Keeping the Conversation Going

Cambridge University Press Remote Teaching Webinar Series: Session 3

This week we are looking at the online equivalent of smaller group discussions, with a number of students ranging from 2-30. As we saw in the first webinar, live interactions of any kind are key for connection between you and your students. With small groups, the additional need is for connection between peers. How do we achieve this with the tools and the time available to us? Looking back at Webinar 2, asynchronous activities can help free up time to maximise the small group potential for peer to peer interaction live.

Synchronous Tools

Breakout rooms

Breakout rooms allow you to facilitate pair/small group work separately from the main discussion and then report back. Breakout rooms on Adobe Connect allow you to add instructions to each room and bring the shared whiteboard from each room back to the main room for review. Breakout rooms on Zoom don't have quite the same amount of functionality but they both allow random and assigned allocation of participants to rooms, the ability to broadcast a message to all teams simultaneously and to create a timer to finish the breakout session and return everyone to the main room. Unfortunately, the MS Teams, which is the best conferencing app for accessibility does not yet offer breakout rooms. They are on their way (date tbc) and there is a workaround involving multiple calls that CCTL have used successfully recently but requires a lot of planning in advance.

Recordings

It is important to note that session recordings **do not record** breakout room discussions. The reason for this is to allow people to speak more freely, as they would in pair work in a classroom. Recording could potentially inhibit students from asking 'stupid' questions thereby inhibiting the effectiveness of the session. However, some students have institutional permission to record sessions for accessibility reasons. Find out if this is the case in your cohort. Make sure those students can do this and communicate clearly with the others about the purpose and destiny of the recording so as to maintain their confidence and free speech.

Polling

Polling is no substitution for discussion but can be great for taking the temperature of the room on a particular topic, drawing opinion from more reticent students, providing punctuation to discussions and allowing multiple stages in a discussion which helps greatly with peer to peer interaction. More on this in-session.

Zoom has an integrated polling tool (read from User onwards) but it disappears in breakout rooms so you may wish to use an external tool like Google Forms, Poll Everywhere or Mentimeter so that students can still access the questions during their breakout discussion. Adobe Connect polls can be made visible in all breakout rooms but are more limited in question type than the others. To use polls in MS Teams meetings, the default would be MS Forms but like the others, you need to create these separately, share a link in chat that takes people away from the meeting and then bring them back. In Teams you can also use Polly directly in Chat (click the 3 dots at the bottom of the chat window) but these can't be planned in advance.

Asynchronous Tools

In the interest of maximising time available for discussion, asynchronous tools or activities may be used in advance instead of giving presentations to the group. These not only give students an opportunity to make more considered responses to group discussions but depending on the tool you use, can practice valuable study and professional skills. In addition to sending out materials as you would do in preparation for online lecture time, you could try any of the following.

Discussion Forums

Discussion forums are available natively in whatever platform you are using. See your institution's guidance on setting them up or find the platform support community for instructions. Use these for when written communication is the foremost skill for your students. You can ask your students to share their work in a forum and have the others view it before the seminar in preparation for rich discussion live

Video discussions

Flipgrid is a video blogging tool that is easy to set up. You and/or students can post a video and students can reply to you or each other, also via video. This is especially useful when students are likely to be expected to give verbal reports or be convincing in person. Watch the Future Teacher Webinar on Collaborative Learning inside and outside the classroom (top video) Spencer from 23:26 to 38:16 to hear Debi Spencer of the University of Central Lancashire talk about how she uses Flipgrid.

Social Reading

Perusall is very easy to set up and use and has a whole host of published material (much of which is currently free due to Covid 19) that students can read and comment on collectively. You can upload your own materials as well. Monitor the conversation as it unfolds without intervening and address any finer points or misconceptions in contact time. Why Perusall?

Engaging with opinion

'…student[s] must have frequent opportunities to do things for which they can receive feedback.' (Robert Duke, 2005) All of the tools above provide students to do those things and to receive feedback from both instructor and peers. You can decide whether to do this asynchronously or use it to springboard richer discussion in live contact time. Students may need guidance on how to give feedback. More on this in the webinar.

Pre-Session Reading

Read this 5 minute article from HBR on effective online meetings. It's couched in a business setting but has a lot that be applied in a teaching setting. What might the equivalent of 'pre-reads' be in your context?

Survey

Please fill out the survey to help guide the direction of the session.