

SYNCHRONOUS COMMUNICATION TOOL

Synchronous communication can be a challenge to plan due to student schedules and time zones; however, real time communication can decrease feelings of isolation and increase a sense of community in the online classroom.

Below are the most common synchronous tools utilized in online education. The appropriate and effective uses of each tool will be discussed, along with its advantages and disadvantages.

Chat

Chat is a form of synchronous text-based communication allowing students and the instructor to meet in “real-time” for conversation, discussion forums, question and answer sessions, or virtual office hours. Blackboard offers this feature and allows the chat sessions to be recorded for later viewing by the instructor or a student who was not able to attend the session.

Advantages: Chat offers immediate interaction and feedback from the instructor. The immediate connection and ability to collaborate with the instructor and other students can help develop a sense of community for the learner. Most chat can be conducted over a slow internet connection (Repmann et al.)

Disadvantages: Chat requires all students to be good typists. Once a slow typist has responded, the conversation may have progressed to a different concept. Gonzales, Kittleson, Tiene found (as cited by Remann et al.) if the chat group has too many participants, the “conversation can become difficult to follow and disjointed” (p. 63). A group of more than five to seven participants is too large (Horton).

Uses: Use chat when other forms of asynchronous communication are too slow. Common uses for chat include (Horton, 2006, p. 430):

1. Real-time question and answer sessions
2. Brainstorming, troubleshooting, and problem-solving sessions
3. Oral examinations
4. Interviews of experts by learners or researchers
5. Study groups, team meetings, tutoring sessions and private meetings with the instructor

Horton (2006) strongly recommends not conducting lectures using chat. In addition, the instructor should inform students of what is acceptable communication and participation during chat sessions.

Chat Tool in Blackboard: From the Control Panel, select the “Course Tools” tab, select “Collaboration” option. Complete instructions on how to use the chat tool/collaboration sessions in Blackboard can be found under the “Communication” tab in the Blackboard Support for Faculty course.

Skype

Skype’s free version enables one to make voice calls, video calls, send instant messages or chat, and send SMS (Short Message Service) text messages. Skype basically turns the computer into a telephone using a voice over Internet protocol (VoIP) technology allowing people to communicate from anywhere in the world. A contact list is created when Skype users accept contact requests from other Skype users.

Advantages: Skype is a free online collaborative tool. “Skype is secure, providing encryption of all communications and engaging anti-virus software to protect the communications” (Hargis & Wilcox, 2008, p. 12). Skype logs calls, instant messaging, and files sent and received for the instructor’s records.

Disadvantages: Calls to land lines or cell phones are not free. Also, the free version allows conferencing from only two sites. Skype requires a high speed internet connection. Slower connections may drop the call or provide intermittent service. Devices that operate on the same frequency may interfere with a Skype connection such as Bluetooth, routers, cordless phones, and microwave ovens. Also, Skype can be a bandwidth hog (Woo, 2006). “**Skype** recommends that universities set up proxy servers, which can act as filters for user requests and which university officials could use to keep its network computers from becoming relay stations” (p. A29).

Uses: Skype is very useful when verbal interaction is required between student and instructor. Activities for Skype include hosting virtual office hours and one-on-one tutoring. Students can Skype with each other sharing their experiences and collaborate in project work. Instructors can instant message to colleagues and students. It is important to provide students with technical requirements and instructions on how to download and setup a Skype account. If the online instructor requires the online student to present over Skype, a trial run is suggested (Repman et al).

Getting Started with Skype:

1. To get started with **Skype**, download the free software and install it.
2. Setup Your Microphone for Skype
 - Select Tools
 - Options
 - Select Audio Settings
 - Select the camera’s microphone from the drop-down menu (Microphone/Volume) – first option
3. To place a call, either type in a phone number or click on the name of a person on your list of contacts. Then click the large green phone button titled “Call” or “Video Call.” Computer-to-computer calls are clear, although crackling can sometimes be heard in the background and some bits of sound are lost. Those problems are more pronounced when making a call from a computer to a land line or cell phone.
4. In addition to making phone calls, you can also make video phone calls, send instant messages, hold conference calls, and transfer files, including those with pictures, music, and video (Woo, 2006, p. A30).

Social Networking Sites

“Over the past five years social networking sites (SNSs) have become one of the most prominent genres of social software, popularized by the *MySpace* and *Facebook* applications that now each boast hundreds of millions of users” (Selwyn, 2009, p. 157). SNSs are individually customized personal online spaces. Users set up profiles to represent themselves online. Profiles contain personal information such as hometown, marital status, hobbies, interests, political and social affiliations, photographs, and videos. This information is shared with preferred ‘friends’ that have been granted access. Facebook was originally created for use by college students to connect and create university communities (Mason et al.)

The rationale for using social networking in education is that teachers have a responsibility to give students skills in how to cope with virtual relationships and to understand what friendship means in the new social culture that has been created by the Web 2.0 environment (p. 112).

Advantages: SNS's provide a creative outlet for students. Through profiles, students can display their audio, video, and photographic works demonstrating "artistic presentation" (p. 112). SNS's can also give a student a sense of belonging by allowing the student to participate in an online community (Mason et al.). Access to SNS's is free, the sites are easy to maneuver within, and a written record of communications is stored. Many SNS's connections lead to face-to-face connections and real friendships. Some educators argue SNS's have the power and potential to fundamentally alter the educational system by actively engaging and motivating the learner as opposed to the traditional passive learner as only an observer (Selwyn).

Disadvantages: Some teachers have viewed students in a negative light with negative consequences after viewing the profile of a student (Mason et al.). SNS's can be addictive as students constantly monitor their site eager for friends to comment on their wall. Also, SNS's offer hundreds of games consuming students interest and time.

Uses: In a study of the 'wall' activity within Facebook of 909 undergraduates, Sewlyn (2009) found the following education-related interactions from students:

1. recounting and reflecting on the university experience;
2. exchange of practical information;
3. exchange of academic information;
4. displays of supplication and/or disengagement;
5. exchanges of humor and nonsense (p. 111).

SNS's can be used as a learning exercise in teaching students how to appropriately construct themselves online and how to discriminate content, "not to accept profiles at face value"(Mason et al., p. 114.) Also, it is important for instructors to teach students "how to discern when, where, and for what purpose technology may be appropriate and inappropriate" (p. 114).

Second Life

Second Life (SL) is a three dimensional virtual world built and operated by Linden Lab. Islands make up the second life world where residents interact with avatars.

Because there is the ability to mimic real life in this virtual world, including chatting, developing friendships and working relationships, setting up a home, purchasing land, traveling, etc., there may be some confusion in one's perspective of SL. Initially, this may seem like a game; however, viewing it through the lens of an educator, it is easy to see many possibilities for interactive, engaged learning (Hargis et al, p. 13).

Advantages: The client is free. The Viewer software requires a high speed Internet connection, at least 512MB of RAM, a fast microprocessor, a good graphics card, and 24.5 MB of space on the hard drive. Students can teleport to almost any island perusing and learning without having to purchase anything. Students can collaborate using chat or audio. Students can deliver presentations in SL, too. SL encourages experiential learning and active participation.

Disadvantages: There is a learning curve when the learner first begins to maneuver through SL. There is so much to do in SL that learners can easily become distracted. Security is an issue. Hackers, vandals, and harassers are intermixed in the SL worlds. In April of 2010, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reported Linden Lab dismantled Woodbury University's virtual campus in Second Life and blocked the accounts of several students and professors due to vandalism. Addiction can also be a problem. "Some people spend hours on the system and become sleep deprived and neglect real life activities" (Power, 2007, para. 17).

Uses: Many colleges, universities, and governmental organizations use SL as a platform for education allowing learners to collaborate, present, and interact in educational sites. In fact, Texas Tech has a virtual campus with access restricted to Texas Tech students and faculty.

SL offers virtual spaces for students to explore astronomy, museums and art galleries, scientific concepts and prototypes, historical sites, math tutoring, English as a Second Language, NASA, and even a 1920's version of downtown Harlem's Apollo Theatre and Cotton Club. Students could tour the White House and then teleport to the Sistine Chapel.