

# Synchronous Online Teaching: Tips and Strategies

## Promote Social Presence

Unlike teaching in a classroom, teaching online leaves us without many of the social connections and contexts we rely on to engage students. Online, we cannot look around the room and check whether students are paying attention or following along as we can face-to-face. Forming a sense of community, or social presence, is therefore even more important in this teaching context, and taking time to do so has been shown to improve students' perception of their learning and satisfaction with the class.

### **Clarify online classroom expectations and roles through community agreements.**

If learning in an online environment is new for you and for your students, consider having a discussion with students about how to translate your classroom norms from the face-to-face classroom into your online space. By building these community agreements collaboratively with your students, you and your students will be more invested in using the online classroom as a shared space. Topics to address include use of microphones, webcams, and chat features; protocols for interacting and engaging during online activities; and ways to seek help with technology.

**Encourage webcam use.** Listening to a disembodied voice over slides can be very disengaging. Similarly, having a conversation without seeing the person on the other end removes many of the social cues we rely on to understand one another. For these basic reasons, using a webcam for discussions or other interactive activities can improve engagement and learner satisfaction. However, keep in mind the limits of the online environment. Some things that may make sense to you and your students locally, such as making gestures or pointing at something on your screen, may make no sense when you are interacting online.

**Create opportunities for students to interact informally** as they would in a face-to-face classroom. These bits of small talk or fun can go a long way in helping build community over distances. This can be done quickly through icebreakers or activities that students can do as they enter the online classroom right before class or as class begins.

## Create an Active, Student-Centered Environment

Without the non-verbal cues of the face-to-face classroom, active learning becomes an even more important tool to help students demonstrate learning progress and for us to provide feedback on their learning. Creating an active, student-centered classroom environment will also help keep students more engaged and motivated.

**Translate your favorite face-to-face activities to the online space.** Though not everything will translate directly, the online classroom provides many analogues that help you can use to get students to engage in their learning and with each other. For example, try using **breakout rooms** for small group discussions before thoughts are shared out over webcam in the main room; use **polls** in Zoom or via PollEverywhere as

a digital clicker system; or use the **chat** for a class brainstorm. Introducing even small, informal activities throughout your class session helps keep students more engaged.

**Encourage collaboration** through shared note taking using **Google Docs**, or group generation of questions to be answered by instructors or other students via **chat**. Increasing opportunities for you and your students to exchange ideas in real time will help further motivate students to participate in your online class sessions. **Model collaborative interactions** for your students to help encourage productive participation.

**Define learning objectives and participation.** Communicating learning objectives to students helps to keep them focused on what they are learning, and will help you and your instructional team determine what is most important to do synchronously online. Use your objectives to consider what should or can only be done when your class is meeting and what might be movable to out-of-class videos, homework, or activities. Similarly, defining what participation looks like will help your students make progress towards these learning objectives, and allow for you to give feedback on engagement.

## Teach as a Team

If you are working with Teaching Assistants (TAs) to facilitate your online course, you can share responsibilities like communication, discussion facilitation, and possibly low-level student technology support. If you are teaching as an instructional team, it will be important for you to have clearly defined roles and a tactical game plan.

**Define teaching roles and make the roles clear to students.** If you have an instructional team (e.g. co-instructors or TAs), determine the roles that you will play during class. Two such roles include the instructor who leads the class (providing the main voice and being the person on camera throughout the learning experience) and the instructor who supports the lead instructor (helping to answer questions on chat, to set up any online tools (e.g., breakout rooms, polls), and to assist with troubleshooting if students have any problems). If you use breakout rooms, the supporting instructor or TAs can also help facilitate small group discussion. Making these roles clear to students is helpful so that they can engage the appropriate person if they need help.

**Create a clear lesson plan and class outline.** Creating a class outline that signals to your instructional team and to your students what technology, tools, or platforms they will be expected to use as part of class is also a good practice. This helps signpost to students what is coming up, and transparency about technology use gives them an opportunity to prepare so that they are ready to engage once the activities begin. Additionally, if you are shifting roles throughout the class period, a clear lesson plan will make sure that your team knows when and how these transitions occur, and when during class students may need assistance.

**Check your tech and test your activities with your team.** Making sure all technology is working well is even more important online, when the whole class is relying on

technology to enable interaction. Test any external tools that you may be using on multiple devices, if possible. Also test out activities with your instructional team, and get their feedback in order to best assure success when running the activity with students and to help get your team all on the same page. Once you know how you would like your activities to work, encourage your students to check technology and practice using it so that the class experience can be as seamless as possible.

## Start Small, Collect Feedback, and Reflect

Teaching online is likely a new experience for you and your students, and will certainly not be without its challenges. Do not feel you need to use all the tools at once, as that would most likely be overwhelming for everyone. Instead, introduce tools and activities slowly to give you and your students practice. Encourage your students to provide feedback on their experience to help you to reflect, revise, and try again next class.

## References and Further Reading

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- McDaniels, M., Pfund, C., & Barnicle, K. (2016). Creating dynamic learning communities in synchronous online courses: One approach from the Center for the Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning (CIRTL). *Online Learning, 20*(1), 110-129.
- Poll, K., Widen, J., & Weller, S. (2014). Six instructional best practices for online engagement and retention. *Journal of Online Doctoral Education, 1*(1).
- Richardson, J., & Swan, K. (2003). Examining social presence in online courses in relation to students' perceived learning and satisfaction.
- Wei, C. W., & Chen, N. S. (2012). A model for social presence in online classrooms. *Educational Technology Research and Development, 60*(3), 529-545.

## Support

For assistance with planning to teaching online, please request a Columbia Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) consultation by emailing [ColumbiaCTL@columbia.edu](mailto:ColumbiaCTL@columbia.edu)

For assistance with the instructional technologies mentioned (Discussion Tool in CourseWorks, Zoom), please contact the CTL Learning Designer assigned to your school or department.

Find contacts at <https://ctl.columbia.edu/faculty/faculty-contacts/>, or email the CTL at [ColumbiaCTL@columbia.edu](mailto:ColumbiaCTL@columbia.edu).