

Creating Flexible Learning Experiences through Asynchronous and Synchronous Delivery Approaches

Introduction

As we continue to transition courses to an online environment, faculty will need to rethink the role that both synchronous and asynchronous delivery approaches play in creating effective flexible online learning experiences for their students. It is evident that neither approach is perfect; there are pros and cons to both modalities for online delivery. Increasingly faculty are opting for an approach that incorporates both delivery formats that enables faculty to be more flexible and responsive to the diversity of learner needs. Ultimately, deciding on your approach will depend on your learners, the curriculum, course materials and your time and capacity as an instructor and other contextual factors. This resource highlights some of the key elements you may want to consider when determining your delivery strategy.

Speaking a Common Language

Perhaps a starting point in the discussion regarding delivery approaches is to clearly define some key terms and how they relate to flexible learning.

- **Flexible learning** incorporates a variety of delivery approaches so that students have the ability to have a choice in how, when, and where they study. Instructors can define how much structure to integrate into the experience for students and often the goal is to strike a balance. Flexible learning may provide opportunities for students *in both online and face-to-face (traditional or via synchronous) environments*, depending on the program and how the learning outcomes are best achieved.
- **Asynchronous delivery** provides students with the ability to work through their course materials, assessments and activities at their own pace or within a prescribed or suggested time frame set by the instructor. For example, students may be required to participate in a discussion activity over a seven day period when it is convenient for them or work through interactive self-paced activities and receive automated feedback.
- **Synchronous delivery** requires students to be online at a specific time and location (I.e. via Collaborate or Zoom) typically on a weekly basis. Instructors and students meet online in real time through video-conferencing and/or live chatting. Instructors may deliver virtual office hours, course check-ins or focused sessions surrounding complex content or troubleshooting issues, etc.

The Power of Blending both Modalities

Traditionally, blended learning has been defined as a *delivery model* for designing learning experiences that combines both face-to-face and online delivery methods in a thoughtful and pedagogically sound manner. If we consider designing online courses that incorporate the strengths of both asynchronous and synchronous delivery models, we can create experiences that enable both flexibility and structure to co-exist, thus creating a more enriching teaching and learning environment for students and instructors.

The tables below highlight some of the opportunities and challenges both asynchronous and synchronous approaches have to offer as they relate to curriculum, learner needs, accessibility, flexibility and engagement. It ultimately provides a snapshot of how each approach can complement one another and how you may consider ways to integrate the best of both worlds. When reviewing the considerations – think about your current approach (what’s working and what’s not), student feedback and areas for potential fine tuning or development.

Key Considerations – Asynchronous and Synchronous Delivery Approaches

1. Curriculum and Discipline:

Analyze how the learning outcomes – both theoretical and tactical elements (physical skill demonstrations) are best achieved. Consider various ways to achieve the learning outcomes (Universal Design)?

Delivery Approach	Opportunities	Challenges
<p><i>Curriculum & Design:</i> ASYNCHRONOUS</p>	<p>Flexibility: Leverage activities that enable learners to participate when it is convenient.</p> <p><i>Tip: Set up activities that span across a period of time (perhaps a week) to provide flexibility.</i></p> <p>Universal Design: Explore ways to address diversity in your class. Provide different ways for learners to access your materials and engage – i.e. alternative formats, audio and/or text feedback. Provide learners with choice - based on their needs.</p> <p><i>Tip: Learn more about their needs early on and adapt as you go (i.e. solicit feedback via discussions, surveys and develop online learning expectations collaboratively).</i></p> <p>Review, Practice, Mastery: Provide video demos of complex content and introduce low stakes practice activities with automated feedback. Students can review as they need to and refer back for future reference.</p> <p><i>Tip: Over time, layer in interactivity – i.e. choose your own adventure applications to enable</i></p>	<p>Time: Designing and developing interactive asynchronous courses takes time, resources and capacity.</p> <p><i>Tip: Set up a conversation with an ID to get started.</i></p> <p>Immediacy: Can be challenging to explain complex concepts without the ability to ask questions or improvise “on the fly”.</p> <p><i>Tip: Set up a Help Forum in discussions to facilitate questions and encourage students to respond if they know the answer (building community and a dynamically growing FAQ for the course).</i></p> <p>Human Connection: Can feel isolating, boring and disjointed if not thoughtfully designed with built in opportunities for connecting with peers and instructors.</p> <p><i>Tip: Layer in opportunities for students to connect and create student driven content, build/adapt activities and contribute assessment questions.</i></p>

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	<p><i>learners to try out new skills and concepts in a safe environment.</i></p> <p>Organization: Forces instructors to be increasingly organized about sequencing, flow, assignment instructions and communication, etc.</p> <p><i>Tip: Creating a course schedule at-a-glance is a great way to get a sense of the flow and sequencing of the course.</i></p>	
<p><i>Curriculum & Design:</i> SYNCHRONOUS</p>	<p>Immediacy: Provide immediate feedback and dialogue; can save time especially when students are struggling with specific elements in the course. Requires learners to be comfortable enough to come forward.</p> <p><i>Tip: Offer learners the opportunity to connect privately or within a virtual office hour (based on their comfort level for asking questions).</i></p> <p>React in “Real-time”: Can provide real-time demonstrations and ability to improvise and adapt “on the fly” based on learner feedback.</p> <p><i>Tip: Record where possible to capture the moment for those who may miss it or need to digest at their own pace.</i></p> <p>Less Overhead: Can adapt traditional materials to transition into synchronous (re-use materials a bit more readily if presenting complex content via MS PowerPoint, etc) but keep in mind accessibility.</p> <p><i>Tip: Consider streamlining your PPT presentations to the most important material – this will focus your sessions and keep your learners engaged and with you. Offer the</i></p>	<p>Accessibility: Synchronous can be challenging for learners with hearing, visual, and other challenges.</p> <p>High Stakes Learning: Relying solely on synchronous delivery of your materials can be challenging when technical issues arise.</p> <p><i>Tip: Think about providing materials in an alternative format and reviewing only critical pieces in “real-time” to give learners time to prepare and also review after sessions. It also serves as a good “Plan B” when synchronous sessions cannot be held.</i></p> <p>Engagement: A bit more restrictive than a traditional face-to-face environment, keeping learners actively engaged “on screen” (instead of passively listening) can be challenging.</p> <p><i>Tip: Offer more opportunity for discussion and sharing rather than lecture-based sessions. Focus on hands-on strategies – have learners solve problems in small group settings (using break out rooms or the other means) and report back to the larger class, creating accountability and tangible action items.</i></p>

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	<i>remaining material asynchronously via content in D2L.</i>	

2. Learner Needs:

Examine learning styles, skill levels, abilities, the digital divide, geographical location and other preferences.

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<p><i>Learner Needs:</i> ASYNCHRONOUS</p>	<p>Flexibility: Learners can work at their own pace or within a course schedule set out by the instructor enabling student to organize their time around milestone and due dates).</p> <p><i>Tip: Create a course schedule at-a-glance to highlight key dates, activities and topics. Students also love the checklist tool – integrate this on a weekly basis to keep everyone on track.</i></p> <p>Variety: Integrate a variety of content, assessments and activities that can appeal to various learning styles and preferences.</p> <p><i>Tip: Layer in variety over time. You may consider integrating various forms of media to liven up dry material and eventually build in more as time permits.</i></p> <p>Practice, Review and Mastery: Provide conditionally released content and activities to customize learning paths and pacing of material (for students who may want to move ahead or require more time).</p> <p><i>Tip: Students who need more practice can take unlimited attempts on a quiz or activity without the knowledge of the class.</i></p>	<p>Timely Support: Students who require additional help will have to schedule time with their instructor and potentially wait for responses. This can be a source of frustration for learners who have scheduled time to work on their courses but it may not align with when help can be provided.</p> <p>Time Management: Courses with heavy complex content, large numbers of assignments, frequent asynchronous discussions can be a source of stress. Juggling multiple courses can also be extremely challenging.</p> <p><i>Tip: Provide some structure to keep learners on track, including checklists, weekly course-check-ins and a Help Forum to keep students connected, while online.</i></p> <p>Motivation: Staying motivated in an online environment can be challenging. Providing learners with the ability to interact in different ways with content, activities and assessments keeps things interesting but also takes time to develop.</p> <p><i>Tip: Involve students in the development process to co-create and enable them to see themselves in the course materials.</i></p>

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<p><i>Learner Needs:</i> SYNCHRONOUS</p>	<p>Human Connection and Support: Facilitating weekly course check-in opportunities (which can be short) can provide students with a level of comfort in knowing they will have the opportunity to ask questions, connect with peers and feel a sense of community on a consistent basis.</p> <p>Ability to Record: Sessions can be recorded for those who cannot attend or for learners who simply want to review at their leisure.</p> <p><i>Tip: Recorded sessions can provide a nice resource for learners (perhaps to study for exams) and also serve as a storyboard for development of future resources (asynchronous materials).</i></p> <p>Immediate Gratification with Less Overhead: Synchronous sessions can feel immediately gratifying and can require less preparation than asynchronous delivery approaches. For instructors transitioning from face-to-face classroom delivery, this may feel comforting while the learning the technology elements (may feel daunting at first).</p> <p><i>Tip: Hold a “low stakes” play session to learn how to use the tools and build confidence, test out audio, video, chat and other functionality.</i></p>	<p>Technical Issues: May arise on a moments’ notice. There can be bandwidth issues, computer access and audio issues. Take into account the learning involved with using headsets, mastering audio, dealing with feedback and video.</p> <p><i>Tip: Hold a “low stakes” play session to learn how to use the tools and build confidence with using the tools.</i></p> <p>It can be uncomfortable: Not all learners feel comfortable with using video, a microphone and/or being recorded. Learners may not want to ask questions in front of their peers in fear of embarrassment (similar to a face-to-face environment).</p> <p><i>Tip: Offer others ways for learners to ask questions whether it be privately or through a Help Forum in discussions, etc. Sometimes the best questions or reflections come after face-to-face interactions.</i></p> <p>Accessibility: Learners who have visual, auditory and other challenges may not be able to participate at all and/or struggle to keep up – this warrants thoughtful consideration and accommodation (such as transcription and other supports, etc). Catering towards different learning styles can also be a challenge.</p> <p><i>Tip: Poll your students to learn more about their needs. Partner with CAL to ensure accommodations are set up. Blending in asynchronous learning provides more of a balance and takes the pressure off learners (and instructors). Meet with an ID to discuss accessibility strategies.</i></p> <p>Personal Circumstances: learners may find themselves in situations that may limit their ability to attend “face-to-face” – they may have demanding jobs, small children at</p>

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		<p>home, elderly parents, home environment that does not provide privacy.</p> <p><i>Tip: Offering recordings of your sessions may alleviate some of the pressure learners feel when they cannot attend synchronous sessions.</i></p>

3. Flexibility and Engagement:

Explore approaches that enable students to choose how, when, and where they study.

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<p><i>Flexibility & Engagement:</i> ASYNCHRONOUS</p>	<p>Creativity and Variety: Integrate a variety of content, assessments and activities that can appeal to various learning styles and preferences.</p> <p><i>Tip: Layer in variety over time. You may consider integrating various forms of media to liven up dry material, leverage your students to create/share materials and eventually build in more as time permits.</i></p> <p>Students as co-creators: Putting students in the driver's seat as creators enables a wealth of ideas to emerge and adds a twist of fun.</p> <p><i>Tip: Incorporate assignments that enable learners to collaboratively build material, case studies, scenarios, discussion activities and even assessments.</i></p> <p>Practice and Pacing: Instructors can layer in scaffolding for learners who need it via Content (additional resources), Quizzing, and Assignments using Conditional Release in D2L.</p> <p><i>Tip: Whether it is providing more attempts on a quiz, conditionally releasing additional material</i></p>	<p>Time and Planning: Designing and developing interactive asynchronous courses takes time, resources and capacity.</p> <p><i>Tip: More interactive learning elements can be layered in over time as the course evolves. Instructors can collaboratively develop and leverage master course materials and also incorporate student creations as ways to address this challenge.</i></p> <p>Less is More: Striking a balance between creating engaging and interactive experiences takes careful consideration and often a bit of trial and error. Too much engagement can be exhausting and leave everyone involved feeling depleted.</p> <p><i>Tip: Be selective and remember quality over quantity. Integrate a few engaging discussions that enable learners to really evolve the topic at hand are better than weekly discussions (that can be exhausting).</i></p> <p>Check the Pulse – It may feel like learners are absent at times if not “actively engaging” in real-time or responding</p>

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	<p><i>and resources – you can help learners of all levels and cater to their needs more readily.</i></p>	<p>to discussions. However, more often than not – they are being active – whether it may be reviewing material, doing research, connecting with peers outside of the course site, etc.</p> <p><i>Tip: Solicit informal feedback early on in the term to see how things are going and make adjustments as you go.</i></p>
<p><i>Flexibility & Engagement:</i> SYNCHRONOUS</p>	<p>Structure: Having a consistent weekly schedule can assist with time management and help learners prioritize their time. Especially for those learners who thrive on routine, having a built-in schedule will help relieve anxiety associated with juggling multiple courses while also providing a concrete way to connect each week with peers and their instructor.</p> <p><i>Tip: Create a course schedule at-a-glance to highlight key dates, activities and topics. Students also love the checklist tool – integrate this on a weekly basis to keep everyone on track.</i></p> <p>Group Work: Students can connect and work on assignments, brainstorm ideas in real-time.</p> <p>Review Recordings at your Convenience: Recording synchronous sessions enables learners to review, digest and study at their own pace.</p> <p><i>Tip: Learners who miss the live session can review as well. Make sure to let learners know sessions will be recorded for review purposes.</i></p>	<p>Timing: Requiring learners to be on screen at a specific day and time each week can be extremely restricting. Not all learners will be able to make the session times. Some may experience technical issues, etc.</p> <p>Engagement: A bit more restrictive than a traditional face-to-face environment, keeping learners actively engaged “on screen” (instead of passively listening) can be challenging, even with the best intentions with break-out rooms, etc.</p> <p>Participation Levels will Vary – Not all learners will feel comfortable with speaking in front of the class whether it be by audio, video or chat.</p> <p><i>Tip: Keep your sessions student-centered with the goal of making the time together worthwhile. Focusing your synchronous sessions on topics that will be of interest or student driven discussions I.e. hosting a Q/A in preparation for an upcoming assignment or assessment, inviting a guest speaker (students can ask the questions) or troubleshooting complex problems or content.</i></p>

4. Accessibility and Inclusion:

Ensure all students can access their online content and educational technologies regardless of their location, experience, device, economic situation or abilities.

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<p><i>Accessibility & Inclusion:</i> ASYNCHRONOUS</p>	<p>Universal Design: Explore ways to address diversity in your classroom. Explore different options for learners to access your materials, consider audio and/or text feedback and different ways of communicating with your learners. Incorporate learning that provides elements of choice - based on their needs.</p> <p><i>Tip: Incorporate initial activities to learn more about their needs (I.e. via discussions, surveys, develop online learning expectations).</i></p> <p>Flexibility: Can enable learners to choose when they can participate but keep in mind the digital divide still exists (regardless of approach).</p> <p><i>Tip: If they do not have regular access to a computer, course time may be structured around their local library (depending on availability). Connect learners with student service supports.</i></p> <p>Practice & Review: Conditionally release content and activities to customize learning paths and pacing of material (for students who want to move ahead or require more time).</p>	<p>Time and Planning: Adapting and/or retrofitting courses to make them more accessible takes time and can evolve over time. Start small – this may be transitioning your print materials to ensure they are accessible, incorporating transcripts and editing captioning for videos.</p> <p><i>Tip: Leverage tools such as Ally and review your accessibility report in D2L to learn more about where to start with your materials. Prioritize and review learner feedback.</i></p> <p>Stay Connected and Accessible: Make sure to stay connected with your learners to ensure they are progressing and not coming up against barriers.</p> <p><i>Tip: Offering weekly virtual office hours or optional course check-ins are simple ways to be accessible to your students.</i></p> <p><i>A help forum in discussions can be set up to post questions, concerns and build a sense of community outside of the regular course activities.</i></p>
<p><i>Accessibility & Inclusion:</i> SYNCHRONOUS</p>	<p>Immediacy and Human Connection: Being able to chat, discuss and “see” the class in real-time can provide a sense of community and enforces to learners they are not embarking on their journey alone.</p> <p><i>Tip: If you have group work in your class you can set up group spaces (that are open ended) so</i></p>	<p>Technical Issues: High stakes software can mean technical issues may arise unexpectedly. There can be bandwidth issues, computer access and headset issues. Learning how to use headsets, master audio, deal with feedback and video should also be considered.</p> <p><i>Tip: Hold a “low stakes” play session to learn how to use the tools and build confidence, test out</i></p>

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	<p><i>learners can connect outside of scheduled activities.</i></p> <p>Review and Digest: Recording –can be used to review materials at their convenience.</p> <p><i>Tip: Offer the option for learners to follow-up with their instructor if they have specific questions and/or post on a Help Forum so no one is left behind.</i></p> <p>Engage your Learners: Provide a variety of ways to enable learners to contribute to conversations online (chat, audio, whiteboard, polling, etc), provide class-wide and private options to cater to different comfort levels.</p> <p><i>Tip: Give students “breathing space” to respond and answer questions to avoid the feeling of being put “on the spot”.</i></p>	<p><i>audio, video, chat. Have a back-up communication plan when technical issues arise and alternative ways for learners to learn about the content missed (posting materials in Content and you may consider delivering a short Kaltura capture video to contextualize the material).</i></p> <p>Accessibility: Learners who have visual, auditory challenges may not be able to participate at all and struggle to keep up – this is a critical challenge that warrants thoughtful consideration and accommodation (such as real-time transcription, etc).</p> <p><i>Tip: Try to solicit feedback from your learners early on to better understand their needs. Learners may choose to not self-identify but quietly struggle. Being accessible and opening the conversation is a start. Check in with CAL and CETL for additional support strategies.</i></p> <p>Learning Styles: Catering towards different learning styles is challenging. Blending in asynchronous learning provides more of a balance and takes the pressure off learners (and instructors).</p> <p>It can be uncomfortable: Not all learners feel comfortable with using video, a microphone and being recorded. Learners may not want to ask questions in front of their peers in fear of embarrassment (similar to a face-to-face environment).</p> <p><i>Tip: Offer other ways for learners to ask questions and express concerns (whether it be privately connecting with an instructor, posting questions in a Help Forum or completing an anonymous survey).</i></p>

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		<p>Personal Circumstances: learners may find themselves in situations that may limit their ability to attend “face-to-face” – they may have demanding jobs, small children at home, elderly parents, home environment that does not provide privacy.</p> <p><i>Tip: record your sessions and make it available for learners who cannot attend.</i></p>

Fine Tuning Your Delivery Strategy – Moving Forward

Reflect on your experience teaching online. Start off by examining what has worked the past two terms. Also think about the most urgent issues you or your students are experiencing that need to be addressed for the next term. Some questions to consider and help prioritize your efforts:

- Where do your students struggle the most?
- Are there elements of the course that are overwhelming (for you and/or your learners)?
- Are there elements of the course that could be more interesting to keep learners engaged?

Blend, fine tune and strengthen. Consider how blending both asynchronous and synchronous approaches might strengthen/reinforce your strategy and respond to your learner needs. In the short term, this may be simply mean incorporating some basic asynchronous learning opportunities for learners who are struggling with synchronous learning (perhaps incorporating a help forum, schedule at-a-glance or checklists) or the opportunity to review materials prior to synchronous sessions. For learner who may be struggling with asynchronous learning – consider integrating short weekly course check-ins for learners needing a bit more structure and connection.

Think about Plan B. This is especially important if you are facilitating the majority of your content synchronously. Post your material in content in D2L and have a communication plan and back-up activity if technical issues arise.

Rome wasn't built in a day. Remember that online course development evolves over time and you can always layer in more complexity as time and resourcing permits. Less is more. Don't try to do everything with every possible tool. Keep it simple, test and solicit feedback and fine tune.

Contact us. We are here to help. Our [helpdesk](#) is available to support you with technical issues. Instructional designers are available for one-on-one and group consults to help address your challenges and come up with creative solutions. There are also a wealth of resources on our [website](#) for both instructors and students. We are here to help so please make sure to reach out.

Resources

- [Synchronous or Asynchronous Delivery – Algonquin College](#)
- [Synchronous vs Asynchronous Teaching? – University of Alberta](#)
- [Zoom Boom – Inside Higher Ed](#)
- [Asynchronous and Synchronous eLearning - Educause](#)
- [Merging Modalities – Educause](#)
- [eLearning at Camosun](#)
- [eLearning Tutorials, Workshops and Resources](#)
- [Accessibility](#)