Teaching Remotely
What Educators Can Learn from One Another

JONATHAN HABER

Jonathan Haber is an educational consultant, researcher and author working at the intersection of K-12, higher education and educational technology. His latest book, *Critical Thinking* has just been published by MIT Press as part of their Essential Knowledge series.

Contact the author

Part 2 – Discussion

In the first part of this series, I explained what educators from K-12, higher-ed, and online education programs could learn from one another in order to improve the effectiveness of lectures. In this article, I'd like to apply that same process to see if there are things teachers working in different academic sectors can learn from each other to improve the quality of discussion that takes place in remote-learning environments.

Online classroom discussion is facilitated through video conferencing tools, some standalone (such as Zoom or Google Meet), some integrated into learning management systems. These tools allow students and teachers/professors to particulate in virtual discussions as a class, or in smaller groups gathered in virtual "break-out rooms" that teachers can drop in on in order to monitor or guide conversation.

Developers of conferencing software, as well as other parties, have developed resources to help educators navigate the features of different virtual meeting platforms. They also provide recommendations relevant to anyone holding an online meeting, such as establishing norms for use of video, asking participants to mute themselves when they are not talking, or protecting a meeting from Zoom-bombing trolls.

But, as many teachers likely discovered over the spring term, getting these basics right does not guarantee that students will participate actively in online discussion or that such discussions will be productive and meaningful. To move from being able to hold online discussion to doing it well requires facilitation skills many educators have not been trained in that are applicable regardless of where conversation takes place.

Discussion Pedagogies

Pedagogies such as Socratic questioning and case-based learning are highly developed in certain areas of higher education, such as law schools or MBA programs. That success has inspired use of these methodologies in learning environments outside of law and business.

Socratic questioning involves asking questions that challenge people's assumptions about what they know (or think they know). While many people might associate the practice with the depiction of law school in The Paper Chase, a film in which an imperious professor keeps students on their toes by never letting them know when

degree of freedom

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they might be called on to answer a challenging query, Socratic methodologies that do not require making students squirm in front of peers have been implemented successfully in K-12 classrooms, as well as undergraduate college courses.

The case method asks students to analyze and respond to real-world problems, presented in the form of true stories drawn from business, law or other fields. These cases are carefully designed to facilitate discussion of principles students are learning, often asking them to grapple with questions in which there are no right or wrong answers. Putting students in the role of decision-makers who must make choices in situations with imperfect information and no obvious correct options sharpens both the mind and deliberation between participants in case-based education.

As you read in the first part of this series on lecturing, K-12 teachers tend to get more training in teaching methods than do educators in other sectors, including training on the science and art of managing classroom discussion.

While a highly engaged group of motivated adults might jump into deep and thoughtful conversation spontaneously, quality classroom discussion tends to be the result of careful preparation by a teacher who plans in advance what learning goals a conversation is meant to cover, develops strategies

for getting discussion started and keeping it moving (or getting it back on track if it gets stuck), and developing questions designed to elicit different sorts of responses.

These questions can be of different types. For example, factual questions have right and wrong answers that can be used to evaluate acquisition of content, while convergent questions have a finite number of answers that require students to both select and explain their choices. Divergent questions have a wider range of possible answers, each of which may represent different levels of probability (rather than being right or wrong), while evaluative questions might require judgement based on evaluation of evidence or ethical reasoning.

These different question types serve different purposes and can be prepared in advance to be integrated into the conversation at strategic moments. Teacher training programs also help teachers develop skills in listening to and validating the responses of students, calling on individuals to participate in discussion without making them feel uncomfortable, and moving the conversation along without dominating it. As this brief peek into the training K-12 teachers receive on managing discussion implies, educators at any level need to be well versed – and well-practiced – in a variety of techniques in order to get the most out of classroom discussion.

Asynchronous and Synchronous Online Discussion

Online courses have long relied on tools that allow students to contribute to and participate in discussion when learning takes place asynchronously (i.e., when all students are not in class at the same time). These include discussion boards, blogs and social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Common asynchronous discussion strategies include requiring students to create blog entries and comment on the blog entries of others, discussions threads based on carefully prepared prompts designed to elicit certain types of responses (such as analysis or debate), and strategic intervention by the teacher to drive conversation in fruitful directions.

Asynchronous discussion can give students who might be hesitant to participate in class the opportunity (sometimes the requirement) to join the conversation online, and written responses can be more thoughtful (and better edited) than sentiments that come out of someone's mouth during a heated classroom debate. Online commentary also provides teachers a "paper trail" they can use to review student work, as well as provide feedback. At the same time, asynchronous discussion limits the kind of give-and-take that makes classroom conversation so lively and productive.

While some teachers and programs integrate online online discussion better than

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others, no organization has put more thought into how to make online discussion *better* than what takes place in a physical classroom better than Minerva Schools.

Minerva is an undergraduate college that began in 2012 as an experiment to reinvent higher education from the ground up. Unlike traditional online courses where students living far from each other log in to a learning management system to join their classmates and teacher for class, Minerva students live together but separately log onto Minerva's synchronous Active Learning Platform when it's time to take a virtual class with students who might be signing in from the dorm room next to them.

You can see demonstrations of Minerva's Active Learning Platform here, as well as learn more about their discussion pedagogy in this presentation or in this book which documents all aspects of the Minerva program. For purposes of this discussion, Minerva's courses are taught seminar style, with no more than eighteen students per class, all of whom are online – and on camera – during an entire classroom block.

While elements of the online learning process are very well integrated in the Active Learning Program, core functionality such as breakout rooms and polling are also available in commercial conferencing tools such as Zoom. The effectiveness of discussion within Minerva derives from methods that leverage those tools, such as systematically calling on all

students to participate in discussion, following up on poll results with discussion based on questions developed in conjunction with the creation of polling prompts, and breakout sessions in which students work on joint projects – often through shared tools like Google Docs.

Classes are also recorded, allowing teachers to use video segments to provide individual student feedback during office hours. Most importantly, expectations of active participation – beginning with their first classes – creates norms for engagement students quickly internalize and bring with them from course to course.

As with other creative experiments in online learning, teachers and professors in traditional K-12 and college/university settings do not need to be fully trained and equipped by organizations like Minerva in order to be inspired by techniques that are working well. They simply need to learn from others how to make classroom discussion purposeful through planning and practice.

As descriptions of what educators can learn from one another regarding lecturing and discussion illustrate, no teacher should feel they are alone in the challenges they face mastering remote learning, nor feel the need to invent every solution from the ground up.

Takeaways from this run-down of ideas coming from multiple areas of education include:

1. Classroom discussion should have a purpose: to give students the ability to learn, practice and demonstrate achievement of learning goals.

2. While quality discussion can emerge spontaneously, in most learning settings it is the result of careful planning and preparation on the part of the teacher/professor.

3. A number of techniques and pedagogies, many taught in teacher-preparation programs or baked into the pedagogies of programs like Minerva, can be learned and mastered by any teacher or professor.

4. Discussion must balance the need for spontaneity with the need for teachers to guide the conversation in the right direction through carefully constructed questions and responses developed in advance.

5. Teachers need to know when to participate in the discussion, and when to sit back and let students drive conversation.

6. Skilled facilitation of discussion requires practice, so teachers and professors need to give themselves room to develop those skills and forgive themselves if things don't go well the first time or every time.