Live From My Living Room, It's My Classroom!

By ESTHER C. KIM

For the past two years, I have been teaching live, video graduate courses online through a platform called 2U. It had become such a routine that I didn't pay much attention to the differences between online and "on the ground" courses until this past semester, when I started to notice several sharp distinctions. Without a physical classroom presence, the task of truly engaging students can be daunting. So with some reflection (and the aid of many captivating YouTube tutorials), I have developed several strategies that have helped me better motivate my students on live video platforms. Among them:

Pay attention to facial expressions. I learned a lot by watching how a few highly popular YouTubers maintained my attention. Most notably, the best video lecturers are animated in the way they speak and present their material, whether their topic is how to use scales of measurement in statistics or how to apply bronzer so it looks like a natural tan. While you may think this isn't what you signed up for when you decided on a lifelong career in thinking, writing, and teaching great minds, there are a few tricks I've adopted to become more animated.

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Since our online students cannot assess our body language, we should use our facial expressions to affirm and engage with them. Now I aim to smile more (when appropriate), nod, and make nonlexical conversation sounds such as "hmm" and "uh huh." In the same way, I pay close attention to what my students' facial expressions show they're thinking about our particular classroom material. For this reason, I ask students to be on audio and on camera for the duration of the class, as it helps me read and understand their facial expressions.

Open your class early. In a traditional "on the ground" classroom, both instructor and students have the option of arriving early or staying after class. This is one of those invisible features of classroom culture that does not exist online — unless it is purposely created. So I "open" my online class about 10 minutes before the official start time to allow students to "arrive" early, ask questions, or chat with one another (about anything, course-related or not). It's a great way to create a sense of community, because the alternative looks something like this: Students log in via audio one minute before class, wait silently for class to start, turn on the

camera, and, when class is over, promptly log off. Such a format may be efficient, but it impedes positive instructor-to-student as well as student-to-student relationships, which, research has shown, help facilitate learning.

Provide suggestions for a strong classroom climate. At the start of the semester, I offer ways for students to stay engaged in an online classroom environment, and I explain the importance of remaining on camera and on audio. Without a proper explanation, students mistakenly think that they can multitask during live class sessions. Among the tips I offer them:

- Refrain from opening email, texting, or browsing the web.
- Choose a space where you don't encounter distractions, which could include family members, laundry, dirty dishes, or a busy street outside your window.
- Avoid sitting on a comfortable couch or bed.
- Pay close attention to peers' comments and ask yourself if you agree or disagree, and why. Add to the dialogue by sharing your thoughts.
- Avoid taking class from coffee shops or other public spaces. The background noise can create a distraction both for you and for the entire class. Also, internet connections may be inconsistent in public spaces.

Don't use the chat box when you can speak instead. On my university's platform, there's a chat box in which students can type messages in real time. This could be a useful tool if used properly. But I often find it difficult to simultaneously read the chat box while listening to a student who's speaking. The same goes for when I am speaking and someone is typing comments or questions in the chat box. If there's a robust dialogue happening among a few of the students and others want to interject, they can place their comments in the chat box. Otherwise, I ask that they take advantage of the face-to-face online time by verbalizing their questions or comments.

At times, students use the chat box to joke or have side conversations with one another. Since I feel it is important to create an amicable classroom culture, I ask them to verbalize these jokes as well and to restrict chat-box content to topic-related material. That way the whole class can chuckle and then move on, without students' competing to outsmart a joke.

Make participation mandatory. As instructors, we all face the problem of silence at some point during class, or of discussions' becoming dominated by a few students. To encourage participation and the completion of reading assignments, I use random selection: I write each student's name on a slip of paper and put the slips in a large container. Whenever I ask key discussion questions and do not have volunteers, I pull

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a name from the bowl. To add a little animation to the task, I sometimes take a few seconds to shake up the bowl, then stick my hand in and call out the name. Students' anticipation of having their name pulled out of a jar is less scary than being directly called upon.

Make use of external online tools such as Google Drive. Some online-classroom platforms are limited when it comes to sharing documents in real time. When I assign students to work in small groups, I post a link to a Google Drive page for each small group. They will remain connected via camera and audio through the platform, but can open the external link to work on assignments together. Since they will

have access to the Google Drive even after class, they can revisit what their group has worked on during class.

Prepare for technology failures. Whether it's problems with the online platform or Wi-Fi connections, technology can fail. During the first few semesters of teaching online, I frantically tried to fix the problem while remaining on camera. Unless you are certain that it will be a quick fix, it's best to post a message on the chat box or say (if your audio is working) that you are facing technological problems, and then offer a five-minute break. Include a time stamp in case the platform freezes; for example: "Hi all, I'm having technical difficulties. It's 5:55 p.m. right now — let's take a five-minute break and regroup at 6 p.m." In my experience, five minutes is enough time to restart the platform, restart your computer, or contact your online-support staff. On that note, make sure you have your real-time online-support phone numbers saved in your phone's contacts.

Another helpful tech support is a battery backup unit into which you can plug your computer and your router or modem. I bought mine for less than $50, and it has already saved me through a temporary power outage.

Online education is a growing field, and, with some effort, it can emulate the feeling of students and instructor being together in a physical classroom. While YouTubers have the advantage of being able to edit their videos and upload the best versions, instructors who teach via video have a greater benefit in being able to interact with their online students. Teaching people how to apply makeup so they look like they're not wearing any might make someone a YouTube star, but creating student engagement that looks and feels natural is truly satisfying. ■

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Originally published on April 8, 2018