.

Because if you're holding office hours on Tuesdays at 1:00 to 2:00 and you're doing that also on Thursdays 1:00 to 2:00 odds are that it's not going to be good for a number of students that you want to try to take in this work-life balance that students are trying to achieve going to school. There's increased pressure that they have to also work in order to support themselves. Trying to figure out what's the best time by involving them, you'll find a better time for them. Other ways of doing this are, I mentioned different forums. I Google forums poll everywhere, but also doodle.

Doodle is a great tool for trying to figure out the best time in someone's schedule that you can send this to all the students. They fill out what's a good time for them, and you can find the optimal times in order to do this. Once you've narrowed down what a good time is, one of the things that you want to do- -is formally defined that that you would put that into your syllabus, announce it in your learning management system and basically lock it down, so they have an expectation on when they would meet with you.

One of the things that-- How I personally do it is I have let this, my students know and I'm going to do this more formally in my syllabus this time, but when I started doing virtual office hours, I wasn't doing them initially, but then I started doing them and I just sent them an email saying, "This is what my spirit and intent was for holding office hours," and sent that into an email.

Then I would typically do that on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday nights that I would get on and I would shoot them an email ahead of time letting them know that I was going to be on the Ed night and how to connect with me. That's how I did it. Lessons learned. What I'm going to do is actually weave this into my syllabus as for this upcoming term, because I have an idea of when I'm going to be on and so then I'm going to make that available to the students, but it should not be a one and done thing.

When you plan to have office hours putting this out as an announcement, as an email and just constantly remind students that you're having these office hours will increase the chance that they actually take advantage of those. One of the things that you may want to consider. Make sure that there's ample notice that they can get on if you are looking to basically schedule one student at a time. For mine minor basically open door. If someone's interested in connecting with me, they just come on during this time that I'm on and that we connect.

For others you may want to have a sign-in system where you may have a spreadsheet or some other scheduling tool where students go ahead and schedule when they want to meet with you and so that you can have them check-in. There's lots of different ways that you can do this. There's tools out there. Google calendar, you can set up an appointment system in Google calendar. You have Acuity. That's another tool that I often hear used. You can also use Doodle's, MeetMe pages so you can set up on Doodle kind of a schedule and when students would be able to connect with you or just a simple spreadsheet.

Google sheet that somebody can sign in and everybody knows when their specific time is. Lots of different ways of doing this and other people do that and that's if you're meeting with individuals. If you're meeting with groups you could have preassigned groups that come meet with you, or you could have study sessions. There's different ways that you can actually have virtual office hours. Then it's a matter of finding a tool, a tool that you want to use for your particular class. I use Zoom. Zoom is the tool that I use and I put the link out there.

I put it in learning management system in my syllabus, send it out in emails so students know how to connect on it. It's a very easy tool for students to use and that that's the tool of choice. One of the new features that I found is this idea of having a waiting room. If I only want to meet with students one at a time, I can basically turn on this waiting room and put in an announcement that I will invite them in, which I haven't ever used that, but that looks pretty attractive. Especially if you need time to talk over maybe an issue that's a little sensitive or you're providing critique that you only want that one student to see, then that's definitely a way to do that and so you can control that.

There's lots of different reasons why you would have open office or office hours or virtual office hours. Lots of different reasons. This article that I mentioned, Dr. Margaret

Walsh, and just for note that in my show notes that I put links to all these different articles that I was researching so you can find ways to do that, but Dr. Walsh, she talked about seven different ways to interact with students during office hours. One of it is teach that they may not be clear on a concept and so that you want to clarify the concept advising where typically they come in, they want something signed so they can get into their classes, but this is also a good time to get to know them a little more and find out where they're going and provide that mentorship.

Collaborating, if you're assigning a paper or some kind of project, you can touch base with them and find out where they're at. Maybe provide some guidance on directions that they can take in order to be more successful with that project. She mentions also offering books. That if you've got a library, sometimes you have extra books that you may want to give to them or lend to them to help them with a certain research direction that those are great things to do. That's, I would say more in the traditional face to face. Just being there to listen and make sure that you take notes when you're listening.

You'll have that continuity when you touch base with them and in the future. Certainly, mentorship getting them involved in your research interests finding out what they are. Being able to direct them to be professionals in your subject. It could be alumni groups, it could be different resources that you want to point them to. Lots of different reasons why you would do that. Other reasons why you would want to hold these virtual office hours is just for Q & A's.

When you have a project coming up, usually there's a lot more questions. Having these open office hours where people can come in and you answer these questions, you can do that. It could be a requirement that if a student suddenly is not doing well, that you may require them to attend office hours so you can get them back on track. Then money as points. Any review questions as you're getting-- Maybe preparing for a quiz or an exam that you can have students come in and do Q & A where you can answer their questions and make sure that you clarify things. Some strategies that you want to consider. This particular article, it was a research article that was pretty extensive and quite useful was by Patrick Lowenthal and Shireen Snelson and Joanne Dunlap.

They put together quite an extensive list of recommendations when considering your live session. I put that article certainly into the show notes so you can check it out, but they broke their area or their recommendations into five different sections and those sections are orientation to live sessions, scheduling, relevance, incentives and assessment and interaction. Some of the things that they happen to focus on dealing with each of those sections is like for orientation to live sessions. One is just maybe rebranding the idea of office hours. They recommended that you have some type of name that was more engaging. Some of the things they mentioned like happy hours, coffee breaks, afternoon teas. It may be design studio or open space or something.

Rebranding them to make it more attractive for students. Certain things that we already mentioned is informed the students of the schedule, providing an agenda, what-- If you're having more of a group session coming in that you may have in his specific agenda that you want to go over and so students have an idea. If this is going to be relevant to them. Certainly always reminders of different sessions. For some of these,

if you're having group sessions you may want to consider recording them and then later posting those recordings back for other students who couldn't make it so they could see.

They also mentioned scheduling strategically. What this means is there are certain times where students will want to engage with the faculty member more prior to an exam. They always want to go over review questions and, is this going to be on the test type thing? But also for major projects that they need clarification on different things and so this is a good opportunity knowing that these deadlines are coming up, getting ahead of them, having these open office hours or virtual office hours so students could come in and ask questions about their project and take care of their comfort level, basically. Making office hours relevant and basically being transparent.

Why do you think office hours are important? Making sure that students understand this. Because for example, in face to face office hours, they may come up and want to do office hours, but they see you working and then they feel a little anxious. They don't want to bother you, that you're busy. You have to get in front of that and explain why office hours are important and why they should attend and how to be as successful as possible with office hours. One of the things that you may want them to do is submit questions ahead of time to you so you are better prepared when they come into the door on the things that they want to work on. If you are using office hours and have an instructional component to it, you may want to provide similar activities for students who were not able to attend, so they get the same benefit. You don't want to provide something to one group and not another group, but with that said, you may want to incentivize attendance. In some cases, folks are saying- -make it mandatory that students have to check in with you at least once. I'm not necessarily a fan of that. Yes, to have something made mandatory, it takes the enthusiasm out of it. It's like, oh, I just have to be here. I would rather that they want to come. There's ways that you can incentivize this. This is could be an extra credit activity that you're tapping into that they can get extra points. In my class for student success, I have a lot of quests that I have students do.

Students in the course evaluations or course review recommended that I create a quest around office hours that I encourage students to check-in, because those students who did check-in found it tremendously valuable and they think other students could benefit from that. I thought that was pretty cool. Those are some of the things, some of the ideas on how to make virtual office hours more useful for you and your students.

A couple of things that I just want to emphasize before we head out is one, try to coordinate with your students on what's going to be the best time to have these virtual office hours and try to set a schedule around what they think is going to be useful. Then, make sure that you publicize this widely and keep sending out reminders on these virtual office hours. Also, emphasize the importance of having those virtual office hours.

Pick a tool that's going to be easy to use and provide links easy links that students can use to get to those tools and then just go out and have fun and do the things that make it enjoyable being an instructor. For me, I am going to go back to my syllabus right

after I get done here and set up my virtual office hours and I'm planning to have them on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday nights because that's when I go on to grade my discussion, and I'm going to make sure that my students know why they should be dropping into office hours, but also making it easy for them to be able to do this.

If you happen to be a traditional instructor that's doing face to face, I would also encourage you to go out and set up some virtual office hours. This will help increase satisfaction for your students and it may increase the traffic that you have to your office hours because I know sitting even in virtually no one's coming and you wonder why you're doing it. These are some strategies that may help you get more traffic and make it more meaningful for both you and your students. With that, here's a quick plug for my book.