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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



One Strategy For Online Teaching During A National Crisis

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One of the most significant challenges of teaching exclusively online is the balance between synchronous and asynchronous teaching and learning times. I have found a balance to be necessary, as not all material is conducive to engagement during an eternal, synchronous, live Zoom meeting. While we may feel pressure to spend a certain amount of time on synchronous meetings in order to demonstrate academic rigor, the fact is that a lot of learning does not necessarily take place there, unless the time is highly structured and engaging for everyone.

First, we need to think through which learning tasks are best achieved asynchronously. Which tasks are relatively simple to execute, best done at one's own pace, and purposeful toward achieving a greater learning goal? While reading articles and books certainly fall into this category, so do creating video responses, contributing to asynchronous discussion boards, and taking short, open-book quizzes to check for understanding of the basics.

I recommend synchronous sessions only those tasks which cannot be completed asynchronously to the same effect. These sessions should be a time for students to share their discoveries from the asynchronous time, ask questions of each other and the instructor, and they should not be too long. I find a structured discussion achieves these ends, keeping everyone engaged while digging deeper into a reading assignment.

The blend of the synchronous and the asynchronous creates a rhythm, something I think each of us craves in this uncertain time.

The following rhythm has been working for me and my students as we adjust to learning exclusively online. In short, the rhythm goes like this:

1. Begin a reading assignment, along with a reading guide, like this one.
2. One, asynchronous video check-in via FlipGrid with initial thoughts about the reading
3. One, synchronous online “fishbowl” discussion during the week

In the live, online “fishbowl” style discussion, some students participate in the conversation (inside the ‘fishbowl’), while others observe, take notes, or present different material.

Here’s how I structure the discussion, which could work on any video chat platform:

☐☐ **Role:** Live discussion participant

Live discussion participants answer questions asked by facilitators and ask questions of each other, as needed

☐☐☐ **Role:** Facilitators

Facilitators create questions based on the text and ask them of the group in the order that seems most appropriate. Gather questions on a common document prior to the conversation.

☐☐ **Role:** Vocabulary

Vocabulary leaders prepare Google Slides featuring four vocabulary words from the text, along with their paragraph numbers and definitions; present live before the discussion.

☐☐ **Role:** Background research

Background researchers create Google Slides featuring information about the author and publisher of the reading. Include at least nine facts.

☐☐ **Role:** Note taker

Sample notes pages

Role: Live Kahoot Maker

The live Kahoot maker will listen carefully to the conversation and create a Kahoot for everyone to take immediately after the conversation. The winners will get a prize!!

There are many ways to modify this structure—perhaps hold two sessions with micro-groups of people or require different elements from each role. It’s my hope that a highly structured online conversation will clarify everyone’s role in synchronous meetings, encourage deep,

sustained student engagement with the material, as well as surface new learning that can only come about from community discussion.

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