Chapter 8
Synchronous and Asynchronous Tools Optimizing Online Learning in the English-Speaking Caribbean

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ABSTRACT
This chapter examines the effectiveness of asynchronous and synchronous tools used in the online education program at The University of the West Indies Open Campus which is located in the English-speaking Caribbean. The students are adults who are self-directed, goal-oriented and self-motivated learners and are used to the face-to-face mode of delivery. Developers of online programs have applied these learner characteristics to online learning to facilitate students’ success. At first, asynchronous tools such as forums were used to deliver online education at The UWI, Open Campus, but in recent time synchronous tools such as Blackboard Collaborate has emerged and has revolutionized online learning in that they provide more scope for e-tutor and student engagement and teacher immediacy. The blend of both synchronous and asynchronous tools has changed e-tutors’ pedagogical practices, and enhanced learning.

INTRODUCTION
The request for higher education at a distance has led many universities to implement online education to meet this growing demand and to expand the market share of the education business community. This paradigmatic shift to online learning changes how learning occurs and is communicated through the use of synchronous and asynchronous educational tools. Through these tools, universities that have campuses across a wide geographic region can deliver online education almost equivalent to the conventional instruction. The University of the West Indies is one such university located in the Caribbean with islands scattered over 3 million square kilometres within the Caribbean Sea. The Leeward and Windward
Islands are fairly close in proximity to two campuses of the University of the West Indies—St. Augustine in Trinidad and Tobago and the Cave Hill in Barbados. However, these islands are over 1,600 km from Jamaica, where the Mona campus is located (see Figure 1).

Travel from these islands to the Mona campus in Jamaica is usually circuitous, costly, lengthy and difficult. These challenges, together with the demand for online learning and the emergence of information technology that supports interactive communication, have given rise to online learning in the region.

The University of the West Indies (UWI) commenced distance education in 1983 through the UWI Distance Teaching Experiment (UWIDITE). The network linked the three campuses of the UWI in Jamaica, Barbados, and Trinidad and Tobago and the Extra Mural Centres in Antigua, Dominica, and St. Lucia. UWIDITE was the first project in the developing world to use telephone audio conferencing as a principal teaching method. Courses were taught utilizing a combination of print material and teleconferences. There were occasional supplements in the form of video or audio tapes, and some local support by way of tutorials or practicum supervision (Lalor & Stahmer, 1987).

UWIDITE came to an end in 2008 when the fourth campus, The UWI Open Campus, was established to better serve the growing distance education community and to improve the administrative efficiency of distance education offerings. The Open Campus is an amalgamation of the previous Office of the Board for Non-Campus Countries and Distance Education (BNNCDE), the School of Continuing Studies (SCS), the UWI Distance Education Centre (UWIDE), and the Tertiary Level Institutions Unit (Lalor & Marrett, 1986). To date, this campus has 42 physical sites in 17 English-speaking Caribbean countries (UWI Open Campus, 2015), from which it uses synchronous and asynchronous tools to deliver various programmes.

Figure 1. Map of the Caribbean showing proximity of leeward and windward islands to Jamaica