

A photograph of two children, a girl with blonde hair and a boy with curly hair, both smiling and looking towards the right side of the frame. They are sitting at a desk with a laptop. The girl is in the foreground, and the boy is slightly behind her. The background is a blurred classroom setting with shelves and lights.

Five Ways Synchronous Collaboration Transforms Learning

Blackboard

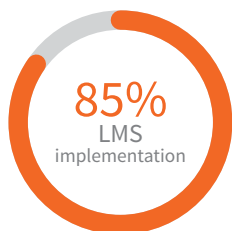


Introduction

What's the best way to engage with students?

Many educators believe face-to-face interaction is the best way to collaborate and work with their students. If this is the case, why do so many schools settle for learning management systems (LMS) that only support asynchronous learning activities such as discussions, messages, assignments, and tests?

To meet the needs of all learners and make the most of face-to-face class time, many districts are turning to blended learning. According to the Christensen Institute, blended learning is a formal education program in which a student learns at least in part online, with some control of their own time, place, path, or pace; at least part in a supervised brick-and-mortar location away from home; and in which the modalities along the learning path are connected to provide an integrated learning experience.¹ In fact, according to Project Tomorrow, **one out of every three teachers** started describing their classrooms as a **blended learning** environment in the past year.² And, over two-thirds of school administrators believe that keeping students engaged in school is a top benefit of digital learning.²



Leveraging an LMS to implement blended learning is becoming the norm in K-12 districts. According to EdNet, **85% of districts report having implemented an LMS** - either substantially (40%) or are using it in some capacity, but could take more advantage of the functionality or increase its usage district-wide (45%).³ Additionally, district plans to implement digital learning are growing and all ten of the top ten technology priorities by districts are related to implementing new learning models.³ The Center for Digital Education reports that 63% of education professionals say that creating a personalized learning environment is a top priority.⁴ And, students - particularly the current generation of digital natives - are accustomed to accessing elements of their classes online. Unfortunately, despite the evolution of communication and collaboration technologies (which have enabled real-time communication and live engagement through a number of different devices and platforms), there is still a major problem. Districts aren't fully utilizing all the technology available to create a comprehensive digital learning environment to meet the needs of all learners.

So what's the answer?

A number of leading schools and districts are integrating synchronous collaboration into LMS installations to allow teachers and students to interact in real-time, introduce live virtual collaboration within digital learning initiatives, and create a comprehensive digital learning environment. This enables digital natives to embrace live engagement on their own terms.

Here are five ways synchronous collaboration transforms the learning experience to improve student engagement and success.



Executive Summary

Synchronous Collaboration



1. Prepares teachers for digital learning by providing flexible, fun, and convenient professional development for teachers while preserving class time and reducing costs.



2. Encourages collaboration and education continuity by providing students and teachers with dynamic communication tools accessible anytime, anywhere.



3. Powers flipped learning to transform face-to-face learning into a dynamic, interactive experience centered on applying concepts and engaging creatively.



4. Engages learners in their world by making use of the devices and platforms that have become a natural part of students' and teachers' everyday lives.



5. Personalizes digital learning by allowing students and teachers to engage with each other in real-time.



1. Prepares Teachers for Digital Learning



With the rise of blended learning and the rapid transition from print to digital content in K-12 districts and schools, professional development is more important than ever. Two out of three (65%) district administrators believe that enhancing teacher effectiveness through professional development has the greatest potential to enhance student achievement.² Furthermore, four of the top seven factors district leaders believe are most important to ensure success when implementing a digital learning initiative are directly related to effective professional development.²

To prepare teachers for digital transformation, teachers who have had the opportunity to learn digitally- with web-conferencing, flipped professional development, and through blended instruction- are more likely to integrate technology effectively in their own classrooms. Additionally, teachers' wish lists for professional development this year reflects the current trends in digital learning. In fact, 51% of teachers want to learn how to use technology more effectively to differentiate instruction.²

To prepare their teachers for common standards and digital learning, Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) used a comprehensive digital learning environment, including synchronous web-conferencing tightly integrated with their LMS, to create and deliver blended professional development to all district teachers modeling effective, competency-based digital learning. After their digital professional development experience, 83% of MNPS teachers reported greater comfort with, and a greater willingness to integrate technology within their own classrooms.⁵

Preparing teachers for digital learning with synchronous and flipped professional development provides additional benefits to districts including cost savings, preservation of instructional time, and respecting teacher time with flexibility and convenience. When MNPS opted to leverage their comprehensive digital learning environment to create and deliver blended professional development, rather than delivering the equivalent face-to-face, the district saved

\$1.3 million dollars in the first year alone and that included providing each teacher a laptop upon successful completion of the course.⁵ Teachers appreciate the flexibility and convenience blended professional development provides. Districts can maximize their digital learning environment investment by conducting virtual meetings (such as school, department, and board meetings, etc.) eliminating travel costs and engaging more of the learning community. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, students benefit greatly from having more time with their teachers in the classroom.

5,000+
MNPS teachers⁵:



89% were satisfied with the blended professional development experience

85% liked the blended professional development model

83% reported they will pursue more online professional development opportunities in the future

83% report greater comfort integrating technology in their own classrooms



2. Encourages Collaboration and Education Continuity



Synchronous learning technology opens limitless possibilities for true collaborative learning and education continuity.

Synchronous collaboration allows students to do exactly that - collaborate. In true collaborative learning, learners work together to solve a problem, complete a task, or create a project leveraging the unique strengths and talents of each learner.

Digital synchronous collaboration tools enable:

Teachers to create learning experiences that require the positive interdependence of learners, individual accountability, and interpersonal skills such as communication, trust, leadership, decision making, conflict resolution, and critical thinking.

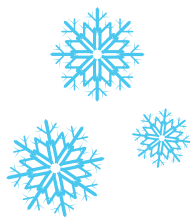
Students to work together, utilizing each learner's unique skills, to brainstorm; to share, discuss, apply ideas; and analyze problems working collaboratively toward a common learning goal.

Synchronous collaboration also provides a solution for the always-on student, allowing formal and impromptu collaboration on assignments to happen without being restricted by location or time. Whether it's with their teachers, with their classmates, or with other students in another state or across the globe, students can collaborate in real-time using the technology and platforms that suit their personal preferences and context. Virtual collaboration also prepares today's students for college and career.

In addition to collaborative learning, synchronous collaboration tools open doors to expand learning opportunities and ensure learning can continue when students and teachers cannot come together face-to-face.

- Consider the possibilities for **virtual field trips** and bringing **guest speakers** to your classroom from around the country or all over the world.
- Imagine **extending class offerings** previously only offered at one school across your district or even your state through your synchronous learning solution.
- Be prepared to continue learning across your district when there is an **unexpected emergency** or **snow day**.
- Continue learning for **homebound students** by including them in class using a synchronous learning platform.
- With virtual options for **parent-teacher conferences**, parents who travel for work or who work multiple jobs to support their families can stay engaged with their child's education to better support them at home and drive success.

Students want to be able to collaborate and communicate with tutors and classmates away from the classroom as well.



Success Story

Atlanta Public Schools provided “virtual learning days” circumventing the need to extend the school year with extra days when the Polar Vortex hit in 2014.⁶





3. Powers Flipped Learning



The power of synchronous collaboration technology extends beyond learning that happens during “real-time” interaction. Synchronous learning solutions offer robust options to record live sessions to create flipped learning content and transform your face-to-face classroom to focus on learning through activity and application. At home, students watch recorded lessons at their own pace. In class, students work together on activities and concepts- with the help of the teacher- putting what they’ve learned into practice, often times learning from each other. In a flipped classroom, the teacher serves as a ‘guide on the side’, rather than a ‘sage on the stage.’

work together in small groups and with her, and engage in activities and games to apply concepts. David Hamman, the Science Department Chair at Medina High School (OH) turns Chemistry and Physics inside out with flipped learning to create teachable moments in his classroom.

Not only is flipped learning taking hold of K-12 classrooms, flipped professional development is proving to be popular as well. In fact, **85%** of MNPS teachers liked their flipped professional development experience.⁵

Flipped Learning: a pedagogical approach in which direct instruction moves from the group learning space to the individual learning space, and the resulting group space is transformed into a dynamic, interactive learning environment where the teacher guides students as they apply concepts and engage creatively in the subject matter.⁷

The flipped classroom model:

- Inspires curiosity and excitement
- Creates teachable moments
- Personalizes instruction and gives learners wings
- Encourages active class participation
- Promotes critical thinking and application of concepts

Flipped learning is transforming K-12 classrooms around the nation and enabling teachers to meet the needs of all learners. Paula Barr, a veteran teacher of 32 years, has been blending her classroom in Lawrence (KS) for two years. She creates flipped lessons of her math and reading curriculum to fully differentiate instruction for each student and meet the needs of each learner at their level. Jessica Gardner, a fourth grade teacher from Sarasota County Schools (FL), turns her math curriculum upside down, flipping each math lesson for her students. Jessica aligns her recorded flipped content to learning standards and provides extra resources, a homework booklet to support note-taking and accountability, a self-assessment, and an assessment to support each lesson. In class, her students collaboratively problem-solve,



I know my students better. I know that they are 100% engaged from the minute they walk in the door until the minute they leave.

Paula Barr, Second Grade Teacher,
Quail Run Elementary School, Lawrence Public Schools, KS

If you ask any teacher if there is one thing they need more of, they will most likely say TIME. One-on-one, or small group time with our students is a precious commodity. Flipping instructional videos gives teachers that time back in the classroom to differentiate and meet the needs of ALL students.

Jessica Gardner, Fourth Grade Teacher, Southside Elementary
School, Sarasota County Public Schools, FL





4. Engages Learners in their World

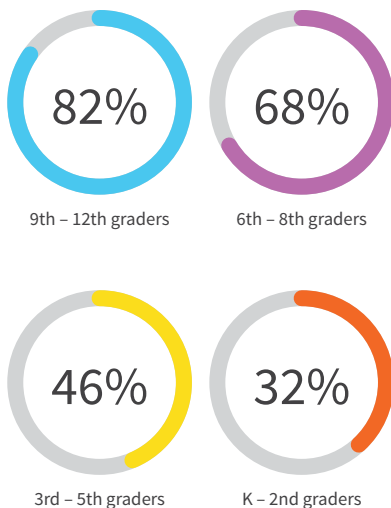


Today's K-12 students have never known a world without the internet and few remember life before the prevalence of smartphones. And a growing number of students have access to a smartphone. According to Project Tomorrow, 82% of high school students and 68% of middle school students have access to smartphones.² And in elementary schools, nearly half of all 3rd to 5th graders have access and 1 out of every three K-2nd graders.² Not only is student smartphone access growing, but two-thirds of parents want their child to have access to mobile learning and would consider purchasing a mobile device if their child could use it for learning.²

The proliferation of connected mobile devices means one thing – teaching and learning needs to get mobile.



Access to smartphones:



We know that parents are on their phones checking Facebook, emails and messages. It's important that we use a mobile app technology to communicate with parents where they are.

Angela Shelley, Executive Director, Strategic Communications,
Carrollton-Farmers Branch Independent School District, TX

Everybody is on mobile. Our philosophy is if it's not mobile, we are not going to do it. We've seen a rapid increase in the number of people with smartphones in our school district. That's where they are and that's where our information needs to be as well.

Zac Rantz, Chief Communications Officer,
Nixa Public Schools, MO





5. Personalizes Digital Learning



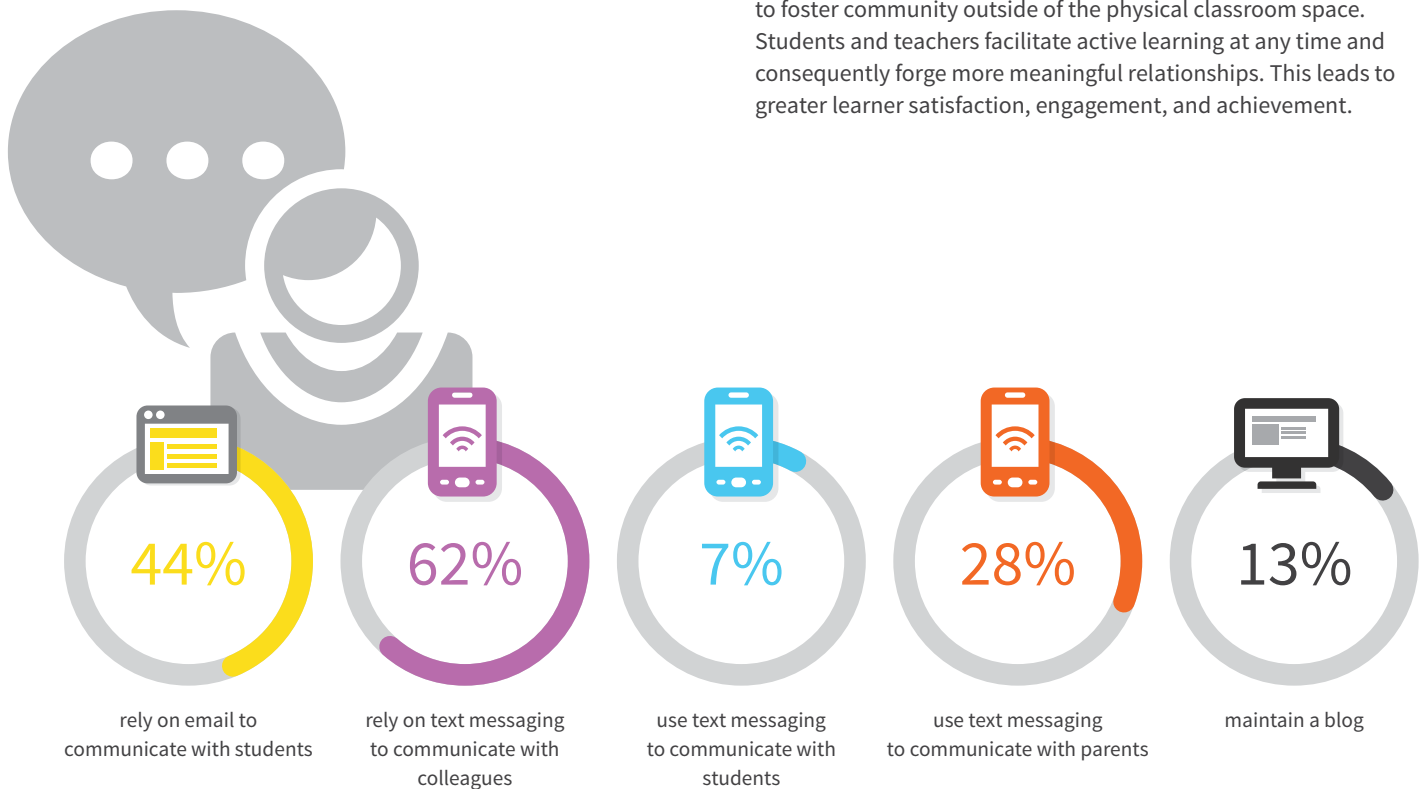
Asynchronous communication tools have a place in any blended or online classroom, but they don't offer the personal experience that synchronous collaboration can supply. Bulletin boards and emails remain essential, but can create too much lag for today's digital natives.

Many districts still rely on these traditional methods of communicating with students and parents in blended learning. According to Project Tomorrow's 2014 Annual Speak Up Survey, K-12 teachers regularly rely on email to communicate with students (44%) and text messaging to communicate with colleagues (62%), but only 7% use text messaging with students to answer questions, only 28% use text messaging to communicate with parents, and just 13% maintain a class blog.³

Synchronous collaboration enables real-time feedback, creating a more personalized learning experience that doesn't just apply to students, but teachers as well. Teachers can adjust the pace of learning based on immediate feedback, have on-the-fly check-ins with students, and take advantage of real-time "teachable moments" in class.

At a functional level, synchronous collaboration enables flexible learning by allowing students to choose how they want to engage with teachers and classmates - be it web conferencing, video conferencing, voice, or collaborative work sessions.

There are an abundance of synchronous collaboration tools available to give teachers and students flexible ways to engage with one another. Technologies that provide real-time interaction - like web and video conferencing, and screen sharing - allow students and teachers to get to know each other better and help to foster community outside of the physical classroom space. Students and teachers facilitate active learning at any time and consequently forge more meaningful relationships. This leads to greater learner satisfaction, engagement, and achievement.





Conclusion

The many benefits of synchronous learning are within your grasp. The collaboration tools are readily available and can be easily integrated into existing LMS platforms to create a more comprehensive digital learning environment. And using these tools leads to educational benefits to learners and to financial rewards for schools. So, why aren't more districts striving to create the best possible educational experiences for their teachers and students?

Perhaps culture is the answer. According to Project Tomorrow's 2014 Annual Speak Up Survey, **52%** of school administrators feel that motivating teachers to change their teaching practice to use technology in their classrooms is the greatest challenge in implementing digital learning.² So, to truly integrate synchronous collaboration tools, schools need to think about transforming their culture into one that not only accepts and embraces change, but is also smart about change management. Otherwise we're back to where we began – with schools failing to meet the needs of today's student – in this case by not enhancing their basic LMS offering with synchronous, collaborative tools.



If schools and districts want to put students at the center of their learning experience, they need to have and use the right tools to engage with them, both in and out of the classroom.



Get a full tour!

Sign up for a synchronous learning demo.



Footnotes



1. Staker, Heather, and Michael B. Horn. "Clayton Christensen Institute for Disruptive Innovation." *Classifying K-12 Blended Learning*. Clayton Christensen Institute for Disruptive Innovation, May 2012. Web. 30 Mar. 2014.
<http://www.christenseninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Classifying-K-12-blended-learning.pdf>
2. Annual Speak Up Survey, Project Tomorrow, 2014.
<http://www.tomorrow.org/speakup/index.html>
3. EdNet Insight Survey @2014, Market Data Retrieval.
www.ednetinsight.com/aboutthedata
4. Center for Digital Education.
"The Path to Modern Education: Preparing Your Network for Personalized Learning." 2014
http://info.aerohive.com/rs/aerohive/images/CDE14_WHITE_PAPER%20Aerohive.pdf?mkt_tok=3RkMMJWWfF9wsRonv6zKcu%2FhmjTEU5z16O0lWKewgokz2EFye%2BLIHETpodcMTcBgNL%2FYDBceEJhgyQJxPr3NLtgn29l1RhmqAQ%3D%3D
5. Metro Nashville Public Schools:
Evolution of a Digital District
<http://bbbb.blackboard.com/mnps>
6. Atlanta Public Schools.
Conquer the Polar Vortex: Embrace Virtual Learning Days Using Blackboard,
Blackboard K-12 Innovative Teaching Series, Fall 2014.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Aj0ObSVXCo4>
7. Flipped Learning Network (FLN).
The Four Pillars of F-L-I-P™, 2014.
www.flippedlearning.org/definition

www.blackboard.com/k12
www.blackboard.com/collaborate

Follow us on:



Blackboard®

Copyright © 2015. Blackboard Inc. All rights reserved. Blackboard, the Blackboard logo, BbWorld, Blackboard Learn, Blackboard Transact, Blackboard Connect, Blackboard Mobile, Blackboard Collaborate, Blackboard Analytics, Blackboard Engage, Edline, the Edline logo, the Blackboard Outcomes System, Behind the Blackboard, and Connect-ED are trademarks or registered trademarks of Blackboard Inc. or its subsidiaries in the United States and/or other countries. Blackboard products and services may be covered by one or more of the following U.S. Patents: 8,265,968, 7,493,396; 7,558,853; 6,816,878; 8,150,925