

Interactive Synchronous Sessions

1 What is it?

People communicate in online courses asynchronously (i.e., not at the same time) and synchronously (i.e., at the same time). Common forms of asynchronous communication include email and text-based discussions, whereas the most common form of synchronous communication involves “synchronous sessions” using web conferencing software, like [Zoom](#) or [Google Meet](#) or [WebEx](#). Online educators generally prefer asynchronous communication because it provides the most flexibility, and opportunities to think and reflect on what to say before responding. Despite the meaningful educational experience in online asynchronous discussion forums (see Garrison, 2017), many instructors are using synchronous sessions to either replace or supplement asynchronous communication. Interactive synchronous sessions are live web meetings where the students are actively engaging and participating during the session. This might involve the following:

- Students giving class presentations
- Students debating key ideas
- Students co-authoring an artifact (e.g., a paper or presentation)
- Students interviewing guest presenters
- Students discussing muddiest points
- Students working in [breakout rooms in a think-pair-share](#) type of activity

Lecturing can be included during synchronous sessions, but consider the following to help make it as interactive as possible:

- Keep the lectures short (e.g., 10-20 minutes)
- Add some type of activity related to the lecture (e.g., solving problems)
- Involve students in the lecture
- Take breaks and have students discuss key ideas

2 Why is it important?

There are good reasons to use synchronous sessions in online courses. Interactive synchronous sessions are important, because research has shown that students learn more when they are engaged and actively involved (Prince, 2004). Further, research has found that some students struggle more than others with learning online. Interactive synchronous sessions can not only help with learning, but they can also help online instructors identify students who might be struggling the most. Moreover, synchronous sessions offer instructors and students the ability to meet online at the same time, which can in turn help establish a sense of immediacy and social presence while decreasing student isolation (see [Social Presence](#)).

From a practical standpoint, interactive synchronous sessions allow instructors to help answer questions and solve problems in a timely manner (Lowenthal et al., 2017). Some instructors also like that synchronous sessions have structural similarities to traditional face-to-face courses (e.g., meeting certain days each week). However, despite these benefits, it is important to remember that synchronous sessions can easily turn into long lectures, encourage distraction, and result in disengaged, tired students (Lowenthal et al., 2020). Therefore, before you add synchronous sessions to your next online course, it is important that you take the time to plan for how you can create interactive, engaging, and student-centered synchronous sessions.

3 How to do it?

Interactive synchronous sessions require intentional planning, implementation, and evaluation.

Planning

- Identify why you want to use synchronous sessions. This could be done by creating a course

map to align your outcomes, activities, and assessments and identify where and how synchronous sessions can help you meet your course goals.

- Identify what students will need to do in order to come prepared to actively participate.
- Set clear expectations about your use of synchronous sessions, when you will use them, and what you expect of students (i.e., this is often done in your syllabus and during the first week of class); if attendance is required and graded, make this clear and transparent (see [Course Expectations](#)).
- Avoid overusing synchronous sessions; you shouldn't be spending all of your "class time" each week online in synchronous sessions (e.g., balance it with asynchronous discussions).
- Take time to practice using technologies before class begins; include students in the practice sessions and make sure they can connect. Students may also need practice before engaging synchronously in assessment activities (e.g., debates or class presentations)

Implementation

- Provide students with an agenda or an overview for what to expect for each synchronous session.
- Show up early and be prepared to stay after to answer one-on-one questions.
- Provide materials (e.g., readings, slides) well before the synchronous session is scheduled.
- Encourage students to keep webcams on to maintain social presence and attend to their participation.
- Discuss and model netiquette and outline rules of engagement (e.g., keep camera at eye level; have appropriate clothing on; use headphones).
- Strategically use chat, polling, and breakout rooms to keep students interacting with you and others (see additional resources section).
- Consider recording and if you do, let students know that a session is being recorded.

Evaluation

- After each session, solicit feedback from students to help evaluate how things went, what needs to change, and if any follow-up is needed on given topics.

4 Technology & Tools

- [Zoom](#)
- [WebEx](#) at Purdue
- [Google Meet](#)
- [Google Docs](#) & [Google Slides](#)
- [Poll Everywhere](#)
- [Headsets for Teaching Online](#)
- [Document Cameras](#)

5 Additional Resources

- [Turns Out You Can Build Community in a Zoom Classroom](#) (may need to register for Chronicle of Higher Ed free account)
- [8 Ways to Be More Inclusive in Your Zoom Teaching](#) (CHE free account)
- [Synchronous Online Classes: 10 Tips for Engaging Students](#)
- [Suggestions for Teaching a Synchronous Class](#)
- [Tips and Practices for Teaching with Synchronous Sessions](#)

6 References

- Garrison, D. R. (2017). *E-Learning in the 21st century: A community of inquiry framework for research and practice* (3rd ed.). London: Routledge/Taylor and Francis.
- Lowenthal, P. R., Dunlap, J. C., & Snelson, C. (2017). Live synchronous web meetings in asynchronous online courses: Reconceptualizing virtual office hours. *Online Learning, 21*(4), 177-194.
- Lowenthal, P. R., Borup, J., West, R. E., & Archambault, L. (2020). Thinking beyond Zoom: Using asynchronous video to maintain connection and engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Technology and Teacher Education, 28*(2), 1-9.
- Prince, M. (2004). Does active learning work? A review of the research. *Journal of engineering education, 93*(3), 223-231.