

Synchronous vs. Asynchronous Distance Learning Activities

There are two primary types of distance learning activities: asynchronous learning and synchronous learning. Knowing the characteristics of each will help you to determine how you will integrate them in your online or blended course.

Synchronous	Live or “real time”– Participants are all logged in and communicating at the same time. Example: Adobe Connect webinar or online chat.
Asynchronous	Not live or “not real-time” – Participants log in and communicate at different times depending on what is most convenient to them. Example: Online individual, team, and whole group discussions.

Asynchronous Learning Activities

Asynchronous learning can be effectively used for in-depth discussions that take place over time, role playing, application activities based on case study scenarios, one-to-one interactions among students and activities that require more independent thinking time.

Characteristics and Benefits

- Participants can contribute to the discussion as they desire without interrupting the flow of the planned class time. The extended time allows discussions to end at their natural conclusion.
- Responses in asynchronous online discussions tend to include higher order thinking and reflection due to the extended time available to comment on others’ postings.
- Archived discussions and chats relieve participants of relying on memory or notes to recall what others have contributed. Archives also create opportunities for course participants to build upon prior discussions, and enable those who missed a chat to later benefit from the discussion.
- Based on experience, the depth of student engagement tends to be greater, because participants interact more with one another. Ongoing dialogue engages participants in higher order thinking as discussions build over time.
- In an online learning environment, all participants contribute to discussions, even if they are normally shy in face-to-face courses.
- The playing field is leveled for all learners by allowing for extended time to reflect and decreased pressure to perform on the spot. In addition, some people communicate better in writing.

Challenges and Considerations for Implementation

- Employ strategies to facilitate activities to guide learning and promote higher-order thinking.

- Have an active presence in the discussion.
- Maintain momentum in discussion and provide frequent feedback.
- Redirect topics of conversation back to course content if discussions get off track.
- Provide a summary of the week’s discussion and post for everyone to see.
- Encourage learners who “disappear” or stop communicating to come back and contribute. It is especially difficult when they are the main cause of a dysfunctional team (see handling team conflict section).

Synchronous Learning Activities

Synchronous learning can be effectively used for showcasing web or computer applications, explaining difficult concepts, delivering lectures via PowerPoint, structured group brainstorming, hosting guest speakers, new topic introductions, community building, and question and answer sessions.

Characteristics and Benefits

- You can interact directly with students in real-time allowing you to instantly gauge if students are engaged and comprehend the content.
- Participants can receive instant feedback or answers/acknowledgement to any questions without delay.
- Participants may feel more connected with each other almost as if they were in a face-to-face session.
- If you are using a microphone, participants can hear your tone of voice. If you are using a webcam, they can even see facial expressions.
- Breakout rooms provide an ideal meeting space for teams who otherwise wouldn’t be able to interact and meet simultaneously due to different locales.

Challenges and Considerations for Implementation

- Establish participation and etiquette guidelines that everyone is aware of before any synchronous sessions are held. This will help to circumvent a number of common challenges and participants feeling overwhelmed.
- Consider how participants should prepare for the session and what activities might follow the session (i.e., asynchronous activity). Develop your own content for the session far in advance.
- Make sure everyone gets to voice their thoughts and opinions and that no one person dominates the conversation.

- If it is a large class, synchronous sessions may be more challenging to manage student contributions. Consider breakout rooms if this is the case and how you wish to divide the class up into these rooms.
- Coordinate participant schedules and locations (different time zones might be challenging).
- Be prepared to have technical support to troubleshoot connection problems. Technical support is particularly needed if participants use microphones to communicate with one another.