


# Adding a Live Online Class to Your Course

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The ubiquity of online meeting software has made it increasingly easy for professors to include live online class sessions to both brick-and-mortar and online courses. I have learned in recent years that live online class sessions not only increase flexibility for students and the professor but can also be a powerful tool in creating community and engaging students in a range of dynamic learning opportunities. That said, I have also learned that in order for online class sessions to be more than just office hours or students passively listening to lecture, three careful considerations for course design and pedagogy are needed: structuring learning activities, communicating the expectations for participation and rationale behind it, and grading.

## Structuring Learning Activities

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First, for a live online class to be valuable for students, the learning activities during class must achieve learning goals only possible through the dynamic exchanges between students and their professor. For example, a live online session is likely the best way to help students learn how to solve a novel and challenging problem for which the course content has given the tools, but collaboration with other students and/or guidance from the professor is needed to understand or “see” how to apply the tools. In this case, students might be given a video lecture and/or assigned reading prior to class, and then placed into small groups to resolve a problem presented by the professor before having each group report to the whole class. The dynamics of such live collaboration can be used to achieve

learning goals that are likely to result from students comparing notes, getting insight into the perspectives of others, and reflecting upon their own understanding of the course material and its application. And, the professor can informally assess the achievement of those goals by “floating” in and out of the groups, as well as facilitating a whole class discussion that provides motivation, direction, and scaffolding for understanding as needed.

## Communicating Expectations

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Second, the learning goals for the class session should be carefully communicated to students so they understand how and why preparation for class and engagement in the activities will contribute to achieving the course objectives. I have learned that not doing so leaves the professor with few, if any teaching tools, to hold students accountable for their preparation and participation in the session. Additionally, stating to students the learning goals for the class, either specific to a particular class or generic for several class sessions, and how those goals contribute to achieving the course objectives, helps students understand the value and orients them to engage in ways that meet those objectives.

After clarifying the learning goals, the expectations of students should be formally articulated with a class participation grading rubric that is used as the basis of their class participation grade. The criteria for a grading rubric should be based upon the learning objectives of the synchronous sessions. One might use Bloom’s taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) to create a rubric that highlights the importance of preparation, engagement, and one or more kinds of knowledge demonstrations. Developing the example above a rubric might look like this:

<b>Outstanding</b>	Demonstrates understanding of concepts, their source in course materials, and generates solutions to problems using those concepts
<b>Very Good</b>	Demonstrates awareness of concepts in the course materials by summarizing, exemplifying, and/or questioning the concepts
<b>Good</b>	Demonstrates an understanding of the discussion by stating opinion and/or endeavoring to understand by asking relevant questions
<b>Average</b>	Demonstrates attentiveness with relevant generic statements
<b>Below Average</b>	Non-participatory

## Grading Structure

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Third, having communicated the purpose and expectations for class participation, the key to making it all work is a grading structure that reflects the same. Live class participation is not

likely to be taken seriously without significant rewards and consequences attached. The optimal amount of the final grade for class participation is, of course, context specific, but less than 20% of the final grade may signal to students that it is a minor learning activity or grade booster that can be overlooked. Conversely, more than 30% may not increase students' motivation and waste some final grade that could be used to engage students by assessing other learning activities.

Regardless of the weight of the final grade, every class session should be graded—either individually or as an aggregate of sessions—and course policies should reinforce the importance of class attendance and participation. For example, a course policy might state that a student can earn partial credit for class participation (e.g., 75%) for an excused absence by submitting the class activity, synthesis of the assigned readings, and/or a synthesis of the recorded class session. Similarly, students who attend but otherwise do not meaningfully participate (below average) might be awarded 60% for the class session.

Whatever the grading structure, keeping track can be as easy as using a rubric code (e.g., A (outstanding), B+ (very good), B (good), C (average), D (below average) during class on a printed roster for each contribution, or observation in the case of small group work (Jacobs, 2019). The same approach can be used in conjunction with, or separate from, virtual classrooms using a chat or IM feature by capturing the transcript to grade after class.

Giving students their grade should be accompanied by feedback that indicates both quality and quantity according to the rubric. Developing the example above such feedback in the LMS might be structured like this to facilitate a copy and paste process for efficiency:

*6 substantive contributions: 1 outstanding; 1 very good; 3 good; 1 average*

- **Outstanding:** knowledge of concepts, source in course materials, and/or generated solutions to problems
- **Very good:** aware of concepts in the course materials
- **Good:** stated opinion and/or asked relevant questions
- **Average:** statement relevant to class content

*Feedback:* I would recommend participating more and in ways that evidence preparation (adapted from Jacobs, 2019).

Grading live class participation and providing this kind of feedback not only demonstrates that participation is important and taken seriously, but also provides the students motivation and opportunity to improve their learning in the course.

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## References:

Anderson, L. & Krathwohl, D. (Eds.). (2001). *A taxonomy for learning, teaching, and assessing: A revision of Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives*. New York, NY: Longman.

Jacobs, R. (2019). *Class participation feedback*. Unpublished manuscript, Department of Public Administration, Villanova University, Villanova, PA.