Teaching Online: Balancing Synchronous & Asynchronous Teaching

In a **synchronous (real-time)** teaching context, a lecturer can use lecture capture/lecturecast software (e.g. Panopto), video conferencing tools (e.g. Collaborate Ultra/Zoom), or text-based interfaces (e.g. chat functions) to interact with students in real-time. **Asynchronous** teaching might involve students engaging with short lecture captures (e.g. Panopto), webinar recordings, and/or collaborating with time delays in discussions via forums, blogs, wikis which are moderated and facilitated by the lecturer.

Synchronous Teaching

Benefits

- Gives an illusion of the easiest transfer of existing practice from face-to-face teaching to digital delivery.
- The 'experience' of teaching and learning can feel closer to traditional face-to-face modes for students and faculty.
- Interactions happen in 'real' time: learners can engage with each other and with lecturers in discussions, Q&A sessions, and group work concurrently.

Challenges

- Online real-time interactions require much greater scaffolding to be successful: who speaks, when? Setting '**netiquette'** rules is important.
- Access to real-time is very technology dependent: how stable/high-speed is your internet connection? Students may have limited access to quality broadband infrastructure or access to broadband. The device they connect through can impact negatively on their experience of a lecture.
- Teaching and learning through a camera can lack feedback cues, leading to dissatisfaction for students and lecturers alike: 'humanising' these interactions can be tricky.
- It's inflexible: students in different time zones, students with caring responsibilities or students with additional needs may find it impossible to attend live sessions consistently or at all.
- Teaching online can feel didactic rather than interactive. This can impact negatively on student engagement.

Asynchronous Teaching

Benefits

- Students have more time to think through activities and reflect on/process content.
- Provides a clear record of student engagement (with content, with each other, and with the lecturer).
- Seminar discussions no longer evaporate into the air: student learning is there for them to review in their own time. This is useful for revision as students can also 'track' how their content understanding has developed.
- Highly flexible: used effectively, it's an extremely inclusive way to teach.
- Quieter/shy students can feel more confident contributing through alternative mediums e.g. chat

Challenges

- Generating a sense of community can be challenging in an asynchronous environment.
- Varying the channels of engagement can take time to plan and manage.
- Learning to 'step back' as a moderator: scaffolding engagement while not being too involved.

Practice Implications

- Think about sharing the following with students:
    - When will the session take place and what technology is involved?
    - How can they join the session (e.g. a link)?
    - What topics are to be covered in the session?
    - How are students expected to prepare in advance?
    - How do you expect students to contribute and participate?
- Record any synchronous sessions using lecture cast software and ensure they are available via the VLE for review afterward. *N.b. Make sure students are aware that a session is being recorded.*
- Try to include some interactivity in all sessions and more than one-way delivery of lecture content.
- Clarify and set out guidelines for all interactions online.
- Make sure that students have some opportunity to work with each other, not just on their own. Learning online needs to have the same social dimension as learning in person.
- Encourage students to put up a profile photo instead of a blank screen where they are unable or unwilling to use a camera (this humanises the process).

Choreograph learning explicitly. If it feels like you're spoon-feeding students more than you would in person, you're probably doing online teaching right!