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.

Technical Foundations
If you are new to online teaching, the technology can feel overwhelming. Don’t worry about mastering everything by day 1, or even day 30. Focus on the basics and build from there.

1. A learning management system (LMS) course site. For an online course, particularly an asynchronous one, the LMS is our home for the term. And designing it well is an art. If you don’t have the time, technical ability, or design skills to do it from scratch, there is good news. Most LMSs are installed with well-designed default templates you can use without alteration. Even better, it’s very easy for an LMS administrator to create your course site from the template of another course. Speak with colleagues experienced in online teaching to find a structure that will fit your needs. Once you’ve settled in, you can adjust it and make it your own.

2. Students connected to your synchronous meetings. You may have students with limited internet connectivity. In most videoconferencing tools, students having trouble can adjust settings to reduce the need for bandwidth. Lowering the video quality, turning off their cameras, or turning off the course video will usually eliminate the issue. If many of your students are having problems, then consider lowering the video quality or disabling video for everyone (or everyone but you). Have each participant upload a photo in their profile (if available in the videoconferencing tool) so that others see their face, rather than just their name; it makes a surprisingly big difference in how personal the virtual classroom feels.

3. Working technology. Technical glitches are a regular part of teaching online. Your students are used to these in online courses and in their daily lives. They won’t hold them against you, even if you cause some of them, as long as you show that you care about it, and you manage the process to address it. That process might be you fixing it, or just articulating a plan. And sometimes the plan is “we’re going to ignore it for now and move on.”

A few things can dramatically lower the chances you will have to cancel a synchronous session because of a technology issue.

- Plug in your laptop in. Dead batteries are a common cause of problems.

- If you have access to a wired connection, use it. They are often faster and more stable than wifi. Or at least have it ready as a backup plan.
• Keep your phone with the videoconferencing app installed handy. If your computer’s network connection goes down, you can use the mobile network to connect. It’s not as good an experience as your computer, but you can teach from it. Or just inform everyone to take a short break while you restart your computer.

• Have another way to reach your students (email, social media, messaging, etc.) to keep them updated if you have issues with the videoconference.

• Appoint a student in your class (ideally one with a reliable network connection and knowledge of the videoconferencing tool) to take over if needed. Have the student facilitate the discussion until you get back online or supply the student with an exercise to run in your absence.

• Keep spare hardware nearby if you have any (microphone, headphones, camera, cables, keyboard, alternate computer)

**Student deliverables**

You can employ your full repertoire of assessments online, as long as what they need to do doesn’t require them to be in a specific location or having specialized equipment. If an exam requires drawing or manual calculations, students can work on paper, and then send you photographs or digital scans of the pages (nearly any smartphone can easily do the scanning at quite good quality). If you use group presentations in your courses, consider whether you need (or want) the presentations to be synchronous. Students could create video presentations and share links to them. To liven these up, encourage creativity and require them to go beyond narrated PowerPoint.

We need to accept that guaranteeing that all written work is done by the students themselves is not feasible. Of course, this was also true in our physical classrooms. Sufficiently motivated students can find ways around virtually any measure. Wireless and other technologies can make communication virtually undetectable. But we can reduce the likelihood of cheating by:

1. Motivating learning. If students are engaged in the learning, they won’t feel the same pressure to cheat.

2. Fostering a norm of academic integrity. Remind students about your school’s honor code, and why it is important. Some research has shown that having students sign or type out the code may lead to fewer breaches.

3. Making it more difficult.
   a. Don’t ask questions for which answers are readily available

   b. Make slight variations in exams. This will make identifying shared answers easier.

   c. Use technology. For exams, there are software products that enable you to view students’ computer screens, limit what software they can use, restrict internet access, and turn on their camera. Third party services will virtually proctor exams for a fee, or you can do it yourself by holding a videoconference during the exam and watching the video feeds. Some of these solutions will require students have good internet connections and fairly modern computers, or additional hardware such as cameras.
Synchronous or asynchronous
Many schools and faculty are struggling with whether to require synchronous sessions in courses. The flexibility of asynchronous has tremendous appeal, especially when students are located across many time zones and may be experiencing difficult personal circumstances. Here are a few things to keep in mind when deciding on your mix:

- If feasible, survey your students to understand their circumstances.
- Consider recording synchronous sessions for those who cannot attend.
- Don’t underestimate the value of gathering for the students. Some faculty teaching synchronous courses are reporting students staying in the virtual classroom for an hour after class time, chatting with classmates.
- If you make synchronous sessions optional, communicate with students early and often about the value of attending and have contingencies in your teaching plan for low attendance.

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.

**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.