Going Online: R(e)imagining Teaching and Learning webinar series

May – June 2020

Responses to webinar questions

Delivery

In an ideal world, students would have a suite of options to allow them to choose between synchronous and asynchronous learning as the learning task, their preferences and their circumstances require. It's important not to simply deliver, say, a three hour face-to-face lecture online; it won't work well for both technical and pedagogical reasons. Try to move away from a time-bounded conception of the class, and think instead of focusing on the Intended Learning Outcomes and the appropriate learning materials. Several mini lectures of say 10 minutes each might cover the major points you want to make, and could be supplemented with readings introduced by a paragraph or two explaining why they are useful, weblinks, interactive materials, a discussion board, and perhaps a synchronous discussion. It would be useful to consult a learning designer when putting the materials together.

Asynchronous learning means that staff and students may all work at different times, as is the case with email and much social media. It uses platforms such as email, discussion boards, blogs, downloadable readings and recorded resources such as short video and audio talks. Asynchronous learning is relatively easy on bandwidth, which may be useful for students with data issues, including remote and international students. As students and staff do not need to be online at the same time, asynchronous learning has the advantage of convenience and flexibility and allows students time to refine contributions and think about complex issues without the pressure of real-time interaction. It also means that students can revisit material they find challenging. The size of the group doesn't make much difference to the experience. Teaching staff

announce set online 'office hours', which trains students to learn to wait for a response, rather than expecting immediate answers, and might make dealing with student concerns less overwhelming for the academics. Similarly, all questions, except for confidential matters, can be posted to discussion boards, allowing responses to be shared between teaching staff if there are more than one. This also gives students an opportunity to respond to other students' simpler problems, such as questions about what chapter to read. It can be useful to have a specific discussion board for glitches and queries.

Asynchronous teaching is, however, *teaching*. You need to actively teach the materials you post, and not simply use online space as a file repository. If you post an article, video, image or link, be sure to introduce it with a sentence or two to explain why it's there. Small and frequent reminders of the teacher's presence are gold to students: they can be audio, video or text based, and very casual. A two minute video talk shot with your phone and posted as an introduction to an article can make a real difference to a students. Even a chatty paragraph of introduction ('This is difficult, but I think you will find it useful because...') can make a big difference to the reader. Using PowerPoint slides is fine if that's your usual practice but you should record some commentary to explain what's going on.

Synchronous learning allows social interaction in real time and is often more technologically demanding (for example of bandwidth). Examples include videoconferencing, chat and live-streaming of lectures. It can be difficult to manage from home, if participants forget to mute microphones and various interferences can occur. Sometimes these interferences are enjoyable and lead to laughter and group bonding, but they can be stressful for the presenter, such as when [Professor Robert Kelly's small children interrupted a live interview with the BBC in 2017](). Class size is relevant, in that large synchronous classes can be harder to manage.

Good practice is to provide options. If a lecture is live-streamed, it can also be put up as a recorded version, and even 'chunked' for student convenience if your systems allow. Discussion groups in real time can be supplemented by (for example) a moderated discussion board. As well as making the unit more interesting, this allows individuals to learn in a variety of ways and also maximises student convenience.

[TEQSA provides links to a large number of good practice guides and checklists]() to help with the transition to online delivery and to develop a highly engaging online learning environment, including:

- [10 strategies for online learning during a coronavirus outbreak]()
- [9 Tips for successfully moving your face-to-face course online]()
- [What is student engagement in online learning and how do I know when it is there?]()
- [Seven ways to improve students' online learning experiences in your subject]()

Class sizes and participation

The size of online classes is limited mostly by assessment logistics and the number of staff involved. While large and static online units are not popular with students and often have a high drop-out rate, many students report great satisfaction with huge (i.e. thousands of students) but well-designed and well-run online classes. In fact, students may report a more intimate experience in well-managed online courses than in some traditional very-large-lecture halls, where the lecturer is a tiny figure on a distant stage.

Again, the key difference is that successful online units are interactive, well-designed and provide a sense of community. Size is less significant.

To manage large virtual classrooms requires having resources to help students learn to use the technology, setting clear ground rules for synchronous participation (for example, 'raising a hand' to speak, muting of the microphone) and exercises to help students with the technology, for example small tasks involving the use of the web cam, recording and posting a contribution and so on. Again, training in the use of the technology is crucial for staff and students.

Assessment

As in all teaching, assessment in online units must clearly align with the learning goals and accord to the Higher Education Standards Framework and the Course Learning outcomes. When redesigning assessment for an online environment, staff should check to ensure that constructive alignment is maintained, where 'We start with the outcomes we intend students to learn, and align teaching and assessment to those outcomes.' (John Biggs).

Tools for formative assessment

Learning Management Systems will have their own applications. You might consider weekly ungraded quizzes, word clouds, interactive whiteboards, polling, and so on. These have a game-like quality and students often enjoy them.

Geoffrey Crisp's Teacher's Handbook on E-Assessment provides a useful overview of approaches.

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