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Synching Up: Adding Synchronous Elements to Asynchronous Courses [1]

October 15, 2021 by Lainie Hoffman | Office of Digital Education [2]

Asynchronous courses are a cornerstone of online learning. Students tend to choose these courses rather than face-to-face or remote because they allow for greater flexibility in self-scheduling their learning time. This can be a boon for students who work full-time jobs, have dependents, and/or live at a distance from campus. At the same time, asynchronous courses present bigger challenges in terms of self-motivation, community-based learning, and combating feelings of isolation.

One approach to addressing some of these challenges is to add synchronous elements to your online course. When used correctly, synchronous elements can add a layer of direct interaction and engagement that doesn't detract from the benefits of the asynchronous format.

However, adding synchronous elements isn't as easy as just setting up regular meeting times (this is one of the reasons your students chose an asynchronous course, after all!). We need to plan with purpose, diligence, and a bit of creativity.

Planning Considerations

So what do we need to think about when it comes to adding in synchronous elements?

First and foremost, know your purpose. What role will synchronous activities play in student learning? It will be much easier to engage students and have them prioritize synchronous activities if there is a clear, learner-focused purpose to the activity. When students recognize the value of an activity, they are more motivated to participate and are better prepped to learn from the activity. Don't forget to share this purpose with students - they may not make the same connections between ideas without a few words of explanation.

Next, consider what you know about your audience. Who are your students and how might that change the design of a synchronous activity? For instance, if you know your students are likely to have similar work profiles, you might choose something different than if your students come from a variety of disciplines. Or perhaps your students are likely to already know one another versus being complete strangers. Additionally, different student populations may need more or less structure to get the most out of a learning activity. Think about students earlier in a program versus those who are closer to graduation; there tends to be a shift in the need for highly structured guidance versus greater self efficacy. Some student groups may benefit from your hands-on facilitation of synchronous activities. Others may be happy to set up and run their own. Use audience insights to help guide your decision-making when it comes to designing activities, and be thinking about backup plans/ideas for students who don't match the "average."

Working with your own comfort level is also important. Some types of activities might require higher levels of technology know-how. Or perhaps you're feeling hesitant about planning activities that have students taking the lead. Don't be afraid to push yourself a bit to get to the goal, but recognize where you will struggle and plan in advance. It might also be worth thinking about how to start small and work up to bigger plans.

And, last, but not least, what do you need to make it happen? Here are some items to consider:

- **A schedule of student availability.** Consider polling students or having them add to a spreadsheet at the beginning of class to get a better idea of when most students might be able to attend events. And don't forget that synchronous doesn't necessarily require a single meeting for the whole class!
- **Your role.** Synchronous activities may or may not need your direct participation. Think about where it makes sense for you to direct, guide, observe, and/or step back and let students run the show.
- **A code of conduct or rules of engagement.** Certain types of activities lend themselves well to broad guidelines to help students envision what to expect and identify boundaries.
- **Technology.** What hardware and software will you need to support your synchronous event? Will you and/or your students need time to learn to use a new technology tool before they can participate?

When it comes to planning, don't forget that you have the option of asking for student engagement in the process: Crowdsourcing tools, group codes of content, polls to determine best meeting times, sign ups for student-led activities...there is a lot of potential to get students involved and build community before a synchronous activity even begins!

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