

One of the great things about being a teacher is that you get to help shape young adults' minds and enhance their skill sets to make them successful in life. Traditionally, university practice many decades ago was to have a professor lecture their students and share their knowledge. If a student missed a class or wanted to participate in a large lecture setting, they were in trouble.

Today, I use Blackboard as a teaching tool in both 100% online courses and also as an enhancement to my traditional in-class courses. In particular, I like to take part of the classroom out of the classroom and expand it online. To do so, I take advantage of Blackboard's Asynchronous and Synchronous learning tools. Asynchronous learning is defined as "Any learning event where interaction is delayed over time. This allows learners to participate according to their schedule, and be geographically separate from the instructor". Synchronous learning is defined as "Any learning event where interaction happens simultaneously in real-time. This requires that learners attend class at its scheduled time in a traditional classroom, or delivered via distributed or e-Learning technologies." (<http://www.justcolleges.com/elearn/glossary.htm>).

Blackboard's Asynchronous Learning Tools

Asynchronous tools are synonymous with the term "anytime, anywhere tools." Some of the Blackboard tools that can be used as asynchronous tools include Mail, Discussions, Announcements, and even Learning Modules, Assessments, and Assignments. The Discussions tool allows a student to read about assignments, questions from other students, topic-led issues from the instructor, etc. in their own time, with the ability to reply to the discussions at a distance. If a discussion does not have a particular time frame associated with it, it is a great asynchronous tool. E-mail by nature is the most popular form of asynchronous communication, allowing students to interact with each other or the instructor and having individuals respond in their own time frame. This is probably the easiest tool to use for communication in a true online course where enrollments may be from around the world.

Learning Modules, Announcements, Assessments, and Assignments can also be classified as asynchronous. Students can access and refer to course notes within learning modules at any time. Announcements can be made by an instructor or the campus' IT staff and be accessed once a student logs in to view their course content. Assessments and Assignments can be opened so that students can access them at any time. I use a combination of each of these methods in the courses I teach, constantly keeping students up to date in some manner about what is going on in the classroom or how far along they should be in the course at a particular time.

Blackboard's Synchronous Learning Tools

Opposite of Asynchronous is Synchronous, which is synonymous to the term "real-time tools." In Blackboard, the quickest synchronous tool to point out is the Chat or Whiteboard. You can also use the Assessment or Assignment tool as a synchronous option. With the Chat/Whiteboard option in Blackboard, students can converse together on team projects or an instructor can schedule virtual office hours for students who may have missed or not be able to attend class. These tools can also help in an asynchronous manner when chat logs or drawings from the Whiteboard are posted for those who may have missed a session. Even though I mentioned earlier that the Assessments and Assignments tools are asynchronous, they can also be synchronous in nature, requiring students to sit down and access an assignment or assessment at a particular time with deadlines.

Summary

As you can see, just about all of Blackboard's tools can be classified and used in an asynchronous manner, which is what makes Blackboard a great learning management system for delivering online courses. However, some students learn better in a synchronous manner, where they can interact in real-time with the professor. Blackboard is great in that it provides a nice toolset for this type of learning to take place.