**Synchronous Learning vs. Asynchronous Learning**

**Synchronous**

**What is it?** Synchronous online learning is learning that takes place in real time with the instructor and students interacting at the same time. Using technology such as video conferencing, real-time chat, or virtual environments, students are able to engage in learning activities such as lectures, discussions or activities. In order to facilitate these lessons, students in the course need to be available at the time designated by the instructor/institution.

**Pros:**
- Synchronous approaches have many of the same interactive advantages of face to face classes.
- Provides the ability to facilitate engagement through real time interactions with students in formal and informal ways. This includes small formative assessments/check-ins.
- Allows for the facilitation of real time student-to-student interaction during activities and or discussions
- Instructors are able to modify lessons based on feedback and/or questions from students. Students can gain answers to questions in real time during these sessions.
- May prove to be a more effective way to convey complicated information for some instructors.

**Cons:**
- Violates one of the key principles of distance learning, which is the flexibility to work at their own pace and at times most beneficial to their schedule
- Student’s learning is restricted by the fixed time of the course.
- Requires a higher technological hurdle for students (microphone, camera, internet connection fast enough to handle the live feed).
- Research about attention spans of modern students indicates that block video lessons may be less effective than letting students work at their own pace by engaging in shorter pre-recorded video lessons

**Why you should use it**
If you teach in a discipline where you feel that having real time interactions with students is crucial to their understanding of the material or assessment of learning outcomes, a synchronous approach could be beneficial. This might include courses that have dense material or where the assessment of learning is tied to specific demonstration of skills (performance, labs, speeches, language). This method is also beneficial as a method to mirror student engagement methods familiar to many instructors and provide opportunity for dynamic interaction in the classroom. This type of engagement can support overall student success as well as facilitate deeper discussion around dynamic issues.

**Why you should not use it**
This should not be used because instructors think it is the only way they can envision teaching or because it would be “less work” to just deliver the same lecture you have prepared for their face to face class via video conferencing. Asynchronous distance learning is also able to deliver dynamic lessons and student interaction. While faculty might prefer synchronous, they should investigate beyond some of the negative stereotypes associated with asynchronous online learning. Synchronous learning has many benefits, but it is not as simple as turning on a camera to film yourself lecturing for 75 minutes. It will take time and energy to monitor student activity and questions, and make sure students are actively engaged. Also, given the uncertainty students will likely face surrounding access to technology, living arrangements, works schedules, and health; instructors need to decide if the benefits of these lessons outweigh the benefit of allowing students the flexibility to work at their own pace.

**Examples:**
- Live webinars
- Video conferencing
- Virtual classrooms
- Instant messaging

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Asynchronous

**What is it?** An instruction model that offers lessons that provide students more independence and flexibility in their learning. This model is shifted from an instructor-based learning model to a learner-based model that provides students freedom of time and distance. Learning can take place independently, within smaller groups, or with the whole class, but those interactions happen in a more structured environment.

**Pros**
- Asynchronous approaches allow students to learn independent of time or location.
- Students can learn at a pace that works for their schedule and learning style. This includes engaging material in small chunks or rewatching portions of recorded lessons.
- The flexibility allows students with obligations that may vary from day to day, to work at times that do not conflict with other obligations.
- Lower technological barrier to entry. Successful learning is less likely to be hindered by access to technology (camera, microphone) and internet speed.
- Fosters student agency through shifting to learner-based model.

**Cons:**
- The lack of real time engagement can cause less buy-in from students or feelings of detachment.
- Students may become frustrated by having to wait to have questions answered or waiting for other students to respond during group activities.
- The learner-based model relies on students to motivate themselves to complete tasks and the lack of scheduled interaction may lead to procrastination and rushed work.

**Examples:**
- Online courses
- Blogs
- Pre-recorded video lessons or webinars
- Online forums and discussion boards

**Why you should use it**
Given the current uncertainty students will likely face surrounding access to technology, living arrangements, work schedules, and health, this method will provide them with a flexible option to meet your learning outcomes. While asynchronous teaching is not without its challenges, many of the negative stereotypes surrounding it have been addressed over the last few decades. There are a huge number of innovative ways to teach students and assess students that more closely mirror how digital native students consume information and the types of tasks they will be asked to do in their careers. Some of the work done in distance learning courses can carry over to face-to-face courses in the future.

**Why you should not use it**
This should not be done as a way to build a self-sustaining course that faculty will not need to spend a great deal of time administering. While one of the benefits of distance learning is the freedom of time and distance, this cannot come at the expense of interactions with students. Given the students we serve, a correspondence-style course with little to no interaction or engagement will be detrimental to their motivation and overall success.
Why not both?

Faculty may consider blending these methods by building a foundation to take advantage of the asynchronous model and supplement those materials with some synchronous activities and lectures. This is an option that can work as long as faculty set clear expectations for students, communicate them well, and keep them consistent. Faculty should be clear if the synchronous portions are mandatory: is this necessary to receive all points in the course and for student learning, or can students receive all knowledge and points through alternative assignments?

Some options to consider a blend of synchronous and asynchronous:

- Have a set number of synchronous lessons and require students to participate in a percentage of those lessons. For example, over a semester have 10 synchronous lessons and require students to attend 3 or 4 of them. Faculty could vary the days and times of the meetings to help accommodate students’ schedules.
- Similarly, faculty could have a number of synchronous lessons/discussions but provide students alternate assignments to complete in case of a change in their schedule or technological issue.
- Consider holding virtual meetings with smaller groups to help them engage with each other or the material in a different way. This might be useful for speeches or presentations, practicing a foreign language, or a performance.
- Gather student feedback via a discussion board and use that feedback to create an interactive synchronous discussion of a topic. This could be done as a review of previously covered material based on concepts students identify as needing clarification or further discussion. Additionally, this could be done prior to covering of a reading to help focus discussion on the topics/aspects students found most interesting. This interactive model can help build motivation and agency as students feel the class is interactive based on their feedback.
- Set up interactive virtual study sessions where the instructors can be present to get the ball rolling with discussing/working through examples. Then the instructor can shift to a learner-centered model by having students lead discussion or work through problems.

Adapted from:
https://www.learnupon.com/blog/synchronous-learning-asynchronous-learning/
https://thebestschools.org/magazine/synchronous-vs-asynchronous-education/