



JHSPH Virtual Classroom Best Practices

Fall 2020

This document highlights best practices (as communicated by the Office of Academic Affairs and prepared by Liz Stuart, Associate Dean for Education) for faculty to keep in mind when moving instruction to the virtual classroom. 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) course sessions 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:

- Giving every activity in the course clear representation in CoursePlus, ideally using the Schedule Builder tool, with dates, deadlines, and Zoom links when relevant. This will allow students to see the activities all in one place, across all of their classes, and will include the activity information in the automated daily emails sent out from CoursePlus.
 - If your course already uses the Class Sessions tool, you can keep it in that format, but you should make efforts to ensure clear communication of assignment deadlines. Alternatively, on the Faculty Tools page, there is a button that allows you to switch from one format to the other, which may be an easy way to convert to the Schedule Builder.
 - Provide a link to each live Zoom session from the Schedule Builder (or Class Sessions) tool in CoursePlus. During 4th term, students were easily confused by conflicting and changing links to Zoom sessions found in email messages or multiple places on a course website. If you are using the Class Sessions tool, the CoursePlus team recently added a feature to [specify a Zoom link for each class session](#). If you are using the Schedule Builder tool, either include the Zoom link as text on a Page Builder page linked to the schedule, or as its own “other web page” event type on the schedule. Do not include the full URL in the event’s assignment description nor additional information fields as those are visible in the public view of the schedule.
- Using the new “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.
- Sending weekly emails to the class highlighting upcoming events and deadlines. Note that these can be scheduled in advance in CoursePlus.
- Trying 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.

- Aiming 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.

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

Consider making a “quiz” (perhaps worth 1–3 points on a student’s final grade) 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, etc.) 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.
- Telling students how quickly course recordings will be made available on the website (for example, within 24 hours).

Aim for High-Quality Recordings

- If recording 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 here: <http://ctltoolkit.s3.amazonaws.com/VirtualClassroom2020/PrepareSelf-RecordLecture-final.pdf>
- If you need help editing a lecture recorded in Zoom or Panopto, reach out to your Department’s Senior TA for assistance or contact [JHSPH Multimedia](#).
- Panopto recordings from previous offerings of a class should not be used. Instead, record new, updated, and higher quality recordings. Exceptions may be appropriate in some cases, such as for guest lecturers who are unable to participate again in the current academic year.
- Synchronous activities should be using Zoom and recorded so that students who cannot attend live can watch the activities later. The Zoom recording will be either on the Zoom cloud or on the local computer, either of which can be copied to OneDrive. The link (either from the cloud or from OneDrive) should then be posted in the Online Library. The Faculty member or TA should post the link soon after the class session is over, although we realize that is not always feasible. Set the Zoom session to record automatically so that faculty and/or TAs do not have to remember to turn on the recording at the beginning of each session.



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 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 up 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. In some cases where a TA is not available, a senior TA may be available to help out.
- See more recommendations on student engagement on the [Resources for the Virtual Classroom Approach](#) page.
- 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.

Be Creative and Thoughtful about Assessments

Some of your usual assessment strategies may not be feasible in the current pandemic. See more recommendations on student assessment on the [Resources for the Virtual Classroom Approach](#) page.

- Proctoring companies (as have been used for some previous online assessments) are not currently feasible due to a few reasons:
 - Cost (which would have to be borne by the students).
 - The software is recognized as malware by some institutional systems and antivirus software.
 - Some of the programs actually rely on scanning one’s room with a camera, raising privacy concerns.
 - In some countries, the software is not permitted and/or subject to “firewall” restrictions.
 - While it might work (or be affordable) for some students, we feel that it wouldn’t be fair unless applied equally to all.
- Instead, we suggest the following:
 - 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 that allow for randomizing question and answer-choice order, or using multiple quiz sets. Learn more from the workshop recording for [Designing Effective Online Assessments](#).