

TeachECONference2021 Session: Lessons Learned from Teaching in a Pandemic – Q&A

In this document, we summarise the discussion around the topics that arose in the Zoom Q&A and chat. The presenters have jointly contributed to this write-up which we hope is useful to those who attended and those who are picking up the ideas at a later date.

Panel

Chair: Stefania Paredes Fuentes (University of Warwick)

Speakers:

- Gosia Mitka (University of St Andrews)
- Jana Sadeh (University of Southampton)
- Sylvia Kuo (Brown University)

1. Blended Learning Strategies – a pandemic case study

Speaker: Gosia Mitka (University of St Andrews)

Q1) How well did Whiteboard work for student interaction? Unless students have a tablet plus digital pen, writing on it is actually not easy, right?

A1: Students who had tablets could write on them, otherwise students were encouraged to use a shared Word document and edit it. Unfortunately, during the in-person Tutorials students made limited use of the virtual whiteboard and preferred me to explain the answers and draw diagrams on the big whiteboard in the classroom.

Q2) Using the mouse to write equations is very clumsy. Have you provided a digital pen of some sort?

A2: I have not. There were 45 students in this module and this would not be possible.

Q3) For the VLE activity is the output like a shared doc that they can download later or a discussion forum? How much engagement with it?

A3: The output is available on Moodle (where the activity took place) and is visible as a table with anonymous responses. Students can see their and their peers' answers immediately



after they entered them. Approximately 20% of students engaged with the activity. Students could post questions on Moodle forum and attend office hours to further discuss the material.

Q4) Which elements did students find most beneficial?

A4: Students found the videos with detailed derivations performed on the screen during the video very useful. They also found the handout questions useful for revision. They really liked the tutorials with discussion as well as group work in the breakout rooms. They enjoyed the innovative forms of assessment: group video and individual briefing and applying material learned in the course to current economic events. These have allowed students to acquire useful transferable skills.

2. Breakout-room Discussions: for the greater good

Speaker: Jana Sadeh (University of Southampton)

Q1) What would you say are the advantage/disadvantage of having randomized groups weekly vs the same group throughout the semester for forming deeper connections?

A1: If the objective is to encourage students to meet most of their cohort, randomising is the way to go. If they spend every week talking to the same 4 people then their network is pretty limited. You also have little control over group dynamics. Some people will work well together and some will not. If students move around they have the opportunity to find some people they work well with and potentially this will become their informal network outside of the module.

Q2) I also use breakout rooms a lot for similar (and different) reasons. Did you use the randomized breakout room function in Zoom/Teams or did you use something else to group them?

A2: I used Blackboard Collaborate for lectures, and it has a function called "Breakout Rooms". This allows you to decide how many groups you want and it lets you know what the resulting group size will be. It takes a few seconds to set the right group number for the desired group size. It allows you to move people around and add people to groups if they join the session late. If people drop out it sends them back to their group without needing intervention from your end.



Q3) How larger are the classes and do you run the tutorials or the TA? If a TA was doing how would you train them using breakout rooms?

A3: I had two cohorts, one of 101 students and one of 150. I ran the tutorials myself this year, although a TA usually runs them. I believe co-leading one session with a TA would be sufficient training for them. The real work is in designing the handouts. The logistics of breakout rooms are actually very simple and I see no reason why a TA would struggle with it.

Q4) What would you do if students do not participate in breakout room? (E.g. nobody speaks in the room)

A4: I am unable to monitor each room, so I usually find out that a particular group was unsuccessful after the event. There are a few strategies I adopt to pre-empt this problem.

- Every week I remind students the point of the exercise is their interaction and not the successful completion of the task. I urge them to focus on discussing the problems and not to assign tasks and rush through it.
- I do not penalise non-completion. Any partially-completed submission is given full participation marks
- I remind students that people contribute in different ways, not everyone is very chatty, doesn't mean they are not trying to contribute. I urge them to appreciate everyone's contribution, however, it may come (chat/video etc)
- I encourage students to try again next week when they express disappointment in their group not working well. I often get feedback saying "last week wasn't great but this week went really well".
- I set my own expectations to be realistic, not every group will get all there is to get out of this every single week. Its ok.
- I remind myself that at worst if a group completely breaks down, the students are working on the worksheet individually and are getting the benefit of the alternative route this tutorial could have taken. So the group sessions can only add value.
- From experience if the group size is at least 5 people, chances are a minimum of 2 individuals are up for a discussion.

Q5) What is your broadcasting technology?

A5: See Q2.



3. Revelations on Student Difficulties from Reflective Quiz Responses on Pre-recorded Lectures

Speaker: Sylvia Kuo (Brown University)

Q1) How was MWF schedule perceived by the students? any complaints about clashes, keeping up to the pace etc?

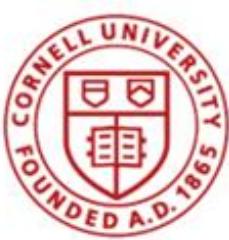
A1: The MWF seemed to be fine but I did release the entire week's worth of videos on Sunday at noon so students could flex their time as appropriate. I did hear anecdotes in Fall that some students, if they were taking many quantitative courses which tended to move towards many low-stakes assignments, felt like they were constantly tied to their computers, since they constantly needed to be clicking feedback.

Q2) Do you think the Barometers would work if no grade were attached to it? Did you find that students took the barometers seriously?

A2: I do not think the barometers would work without a grade, or the feedback that I would receive would be so skewed towards the very engaged students that it would no longer serve as a democratized feedback process. I did try to be careful to not make it burdensome, hence they could miss ¼ of them without penalty, but I wanted to give them the incentive to keep staying on track with the lectures.

Some students took the barometers seriously, particularly at the start of the semester. I had to tell them explicitly that it was okay if they didn't have any questions (which is useful knowledge), since I found a series of short questions on obscure details in the textbook that students were just writing to have something to write in that box. But definitely over time, as energy flagged, some students did discover that they could manage to write nothing or just "No" to trigger automatic credit by Canvas. Even still, I still got very interesting and useful questions and information towards the end of the semester, even with the less engaged participation.

Q3) These "unexpected misunderstandings" that you uncovered are such a gift! They're always there, but you made them visible so you can address them! So how will this change how you teach the material to begin with?



A3: First, because they pointed out areas where students were not putting ideas together that before, I had thought were clearly explained, I am thinking of using much more concrete examples (e.g. instead of saying “firm 1” and “firm 2,” strategically choosing two companies, and naming them in the example). Second, I’m also realizing that students need repetition, so sometimes it isn’t that my explanation wasn’t clear but that their headspace had not advanced to that place yet to understand what I said in the initial instance, but if I repeat what I said again, a few days later, then it resonates.

Q4) Given time constraints in the discussion sessions, how do you prioritize the issues to cover amongst those uncovered by the reflective quizzes? How do you then ensure that students feel that their questions are answered in your relatively large class of 150+ students?

A4: This is a great question. I skimmed through all the questions and tried to come up with the big themes. Sometimes it would be groups of questions that were not really coherent that suggested that the easiest way to approach it would be to explain X concept again and try to stop at those key points of confusion. So often I wasn’t able to even answer the most popular questions directly but had to put them into the larger context, and hope that the students that attended discussion would pipe up (which happened) to delve more into an issue. But, yes, many interesting or compelling questions or large misunderstandings that I would have grabbed the student and had a 2-minute conversation over but I just could not address with 150 students. I could not get bogged down in it.

Q5) When you notice that students can plug and chug well but lack conceptual understanding, what do you do to address that issue?"

A5: Good question. This issue pops out on occasion on the fringes as an offhand comment that resulted from the discussion and it will catch me off-guard. In that moment, I usually mention the issue and then pause and say, okay, let me pan out and put that into the larger context. And then point out how that is similar to something else from a different part of the course, or based on the same theme. Or how we put these ideas together coherently to create one picture (that is consistent).

Q6) Did you try to monitor for students who were just filling the fields to get the participation points but without really engaging?

A6: I did not. I wanted to just get a broad sense of what was confusing in order to know what to discuss with students. But I also wanted these barometers to serve another purpose which was for the students themselves for them to be a commitment device to keep them



on track, so if they had to click something (even if they didn't articulate a question) maybe they also bothered to click open the videos to watch them.

Q7) Have you thought about quantitatively measuring the impact of what you do to address issues that came up in the questions?

A7: No because I am not sure how to really measure what it was that I did in response, since I was just trying to just deliver content in a way that was digestible, but also responsive. I'm also not sure how to measure the outcome – which were problem sets submitted online and online timed open-book exams (taken over a 24 hour window) – and how to make attributions to what it was that I would have done. I feel like my assessments were an even poorer signal of learning than pre-pandemic, with all of the student collaboration going on behind the scenes.

General questions

Q) Do you find that the new medium we have to work with helps or hinders the development of our students' soft skills beyond the learning of the syllabi? Wikipedia lists the following soft skills (and the list is not exhaustive): critical thinking, problem solving, public speaking, professional writing, teamworking, digital literacy, leadership, professional attitude, work ethic, career management, and intercultural fluency.

Sylvia - I think that this online environment is much worse for soft-skill development. We've lost important aspects from face-to-face communication – the nuance, visual cues, etc. that play into relationship-creation. I think a few students were better able to interact with the online environment, e.g. those with social anxiety being (better) able to express their voices, but otherwise, I think it was mostly detrimental.