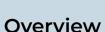A spotlight on...

Online Synchronous Teaching

Centre for Innovation in Education & Centre for Higher Education Studies

Overview

Synchronous teaching is where the teacher is present at the same time as the learners. Synchronous delivery is beneficial when there is a need for teaching presence, such as live discussion and interaction.
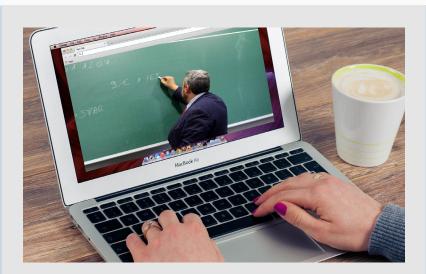
Delivering entirely synchronously, can limit flexibility (Flaherty, 2020), allowing little room to vary the pace of learning. Include a mix of synchronous and asynchronous teaching in an online model and only use synchronous sessions when there is a need for it, however care must be taken to not reduce scheduled contact hours (Havergal, 2020).

Benefits

Connectivity between students, helping avoid feelings of isolation (Racheva, 2018). Synchronous sessions require simultaneous participation, which benefits those who like to learn as a group.

Session structure helps keep learners on track and controls the pace of learning.

Interaction improves learner engagement (Falloon, 2011, Strang, 2013, Watts, 2016). Group activities and collaboration offer real-world skills such as communication and teamwork.

Putting it into practice

Complement with asynchronous
Synchronous online learning does not perform well alone, so complement sessions with asynchronous content. If you're using video conferencing technology, you can record the session for those who miss class or wish to revisit content in their own time. Alternatively, you can produce some content highlighting the key points in an alternative format.

If holding a live chat or discussion board, leave these available for students to engage with for a few days after the synchronous element. This ensures all learners have time to process information and engage with learning in a way which best suits them.

Make synchronous novel
While synchronous sessions will connect to other elements of the course and scaffold learning towards a common goal, duplicating content in synchronous settings gives learners no incentive to attend. Offer insights or activities which encourage them to attend live.

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Embed active learning

Active learning (Zepke & Leach, 2010) is another pedagogy where we can take our experiences of teaching face-to-face and adapt to an online situation. To ensure students are actively engaged in their learning you might pose questions, give time for reflection, ask students to lead topic discussion and write or verbally deliver responses.

Consider including active elements (if technology allows) such as polling, breakout rooms, screen sharing and whiteboard tasks (Blundell, Moindrot, & Asgari, 2020). While we would never require students to put their webcams and microphones on in sessions, this can be encouraged through these tasks (Cheetham & Thomson, 2020). However, it is important to design learning that works for those who don't have access to this level of technology so we make sessions as inclusive and accessible as possible.

Flip the online classroom

A lot of the pedagogy we use in a face-to-face classroom can be adapted and used in an online synchronous session. Using a flipped classroom approach minimises the length of synchronous session you need, so you can focus on the most relevant points in the session. You can also collect information and prompt questions on your session subject so learners bring ideas to the synchronous gathering. Setting expectations before class can also save time and help learners prepare for learning – let them know what topics will be covered, how they can prepare and what they'll be expected to do - will they require a particular technology, set of ideas, or access to resources for active learning activities?

Check in with wellbeing

There are many means for checking in with students' wellbeing and progression with learning asynchronously too, but synchronous is a great opportunity to check-in with them either collectively or in a one-to-one session. General conversation with learners before the start of a session can also help to ease them in and break down social barriers whilst also quietly creating the expectation of interaction for the sessions.

Challenges

Lack of flexibility

Synchronous online teaching requires the presence of learners at a set time, using the chosen technology. This may not be ideal for those who have other commitments and prefer (or need) to learn at their own pace. Also, the scheduled time of sessions will benefit some, but not all learners.

Students' learning pace

Synchronous learning alone means the pace is set by the teacher, rather than the student; it means that the group must progress at the same speed, regardless of ability. Some students may take longer to grasp concepts and understand what is being asked of them, so synchronous learning may move too fast for them (Flaherty, 2020). Provide asynchronous options so students can revisit content, such as a session recording or summary.

Reliance on Technology

Over-reliance on technology for synchronous teaching can disadvantage some learners. Learning in their own space, students may not have the bandwidth, reliable internet connectivity or equipment to participate fully in synchronous video-conferencing sessions (Barron, Fleetwood, & Barron, 2004), which can also throw up accessibility issues for some students.

Additional Resources & References

Can you help us improve this resource or suggest a future one? Do you need this resource in an alternative format? Please contact us at cie@liverpool.ac.uk

A full list of references are available on the Centre for Innovation in Education website.