

Planning

When planning a synchronous online session you will need to think about why you want to hold the session, who your participants are, and what you hope they will be able to do by the end of the session (outcomes). This type of analysis is necessary to help you design a great session which will meet both your needs and the needs of your participants.

Purpose

First, think about the overall purpose of the session that you'd like to hold. Why would you like to do it? Some common purposes might be to;

- host a discussion or question and answer session,
- plan or make decisions about something as a group,
- hold office hours,
- build or maintain online class community,
- gather feedback from people,
- interactively teach a topic,
- host a guest speaker,
- model or demonstrate a skill.

Chances are, your synchronous sessions will be part of a longer asynchronous course so you will want to consider how your synchronous session will help you with the purpose and goals of your longer asynchronous course. Here's an example from his 2015 book [Teaching in a Digital Age](#) of how online learning pioneer Tony Bates thinks about incorporating synchronous sessions into a larger asynchronous course.

"In a fully online course, I also sometimes use Blackboard Collaborate to bring all the students together once or twice during a semester, to get a feeling of community at the start of a course, to establish my 'presence' as a real person with a face or voice at the start of a course, or to wrap up a course at the end, and I try to provide plenty of opportunity for questions and discussion by the students themselves. However, these synchronous 'lectures' are always optional as there will always be some students who cannot be present (although they can be made available in recorded format)".¹

Thinking about your session's purpose is a necessary step to confirming whether it makes sense to hold your session synchronously online. For example, if you determine your purpose is to deliver

large chunks of content as a lecture, you may ask yourself if that is the best use of all participants' time, or even if it is the best way for your participants to learn. Although there may be a place for the types of webcasts (uni-directional synchronous online learning events), generally they are not the most efficient use of a synchronous session where the aim should be to promote participatory and interactive learning. Perhaps a better strategy might be to prerecord a video with the content, have learners watch it on their own time, and then gather together in a synchronous session to discuss the content.

Working with co-facilitators

Working with a co-facilitator or a facilitation team to facilitate synchronous sessions can be a useful experience, both to handle "the load", so to speak, and to continue our own learning when seeing each other demonstrate great facilitation skills.

In [Facilitating Live Online Learning](#), Colin Steed notes (p. 54) the following four roles that co-facilitators can play:

- handling technical issues
- ensuring content is available and working
- keeping note of the questions asked in Chat or Q&A panels
- acting as a side-kick

Although the way he frames his advice is to have one leader facilitator and one co-facilitator to act as a producer or host, the roles could easily be shared by two or more co-facilitators equally. This is often what we see in higher education, rather than - as sometimes experienced in the corporate world - one facilitator or presenter and one producer whose role is to support the session more behind the scenes. Particularly when we are facilitating sessions that involve participatory and active learning, it is preferable to add more facilitators to the mix.

Working with co-facilitators does mean that you will need to find time to plan your session together and have discussions about who is going to take on which pieces or which role. Talk about each of your strengths and preferences, and potentially your "stretch goals" - what you'd like to try to get better at when facilitating in this way. Talk about your current technical skills and help each other learn the "techy things" that will help you facilitate a great session.

You may wish to indicate how you have divided your responsibilities between facilitators in your lesson plan or in the notes section of your PowerPoint slide deck, although make sure that you are very familiar with all sections of the session just in case things get mixed up when you are actually facilitating and one facilitator takes another facilitator's slide to discuss.

Participants

In the planning of your session you will also need to think about your participants. Ask yourself questions such as:

- who will attend this session?
- do they have any common characteristics? how might they be different from each other?
- what is their anticipated technical skill? do they have the computer hardware/software to be

- able to connect to a web-conferencing system?
- how many participants do I anticipate having in my session?
- when might they be able to participate in the session? (e.g. time zone, work schedules)

Keeping your participants' needs in mind is important in being able to plan for and design a session that works for all who will attend.

Outcomes

When planning your session it is important to articulate the learning outcomes that you hope your participants will be able to achieve by the end of the session. What do you want them to be able to know/do/value by the time your session is over? Can you use synchronous online learning to help your participants achieve them? Use this step as a check and balance as to whether it does make sense to hold your session synchronously online.

Writing measurable learning outcomes is certainly the subject of a course on its own. But generally you could start with the stem, "By the end of the session, participants will be able to..." and then use appropriate verbs (perhaps using [Bloom's taxonomy to guide you](#)) to try to articulate what you'd like participants to be able to achieve. (Hint: Avoid the terms 'know' or 'understand' as they are not very measurable).

Examples:

- By the end of the session participants will be able to describe why learning from failure is an important part of innovation.
- By the end of the session participants will be able to name the three essential parts of an essay.
- By the end of the session participants will be able to summarize briefly three different change models and their key points.

Caveat: We're not saying the learning outcomes above are great examples of outcomes that would be appropriate for synchronous sessions per se, but they are examples of outcomes in general. It will be up to you to decide if what you're trying to help your participants achieve is something that they can achieve best via a synchronous online mode.

Know Your Tools

Before we dive into talking about designing your session and the elements that you should consider when doing so it may be useful to talk about the tools that you will have at hand in your synchronous online platform.

While it's not usually effective or recommended to start designing a learning event thinking about the online tools you would like to use and then building your design accordingly, it does make sense to be at least aware of the tools you will have available in order to design a session that is indeed possible to carry out in your platform.

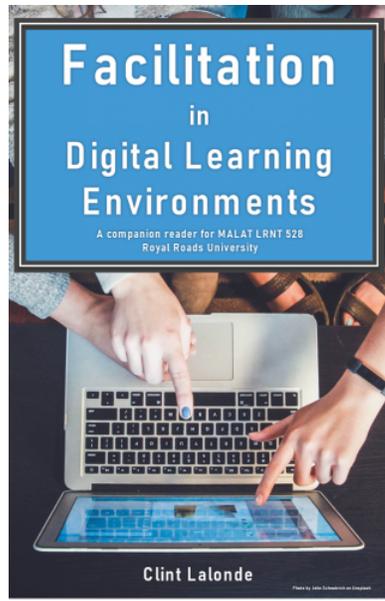
Now, no two web conferencing platforms will be alike, but many will have similar features and tools. For example, most tools will give facilitators and participants the ability to:

- share their webcam and audio
- use a collaborative 'whiteboard' to view and draw/write on
- share screens, including the ability to share a presentation slide deck
- participate in virtual breakout rooms
- create simple polls for participants
- have participants raise a virtual hand or otherwise get the attention of the facilitator
- have a live text chat with others in the room

Get to know the platform that you will be using for your synchronous online work and then have its capability and functionality in your mind as you start to design. Remember, it IS possible to use other web-based tools (such as collaborative documents like Google Docs) with your web-conferencing system by sharing the link in the chat with the participants ahead of time or in the chat.

Attribution

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Lalonde, C. (2020). *Facilitation in Digital Learning Environments*. EdTech Books.
https://edtechbooks.org/digital_facilitation