Synchronous and Asynchronous Interactions

Remote course delivery can add flexibility for instructors and students by focusing synchronous interactions just on the areas where they have the most impact on learning. To leverage this, instructors should consider which course activities in fact require face-to-face time, and which can be asynchronous. For example:

- **Lectures** delivered asynchronously may improve learning by allowing students to pause to take notes.
- **Tests and quizzes** completed remotely can be auto-graded, saving instructors valuable time.
- **Assignment directions**—often delivered orally by instructors during class—are more useful in writing, where students can refer back to them.
- **Discussions**, when conducted asynchronously, achieve higher participation and offer students the opportunity to think through what they want to say before they start to respond.

Allowing students to complete these activities on their own schedules enables instructors to reserve synchronous time for intensive interactions where immediate feedback is important, and it enables students to have more informed, better-directed conversations.

Planning is essential to ensuring the success of online synchronous interactions. This includes both:

- Having **a coherent lesson plan** that spans the asynchronous and synchronous elements of the course.
- Making sure that all participants' **technology and environment** are conducive to a good experience.

MEHP Online's recommended best practice is to ask students to come to the synchronous interaction having used the asynchronous elements of the course to prepare. Lectures and readings inform students, and asynchronous pre-activities prime the pump for an active synchronous discussion.
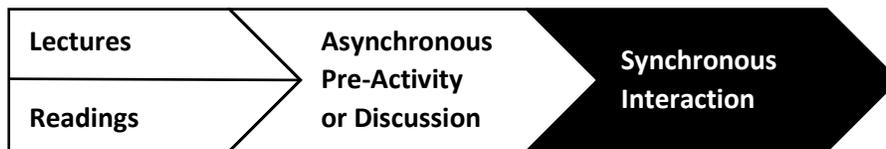
Instructors should prepare guiding questions that build on work students have already done but push beyond what they have articulated in the asynchronous portions of the course. As with an in-person class, the goal is to create an environment where students can learn from the instructor and from each other.

Where synchronous interaction is infeasible, most of this work can be achieved asynchronously as well through:

- **Instructor participation in discussion forums** (excessive participation can dampen student interactions, but commenting after the fact and asking students to respond is one useful strategy).
- **Multimedia interactions** using tools like VoiceThread that integrate with the LMS and allow asynchronous, threaded interactions using a combination of audio, video, and text.
- **Instructor Q&As** in which—when content clarification is the priority—students ask questions in a discussion forum and instructors respond either in writing or with a video.

If you have questions about planning synchronous and asynchronous interactions, contact the MEHP Online team.

Best Practices for Synchronous Interactions

Useful advice for students and instructors, before and during a synchronous interaction.

- **Before each synchronous interaction, update and test your technology.**
  - Update your computer's operating system, web browser, and videoconferencing software.
  - Test your computer's webcam, speakers, and microphone.
  - Use a **headset** to improve audio quality.
  - Test your settings and connection with a practice videoconference.
- **Minimize virtual and real-life distractions for yourself, your students, and your classmates.**
  - Close non-essential programs on your computer, including extraneous browser tabs.
  - Find a quiet place from which to participate.
  - Adjust your webcam angle and room lighting (backlighting, especially, can cast you in a shadow and make you difficult to see).
  - Minimize multitasking, both virtual and physical.
- **Be courteous and collegial during the synchronous interaction.**
  - Mute your microphone until you are ready to talk.
  - If you are using a telephone, minimize disruptive echoes by refraining from using speakerphone.
  - If possible, turn your webcam on to create a more collegial atmosphere.
  - Avoid disruptive crosstalk by using your videoconference app's chat feature to make any necessary side comments to classmates.

Leading Synchronous Interactions

Advice for instructors leading a class.

- **Be transparent about the goals and plan for the class.**
  Preview the topic in weekly reminders and be clear about what you would like students to prepare before they attend. Then, at the start of the class, reiterate the topics you intend to cover.
- **Come prepared with guiding questions.**
  Given your goals for the synchronous class, consider what questions are most likely to start a conversation—and to restart a conversation in the event of a lull. Ask students to reflect on their work, and consider what topics will be most impactful when presented face to face.
- **Be comfortable with silence.**
  Even prepared students need to pause and think before they speak. One effective strategy for more focused and lively conversations the minute paper: 1) introduce a topic; 2) ask students to make notes; 3) ask students to share their ideas, based on what they have written.
- **For classes with large attendance, ask students to form a queue to speak in the chat.**
  Having students indicate that they have a comment by asking them to write their names in the chat box is one effective method. You can then call on students one at a time.
- **Make recordings available for students who cannot attend live.**
  Students in virtual classrooms have real-life obligations that sometimes conflict with synchronous time. Allowing students to watch the class after the fact provides additional flexibility.
- **Ask students to reflect on their experience.**
  Whether students participate live in a synchronous interaction or watch the recording, asking them to write a brief reflection can help students cement new knowledge and consider their next steps.