



Question Themes from: *Adapting Quickly to Teaching Online Webinar*

Our presenter, Professor Bill Schiano, provides his insights on the common themes that arose from the questions we did not have time to answer during the webinar.

Managing shy/reticent students

This is a common challenge with online courses. The first thing you need to do is decide how important this issue is to you, and let that determine the remedies you implement. For me, it's essential that all students be engaged in the discussion, including turning on their video camera for synchronous sessions and contributing to the conversations. I see it as central to the success of the course and, more importantly, to their learning and development. My students are in a business school, and planning careers that require being able to engage and speak up in physical and virtual meetings. Here are strategies I often use:

- Make it clear that online engagement is required (technical camera issues are rarely a valid excuse in 2020 – they can use their phones).
- Passionately explain why such engagement is important/valuable
- Warm call students regularly (some before the synchronous sessions, some during).
- Send emails (I use a mail merge to make it seem more personal) to anyone that didn't engage in the first session, expressing my interest in hearing from them in the second.
- Make participation a significant part of the grade, if possible
- Use polls/shared documents/brief writing exercises/chat to help them draw out their ideas, then call on them to expand (this doesn't feel as high pressure as a "pure" cold call).
- Use group work before or during class to prime the discussion

These same techniques also help students from diverse backgrounds, who may not be studying in their native language. Many students reluctant to speak in physical classrooms find speaking in virtual ones easier. The same techniques you use in the physical classroom remain essential, but pay particular attention to speaking pace (yours and your students'); many of us speed up when speaking to a computer.

Breakout groups

Most of the major tools (Zoom, Adobe Connect, Blackboard Collaborate, etc.) offer this functionality. Don't be intimidated by it – vendors provide good, brief, tutorials on how to use the function. Most will also let you set up the groups before the session starts. But in the worst/simplest case, you just input the number of groups, and the system will assign everyone instantly.

I find the ideal size of a breakout group to be in the 4-7 range. You can go larger if the students are used to working in virtual groups (although I'd stay below 10 if you can). I try to pop in on each group if there is time, just to check on progress and ask if they have questions. If you want to keep close

tabs or have a record, you can forbid/disable audio in the breakout rooms, but I typically let them use audio and video in the rooms if it is available. Unless I have a lot of time for the session, I don't do much substantive work with individual breakout groups. If you have a very large class, you probably can't "visit" every group personally. Most tools will let you send messages to groups without "joining" each one.

If you don't have enough students to make subdividing into groups sensible, then take time with them to be part of a single group, or let them work as one group. I find sitting out of a lone group's work entirely awkward. In that case, I usually "sit in" in the role of their manager, auditor, consultant evaluating them, client, etc.

To use the group time well, set a clear task, suggest process(es) that might make them more productive, provide a timer, or regular reminders of time remaining, scope the deliverable so that it will be meaningful and useful, and define the deliverable explicitly.

The Technology

Everything I did in our Webinar used functionality built into Zoom (sharing my screen, chat, polls, Q&A, etc.). I set up the polls in advance. If you want to do more sophisticated sharing, such as showing a video and having them hear that audio, or using your own software for added functionality, most tools have settings to enable that. We were running Zoom in webinar mode, which does not enable participant video, but for a class meeting, you could see many students' videos at once (the limits for how many vary by tool and license). In general, the differences between tools are fairly small and getting smaller each year. All the tools are fairly stable, although they are sensitive to the speed of connectivity and local regulations. These issues change regularly and may require some agility. If you can, conduct a survey or tests before choosing your tool.

For tracking attendance, some tools offer logging functions, but I've found it easier to create a poll and require everyone to respond, then use that list. Or just take screen grabs of the video array or participant list at the beginning and the end of each session.

Timing

Fatigue is a major challenge for participants and faculty. I prefer 50-90 minutes for online sessions. But the reality can be much longer for many of us (140 minutes for me at Bentley). If you go past an hour, introduce as much unpredictability and novelty as you can. If you use slides, don't share them in advance for this reason. Use surprising questions, small activities (writing, problem solving, videos, shared documents, etc.), and groups to break up the monotony. And be sure to offer breaks if you go past 90 minutes. For yourself, get comfortable (if you are standing, consider a mat or other padding) and do anything you can to optimize your energy and mindset. I find online teaching the most cognitively demanding thing I do, so I always try to get as much as sleep as I can the night before, fast the day of, and block a few minutes to myself just before I "go live" to relax and remind myself that I want to help these students learn. For many of my colleagues, it's just the right cup(s) of coffee, their favorite foods beforehand, or perhaps exercise.

Assessment

Remember that your students are not expecting these initial sessions to be perfect. Pay close attention to the quality of their responses and deliverables to see if they are learning at the pace you expect. Record synchronous sessions and watch at least parts of it to spot tendencies you'd like to change. Work with colleagues to review one another's classes. Create a survey for the class to ask how things are going and ask for suggestions for improvements.