Teaching Tips/Notes

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Pivoting to Remote Instruction: Engage Students with Asynchronous Learning Technologies

Introduction
The selection of any methodology, whether it be in research or teaching, should always start with the problem that needs to be solved. Perhaps your students are reluctant to speak up during live online class sessions, or you despair at the mere thought of grading discussion threads in your learning management system. You also might be wishing that you have more time in class to get to know your students, but you hesitate to spend precious class time on introductions and get-to-know-you activities.

Asynchronous learning technologies can provide options and help to solve some of these problems. You don't have to try to pack everything into a live Zoom class session. Students have more choice when and how they engage in learning course material. If a student is unable to connect to a live class session, there are other options to engage with the instructor and classmates.

Procedure
There are asynchronous learning technologies available through individual or institutional subscriptions, but many others are free. Two technologies that I will discuss here have free versions available.

VoiceThread
VoiceThread is an online platform that allows for asynchronous interaction around content. For example, an instructor might upload a presentation and add video comments to each slide. At any point in the presentation, students can ask written, audio or video questions. If the instructor stops to ask the class a discussion question, students can chime in asynchronously to provide answers. Instructors and students can opt to receive e-mails notifying them of new comments on the VoiceThread so they can keep up with the conversation.

From the instructor point of view, VoiceThread allows for comments to be recorded one slide at a time. This feature allows instructors to gather their thoughts and think about the most efficient and clear way to express their thoughts on each slide, and avoids the high stakes feeling of recording the entire lecture in one continuous take. If this is a lecture that an instructor gives in each offering of the course, recording on VoiceThread would allow the presentation to be utilized for multiple courses, but also allows the option for the presentation to be updated.

From the student point of view, VoiceThread allows for students to access the content on their schedule. It has an interactive element that makes a presentation much more engaging than a simple video lecture. Students can ask questions at the exact point in the presentation when the question comes to mind. Depending on the comment settings, students can also hear questions and comments from their classmates. When a student doesn't understand their participation grade, the instructor and student can have a conversation utilizing the recorded comment artifacts, rather than just their memories of the student's participation.

While this is a simple example of a lecture on VoiceThread, there are many other ways to utilize this technology. With the comment moderation feature turned on, student comments are only available to the instructor which allows VoiceThread to be utilized as an assessment tool. Instead of uploading a presentation, an instructor might upload the syllabus document and give the course overview. A weekly VoiceThread question thread could serve as virtual asynchronous office hours. VoiceThreads could be used to share projects with community members, or in a portfolio. The technology is simple to use and there are many ways to integrate it into a course, no matter what the discipline.

Flipgrid
Flipgrid is a free online platform that allows for asynchronous video-based class discussions. Videos are organized by topic, and the instructor can set the time limit on each video comment. The videos are only visible to the instructor and those with a password or direct link.

One example for utilizing Flipgrid in a course might be student introductions at the beginning of the semester. The instructor starts the discussion thread and gives instructions for what information students should include in their video introduction. The students respond with their introductions, keeping to the time limit set by the instructor. When the thread is played back the video introductions can be played in a continuous thread one after another, or an individual introduction could be selected on its own.

From the instructor point of view, Flipgrid is a good tool for extending discussion and other activities that might take place in a live course session. It can be an effective way of engaging hesitant students in discussion, and also lends itself well to assessing participation. Flipgrid also provides captions to the videos, which makes it more accessible to those with disabilities or non-native speakers.

From the student point of view, Flipgrid gives students an opportunity to engage with the instructor and classmates through video, which many of today's students find more engaging than written discussion threads. Before a video posts to the thread, students have a chance to review it and re-record it if they are unsatisfied.

Flipgrid is a simple technology that is intuitive for both students and instructors. The playback features give the feeling of being in a classroom discussion, with one student comment playing after another. In the best cases, students build on each other's comments and raise questions that other students answer. Gone is the awkwardness of

a student digitally raising their hand in a live Zoom class session, or two students starting to speak at once.

Assessment
Asynchronous learning technologies provide a wealth of options to instructors to engage with students in online environment. They can take the pressure off an instructor who is trying to pack everything into a live Zoom session, and provide additional options when an instructor's or student's internet suddenly crashes. They give students a choice in their learning, and instructors new opportunities to engage meaningfully with students. They open up new possibilities of student accountability and assessment. VoiceThread and Flipgrid are examples of asynchronous learning technologies that are free to use, and well worth the few minutes that it takes to learn how to use them.

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