



Challenges and affordances of synchronous aspects of virtual courses

Synchronous affordances	Synchronous challenges	Synchronous strategies
<p>Real time connection: Being able to connect in real time reduces transactional distance and provides opportunity for spontaneous interactions and quick responses.</p> <p>Prioritization: Having a set time that learners need to show up for can help them prioritize these course components, building in some temporal urgency or fear of missing out.</p> <p>Social presence and connection: The ability to see faces, hear voices, and respond to learners' questions or concerns in the moment can be helpful when dealing with difficult concepts or sensitive topics.</p> <p>May be most familiar format for some instructors: Preparing for a synchronous format may feel more akin to how one prepares for and teaches in the traditional classroom.</p>	<p>Access issues: Access inequities can be amplified in synchronous sessions due to some learners living in different time zones, living in places with bandwidth issues, or not having access to reliable internet, and lack of access to technology (e.g., webcam, a computer, etc.).</p> <p>Reduced flexibility: Synchronous course components provide less temporal flexibility, requiring learners to show-up at a particular time, which may not be their ideal time for learning and this lack of flexibility exacerbates the issues mentioned above.</p> <p>Accessibility issues: For learners who are hearing or vision impaired, have cognitive processing issues, and/or those who use assistive technology, live video sessions can be an issue and these students may require accommodations and asynchronous alternatives.</p> <p>Cognitive load issues: Some learners may</p>	<p>Provide asynchronous alternatives: Alternatives build in flexibility, improve access, help with future-proofing your course so you are prepared if/when you do have a learner who requires accommodation. Further, alternative asynchronous activities enable students who cannot make it to the synchronous session the opportunity to participate.</p> <p>High-impact alternatives include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • record video sessions and provide transcripts (transcripts are not just for the hearing impaired, they make videos much more searchable and help students find and review material). • reviewing the recording and writing a summary of the synchronous discussion and adding one's own points. • providing a post-synchronous session reflection could also be an effective solution for a learner who discloses they were uncomfortable participating in live discussions due to a sensitive topic or cultural approaches to learning. • another option for students who could not attend is to provide the opportunity to work together/collaborate with others in the same situation on some problems using an asynchronous collaborative tools such as Office365 or Google Docs, etc. <p>Identify an element that doesn't require synchronous engagement: This reduces stress and access issues associated with internet and tools/technology inequities, and reduces cognitive load allowing students to set their own pace, focus on the concepts and practice skills, reflect and integrate, and prepare to participate in synchronous sessions.</p>

	<p>not be able to keep up with the pace of listening while rapidly entering and reading chat entries, causing stress and a loss of confidence (Nilson & Goodson, 2018). Synchronous sessions are also difficult/impossible for students to return to and review.</p> <p>Privacy issues and anxiety: Many learners will not feel comfortable turning on their camera and inviting you and the entire class into their home/bedroom. “Home” is not a quiet, private, clean, or safe space for everyone.</p> <p>Stress and anxiety: For all of the reasons listed above synchronous sessions can be a source of significant stress.</p> <p>Learners may remain passive and with cameras off (especially in large classes): Instructors who choose synchronous formats may choose this format for its familiarity, however, the video format is different for learners. Many will choose to leave their camera off and may be less engaged than they would be in the classroom. Multitasking (which learners do in the classroom too) is a constant temptation and distraction.</p>	<p>For example: Asynchronous tests and exams can be effective and circumvent inequity in access to reliable internet and tools/technology. Open book tests, asking students to apply, generate, transfer knowledge to novel domains, asking students to submit their handwritten work, and/or creating multiple versions of a test can circumvent academic integrity issues.</p> <p>Instead of lecturing in a synchronous session, provide the learning materials and activities ahead of time. Synchronous time can be then focused on interacting with your learners and allowing them to interact with each other (e.g., through debate, discussion, problem-solving, group work, Q & A, learning games, etc.,).</p> <p>Getting learner buy-in to boost engagement: When learners understand why the synchronous format has been selected and why it is important to you that they show up and participate you may find more students engaging and turning on their cameras.</p> <p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sharing with learners why you’d like to see some faces (cameras on) in synchronous sessions (while keeping this optional) helps them see how they can help you and give back. You may see more students turning their cameras on when they realize this matters to you. Of course, you’ll need to set the stage by modeling that behaviour first. Seeing a messy office or a cat walk by the screen can really help them see you as a human and make them feel more comfortable inviting you and their peers into their home. • Outlining which learning outcomes are achieved through the synchronicity of interactions (alignment) helps students understand that you strategically chose this because it’s best for their learning and not simply easier or more familiar for you. For instance, being able to engage in live discussion, respond on your toes, present in public, etc.
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