



## Handout

Adapted from "Planning Effective Synchronous Sessions." Academic Computing and Communications Center. University of Illinois. Accessed 22 Jun 2020.

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A virtual classroom is an online learning environment that allows for live interaction between the instructor and the learners as they are participating in learning activities. The most common tools you can find in a virtual classroom are videoconferencing, screen sharing, online whiteboard for real-time collaboration, chat tool, and breakout rooms. Immediate communication favors relationship building within the group, as well as a sense of community. Using synchronous tools can be challenging for instructors and students. An effective live class session requires careful planning.

## Synchronous Learning

Synchronous learning occurs at the same time and typically in the same place (virtually or in-person). A lecture or activity that is given using Web Conferencing tools is an example of synchronous learning.

- Take away: Synchronous instruction is a great way to come together as a group, create a social presence, and create opportunities for participation.

## Recommended Strategy

Do a live lecture with Q&A using a web conferencing tool as a virtual classroom (e.g. Blackboard Collaborate). Record the live session using the "Recording" feature in the tool. Make the recording available on Blackboard for students to view.. Create a due date that gives students a few days to view the content. Also, see Virtual Office Hours.

- Note: Some preliminary feedback from faculty across higher education institutions are finding with the emergency transition to remote teaching, students appreciate having opportunities to synchronously learn due to feelings of isolation and loneliness.

## Recommendations for More Effective Synchronous Online Sessions\*

### Before:

- **Communicate expectations:** Before the session, post, send, or share the session's agenda with the students. The students will then know what to expect and how to prepare beforehand, such as watching a video or reading an article.
- **Provoke the students' curiosity and interest in connecting:** It is a challenge to get all of our students to join the sessions, so make the topics insightful and engaging. Norman (2017) recommends putting yourself in your students' shoes and asking, "What new ideas, information, or wisdom will I learn from this session that is not already incorporated into the online course?"
- **Visualize the content (Prepare visual aids):** Remember the technological complications of sometimes losing Wi-Fi or having scratchy audio. Therefore, prepare brief explanations, images, information, and shared files ahead of time for the students. If the student can visualize the topic, then they will be more focused and current during the session. A college student routinely alternates between attention and distraction in a face-to-face class, according to Bunce, Flens, & Neiles (2010). They showed that the first moment of inattention could occur as early as 30 seconds into a lecture. Subsequent spikes occur at approximately 5 minutes, 8 minutes, 10 minutes, and so on.

### During:

- **Getting started:** Norman suggests beginning the session with an informal chat to check on everyone. Consider asking the students to recommend movies they have watched or show a slide with a conversation-starter such as a joke, meme, gif, or trivia question. Arrive a few minutes before the session starts and make small talk online, just like in the face-to-face classroom. When possible, use a wired connection (versus a wireless). If you plan on sharing screen, make sure to close other desktop applications to avoid inadvertent sharing.
- **Ask students to turn on their cameras:** Share your guidelines for how you want students to ask questions (e.g. chat, vs. audio). It is so much easier to make a personal connection with people if you can see their faces, and they can see yours. If internet bandwidth is an issue, ask the students to turn on their cameras at the beginning of the session for the informal chat so everyone can say hello to each other. Then they can turn off their cameras after the informal chat if the bandwidth is low.
- **Share the agenda and start the recording:** Remember the technological complications such as blurry video or audio. At the beginning of the session, share the session plan (as done at the start of productive business meetings). If a student is ejected from the session, when they return, they will know exactly which topic is being discussed or which activity the class is doing. Record the session and make students aware that you are recording the session for the benefit of other students.
- **Use frequent responses:** Frequent responses keep the students active in the session. Recognizing by name when responding to a question or comment helps students feel connected. Apply polls, ask questions, and have students post a thumbs up or thumbs

down in the chatbox to indicate their understanding. These help the teacher know if the students are keeping up and comprehending. The frequent responses maintain the students' interest and involvement in the session and combat the students' passivity. Remember to see the online class from the students' point of view. Imagine you are the student watching and participating in the session. What would keep you motivated to pay attention?

- **Suggestions for polls**
  - In a discussion, ask students to pick the option that is most important to them.
  - In a debate, choose a side to agree or disagree.
  - For a question on grammar or math, have students select the correct answer.
  - Check for understanding and mastery level of a topic. Students can select from
    - 1 = completely confused, 2 = feeling comfortable, or 3 = expert
  - Apply a pre-session survey on the topic to be discussed. Send out a brief survey or poll a few days before to find out the students' existing knowledge and their beliefs. Doing these things can help you better to prepare the session plan, materials, and activities.
  - Exit poll. At the end of the session, ask the students to rate the session to help you to gauge its effectiveness and to make improvements for future online classes.
- **Watch your time:** Be concise in the session. Remember, showing a 20-minute video during an online class is not a good use of time. So, use the time to maximize learning. A student can pay attention in a traditional classroom much longer than an online session.
- **Keep an active pace:** Remember the 30-minute attention span. Take advantage of this. Keep in mind that students are easily distracted by outside influences, so keep the pace lively.

After:

- **Exit poll:** Obtain feedback from the students through an exit poll or survey after the class to gauge its effectiveness and use the results to improve your future sessions.

## References:

Normal attention span expectations by age. (2020). Brain balance achievement centers. Retrieved April 1, 2020, from <https://blog.brainbalancecenters.com/normal-attention-span-expectations-by-age>

Norman, Marie (2017). Synchronous Online Classes: 10 Tips for Engaging Students. Retrieved from <https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/online-education/synchronous-online-classes-10-tips-engaging-students/> on March 31, 2020.

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