Synchronous Collaborative Events in Evaluation

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Abstract
There are many opportunities to be gained through using synchronous collaborative elements in evaluation. Communication today and in the future is significantly different than that of the past. The use of web-based technology, and significantly advanced video and audio technology has made the type of communication that was once considered science-fiction a reality of today’s businesses, educators, and even in our homes. These tools provide increased opportunity for sharing data, video, documents, and face-to-face discussion even when the participants are miles or even continents apart from each other.
This paper will provide the reader with demonstration and discussion of advantages for use of synchronous collaboration via web technology in business and in education, as well as offer examples of several current cloud-based products that can be utilized in collaborative events.
Synchronous Collaborative Events in Evaluation

Historically, e-learning has been extensively an asynchronous opportunity in learning. Asynchronous learning provides learners with many advantages to learning, Stefan Hrastinski writes in his article, “A study of asynchronous and synchronous e-learning methods discovered that each supports different purposes”, writes: “When communicating asynchronously, however, the receiver has more time to comprehend the message, since the sender does not expect an immediate answer.” Hrastinski concludes that asynchronous learning increases the learner’s ability to process information, a significant advantage to asynchronous learning (Hrastinski, 54).

At the same time there are conclusions that can be drawn for advantages of synchronous learning events within online education. Hrastinski states, “synchronous e-learning increases arousal and motivation”, and the studies of both synchronous learning and asynchronous learning demonstrated that neither had a significant advantage to the learner over the other (Hrastinski, 54). Both asynchronous learning and synchronous learning have significant advantages to the learner that would necessitate the implementation of each type of learning in an e-learning experience.

In the debate that existed between developing e-learning experiences with synchronous learning or with asynchronous learning, or as a blended method, one of the single most desirable advantages to learning has been left out of the discussion, that of collaborative learning. When implementing collaborative events into classroom instruction significant gains for both higher level learners and lower level learners were noted. Collaborative instruction builds self-esteem in learners, enhances student satisfaction with the learning experience, and promotes a positive attitude toward the subject matter. “[...] Everyone benefits from a [collaborative learning] environment. Students help each other and in doing so build a supportive community which
raises the performance level of each member” (Kagan 1986). All too often, instructional designers of e-learning curriculum do not plan for synchronous collaborative learning events, choosing instead to use easier discussion tools such as discussion boards. Discussion boards provide the advantages of asynchronous learning, but do not provide opportunity for learners to experience the advantages of synchronous discussion. Synchronous events in e-learning are then used for question and answer sessions, presentation of specialist in the field of instruction, or lecture presentation on the part of the instructor, providing very little collaborative instruction.

There are many online tools that can be utilized to build synchronous collaborative events into the e-learning curriculum either by the instructional designer or the instructor to the course. The only significant disadvantage to implementing synchronous collaboration is the availability of hardware necessary to operate the online event. However, in e-learning, it can be assumed that most of the hardware needed for these events is already present, as the curriculum is also delivered over the same or nearly same medium, the world web wide.

The advent of cloud computing, cell-phone applications, and increased hardware efficiency has made the opportunity for synchronous collaboration in e-learning more possible than ever before. Programs and applications, such as, Skye, FaceTime, Google Hangout, and iChat are readily available and are provided free of charge, downloaded from the Internet. At one time, video conferencing was once only implemented by large corporations and at a significant cost. The cost of web conferencing has significantly decreased with the availability of products online, inversely, the productivity and development of these products has significantly increased providing “real-time” opportunities for e-learners to engage with their instructor as well as with other learners.

In the article, “The Practice of Web-Conferencing: Where are We Now?” describing her
study of web conferencing in education, Birget Loch writes, “The dynamic nature of teaching in
general requires teachers to be continually evaluating the learning situation in order to promote
and nurture an atmosphere that supports the development of new ideas, the challenging of old,
and the exploration of alternatives” (Loch, 562). It is within the very nature of education that
new systems of content delivery are to be sought out, even desired. It must also then be the
nature of the educator to be constantly challenging how education “works”, how content is
presented to learners, and to seek out those tools that are innovative and motivated, constantly
engaging and re-engaging the learner. Loch concludes, “network-enhanced interaction can fulfill
some pragmatic human needs at certain points in time by providing access, convenience,
flexibility, utility, speed, and cost-effectiveness. Education is a powerful tool in the global
educational environment and the Internet has enabled a new era in human collective activity”
(Loch, 570).

The success of any educational tool in a learning environment is highly dependent on its
use and implementation within that environment, whether that is in the traditional classroom or
in an e-learning experience. Web-conferencing is by no means an exception to this rule.
Instructional designers and course instructors may find it necessary to re-design curriculum or
course work, to develop new discussion topics that will fit within the medium of collaboration
via web conferencing, design assignments around groups or teams of learners working together
to complete a project or study.

Most web conference applications allow you to share documents such as PowerPoint
presentations, Word Documents, Excel Documents as well as multimedia files, video, and
slideshows. Sharing these resources within web conferencing provides for more interaction and
collaboration between attendees. Here are some other options that most web conferencing
software provide:

- Ability to share applications and presentations
- Unified web browsing
- Remote computer control
- File sharing
- Ability to poll participants
- Live or private chat
- Record and archive meetings

There are many sources for web conferencing available to be implemented within the design of an e-learning course. Here is a brief description of a few of these:

**Watchitoo**

Watchitoo is a real-time collaboration platform where multimedia presentations meld with video conferencing to create a powerful stage for online communication. Its technology lets you easily host and participate in cutting-edge presentations that support multiple video feeds, screen sharing, white-boarding, API implementation, embedding capabilities and recording functionalities that enhance collaboration.

**Infinite Conferencing**

Infinite Conferencing delivers feature-rich solutions that range from on-demand conferencing to full-scale, online event management. Invitees need only an Internet-connected computer and phone line to participate in a Web conference. Infinite has a nonprofit program that offers discounted rates to charities, religious organizations, foundations, educational institutions and membership and scientific associations.

**GoToWebinar**
Just schedule your webinar without tech support, invite people to register, prepare for your event and present your webinar. Streamline your student’s communications, update students on course announcements, and host online seminars, discussion, lectures, and more.

**Adobe Connect**

Adobe Connect is based on the widely available Adobe Flash technology. Adobe Connect 8 software has a new simplified interface featuring better-organized controls, accessibility functions and one-click sharing. Connect includes: screen sharing via desktop and applications, multiple presenters, annotating tools, text chat, tele-conferencing, VoIP, and videoconferencing.

**Zoho Meeting**

Zoho Meeting provides remote support, online meeting and Web conferencing features to host instant meetings or Web meetings for your students. You can embed Zoho Meeting in your blog, wiki, notebook or any web page for a mass web conferencing.

**Microsoft Office Live Meeting**

Microsoft Office Live Meeting lets you hold a virtual meeting with small or large groups of participants. Live Meeting allows users to exchange information via live video and audio interaction, chat, shared files or desktops and pre-recorded presentations. Presenters can receive real-time feedback from meeting attendees to allow them to adjust their pace and content. The software provides presentation and annotation tools for underscoring major topics and whiteboarding ideas.
**Dimdim**

DimDim is cheap, no-nonsense and to the point. You can provide for instant or planned meetings with smart URLs. Invitations from Dimdim, local email addresses, or smart URLs can be used as a simple log-in to the application. It includes screen sharing via desktop and applications, multiple presenters, up to four, as well as, annotating tools, text chat, teleconferencing, VoIP, mobile access, and video-conferencing.

Implementation of this type of sharing and collaboration will greatly increase the learner’s ability to work with technology in their learning experience. Greater opportunity for learning is created through collaborative interaction, sharing in program and learning responsibilities, increased responsibility to other learners, and increased knowledge retention through “real-time” discussion. When considering increasing synchronous learning events within the e-learning curriculum, web conferencing and collaboration must become more significant within the course design.
Bibliography


