Telecommunication can be divided into two categories: Synchronous telecommunication describes a conversational exchange that takes place simultaneously, such as in a chat room, IM or SKYPE where multiple participants are having a live conversation at a preset time. Data is transferred directly from the transmitter to the receiver. Asynchronous telecommunication describes participants taking part in a conversation that does not occur simultaneously but in which participants post their thoughts and responses at a time that is convenient to them, such as a discussion board. Data is being transmitted intermittently.

Both types have their purpose and distinct advantages and disadvantages. Synchronous communication has the advantage of resembling real face-to-face communications the most. It can actually occur in that fashion if participants have webcams and microphones so participants can rely on audiovisual clues. In a chat room where participants rely on typing on a keyboard the person who types the fastest has the best chance to have his or her input heard best. Slower participants may notice that their answers to a question show up at a point where the conversation has moved on to another subject. Their answer may sound out of place or right out rude, depending on the circumstances. The first problem with this type of conversation is the challenge of setting up a meeting. Depending on the group, experience, attitude, schedule, and disposition of the members, agreeing on a specific date and time can become a challenge since all participants have to agree on a time slot long enough to overcome potential technical problems and for a conversation to take place. Another downside is that participants do not have sufficient time to think about the subject and form cohesive ideas that may better reflect their intellectual capacities. Responses tend to be rash. Frequently it is hard to even read and absorb all the responses. This may have a positive result, though, as in alerting other participants to misunderstandings which can be easily cleared up in this type of exchange. Many participants, especially in a high school setting, may feel more comfortable knowing that no deep thoughts are required. Almost all high school students are so used to texting that communication is instantaneous. Teenagers are also not that concerned about overlapping thoughts because, again, they are used to it from their chat rooms, unlike people who are more used to having a traditional conversation where participants listen quietly to each other’s opinion without interrupting and cross-talking. So the issue that bothered me personally most is less of an issue with the younger generation and should not be played up for more than it’s worth. In this case, a lack of manners actually spells out “advantage”. Grammar and spelling are of minor consideration. Abbreviations and emoticons are commonly used to clarify ambiguous remarks. Conversations can be recorded in form of a transcript. In order to be a success it is important to keep groups small. The more familiar participants are with each other’s background and thought process, the smoother the conversation will go. However, if all participants are friends the conversation may trail off to irrelevant subjects.

Asynchronous telecommunication requires a more general timeframe in which participants are required to respond. The most common form is the discussion board where participants are given a theme on which to reflect and then write their thoughts in a compact, well-structured form of about ten sentences—which is by no means a rule or even a guideline, but more of an observation. After the initial individual posts, students respond to other participants’ postings by agreeing, disagreeing or expanding on these reflections. The advantage is that participants have more time to think about their answers and to research them properly. Spelling and grammar can be corrected before submitting thoughts to the public. Responses are also thought through and arrive at less hectic intervals. If responses are required it is a good idea to have two deadlines in the set-up in order to allow everyone—even the slowest posts—the opportunity to post responses. In school this type of exchange can be useful in many ways. Students would appreciate the opportunity to express themselves in a contemporary fashion. Having a discussion board can make them feel as though they are getting their first taste of what college would look like. Students would be more likely to write a reflection on a reading assignment on a discussion board because it is cooler than the old paper and pencil routine and because an essay would probably be infinitely longer than a reflection. They may appreciate other students’ input rather than the teacher’s. An assignment requiring a response requires participants to deal with a text on a much deeper level than a simple summary or an essay because it requires a change of view, an angle that is desperately necessary for teenagers who tend to be self-centered. The teacher might want to consider curbing the “I agree” responses to 50% to force students to explore an alternate stance at least half of the time and support that opinion with facts. I see the asynchronous conversation as an extremely useful tool to transition teenagers from instant messaging to the adult world of deep conversation and critical thinking.

Both types of telecommunication, synchronous and asynchronous, are a good choice of integrating modern technology into the classroom. Students are already using technology for that purpose but need instruction on how to turn their chatter into meaningful conversations. The form just might win over the substance and encourage even the most apathetic students to be just as verbose about, say, Shakespeare as they are about their friend’s latest hair color. Important is not what the teacher likes and is used to, but what works for the students and what prepares them for the future.