When to Go Synchronous—and Why

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Irony is at play right now in the fast-changing world of distance education. Asynchronous (anytime) learning has leapt way ahead in popularity, while synchronous (real-time) learning lags behind, even though it far more closely resembles the traditional classroom experience. Apparently, academia is quicker to change than anyone thought.

In 1994, when FutureU co-founder Claude Whitmyer started one of the first graduate business programs to have an online component, more than a few of our colleagues pooh-poohed the very idea of "discussion software" that allowed teachers and students to interact via written threads of conversation spooled out across the weeks. Online learning was a hard sell. Today, by contrast, nearly every college and university in the land has an online program dominated, often exclusively, by an asynchronous culture.

Students retrieve assignments and take tests online whenever they want. People log in at all hours to contribute to the discussion. What used to happen in an hour now takes three days, yet instructors report improved outcomes, students love the convenience, and administrators are all smiles at the surge in online enrollment.

Asynchronous, text-based tools took the early lead no doubt because slow, erratic Internet connections made real-time communication choppy at best. Now, even the Boondocks have high-speed access, and vendors offer a growing menu of tools for real-time audio, video, application sharing, instant polling, and more. Still, the real-time tools are having a tough time finding an audience. With asynchronous solutions well in hand, people are asking: Why bother with real time? Some school officials are going so far as to say their students won't even show up for an online experience in real-time.

Yet real-time does have its place. Institutions that add a synchronous component to their program see a number of benefits, namely these:

Give the "writing impaired" a fair chance. Asynchronous learning favors, and attracts, students who excel with the written word. A man we know who holds an advanced degree in mathematics tried to take an unrelated course online for the fun of it, but quickly dropped out. "Too much writing." If the instructor had added some real-time audio or video teleconferences to the mix, the man might have stuck it out.

Encourage quick thinking. Asynchronous, text-based discussion nurtures deep reflection and the careful articulation of ideas—excellent learning, yes, but not the only kind. In a synchronous environment, students must

think "on their feet," a skill especially valuable in today's workplace.

Give interactive demonstrations. While students watch via live video, you conduct a chemistry experiment, role-play a sales call, perform a dance. In real time, you can entertain questions as you go, as soon as they occur to students. If you wait for questions to come in asynchronously, some may be forgotten before they ever get asked.

Hold student presentations. "Application Sharing" allows the instructor to turn over control of a web-conferencing session to any participant. Pass the baton from one student to the next as they each in turn present their work on the web-conference whiteboard and answer questions from the instructor and fellow students.

Take a poll or build a list. Some synchronous environments have a built-in survey tool and/or chat function. Chat, the unloved stepchild of the synchronous world, actually plays a useful role in brainstorming and list building. For example, ask the same question of everyone in the group and have them type their answers into the chat space. Once everyone has replied, copy/paste the whole set of responses into the whiteboard, then sort into categories. This is a quick way to get a sense of the group's general perspective, level of understanding, and degree of variation.

Add variety for greater interest. Gone are the days when the average student will tolerate a course that is just one lecture after another. Similarly, an online course that involves nothing but readings and text discussion may drag. An increasing number of institutions are finding that a "hybrid" approach, with some synchronous and some asynchronous interaction, maximizes completion rates.

Detect fraud. How do you know the person who enrolled is the one who is leaving those insightful messages in the discussion forum? Requiring periodic participation in a real-time session is one way to rout out pretenders.

Strengthen the bond within a student cohort. Students who periodically meet in the synchronous as well as the asynchronous environment tend to work together well in small groups.

Assign small group discussions or research projects. In a comprehensive web-conferencing environment, the instructor may send two or more students to "break-out rooms," then bring them back later to the main group to report on their work together.

Hold meetings conveniently. Beyond classroom use, administrators and faculty are finding synchronous web conferences to be a viable alternative to leaving home or office for face-to-face meetings. At FutureU, we hold all our staff meetings by phone with a web-conferencing room open on our desktops. We build an agenda together in the whiteboard, check off items as we discuss them, edit documents as a group, visit client web sites, and don't think twice about the fact that we aren't all sitting in the same room.

Write documents collaboratively.
Joint authoring can actually go more smoothly and produce superior results when the partners work from their own desktops, talking via headsets instead of face to face. They view the document as it appears on one of the partners' screens, making suggestions that the lead partner then inserts for everyone to see. Sometimes one partner may even "reach through" to the lead partner's desktop to type modifications directly into the document.

FutureU co-founder Gail Terry Grimes worked this way with a client across four days over the New Year holiday last winter, collaboratively producing a polished document that might otherwise have required multiple drafts and weeks of meetings. The result was a satisfying work experience for both parties and an unexpected success for the organization.

Offer virtual office hours, tutoring and advising. Meeting one-to-one in a web-conferencing room, a student and an instructor can go over test results together. A tutor can take control of the student's desktop long enough to point out the weak and strong points in an essay the student has drafted. An advisor can lead the student on a tour of graduate school web sites, or recommend changes to a class schedule or scholarship application. Rather than feeling short changed, the distance ed student thus enjoys "quality time" with the people who shape his or her educational experience. Most people say the experience is at least equal to what's possible face to face—and a great deal better than the little or no contact that often comes with distance or busy schedules.

Do synchronous tools still have a way to go? Sure. Prices are still all over the map. At FutureU we still spend a lot of time vetting products for quality and consistency. No single product "does it all." Still, several synchronous tools are well worth the investment, especially when a discounted price can be negotiated, and when you invest in training faculty to use the new tools.

The key, as always with technology, is to choose the right medium for the message. Go synchronous not just because the tool is there but when it turns out to be the best one for the job.

It's not the technology.
It's what you do with it.®

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