

Synchronous learning is learning that occurs at the same time for everyone in the class, cohort or learning group. In online learning, synchronous learning takes place via a platform such as Blackboard Collaborate, where video and audio conferencing, real time chat, collaborative work space and instant feedback capabilities replicate a face to face environment for teaching and learning. It allows learners to connect with teachers over greater distances and fit classes in around other life commitments. Edglossary.org notes that although traditionally synchronous learning would have occurred while learners were at the same location, with the advent of online collaboration tools synchronous learning is now “education, instruction, and learning that occur at the same time, but not in the same place.” (Glossary of Education Reform, 2013)

Asynchronous learning is learning that is done at anytime and anywhere as suits the needs of each individual learner. D2L, Weebly and other LMSs, like Moodle or Canvas, are good examples of platforms that can support asynchronous learning. Students have the ability to connect with the instructor or their peers via email, text or by using programs like Skype in order to get answers to questions or receive support. The interactions are not always in real time, however, and often require the learner to wait for clarification before they can proceed with their work. Generally in asynchronous learning environments, “[i]nstructors provide materials, lectures, tests, and assignments that can be accessed at any time. Students may be given a timeframe – usually a one week window – during which they need to connect at least once or twice. But overall, students are free to contribute whenever they choose.” (eLearners.com, 2012)

There are pros and cons to both types of learning and often those pros and cons will differ between students. Some students prefer to be able to work on their own, at their own pace and in their own place. They shy away from group work and want to work methodically through the coursework provided until they are done. Perhaps they need more time to formulate their comments and ideas and don't like the fast pace of real-time chats for getting their ideas across. They are focused learners and can motivate themselves in order to get the job done. For these types of learners, asynchronous learning works well.

Other learners want to be a part of a learning cohort but are unable to join because of the proximity of where they live to where the course is being offered. They enjoy being able to chat with their peers during lessons, ask questions and suggest ideas for discussion and participate in lecture type classes to gather information. They like the fact that they can get instant feedback on their work. For these learners, synchronous courses provide them with the opportunity to participate in real time classes with other learners.

Throughout the OLTD we have participated in courses that had elements of both synchronous and asynchronous learning. Some of our courses have been quite structured in terms of meeting times. Each week we would meet in Collaborate and work our way through content, use break out rooms to work in small groups and have group discussion on questions or issues that arose in real time. These sessions have helped to create a sense of community and allowed us to support each other through our struggles and celebrate our successes as we went along. Other courses have been less structured, leaving us to work at our own pace through the course materials and having to rely on other established modes of communication (through email or our Facebook group) to clarify misunderstandings or connect with each other. Both styles have their merits, though it seems to me that our group misses each other when we don't get to meet on a regular basis and we enjoy the shared learning opportunities that synchronous learning allows. Being that I am all about building strong relationships with my students to support their learning, I think synchronous learning experiences would definitely be my first choice in any online course. Reference is made to this community building aspect of synchronous learning on Wikipedia (2013) when they posit, “These synchronous experiences can be designed to develop and strengthen instructor-student and student-student relationships, which can be a challenge in distance learning programs.” (Orr, P., 2010)

That being said, a number of people appreciate the freedoms of online learning knowing that they'll be able to fit coursework into their schedule, be it a break on their graveyard shift, a weekend of free time or a 9-5 workday during the week. In the end, personal choice, needs and learning styles need to be considered when deciding whether to go with synchronous or asynchronous learning. It all depends on what works best for you as a learner.

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