There's a widely circulated YouTube video you may have seen called "A Conference Call in Real Life." To spoof the strange, stilted dynamics of conference calls, it replicates them in a face-to-face setting. Participants stiffly announce their names at the door of a meeting room, are suddenly interrupted by bizarre background noises, and find themselves inexplicably locked out of a room they were just in.
If you haven't watched it, do. You'll recognize the familiar awkwardness of virtual meetings, where the rhythm of conversational interaction is thrown wildly askew by technological hiccups and the absence of visual cues.

Virtual space is not always easy.

Yet, virtual meetings are increasingly common, not only for geographically distributed work teams, but also for online courses.

So how do you teach in this odd virtual space? How do you keep participants from descending into that peculiar passivity characteristic of conference calls? And how do you help students fight the constant temptation of momentarily clicking away from class? While virtual classes are not without challenges, there are, in fact, concrete steps you can take to run class sessions that are energetic, interactive, and productive. Here are a few suggestions.

1. **Collect information before class.** Send a quick email or a 1-3 question survey a day or two before class asking students about their experiences or opinions relevant to the session topic. (e.g. "Have you experienced reverse culture shock? Where did it come from, and what was it like?" "What three changes do you think would most improve public education?") Collecting information from students in advance will help you prepare appropriate questions and materials. It will also show students that you're interested in what they have to say, which will help spur discussion in the synchronous environment.

2. **Tell students what to expect.** Email students before each synchronous session and tell them what topics or questions the session will cover, how they should prepare, and what they'll be expected to do. Be as concrete and specific as possible, (e.g., "Please come prepared to … briefly

describe your research problem, identify one specific challenge you face vis-à-vis time management, or discuss at least three metaphors used in this book.") When students have time to prepare, they are often more invested in the discussion and willing to participate. And you will feel better about calling on them.

3. **Make it relevant, then highlight the relevance.** We instructors have all too many claims on our time, and we make constant calculations about where to put our efforts and attention. So do students. Thus, as teachers, it's always worth asking ourselves: Why should students care about *this* topic? How is it going to help them answer questions or solve problems that matter to them? Highlight the answers to those questions with a brief description of the class session (perhaps in your Learning Management System or in a reminder email) that is designed to spark students' curiosity. For example, "What are the characteristics of the most and least effective teams you've been part of, and what specific things can you do to make the teams you lead function well? We'll discuss these questions in this week's synchronous session…"

4. **Ask participants to come with one burning question** about the topic at hand—something that frustrates them, confuses them, or that they want a chance to ask you and/or their classmates. Start the session off by giving some or (depending on class size) all of your students the opportunity to ask their questions. See what answers or insights the class can provide before answering the question yourself.

5. **Make sure your synchronous session offers novel content, insights, or activities** and avoid duplicating what is covered elsewhere in the course, e.g., readings, videos, discussion boards. While synchronous sessions should, of course, connect to other elements of the course and build toward common goals, there should always be added benefit to attending the synchronous session, such that students don't like to miss class for fear of missing something important.

6. **Ask participants to keep their cameras on**. Students don't always like to have their webcams on, especially if they're participating from home in their pajamas. But showing their faces — and seeing yours — creates a sense of connection and accountability that can help to overcome the disconnectedness that virtual meetings so easily engender. Make it a course expectation that students turn on their cameras (and explain why.) Note: If bandwidth issues arise from too many video feeds, you can always elect to turn them off later.

7. **Do a quick social check-in at the beginning of class**. Instead of leaving an awkward silence while students are arriving, use the opportunity to chat. Ask students what's new and interesting in their lives, what their holiday plans are, etc. Just as in a physical classroom, some chitchat

helps to break down social barriers while creating the expectation of interaction. You might consider pre-loading a slide that features a current event, cartoon, or trivia question to spark conversation in the minutes before class begins.

8. **Pose a question and give participants a moment to write**. Regular cold calling is an effective technique for holding students accountable, but it can irritate them and erode motivation if it feels like a "gotcha" exercise (Lemov, 2015). An alternative is to pose a thought-provoking, relevant question and give students a few minutes to write down their thoughts/answers. Again, giving students time to prepare gives you license to call on them without putting anyone on the spot.

9. **Ask questions that require students to pick a side.** When students are asked to state an opinion, they become more invested in discussing it. So, consider asking a content-relevant either/or question, e.g., "What is more essential to professional success: being organized or being creative?" "Overall, do you think the impact of the Internet has been positive or negative?" Ask students to write their opinion in the chat window, then ask a few participants to explain or defend their positions. Students will quickly add complexity and shades of gray to otherwise simplistic choices ("How can you be creative if you aren't, on some level, organized?") and the discussion will be off to the races.

10. **Use synchronous sessions as consultations**. If it suits your topic and students' developmental level, rather than using synchronous sessions for didactic purposes, have students bring challenging dilemmas or problems and get the group's input and advice. This can be particularly effective with adult learners or in project-based courses.

    The tips offered here won't miraculously eliminate the initial awkwardness of virtual class sessions, but they'll help. And over time, the rhythms and idiosyncrasies of virtual meetings will become normal, even comfortable. What's more, you'll find that most of the tips provided here work equally well in a traditional classroom setting. They are simply methods for increasing mental engagement, participation, and accountability. Because, at the end of the day, teaching with technology is just teaching – if "just" can be applied to something as complex and nuanced as teaching. And while the contexts and specifics differ, the same learning principles and general strategies always apply (Ambrose et al, 2010).

Resources

Ambrose, S.A., Bridges, M.W., DiPietro, M. Lovett, M.C., Norman, M.K. (2010). *How Learning Works: 7 Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Lemov, D. (2015). *Teach Like a Champion: 62 Techniques that Put Students on the Path to College*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Dr. Marie Norman is an associate professor in the School of Medicine at the University of Pittsburgh and director of the Innovative Design for Education and Assessment (IDEA) Lab. She is co-author of the book, How Learning Works: Seven Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching.