

BEST PRACTICES FOR ONLINE SYNCHRONOUS SESSIONS

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SESSION DESIGN AND PREPARATION (BEFORE)

DESIGN

- **Integrate** webinars (or “virtual classrooms”) into other course activities, weaving them into asynchronous tasks, rather than being stand-alone or outlier activities. Students can be given preparatory (e.g. surveys) and reflective materials and tasks that deepen their learning.
- **Student Interaction & Creating an Impactful Webinar:**
 - Active learning drives best practice in online learning, and synchronous sessions are no exception. Use these sessions as an opportunity to do ice breakers, have brainstorming sessions and other small group work (via breakout rooms), “just-in-time-teaching” (via polling), student presentations, simulations and role play activities, etc.
 - Have tailored, fun tools (but not ones that take too long to explain or learn), and (particularly in large courses) allow students to express their opinions via emoticons or hand raising to increase interaction.
 - Invite students to submit questions they may have in advance (particularly for guest speakers, final exam reviews, etc.)
- **PowerPoints** should be created with the 6x6 principle that guides presentation design; make use of graphics and images, and reduce text so that students aren’t cognitively overloaded by reading and listening to different content at the same time. Decks should be uploaded well in advance of the session.
- **Checklists, Scripts and Outlines:** Preparing even a basic outline can help the flow of the session immensely. The outline should cover at the very least: an introduction, topics, activities (e.g. polls, Q&As, small group discussion, etc.), timings, and a conclusion (instructors should be reminded to leave time at the end to summarize and wrap up the session).
- **Variety:** Given what we know about students’ attention spans, Instructors are encouraged to “switch gears” and **change the activity every 10-12 minutes** in order to maintain engagement.

PREPARATION

- **Headsets:** It is essential that the Instructor use a headset, and ensure that it is working correctly prior to the entrance of students.
- **Tech Support:** Communicate with tech support about your lesson plan in advance so that they may help you in the background throughout your session, particularly if you are using tools that require assistance.
- **Polls & Breakout Rooms:**
 - Having **polls** created prior to the session is essential to the efficiency of a seminar; the transition time between questions and student interaction has to be fluid in order to keep student’s focus.
 - Instructors should also know that Tech Support can (and in many cases should) set up **breakout rooms** to reduce transition time and keep the activity flowing. Providing tech support with instructions on how you wish to create groups and allocate students to rooms, in advance, is advised, particularly for complex group formations.
- **Documents:** Sometimes Instructors attempt to transition from one shared document to another and have great difficulty doing so. Adobe Connect has the ability to share multiple documents at once, cycling the layers to relieve document cancellation and upload times. This function needs to be made clear and taught to Instructors who intend to use multiple documents in one session.
- **Background for Video:** Most Instructors do not use video, and we do not recommend it if they do not have

a fast and secure hard-line connection. However, if Instructors do use video, they must take the time to prepare correctly before the session. 3 Main points to consider are:

- **Lighting:** Try to make sure the light is coming towards the Instructor's face, from a downward angle above their head and behind the camera. You do not want to blind students, nor cast shadows in the frame.
- **Camera Angle:** Having the camera adjusted correctly allows for a more pleasing screen and focus. Try to have the camera a couple inches below the Instructor's eye-line.
- **Background:** The background needs to show the institutionalization and professionalism of the Instructor. A bookshelf or desk would be appropriate. It is recommended, though, that you use this to reinforce your brand at the same time. Suggestions center on a banner or background panel of your brand (faculty, Queen's logo, etc.) as the backdrop of your session.
- Instructors are encouraged to **post a photo** if they aren't on webcam to create a sense of connection.
- **Dry Run Testing:** Technology will always have problems. Having your entire teaching team (TAs included) run through your entire session beforehand, practicing transitions, testing your headset and microphone, trying out polls and breakout rooms etc., will help Instructors minimize the possibilities of problems cropping up during the session. Record your session so that you can go back and reflect. Students should also be encouraged to use a practice space in onQ where they can ensure that they are able to access the session.
- **Invitations, Registrations, and Reminders:**
 - **In advance:** Students are more likely to participate in an event that they have had to actively register for. Invitations give you the opportunity to get students excited about the event, remind students to ensure that their technology is up-to-date, communicate learning outcomes, tell them what naming convention you'd like them to use, and any other relevant instructions.
 - **The day of:** Use a content teaser (e.g. trivia) to remind them and promote interest.

SESSION DELIVERY (DURING)

PRE-LESSON

- **Early Log-ins:** Having the Instructor waiting in the session is necessary for keeping students focused.
- **Title in name:** Instructors and TAs are **strongly** advised to use their titles for easy identification.
- **Entering message to students:** While students are filing in, instructors should engage the students in some way to keep their interest and maintain engagement.
- Set up a **"Parking Lot"** for questions (using a notepad or Q&A pod) when it's not ideal to interrupt.

MID-LESSON

- **Housekeeping Rules:** Be explicit about: how long the session will be and if there are any breaks; how students should get your attention (e.g. how to "raise" their hand); what they should do if they have technical issues, especially if they lose access and can't contact the instructor or tech support within Adobe Connect; what roles they may assign in small group discussion (e.g. facilitator, note-taker, timekeeper); what to do with questions (e.g. is there a "parking lot"?); how they are expected to follow up after the session, etc. If the topic is particularly sensitive, you may also wish to highlight some accepted practices around language use and ways of disagreement that demonstrate continuing respect for peers.
- **Dead Time - The Webinar Killer:** Dead time is the killer of webinars; it allows students to lose focus, get distracted, and tune the session out. Having an effective understanding of how to operate Adobe Connect is essential in eliminating dead time between Instructor teaching and student interaction. Instructors are also encouraged to narrate what they are doing or "think out loud" if they are doing tasks in the

background that require their brief attention.

- **Transitions:** Let students know when a discussion or other activity is about to come to an end by communicating the time (e.g. 2 minutes) they have left before you transition.

QUESTION PERIODS:

- If students submit a lot of questions to the instructor (generated either in small groups or in the main room with a large class), have a TA categorize questions and present back to instructor and the class.
- It is recommended that instructors come with some prepared questions in case the class has a difficult time generating them initially.

END

- **Wrap Up:** Instructors should have already planned a wrap up that summarizes, synthesizes, and provides next steps, applications or extensions for the lesson. Instructors are also encouraged to thank students for their participation, and reinforce parts of the session that went particularly well.

SESSION WRAP UP AND REFLECTION (AFTER)

- **Next Steps and Student Reflection:** After the session students should be engaged in refresher, extension or metacognitive activities that prompt recall or further deepen their learning. Examples of these types of activities are summaries, responses to mastery questions posed in the session, or reflections, that are due within a certain time frame after the session ends.
- **Student Feedback:** Send out a survey to students to get their impressions of what worked well and what wasn't helpful.
- **Instructor Reflection:** Following the lesson, take a few minutes to reflect and record what went well and what changes you would like to change for the next time. If using a survey, incorporate student feedback.

Appendix A

SYNCHRONOUS SESSION LESSON PLAN TEMPLATE

Dates Times/Offered:	*30-40 students per session; offer at least 3 times per session (F/W)
Module:	
Pre-Session work (if required):	
Learning Outcomes for session:	

Getting Students Ready to Learn (5 – 15 min)

Step 1: Share Objectives -- State the objective for the lesson, be sure to tie to the weekly outcomes. They can be the same as the weekly outcomes. In other words, post an agenda of the items that you will be covering during the session.

The purpose of today is...

Today, we will be covering the following....

Step 2: Anticipatory Set -- Getting students to focus their attention on the material to be presented -- getting them interested or prepared for what they are about to learn

- Establishing a positive learning environment
- Connecting to prior learning and/or experiences
- Setting the context for learning

Adobe Connect options: polling questions, Q&A, emoji

NOTE: During the first session, establish the rules for the session. Will they have their mics on, when do you get to talk, can anyone ask questions, etc. You may need to review grading policy too. You may want to offer an orientation session to get students and you comfortable with the technology.

Main Activity (15 – 30 min)

Step 3: Activities/Group work

Activities to consider: case studies, problem based learning, debates, jigsaw activities, role plays, games

Adobe Connect options: breakout rooms, student presentations, polling questions, Q&A, Notes

What activities will allow students to actively apply their knowledge? Outline each of the steps for different activities on a PowerPoint slide so that students don't forget the instructions.

You may want to include specific questions that you would like the TAs to ask to keep the group focused or questions to ask the groups as they are working to ensure understanding (i.e. *how do you know that? Tell me more about your decision to...*).

Step 4: Checking Understanding and Assessment of Learning

Consider how you will check understanding and assess their learning. What are you looking/listening for? What assessment tools and strategies are you going to use? Be sure that your assessments are aligned with the learning outcomes and with your instructional approaches.

Questioning and probing:

- *How would you apply X to this situation?*
- *Has anyone had experience with this before?*
- *What you just said is interesting. Can you tell me more about that?*

Also, how will you have students reflect on their learning to ensure metacognition?

This may be in the form of the students completing a product by the end of class. However you also want to ensure that you check individual's understanding of the concept. An exit poll would be useful at the end of class. (E.g. *Today I learned or the most interesting topic that we talked about today was... because...*).

Conclusion (5 – 10 min)

Step 5: Recap and Next Steps

Have a brief recap or a concluding activity that summarizes the session. This helps students to process the experience and consolidate their learning. Ending with “Are there any questions?” does not provide this closure.

Post-Session

Step 6: Personal Reflection

Following the lesson, take a few minutes to reflect and record what went well and what changes you would like to change for the next time. If using an exit poll, incorporate student feedback.

Questions for consideration:

- *What worked well? What didn't?*
- *What would you do differently next time?*
- *What evidence do you have that the objectives were met?*