

Going Virtual Quickly: Tips for Successful Interaction

I'm writing this first blog article to offer some tips for providing a quality virtual environment for student learning, both from my reading of literature in this area and from my own online teaching experience. Before I begin, let's get the "elephant in the room" addressed: moving courses that were formally face-to-face to the virtual environment is no easy task! (especially in a limited time frame!) But the good news is that the positivity of your students' online learning experience this semester will be based more on the quality of interactions you have with them than how many tech tools you try to learn! I've rarely heard any student say "Wow, this was a great class because of all of the technology the teacher used." Typically, when students remember a course fondly, they refer to the time and care the professor showed for them and their learning. So how can you translate quality interactions with your students in a formally face-to-face course to a virtual environment?

Make Time/Plan for Interactions in Synchronous Sessions

One great opportunity for interaction with your students is to use a synchronous teaching option. Using [Zoom](#) (a powerful web conferencing tool), there is an opportunity to have live interaction with virtual students who, unlike in traditional online courses, signed up for the course knowing that they needed to be available during a given time slot. Plus, you can record your live broadcasts for anyone who misses them or for future use (if you want).



Interactivity will be critical as content alone is rarely rich enough to keep an audience's attention. Thus, it is a good idea to pause every 5 to 10 minutes for an interaction. Breaking up a lecture is also critical for retention; people need sporadic pauses to engage with new information and move it from their working memory to their long-term memory. One way that I remember to "pause and interact" is to build in a Q &

A slide into my PowerPoint presentations. This works very well to cue both you and your students that it is time to interact!

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I'm going to share several types of things you can do during those Q & A times, starting with the least time intensive in preparation to the more time intensive strategies. All are beneficial, so please consider your comfort level, preference, and time, when deciding what might work best for your classes.

Least Time-Intensive Strategies

A simple interaction is to ask the class a question and solicit answers either via the chat function in Zoom or by audio. Just make sure to tell students to mute themselves when they are not speaking to avoid a cacophony of noises (you can also use “mute all” in Zoom when you move back to your non-Q & A slides). You can also have students use the “reaction” tools under “Participants” to click “Yes” or “No” options, but these take more monitoring time for you, and may not be worth the extra effort. I generally find that the chat and audio options work best for my classes.

Moderately Time-Intensive Strategies

Another option for interactivity is to use the [Polling feature in Zoom](#). The polling feature allows you to initiate poll questions (single choice – one answer or multiple choice – can choose more than one answer) throughout your session (and later download the results). You can also share the results of each poll question “live” with your class to use for discussion about incorrect answers chosen (good review activity) or which ideas were more popular, etc. The items can be practice questions to gauge concept understanding or just to engage the class in a discussion of personal opinions or thoughts on the topic. Polling does require that you create your poll questions PRIOR to your synchronous Zoom session (so that you can launch them during your session); these are not something you can do on the fly! You can set up the polling responses to be anonymous or not; you would NOT want to make them anonymous if you want to be able to use the data for attendance.



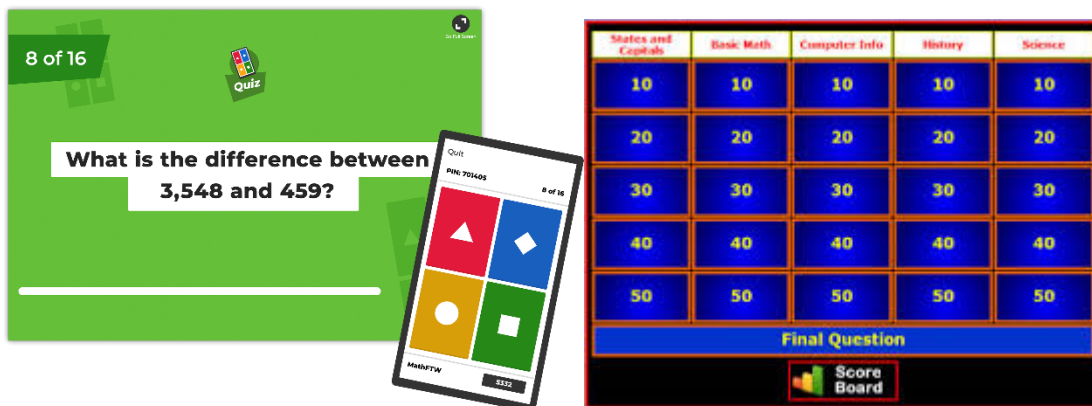
One of my favorite ways to engage my lab class (that went from face-to-face to online this semester due to COVID-19) is to create an activity (or use an existing one!) that students can complete together in groups using Zoom's [Breakout Rooms](#). My students have responded favorably to this option, saying it feels “close to” the group work they used to do in lab. Caveat: I do have the advantage in that my lab class is about Research Methods and Stats and doesn't require any equipment that other science lab courses might.

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Breakout Rooms can be fairly easily done by letting Zoom randomly put the students into the number of groups you want (e.g., if you have 25 students in the class and choose “5” groups, Zoom will put 5 students in each of the breakout rooms). If you want to specifically assign the students who will go in each group, that will take more time. The way I use Breakout Rooms is to post the lab activity PRIOR to lab (at least 24 hours in advance) so students can print it or download it to their computer to be able to complete it during our lab breakout time. When we get to that part of lab, I randomly assign them to breakout rooms to do the activity together for X minutes (changing the time based on my guesstimate of completion for that activity). Typically, my breakout times are about 15 minutes to 30 minutes, and I “visit” each breakout room randomly, spending about 5-10 minutes in each. When the time for the breakout rooms is done, they are all returned to the main Zoom room with me and we go over the activity as a class, talking about where they felt confident, what they struggled with, etc., and go over any parts or correct answers they want to check. I typically then assign them a homework assignment similar to the activity, so they can check their understanding of the skills/concepts on their own.

Most Time-Intensive Strategies



Lastly, if you are ready for more “tech,” you can create an interactive game using [Kahoot!](#) or an online [Jeopardy](#) game. This option is fun and adds an element of competition, but if you are using a PowerPoint you will need to switch back and forth between applications to run it. I would recommend that if you want to use a game feature like either mentioned above, that you incorporate it as an ending activity in your synchronous session, that way you will not need to switch back and forth

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between the audience response system (e.g., Kahoot!) and your PowerPoint presentation. You will just need to share your screen of the application open (and have students use their mobile devices for Kahoot!).

Hopefully you've enjoyed reading about these options for synchronous interactivity with your students. Remember: Choose what works best for you and your students – even the less time-intensive options presented can work effectively for engagement! And of course, offering online office hours via Zoom also gives your students an opportunity to interact with you on a regular basis!

Until Blog #2,

Shelli

Note: A few parts were adapted from John Orlando's (2020) <https://www.teachingprofessor.com/covid-19/taking-your-classes-online-in-a-flash/>