

Bridging Social Distances in Online Learning: Techniques, Strategies, Findings

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Catherine Takasugi teaches various courses at Aoyama Gakuin University, including two new seminars. One, entitled “A chapter a week: A taste of everything,” which introduces students to books from a variety of genres, from philosophy to science fiction; and another that explores diversity and identity by having students cultivate their creative capacities through engagement in poetry, yoga, meditation, photography, drama, and drawing.

This paper summarizes the author’s contribution to the LLL SIG-sponsored forum “Bridging Social Distances in Online Learning” that was presented at the JALT 2020 Online Conference, co-presented with Andrew Reimann, Joseph Dias, Fraser Gould, Jonathon Campbell, Natsuki Suzuki, and Kazuko Namba.

Introduction: Entering the unknown together

When the 2020 Spring semester belatedly began due to the pandemic-induced State of Emergency, many lecturers could only imagine the challenges that we would face. In our efforts to reduce the unknown we spent many hours collectively working on the new platforms, sharing ideas and strategies, and becoming familiar with the new norm. The gamut of experience with online applications and potential usages and pitfalls was immense with some of us considering ourselves barely past analogue and others feeling that the leap to entirely online was not so frightful at all.

We worried that our students would be at least as technologically varied and possibly in more diverse economic circumstances than ourselves potentially leading to severe gaps in hardware and Internet access. It turned out that these issues and challenges were realities but only for a very minimal few of the students.

As teachers we were also concerned about how to make the emotional connection with our students. Essentially, how to reach through and inspire the students into providing their best work.

Showing technical vulnerabilities and connecting with students

Being my authentic self, showing my technical vulnerabilities for example, actually lessened the tension and allowed students to take risks and stretch their academic possibilities further than I expected. As the semester progressed, we educators found our elements of success and points of disappointment, and more often than not, shared our findings with our colleagues for everyone's advantage.

What follows are some tasks and techniques which I found to be effective when transitioning to an online mode of instruction.

Zoom: Making the most out of what you have

Here are a few of the techniques that enhanced the Zoom experience and ensured smooth transitions in the online classroom:

1. Playing music 10 minutes before the class. Eclectic choices from classical to country. This encouraged students to arrive at class early.
2. Welcome questions: Often posted in Google Classroom in advance to keep attendance flowing. This offered a point of connection with each student every class.
3. Assigning a leader for each breakout room who would then be responsible for starting the discussion and making sure all voices were heard.
4. Textbook work could be effectively completed in breakout rooms. Students could check answers with classmates before being called on to answer in the larger group.

Introducing three new assignments

Making each assignment meaningful, relevant, and inspiring became the focus of my courses. Three new assignments were executed with moderate success: A) No Excuses November, B) Podcast Assignment, and C) Interview and Poster Presentation.

A) *No Excuses November*

1. Each student chooses a personal challenge that is concrete, achievable, and meaningful to them. (For example: I chose to be vegetarian this November).
2. They publicly state their goal to the class for accountability purposes. (A document of intent is also submitted to the teacher)
3. Every day in November they aim to complete their goal. (Achievement calendar is marked)
4. Three videos of 1 minute each are submitted to the Seesaw (Seesaw, 2021) application showing the progress of the challenge. Other students are able to see the videos of their classmates.
5. The assignment has two discussion components: one to brainstorm ideas (October) and one to discuss learnings (December).

Graded elements: 3 videos, 1 intention document, 1 achievement calendar. Bonus points are given for creating a vision board and joining and participating in the private Facebook group that the teacher created in advance and deleted after the assignment was completed.

B) *The Podcast Assignment*

1. Students select a podcast from the 50+ choices I provide.
2. Using Padlet, students write a short explanation including justification for the podcast choice and provide a link to the episode.
3. They listen and prepare 3 discussion points for class. Breakout rooms are used for small group discussions.
4. They write 200-400 words reflection piece about the podcast.

This activity is repeated 3 times with different podcasts or episodes each time. It is important for students to choose something they are interested in because it is linguistically challenging. The podcast must be longer than 10 minutes, and must be in English.

Understanding everything in the podcast is not the point; listening

attentively, identifying key points, formulating an opinion, and then guiding a meaningful discussion is the true goal.

Graded elements: A final written document with an introduction, podcast 1 reflection, podcast 2 reflection, podcast 3 reflection, conclusion. (750-1500 words).

C) Interview and Poster Assignment

1. Identifying interesting, appropriate, and meaningful questions.
2. Using Padlet ask three questions to the teacher. (I chose one question from each student to answer in Padlet and then encouraged a continuation of the discussion for the duration of the semester—A VERY worthwhile activity).
3. Students identify a research question and use one class period interviewing classmates.
4. Create a poster presentation highlighting the findings of the mini-research project. Learn to synthesize the material into meaningful visuals.

This year the interviews and poster presentations were completed via Zoom and changing between classmates (interviews) and effective presentation practices (showing the poster) were acceptable but not splendid.

Graded element: Presentation and poster.

Conclusion: Learnings and Thoughts for the Future

One important finding with exclusively online classes was that group assignments were effective with students who already knew each other or were somewhat established in their academic program. The first-year students from various faculties had a harder time establishing trust and friendships in the online classroom and in the future I would likely not assign a graded group assignment to my first year students.

These were some items that I particularly found to be important to keep in mind:

1. Clearly stating expectations for grading, participation, attendance is beneficial to both educators and learners.
2. Asking for large visual responses from students, (nodding of heads, use of reaction buttons, or thumbs up), keeps the pace of the class on track.
3. Longer wait times after posing a question is often rewarded with an answer. (Try not to fill the silence).
4. Paperless is possible and desirable whether we teach online or face to face.
5. Google Classroom (or other similar platforms)- makes courses more replicable in the future, retains a copy of the students ' work, and is an excellent tool to communicate with the students.

References

Padlet. (2021, May). Multimedia collaboration app.

<https://ja.padlet.com/>

Seesaw. (2021, May). Digital portfolio. <https://web.seesaw.me/>