

BSPH Virtual Classroom Best Practices

Spring 2025 Update

This resource was originally created in the Fall of 2020 to guide faculty with a set of best practices, as communicated by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health (BSPH) Office of Academic Affairs. It prioritizes what faculty should do when moving on-campus instruction to the virtual classroom. While it was developed at a pivotal time in online learning, the guiding practices remain true: whether an emergency or planned shift, the virtual classroom should meet the needs of the learners and faculty while considering the course modality. Virtual learning brings a special set of considerations to course preparation and facilitation in its organization, interactions, learning activities, and engagement.

Please [contact the Center for Teaching and Learning](#) with any questions or suggestions about these recommendations.

Keep a Focus on Course Organization

It can be harder in a virtual environment to know when (and where) class meetings will happen, and lack of clarity regarding timing, deadlines, and organization can lead to substantial frustration on the part of students. Maintain good course organization by:

- Give every activity in the course clear representation in CoursePlus, using the [Schedule Builder tool](#), with dates, deadlines, and protected Zoom links when relevant. This will allow students to see the activities all in one place, across all their classes, and will include the activity information in the automated daily emails sent out from CoursePlus.
 - It is recommended that any synchronous sessions be included as an item on a [Standard Page](#) linked to the schedule, or as their own Schedule Builder Event associated with “other web page”. Refer to the CTL Blog Post regarding [adding Zoom links for individual class meetings on a standard page](#). (See an [example page here](#).) Or, if you do choose to make a meeting link directly on the schedule, do not include its full URL in the event’s listing, which is visible in the public view of the schedule.
- Use the “Virtual Classroom Approach” section of the [CoursePlus Syllabus Builder tool](#) to give students an overview of the planned structure for the course, including the amount of synchronous and asynchronous activities, the general timing of any synchronous activities (with details in the Schedule Builder), and clarity regarding what “attendance” is required and what will and will not be recorded. Put this “Virtual Classroom Approach” section near the top of the syllabus so that it is easy for students to see.
- Send weekly emails to the class highlighting upcoming events and deadlines. Note that these can be scheduled in advance in CoursePlus.
- Try to move all questions and discussion to the CoursePlus Discussion Forum rather than individual emails to and from students. This may help make it manageable for the faculty and TAs—and will



help students see responses to other students' questions, which may cut down on the questions overall.

- Aim to use only the CoursePlus Syllabus and Schedule Builder tools to convey course information and avoid having a separate Word syllabus unless you can be fully confident that both places have the same information. Having two versions of the syllabus and schedule information can lead to substantial confusion. Additionally, the built-in CoursePlus tools are always digitally accessible.

Be Clear about Course Policies and Expectations up Front by Including them in the Course Syllabus

Consider making a low-stakes quiz at the beginning of the term on the policies to give students incentive to read the syllabus. The policies should include normal course policies (such as late homework submissions), but also some specific to the online/hybrid environment, such as:

- Reminding students that class sessions will be recorded.
- Clarifying attendance requirements. (For example, whether watching a recording after the fact will count as attendance at that class session. This is recommended if students in the class are in a variety of time zones and/or with intensive work or other commitments.)
- Specifying when and where students can expect course recordings to be shared—for example, within 24 hours in the Online Library of the CoursePlus site.

Aim for High-Quality Recordings

- If you record in advance, aim for a series of 15- to 20-minute segments rather than a full hour.
- Use high-quality recording equipment. Recommendations can be found in the CTL Toolkit document and page:
 - [How Do I Prepare to Self-record a Lecture?](#)
 - [Self-recording Options](#)
- If you need help editing a lecture recorded in Zoom or Panopto, [reach out to BSPH Multimedia](#), selecting “Need a New Service”.
- Panopto recordings from previous offerings of a class should not be used. Instead, record new, updated, and higher quality recordings. Exceptions are appropriate in some cases, such as for guest lecturers who are unable to participate again in the current academic year.
- Synchronous class meetings and other learning activities should be recorded in Zoom so students who cannot attend synchronously can watch later. The Zoom recording—either in the Zoom cloud or on the local computer, the latter of which can be transferred to OneDrive cloud storage—should be shared with its transcript from the [Online Library](#). This should happen soon after the class session is over, though this is not always feasible. [Enable Zoom to automatically record](#) or remember to turn on the recording at the beginning of each session. (Academic department coordinators can assist faculty with requests for fully licensed Zoom accounts that allow longer meetings and record directly to the Zoom cloud.)

Be Thoughtful about Course Scheduling

- If the course was originally scheduled to be on-site with set lecture times, stick to those times for any synchronous activities.
- Offering office hours may be even more important in a virtual environment than when we are on campus, as a way to give students an opportunity to interact with faculty and TAs in less structured environments. When scheduling office hours over Zoom, be mindful of the time zones in which the students may be in; consider a quick survey at the beginning of the term to identify the timing constraints of the students enrolled in the class. (Please note that the location information provided in SIS is not always up-to-date; a survey at the beginning of the term is a safer way to get that information.)
- Be mindful of workload expectations; if you are using a combination of recorded asynchronous lectures and synchronous interaction, you may want to reduce the number of synchronous sessions in order to make the overall workload consistent with the [credit hour and workload recommendations](#). On average, one credit is estimated to be about three hours of course work per week.
- If you are going to have an 80- to 90-minute synchronous session, consider giving at least a five-minute break in the middle.
- Make sure to start and end on time! Students will often have classes just after your session, or other time commitments. (But also consider opening the session a few minutes early for casual conversations before the formal class session starts.)

Find Ways to Engage with Students in Formal and Informal Ways

- Record a “Lecture 0” at the beginning of the term to welcome the students to the class and orient them to the structure, content, and key policies.
- Hold online office hours with the faculty and/or TAs, for general student questions.
- Students appreciate opportunities to interact with each other and with the course instructors in formal and informal ways. Consider:
 - Starting the Zoom session early or allowing students to join the session before the host to promote socialization.
 - Staying on for a few minutes after the class ends, to let students ask questions.
 - Scheduling optional short coffee hours or after-class Zoom sessions for students in the course to mingle.
- If possible, use a TA to help manage the chat and breakout rooms in a synchronous Zoom session. This will help the faculty member focus on the instruction.
- Consider creative uses of Zoom, including polls or sharing of information besides slides, such as using PDF markup tools to show what is good or bad about a paper, real-time data analysis in RStudio, using breakout rooms for small group conversations that come back to the full group, or using the whiteboard feature for drawings or casual notes.

- Develop targeted [Discussion Forum](#) prompts for each week or module of a course. Questions can be asked that ensure that students understand the material (the prompts can be based on common areas of misunderstanding) and are able to synthesize and draw on this information to make “bigger picture” or current event connections. Responding may be part of a participation grade in the class, but these posts do not have to be graded.
- Consider whether offering instruction online facilitates novel opportunities for your course, such as remote guest lectures or the sharing of web resources such as videos or relevant websites.
- See more recommendations on [CTL’s Teaching Toolkit page on Active Learning](#) and by searching for the term “engagement” on the [Toolkit Shelf](#) and the [On-Demand Workshop Videos page](#).

Be Creative and Thoughtful about Assessments

Some of your usual in-person assessment strategies may not be feasible in a virtual or hybrid classroom. This is due in part to the modality where all exchanges are digital. But academic integrity must also receive special consideration when teaching online.

- Artificial Intelligence (AI) is readily available in varying levels to all students. Consider reviewing the FAQs on the [Toolkit page, Artificial Intelligence in Teaching and Learning](#), for some advice about developing AI-resistant learning activities as well as ways to incorporate AI in your courses. Additional recommendations are included concerning communicating your expectations and what to do if you suspect a violation of academic integrity involving AI.
- Proctoring companies are not currently used in BSPH online courses. However, you can request [students set up their own proctor](#) and then, using the features in [Quiz Generator, set up a password-protected and proctored exam](#).
- Suggested techniques for rigorous online assessments include:
 - Employ real-world, authentic assessments such as papers, essays, exercises, etc.
 - Avoid closed-book exams in general.
 - If you need to use a multiple-choice exam, employ some of the features in CoursePlus Quiz Generator tool that allow for randomizing question and answer-choice order, or using multiple quiz sets. Learn more from the workshop videos: [Leveraging CoursePlus Quiz Generator to Promote Academic Integrity](#) (slides | transcript) and [The Fundamentals of Multiple Choice Question Writing for Better Learning](#) (slides | transcript).
- See more recommendations on [CTL’s Teaching Toolkit page on Assessment and Grading](#) and by searching for the term “assessment” on the [Toolkit Shelf](#) and the [On-Demand Workshop Videos page](#).

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