

Exploring New Teaching Modalities: Pandemic Edition

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Abstract

Panic set in as soon as I learned I was assigned to teach a synchronous online class. So many questions raced through my mind. What do I do as a two dimensional figure on the other side of the screen? How will I make sure that I am able to share the content I need to in the time allotted? Will it be the same experience (or close) to what I offer in a face-to-face class? How do I do this? Where do I start? This paper seeks to answer some of these pressing questions for anyone tasked with teaching a synchronous class.

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“I have assigned you an online synchronous class next semester.” Upon reading this sentence, I felt immediate panic. Over the past 18 months, there have been quick changes to modalities: from seated to online, from online back to seated, and sometimes both in the course of one semester. Some faculty had to teach classes they had not taught before. Others had to teach more classes than in previous semesters.

Prior to the pandemic, I taught both seated and online asynchronous classes. Teaching online in a synchronous environment, while on my radar to tackle at some time in the future, was not in the

forefront of my mind. It did appear, though, that there was a demand for real time instruction. Although a bit apprehensive, I was ready to take on the challenge of trying a new modality.

Teaching an online synchronous class, while more similar to teaching in the classroom than asynchronous, is a different experience. Allow me to share some of my *lessons learned* from teaching synchronously.

Be You and Be Present.

After overthinking about teaching synchronously for an inordinate amount of time, I decided to reach out to three of my colleagues who had already taught in this modality. Mind you, they had not taught the class that I was slated to teach; nonetheless, they gave me a good feel for what to expect. One trusted colleague keenly observed that in this environment, students want *you* for the synchronous classes. They want a live, visible, speaking person to whom they can ask real time questions and get immediate answers.

I did find this observation to be highly accurate. I had students who logged on early to class, just to chat with me or ask me questions. There were some students who reported that communicating with me and their classmates during class was the only interaction they had outside of their home. Even when I used PowerPoint or showed a brief video, I still kept myself on camera (as

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technology would allow) so students could see me. I also allowed them to get to know me, probably more than I would have in a seated class.

Technology

There are always technological concerns, regardless of modality. I did test out the software we were using well before class started, but it is not enough just to know how to work the technology from the faculty end. It is helpful to be able to troubleshoot any minor issues students have with accessing the class; otherwise, solving these issues eats up class time. I did send out a link to the online space we would be meeting in a few days before class started and encouraged students to go into the online space to test out audio, video and microphone use, and a few did. I provided students the contact info to IT if they had major problems. That way, any issues could be worked out ahead of time.

During class meeting time, it was helpful to use interactive technology tools. It was a simple and easy way to monitor engagement, and it served as a way to give a quick formative assessment on the content being presented or prepared for that day's class. Similar to the technology used for the meeting space, it is imperative that faculty members have some knowledge of the technology issues faced by students with some of these tools and be prepared to quickly help.

Creativity

We have all had to change an approach to a topic or change content at the last minute. The same situation applies to synchronous classes. There will be students who are unprepared for class, and whatever was planned will not work without that preparation. Beyond that, any exercise or activity that has been done in the classroom may take slightly longer in the online environment, or not.

For example, I had a whole class exercise that I used in my seated classes that worked well. It was the best way I had found to teach this specific point. However, it could not be translated online in the same way, as I quickly learned. The workaround that I developed on the fly took far more time online than I would have liked. Conversely, I found that a major component of my class was far more efficient synchronously online than it was seated. Student

presentations that would take three classes to accomplish only took one synchronous class!

Engagement

In a seated class, it is somewhat easy to monitor engagement. It is a bit more challenging online. Although the attendance may appear better (at times) in a synchronous class than a seated class, there is more effort involved to keep students engaged. In a seated classroom, a faculty member can wander the room while speaking and make eye contact with students. In the online environment, not every student is comfortable with having their face showing on the screen. Also, depending on the meeting software, the number of students that can be seen from the faculty side may be limited. Generally, I tell students that if I see they are not participating I will send them a private chat message, and they are expected to respond. It becomes very obvious in these activities when someone just has the class *on* but is not participating.

Although I have been teaching for multiple years, I learned from this experience that I have more learning and more exploring to do. While the questions of how to start and what to do may always be present when faced with something new, sometimes it is best just to push forward into it and learn along the way. I look forward to teaching more synchronous classes in the future if students ask for them, especially now that I have had the opportunity to try one out. None of us knows what the future holds as far as how we will be teaching, but as we continue to add to what we know about how students learn, I think we can expect some exciting future modalities to explore together.

Author's Note

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