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## Top Synchronous Training Myths and Their Realities

By Nanette Miner

*I recently had the opportunity to speak with Jennifer Hofmann, president of InSync Training ([www.insynctraining.com](http://www.insynctraining.com)), a synchronous instructional design firm based in Connecticut. Hofmann is dedicated to dispelling the myths associated with the field of live online learning by offering educational programs for designers and facilitators of online learning. Here are some of the more common myths (and their realities) that she encounters.*

### Myth: Synchronous training is “just” the traditional classroom online

**Reality:** There are, indeed, many similarities between traditional classroom training and the live online classroom. For example, participants are gathered at the same time, and the facilitator uses slides and other instructional materials to facilitate the content. Additionally, many of the engagement techniques that work in the classroom may also be applied to the synchronous environment.

There are also a lot of differences. First, there are various types of collaboration tools (application sharing, multi-user whiteboards, chat, and so forth). Also, programs tend to be shorter in duration (no more than two hours), and curriculum can be spread out over a long period of time instead of bunched into several days.

These factors alone require developers and instructional designers to pay attention to how we design and deliver online instruction.

### Myth: Synchronous training is not interactive

**Reality:** I think training in this medium can be far more

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Brandon-Hall.com recently released Hofmann's best practices report *How to Design for the Live Online Classroom: Great Training Using Web Conferencing Software*. To purchase a copy, visit [www.brandon-hall.com](http://www.brandon-hall.com).

interactive than comparable classes taught in a traditional format. Using an approach I call *concurrent collaboration*, developers can design exercises that encourage all participants to interact at the same time.

In a traditional classroom you would never be able to get the opinion of 30 participants on every question you pose. Using such tools as whiteboards and public chats enable facilitators to hear each learner's opinion on just about every topic—and in a relatively short period of time.

### **Myth: Soft skills cannot be taught synchronously**

**Reality:** Plenty of research reveals that synchronous skill building is more realistic than traditional face-to-face methods for certain audiences and topics because of the jobs the participants' hold. For example, a telephone sales representative will experience a more realistic training when taught synchronously than when sitting in a training room with 30 other reps.

### **Myth: The quality of synchronous training cannot meet the quality of traditional classrooms**

**Reality:** If you want the same quality from your synchronous deliverables that you expect from your face-to-face programs you must invest the same time and effort, the instructional design resources, the needs analyses.

You must pay attention to all the components, including support materials, visuals, communications, interactions and collaborations, scripts, and more, to make it a success. Most organizations simply try to move their classroom materials online when they need to start at the beginning—as if the course had never existed.

### **Myth: Synchronous training isolates learners and does little to foster a sense of community**

**Reality:** When designed to be collaborative in nature, synchronous training can actually increase interaction and encourages participants to continue relationships beyond the live learning event. In fact, a participant in a class I

was teaching recently said, “I continue to be amazed at how similar this is to a traditional classroom.”

### **Myth: Once webcams are easily integrated, synchronous training will be so much easier**

**Reality:** Live video is a good way to engage participants, but use it sparingly; perhaps at the beginning of a session to introduce the facilitator, then at the very end for Q&A. Overuse of webcams deaden the effectiveness of live video, and can be distracting for participants.

Some content, of course, will almost certainly be enhanced by video. For example, teaching bedside manner to physicians, or demonstrating the right body language to project during an employee review. But video is no replacement for face-to-face interaction. Eye contact via video isn't real eye contact, even if the video is two-way. You're not seeing the other person's body language. You're not catching the other person's eye. Video lacks the emotional impact that a face-to-face connection carries.

### **Myth: One advantage of synchronous training is that you can train hundreds of people at one time**

**Reality:** To be sure, it's difficult to create true 'learning' with a large audience. How do you foster collaboration and encourage more than familiarization with the content when the dispersed audience is so big? It's difficult.

Generally, when the audience is large, the event is more of a presentation rather than training. Participants are being exposed to content, rather than the opportunity to practice, apply, or evaluate what they have learned.

### **Myth: Implementing a synchronous classroom is a big technology hurdle— the technology could make or break the success of our online learning**

**Reality:** Get over the technology! The implementation of synchronous technologies, or any learning technologies, is much more of a change and culture issue. How do learners learn differently? How do trainers facilitate differently? How do we convince everyone that synchronous learning is

REAL learning? These are the issues training professionals need to tackle. Leave the wizardry of the technology to the IT department.

### **Myth: Instructional materials (leader guides, participant guides) are not as crucial for a synchronous class**

**Reality:** We tend to forget about these printed (a.k.a. PAPER) materials, such as leader guides and participant guides, when we migrate to the synchronous classroom. That's a mistake.

Participants need a printed participant guide in order to take notes, participate in exercises, and have something to reference later. Facilitators need a printed guide to deliver a high-quality program that is consistent from delivery to delivery, and to integrate the management of instruction and technology.

### **Myth: A one-hour synchronous program is an hour of free time—according to participants**

**Reality:** Since the introduction of the virtual classroom, bad design for live online sessions has inadvertently taught participants that synchronous sessions are a "free hour" — an opportunity to listen intermittently while checking and responding to email and taking care of other light duties. Currently, participants are so accustomed to this free hour idea that they often are annoyed when the facilitator of a live online session asks for their participation.

In short, unless you provide meaningful engagement, you can be quite certain that participants will get bored—and distracted. Just as in a traditional classroom, participants in a live online setting get restless and tired and lose interest if it isn't immediately apparent that the session is worth their time.

### **Myth: Instructional design for synchronous classes is easier because class times are shorter and more lecture oriented**

**Reality:** That most certainly IS NOT the case. If your classes are lecture-oriented, you'll most certainly bore your

audience. Finding ways to engage learners and maximize their return for attending a two-hour class is a real challenge that will require all your knowledge, skills, and creativity.

### **Myth: Because of shorter class sessions, asynchronous trainer can teach four two-hour classes each day (that's eight hours isn't it?)**

**Reality:** Don't get caught in this trap! Each class, no matter the length, requires set-up and follow-up tasks. Most important, teaching online takes a lot of energy. Experienced synchronous trainers know the frustrations of having participants distributed across the country or the world. Keeping participants continuously engaged is like trying to teach a class right after lunch. You know what I mean: when the blood sugar has gone to learners' toes and you must nearly tap dance—with a parasol—to get their attention.

I suggest not teaching more than three 1-hour or 2-hour hour classes a day.

### **Final thoughts**

The good news is that developers have identified a core of proven design best practices and we're able to attain the goal of synchronous events—meeting the quality that we expect from our traditional interactions and programs. We just need to work to dispel the myths and do your best to implement best practices.

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