THE HOW-TO GUIDE TO SYNCHRONOUS E-LEARNING

Tips for making appropriate use of videoconferencing systems for on-line teaching at universities during an epidemic

Synchronous – both teacher and students are in one virtual room at the same time

Asynchronous – both teacher and students work online at a time that suits them

1 We combine both forms of e-learning.

In a time of an epidemic, asynchronous e-learning must be the basis for on-line teaching at a university. Synchronous activities need to be carried out only for carefully selected subjects and their specific activities, e.g. where there is no other option, in subjects where it is necessary to illustrate to students some procedure, in subjects where students need to communicate in a foreign language, etc.

2 We take advantage of individual forms.

Synchronous e-learning motivates students more, and can be very similar to full-time, in-person teaching. However, this form is very demanding for teachers and students. Asynchronous e-learning enables students to make better use of individual opportunities. They study in different places, at their own pace, at a time that suits them, in a way they are familiar with.

3 We record synchronous activities.

For example, if we're conducting an on-line lecture, it's advisable to record it and make it available to students. It will more than likely be used both by students who want to repeat the curriculum or to listen to parts they didn't understand, and students who, for various personal reasons, were unable to attend synchronous lessons.

4 We test a videoconferencing environment.

Before we use synchronous e-learning for students for the first time, we test an online meeting with a colleague. We need to learn how to use each function. If necessary, we also ask for expert support from technicians. We don't rely solely on our own abilities and know-how.

5 We send instructions to the students.

It's important to let students know which technologies we will actually use, to reassure them that any technical problems should be taken into account. We inform the students well in advance about the date, time, and topic, as well as when and how they will receive the invitation. We'll notify students in time if they are expected to study or prepare something in advance.

6 We avoid technical problems.

We'll recommend a suitable web browser for students to use the chosen tool. We'll advise them to join the video conference, first without using a video camera, in order to alleviate the initial load on the system. We encourage students to mute their microphones when they are not speaking.

7 We start with an informal discussion.

It's desirable to avoid "awkward silences" as students gradually "enter the room". We use chat rooms. We can gradually "give the students the floor" to greet the others through a video camera. Fun activities at the beginning (ice-breakers) and humour are sensitively included.

8 We "activate" students.

We include interactive elements. We ask students questions, leaving them enough time to write an answer in the chat window. It's a good idea to instruct them to send the answer at once. According to the answers, we can "give someone the floor" to justify their opinion with their video camera. We use technologies to enter surveys or various test items (Padlet, Socrative, Mentimeter, SMART Response, Kahoot, etc.).

9 We provide feedback to students.

If more students answer the question in writing in the chat window at the same time, or if they respond under their own name in selected applications, we get instant feedback on how individuals have understood the topic. We praise the students. We use their mistakes and wrong answers to explain the problem.

10 We choose an appropriate method for completing the lessons.

At the end of synchronous lessons, students will be asked to type their tips, suggestions, and comments about the on-line meeting. We'll use them to improve other online lessons. In smaller study groups, we'll give the students a final say on camera. We adhere to the predetermined time limits; we don't let it drag on.