



Distance Learning | Feature

The 'Dos and Don'ts' of Synchronous Online Learning

- By Bridget McCrea
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Creating videos, presentations, and lessons that college students access and interact with on their own time and terms is one thing, but developing learning content that requires both students and instructor to be online at the same time presents a whole different set of challenges for college professors and instructional technologists.

Formally referred to as synchronous online learning (versus asynchronous learning, which is accessed and utilized at any time), the "live" learning environment happens in real-time on the Web and encourages interaction, commenting, Q&As, and other types of instant feedback.

As news broadcasters and other people have learned, being "live" in front of an audience comes with a unique set of challenges. Inoperable equipment, diminished bandwidth, and missed cues can all take their toll on a successful session. Here, two users of synchronous learning at the college level give their top do's and don'ts for anyone looking to set up a new--or hone an existing--online learning program:

- **Do conduct a thorough equipment check before the session.** Hoping that everything is in working order when the entire class logs in is the wrong approach. Always do a quick run through of your classroom setup (computers, cameras, software, etc.) 15 minutes before the class starts. "This will help you gain a comfort level with the technology that you'll be working with," said Shannon Tufts, assistant professor and director of the [Center for Public Technology at the University of North Carolina's School of Government](#), which has offered synchronous online classes since 2007, "and minimize interruptions due to equipment failure."
- **Don't assume your students have everything under control.** Today's college pupils are pretty tech-savvy, but that doesn't mean things can't go haywire in the middle of your session. Having every student perform a simple browser and software compatibility check before logging in, for example, will help ward off last-minute cries for help and ensure that everyone is engaged and on task--and not worrying about technical glitches. "Factor in your students' available bandwidth, what devices they are using, and how current their software is," advised Francine Glazer, assistant provost and director of the [Center for Teaching and Learning at New York Institute of Technology](#). "Just one or two students that haven't updated their computer software, for example, and who need help troubleshooting, can hold up the whole class."
- **Do plan ahead for contingencies.** Depending on the size of your group, there may be times when someone "dropping off" of the connection impacts the entire lesson. When the teacher is the one dropped, the situation can quickly spiral out of control. Tufts said she avoids this issue by

informing participants ahead of time not to hang up and to give the person ample time (5-7 minutes, for example) to log back in and resume teaching or learning.

- **Don't overload the session with technology.** When it comes to synchronous online learning there is a tipping point where "too much" technology negatively impacts the student experience. "Using too many types of media, tools, applications, and/or software is bewildering to the students," said Glazer. Keep it simple when developing the coursework and related content, she added, and focus less on the technology itself and more on creating an engaging, interesting learning environment.
- **Do experiment with different pieces of equipment.** After testing out her laptop's built-in microphone and comparing it to an audio headset, Tufts said she opted for the latter for its quality and convenience. Her students, on the other hand, typically use their laptops' built-in microphones and video cameras during synchronous sessions. "It's really a matter of personal preference," Tufts said, "and the only way to figure out what works best for you is by testing out different options and determining what you're most comfortable with."
- **Don't assume your audience is homogenous.** Not all students learn at the same pace, nor do they possess the same level of technical proficiency. For example, some may come to the session, zip through it, and learn everything they need to know without asking any questions. Others will need a slower pace and more reinforcement. Instructors are accustomed to striking this balance in a traditional classroom setting, but the task can be onerous when students aren't sitting front-and-center. "Cram in too much content without the opportunity for reflection, application, and integration," Glazer said, "and you'll wind up with an unengaged group that doesn't get what's going on."
- **Do match your educational strategies with your teaching tools.** Polling your students, creating discussion groups, and conducting brainstorming sessions all require a different set of technology tools, according to Glazer, not all of which will gel with your specific teaching methods and strategies. To ensure a positive match, she said professors should think through the class that they want to deliver and how they'll be using technology to engage the students, "then decide on the appropriate methods and/or tools for delivery."

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