

Synchronous online seminars: student experience and engagement considerations

Introduction

This guide provides an overview to the student experience and engagement considerations associated with creating and facilitating synchronous online seminars. The guide outlines benefits, challenges, practice suggestions, links to national student engagement research and associated CIE online staff guides. The guide will also be relevant to other non-lecture interaction online teaching sessions.

Benefits

Facilitates peer connections

Some students may prefer synchronous online learning, and find it a connecting and positive experience as the following example illustrates:

“I feel I am learning quite a bit in this environment because it allows me to exchange ideas with my classmates with negligible distraction. The experience is starting to feel much more personal to me than a classroom or discussion board because the (webinar software) environment allows us to interact directly with one another. We aren't all facing one direction like you would in a traditional classroom and we are all present at the same time unlike discussion boards. This allows for a lively exchange of ideas in real time.”

(Farooq et al, 2016)

Enhances tutor presence

Video interaction provides opportunities for students to hear, see and get facial clues from tutors, which can be limited with hybrid active learning.

Supports continuous learning

Within limited scheduled classroom teaching, online seminars can provide important events and milestones, in addition to continuous assessments etc, that support students to engage with their learning more consistently.

Enables adaptive teaching

With none of the complexities of booking classrooms on campus, online seminars can be quickly be added to support student learning needs - within timetabling constraints across multiple modules.

Simulates real-world online contexts

Hosting online seminars in software such as Microsoft Teams can simulate real-world and professional online work-related contexts supporting student employability and digital fluency development.

Challenges

Aligning with online asynchronous and classroom learning needs careful consideration

How does or how could synchronous online seminars integrate within your wider strategy for hybrid active learning? How do you intend to utilise classroom-based learning and how do you intend to develop online asynchronous learning with your students?

Could asynchronous online learning be utilised to support learning tasks commonly conducted within classroom-based seminars such as application of theory, deepening student's knowledge or engaging with difficult concepts?

[Hybrid active learning support site - example teaching activities](#)

Participation can be problematic for some students

"I found this part to be the most distracting. It was hard to know when it was a good time to participate. I like the interface in (webinar software) where you can raise your hand (click on the hand icon) when you want to speak. I also found the tendency for some to not mute their mics when they were not talking to annoying but not impossible." (Farooq et al, 2016)

Some students will take time to adjust

"I enjoy the fact that we can have a seminar-like experience, although it is not quite the same. I often feel more "on-the-spot" in this environment because of the video element. In a traditional classroom setting, members of the class do pay attention to other students and what they have to say, but the online synchronous sessions seem to emphasize each person that is talking. It will take some getting used to!" (Farooq et al, 2016)

Some non-native English speakers may lack confidence to engage initially

Students for whom English is not their first language may find video communications in small groups initially challenging as this example illustrates:

'If the teacher points at me, I will speak. I will hide if nobody asks me to speak because my English is not good and I can't speak fluently. I feel shame to speak in front of twenty, thirty something people as they are local and their mother tongue is English.' (HEA, 2014)

Technical failures can occur

Some students may have problems accessing online seminars through home broadband or webcam issues etc. Technical failure of university hosted systems, although rare, can be frustrating for students if the seminar is a significant component of the learning process.

Suggestions

Develop and communicate to students your rationale for online synchronous seminars

What is their purpose for your online synchronous seminar and what is its relationship to online asynchronous and classroom-based learning?

[Hybrid active learning support site - example teaching activities](#)

Explore and select appropriate webinar software

Different webinar systems will enable different learning activities and afford different student learning experiences. For example, the ability to facilitate questions and conversations, manage breakout rooms, poll students, or to enable students to present or work collaboratively on a document.

CIE website, guides and resources - [A Comparison of Web Conference Tools for Active Online Teaching](#)

Foster students' sense of belonging

As hybrid active learning is substantially an online experience for students, it's important that we design opportunities for students to feel part of a supportive learning community. Within the seminar, build in activities for students to get to know each other and to get to know you.

[Hybrid active learning support site - student engagement](#)

Build student's confidence to participate online

Consider test runs in webinar software with simple low stakes learning and communication activities to build students technical confidence, group cohesion and familiarity with learning activities you intend to use in your seminars.

Develop clear communication and interaction protocols

So, students know when and how to participate and which tools and facilities in the software to use.

Apply effective seminar practices

As with classroom-based seminars provide pauses in discussions and presentations to enable a student to formulate questions, reflect on their learning, complete tasks individually, in pairs or in smaller groups before contributing to whole group. For non-native English speakers enable students to ask questions through text-based chat tools as this give them time to plan and check their questions. (HEA, 2014)

Present clear online information for students to prepare

This could include associated discussion forums to manage questions from multiple students and other supporting online resources.

Ensure seminars are accessible and inclusive

Use appropriate software that supports captioning, is recorded for students to be able to access afterwards.

[Hybrid active learning support site – Accessibility](#)

Create realistic Plan B if the technology fails

References

Omer Farooq, O., Matteson, M. (2016). [Opportunities and Challenges for Students in an Online Seminar-Style Course in LIS Education](#): A Qualitative Case Study. *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science*, Vol. 57, No. 4.

The Higher Education Academy (2014). [Seminars and tutorials](#) – teaching international students.

Centre for innovation Education, [Canvas Hybrid Active Learning support site](#).



© 2020 by the University of Liverpool, Centre for Innovation in Education.

[Synchronous online seminars: student experience and engagement considerations](#) is made available under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#).