

## DigiGuide: Designing and facilitating an engaging online synchronous session

### Tips for a Successful Online Synchronous Session

Adopting an online approach for the first time can seem a daunting task. It is a good idea to try to plan lessons with your colleagues and adopt a pedagogy that aligns with your lessons aims.

Remember to:

- Consider which activities do not need to be synchronous and do these asynchronously where possible. For example, observing multimedia, reading text, taking quizzes or tests, and assignments can all be done asynchronously.
- Make sure that your synchronous and asynchronous activities are mapped to the learning outcomes of your module or course.

Be sure to:

- Remember to record all live synchronous sessions and activities, allowing asynchronous viewing for students to recap and reflect on the session.
- Ensure content is accessible – use closed captions and check compatibility with mobile devices.
- Help students feel connected with each other, and you the teacher. Maintain on-going communication in online chat forums and channels.
- Collect student feedback and use this to re-design and enhance your online teaching approach where appropriate.

Before a session:

#### **1. Plan for an engaging session**

- Compose a session plan with a clear structure that maps the learning activities and channels of engagement available to the students.
- Where possible, limit the time duration of your session to one hour. It is difficult for students (and you) to maintain attention in synchronous online environments. If this is not possible, be sure to schedule regular breaks into your session.
- Avoid long lectures and including long forms of multimedia – these can be viewed before or after a synchronous session, allowing more time for interaction and active learning.
- Identify a variety of media to include in your session – include short videos, web resources or specialist software related to your subject.

## **2. Develop student motivation**

- Make it clear to students that active participation is required during a synchronous session – consider a code of conduct or code of participation for your course.
- Design the learning experience to include tasks for students to complete before a session. Make these activities as interactive as possible – include multimedia, reading etc. and discussion topics. Outline how these activities relate to the learning outcomes of the session and monitor student engagement.
- Also include tasks for students to perform after a synchronous session to reinforce what they have learned and to disseminate their understanding with their peers. Consider setting reflective activities or encouraging the completion of a journal or blog which can be shared with peers.
- Help students feel prepared for the live session; include help resources from your chosen platform, remind students of the need for a stable internet connection, webcam, headset/microphone, provide a link to the session, highlight campus facilities which are available if needed, and provide contact details for technical and/or accessibility assistance.

During a synchronous session:

### **3. Making a good start**

- Ensure that you provide clear instructions of where students can post questions and if they have permissions to share audio/webcam etc.
- Create a welcoming environment and lead by example by sharing your audio and video. Ask students to introduce themselves in the chat and share something about their day.
- Start by explaining the aims for the session and how it links to the overall learning outcomes of the course – be clear about what your expectations for the students are and how they should interact during the session.

### **4. Interaction and feedback**

- Facilitate peer interaction by using breakout groups and design group tasks which give students a reason to interact and collaborate.
- Use a mix of active learning tools and approaches to encourage student participation and engagement.
- Ensure each activity is supplemented with clear instructions, guidance and aims so that students know what they need to do and why they are doing it. Consider using time-limits to keep students focussed and on-task.
- Be active in monitoring student interaction and provide regular feedback and comments in response to these interactions – this will provide students with on-going constructive guidance which they can apply to the tasks in real-time.
- Encourage students to give feedback to their peers, and design activities where groups present their work and findings to the wider group – encourage students to share knowledge and engage in discussion.

After the session:

### **5. Consolidation and reflection**

- Capture student feedback to find out which aspects students value the most and where improvements can be made – make this process anonymous to encourage openness, either via a survey, poll, or discussion forum.
- Share the recording of the synchronous session for students to reflect on and revisit areas which they need to, or indeed for those that could not attend.
- Monitor and manage any post session activities and address any issues which may have arisen during the session. Consider sending a summary announcement or short video to clarify any areas which may need addressing, highlight any exemplar questions or answers which have been made by the students.
- Check activity data on Canvas to see which learning content students are actively engaging with.
- Reflect on your session and review your recording – identify areas which students reacted positively to and see where improvements can be made. Consider asking a colleague to review the recording as an independent viewpoint.

## Online Activities for Student Engagement

Your synchronous online teaching should be supported by student-focussed activities. Successful implementation of these activities can help to develop student motivation and maintain their attention during a synchronous session. The following activities can be facilitated at the beginning or end of a synchronous session, and are designed to stimulate student engagement, nurture a social presence, or reflect on what the students have learned during the session. Some activities are also designed as larger activities which enable a higher level of student engagement with the learning content and can be completed asynchronously if required.

### **1. What is your location?**

Find out where your students are joining from.

- Share a slide which includes an image of a map and use the markup or annotation tool to mark your location.
- Invite students to share their location by marking it on the map using the same tool.
- Extend the activity by asking students to describe what the weather is like where they are or invite them to post in the chat an interesting fact or something they like about their location.
- Tip: Padlet has a great [Map function](#) which you can easily create and share with students.

## 2. How are you feeling?

Check how your students are feeling at the start of a synchronous session.

- Make use of status icons, emoji, and emoticons to tell your students you are 'happy' to see them and excited to be with them in this session.
- Ask students to share how they are feeling by using the meeting reaction function or sharing an emoji in the chat forum.
- Summarise how the group is feeling – or extend the activity by asking a selection of students to say something about how they are feeling.
- Consider facilitating this again at the end of the session – this will allow you to observe how students responded to the content.

## 3. Test knowledge

Use a knowledge check or informal quiz to test students existing knowledge on a subject.

- Prepare questions using a poll or form which you can share with students at the beginning of a session.
- Share the poll or form and consider setting a time-limit for students to complete it.
- Observe the answers and make comments to the group on the responses submitted.
- Consider extending the activity by inviting a selection of students to expand on their responses and to share their knowledge with their peers.
- Tip: See how to [create polls in Microsoft Teams](#) or [Zoom](#)

## 4. Share a statement

Seek student opinion and check understanding as you progress through a session.

- Pre-prepare statements about your subject which may be true or false – this may be specific to the subject theme, assignment details or checking key dates from the course. Add each statement to a different slide.
- Display a statement and invite students to agree or disagree in the chat forum or use emoji or emoticons to make it clear if they agree or disagree.
- Give feedback to the general group after each statement.
- Extend the activity to invite students to expand on their response using their audio and/or webcam.

## 5. Collaborative content creation

Allow students to co-create a document or design a presentation.

- [Use Office365 and create a blank Word Document](#) or PowerPoint for students to work together on.
- Make sure students are clear about what the task is and what they need to create. Assign breakout rooms and set a time-limit.

- Regularly visit each group to ensure that they understand the task and are aware of the time-limit – keep students 'on-task'.
- When the activity is over and students are back in the main room, invite one participant from each group to feedback to the whole group regarding the output from their activity.
- Consider making this a larger activity and asking students to begin the activity together in the synchronous session and continue working on it as a group asynchronously after the session has ended. Alternatively, ask the students to work on it together before the synchronous session, during the session in 'real-time', and after the session asynchronously.
- Tip: If you are putting students into groups, create several versions of the Word document or PowerPoint so that each group has their own version to work on. Also, consider creating a template document rather than a blank canvas – this can enable students to be more focussed on the task and output required.

## **6. Annotation & images**

Give students an image or diagram to annotate or complete.

- Prepare an image or paragraph related to the sessions theme or topic – this could be a graph, equation, design blueprint, process diagram or excerpt from an article.
- Share the artefact with students and invite them to [annotate or label the image in real-time](#).
- Make general comment on the additions and invite students to expand on their answers.
- Consider using several different images and splitting students into groups to enable them to work on different scenarios or images. They can share their results and feedback to the main group once the activity has finished.
- Tip: take a screenshot of the activity once students have made their annotations and share this with the group after the synchronous session.

## **7. Think-pair-share**

Give students time to reflect on an idea, discuss in small groups and feedback to the whole group.

- Present students with a thought-provoking question or scenario related to your subject and give them time to reflect on the information.
- Divide students into small breakout groups and encourage them to discuss their ideas. Consider setting a time-limit for this.
- Once the activity has started, make sure that you regularly visit each group to check on discussions and be available to answer any questions which may have arisen.
- Once the time-limit has passed, bring students back into the main room and invite them to share what they had discussed in their groups.

- Tip: Consider creating a [collaborative document in Office365](#) or [Padlet wall](#) for each group so that they can make notes on what they discussed – this may help with sharing knowledge across groups and sharing after the session has ended.

## **8. Virtual tours**

Guide students on a virtual tour, either around a software, lab experiment, or field trip.

- Identify an online resource related to your subject. This could be a walk-through of a software, 3D model, map, or virtual museum, for example. Create a short guide on key areas or basic instructions which students can use to follow the virtual tour.
- [Share your screen](#) and the online resource and invite students to submit questions and share comments in the chat forum.
- Consider allowing students to share their online resources with the group – give them permission to share their screen and audio to share their virtual tour with the group.

## **9. Role-play**

Enable problem-solving by giving students different roles to work together in identifying solutions.

- Design a task which will enable students to take on different roles and work together to find solutions to a problem. Making this task specific to your subject, this could range from a medical consultation of a patient, a business project-planning meeting, or a meeting between different stakeholders in an engineering project, for example.
- Make the objectives and the focus of the task clear to students, with details of the different roles where appropriate.
- Firstly, assign students into [breakout rooms](#) which contain those students assigned with the same role. This allows them to decide on an agreed course of action and/or approach. Be clear regarding a time-limit for this part. Again, monitor the groups regularly to keep the students on-task.
- Bring students back into the main room and be clear about the next steps. Students will now form new breakout groups containing different roles, in which they will work together to solve the assigned problem.
- After the second part of the activity has ended, bring students back into the main room to share feedback, solutions and actions performed with the main group.
- Alternatively, assign roles and task criteria before the synchronous session – this will save time during the live session.
- Tip: Consider asking students to continue the group task asynchronously after the live session or encourage them to write a reflective piece or discussion forum entry on their key takeaways from the activity or role that they were assigned.

Please refer to the CIE [DigiGuide](#) and [Spotlight Guide](#) on Online Group Work for further support.

## 10. Poll & evaluation

Receive feedback from students on how the session went.

- Create a poll or form to collect feedback from students on how the session went.
- Give the students an allocated time-limit to complete this activity and monitor responses as they are submitted.
- Give comment to specific responses or any common themes or areas that are emerging – give students the opportunity to expand on their responses in the chat forum or via their audio and webcam.
- Tip: If you performed a knowledge check at the beginning of the session consider performing another knowledge check at the end of the session to compare student knowledge pre and post session. This will also give you a good indicator of how the session was for the students.

## References

'7 things you should know about the HyFlex course model'. EDUCAUSE LEARNING INITIATIVE [educause.edu/ELI](https://www.educause.edu/ELI) E. © 2020 EDUCAUSE. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons BY-NC-ND 4.0 International License

'Online Pedagogy' Dr Peter Kahn (PFHEA, NTF), [Online Pedagogy](#) by Dr Peter Kahn (PFHEA, NTF) is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

'Online Synchronous Teaching' Scott Farrow, [Online Synchronous Teaching](#) by Scott Farrow is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.



© 2021 by the University of Liverpool, Centre for Innovation in Education.

[Designing and facilitating an engaging online synchronous session](#) is made available under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#).