

# Adding Synchronous Strategies to a Distance Course

Flexibility is often a factor for students taking distance courses. Certainly, being able to attend class regardless of where or when it is happening can be a huge benefit for non-traditional students especially. Distance courses and programs at UAF inhabit a spectrum based on percentages of reliance on specified time and place.

A distance class that is not dependent on any set time or place is considered asynchronous; it takes place completely online and interaction between students and the instructor happens in spaces such as discussion forums, blogs, and regular announcements.

Courses that have some scheduled meeting times but do not depend on a specific location are also 'distance' courses. There have been some recent studies that suggest a combined approach to distance education is beneficial; the overall student satisfaction, perception of social presence, and feeling of emotional support is greater in courses that combine asynchronous and synchronous methods of communication.<sup>1</sup> Inclusion of synchronous communication activities in an otherwise asynchronous online class can reduce feelings of isolation, empowering distance students with enhanced support for learning. It is this social support that is potentially the most important connection with fostering a personalized learning experience.

## SYNCHRONOUS STRATEGIES

- Don't be a just a talking head.
- Engage students in discussion and other collaborative activities
- Break students into groups to work on problems (depending on platform used)
- Provide a quick icebreaker activity at the start of each session

## TECHNOLOGY

There are a number of online spaces that allow you to see video of participants, share your desktop and participate in a whiteboard. Choosing the best platform is the first step.

- Blackboard Collaborate - tied to classroom UAF Blackboard shells, great for group work

- Google Hangout - up to 15 participants, tied to UA Google Apps for Education
- Join.me, GoToMeeting, Adobe Connect - other online meeting spaces

Spin up on the technology before class and hold a practice session for students so they can get used to the technology before a real session. Make sure you specify the time zone on the meeting for distance students.

- Have a backup plan.
- Be prepared for helping students troubleshoot issues they may encounter such as audio, video and bandwidth issues.
- Provide an audio conference number and PDF for students with very low bandwidth.
- Provide instructions for students on what to do if they are dropped from the connection.

<sup>1</sup>Moallem, Mahnaz. (2015) The Impact Of Synchronous And Asynchronous Communication Tools On Learner Self-Regulation, Social Presence, Immediacy, Intimacy And Satisfaction In Collaborative Online Learning. *The Online Journal of Distance Education and e-Learning*, 3(3), pp. 55-77 Retrieved from: <http://tojdel.net/volume/tojdel-volume03-i03.pdf>

### DID YOU KNOW?

The rise of available online learning opportunities has been instrumental in making education possible for much larger population than ever before across the globe. November 9-13, 2015 is National Distance Learning Week at the United States Distance Learning Association. In recognition of the influential growth of distance education, there will be online seminars available in a wide range of topics from industry standard leaders. For more information, visit <https://www.usdla.org/events/ndlw/>

At UAF eLearning, this week we are inviting students to share their stories on our Facebook event: <https://www.facebook.com/events/763802480433172/>. It's also a great week to sign up for a consultation with an instructional designer if you are thinking about developing or redesigning an online course. Contact Madara Mason for more information: [emason@alaska.edu](mailto:emason@alaska.edu).