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## Utilizing synchronous discussions to create an engaged classroom in online executive education



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### ABSTRACT

Many universities are increasing the use of online executive education which provides greater flexibility for students and instructors. While student engagement can be difficult to achieve in traditional classroom settings, the Distance Learning (DL) context inherently impedes student engagement and provides unique obstacles to the desired outcome of student engagement. Therefore, in this paper, I present a best practices approach to synchronous class discussions that can be implemented to increase student engagement in online executive education.

*“Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn.”*

Benjamin Franklin

### 1. Introduction

The allure of online executive education is spreading across the world. Many universities are increasing the use of distance learning (DL), discerning the appeal of this new paradigm to the growing number of non-traditional students. While extant studies demonstrate a significant level of student satisfaction and learning in DL courses (Allen & Seaman, 2014.), many of these studies indicate that the satisfaction is based upon certain salient factors in the course (Allen, Bourhis, Burrell, & Mabry, 2002; Burga, Leblanc, & Rezania, 2017; Graham, Toon, Wynn-Williams, & Beatson, 2017; Kauffman, 2015).

Students are more satisfied with a course when they are engaged (Webber, Krylow, & Zhang, 2013). While online courses tend to inhibit student engagement (Bernard & Amundsen, 2008; Bullen, 2007), synchronous communication has been found to lead to increased engagement (McBain et al., 2016). Synchronous communication, however, can prove to be a challenge for instructors who are new to online education with synchronous components (Ng, 2007). Therefore, in this Teaching Brief, I will be presenting a pedagogical method to incorporate synchronous discussions in DL courses in order to increase student engagement. These didactic best practices have been established over years of developing, implementing, and assessing these pedagogical methods in the author's DL courses. I will now discuss one of the areas where online education is becoming more prominent, namely executive education.

#### 1.1. Online executive education

In response to the dramatic grow in online education, researchers are examining how to foster DL in executive education, including project-based approaches (Jacobson, Chapman, Ye, & Os, 2017) and blended learning approaches (Lockhart, McKee, & Donnelly, 2017). The research on online executive education often examines methods for more effectively delivering course content.

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Klotz and Wright (2017) presented a modular design of a hybrid course delivery structure for an executive education program. While their design incorporates online class discussions, it does not provide guidance on it. This paper extends their discussion, offering guidance for how to effectively manage these synchronous class discussions in order to increase student engagement.

Furthermore, Kendall and Kendall (2017) propose utilizing storytelling in online executive education. While this teaching method is novel, the authors do not explicate best practice approaches for how to manage a synchronous online discussion. While indeed the instructor in this teaching tip utilizes case studies for the basis of the online discussions, storytelling exercises could also be discussed utilizing the methods presented in this paper.

Thus, the contribution to the literature of this paper involves explaining certain pedagogical methods that has been utilized in online education to increase student engagement. As instructors are being asked to transform their executive education courses into online formats, they can adopt a best practice approach to synchronous class discussions that has been utilized to increase student engagement in online courses.

### 1.2. Student engagement

A highly-researched and important factor in DL research is student engagement (Henrie, Halverson, & Graham, 2015; Imlawi, Gregg, & Karimi, 2015; Schwarz & Zhu, 2015; Skinner and Pitzer., 2012), which can be defined as *participation, commitment, investment, or effortful involvement in learning* (Henrie et al., 2015; Reschly & Christenson, 2012). Studies have demonstrated a relationship between student engagement and student satisfaction in online courses (Imlawi et al., 2015; Wambach & Brothen, 1997), and DL instructors seek to engage students in their courses.

While student engagement can be difficult to achieve in traditional classroom settings, the DL context inherently impedes student engagement and provides unique obstacles to the desired outcome of student engagement (Morris, Finnegan, & Wu, 2005; Robinson & Hullinger, 2008). Research has found that incorporating synchronous oral communication components rather than only traditional asynchronous written assessments facilitates engagement in DL courses (McBain et al., 2016). Therefore, in this Teaching Brief, I seek to present a pedagogical method to incorporate synchronous discussions in DL courses to increase student engagement. I will begin by discussing the communication elements of DL courses.

### 1.3. Communication in DL courses

In order to understand the impact of this method, I will first discuss communication elements of distance learning courses. DL courses can include either or both synchronous or asynchronous components. Synchronous components of a course involve real-time communication. Technology such as instant messaging, teleconferencing, and interactive videoconferencing (Rybarczyk, 2007) could be employed to facilitate synchronous communication in an online course. Asynchronous communication can occur at any time and at irregular intervals. The technologies involved in facilitating asynchronous communication in DL courses include online/internet-based courses, modules with streaming video, and postings to a discussion forum.

Some traditional face-to-face courses may include only synchronous communication, while some DL courses may include only asynchronous communication (Turner, 2015). Therefore, DL courses present a new pedagogical paradigm for the students who have experienced only traditional face-to-face courses for their entire educational experience (Sanford, 2017). Therefore, I posit that by incorporating synchronous communication in a DL course, an instructor provides some familiarity for the student who may begin to feel disengaged with a purely asynchronous learning environment. In order to mitigate this discomfort and subsequent disengagement in the classroom, I will next discuss the DL communication framework.

## 2. DL communication framework

In an effort to increase student engagement in a DL course, I postulate that synchronous components can provide students with a greater commitment to the course. One of the benefits of DL courses is the high level of asynchronous elements, which provides flexibility to students with external commitments (e.x., family, work, etc). However, I propose that the benefits of asynchronous communication inherent in DL courses should be balanced with the benefits of traditional synchronous face-to-face courses. In Table 1 below, I present a framework (Schwarz, Mehta, Johnson, & Chin, 2007) to delineate the pedagogical differences between

**Table 1**  
Pedagogical differences between communication types in DL courses.

	High Level of Synchronous communication	High level of Asynchronous communication
Flexibility	Decreased; need to schedule time for entire class to be available	Increased; students can learn material whenever they would like
Students best suited for	Students with a more flexible schedule and less Job/Family commitments; may not be as comfortable with autonomy necessary for DL courses	Job/Family commitments; less flexible schedule; highly organized/dependable
Quality of communication	Richer communication, including immediate feedback	Miss real-time verbal cues and feedback
Amount of oversight from Instructor	Higher	Lower

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