Guidelines and Best Practices for Synchronous Online Instruction
Distance Learning Committee (DLC), Spring, 2020

In response to COVID-19, 95% of Mt. SAC classes moved online.   Many instructors, who had never taught online or even used Canvas regularly before, chose to teach their classes in a synchronous format. In a synchronous format, professors and students meet online at the same time as they would in an in-person class.

The purpose of this recommendation is to share guidelines and best practices for synchronous online instruction.

Requirements for Online Course Instruction

The requirements for both synchronous and asynchronous online courses are the same.
1. The professor will set the pace of the course; otherwise, the course will be considered a correspondence course.
2. The professor will regularly initiate substantive contact between professor and individual students and will incorporate opportunities for student to student interaction. These are known as Regular and Effective Contact (REC).
3. The professor will include a variety of instructional methodologies to reach students.
4. The professor will use the campus Learning Management System, Canvas, to meet authentication and privacy requirements, to keep attendance logs if they are required, and to furnish examples if accreditors view closed online courses.
5. Online course participation should be measured by active participation on the part of the students; therefore, frequent assessments and activities should be deployed.
6. All distance education courses, materials, and resources must be accessible to students with disabilities, following Section 508 and 504 guidelines.

Pros and Cons of Synchronous Online Instruction

Pros:
- The pace of the course is set by the professor.
- Synchronous interaction helps connect students who thrive on face-to-face interactions.
- Students can get immediate, real-time feedback.
- Online synchronous meetings can be set up through Canvas.

Cons:
- Students must adhere to a set schedule. Work, family, and other obligations must be scheduled around the class, just like an in-person class. Therefore, students have less flexibility than with an asynchronous class.

- Faculty must adhere to Mt. SAC schedule blocks.
- Students may or may not interact more in a synchronous discussion or activity. Some students prefer having time to think and research their responses, and may be more likely to contribute to an asynchronous discussion.
- Professors will need to activate captioning, and check privacy features for online synchronous meeting recordings for each class.
- The CVC-OEI (California Virtual Campus Online Education Initiative), which sets best practices for online course instruction, created a rubric that is essentially based on the asynchronous model. Asynchronous classes offer students greater flexibility, accessibility, and variety in pedagogy.

Guidelines for Synchronous Online Instruction

The DLC recognizes that synchronous class meetings can be an effective tool in an online course. The same guidelines for asynchronous courses apply for synchronous courses. Professors and departments should consider the following:

- Departments must follow standard scheduling blocks when determining timing for synchronous classes. A campus process for communicating synchronous class times is included in the Schedule of Classes.
- A combination of synchronous and asynchronous activities is the best method for providing variety of instruction and REC. It is up to the professor to determine how much of their course will be offered synchronously. This should be communicated to the student at the start of the semester and adhered to throughout the course. If the course meets weekly, the professor should prepare synchronous material for each week.
- Professors must not rely upon their synchronous class meetings to fulfill *all* their REC requirements. An online class should include a variety of methods of professor outreach and student interaction.
- Professors should plan regular activities to monitor *active* participation in the course. This may include synchronous activities like breakout rooms, polling, or Chat during a class meeting; or asynchronous activities like discussion forums, homework, quizzes, group projects, or use of external tools like Flipgrid, Padlet, or other interactive apps. Merely holding a synchronous course lecture and including automatically graded quizzes is not consistent with variety of REC.
- Besides meeting accessibility guidelines for the asynchronous component of the course, the synchronous component should have captioning deployed at each class meeting.
- Student privacy should be respected. (See guidelines for recording and safeguarding Zoom meetings below.)

Requirements for Setting Up Your Synchronous Class Meeting

- Include the link to your synchronous meeting within the LMS (Canvas) course shell to ensure authentication and privacy.
- Use the institutional ConferZoom account that is integrated into Canvas, not your personal Zoom account.
- Protect your class from "Zoombombing" or other damaging, external invasions:
  - Set participants on mute when they enter
  - Set a password or have a waiting room so the host must let them in
  - Please review Zoom information in Resources for Teaching During Disruptions at Mt. SAC and the CCC TechConnect Center.
- Activate captioning. Live streamed lectures should be live captioned to allow students to read the text in real time. Having captions would not only ensure compliance with college policy, accessibility standards, and federal and state law, but it can be beneficial for all students. Having accurate captions is also important to ensure equitable access to instructional content.
  - Have captions on by default. The student will have the option to turn them off.
  - Mt. SAC's option for automatically generated captions is Otter.ai. Synchronous classes must be set up with institutional licensing. Otter only works within the institutional Zoom account. The FCLT sends out instructions for faculty teaching synchronous courses. For more information, contact the FCLT.
  - If a student with a disability identifies him or herself to you, you can request help with procuring live captioning from ACCESS.
- Get consent from students and guest speakers if they give permission to being recorded.
  - Students are prompted to agree to recording once recording is activated.
  - You may request that students keep their videos on during class, and articles about online teaching recommend this practice to increase engagement. However, while you may request it, you may not require it. One reason is that students have a right not to be recorded. Another is that students may not have Wifi or other stable internet connection, and may need to call in on their phones. If you wish to judge attention and attendance, form breakout rooms and visit each of them, include research presentations, or ask for answers in Chat. You can plan these exchanges at various times in your presentation.
  - That said, if you do record the video, make it available within the course shell so only authenticated students can access it. Do not upload to the web.

Best Practices for Synchronous Classes

Incorporate some of these guidelines when creating a class that meets synchronously. These are suggestions from *eLearning Industry* and *Faculty Focus*.

1. **Let your students know your expectations beforehand.**
   In your orientation, syllabus, or pre-semester announcement, communicate what you expect of students during the synchronous sessions (for example, levels of participation). You may also need to stress the importance of a distraction-free environment and video-conferencing etiquette.

2. **Do a quick social check-in at the beginning of class.**
   Small talk helps to break down social barriers while reinforcing interaction. Instead of leaving an awkward silence while students are arriving, use an ice-breaker.
   - Ask students what's new and interesting in their lives.
   - Pre-load a slide that features a current event, cartoon, or trivia question to spark conversations.
   - Ask a student to plan and lead the ice-breaker each week.

3. **Stress the importance of student participation throughout the class.**
   a. Encourage students to ask questions and share insights during the synchronous session by using Chat, audio, or polls.
   b. Engage students every 5 –15 minutes. Keep it "text-light" and "activity-heavy."
   c. Divide students into small group breakout rooms to encourage interaction. Join the rooms periodically to see if there are questions.
   d. Assign a pre-reading or an activity before the session, ask students to prepare a question, quotation, talking point for the session, and use the session for conversation.
   e. Schedule student presentations. Whether individual or group, student-student presentations should be captioned. Options include FlipGrid, VoiceThread, Screencast-o-Matic, and YouTube. Contact the FCLT to determine options.
   f. Have a different student monitor the Chat each session.

4. **Modulate your tone and pace based on student needs.**
   Speak clearly, with enthusiasm, and at a steady pace. Don't rush through the content. Check the auto captioning to make sure that it is recording what you actually said. Check the Chat to see if there are questions.

5. **Learn as much as possible about the tools you have at your disposal.**
   Check out FCLT resources (Canvas Faculty Center) to learn more about tools. Go through a test run to ensure that everything runs smoothly.

Ideas for Effective Online Synchronous Activities

The following ideas can be used to inform your synchronous classes, or to integrate synchronous options into a class that you are teaching asynchronously. These are suggestions from *Northwestern School of Professional Studies*.

- **Hold an online introductory Q&A session** near the beginning of the semester to answer student questions about the syllabus and course structure.

- **Identify synchronous sessions in the syllabus**. Schedule synchronous sessions on specific topics, before a big exam, or the week before final projects are due. Students with disabilities will be able to request accommodations early on.

- **Use your synchronous class to demonstrate** tasks or processes that are easier to show than to tell.

- **Invite guest speakers** to join the class and ask each student to prepare at least one question ahead of time for the guest speakers.

- **Connect students with accessibility resources**. Ensure that your syllabus includes information about ACCESS to encourage accommodation requests.

Implications for SPOT Instruction

SPOT (Skills and Pedagogy for Online Teaching) is the training component of Mt. SAC's online instruction system and fulfills Title 5 requirements for online teacher preparation.   A SPOT-certified instructor will be able to teach both asynchronously and synchronously. There is no separate SPOT instruction for synchronous versus asynchronous teaching.

Currently, SPOT uses the CVC OEI Course Design Rubric as its prototype (although in a truncated form). The CVC OEI Course Design Rubric is based exclusively on asynchronous delivery methods. As a result, SPOT does not cover synchronous teaching.

SPOT will be updated to include synchronous best practices. Faculty should be informed in their welcome letter that they cannot rely exclusively on synchronous lectures to fulfill their SPOT requirements.

References

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