

## **Forced Online: Synchronous or Asynchronous Learning?**

### **Abstract**

There are arguments for the benefits of both synchronous and asynchronous learning in an online format, but in the times of a global pandemic, what we know has been called into question as the context has changed. In this discussion session, we'll contemplate the pros and cons of synchronous and asynchronous learning as many of us will be teaching hybrid or online classes as colleges and universities decide how social distancing is compatible with education. We'll share tools and tips for both types of learning and whether a combination of synchronous and asynchronous methods can be effective.

*Keywords:* online tools, synchronous learning, asynchronous learning

## **Forced Online: Synchronous or Asynchronous Learning?**

### **Introduction**

In this roundtable discussion, participants will discuss the pros and cons (and their experiences with) synchronous and asynchronous learning in online classes and tools for both methods. Since covid-19 forced all classes online, debate has been pretty heated about which is the best format. One teacher/professor group on Facebook included comments like:

- “My Uni was encouraging asynchronous delivery”
- “We were told to stay as synchronous as possible. “
- “In ordinary circumstances synchronous classes are not a good idea...But in ordinary circumstances we would not be teaching classes that need hands-on instruction and coaching online. It would be a waste of time to teach those classes asynchronously.”
- “... intended to be asynchronous, powerpoints and emails and discussion boards and all. But my students kept asking for zoom sessions,”
- “Our students want/need the connection they have always had. “
- “Synchronous does not work for sudden distance learning.”
- “I’m definitely in the pro-asynchronous camp, for all the equity related-reasons”
- “I have taken my classes asynchronous, and I wonder if it was mistake in some ways.”
- “There’s a prof at my college complaining about students who don’t respect her by being on camera during required synchronous lectures, because after all, that’s what her department decided on”
- “...feeling shamed by other educators for trying to offer some synchronous classes...”
- “I see asynchronous teachers being shamed as slackers or too easy or low standards...”

Clearly, there are strong feelings on both sides, and a lot of confusion about what is “best” during this time. In this discussion, we will talk about synchronous, asynchronous, and combination methods for taking classes online, as well as some tools that can help.

### **Theoretical Foundations/Teaching implications**

A review by Watts (2016) found that asynchronous classes can allow more time for reflection and engagement with the material, while synchronous classes may help students engage and feel more connected to the professor and fellow classmates. Watts (2016) also reports that using both synchronous and asynchronous simultaneously may cause student

frustration. Students may need technical training on the technology used (Pan & Sullivan, 2005), as may professors! This was a particularly difficult hurdle for classes pushed online mid-semester that may not have used the LMS before. Overall, Watts (2016, p. 30) concludes, “both formats play a part in keeping students connected, learning the content, and providing satisfaction in the online classroom... instructors must examine course content, learner motivation and needs, and learning outcomes before deciding on the types of interaction to be woven into course work.”

Of course, we want online learning to be engaging and interactive, but synchronous or asynchronous does not necessarily make this easier: they both have pros and cons. Synchronous learning allows for immediate feedback and clarification and easier and quicker back-and-forth in discussion, with potentially less misunderstanding due to richer communication when video conferencing is used (but this is not always possible). However, in-class activities cannot always be easily taken online, even in a synchronous format, and indeed some activities are better adapted to asynchronous for flexibility and easier monitoring by the professor (e.g., Gibson et al., 2018), and some research indicates that asynchronous discussions result in higher cognitive levels (thinking at the comprehension rather than knowledge levels; Brierton et al., 2016), so asynchronous may be valuable. Research has also shown that teaching presence is important for online learning outcomes, and that “personable, knowledgeable, and timely” communication from professors is key (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2016). Synchronous has the timely advantage, and perhaps personable as well, but a well-structured asynchronous course can also accomplish this.

One alarming study on distance learning concludes: “Students with a low cognitive ability, and therefore low ability for autonomous learning, will usually not be able to become

integrated in a framework of distance education, even in its synchronous form in which the interaction is relatively higher than in the asynchronous form” (Offir et al., 2008, p. 1182). This implies that struggling students will not do well with synchronous *or* asynchronous learning. We must be cautious with this conclusion, however, since the study is more than a decade old and technology has advanced so much that both synchronous and asynchronous learning today is very different than when studied to come to this conclusion. This is one of the main problems with relying on research that supports that synchronous online or asynchronous online learning is effective—the studies were conducted in a different world. Students are more isolated and more stressed today than the average student, on account of the ongoing global pandemic. Students may or may not be quite as isolated in the fall semester; no one really knows. Accordingly, the problems of students being at home with family members needing care, needing to work during scheduled class time, and having technology limitations from no longer being on campus may or may not be what we are dealing with in the fall. In this session, we will discuss, commiserate, and make flexible plans for uncertain semesters ahead.

### **Session Description**

In this session, we will discuss the pros and cons of synchronous and asynchronous learning as well as how to plan for possible hybrid/fully online courses going forward.

- The session will begin with introductions and a poll of how professors taught in the spring: synchronous / asynchronous / both.
- Next, we’ll discuss the benefits and pitfalls of asynchronous learning
- Followed by the pros and cons of synchronous learning

Next, we’ll discuss tools and best practices for both formats.

Tools for synchronous discussions:

- Blackboard Collaborate (or other built-in LMS features)
- Zoom
- Microsoft Teams
- Discord: <https://discordapp.com/>
- Poll Everywhere: polls or quiz “competitions”: <https://www.polleverywhere.com/>
- Kahoot!: real-time quizzes: <https://kahoot.com/schools-u/>
- Metastream (allows watching videos and chatting synchronously):  
<https://app.getmetastream.com/>
- Remind (allows scheduling reminders for synchronous sessions and due dates):  
<https://www.remind.com/>
- Other suggestions from attendees

#### Tools for Asynchronous

- Powerpoint (recording lectures directly within PPT)
- Screencast-o-matic (Recording lectures and screen capture. 15 minute limit):  
<https://screencast-o-matic.com/>
- OBS Studio (also allows recording and screen capture): <https://obsproject.com/>
- Discussion boards in LMS
- Edmodo for discussions: <https://new.edmodo.com/?go2url=%2Fhome>
- FlipGrid for video discussions: <https://info.flipgrid.com/>
- Remind
- Kahoot! Challenges (post the link and students can take it at any time)
- Other suggestions from attendees

#### Best practices / topics of discussion

- Don't assume your students are tech-savvy or know how to use the programs
- Don't assume students have high-speed internet access, access to a webcam, or a certain device (they may only have a cell phone)
- Provide a rubric or very clear directions for online discussions (see Comer & Lenaghan, 2012, for some guidance)
- Don't force students to turn on a webcam during class, but you may want to encourage it
- Record any synchronous sessions if possible
- Keep posted lectures/videos short
- How to handle testing (Respondus Monitor, open book tests, no tests?)

Hosting this session at MOBTS allows attendees to share wins and frustrations and learn new techniques in the collegial, no-shame, MOBTS environment. Even professors who have taught online before may be facing new challenges in the covid-19 world.

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