

Asynchronous Learning and Discussion Boards

by Guy Hamernik

Asynchronous learning is based on the constructivist theory, which emphasizes peer-to-peer interaction and self-directed learning. Asynchronous learning usually happens in an “any time/any where” format where normal classroom meeting time constraints are not followed, allowing for a more free-flowing distribution of information. The benefits to this delivery method include a wide variety of geographical and cultural differences, student values, backgrounds, and career paths which all contribute to the essence and quality of the class. Therefore, each time the class is taught, learners will have the benefit of learning the same core elements that are required for successful completion of the course, but may have different learning experiences based on what each student contributes to the class.

One example I can give for this was during an instructional design course that I took through The George Washington University. I was paired up with two Americans for group projects: Janet, a Peace Corp. worker in Angola Africa, and Ken, a U.S. Army officer stationed in Japan. Because we were positioned geographically each 1/3 of the way around the world, any synchronous activity with the three of us was nearly impossible. The three of us each had some background in teaching and training, although the circumstances in which we were involved were greatly different. The way learners are trained and educated varies greatly between the disciplined methods of the military, the traditional methods of higher education, and the challenging “any way possible” learning in third-world countries where electrical power may only be supplied for a few hours each day.



Because distance learning includes a global classroom, the thoughts, beliefs, and experiences brought in will be expanded exponentially if you can motivate your learners to share them, and to be open minded to the ideas of others. Janet and Ken each showed me methods used in their countries within their educational settings and opened my eyes to new challenges and possibilities. In this environment, the instructor wears a different hat other than the “all knowing guru.” In fact, the instructor more likely plays the roll of the educational facilitator, guiding the students to discovery by steering the discussions in the direction of the lessons learned for the week through questions and commentary. That’s not to say learners aren’t allowed to question, challenge, or offer suggestions or their own experiences as long as it is done in a respectful manner.

One area you may utilize in your D2L environment for collection and dissemination of these ideas and experiences is the discussion board. Discussion boards are a perfect place to openly discuss how subject theory has concrete meaning for your learners. This can be brought forward through first-person personal experiences, web links, data base links, or links to dynamic media such as animations or video clips. Discussion boards are not limited to the distance learning environment either, as many instructors use the area in traditional classes to supplement classroom learning and provide an area for further discussion.

One method that was utilized in nearly every online class I have taken is to have the instructor divide the students into equal groups and make them lead the online discussion for their assigned week. This means that the students scheduled to facilitate must read the materials ahead of time and do a bit of research to provide a backbone of knowledge to get the ball rolling. The advantage is that this defers a bit of the instructor's "leg work" to the learners, and the learners get more out of the week's lessons when they are assigned to be the leaders. This also adds a little pressure for them to keep up with assigned readings and homework, or suffer the consequences of looking foolish by publishing a poorly researched post.

Setting up the discussion board is easy in Desire2Learn. The hard part is using it effectively. Please contact Educational Technology if you need help setting up a discussion board.

Watch this short and easy tutorial created by D2L users at Mansfield University on how to set up the D2L discussion board:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LDu_PJLshQ8