



## Best Practices for Using Webinars in Teaching

Chris Roddenberry, PhD - August 12, 2019

Webinars can be valuable additions to online courses because they lend a synchronous element to the class. They can also be valuable additions to face-to-face courses because some students are more comfortable interacting in a digital environment than they are having the attention of an entire room directed to them. By following a few basic rules, you can incorporate webinars into your courses to improve student learning.

### Structure

Weekly webinars are a good way to help your class engage with the material and build a sense of community in your class. Creating and running a good webinar, however, requires planning and practice. A good way to ensure webinar engagement is to structure it with the rule of thirds. The rule of thirds allocates a webinar into three elements:

1. Teacher-directed presentation
2. Engagement activity (e.g., a video or an exercise)

### 3. Student discussion

You will want to include a lecture in each webinar, just as you do in your traditional classroom. Most web conferencing tools let you share your screen or files such as PDFs and PowerPoints. This is where you set the context for the class activity and scaffold the weekly project you are supporting. This should be 10 or 15 minutes, and you should strive to make it engaging and visual.

After the short lecture you should switch to a different activity, such as one involving an in-class exercise, video, or website that the students can explore. For example, in an abnormal psychology class, you might have students watch a video and diagnose the character's psychological disorder using criteria you provide. In a business class, you might put your students into small groups and give them a 15-minute case study to complete. In a math class, you might ask the students to complete an online quiz with practice questions before going over them as a class. And in a biology class, you might have your students visit an anatomy website to research an organ or body system and then report back to the class about what they found. The idea during this 15- to 20-minute period is to provide a short application of the content that allows the students to actively engage the material.

Finally, you will want to leave time at the end of the webinar for discussion. You can lead your students in a group discussion or, if your web conferencing software has breakout rooms, put students in small discussion groups.

You may choose to organize your elements in any order you see fit. For my class it makes the most sense to provide a short lecture to contextualize the activity, following it with a short activity and then giving the students time to interact with one another.

#### **Webinar scheduling**

You may have questions about when during the week you should schedule a webinar. Here are several suggestions from experienced synchronous teachers for maximizing your webinar attendance:

- Pick days in the middle of the week. Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays typically have the best student participation. Sundays and Mondays are generally not as popular. Avoid Friday and Saturday nights at all costs.
- Evenings will draw larger audiences than mornings or afternoons. Full-time students are in class during the day, and most of your part-time students will be at work. Generally, start times between 8:00 p.m. and 9:00 p.m. are best. Earlier start times may interfere with family dinner hours and child bedtime routines. Start times at 10:00 p.m. or later will often be too late for early risers.
- Remember, you are the only one who must attend all the meetings; select a time when you want to meet. Do not survey the students at the beginning of the course to find a time. This is problematic for many reasons. The first reason is that a student cannot commit to an event until they know when it is. The second problem is that students are not aware of the multiple considerations that go into choosing a meeting time, and those whose preferred times are not used may feel that you don't value their opinions. Finally, it is often a waste of time. You are asking students to give you a preferred time for a meeting that even the most vocal about their time preferences may not finally attend.
- Do not promise to do the webinar multiple times per week. While this may mean that one or two students who can't make the meeting time will miss out, you will drive yourself crazy with work while

not appreciably increasing the size of the audience. Again, you are the only person who must attend every meeting. Make sure not to work yourself to death.

- This may be the most controversial suggestion, but you should avoid providing recordings of these live events. The real value of the webinar in a fully online course is the social interaction that occurs among participants, which a recording does not include. Students who are given the opportunity of watching recordings may choose to do so when they could have attended the live event. This decreases the impact the lesson will have on students.

### **Other uses for webinars**

Besides the weekly webinar, there are many other ways in which you can incorporate web conferencing into your class.

#### *First week course orientation*

The first day of almost any traditional class is an orientation day when the instructor explains how the course works and how students can succeed in it. In an online course a live, virtual orientation can humanize you for your students and thus make the class go better. Plus, almost all meeting apps come with a screen-sharing feature, allowing you to share you LMS and walk students through the course experience. The orientation is also a good time for icebreaker that lets students share information about themselves and learn about their classmates.

#### *Office hours*

Meeting software is an ideal way to hold virtual office hours. But instructors should not set expectations too high for student participation in these meetings. Some instructors who do virtual office hours complain about the lack of student attendance, but students do not come to traditional office hours very often either. Still, it is important to make the offer to demonstrate that you are open to meeting with students and care about their issues. Carving out dedicated time each week for virtual office hours available creates a welcoming environment.

#### *Review and help sessions*

Final uses of webinars include holding test reviews and problem-solving sessions, giving students time to work on group projects, and leading any other collaborative activity that supports your course. Many instructors wrongly assume that online students intuitively know how to collaborate and work with remote partners. In reality, most students have very limited experience collaborating online. By providing these structured events, you can help your students learn to work in remote groups, a skill that will undoubtedly be important in the 21st century.

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