Avoiding being the sage on the screen – Facilitating online sessions

In 1993 [Alison King suggested we move our teaching away from 'sage on the stage' to a role of 'guide on the side'](#) but what does this mean in the blended learning context?

In my role, I am focused on supporting colleagues in preparing their teaching for 2020/21 and many are reporting mixed feelings about teaching live online classes. Whilst there is excitement in developing different ways of teaching and engaging students, there is also apprehension about live sessions using technology such as Microsoft Teams and approaches to encouraging student interaction in the blended space. I empathise with these mixed feelings.

When I first started teaching online, I found it challenging to translate the values shaping my face-to-face teaching (focused on supporting an active learning environment) into the online space. I lacked confidence and felt unfamiliar with the software used for my online teaching. Consequently, I planned online lessons structured around delivery of content supported by slides and with space for discussion around key questions. The result was limited student discussion, in part as for large parts of the online classes the students had been listening, looking at slides and note-taking. Or were they even listening at all? It felt very passive and teacher-led. My online teaching felt dissatisfactory; I had the feeling of being the sage on the screen and most certainly not the guide on the side. Yes, I was nervous about the technology but I hadn't considered how I could design my sessions to foster interaction in very low-tech ways and which built on my face-to-face strengths. Attending CPD sessions built my confidence in using the software but more importantly I turned my focus to thinking about my online presence and ways of designing and facilitating online sessions to support engagement. Here are my tips on how you may do the same when hosting live teaching sessions in Microsoft Teams.

1. **Socialise your group into the online space and be explicit in identifying ways of interacting**

It's important to take the time to establish a shared sense of group norms and values for how the group will interact in the online space. This is not simply about ensuring your students know how to use different functions such as hand raising, contributing via the chat and whether different types of contribution are welcomed, but also about respectful communication in the online space. In our online CPD workshops, we use a netiquette slide for this purpose, but you could also turn this into an orientation activity with your students where the group designs its own netiquette or shared ways of interacting.

2. Introduce active learning early in the online session

Reinforce your expectation of participation by setting the tone early. Introducing active learning from the start of the online session can be achieved by low-stakes activation of prior knowledge activities – perhaps through asking students to post in the chat, or participate in a poll. However, it can also be done by asking students to do something individually. For example, in the face-to-face classroom we may introduce a 'minute paper' where students take 60 seconds to reflect on a question and capture their thoughts. This can translate into online sessions. You may show an image, a song, an equation to prompt their minute paper. They may not ever share what they have written, but it is a method to get the students actively engaged in the topic at the start of the online class and sets up the rest of the session.

3. Think about where you want your students to direct their attention

In the face-to-face teaching environment, students can be subject to cognitive overload if there is lots of content on slides whilst the lecturer is talking over the top. The student may experience conflict in whether to look at and listen to you, or to look at and make sense of the information on the slide. In the online space, think about what your students are looking at; if using slides, I would encourage you to go between slides and video to avoid your students simply looking at slides for the entire session. If you are making use of the chat, do you want to use this throughout the session, potentially introducing the role of a student chat champion to moderate? Or do you want to use the chat at specific points and signpost this so everyone knows to direct their attention there?

4. Acknowledge

In the online space people can feel anonymous, so it's important to explicitly acknowledge students; where possible looking out for those who are contributing and those who are silent. All of your student names are in the participant list – if the group is small enough you could welcome people into the call, referring to them by name. Equally where there are questions in the chat these can be acknowledged by name or you can respond to the comment with a statement or by using the response feature to give a thumbs up, smile etc. You may even want to say, "Ayesha, that's a great comment in the chat, would you like to come on the microphone and tell us more?"

5. Praise and motivate

Similar to acknowledging your students, praise can be a strong motivator that not only encourages and builds confidence in contributing, but also signals to all students the value in contributions of their peers: e.g. "Excellent points Arinze on the criticisms of Eysenck's Theory of Personality – can anyone think of any other criticisms?" Praise can be given on the

microphone, using the response feature in the chat, or there is even a specific function in the Teams chat to provide a praise icon to class participants.

6. Weave

Weaving is a particular type of facilitation technique you may already use in the classroom-based context; where you bring together different contributions, provide feedback and highlight the connections between and overall contribution to the group's understanding e.g. "In their micro-presentation, Team A articulated a strong case arguing that supermarket power constrains consumer choice on the basis of the concept of monopoly. But Team B, offered a powerful counter argument… ." This translates well into the online space as a way to recognise contributions, potentially from the chat and video, and bringing together knowledge shared.

7. Question – and don't be afraid of silence

Another key facilitation technique you will already use in the face-to-face context is questioning, and probing students' initial contributions to encourage them to think more deeply. This is an equally useful technique in online teaching, and it's important that when asking questions, you are not afraid of silence. If you ask a question, let this sit and provide the space for students to consider, as you would in the face-to-face classroom. This relates to the next point…

8. Provide space to think

In the online space, people can feel under pressure to have constant activity on the microphone or video. Even just 60 minutes online can be an intense teaching experience as the non-verbal cues may not be as apparent or immediate as in the face-to-face context. When designing your session, you may want to include prompts which purposefully provide space to think e.g. "Take a minute and identify two risks and two opportunities with this mode." It's important you then allow silence and the space for students to consider this question before you ask for their contributions.

9. Check – are your students with you?

Particularly in the first few weeks, when you and your students are new to blended learning, this is important. People may be joining using different devices. Laptops, phones, tablets can all make things appear differently and we should also avoid making assumptions about digital skills. This means we need to check, "can everyone hear me?", "I'm now displaying the slide with different bridge structures, can everyone see this?", "Can everyone see the chat function?".

10. **Think carefully about how the design enables interaction**

With a small group, even the most basic of approaches to soliciting student viewpoints can work. Simple polling can include: "put your hand up if you think the answer is A) and leave your hand down if you think the Answer is B)". Or, you may list answers 1-4 on the slide and ask the students to insert the correct number in the chat. Additionally, within Microsoft Teams, there is also the Form function where you can set up short polls. However, if you are teaching large groups in Teams then you may want to design your session in Mentimeter, using different ways to enable contributions from a large number of students simultaneously, and sharing the Mentimeter presentation in the session through screen share.

The strength in your online teaching will depend on socialising your students into learning in the online space, thinking carefully about the design of your session, as well as your strategies for facilitation. Learn to use the tools within Microsoft Teams, but also consider how you can translate the many strengths you have in the face-to-face classroom into the virtual space.

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