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TEACHING ONLINE PLAYBOOK



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Note from the Editors

Harvard Business Publishing Education's [Inspiring Minds](#) publishes articles from leading experts on best practices for teaching online (among other topics). In the Online Teaching Playbook, you will find tips and insights from these experts adapted and compiled into a single resource to guide educators through the process of creating, executing, and assessing online courses. Throughout, you will find links to the original articles for full insights and wisdom from these experts. As you tackle the challenges and possibilities of the online classroom, we encourage you to share your own experiences, questions, and best practices with us at editorial@hbsp.harvard.edu.



Foreword

Online teaching is full of opportunity for both students and educators. For students, it opens up access to faculty, students, and learning materials that might otherwise be unavailable. For educators, it offers possibilities for amplifying and enhancing learning with ever-changing tools and online capabilities. Rather than attempting to replicate the face-to-face classroom experience, you will soon find yourself optimizing online technology, tools, and platforms in ways that highlight learning objectives, drive student engagement, and create a successful online course. Starting from a blank course page, the process of building an online class can look daunting. Be assured that resources are available—from your colleagues and administration, from online educator communities, and from the experience of the experts featured here—to start you off on the right foot.

For educators,
online teaching
offers **possibilities**
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The Basics

When planning an online course, any outline of technology requirements must, of course, be tied to your expectations for the class: Does the course content lend itself to a synchronous course, with live online student participation? Is it lecture-based and better suited to a recorded, asynchronous experience, with students interacting via chat whenever they are available? Will the course combine some elements of both? Is group work required? Where are students located? What technology will they have access to? Starting here, you can better evaluate the range of possibilities for technology, tools, and platforms that are available and accessible—including chats and discussion boards, video or audio, whiteboards, polls, and breakout rooms—to support a content-rich and dynamic course.

Tech, Tools, and Platforms

Keep It Simple¹

The best advice for setting up your online classroom? Keep your technology simple and lean. Use common online tools as much as possible.

For instance, educators will often use learning management systems (LMSs) mainly as a mechanism for keeping track of who has access to the course materials, and then provide most of the content via more widely available tools. (However, be aware that the availability of these tools may vary in many countries.)

While you could publish each document on your LMS, the editing features of most LMSs tend to be clunky compared to familiar, online shared tools such as Google Drive or Microsoft OneDrive. So instead, once you edit your documents using these tools, you can then make the files available through the LMS. Or you could set up a shared folder (perhaps using a tool such as Dropbox),



Keep your technology simple and lean. Use common online tools as much as possible.

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which makes it easy to have course folders on your own hard drive that are automatically synched for sharing with students. Some tools also allow students to comment and even edit shared documents. Similarly, blogging tools such as WordPress are elegant options and offer client-side tools for easy editing and interaction.

Again, there are more tools than ever to help you manage the online classroom experience. Just be sure to keep it as simple as possible for students and reduce the tech burden on them and yourself.

Learning Management System

For most students, the first impression of your course will be in the LMS. This technology is your classroom, and you should be as familiar with it as you would be with the physical environment of a traditional classroom. Familiarize yourself with the online course platform before students connect to the course: fully explore the layout, make changes as appropriate, and test the tools you will use. Having full command of your online course platform will improve your self-confidence as you manage the course, make class time more efficient and effective, and improve your ability to troubleshoot issues.²

TIPS FOR SETTING UP YOUR COURSE IN AN LMS

1. First, get to know your LMS.

Knowing how to navigate the LMS before the course begins will make things much smoother throughout the semester; you can then keep your focus on students and their learning rather than technical glitches.³

2. Make your LMS look professional, inviting, and easy to follow.

Give your layout a consistent look—or even a creative design—but keep it as simple as possible. Make sure that every unit (e.g., a case) has the same information elements (e.g., case title, description, assignments, deadlines) in the same places throughout the course. Setting up and reusing a skeleton framework can simplify this process. This makes maintaining consistency in information much easier.⁴

3. Make the most of LMS features.⁵

These vary, but some useful features of the LMS include the following:

- “To-do list” functionality that will remind students about due dates.
- Assignment evaluation processes. You may be hesitant to adapt your own process to the system, but in this case, many LMSs have good processes for assignment evaluation and feedback. You may be able to enter text or audio comments. The LMS may also support automatic distribution of evaluations to students. Be sure to set the system to not publish anything until you have evaluated all the assignments. This saves you queries from students whose papers you have not graded but who have heard grades were posted. It also allows you to recalibrate grades as needed.

[LMS TIPS CONTINUE ON NEXT PAGE]

[TIPS FOR SETTING UP YOUR COURSE IN AN LMS, CONTINUED]

- Plagiarism detection. Turn it on by default, even if you never look at it, as it disciplines the students.
- Bulk downloading of assignments. This allows you to read students' assignments offline.
- Timed publication. Use this feature to make documents, assignments, and other content available at a time you specify. You can do a lot of prep early and still post the next individual discussion segment (or "discussion pasture") at the right time.

4. Have one version of the truth—and many links to it.⁶

It is essential to post and update information in only one place. That way, if you make changes, you simply need to make one update in one place and can be assured everything is current. This also allows you to easily post reminders and pointers to content wherever it may help your students.

5. Be precise.⁷

As in any class, you will have students who will complain about ambiguities in assignments, due dates, and expectations. But in an online environment, where students' access to you can be more limited, clear communication is essential. For example, use the same time zone for all assignments and deadlines, and clearly delineate it in your instructions ("14:00 Eastern Time" or "2 PM PST"). It's also helpful to include link to a time zone conversion tool so there's no confusion for students.

6. Ask around for LMS tricks and workarounds.⁸

Every LMS has its idiosyncrasies, and colleagues and support staff have likely found workarounds and time-saving techniques. Online forums can also help.

Chat⁹

Most synchronous meeting tools also support a chat window for all participants in addition to audio or video.

The chat allows you to see what ideas are being exchanged and highlight what areas spark interest or create confusion. Many synchronous meeting tools also offer you an exportable archive of the discussion.

From a practical perspective, such side channels are likely to exist whether you set up a classroom chat or not. If you don't open a chat in the course, students will inevitably use other forms of social media or communication in its place, but you may not be privy to these conversations.

Of course, the chat window can also be distracting for both faculty and students, so you might consider opening up a chat only periodically during synchronous discussion.

The Whiteboard¹⁰

In a synchronous online session, a “board” will be a portion of the screen under the control of the teacher, and perhaps of the entire class. In some videoconferencing systems, it is just a shared screen; in others, it is a board simulating a physical whiteboard.

Options for using an online board (shared visual space) during a discussion include the following:

Pre-produced slides. In some cases, you can predict many of the issues that will arise and have slides ready for them, in much the same way you might use hidden slides to anticipate questions in a lecture or presentation. This obviates the need to write on the board during the session; however, it could make the discussion seem pro forma to students, as if you had pre-packaged the answers. To avoid this, one variation would be to prepare slides that include only the pasture headers and fill in details from each discussion as it happens.

Live typing. This option has the advantage of legibility and, depending on your typing speed, can be faster than using a traditional board. You can highlight and organize items by creating separate documents, just as you would use separate boards in a physical classroom. For visual interest, you can make use of capitalization, various fonts, font sizes, text colors, and highlighting in most tools. To avoid interfering with your audio, live typing requires a quiet keyboard and good isolation for your microphone.

Handwriting. Stylus technologies have advanced sufficiently that you can write well on many touch screens. This can be the closest analog to a traditional classroom board: you can draw pictures, circle items, make connections, and write freehand. But be sure to test the system you are using for quality and response time.

Polls¹¹

Most LMSs and videoconferencing software have polling functionality. If yours does not, use a dedicated polling application—or even a simple online form or spreadsheet. Polls give you an opportunity to take the pulse of the class on their preparation, opinions, or analysis while also engaging the group. You can craft many polls ahead of time. Polling can also be useful before opening a discussion or moving to a new pasture. Be sure to save your polls in a format that will make them easy to reuse in subsequent iterations of the course or build on the fly when an unanticipated question arises.

Keep your poll questions brief and be as clear as possible. Many tools allow you to see who gave which response, which facilitates follow-ups. This is particularly helpful when your poll has several categories and you want to further engage with students who chose specific responses to each topic.

Breakout Groups

Peer learning offers **more democratic ways to process information** and share knowledge than do hierarchical models of knowledge, in which you control access to information and choose which knowledge to disseminate to students.¹²

Student Collaboration in Breakout Rooms¹³

Within each breakout room, beyond communicating via chat, audio, and video, students can share software to co-create digitally, either by displaying the work an individual group member is composing for everybody or giving other group members the ability to make changes to it, sequentially or simultaneously. Any software students use in your courses can be shared in a breakout room, from drawing and simple text editing tools to full versions of spreadsheets, word processors, presentation software, collaborative diagramming, emulators, and collaborative programming environments.

Communicating with Students During Breakouts¹⁴

As the instructor, you can join a breakout room at any time, just as you might visit small groups in a traditional classroom. You have the same options for pedagogy in terms of how you want to use that ability, but you should check in to identify any technical issues, especially if students are new to breakout rooms. If you prefer to visit groups while they are working, breakout rooms let you do that more efficiently, so more of your time is actually spent in the groups rather than moving between them. Most platforms provide group members a way to signal to the instructor that they would like help.

You can broadcast a message to the breakout rooms, which is particularly useful for letting teams know when group time is wrapping up. Keep messages concise, as they may only appear briefly. Implement a countdown timer in your room if your platform permits it. If not, consider setting one up in your LMS or other site and asking students to open it. Let students know if the chat in the breakout room is limited to the members of the room.

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Master Your Breakout Room Skills¹⁵

Managing breakout rooms is not terribly complicated (see more tips on using breakout rooms in the [Group Work](#) section). But the first step is to get comfortable with—and eventually master—key skills before using these rooms in class for the first time. You should know how to do the following:

- Send students from the virtual classroom to breakout rooms.
- Bring students back from breakout rooms to the central room.
- Send a message to all students during a breakout. What do the students see? For how long? (In some platforms, messages only show briefly.)
- Send instructions to all breakout rooms.
- Send a message to a specific breakout room.
- Visit breakout rooms.
- Pre-load room assignments.
- Manage display names.

- Launch and run all the tools you will use in class. Have a complete list of the tools needed (including versions, if applicable) and be sure these tools are open and running on your computer before class.

Make sure your students practice their skills, too. They should all know how to do the following:

- Use the appropriate tools to create, share, save, and submit the results of their work. This may involve tools within the video conferencing platform, software on students' personal computers, and external cloud-based software.
- Share their screens.
- Send a help request to the instructor from a breakout room.
- Identify their group membership for others; for example, by updating their screen name to include a group ID and setting their background image.



Make sure students know how to use the appropriate tools to create, share, save, and submit the results of their work.

Setting Up Your Space

Your own environment and work area can greatly improve your efficiency and effectiveness.¹⁶

If you're teaching synchronously, make sure you are comfortable before class starts. Decide if you want to sit or stand during the session. Keep multiple colored pens, multiple colored Post-it Notes, a teaching plan propped up, and a clipboard sitting on a tablet stand. During the class, when something occurs to you, you'll be able to jot it down. It might be something you want to do in 10 minutes, a reminder for something else, or the name of a student that you want to call on. Stick the notes on the monitor, trying to always stay on camera. Having that list available is incredibly useful as a reference.¹⁷

If the class is solely asynchronous and participation is through a text-based interface, the main things are a really good keyboard, lots of monitor space, and a comfortable place to sit or stand and work, as well as well-chosen software tools.¹⁸

Hardware

Get a big monitor. Or, even better, two big monitors. Or three. Use the biggest monitor that you have. If you don't have a large computer monitor, use your television set. You're going to be able to see yourself and you're going to be able to see your students if they're sending or streaming video. You will need to see lots of information and introduce it into the discussion in both synchronous and asynchronous teaching. Enough screen real estate increases productivity.¹⁹

Use a good keyboard. If you are doing anything that involves a microphone, make sure the keyboard is as quiet as possible. If you are using your laptop's microphone, use an external keyboard to minimize interference.²⁰

Headset or speakers? Most video conferencing software now has good-quality audio. Decide whether you'll use your speakers or wear a headset. Built-in microphones have improved,

but you may want to invest in a good external microphone, especially if you will be talking to or interviewing someone in the same room. Put the microphone on a stand or a rubber mat so vibrations from the keyboard and desktop are isolated. If you do get feedback, you'll need headphones. Your students should also use headphones to cut down on feedback.²¹

Optimize your visuals. If you are going to use video for recording lectures or for hosting an online class, get a good camera and optimize the lighting as much as possible. There are many tutorials online for good lighting advice. Set the camera so you are looking into it (not looking at your own image or the group) and creating direct eye contact. Frequently, this means setting the camera in front of the monitor. Many people on web conferences look detached or evasive because they are looking not into the camera but somewhere else on the screen—generally at the audience or themselves.²²

Software and Productivity Tools²³

Familiarize yourself with your LMS and video-conferencing software.

Add software to manage the video. If you are using a video camera, there are programs that, for example, allow you to display yourself in black and white or use other effects. Being able to “freeze” the picture so you can locate some information (or sneak off to freshen up your coffee) while someone else is speaking can be surprisingly useful in a pinch.

Consider using a text expander. This software allows you to abbreviate certain oft-repeated words or phrases to speed up your typing (“tc” for “transaction cost,” for instance). Depending on your system, you may need to install it as a special application or create shortcuts or macros.

Keep your system updated, but not on the bleeding edge. Don’t do a big system upgrade just before you start teaching, and don’t introduce new tools to work in combination with the LMS or the videoconferencing system without having tested them first.

Know how to turn off distractions. We all have seen presenters getting pop-ups announcing upcoming activities or emails—sometimes things that are quite private. Before you start the teaching session, exit all unnecessary applications and turn off alarms for your email and calendar. Some online teaching and conferencing tools, such as Zoom, are smart and will turn those off for you. (And remember to turn off the ringtone on your cell phone!)²⁴

Before you start the teaching session, **exit all unnecessary applications and turn off alarms for your email and calendar.**

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Physical Space²⁵

Light the area well. In particular, make sure you have light from the front toward your face so you avoid the “haggard raccoon” look, with dark shadows under your eyes from overhead lighting. An office lamp filtered through a sheet of white paper (using an LED light bulb to avoid a fire hazard) can work well.

Take another look at your video background. Ideally, make the background neutral (for university professors, the ubiquitous bookshelf is, of course, *de rigueur*). If you want to get fancy, you could add curtains or a screen in sharp green behind you and superimpose any image you like as your background (green screening).

Avoid sitting squarely in the middle of the camera frame. Instead, especially when making videos, sit a little off center, about one-third of the way in. This is what many news anchors do, and the effect makes you look a bit more professional—less like a staring amateur in front of a laptop and more like a reflective academic in command.

Sit or stand? Some people are more energetic, engaging, and effective when standing. A motorized desk changes height with a push of a button.

Do what you can to reduce noise. You don’t want hums or background noise interrupting your class time. Turn down your heating or cooling system for a little while if you can.²⁶

Let your household know that you’re on the air. Announce that you’re live with students. This could be as simple as putting up a Post-it Note or a large sign, but always do it. Make sure you’re not going to be disturbed.²⁷

Always check your audio and video *before* you go live.²⁸



Make sure you have light from the front toward your face so you avoid the “haggard raccoon” look, with dark shadows under your eyes from overhead lighting.

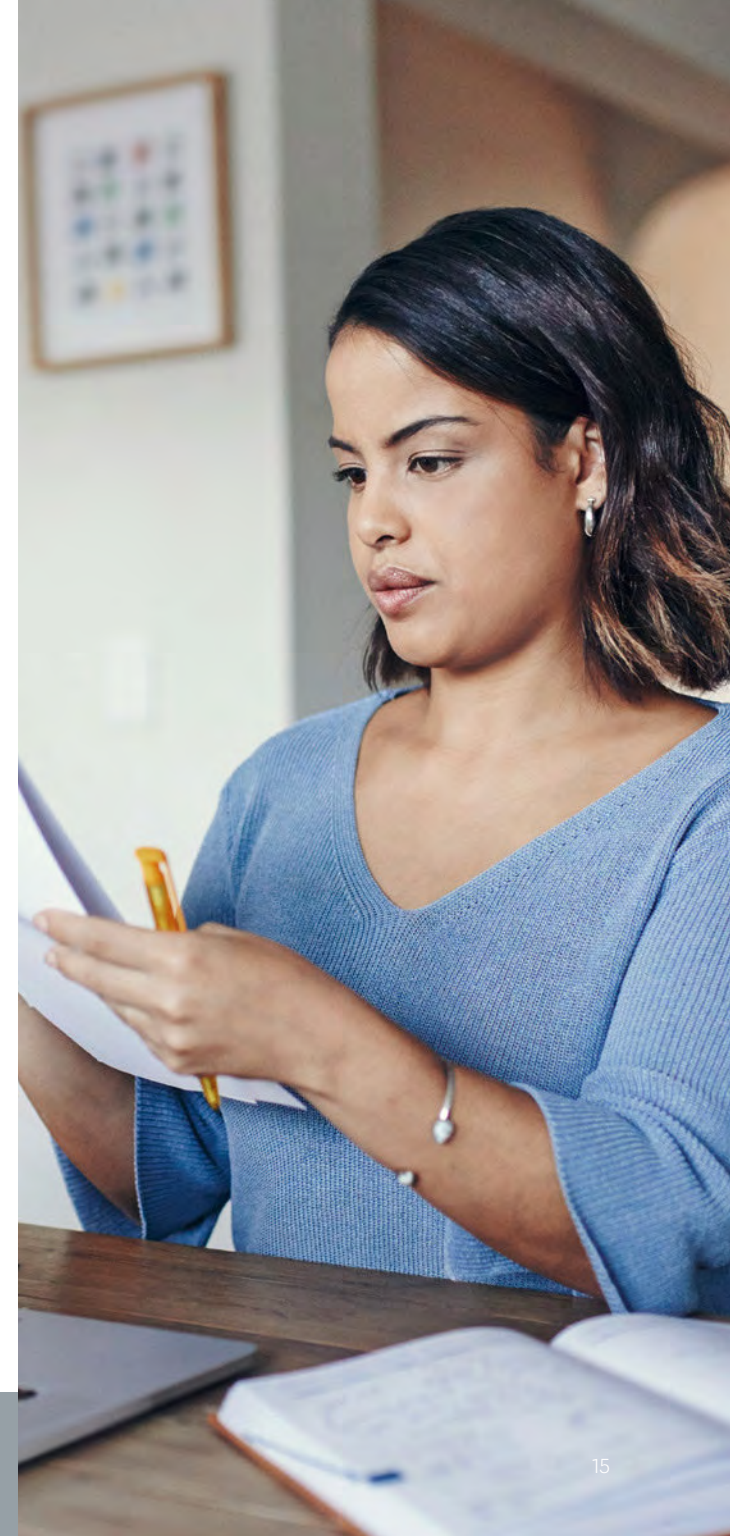
Preparing Before Classes Start

Resetting Expectations: Adjust Your Rules of Engagement²⁹

As you assess your technology options, you will also be revising your expectations of the classroom experience. Teaching online can be exhausting, especially the first time you do it. There is much more to keep track of, it is harder to feed off students' energy, and it is harder to get a read on the room: *how engaged are students today?*

In your planning, take a look at your content and structure to find moments to reduce the cognitive load for the students and yourself. Perhaps add some materials that students really enjoy, even if they don't precisely fit the course. What's boring in a physical classroom will be even harder to teach online.

And because technological limitations are inevitable, expect that you won't be able to cover as much material per class as you are used to. For instance, in a live online class, the pauses that happen after you ask a question and wait for replies will slow things down. On average, you should expect to cover about 80 to 90 percent of the material online that you normally cover in person.



The Online Learning Contract

From the beginning, establish—and perhaps reset—classroom ground rules. Be sure to set aside time for a “class launch” that sets expectations for this new way of learning. Clarify, in detail, how students will work together online. How should they communicate with each other and how often? You can also ask your students what they think and take that into consideration as you establish new norms.³⁰

As in your in-person classrooms, you should expect students not to multitask or check their phones during class. To enforce this in an online course, ask students to use video and keep their cameras on throughout class.

Similarly, you still need to establish the minimum (and perhaps maximum) level of effort you expect from students, and how that has been adapted to an online environment. The minimum constitutes the time it would take students to read and prepare a case, along with whatever involvement and creation of deliverables are required for them to receive a passing grade. The scope of your learning objectives and your choice of pedagogy will be constrained in part by the level of expected student preparation.³¹

The Communication Plan³²

Just as you set expectations for your students’ classroom interactions, you also need to define how you will communicate with the class. And while this plan focuses on your messages, consider whether some aspects of classroom communications could be handled by a teaching assistant, if you have one, or, in some cases, even by the students themselves.

Who: The Target Audience

While many of your messages will go to the entire class, contacting individuals (or a set of students) can be more effective. Personalizing messages to individual students can have an enormous impact, especially early in the semester. Peppering your message with a specific reference about a comment the student made in a discussion and implying whether it is good or bad, and perhaps why, shows that you are paying close attention, helps students adjust their behavior quickly, or reinforces good performance. Among those you may want to contact are the following:

Students who are actively participating.

Acknowledge their contributions and perhaps encourage them to draw out fellow students.

Students who are not active enough.

Contacting them early in the course sends a powerful signal that you are paying attention. Be encouraging and enthusiastic about the value of contributing, in addition to reminding recipients about lost learning opportunities, their obligations to classmates, and any grade implications.

Groups. You may want to communicate with groups individually. Use LMS functionality to make this easier or set up a mailing list for each group in your email.

These messages can be written ahead of time and reused from semester to semester. You can also decide how personalized to make the message—perhaps you don’t want students to know they are part of a group receiving the message. This could be done by individualizing each message (using mail merge features to simplify the process) or using the BCC function in your email client.

What: The Desired Outcomes

Carefully consider what you hope to accomplish with your message. How would you measure its success? Do you want students to take a specific action? Especially in an online classroom environment, the more explicit you are in your goals, the more likely the message will be effective.

Where: The Communication Media

Whatever media you are going to use to interact with the class, be sure to notify students in advance. For instance, many students disable notifications from the LMS to reduce spam. If you are going to use the LMS as your primary means of communication, be sure to let students know so that they will enable the functionality.

If you are going to use social media, make sure that all students have the appropriate accounts. Then be consistent about it. Don't go to the trouble of creating a Facebook group just to post only once during the course. Be sure to make explicit what's required of students. And if you are going to communicate via social media, make students' use of it a part of the evaluation process, if possible.

When: Timing and Frequency

Consider a plan that includes several versions of the same message to increase its effectiveness, especially when related to deadlines. Many of us now rely on software to remind us of things, and it is not unreasonable for students to want the same from the LMS. For example, when will the discussion open? A reminder email a few hours later can be useful to say that the discussion is open and to encourage participation. However, be careful not to send too many messages—you want the students to feel that the responsibility for keeping up with the course and what is happening is theirs, not yours.

How: Conveying Information Clearly

Faculty often assume communications are clear and readily understood, but students may misinterpret them, or students may absorb only one aspect of them. For online classes, you don't get the benefit of blank stares that tell you something was not understood. Consequently, you'll need to focus on clarity in your communications, and repetition may be necessary for student understanding.

Especially in an online classroom environment, **the more explicit you are in your goals, the more likely the message will be effective.**

Special Considerations for Synchronous and Asynchronous Course Time

Synchronous

If your course involves any live online meetings, emphasize the importance of this synchronous learning time. And if you are using the LMS for a lot of asynchronous work, the times that you do require the class to be in attendance together need to be worthwhile. Spending synchronous time on a lecture is wasteful and will frustrate students; instead, use the time together to foster interaction and engage as a group.

Synchronous learning time could be useful to debrief a particularly exciting simulation or to make connections between a few different assignments that show a larger learning arc. Whatever you decide, make sure synchronous time is worth it for both you and your class and communicate that to them ahead of time.³³

Asynchronous

Make the most of asynchronous learning. One of the great benefits of online teaching is the ability for students to engage even when class isn't in session. In fact, many aspects of a course can be done whenever they fit best in students' daily schedules. Watching recorded lectures, reading a case, playing certain simulations, and even responding to some discussion questions does not necessarily have to happen for the entire group at once.

Individual discussion pastures require much longer blocks of time than face-to-face teaching does, depending on the frequency with which students will log in to the system. You also have the opportunity to be more thoughtful about modifying your teaching plan as the class progresses. In an asynchronous course, you can reread the case, do research, consult colleagues, and even sleep on it before taking action in the discussion. For many, teaching an asynchronous course can be less stressful than teaching a real-time, face-to-face one—particularly if you are more reserved during live discussions.³⁴

Leaning heavily on asynchronous learning does mean you will want hard and clear deadlines for certain things (such as discussion board participation), but ultimately it can be a great tool for you and your students.³⁵

Watching recorded lectures, reading a case, playing certain simulations, and even responding to some discussion questions does not necessarily have to happen for the entire group at once.

Classroom Culture and Community

Creating an Effective Culture Online³⁶

Building a great culture for a virtual classroom is both important and challenging: access to faculty is more limited, communication is less personal on screen, and there are simply fewer opportunities for informal interactions among educators and students. Here are three steps toward fostering a more supportive classroom culture:

- Make sure students always feel like they know what's going on. Communication is extremely important: send more emails or announcements, implement one-on-one conversations, and encourage more discussions.
- Take care to ensure that students don't feel like they have less access to you than their peers do. Make sure you're accessible and available to everyone equally. Engage your students more than ever and do it fairly. They need to feel like there's parity among them.
- When you run synchronous class time with the entire group, be sure you're balancing for inclusion and airtime. If you have students who tend to dominate the conversation during in-person discussions, they're going to dominate virtually as well. Call on students who are less inclined to speak up when other students are dominating class time. (For online classroom discussion tips, see the [Discussion Boards](#) section.)



Call on students who are less inclined to speak up when other students are dominating class time.

Building a Virtual Community of Students

The more you can build community, the more your students will feel invested in the course and the more likely they are to engage in the work. Plus, by promoting community among your students, you'll encourage everyone to want everyone else to be better.

There are also benefits to community building that go far beyond the classroom. Many of your students may be missing the connections of being physically on campus or having informal chats in the halls and over coffee; a positive online community can help.

Actively Make Time for Community

A simple but important step: make sure your students know each other. There are tools available in your LMS that foster community by allowing you to build profiles where students can describe their background. Also, encourage your students to chat informally just as they would in a physical classroom—during breaks or before class.³⁷

Establish Clear Community Norms for a Virtual Environment³⁸

Set clear, precise, and defined rules of behavior. Like any community, a good digital community of learning should have a set of rules. Make sure that everyone knows, understands, and respects these rules. For example, set expectations around when and how people can talk or ask questions. Declare that when a student is speaking, everyone else should keep their microphones off to avoid background noise.

Have students use the hand-raising function available on most online platforms, which allows the moderator to “call on” a participant to speak. If you are delivering a lecture, you can also ask students to post their questions in the chat instead of raising their hands. At the end, you can review the posted questions with the class, ask students to comment on the questions, or have some students ask the questions others have previously posted (this is particularly effective for large classes).

Other rules can define preferred times and methods of interaction (such as online forums, chats, video and telephone conversations, or emails) and the appropriate use of polls and emoticons.

Many of your students may be missing the connections of being physically on campus or having informal chats in the halls and over coffee; a positive online community can help.

The Student Experience

As you prepare for your first class, do not overlook how learning has changed for your students; recognize their challenges in this new environment.

Technology and Access³⁹

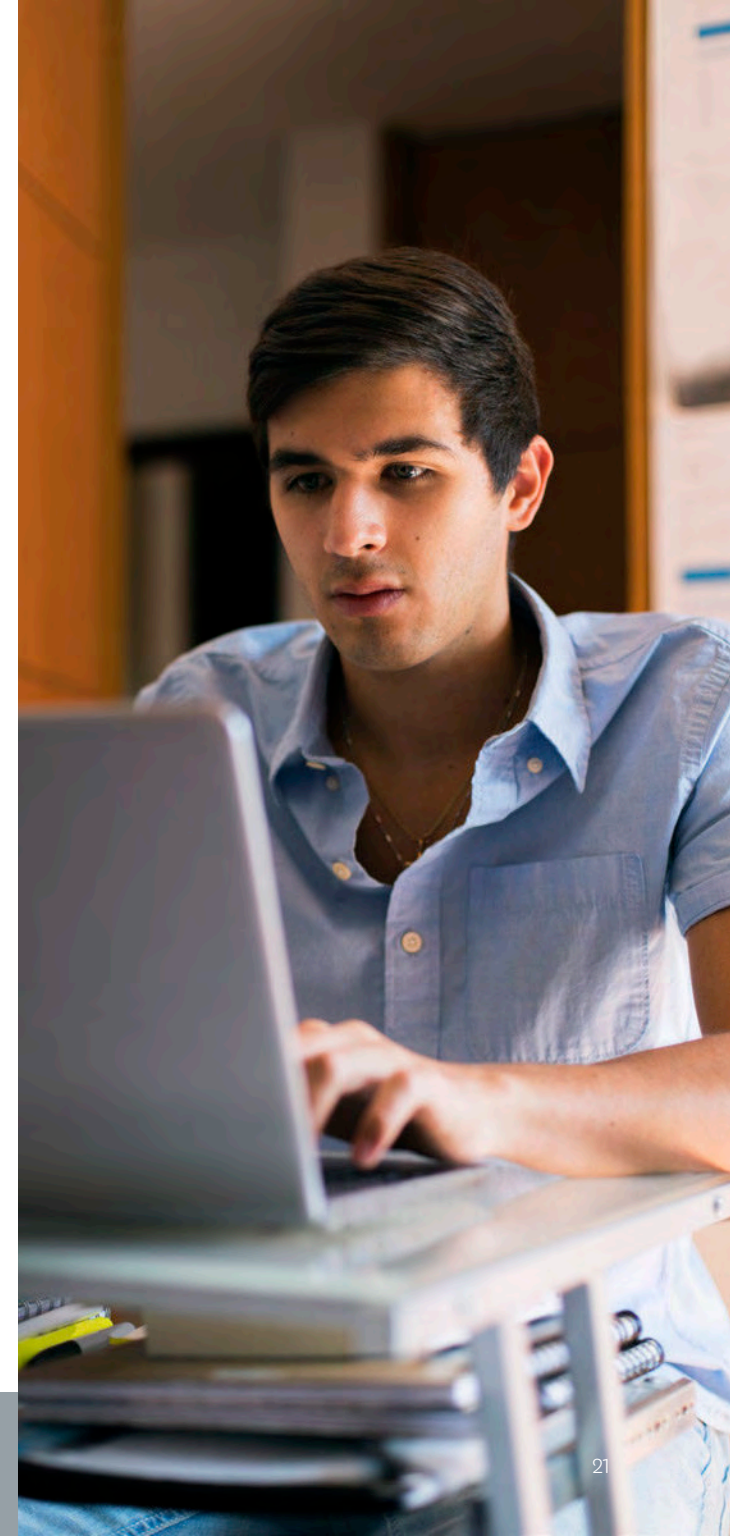
Do your students have the technology they need to fully participate in virtual learning? Does every student have access to a device that can perform the functions necessary for online learning, and does that device have the basic software installed to run classroom sessions?

You don't need to have all the technology answers, but before students join the class, you do need to be a resource for them. Know the contact information for your institution's IT department and direct students to any assistance services they may require. Ensuring that every student has full access to the resources they need and can overcome barriers at home to participate effectively online is critical so that no one feels excluded or left behind.

Barriers That Students Face Online⁴⁰

While inequities exist everywhere, college campuses have at least some equalizing effect when it comes to giving students access to safe spaces and resources, to you as faculty, and to study and learning spaces. The physical infrastructure of a campus and the organization that comes with it serve as stabilizing forces in students' lives. Without that, preexisting inequities are magnified.

Simply noticing a discrepancy in performance can impact performance. Students who have experienced school only as physical classrooms will notice all the ways they are falling short of their typical performance as they adapt to online learning. This might magnify the stress they feel about successfully completing the semester.



The Psychological Impact of Screen-Only Learning⁴¹

Without the benefit of face-to-face contact, educators and students in online-only environments may feel isolated and lonely. If you and your students are accustomed to having unplanned and informal “hallway” conversations before or after class, you may now realize the importance of those interactions to the overall learning experience. Those conversations can have a direct impact on participation and on students’ sense of connection with you and each other, but they can easily disappear in remote environments. Consider setting up avenues to recreate those informal social moments.

TIPS TO HELP STUDENTS TRANSITION ONLINE⁴²

- Consider students’ technology.
- Define and communicate the minimum tech setup you’ll require from them.
- Get them outside help using online tutorials or support from the school, if it’s available.
- Hold a practice session, if you can, during which you talk about the technology but not any class content.
- Have a communication plan that covers all elements of corresponding with students.
- Set and foster norms to help students adapt.

Students who have experienced school only as physical classrooms will notice all the ways they are falling short of their typical performance as they adapt to online learning.

The Educator Experience

Like your students, you may need to adapt to online learning—and these skills take practice.

In synchronous learning, for example, you have to overcome the distance the camera introduces between you and your students, and it will require you to be larger than life. First, don't forget to look at the camera. If you arrange your setup so that you're looking into the camera by default, that's going to help a lot. And second, sell. Be a shameless salesperson when you're teaching a course; there's nothing wrong with that. If you don't sell, then students aren't going to be fully engaged. Show your passion. Maybe it's with hand gestures and vocal intonation. Maybe it's just with the conviction of your words.⁴³

Set the Right Tone⁴⁴

Tone has a tremendous impact in an online course. As in the traditional classroom, you can set a relatively formal, intense tone simply by wearing a business suit, or change the class atmosphere with more relaxed attire. A conversational tone can set a warmer atmosphere and foster a sense of community. Decide how you want your class to feel. Does it fit with your style? With your school? This will help you decide on a number of things: what the assignments will look like, how students will introduce themselves to each other, how you're going to build a community, and what it will be like to participate in that community. Is your class going to feel like a business meeting, friends conversing, or something in between?



Because some people need preparation time to feel comfortable and presentable on video, let them know ahead of time if video is preferred.

There is no right or wrong here, but you want to make that choice overtly and consciously rather than having it just evolve. It will also be helpful to take stock after the first or second class to see how things are going so you can adjust accordingly (see [The First Few Classes](#) section).



Make It Personal⁴⁵

Virtual settings can feel quite impersonal because of the physical and psychological distance, so you need to be creative. Some educators like to arrive to their online meeting early so they can greet people as they pop up on the screen and engage in a bit of friendly small talk before class begins. Encourage students to turn on their video functionality, if possible, to enhance the personal connection. Because some people need preparation time to feel comfortable and presentable on video, let them know ahead of time if video is preferred.

Try to use students' names when referring to them, and invite them to take the floor and participate if they feel comfortable doing so. With a chat function that indicates who said what, alongside video images with students' names, personalized facilitation becomes much easier.

Convey Warmth and Presence⁴⁶

Typically, when in front of a screen, you tend to look passively—whether you're sinking into the couch to watch a favorite TV show, a webinar, or a how-to video. But when you're facilitating an online meeting, you have to adopt an engaged, active persona in an environment that doesn't necessarily lend itself to that.

There are a number of little things you can do to create warmth virtually. For starters, make eye contact with your participants by looking directly into the camera as often as possible. This can be hard to remember to do, especially when the image of your participants may be away from where the camera is on your computer. If you can manually move that image as close as possible to the camera, you can better make eye contact and see their response.

As you develop your online courses, think about where you can promote a more relaxed environment and plan some lighter activities for students to enjoy.

Just like in-person settings, online environments have their own distinct cultural rules and norms, and not all settings are the same. For example, there are some contexts—say, an undergraduate class or a meeting with collaborators on a consulting project—where it would be fun and appropriate to turn the camera on your dog laying by your feet on the floor. It's a great way to create a sense of warmth and connection. However, you probably wouldn't use the same tactic during a virtual keynote talk to a corporate audience or in an executive education presentation. In these more formal settings, start with a personal story, a poll question, or ask people to write in where they're calling from—all in order to create a personal vibe that's still in line with your setting.

Use Humor to Reduce Tension⁴⁷

Humor and laughter can **ease tensions, promote health, and strengthen human connections** during periods of uncertainty. As you develop your online courses, think about where you can promote a more relaxed environment and plan some lighter activities for students to enjoy. Consider using memes or other images to help infuse some humor into class. For example, memes can communicate concepts and ideas to students in a humorous way. It is, however, important to respect cultural differences, which may be more difficult to perceive in digital environments.

Manage Your Time⁴⁸

Effort for faculty is not linear throughout the semester—it requires more time up front than in the middle or at the end. The effort required early in the course will vary depending on the tools used and the online experience both you and your students have had. If you are teaching the first case class your students have had, or if you are using cases in a way that is different from what the students are used to, you will need to invest time in helping students adjust to the process of case discussion.

The first step is to document how much time you expect to commit to your next course; then keep an informal log of the time you really spend and what you are doing for the first several weeks. Once you have the data, look for potential efficiencies, consider how you are allocating your time, and decide whether that distribution is in line with your goals for the course. You may be surprised by the breakdown of your time. Seemingly small efforts to check on a discussion forum can add up quickly. Your time may be well spent, but there might be even better ways to spend your time on the course.

Remind yourself that lectures are generally quite effective online, even if you receive no confirmation until well after the fact.

Get Used to Delayed Feedback⁴⁹

Presenting virtually inevitably means learning to become comfortable—or comfortable enough—with a different mode of receiving feedback. For example, when delivering a lecture, you typically receive no real-time feedback about how you're doing. No nods of the head, no laughs from the class, no opportunities to move around the room and engage with people in the crowd. In an online setting, you can deliver an entire 30- or 40-minute talk and

still, by the end, have no idea about how well the message was received. Learn to anticipate these feelings and remind yourself that lectures are generally quite effective online, even if you receive no confirmation until well after the fact.

The effort required early in the course will **vary depending on the tools used and the online experience** both you and your students have had.

Maintaining Student Engagement

Ask Good Questions⁵⁰

It is easy to see how engaged students are and how they react to discussion questions. Unfortunately, it is much more difficult to gauge their reactions in an online classroom. Because of this, it is important that you ask questions—whether in a synchronous discussion or on a class discussion board—that can spark complex conversation. Vary the types of questions you ask and try to make them as immersive as you can. Those intentionally provocative questions can be useful to instigate lively discussion.

Fight Fatigue⁵¹

Fatigue is a major challenge for educators and students when teaching and learning online. If you go past an hour, introduce as much unpredictability and novelty as you can. If you use slides, don't share them in advance for this reason. Use surprising questions, groups, and small activities (writing, problem solving, videos, or shared documents, for example) to break up the monotony. And be sure to offer breaks if you go past 90 minutes.



Make It Interactive⁵²

No matter what, try to make classes as interactive as you can. One of your goals when teaching online is to keep students from tuning out. Finding ways to engage students that are also pedagogically meaningful is essential to online learning.

That said, if you're planning a lecture without any interactive elements, then you'd be better off recording the lecture and making the course asynchronous. Don't make students log in at a set time just to listen to a lecture.

To make a synchronous class more discussion based, make it a point to interact with students at least every 15 minutes. Set time flags to remind yourself to take a break from speaking and ask questions or run polls. Use the technology that you have available to do some of the following:

Interact with your students

through audio and video.

Share your screen so that the whole class can view your PowerPoint slides or other presentation materials.

Handwrite notes or draw on screen using a blackboard substitute such as a tablet. If you don't have a tablet, you can type on a keyboard (a quiet one!) or use voice recognition.

Open up a chat. Chat windows are a lot to keep track of, but they are a powerful tool to allow students who aren't speaking to bring up ideas or follow up on previous points. Be sure you occasionally refer to what is being said in the chat comments so students know you're incorporating their observations into the discussion.

Use breakout groups. With most online teaching platforms, you can set groups, push a button, and then instantly get students into virtual subgroups.

Warm Calls or Cold Calls?⁵³

This will depend on the format of your class, to some extent. Whether you are teaching live or asynchronously, warm calls work both publicly and privately. Calling out individual students can be useful. This can be done in discussions directly, as a cold call during a synchronous session ("Jeffrey, what do you think?"). In an asynchronous class, calls are warm at best, as students have time to think before responding. But these calls can be done either publicly in front of the group or privately via email or other channels. (In asynchronous classes, you might use timer-based tools that require student responses shortly after they receive a prompt.) Private calls to students can be particularly helpful when drawing out reticent students or trying to change a student's tone in a discussion.

Managing Shy or Reticent Students⁵⁴

This is a challenge with any course. you'll need to decide how important participation is to you, and then let that determination steer the remedies you implement. All students must be engaged in the discussion, including turning on their video camera for synchronous sessions and contributing to the conversation. It is central to the success of the course and, to students' learning and development. Here are strategies to use:

- Make it clear that online engagement is required. Technical camera issues are rarely a valid excuse in 2020—students can always use their phones to join a videoconference.
- Passionately explain why such engagement is important: it's good for the class and it's an important practice for them before they embark on their careers.
- Warm call students regularly—some before the synchronous sessions, some during.
- Send emails (a mail merge to make it seem more personal) to anyone who didn't engage in the previous session. Express your interest in hearing from those quiet students in the next session.

- Make participation a significant part of the grade, if possible.
- Use polls, shared documents, brief writing exercises, or chat to help draw out students' ideas. Then call on individual students to expand their thinking—this doesn't feel as high-pressure as a pure cold call.
- Use group work before or during class to prime the discussion. You can assign groups to present the opening part of class, for example. Or you can delegate extra responsibility for the class discussion to a group to ensure you will at least have a small subset of students who are well prepared.

These same techniques also help students from diverse backgrounds who may not be studying in their native language. Many students who are reluctant to speak in physical classrooms find speaking in virtual ones easier. The same techniques you use in the physical classroom remain essential, but pay particular attention to speaking pace (yours and your students'); many of us speed up when we are speaking to a computer.

Leveraging Chat

The chat function enables people to comment in real time as you're presenting and can be a useful marker of student participation in discussion. For example, you might say, "Anita just wrote in a great point about cultural differences in group dynamics—and it seems Juan also has a similar point to add. Do either of you want to explain to us your points in a bit more detail?" One big advantage of virtual settings is that they lower the bar for participation; you often get thoughts and insights from people who ordinarily might not speak in an in-person environment.

9 TIPS TO KEEP YOUR STUDENTS ENGAGED⁵⁵

- 1. Set high standards for your students.** Expect things from them and they will rise to the occasion. If you expect that they're not going to do that much, then guess what? They're not going to do that much.
- 2. Allow for time lag.** Internet connections are not always going to be perfect. When you speak, your timing is going to be off a little bit, so don't try to accomplish quite as much in the same amount of time. If you ask a question, pause for longer and give students a chance to hear it because there may be a delay.
- 3. Keep a class list visible.** You can't rely on the participant list in your online platform—it will be constantly changing depending on who logs in, who logs out, and who's speaking. This can be very hard to keep track of, so having a separate class list handy—even if you need to print it out on paper—will simplify this for you.
- 4. Engage a range of students.** Make sure that you call on different students. Don't let the same voices dominate.
- 5. Use warm and cold calls.** Use warm calls by letting students know ahead of time that you plan to call on them. You could say, "Joe, I'm going to call on you in a little bit." Or email students ahead of time: "Ann, I'm going to ask you to talk about this topic." You can also cold call students in a live session. If cold calling produces more anxiety in your students than you are comfortable with, warm calls can still be very effective.
- 6. Consider the chat window.** You can open a chat window for certain periods of time to have an intense discussion and get a lot of ideas out quickly.
- 7. Interject discussion at least every 15 minutes.** Again, this will wake students up and reengage them or bring them back if they've drifted. Accept the fact that some of them are going to drift, as that's just what happens with online teaching.
- 8. Create polls in response to discussion.** You can create polls ahead of time to use during class or write them on the spot if something interesting comes up during the discussion. For instance, if someone raises a point you hadn't thought of, conduct a quick poll to see what the entire class thinks about that issue.
- 9. Summarize.** You may not do this very much in a traditional classroom, but when online students' attention fades, have some way of summarizing what you've been discussing. Even better? Have your students do it. Call on them and say, "Can you tell us what we can learn from the last 20 minutes of discussion?"

The First Few Classes: Fine Tuning Participation and Performance

Watch Student Engagement and Adjust for Better Participation⁵⁶

In an online setting, it can be easy for timid or passive students to hide in the back while others take up all the discussion time. There are many ways to help students speak up in an online class aside from cold calling during synchronous discussions. Vary the time of day you post topics to the discussion boards so that there are more opportunities for different students to get the conversations rolling. Rotate through your class list who can post first when a discussion begins. Reach out to some of the students individually ahead of time and ask them to engage about a particular point. Just like in a traditional classroom, when all of the students are participating and engaged, the discussion and learning experience becomes richer for everyone.

Consider Publicizing Performance⁵⁷

If students are not living up to their obligations in the course, publicly posting student performance can be a powerful motivator. While some faculty (rules differ from country to country) go so far as to post grades or activity metrics with student names sorted in descending order, consider subtler signals, such as reminding students of their obligations and expressing disappointment to the class if necessary. (That being said, if you give students their ranking with their grade—“Your grade was B+, and you ranked number 14 out of 56 students.”—you cut down on complaints simply because the students grasp that they are being compared to others.)

Get Valuable Feedback from Your LMS

Remember that electronic tools leave electronic traces. Use this to your advantage.⁵⁸ Because your course is online, the LMS will store an impressive log of information: when you post materials, how frequently you give assignments, which information students respond to best, which students are interacting most, how long it takes for discussions to start, how long discussions last, and so much more. Paying attention to these details and noticing patterns can help you course correct when needed throughout the semester.

Discussion and Group Work

Discussion Boards

Structuring Discussions⁵⁹

You have a wide range of options when it comes to structuring asynchronous discussions. You can keep all discussion of one case within a single thread, a series of sequential threads, or multiple parallel threads. In most systems, you can allow students to start new threads themselves, which can increase students' ownership of the discussions and reduce your workload.

Allowing parallel threads can lead to powerful, simultaneous, focused discussions and make it easier to follow conversations. However, you need to establish strong norms and be quite explicit about when it is appropriate to start a new thread, or the entire forum can quickly become disjointed, with redundant

posts and confusion about where to make new contributions. Even well-intentioned students who have read the norms about where to post can get confused unless the threads themselves are well labeled. In fact, an important role of an online teacher is to make students aware of redundant discussions and explicitly point them to the appropriate place.

Some parallel discussions can allow students to focus on their areas of interest, but try to keep the number to single digits. Move posts into appropriate threads if the system permits this. This can be a powerful way of highlighting especially salient points.



How Long Should a Discussion Go?⁶⁰

A discussion can, in principle, last from a few minutes to weeks. Try to keep discussion of a single case to less than a week to keep participants from forgetting the early part of the discussion. If students are online synchronously, the discussion can be as rapid as in a physical classroom. But often a primary reason for teaching online is to enable asynchronous elements. These factors will vary by program and student composition, not to mention that some schools that do online teaching have more official discussion requirements (duration, a maximum and minimum number of comments, etc.) you may have to follow.

When deciding how long to allow a discussion to run, consider the following:

- How many times do you want students participating? If you are satisfied with each student contributing only once or twice to a discussion, then it can be reasonable to keep a forum open for only a few hours or days. But if you would prefer to see sustained conversations with students communicating back and forth, you may need a longer time period.

- How frequently can you require students to log in? Depending on the nature of your program, it may not be appropriate or feasible for you to require students to log in multiple times a day or even daily. If this is the case, it becomes difficult to complete a case discussion in under a week.

Managing Discussion Groups to Engage All Students

How do you keep a student from dominating discussion groups? What about a student who consistently posts answers immediately after your question is posted? This can be frustrating to students—by the time they log in, many of the relevant (and perhaps “easy”) points related to the question have already been raised.

Here are some potential remedies to address the overeager student:

- Rotate which students are allowed to post in the first window of a discussion.
- Vary the times of day at which new topics are posted.

- Privately contact students who are dominating and ask them not to post in the first several hours of a discussion.
- Allow students to read the full online discussion only after they have created their first comment. Be cautious when doing this—it can sometimes lead to a long list of repetitive first responses.

What Makes a Good Post?⁶¹

Instructors must set norms for what constitutes a good comment so students know what to aspire to. This should include whether the comment is on point, builds on the previous comments, and is of an appropriate depth. Depending on your teaching style and the goals of your course, you may place emphasis on the quality of the writing in the comment.

Part of this hinges on how much spontaneity you want. The more formal you expect the posts to be, the less spontaneous they will be. This can lead to longer lags between posts and less engagement among the group. On the other hand, spontaneity can produce posts written in stream of consciousness,

DISCUSSION AND GROUP WORK

which may be less valuable to the discussion because they are less considered.

Some faculty enforce word or character limits on posts. In some cases, this encourages tighter editing, but it can also just lead to trivial or vapid comments.

Using Gamification⁶²

Many LMSs allow participants to allocate points to each other and publish the results. For some students, this can be motivating. Whether posts are “liked” or rated, it allows students to evaluate the posts of others. The system can then flag or even promote the best-liked ones. This works best with students who have some experience with online discussion and have a more developed sense of what constitutes a good post. Even with norms established, this takes experience to build.

While it is possible for students to distort this system by colluding (agreeing to give each other “likes” or high ratings, for example), it is unlikely to happen. If you do suspect this is taking place, you can manage it by calling out students (publicly in the LMS or privately, as you see fit) to explain why they highlighted a particular

post, perhaps relative to other, stronger posts. You could also require students to issue both low and high ratings to keep ratings inflation (“I rate you high, you rate me high”) in check.

Group Work

Employ the Right Tools to Organize Team Activities⁶³

Online team-building activities can help your students come together. There are many tools available—such as Google Docs, WhatsApp group chats, Instagram stories, Canvas, and Slack—that help students contribute in online environments in real time. One example is to simply share a Google Doc or a Word file and ask each student to add one sentence that summarizes the lecture and the major ideas conveyed in class. Each participant contributes one short sentence and, together, the group prepares a summary of the lecture that anybody can then use for studying and revision. It is often harder for digital communities to perceive common goals, so using these tools also helps create communities that strengthen the group’s shared purpose, vision, and goals.⁶⁴

Designing Breakout Groups

Most platforms enable you to either pre-set the team composition or generate teams automatically during the session. Independent of how you compose the groups, find a way to identify the members of each group in the central room. Depending on your platform, students could do one of the following:

- Change their screen name to include their group ID.
- Select a similar virtual background for members of the same breakout group. You could assign the background or let each group choose.
- Display a sheet of paper with their group ID.

For small classes, consider putting each student in their own, one-person breakout room. You can then communicate privately with each of them. They can share their screen, ask questions they may have been reluctant to ask in front of others, or save face as you assess their level of preparedness.

The smallest meaningful breakout requires a minimum of five to seven minutes. Even solving a simple problem requires some lead

DISCUSSION AND GROUP WORK

time as participants acknowledge each other's presence and formulate a collaboratively composed solution. If deliverable material must be created, starting up the tools takes time.

Managing Group Work⁶⁵

Common techniques for managing group work also apply to online teaching: clarifying expectations, composing groups with varying backgrounds, and deciding on timing and deliverables. However, with online teaching, you have the opportunity to be more involved in the groups if you choose. This makes it critical to set clear boundaries around your role here.

Unless your course is intended to teach students how to work effectively in groups, think carefully about how to limit the extent of your role in students' group work. Find ways to facilitate their work without eating into your own work time.

4 TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL ONLINE GROUP WORK

- 1. Make suggestions about the process.** Just because students have experience with group work does not mean they are effective or even efficient at it—especially if they are new to group work. Of course, if your course is about process, you may want to invest time in an analysis of the process itself.
- 2. Make checking in on group work easy.** You can require students to use LMS tools or have them include you in the external tools they use. Most of our students prefer to use non-LMS tools for interacting in group work (messaging, project management, shared documents, version control, etc.). You can also require certain group processes (regular meetings, minutes of meetings, status updates, intermediate deliverables, evaluations, etc.). For instance, you can create a simple status report form each group must file that will give you key data points about their performance and help raise red flags before the groups get into trouble.
- 3. Have groups meet synchronously.** You may be able to facilitate this through the composition of the groups (for instance, one group per time zone).
- 4. Use peer evaluation.** This is critical to managing “free riders” in group work as well as helping with participant development. You can automate much of the work with a dedicated tool, but an online survey tool or Google form is also easy to set up and works well.

Reporting Out

Don't feel obligated to have every group report their results every time, particularly if the reports will be time consuming. Having each team submit a deliverable will motivate students to work diligently. (This is greatly simplified when the group submits a shared cloud-based spreadsheet, word-processing document, presentation, or other deliverable material that is shared with you). Meeting time in the central room is precious. Avoid repetitive reports of the same findings by multiple groups.

You and your students can quickly master virtual collaboration in the breakout room environment. Accept that some glitches are inevitable and keep open communication about what worked well and what was difficult in order to continue to improve.

Using breakout rooms, you will find your students to be more engaged when they return to the central meeting room, and you will have some valuable fodder for the remainder of your class. Not only will the students be refreshed from the change of context, they will also be poised to apply what they learned while working with each other.

7 Helpful Techniques for Better Breakout Rooms

1. Make the task clear.
2. Set group breakout rooms and assign students to them before the session starts.
3. Orient students to the room before pushing them into it.
4. Prepopulate the room with the question and any relevant instructions.
5. Set clear norms for how students should engage (voice, text, video, whiteboard, etc.).
6. Provide a timer for each group—either make a student responsible for keeping time (so the breakout finishes when it is supposed to) or load an application providing the same service.
7. Visit each room early on, if possible, to ensure students are working productively.

USING BREAKOUT GROUPS DURING SYNCHRONOUS CLASS TIME⁶⁶

Using breakout groups can be worthwhile, even when synchronous time is at a premium. The more intense and personal interactions that take place in smaller groups build connections among participants and offer a welcome break from the full-class video conference. To make the most of the exercises, plan ahead and manage the time carefully.

Online Teaching Materials

Teaching with Cases Online

As always, the more a case resonates with students as they read it, the more likely they are to engage with it. A case that develops beautifully in a physical classroom, though, may not work as well asynchronously, since you can't make use of the energy available to you when present in person. Students won't have the shared experience of receiving the opening question at the same time nor have a discussion unfolding at a uniform pace. For an asynchronous discussion, you may have to choose a case specifically for how it unfolds in an asynchronous discussion. Ideally, the case should so grab students that they anxiously await the opening of the online discussion.

Selecting Cases⁶⁷

Here are some attributes to look for when choosing a case for an online class:

Compelling in regard to company, industry, or protagonist. Is the company or industry one where some of the students have worked or want to work? Is the case of specific economic or social interest? Is the protagonist interesting to the students? This could be someone with whom they can identify or just a vividly painted character who will prompt reactions.

Recent. Students prefer newer cases. Many educators regularly use older cases, but it increases the need to convince students that preparing and discussing the case is worthwhile.

Novel. Particularly for students in a case-based program, many cases can seem discouragingly similar. Is there something different about this one in style or content? For instance, the iPremier case (Austin, 2009) about a company experiencing a cyberattack is available in a graphic novel (i.e., cartoon) format, which provides a welcome break in an otherwise purely text-based case course, particularly for students whose first language is not English.

Multimedia. Cases with digital or online components fit well in an online course. And the variety of aspects of the multimedia elements can be more easily explored in an asynchronous format, as students can review detailed aspects or replay video before responding to questions.

Well written. Let's admit it: some cases can be hard to read simply because the language is complicated. This is a particularly important consideration if the case is not written in students' first language.

High drama. Look for cases that are likely to provoke strong feelings, particularly with disagreement within the class. You may want to emphasize the tension and conflicts in your cases to engender better discussion.



Multipart. A multipart case is one with A, B, C, and sometimes even more case parts. These can energize a discussion and facilitate transitioning to a new topic. Keep in mind that the follow-on cases parts need not be formally published cases. If there aren't formal, extant, multipart case studies, create your own. This might simply mean compiling published articles about a company, blog posts, press releases (the right sequence of press releases can trigger great discussions), or even fictionalized scenarios you create to prompt discussion.

Complex or long. Yes, it is possible, if you manage the discussion sequence well, to use more complex cases online. Students have the advantage of referring back to the case to answer a question and before contributing to discussions, which can lead to more in-depth responses. Discussion of each part of a complex case can also occur across multiple assignment periods. However, long, complex cases are generally not a recipe for high engagement, so they are best left for later in the course after students are used to the process and already invested.

Introducing Cases to Your Students

Be sure to introduce each case with some context (such as why it is included in the course or how it relates to other cases) to motivate students to prepare it. Many students will not see the connections from case to case, so make these explicit during the course design and execution stages. A well-written intro to a case can also serve as a motivator for students to bite into a challenging case. For example, "The next case is X. Prior students have found this case quite challenging, but we keep it in the syllabus because it is historically important and shows the hard details of a really important management problem. A good way to approach it is to focus on this particular story line..."

If students are told a case is a bit of a challenge and are given structure for understanding it, they put much more effort in. If you find it difficult to articulate why you are including the case, it may be a sign that you should rethink using the case.

Teaching with Simulations Online

We are likely all familiar with the maxim that there's nothing as practical as a good theory. But we are educating our students to be leaders in business, so they need to be able to execute. Sometimes it's practical to have them actually try things, but sometimes that's not realistic—especially in giving them an experience on a large scale. But you can give them that experience with simulations.

For example, a [change management simulation](#) helps students lead change in a large or a medium-sized organization. A [capstone simulation](#) allows students to run a business right from the start—they develop new products, market them, sell and service them, and more. Obviously, students are not going to have that opportunity in real life (not yet, anyway), so that's why simulations can be useful. Students are better able to process the theory, make decisions, and see what the consequences of those decisions are when they play a simulation.⁶⁸

Selecting Simulations⁶⁹

Asynchronous single-player simulations.

Asynchronous single-player simulations are most easily adapted for virtual delivery. These simulations can be assigned and played by students individually or, in some cases, in small groups ahead of the designated online class periods.

Asynchronous multiplayer simulations.

Many asynchronous simulations are multiplayer, meaning the entire class does not have to play simultaneously, but a specific team of students within a class does. Each student will play on their own device, so students on the same team in a multiplayer simulation do not need to be physically together while playing but they do need to be online at the same time. This will take some coordination on the part of the students.

➔ **LEARN MORE ABOUT
TEACHING SIMULATIONS ONLINE
WITH THIS SPECIALIZED GUIDE**

Synchronous simulations.

Some simulations can be used in an online setting only when all students are online at the same time because synchronous play is an integral part of the experience. For these simulations, groups are informed just before the simulation play begins and students do not communicate with each other except through the simulation.

Planning⁷⁰

Once you've selected a simulation, prepare for the teaching intervention. A good start is essential to getting students engaged in the exercise. Aside from planning the brief-play-debrief steps, take proper time to generate and seamlessly distribute usernames and passwords, team assignments, communication information, and briefing material.

During this preparation, also decide how you will assess students' learning. In a virtual classroom, don't over-emphasize competitive elements in the simulation or make students' scores count in the grading for the course. Such an approach only encourages cheating and distracts from the learning process. Ideally, learning from the simulation can be integrated into existing assessments and can be supplemented by written learning reflections.

Playing

Once you finish planning the simulation process and deciding on an assessment or integration method, you can begin briefing your students. The briefing phase usually starts with you asking students to watch the briefing video. This can be followed by a Q&A session between you and your students, in either synchronous sessions (real-time interactions) or asynchronous sessions (through a message board). If there is a briefing video from the simulation publisher, supplement it with information about how the simulation links to the course, any deadlines for completion of various steps, and how (if at all) the simulation will be assessed.

When students play the game, monitor their activity and provide support when needed. The instructor functionality of online simulations usually provides various ways to track student activity, including scores obtained and details of simulation runs played by each student, time spent logged into the simulation platform, and communication done through the communication system. You can help remove obstacles for students who have difficulty

getting started and contact students who are not logged into the simulation when you expect them to be. As the simulation progresses, it is important for you to show presence by regularly communicating with the class about progress made, pointing out links to the course materials, and providing solutions to any issues that students encounter.⁷¹

For simulations that require students to log in synchronously, it can be very challenging, especially with larger classes, to find alternative times that work for everybody. If a significant proportion of students are now far enough away that it is impractical for them to log in synchronously, give them a separate opportunity—perhaps they could play the simulation as a group.⁷²

Debriefing

After students have finished playing, you may be tempted to simply declare the exercise a success and move on, but it is through the debrief that students consolidate their learning. Debriefing is critical—and it merits particular attention in an online learning environment. A synchronous online session can include live discussion led by you, supported by a few relevant debriefing slides. If a synchronous online session is not possible, you can lead an asynchronous discussion and ask students to capture their learning in a writing assignment.⁷³

Consider following the teaching notes or instruction manuals, at least the first time you run the simulation. Asynchronously, if you're having a discussion board for the debrief, it's important that you create smaller groups even if it's not the way the teaching note suggests you set up the debrief. If you have a long discussion board where perhaps 20 or 50 students are posting, it makes it really difficult to process that much information. Instead, break students up into groups of 10 or so, to allow them to have a conversation, rather than just disjointed posts that students have written offline with no real interaction.⁷⁴

FAQ: INCLUDING SIMULATIONS IN YOUR ONLINE CLASS

How do you keep students focused and connected with the simulation experience, particularly in an online setting?⁷⁵

That really is so different from simulation to simulation. You have to make sure students understand the purpose of the simulation: What are they going to get out of it? What are the learning objectives? Then the instructions need to be very clear and given ahead of time. If you have live meetings, it can be helpful to reserve some time in class to do that. Because if you give open-ended instructions, such as, "Make sure that you come back after you've viewed how to play," three-quarters of the students will do it and a quarter won't, and then you're stuck. So instead, say, "OK, we're going to take some time in class to prepare."

What is the best way to give instructions for an offline simulation?

If students are going to play offline instead of during class time when you're with them, they process the material better if you record a video with instructions. You can also connect the simulation with specific topics from class or give specific examples.

What about time management? How long do you allow students to play different sections of the simulation? Is it different online?⁷⁶

Students typically don't need more or less time for online simulation play. The debrief is a little bit different, however. If you're going to have smaller groups talking first, it actually goes faster online. There are fewer logistics, and because they automatically go into breakout rooms, the transition is a little bit smoother. But overall it runs very much along the same timeline.

Assessment and Grading

Assessing Participation⁷⁷

Quantity

The LMS should be able to provide data on the number of times students have viewed pages and posted. This can be helpful in identifying students who have failed to meet minimum standards for activity, but of course, it does not address the qualitative aspects of what students have contributed.

Quality

If the scale of your course and your time permit, the gold standard for judging the quality of participation is to read and evaluate the comments of students in online discussions. You can do this using the same basic method you use for evaluating class participation in traditional classrooms, except here you can keep your gradebook open and pause whenever you like without disrupting the flow of the discussion.

If you need more efficiency, you can view the posts by an individual student and judge their portfolio. You miss the context of the discussions, although you may recall some of it if you have been following the discussions. If the course is long enough, you may be able to use sampling to evaluate the quality of students' contributions.

Attendance⁷⁸

For tracking attendance, some LMS tools offer logging functions, but it can be easier to create a poll, require everyone to respond, and use that list as attendance. Or simply take screen grabs of the participant video array or participant list at the beginning and the end of each session.



If the scale of your course and your time permit, the gold standard for judging the quality of participation is to read and evaluate the comments of students in online discussions.

Assignments⁷⁹

Enhance online assignments by employing shared documents within groups to do case write-ups—for instance, by having students draft a memo to a case protagonist or having students record presentations in lieu of some written work. Unless individual presentation skills are part of the learning objectives, it is not necessary to assign individual presentations unless a student has pertinent, specific knowledge of the case (such as having worked for the company in the case).

If groups are giving presentations, give each a different topic. If students have to watch several presentations on the same topic from the same case, they are likely to tune out, giving the first presenters an unfair advantage. If they need to be on the same topic for pedagogical reasons, then try to give each group a different angle on the problem (perhaps they are grounded in different theories or emphasize different aspects of a framework). Or consider not requiring all students to view all presentations; they could each get a couple of random ones to compare, or you could view the presentations. Alternatively, modularize the presentation assignment such that groups

might present only part of it (one of five forces, or one component each of the marketing mix).

Decide whether there is added value in using precious synchronous class time (if you have any) for student or group presentations. If the groups are doing only voiceovers for slides without any interaction with the audience, have them record the presentation and have participants view it before the synchronous session and submit questions, and perhaps analysis and evaluations, ahead of time. Then use synchronous time for questions and answers or discussion.

4 TIPS FOR ASSESSING STUDENT WORK

- 1. Self-evaluations.** Have students identify their best comments for each class session. You could also post the analytics and ask students to evaluate themselves relative to that data.
- 2. Peer rankings of posts.** Give some weight to what classmates thought of the comments. If you suspect students are gaming the system, enforce rankings.
- 3. Summaries of discussions.** Have students summarize discussions and attribute the best comments to specific authors.
- 4. Groups.** Do at least some of your evaluation at the group level.

Grading

Whatever grading mechanism you use in the traditional classroom absolutely can translate to the online classroom. For a forced curve where you have to give some lower and some higher scores, make sure your system is transparent and students are aware of the criteria. For example, if you're going to grade discussion posts, explain what makes a good post and why. As long as you do that, you can absolutely hold the same standards with the same low level of grade complaints.⁸⁰

Most LMSs have good tools for structuring automatically graded exams and quizzes. Pop quizzes can be helpful in ensuring preparation. Online students view answering questions and interacting with the system as an organic part of an online course, and they are less resentful of such quizzes than in a traditional classroom where they can feel infantilizing, especially at the graduate level. The key here is to make it relatively low effort for both faculty and students. If you are concerned about academic honesty, you can create a pool of questions for each case and randomize which questions students get. You can also set a short deadline for completing the quiz.

For exams, you can proctor students with the help of webcams or third-party proctoring services. If you have the luxury of requiring synchronous meetings, this can reduce the passing of questions and responses. You can also check for students hiring others to do their work by having oral examinations via videoconferencing, where a student who has done their own work can easily discuss it and a cheater cannot.⁸¹



If you are concerned about academic honesty, you can create a pool of questions for each case and randomize which questions students get.

Looking Ahead: Planning for the Next Iteration of Your Course⁸²

Prepare next year's course during this year's course. If you know you are going to teach the same course again next semester, ask your LMS administrator to create the next course instance right away and make it available only to you.

If that is not possible due to administrative routines, create an online folder for the course material. Copy all your created material to that next course (or folder). As you teach your way through the current course, you will inevitably find errors or changes to be made. Rather than making a note of it and trying to remember to fix it next time, just make the change on the new course instance. When the new course comes up—and so often, it does come as something of a surprise—you have already done most of the preparation.

4 TIPS TO SAVE TIME FOR YOUR NEXT COURSE ITERATION

- 1. Don't put dates directly in documents**, or if you must include them, use your word processor's automatic date function. If that is not viable, always keep them only at the top or bottom to make updating faster.
- 2. Modularize your content** so that you do not need to update entire chunks. For instance, separate instructions from problems and process from content. With cases, for example, create separate documents for the case, the case discussion questions, and the context description of the case.
- 3. Use clear, long, descriptive document names** and titles so that you can easily identify them later.
- 4. Use the copy function in the LMS** to move content from one course iteration to the next.

Conclusion

A generation of educators is now challenged to try new approaches to online coursework, learn from their experience, adopt new and emerging best practices, and try some more. Leverage the tools available to you to create a robust, well-rounded classroom. Prepare your students for what is expected of them (and when), and engage them fully by thoughtfully choosing tools, resources, and the right mix of compelling content. Remember that the goal is not to replicate a face-to-face classroom, but to optimize your course for a rich, interactive online learning experience. The tools you need to succeed are at your fingertips.

➔ **ACCESS OUR TEACHING ONLINE RESOURCES**
hbsp.harvard.edu/teaching-online-resources



Endnotes

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