**Planning for Virtual Courses**

As we start thinking about fall, it is possible that some or all of us will need to once again teach in a virtual environment. This resource provides some approaches and examples on how to create synchronous, asynchronous, and blended course sessions.

# Styles of Virtual Teaching

Most online courses in higher education are offered **entirely asynchronously**, with students completing work such as watching recorded lectures or participating in a discussion forum either entirely self-paced or with weekly deadlines. Typically, there are no virtual class meetings with all the faculty and students together, although faculty may hold virtual office hours, review sessions, or one-on-one meetings for students to attend.

Pros of asynchronous approaches:

* They maximize convenience for students, as they can complete their work when they have time, rather than at a set time when others in their household may need shared equipment or bandwidth.
* When asynchronous assignments are well-designed to meet learning objectives, they can be just as effective as in-person classes for learning.

Cons of asynchronous approaches:

* It can be more difficult to foster community and student relationships in an entirely asynchronous environment.
* Faculty have a higher workload as they must transform a class designed for synchronous sessions into asynchronous activities.
* If those activities are not-well designed with clear guidelines and instructions, students may view them as unnecessary busywork.

Alternatively, you can offer courses that meet **entirely synchronously**, with class meetings at a set time and platform. This is the most akin to the in-residence experience, with faculty using a video conferencing platform and perhaps a virtual whiteboard or shared screen to facilitate discussion and other modes of teaching.

Pros of synchronous approaches:

* Most resembles the in-residence experience
* Allows for dynamic in-person discussions
* Helps build community and relationships in the class
* There is a designated time for class, which can help with scheduling

Cons of synchronous approaches:

* + Requires everyone to have reliable equipment and strong internet connectivity
  + Less flexibility in when classwork is completed, leading to potential distractions or absences
  + Screen fatigue (physical and mental exhaustion from too much time in video conferencing calls)

The third style is **blended learning**, which mixes synchronous and asynchronous activities. Students still attend regular class meetings, but these are shorter or less frequent then they would be if the course were meeting in person. They also complete activities before or after the session that are designed to further their learning. This style lets you benefit from the pros of asynchronous and synchronous classes, while mitigating some of their cons.

# Using synchronous and asynchronous activities in a blended course

Determining which parts of your class should be synchronous v. asynchronous requires thoughtful assessment of your learning objectives and the purpose of the activity in meeting them. Here is some guidance:

Asynchronous activities should meet at least one of the following needs:

* Prepare students for a discussion or presentation (individual or group)
* Check student understanding of a specific term, concept, theory, or idea.
* Follow-up on a discussion topic that needed more time
* Initiate discussion on a topic there wasn’t time to cover at all.
* Reduce the amount of time needed in synchronous sessions to deliver content
* Give students meaningful work that will enhance their understanding of key content.

Synchronous activities should be used to meet one or more of the following needs:

* Host a discussion that is well-suited to instantaneous response.
* Review points of confusion in the readings, lectures, or asynchronous discussions
* Student presentations and small group problem-solving
* Introduce, discuss or review particularly complex topics, procedures, or ideas.
* Identify and assess key take home points for the week and build bridges and connections to previous or future material
* Give students meaningful work that will enhance their understanding of key content.

# Examples of Blended Learning Class Sessions

Table 1 gives some ideas on how you can pair asynchronous and synchronous approaches into a course session. They are meant as examples only, and faculty are encouraged to find innovative ways to create blended lessons for their classes. Synchronous activities can be done in Canvas, Big Blue Button, or Microsoft Teams. For each asynchronous activity you will find a ‘how’ section that gives you some ideas on how to do this in your chosen platform.

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| Table 1: Samples Lessons Combining Asynchronous and Synchronous Activities | |
| Asynchronous Activities | **Synchronous Activities** |
| *These activities are designed to be completed before or after class, and to complement the activities done during an in-class session. They also can be adapted and used in an entirely asynchronous course.* | *These activities are intended for in-person sessions where faculty and students meet in a virtual classroom. They inform and are informed by asynchronous activities, but can be adapted for a fully synchronous course.* |
| Ask students to complete a short quiz on the lectures and readings before class to check their understanding, signal important points, and identify areas of confusion.  *How: Use Canvas Quiz function to create the quiz.* | After reviewing the quiz results before class, use it to guide your in-class discussion. You can focus on common points of confusion and work to ensure understanding of key terms. |
| Before class, ask students to generate strong discussion questions for the next session. Let them vote on which ones they would most like to discuss.  *How: you can do this in the Canvas discussion forum of a Canvas Page.* | In class, ask the student who wrote the chosen question to explain why they asked it and give the first response. Then let other students respond to it. |
| Ask students to work in small groups before class to complete a problem set, answer a prompt, or some other group activity.  *How: Create a group discussion in Canvas so they have their own place to create, share, and edit documents. They also have the ability to create their own Big Blue Conference.* | Have each group present their work and invite other students to critique and offer counter arguments. If the group work requires a short period of collaboration, you can use Breakout Groups and have the group discussion during class, rather than before |
| Take a single complex discussion question and break it into parts. Assign a small group to each part of the question and have them build a collaborative resource to answer it from the readings and any lecture notes. For example, if you want students to discuss how American and British strategy differed in the American Revolution, assign one group to each actor, and let them comment on and edit each other’s work.  *How: Have them build the resource in their Canvas discussion group or on a collaborative document in Big Blue Button or Google Docs.* | In class, have each group explain what they wrote. Invite other groups to critique this, and add the comparison from their worn work. Ask them to edit the document after class to incorporate notes from the class discussion. If it’s still not comprehensive, prompt them with additional questions. |

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| Asynchronous Activities | Synchronous Activities |
| After class, post a couple of discussion questions for students to answer on topics that you were unable to cover in class. Ask students to respond substantively to 1 or more questions by the next day and to offer a counterargument to another classmate by the day after that.  *How: use the Canvas discussion forum* | During the class session, cover as many discussion topics as you like, but recognize that you may not have the time to achieve the desired depth and breadth. Stop discussions as needed to move on to the next topic, but provide a forum for students to continue the conversation after class. |
| Upload a short lecture on content that needs to be delivered. Alternatively, send them a link to a video. Ask students to post questions, take a quiz, or respond to a prompt before class. Or give them a reading guide with questions to focus their attention on key points.  *How: Record the lecture on Kaltura. Invite conversation or post prompts in Canvas discussion forums.* | Address any student questions about the lecture or video and highlight points of confusion before initiating discussion on a related topic. Ask students to generate a shared set of key take-aways about the lecture or video on Teams or Blackboard. You can also ask them to compare the ideas in the lecture/video to something covered previously. |
| Ask students to annotate or analyze a key reading to generate questions, identify key points, or note points of confusion.  *How: open-source documents can be annotated collaboratively with the free software Perusall. Otherwise, ask a set of questions about specific parts of the reading in a collaborative space such as Canvas group discussion, letting students build a collaborative response to those questions before class.* | Compare student key points or annotations and make sure that everyone has consensus on the takeaways. Apply the concepts or lessons to a case. |
| Have students work in teams to collaborate and build a wiki-style entry on a key theory, process, concept, or case.  *How: use Canvas group discussions, Collaborate or Big Blue Button.* | Challenge students on elements of their shared document, including assumptions, missing information, questionable conclusions, or other points of improvement. Ask each team to critique and add to the work of the other, and to edit and refine the document after class in line with those critiques. |

*This work represents solely the views of the author,* *Amanda M. Rosen, PhD, Associate Director, Teaching Excellence Center, US Naval War College, and does not in any way represent those of the US Naval War College, the Navy, or US Department of Defense. Last revised May 8, 2020. Further revised by CJ Jordanek and Bill Reynolds, FGCU, May 15, 2020.*