

Strategies for teaching online and in person simultaneously (opinion)

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To adhere to social distancing guidelines within classrooms, many colleges and universities that are planning to have students back on their campuses are offering concurrent classrooms in which professors teach some students in person and others simultaneously online. Under those circumstances, professors can feel overwhelmed by attempting to cater to two audiences and worry that the online students may have a diminished learning experience.

In this article, we outline six strategies to promote meaningful engagement for online students while at the same time providing a rich in-person learning environment. Fundamentally, professors can take one of two approaches with their distanced students: they can simulate the in-person experience or differentiate online engagement.

First Approach: Simulate In-Person Experience

The basic premise of this approach is to make the online experience feel as similar as possible to the in-person experience by integrating across modalities. Here are three strategies that ensure balanced student engagement regardless of setting.

No. 1: Chat mods. Online students can struggle to get their professor's attention over the more visible students in the classroom, and introverted students -- especially in an online setting -- may lose out on participation altogether. Online contributions need to carry the same weight as those in person to achieve a balanced learning environment.

To ensure that happens, assign chat moderators, or chat mods, to filter questions or other quality contributions from the online platform's chat. Already knowing which student is designated for this role for the day eliminates the time spent searching for an online student willing to speak and allows for smooth transition and curation of the best student contributions. Rotate this role among the students who attend online, potentially partnering two students per class session to serve at a time if necessary. Include specific checkpoints in your PowerPoint slides or lecture notes where you will purposefully elicit the chat mods to share with the class.

For this strategy to work, of course, online students need to provide content for the chat mods to filter. Assigning participation points can increase online student engagement and quality. The online students can earn points for contributing a question or example via the chat, and the chat mods can earn points for their successful presentation of the most popular or insightful contributions to the class at large. You can also save the chat contributions through default settings for easy grading after class.

No. 2: Breakout rooms with deliverables. Breakout rooms allow for peer-to-peer conversations online akin to those that occur in a live classroom. However, online breakout rooms are harder to monitor than small group discussions in the classroom. How can instructors make sure students are on topic while online?

Have a clear deliverable from the group. Sometimes the deliverable may be the same for in-person and online groups; other times, it can be effective to give groups different objectives and let them know it. That way, the online students will be aware that their group's outcomes are distinct contributions to the larger class discussion and their voices are as important as those of in-person students.

If appropriate, you can direct all student groups (in person and online) to upload their deliverables to the learning management system as an assignment or discussion board entry for further asynchronous interaction.

You can then increase cross-collaboration by having students comment on the other groups' contributions.

No. 3: Interactive tools. Polling and quizzing are good ways to engage students in the classroom and online. Most online meeting platforms have limited polling functionality in the system, however, and are poorly suited to serving both students in class and online. Other options that permit a wider array of question types -- such as open-ended responses, word clouds or clickable images -- include Poll Everywhere and Sli.do. Those sites offer free polling services up to a limited number of participants and enable students to ask questions that can be voted up or down.

Kahoot is another popular free option that offers playful, competitive quizzes that encourage student participation in class and online, declaring a winner based on speed and accuracy of responses at the end of a cycle. Kahoot also offers free basic analytics and tracking over time to allow you to review which academic material students are consistently missing and thus requires greater focus in future sessions. Additionally, it can track individual performance, helping you to remediate specific students or to ensure online students are performing as well as in-class participants.

Second Approach: Differentiate Online Engagement

Rather than trying to duplicate the in-person and online experience, this approach accepts that different modalities can lead to different experiences and leans into that as an opportunity. If some students must join class virtually, you can maximize the benefits of having those students on their devices and unmasked. Here are three strategies.

No. 1: Discussion leaders. Given that students in the classroom during COVID-19 will need to wear masks, online students are best positioned to lead large group discussions or presentations. Assign discussion leaders for the day who complete prep work to stimulate student debates or deeper inquiry.

You can accomplish that by having the discussion leaders research outside content relevant to the day's topics and generate complementary student discussion questions. Then, display a discussion leader on the projector screen in the classroom where they can speak to the students and share their own screen with prepared content as needed. Depending on the location and flexibility of your classroom webcam, you may need to facilitate in-class student responses or help relay their comments back to the online discussion leaders. But the students in the room and online will both benefit from being able to clearly see the unmasked discussion leaders.

No. 2: Search masters. Since online students are already connected to the internet, use this strength and engage them in live searches for current events or answers not found in the textbook. Make it a lighthearted competition for the fastest find or the best example procured, with small extra-credit points for the winners.

You can give all online students this task or assign it to two or three of them for the day, just like chat mods. They can share their findings back to the class live during the session, drop them in the chat or post them on virtual whiteboards (such as Miro) or the learning management system for a deeper dive later on. Coupled with the discussion leader ideas above, these strategies can quickly diversify your course content and keep it up-to-date, as well.

No. 3: Reflective summaries/analogies. Consider bookending class with online student reflections that help the class summarize what discoveries were made in the session or how course material applied to their everyday life between class meetings. For added fun and challenge, have students generate relatable analogies or memes. A student once summed up a class session on workforce planning by stating, "Bad workforce planning is like trying to recruit more checker pieces when your business needs to play chess." You can either have them drop those in the chat at the end of the session and read them aloud as class is dismissed or have them submitted more formally for your review. Then at your next class meeting, open with a few of your favorite reflective takeaways to recap the previous session. Keep a

running list of them for the semester, and you will have a wonderful one-of-a-kind summary of the course in this section's own words.

Which Approach?

When determining which of these approaches to use, consider two factors. First, how many students will be online versus in the classroom at a given time? If there are substantial numbers of online attendees (half or more of your class), simulating the in-person experience may be the simpler, less time-intensive solution. It reduces the amount of role assignment and analogy wrangling on a day-to-day basis.

Second, is the course more didactic or more activity-based? A purely didactic course lends itself to the first approach by transforming passive, online learners into active participants engaging with the material in a meaningful fashion. A more activity-based course requires the second approach to enable the online students to experience the same learning opportunities as their in-person peers.

Teaching online and in the classroom simultaneously is a challenge, but using instructional strategies that reflect the educational design of the course can allow both sets of students to have a rich and robust learning experience.

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Author Bio:

Amy E. Crook is an associate professor of management and Faculty Senate president at Belmont University. Travis W. Crook is an assistant professor of pediatrics and director of pediatric medical education at Vanderbilt University School of Medicine.

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