TeachECONference2021 Panel: A Year of Blended Economics Education – taking stock and moving forward Q&A

In this document we summarise the discussion around the topics that arose in the Zoom Q&A and chat. The four presenters have jointly contributed to this write-up which we hope is useful to those who attended and those who are picking up the ideas at a later date.

Panel

Chair: Parama Chaudhury (UCL)

Speakers:

- Gail Hoyt (University of Kentucky)
- Derek Bruff (Vanderbilt University)
- Joshua Eyler (University of Mississippi)
- Jennifer Imazeki (San Diego State University)

General questions

Q1) How are the panelists thinking about managing how the student transition back to in-person learning (e.g. online open book exams versus in-person memorization based exams), and that they may not have learned prerequisite material as well as they would have in prior years?

A1: Gail – during the pandemic I gave online exams uses Respondus and lockdown browser. So my exams were online, but NOT open note. Although I did give students a 2-hour time limit on taking the exam within a 12 hour window – so obviously, students who had completed the exam could talk with students who had not yet taken the exam. In the fall - I am thinking about administering exams in the classroom, but having the exams in canvas to avoid paper. The only issue will be the size of my class and wifi capacity in the building. If it looks like that will be an issue, I will do exams on paper in the classroom.

A1: Jennifer: to the point about students not being as well prepared, I have been encouraging my faculty to use lots of formative assessment and consider using knowledge surveys (which ask students to self-identify how confident they feel about concepts). I always use knowledge surveys in upper-division courses as a way to a) let students know what, exactly, I expect them to know/remember from lower-division prereqs, b) see what students actually remember, or
think they do, and c) help students identify where they need to spend some extra time on review (and where I may need to provide extra resources to help them with that review). This sort of assessment will be even more important this year.

Q2) Is the limited engagement with Faculty on policy new, as a result of the ‘emergency’ response to the pandemic? How can we have more involvement in strategic decision-making at the institutional level?

A2: Jennifer – This will depend a lot on your particular institution but every institution has some form of ‘shared governance’ (at SDSU, we have a University Senate and any major policies have to go through them). During crises, there is a tendency to circumvent shared governance because it takes longer to get things done but if that continues once the ‘crisis’ has passed, faculty need to make sure that they re-assert their role within the University structure.

Q3) Any clues on how to design the courses for the fall? I am finding that we have a big unknown ahead where we are starting with a face-to-face / hybrid model, but that may change fast when the new outbreak occurs.

A3: Derek – My main advice would be to lean into asynchronous online learning activities for your course. If you build your course around a solid core of such activities, then any synchronous time you get with your students is a chance to help them make sense of those activities. If the synchronous time needs to shift contexts—from in-person to remote or entirely online—the main learning in the course continues through the async activities. This means having a few tools or platforms you can depend on for async learning activities, which could be your learning management system or any number of other educational technologies. For instance, this past spring semester, I ran my course on Brightspace, Perusall, and Microsoft Teams. I didn’t have to pivot to remote teaching and learning, but if I had, I could have just used those tools—that I and my students were already familiar with—for more activities, supplemented by Zoom sessions as was manageable.
Q4) What are your thoughts about post-pandemic teaching approaches for smaller classes (<20 students)? At my school (which is smaller), we are moving back to f2f. We tried hyflex and it was extremely hard to teach 2 audiences at the same time.

A4: Gail – I have a class with 25 students in the fall that is planned to be face to face. There are a couple of topics where I may have a zoom class session, because it will actually work better for the topic – but they will all be meeting synchronously in zoom. I agree that the hyflex model is riddled with issues and I will do my best to avoid it. It is really tough to think about two different audiences at the same time, but you can see the features that appeal to university administrators.

A4: Derek – One approach I took in my spring seminar (n=16 students) was to assign students to persistent small groups (four groups of four students each). Most of my students were on campus, with just one participating remotely on a regular basis. But I knew I would have students have to participate remotely occasionally as the semester went on, and I was right. (One student was a commuting student with car troubles, another had to quarantine for two weeks.) One role for the persistent groups was to have each group make sure any of their remote members were involved in the in-class activities. This meant I could plan on small-group activities during class, knowing that my remote students had extra resources for participating actively. It was a small class, so I had a lot of interactions planned for class time, and the persistent groups helped that approach work.

Q5) My students loved the chat function available in Blackboard Collaborate during synchronous classes. I would like to include a chat function when we return to the classroom. Ideas on how to do that?

A5: Derek – For text chat during an in-person class session, you have a few options.

A. You can ask students to login to a videoconferencing tool that has a text chat, like Zoom or Blackboard Collaborate. This is most useful if you have one or more remote students who will be using such a tool anyway.

B. Another option is to use a “chat and channel” app like Slack or Microsoft Teams. These mobile friendly apps let you set up multiple channels for different purposes (e.g. class discussion, questions about the readings, off-topic chat) and allow conversations to extend beyond the time of the class session.
C. For a more structured approach to “backchannel” during class, you could use a polling tool like Top Hat or Poll Everywhere that supports free-response questions. For instance, both tools have options to pose a question to students, have students respond with free-text answers, and have students “upvote” other student responses, making it easier to prioritize responses during limited class time.

Q6) Does anyone know of a good technological solution for keeping a backchannel while lecturing live?

A6: See Q5.

Gail Hoyt’s Summary Points:

I have three realizations as I reflect on the past 18 months and think about the coming academic year.

1. **You CAN teach old dogs new tricks** I feel that I have always tried to grow and evolve as a teacher and try new things. But I am a TWEAKER and I am a LATE ADOPTER. I typically don’t make drastic changes, but the pandemic forced quick and substantial change. I have realized, that as much as I believe in teaching students to have a GROWTH MINDSET, I don’t live that in my own work life. It was reassuring to see that I could make big changes and do it quickly - so at 55 – for the first time in my career – I realized that I can approach my teaching with a real GROWTH MINDSET. I find this to be empowering, invigorating, liberating, and completely unexpected.

2. **Online instruction if NOT pure evil.** Pre-pandemic – I was an outspoken opponent of online education. I love the energy and excitement of the face to face teaching experience, so I only thought about the negatives of teaching online and never wanted to do it. Given it was the new reality, I wanted to do a good job and it forced me to look for the positives and figure out how to produce positive outcomes in an online environment. While I still prefer face to face – I have experienced the upside of online education. The positives of the online experience that I hope to take back with me when teaching face to face include increased accessibility, the flipped model, and the intellectual intimacy you can achieve when teaching live in Zoom.
3. **Something different in mandatory!** Typically – at this point in the summer – I begin thinking about my fall classes, knowing I will only be making a few minor adjustments. Going into this fall, I feel compelled to do things differently. Even though things are supposed to be back to “normal” nothing feels truly normal. Social unrest and social transition are features just as salient to the past 18 months as the pandemic, and both are transforming education and the academy. I think we are all compelled to think much harder about creating inclusive learning environments and making economics truly accessible to all of our students. I also think we are called upon to be brave in the classroom. Are we teaching our students how to engage in civil discourse? Do we give our students the tools to develop INFORMED opinions? And do we tackle the messy issues and heavier examples, or do we gravitate toward lighter things? The pandemic taught us that we are capable of sweeping change in how we teach economics and we need to maintain a growth mindset as educators and continue to evolve