

Active participation in synchronous online learning

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Innovative impact

Online synchronous education has recently been vital in replacing face-to-face teaching during the pandemic. Although there is increasing use of synchronous technologies in higher education, there are still challenges which need to be addressed. The most significant of these is lack of active participation by students. Even where educators are experienced in running synchronous online learning sessions, previous research has shown that these sessions tend to be didactic in nature, and interactive elements are often not used. Students' unwillingness to use audio or video channels is one factor, which denies educators the non-verbal feedback intrinsic to face-to-face teaching. In general, there may be a lack of student engagement, with students attending but in a passive capacity, with a reluctance to contribute.

There is a need to address two related challenges: designing synchronous online sessions which have active learning built in; and overcoming students' inhibitions regarding active participation. This article discusses these topics, based on prior research and practice. It then briefly presents selected data from a student survey at the UK Open University. The survey collected quantitative and qualitative data to gain an understanding of students' experiences and views about online synchronous sessions: for example, what value do students place on active participation, and why? The aim of this investigation is to make online synchronous learning more interactive, engaging and effective.

Keywords: synchronous, online, participation

Introduction

In online learning contexts, active participation is believed to be fundamental to student success and educational quality (Caliskan, 2020). Students consider active participation to be important, and particularly value learner-to-instructor interactions (Martin & Bolliger, 2018). In this article we focus specifically on active participation in synchronous online learning sessions. Banna et al. (2015) found that students value opportunities to join synchronous sessions, and the chance to interact with peers and their instructor.

However, active participation is viewed as less important by some online learners, who may not engage significantly during synchronous tutorials. This may depend on the fit between the students' conceptions of learning and the approach to teaching (Richardson, 2013); an active approach may only be best for students who believe this approach to be beneficial. Although teaching staff may be frustrated that students are not being more active, student satisfaction with synchronous online tutorials can still be high. Students may

feel that they are receiving a quality teaching and learning experience despite not interacting significantly with others during it (Butler et al., 2018).

There are many ways active participation in online tutorials can be encouraged, such as quizzes, well-timed questions, and text-based communication, as well as through the audio and video channels often associated with synchronous online tutorials. However, if students do not engage, tutors may feel unable to adapt their approach due to a lack of feedback from students (Rogers et al., 2021).

There are practical reasons for students not engaging with active approaches in synchronous online tutorials; they may not want to use audio and video communication if they are worried about the presence of family members in the background. The major reasons for preferring to keep a webcam turned off during an online session include anxiety, shyness, wishing to ensure the privacy of the home, and a fear of being exposed (Gherheş et al. (2021); Rajab & Soheib, 2021). If teachers can establish an empathetic environment, students will feel safer engaging actively. Teachers exhibit

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