

## **SYNCHRONOUS MEETINGS: A Way to Put Personality in an Online Class**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Synchronous meetings provide both professor and student the advantages of face to face (traditional) class meetings while in reality they can be many miles apart. With today's lifestyle it is not always possible for students to attend classes on a physical campus in a specific city at a specific time. The use of synchronous meetings allow the online classes to be supplemented with online office sessions, study sessions, special instruction, brain storming get togethers, collaborations, etc.

The meetings can be held almost any time 24/7 that is agreeable with the participants. In 2008, it seems that everyone is concerned about confidentiality. Synchronous meetings allow both professor and student to meet and all personal information such as cell phone number, home phone and personal address are not known unless someone wants to divulge such information. A few simple rules, which are included in the article, can and will help to make all meetings more success for all.

**Keywords:** synchronous meetings, distance education, online classes

### **INTRODUCTION**

A professor can truly meet online students by using synchronous (*singkrønæss*) meetings. Students can be part of the class even if they are miles, states or even continents apart. Today's lifestyle and availability of online classes allow students to live miles from the physical campus. In fact many students earn degrees via online classes and never step foot on the physical campus.

The use of synchronous meetings helps to make these online classes easier to utilize than in the previous years. These meetings also prove online classes can be much more than glorified correspondence classes. They put the student on center stage and make him/her aware of information which might otherwise be omitted if the class was strictly/truly an online or a correspondence class.

Online synchronous class is conversational in style and has both the spontaneity and fluidity of a face to face class. (Wang, C. H. 2005) Because synchronous meetings has many of the features of being in a face to face class or in real-time, students can and do build a sense of social presence and a delicate sense of association in the communication events. Murphy & Collins 1997; Green, 1998; Duemer et al. 2002; Schwier & Dykes 2004).

Synchronous meetings or classes in contrast to asynchronous classes have a number of advantages which students seem to appreciate.

Asynchronous meetings would email, voicemail, pager, PDA and Usenet newsgroups. In these meetings the messages are not in real-time but as the reader elects to read the messages. Since asynchronous is not in real-time it can present students with a dilemma

as peers may not be on the same page with much time as elapsed between the original postings and when the student is ready to contribute to this conversation. In the synchronous meetings, students are able to share and even debate multiple perspectives simultaneously without the fear of interrupting the flow of conversation or that the conversation has moved on.

This is a trait which students report makes them even more comfortable than even the face to face classroom. Some students just do not like their peers looking at them while they are speaking.

Synchronous meetings can take two forms or a combination of the two. In the first, the professor serves as the host and is the only who has a speaking part. In the second form, there is a professor who is the host however, every one has permission to speak and does. Patton (in press) found that this type was very successful if the group was eight or less. If the number of participants, number eight or more, they seem to talk over each other. However, the codes discussed later are extremely helpful. In addition to these two, there is a third type where the professor grants permission to some members for a period of time.

This is especially good if student are trying to make presentations, etc. Wang (2005) reported that in some of his research, he found that the synchronous meetings were viewed by some as social events; however, in a fully online class this did not seem to be the case. In the fully online class, the synchronous meetings were used to supplement the WebCT or Blackboard- type based classes. Students attending either of the types of sessions maybe at various locations and communicate via typing or speaking their thoughts, responses, etc.

Although the internet is widely used by millions today in business, education and as pleasure, it did not become a technology mainstream until after 1992. Prior to early 2000's many online classes were just extensions of the old correspondence classes via the mail service. During the last five years we have witnessed the addition of graphics and audio to websites. The interactive component is almost a toddler in this technology age. However, it is growing at a rapid pace. During the last few years, technology has been improved so graphics, video, interactive components, audio, etc are common place. Each of these components plays an important part in synchronous learning.

Synchronous meetings can have three types of exchange as found in Hrastinski's (2005) work which he credits Haythornthwaite (2002) as being very influential. The sharing of information among students is one of the main foci of any class whether it is traditional, non-traditional, face to face or distance (online). Students need to feel as ease and in a non-threatening environment if they are going to ask questions and share thoughts with others. The social support is needed as a means of "maintaining relationship to foster knowledge work"(Cho, Trier & Kim, 2005). Task support relations are needed to bring the culmination of the project.

Type	Advantages for students:	Disadvantages for students:
Information Exchange	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students are able to ask questions in real time and get immediate response from professor as if in a face-to-face classroom.</li> <li>• Share information</li> <li>• Express an idea or thought</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students will be on the spot if they have not prepared for class. (same as in a F2F class)</li> <li>• Some students will have a tendency to miss the point of discussion without body language</li> <li>• Active Participation is required and some students do not have the time to devote to the class at a specific time period if an optional meeting.</li> </ul>
Social support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Talk about things not class related yet build a support network for class activities</li> <li>• Express companionship, emotional aide or advice</li> <li>• Support during a minor or major upset. (able to get help from peer when having difficulties with assignments.)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is a tendency to have side conversations and not be actually in the class environment.</li> <li>• Students will "bird walk" thus wasting valuable class time.</li> </ul>
Task support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Planning work, allocating tasks, coordinating joint efforts or reviewing drafts.</li> <li>• Form study groups</li> <li>• Negotiating and resolving conflicts.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Get into study groups which have many conflicts.</li> <li>• No body language to help with conflicts. Only words can be a problem if misinterpreted.</li> </ul>

**Figure: 1**  
Exchanges: advantages and disadvantages from the student's perspective

Type	Advantages for professor:	Disadvantages for professor:
Information Exchange	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students are able to ask questions in real time and get immediate response from professor as if in a face-to-face classroom thus providing the professor with feedback as to the effectiveness of his/her presentations, etc.</li> <li>• Share information</li> <li>• Express an idea or thought</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students can ask questions which may be considered petty if they are not prepared for class and use valuable time.</li> <li>• Share information which might not be appropriate but because the professor is no seen, the topic seems to be ok.</li> </ul>

<b>Social support</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Talk about things not class related</li> <li>• Express companionship, emotional aide or advice</li> <li>• Support during a minor or major upset. (able to get help from peer when having difficulties with assignments.)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not consider the professor to be a real person.</li> </ul>
<b>Task support</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Planning work, allocating tasks, coordinating joint efforts or reviewing drafts.</li> <li>• Negotiating and resolving conflicts.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No body language to help with conflicts. Only words can be a problem if misinterpreted.</li> </ul>

**Figure: 2**

**Exchanges: advantages and disadvantages from the professor's perspective**

Synchronous meetings are thought to be something new and very technological, when in reality it has been around as long as there has been communication. Synchronous means occurring simultaneously, working at the same rate and in the same period of. Technology has made it possible for the participants to be in different locations and this aspect is fairly new to the real time instruction.

Many of the technologies designed today seem to remove the human involvement however; synchronous tools place the participants on center stage. If willing participants are able to share, collaborate and learn. The use of synchronous learning can be exciting and fruitful for everyone involved. Synchronous learning technology has a learning curve which is almost flat as participants can be proficient using synchronous learning in a very short time. After, one or two short sessions everyone seems to be performing like pros. The uses for synchronous meetings are virtually endless. It can be used anytime or place that two or more people who are not in the same physical location need to communicate. Unlike the traditional meetings the synchronous meetings allow participants to be across town, state, country or even continent. If desired the class can meet anytime 24/7. This flexibility and convenience afforded in the synchronous classes also carry some serious liabilities. This technology offers the professor and student an alternative to just presenting material.

The simple act of presenting content does not equate to teaching. It is a known fact among educators that it is important especially for distance educators to find ways to support students and keep them as active participants in educational setting. (Moore & Kearsley, 1996; Wenger, 1998; Arbaugh, 2000; Bento & Schuster, 2003; Mazzolini & Maddison, 2003)

A sense of disconnection and isolation is a major concern in online classes. Experienced distance learning educators have stated that motivating students is a major problem. Web-based courses just seem to lack the energy of the traditional face to face classes thus putting a burden on the instructor to bring life into the class (Finkelstein, 2006). Synchronous meetings seem to put back much of the personality back into the online class as if it were a face to face format.

With the constant need to be accessible to students and students having more and more responsibilities outside the campus, the academic world is striving to meet the needs of the students (Anagnostopoulos, Basnadjian & McCrory 2005) Synchronous meetings seem to be a possibility as a partial answer to those needs. Unlike the traditional classes with all students being in one room, the synchronous meetings or classes allow students to be across campus, town, state, country or even continent while attending. The time

factor can be as open or closed as the host desires. Although many of the meetings occur at non-traditional times, meetings during mid-morning and afternoon have also been utilized and proven to be very fruitful.

Synchronous meetings can be used for

- Virtual office
- Instruction
- Collaboration
- Study sessions
- Brain storming
- Support
- Extensions

Virtual office is especially useful as many of today's students have so many other responsibilities and can be as late or early as the professor desires (Wang & Beasley 2006). Virtual office can be private or if desired more than one student can be in the office at one time. The professor can even hold office hours from his/her home without providing such personal information as cell, home phone or address.

Instruction using synchronous meetings is awesome. One way is for the professor to make a presentation slide show. While the students sit at a PC, they can see the slide and hear the professor lecture. Another method is to use the whiteboard in connection with the slides and the professor is free to mark on the slides as needed. A tablet PC is especially useful with the whiteboard in a math class.

This is almost the same as everyone being in the same physical classroom while the professor is writing a problem on the board. Students appreciate a hard copy of the problems to use during the synchronous meetings therefore, an email is sent to the students 24-48 hours prior to the synchronous meeting. Just as students have an opportunity to prepare for a class using a textbook, the students use the emailed problems to prepare for the meeting.

All visuals should be easy to read and easy on the eyes (Clark & Kwinn, 2007). You do not want the synchronous meeting to be viewed as an eye test. Always use font size of 18 or larger. Occasionally if you must use something smaller, be sure it is to help the student to locate an important aspect on a page or something similar but definitely not text the student must read. Easy to read fonts will be ones which are eye appealing, clear and easy to read. Simple straight line fonts are usually better especially. The fonts i.e. Ariel do not seem to create the fatigue that some of the fancy ones do. Simple clean slides rather than cluttered backgrounds which can be distracting is usually a preferred choice. Use soft pleasing to the eye background rather than white backgrounds with dark lettering or dark background with white lettering as both seem to cause eye fatigue. Simple slides are usually more effective than ones with a great amount of information. You do not need everything you are going to say on the slide, remember that the students can read. The slide should be just an outline of the information or just a few of the important words concerning the topic.

Collaboration is another feature of synchronous meetings as groups of students can collaborate while the professor serves as a facilitator. This is especially good when the students do not have a chance to meet face to face.

Study sessions can be most fruitful using the synchronous meetings. Professor lead sessions helping students to prepare for certification tests can be trying for both the professor and the students. One of the best parts of having these sessions utilizing synchronous meeting is the ability to have them late at night or very early in the morning in order to accommodate the needs of the students. Students have even said, "It is just like meeting on campus but I can be in my PJ's." Sessions of this nature are usually

optional and students usually have better attendance when they are able to attend at times which do not conflict with school, work and family obligations. Many of the students who need these sessions have many time constraints therefore the synchronous meetings are a very welcome method of studying.

Synchronous meetings are excellent for brainstorming. Students often are more willing to contribute to the cause when they do not have the all the eyes on them as in the classroom. To reduce stress, students can even be allowed to use pseudonym or an alias. The professor can ask for identities if needed via email, etc. (Branon & Essex, 2004). These brainstorming sessions seem to draw contributions from the shy students. Often the contributions would have not been expressed in the traditional classroom. These shy students do not seem to realize that they, too, can add valuable contributions.

Extensions are very easy as the professor can move beyond the expected or required and work with the students who are capable and desire to do more than the minimum expectations. As with collaboration and sharing, these extensions can be most fruitful.

Just as any meeting requires a few management rules or ethnics, the synchronous meeting is no exception. By using a few simple signs the synchronous meeting can be very productive. Students are asked to think about what they are planning to insert into the conversation before they actually make the interjection. Since I usually teach math classes with this media, many of the examples are math oriented. If they become familiar with the matrix below it and use it, the synchronous conversations become much more focused. If their interjection is "Urgent and Important" then, the student needs to speak up at this time.

If it is "Not Urgent/Important" then this will wait until the appropriate time which is usually at the end of the class when students are given an opportunity to add. It comes in the "Unimportant/Urgent" category; the problem needs to be addressed as quickly as possible to avoid distracting peers. It does not take long for the entire group to lose their focus thus the meeting has lost its value. Lastly, if it is "Unimportant/Not Urgent" most likely the student needs to re-focus or leave the meeting. It is only going to create problems for everyone.

	Urgent	Not Urgent
Important	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Someone makes a calculation error when working a problem while the problem is being presented. (We all make little errors i.e. <math>2 + 3 = 3</math> while working but such errors will create quite a mess later in the problem solving).</li> <li>Asking general questions for clarification of the subject matter.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sharing a special link about the concept being discussed for the other members of the group to check out at a later date</li> <li>Asking about supplemental materials related to the topic</li> <li>Asking questions about what will be covered on or dates of upcoming tests.</li> </ul>

<b>Unimportant</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Non-important phone (cell, pagers other phones) calls creating interruptions.</li> <li>• Dog barking in background (keeping one from hearing)</li> <li>• Baby crying</li> <li>• Other people in the room</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Totally personal, unrelated information i.e. small type chatter.</li> <li>• Sending personal memos (unrelated to topic) using the hidden message text mode (similar to texting with one's cell phone) this is just a tech version of the old note passing.</li> </ul> <p>© Patton 2006</p>
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**Figure: 3**

In order to keep the conversation, flowing at the optimum speed, students are urged to use a few signals such as "?" for "I have a question, please allow me to speak" or "!" for "I would like to add something to the conversation".

When the participants want to type in a question, it is best to only type in a few words, hit send and proceed by repeating the few words, send mode until the entire sentence is completed. This will allow the rest of the group to have the questions as it is sent rather than wait until the entire question can be typed in. (Branon & Essex). Since many of us are not very face typing on the keyboard, the signals help to keep the conversation on target. Prior to using these signals, the conversations seem to almost bounce back and forth between a couple of topics and almost everyone had difficulties sorting the information into the proper categories.

In small groups of eight or less, it is very good for each person participating in the meeting to have the ability to speak however; in larger groups it is much easier if only the professor has speaking privileges and students can type in their input or responses (Barnes 2003). Even with only one person speaking the signals help to keep the session more organized.

<b>Symbol</b>	<b>What I am trying to signal</b>
<b>?</b>	<b>I have a question</b>
<b>!</b>	<b>I would like to add something</b>
<b>X</b>	<b>I believe there is an error which we need to address</b>
	<b>© Patton 2006</b>

**Figure: 4**

<b>Emoticon</b>	<b>Sentiment Expressed</b>
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:-) or :) )	happiness
:- ( or : (	Unhappy or sadness
;- )	wink
;- (	sarcasm
:- /	Confused or unsure
: -D	Very Very Happy
%o-(	confused
^5	High 5
:-O	surprised
/\\//\	laughter

Figure: 5

The symbols are similar to quick text. The symbols are intended to signal the presenter and participants that this person needs to be granted the privilege of communicating with the group. These quick texts are also intended to express emotion.

Quick text	Sentiment (nonverbal form of behavior)
LOL	Laughing out loud
ROTFL	Rolling on the floor laughing
J/K	Just kidding
TTYL	Talk to you later
BRB	Be right back

Figure: 6

Online classes have so many advantages as to scheduling, etc for the busy person who has many other responsibilities. According to Haefner, this flexibility and convenience afforded in the synchronous classes also carry some serious liabilities. A sense of disconnection and isolation is a major concern. Experienced distance learning educators have stated that motivating their students is a major problem. They further believe that Web-based courses just lack the energy of the traditional face to face classes thus putting a burden on the instructor to bring life into the class. It is up to the professor and the class working together to make the sessions successful. The use of emoticons and quick text helps to rid the class of some of the disconnection and isolation. They can be used by either the professor or the students or both. The charts above have a few of the more popular ones or ones which would be appropriate in the classroom setting.

An advantage of the synchronous meetings is that when used as the beginning of an online course, it helps to help a friendly and social atmosphere. This is very valuable as the students' progress through the semester (Lin & Lee, 2003). The social atmosphere is not to be confused with a non educational atmosphere. The social atmosphere allows the student to realize that the professor and peers is really people. This personal touch seems to make students more comfortable and eager to learn. They do not feel so alone.

With the synchronous meetings, students have the opportunity to brain storm, exchange ideas and thoughts. If the professor will pose open-ended questions, the students will gain much perspective of the content during each session. Questions can easily turn into ones in which a short one word answer is appropriate but those questions will not promote a sharing environment. Do not toss the short answer questions, as they can be used sprinkled about the session and it will help to keep some of the non-actively involved participants on task.

Of course, there are drawbacks as well as positives in synchronous meetings just like other aspects. Since many of the students never see each other, they do not recognize their peers even if they meet face to face. This also means there are no unplanned chats in the snack area, no chats after or before class, no conversations as peers walk to and from class, no serendipitous meeting on campus or even in the local grocery store, and few exchanges between student and professor after class.

One of the greatest drawbacks is the fact that one can not see the others therefore there is not any body language (hand gestures, facial expressions, etc.) to help the receiver understand the speaker's message. However, the use of emoticons as discussed earlier can alleviate some of this burden.

"Synchronous online sessions cannot equal the subtlety, the humor, the energy, and the excitement of the real life classroom, but it affords more immediacy than asynchronous (posting on chat boards, voice mail, emails, etc) communication alone" (Haefner). Dialogue and conversation are by definition immediate interchanges, are synchronous. Dialogue and conversation have been an integral part of teaching and learning since humans began communicating. "Immediate interchanges (synchronous) have an energy and earnestness that can't be matched by deferred responses, delayed replies" (Haefner). Synchronous meetings may not be the panacea to solve all the distant education problems however; it has good prospects in the early years of the twenty-first century.

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