Five ways Synchronous Collaboration will Change Your Learning Experience for the Better
Introduction

What’s the best way to engage with students?

Many education providers believe face-to-face interaction is the best way to collaborate and work with their students. If this is the case, why do so many organizations with learning management systems (LMS) in place still resort to asynchronous communication?

Having an LMS in an institution is now the norm and students - particularly the current generation of digital natives - are accustomed to accessing elements of their course online. Unfortunately, despite the evolution of communication and collaboration technologies (which have allowed real-time communication and live engagement through a number of different devices and platforms), there is still a major problem. Instructors aren’t fully utilizing the technology at their disposal to meet their students’ needs.

There’s a practice deficit between what course providers say they want to provide and what they actually provide to their students when it comes to technology. According to research conducted by the Book Industry Study Group, around 90% of instructors would be willing to consider any technology that will help make students more successful in meeting desired learning outcomes. The same research report also found that over 40% of students who have taken both online and classroom courses found that the main drawback with online courses was that it was more difficult to get support from the instructor. It seems that instructors want to use technology to help students but there’s still a need for real-time engagement with online learners.

So what’s the answer? A number of smart education providers are integrating synchronous collaboration into LMS installations to allow instructors and students to interact in real-time and to introduce a human element to online learning. This enables digital natives to embrace live engagement on their own terms.

Here are five ways synchronous collaboration will change the learning experience for the better.
Executive Summary
Synchronous Collaboration

1. Makes learning more personal by allowing students and instructors to engage with each other in real-time.

2. Encourages collaboration by providing students and instructors dynamic communication tools accessible anytime, anywhere.

3. Enables mobility by making use of the devices and platforms that have become a natural part of many students’ everyday lives.

4. Creates deeper connections between the students and the faculty by enabling them to build more meaningful relationships.

5. Provides a seamless experience by integrating easily into existing LMS environments.
1. Makes Learning Personal

Asynchronous communication tools have a place in any course, but they don’t offer the personal experience that synchronous collaboration can supply. Bulletin boards and emails are often essential, but can create too much lag. They’re a way of working that’s leftover from the old days of correspondence courses.

Many organizations still rely on these traditional methods of engaging with students. According to Gatepoint Research’s Trends in Online Learning white paper, commissioned by Blackboard, 90% of educators rely on email, while only 52% use video conferencing and 20% use instant messaging [3].

Synchronous collaboration enables real-time feedback, creating a more personal learning experience that doesn’t just apply to students, but instructors as well. Teachers can adjust the pace of learning based on immediate feedback, have on-the-fly check-ins with students, and take advantage of real-time “teachable moments” in class.

At a functional level, synchronous collaboration enables flexible learning by allowing students to choose how they want to engage with faculty and peers - be it web conferencing, video conferencing, IM, or collaborative work sessions.
2. Encourages Collaboration

Guess what? Synchronous collaboration allows students to do exactly that - collaborate. Whether it’s with the faculty or with their peers, students can collaborate in real-time using the technology and platforms that suit their personal preferences and context.

This goes way beyond simply setting up a virtual classroom. Synchronous collaboration changes the conventional flow of learning - a one-way push of information between two groups (student and teacher) - typical of the traditional classroom model. Instead it creates a learning experience with many directions and touch-points as ideas, information, feedback and more are exchanged between several parties. It also provides a solution for the always-on student, allowing formal and impromptu collaboration on assignments to happen without being restricted by location or time.

It’s obvious that this is hugely beneficial to non-traditional students - those that can’t attend classes in-person due to work or family commitments, or because they live in a remote geographic location. But they’re not the only ones crying out for synchronous collaboration. Traditional learners want to be able to collaborate and communicate with tutors and peers away from the classroom as well. The technology is ready; the need is there. But, are learning providers willing to supply this service?

What’s driving institutions to invest in online programs?

- 79% said increasing and diversifying the student body
- 62% said improve retention
- 60% said better engage students
- 57% said improve learning outcomes[^1]

[^1]: Five Ways Synchronous Collaboration will Change Your Learning Experience for the Better
According to the Book Industry Study Group’s research,

just under 60% of students own a smartphone + and over 30% own a tablet

The proliferation of connected mobile devices means one thing - learning providers need to get mobile.

The Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) movement has spread across the business world, as companies everywhere have realized people are more productive when using devices they’re comfortable and familiar with. Adopting a similar strategy in the education industry makes sense. If learners and faculty can engage with the course from a device of their choosing, it frees them to learn and collaborate from anywhere at any time.

Simply put, synchronous learning on a mobile device fulfills one of the biggest expectations of today’s learner: the ability to be continuously connected, and have access to people, learning content and tools from wherever they are, at any time.

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- Marcel Bechtoldt, System Admin-Principal and Senior Lecturer, University of Missouri-St. Louis
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There are an abundance of synchronous collaboration tools available to give faculty and students flexible ways to engage with one another. Gone are the days of anonymity through email - now students and instructors can forge meaningful relationships to facilitate active learning at any time and improve overall learner outcomes.

Technologies that provide real-time interaction - like web & video conferencing, IM, and screen sharing - allow students and instructors to get to know each other better and help to foster community outside of the physical classroom space. This leads to greater learner satisfaction with their education environment, and, ultimately, provides greater retention.

The forward-thinking institutions that are deploying synchronous learning and collaboration capabilities are finding that students are more engaged, achieve better grades, and are less likely to drop out.

By adding synchronous components to online and hybrid courses, the University of Utah reduced attrition rates to 8.5% (compared to 16.5 for face to face classes). Students who reviewed archived courses with audio components achieved grades that were 24% higher than those who reviewed course content composed of un-annotated PowerPoint slides.

In the California Community College system, online courses with synchronous components had a higher retention rate, and more students achieving A and B grades, than purely asynchronous online courses.

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Institutions can also roll-out more courses to wider audiences delivered in more ways – and do it cost efficiently. Employing remote faculty to teach subjects where there is limited expertise available on campus can increase enrollment and often result in improved outcomes without adding to the physical plant.

5. Provides a Seamless Experience

For the students, a truly integrated learning environment means a system with many modes of collaboration and learning accessible from a single place, resulting in a learning experience that is tailored for them, improving their outcomes.

Faculty benefit from course management from a single place, using synchronous collaboration tools conveniently available to them through the LMS. This means less administrative overhead and more time spent on their teaching & learning tasks, producing effective course setup and delivery.

Blackboard
Conclusion

Synchronous learning is within your grasp. The collaboration tools are readily available and can be easily integrated into existing LMS environments. And using these tools leads to educational benefits to users and to financial rewards for institutions. So, why aren't more learning providers striving to create the best possible educational experiences for their faculty and students?

Perhaps culture is the answer. According to Gatepoint Research, 51% of senior education professionals said faculty skepticism was the main challenge facing online learning [9]. So, to truly integrate synchronous collaboration tools, learning institutions need to think about transforming their culture into one that not only accepts and embraces change, but is also smart about change management. Otherwise we're back to where we began - with learning institutions failing to meet the needs of today’s student – in this case by not enhancing their basic LMS offering with synchronous, collaborative tools.

If learning providers want to put students at the center of their learning experience, they need to have and use the right tools to engage with them, both in and out of the classroom.

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Footnotes

[1] Book Industry Study Group, Student Attitudes Towards Content in Higher Education

[2] Book Industry Study Group, Student Attitudes Towards Content in Higher Education


[6] Book Industry Study Group, Student Attitudes Towards Content in Higher Education