

Higher Education  
Dialogues – Deep Dive

---

# **How can teachers encourage active learning in an online delivery environment?**

Spotlight report  
November 2020

---

Across universities around the world, one response to COVID–19 has been a shift from primarily face-to-face models of teaching to those that operate largely online. Remote teaching and learning has, in fact, for many higher education institutions very rapidly become the norm. This situation has created new pedagogical demands on teaching staff and one question of universal relevance that has arisen is ‘how can teachers encourage active learning in an online delivery environment?’. This was the focus of the second session of the British Council’s Higher Education Dialogue Series for 2020-21.

Over 80 participants from 10 countries participated in this online event. Joanna Pearson, Director of New Product Development at the British Council, introduced the session by describing the British Council’s own experiences in 2020 of transitioning to online models of business and delivery. Dr Catherine Hack, Principal Adviser (Learning and Teaching) for [Advance-HE](#), then led participants, via a series of inputs and practical activities, through an analysis of strategies for promoting active online learning. Overall, the session had four key aims:

- to provide an introduction to good pedagogic practice in the online space
- to encourage participants to reflect on what they want to achieve in online delivery
- to introduce some high impact online practices
- to identify some principles for effective online teaching and learning.

Key themes from the session are summarised below.

## How we learn

Discussions of effective online learning need to be situated within understandings of how people learn generally. Participants were invited to reflect on their own memorable learning experiences and the factors that contributed to these. The responses that were shared highlighted a wide range of factors that were seen to enhance learning, including hands–on activities, a relaxing learning environment, opportunities to share ideas and discuss, a variety of tasks and regular feedback. Many of these factors map onto the ‘ripples’ model of learning developed by Phil Race<sup>1</sup> and which Dr Hack then presented. According to this model, learning is initiated by individual wants or needs; it is then facilitated by opportunities to engage in practical activities, make sense of new information and verbalise understandings. In this model, feedback is also a central element in the learning process. Online environments can support learning more effectively when they acknowledge the broader processes through which people learn.

## What is online teaching?

According to Dr Hack, the process of online teaching can be broken down into various stages, as shown in Figure 1 below. Thus, planning online sessions should involve a consideration of the various stages of the process and of the kinds of activities students can be asked to engage in at each stage. For example, before online classes students can be assigned various kinds of preparatory pre-thinking tasks, while during the synchronous part of the session it is important to create opportunities for students to

---

<sup>1</sup> This model has gone through various versions. See <https://phil-race.co.uk/2016/04/updated-powerpoint-ripples-model/>

interact with the tutor and each other. In subsequent asynchronous work, students can be assigned further out-of-class interactive and independent tasks. It is also important, in further synchronous meetings, for students to have opportunities to receive feedback on their work and to review their understandings of content.

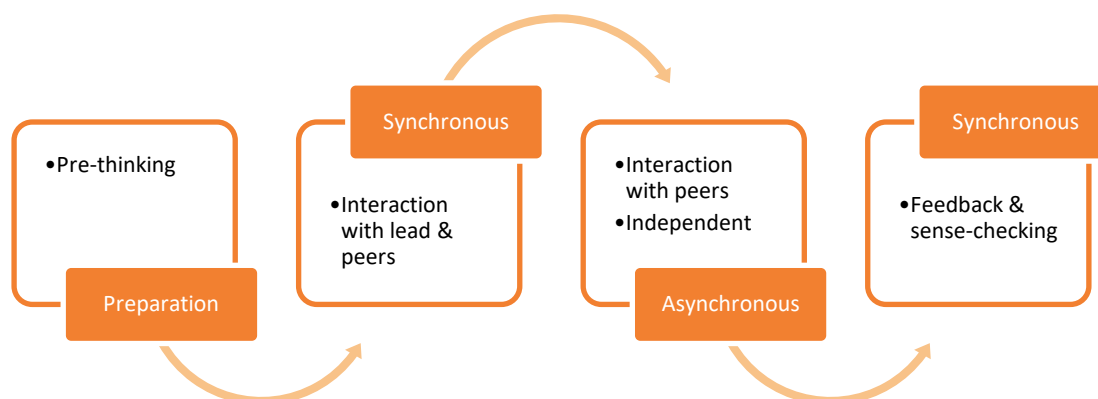


Figure 1: The online teaching process

## High-impact online practices

Participants were introduced to seven high-impact online practices. These are strategies which enhance the learning environment during online delivery; in particular, many of these strategies engage students more actively in the learning process. These high-impact strategies are summarised below.

- a. *Retrieval practices* – These are activities which give students opportunities to review material and which facilitate the retention and recall of information. Reviewing, for example, can be achieved through various forms of online quizzes ([Kahoot](#) is a popular tool for such purposes). Students can also be asked, in advance of a class, to review the previous one and to identify questions they want to ask to further clarify their understandings. Such questions can be entered into a Google Docs form and shared with the whole class. In terms of strategies to enhance the recall of information, students can be encouraged to use various forms of drawings and doodles, graphic organisers and mind-maps, in addition to conventional linear notes.
- b. *Signposting* – Dr Hack explained that ‘in order to allow students to explore the much more rich content that’s available to them [online], it’s important that they’re signposted so that they don’t just get lost’. Signposting strategies thus facilitate for students the process of making sense of large amounts of online information. Signposting also includes advice that helps students distinguish high-priority course content from that which is more peripheral. When students understand what areas of content they need to prioritise, they can also make more effective use of their time.
- c. *Rich discussions* – Online learning will be enhanced when students have opportunities to engage in rich discussions about the material under study. Discussions can take many forms but will include any activities where students must, verbally, express an opinion, ask and/or answer questions, provide a summary of an idea, debate for or against a particular position, or provide a judgement or evaluation of some kind. The shared feature of such activities is that they give students the chance to process information and to verbalise their understandings of it. Various online tools are available which allow students to share the outcomes of their discussions; these include [Padlet](#) (an online notice board), [AnswerGarden](#) (a feedback tool) and [Jamboard](#) (an interactive whiteboard). Figure 2

is a screenshot of the output generated on AnswerGarden during the session when participants were asked to write comments about the skills their students need.



**Figure 2: Output from AnswerGarden**

- d. *Transforming passive viewing into active engagement* – Online learning often involves students in the process of watching videos. However, simply asking students to watch a video may not generate high levels of engagement. The inclusion of tasks to be completed while a video is being watched or on conclusion of the process, though, can create a more active learning experience. Various examples were provided in the session of the form these tasks can take: pausing the video and asking students to discuss what will happen next; presenting the video without sound and asking students to provide a commentary; writing questions that could be used to interview a character in the video; or constructing an argument that opposes that presented in the video. Many other possibilities exist; the key point here is that the addition of tasks can make the process of watching videos a more engaging one.
- e. *Gamification* – This involves the application of elements of game design and mechanics to non-game environments in order to produce a change in behaviour. Thus, understandings of the features of games that make them motivating can be applied to the design of active learning experiences. Gamification does not mean that students must be involved in playing a game; rather, features of effective games – such as the use of challenges, puzzles, points, visible progress and leaderboards – can be applied to the design of educational activities. Escape rooms<sup>2</sup> were mentioned as a specific example of a popular approach to gamification in educational settings.
- f. *Narrative approaches* – Narratives can be used in two ways to promote more active online learning. The first is as a pedagogy in which learning is promoted through the creating and sharing of (often digital<sup>3</sup>) stories. The second is through the creation of a story-world (which can be virtual or augmented) in which students participate and, through the process, learn.

<sup>2</sup> For examples of digital escape rooms in higher education see <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/342014627> Online Approaches for Implementing a Digital Escape Room with Preservice Teachers and <https://pubs.acs.org/doi/10.1021/acs.jchemed.0c00449>

<sup>3</sup> For digital storytelling resources, see <https://elearningindustry.com/18-free-digital-storytelling-tools-for-teachers-and-students>

- g. *Real-world triggers* – This practice involves the use of authentic materials, such as news stories, documentaries and videos, to stimulate active learning. The range of activities that be designed around such resources is endless; the key feature in such work, though, is the use of appropriately-chosen real-life materials that will heighten student motivation and engage them more fully in the learning process.

## Principles for online teaching

The final part of the event reviewed a number of principles which can guide the design of online learning and enhance the extent to which it provides an active educational experience for students. The principles highlighted in this conclusion to the session recommended that:

- teachers should recognise the positive elements of online learning — it does facilitate certain learning processes more effectively than face-to-face learning can
- form should follow function — the selection of tools to support online learning should be informed by a clear understanding of what the goals of the learning are
- social relationships matter — teachers need to connect with students and to foster positive relationships within online groups
- opportunities for various forms of ‘play’ are important in creating more active online learning environments
- the key objectives of online learning should be made explicit to students
- less is more — students should not be overwhelmed by the simultaneous use of too many different online learning tools
- student support is important — in online learning, students will often require support to enable them to make sense of new ways of learning.

As noted earlier, good practice in online teaching will reflect what we know about how people learn more generally; in the same way, some of these principles are of more general relevance to effective pedagogy.

## Take-away questions

Here are some take-away questions from this session for universities and teaching staff who would like to create more active online learning environments for their students.

- a. In terms of your existing practices, which aspects of online delivery seem to be positively received by students?
- b. To what extent do your current approaches to online delivery make use of the kinds of high-impact practices discussed in this session?
- c. Which aspects of your existing approach to online delivery would you like to enhance in order to make learning a more active process?
- d. Could you identify one high-impact online practice and take concrete steps to incorporate it more fully into an online course you are teaching this academic year?

- e. What pedagogical support is currently available for teaching staff who are entrusted with the process of delivering online courses? What additional support might staff need?
- f. To what extent do teaching staff have opportunities to collaborate in the design and delivery of online teaching and in the analysis of how active students are during online courses?
- g. How is the quality of online learning evaluated in your institution? To what extent does the current approach provide insight into how active students' online learning experiences are?

## Resources



### Session recording



### Speakers' slides

- Active learning for your online classroom: Five strategies using Zoom (Columbia University in the City of New York): <https://ctl.columbia.edu/resources-and-technology/teaching-with-technology/teaching-online/active-learning/>
- Bao, W. (2020). COVID-19 and online teaching in higher education: A case study of Peking University. *Human Behavior and Emerging Technologies*, 2(2), 113-115.  
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/hbe2.191>
- Best practices for teaching online (Arizona State University):  
<https://teachonline.asu.edu/2018/09/best-practices-for-teaching-online/>
- Best practices: Online pedagogy (Harvard University): <https://teachremotely.harvard.edu/best-practices>
- Lowendahl, J.M. (2020). Resilience and beyond in higher education. Gartner:  
<https://1drv.ms/b/s!AkjC79GI2Na8gcQSML2OT4XWzD90tQ?e=qL9s24>
- Martin, F., Ritzhaupt, A., Kumar, S., & Budhrani, K. (2019). Award-winning faculty online teaching practices: Course design, assessment and evaluation, and facilitation. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 42, 34-43.
- Morgan, G. (2020). What's next for online learning in higher education. Gartner:  
<https://1drv.ms/b/s!AkjC79GI2Na8gcQTWiOb-FICbB-OyQ?e=7RmB87>
- U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation, and Policy Development (2010). Evaluation of evidence-based practices in online learning: A meta-analysis and review of online learning studies. Washington, D.C., 2010. <https://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/tech/evidence-based-practices/finalreport.pdf>