

Synchronous Online Learning

What is synchronous online learning?

Many people new to online learning have not yet heard the terms Synchronous and Asynchronous. Quite simply put, synchronous means "at the same time", whereas asynchronous means "not at the same time".

You may already be familiar with examples of asynchronous online activities that often take place in learning management systems, like discussion forums, polls and feedback surveys. Learners participate in these activities at times of their own choosing.

Alternatively, synchronous online describes when people gather together in a web-based space at the same time. Such gatherings often have a facilitator who is responsible for guiding the group's process during their meeting.

There are numerous ways to gather synchronously. The most common are often video-based real-time meetings or webinars using technologies such as Zoom or Collaborate. However, synchronous discussions can also occur using technologies such as chat rooms, text messaging or even technologies such as Google Docs where people are in different physical locations but are collaboratively editing a single document at the same time. That said, most of the time when people talk about synchronous learning, they are referring to real-time video conferences where people gather together in the same virtual meeting room at the same time to participate in some type of event together.

Why facilitate synchronously online?

There are many reasons why people choose to facilitate synchronously online in educational settings including;

- accessibility for participants (allowing them to learn from home, connect from rural settings, etc.),
- real-time interaction opportunity between facilitator and participants,
- to promote participants' active learning,
- to enable a diverse virtual classroom, potentially with participants from around the world.

In addition, particularly when synchronous sessions are combined with longer, asynchronous online courses, they can;

- drive deeper discussions around course topics,
- build course community among participants and participants/facilitator(s),
- decrease participants' feelings of isolation,
- address participants' concerns or questions at the beginning of the course or points throughout.

Stefan Hrastinski, in his 2008 article ["Asynchronous & Synchronous E-Learning"](#), notes:

"Synchronous learning, commonly supported by media such as videoconferencing and chat, has the potential to support e-learners in the development of learning communities. Learners and teachers

experience synchronous e-learning as more social and avoid frustration by asking and answering questions in real time."

Though the quote above mentions just videoconferencing and chat, today it could be argued that we rely even more heavily on web-conferencing platforms to support synchronous learning online, and these platforms also offer the benefits described above. And Martin & Parker (2014), in their article ["Use of Synchronous Virtual Classrooms: Why, Who and How?"](#), have noted that "synchronous virtual classrooms via web conferencing systems are increasingly being used in higher education".

Potential limitations

While there are benefits to learning synchronously, there are some limitations that facilitators should be aware of. These include;

- the difficulty in choosing a time for the session(s) that all participants can attend (i.e. geographically different time zones, work and family schedules etc.),
- the contradiction between what participants have potentially signed up for (e.g. students who choose to learn online for its asynchronous benefits and flexibility) and the planning of accompanying synchronous events which must be attended at a certain time and day,
- increased technology requirements (i.e. bandwidth, webcam, microphone),
- maintaining an accessible environment for all participants.

Synchronous facilitation skills

Facilitating in synchronous online environments is something that is fairly new to many of us (Jones & Gallen 2016). Jones & Gallen (2016) also indicate that "it is useful to make a distinction between the development of technical competence and the development of practices which facilitate effective learning using such tools" (p. 616). So as facilitators in these environments we must not only learn and enhance our technical skills but our facilitation skills as well.

Jennifer Hofmann, President of InSync Training, a corporation that specializes in "virtual training", argues that there are multiple skills for synchronous online facilitation, which are different than what is needed in the face to face classroom. In her article, ["Virtually There: Developing the Competencies of Virtual Classroom Facilitators"](#), she lists the following areas as crucial for "virtual trainers" to be skilled in.

1. **Digital Literacy.** The ability to find, evaluate, utilize, share and create content using information technologies and the Internet
2. **Virtual Classroom Fluency.** The ability to gauge the success of a virtual activity or conversation by reading digital cues and managing simultaneous conversations.
3. **Cultural Intelligence.** The ability to consider the audience and facilitate interactions that are inclusive and provide needed support for the culturally diverse global audience.
4. **Time Management.** The ability to manage a virtual event in such a way that participants are engaged, desired outcomes are met, and a strict timetable is adhered to.
5. **Application of Adult Learning Principles.** The ability to analyze a blended learning design to ensure the principles of Adult Learning are upheld and program objectives are met.

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