Introducing Live Group Meetings in an Online Class: Tips and Techniques

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Abstract

Live group meetings using synchronous tools in online classes promote student engagement, persistence, and success by increasing social, cognitive, and teaching presence. Based on one instructor's experience in 8-week composition and literature class sections of 15–25 students at an online university, practical recommendations for instructors considering integrating live group meetings, for the first time, as part of an online course emerged. Three specific types of live meetings include orientations that introduce students to the class, instructor, and each other; assignment reviews that provide guidelines and strategies for success for upcoming assignments; and workshops that use student work for collaborative discussion and revision. Tips and techniques provide for planning and leading live group meetings, overcoming challenges, and maintaining Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliance.

Keywords: synchronous tools, live meetings, online classroom

Presentación de reuniones grupales en vivo en una clase en línea: consejos y técnicas

Resumen

 Las reuniones grupales en vivo que usan herramientas sincrónicas en las clases en línea promueven la participación, la persistencia y el éxito de los estudiantes al aumentar la presencia social, cognitiva y de enseñanza. Basándose en la experiencia de un instructor en secciones de 8 semanas de clases de escritura y literatura en inglés de 15 a 25 estudiantes en una universidad en línea, surgieron recomendaciones prácticas para los instructores que consideran la posibilidad de integrar reuniones grupales en vivo por primera vez como parte de un curso en línea. Tres tipos específicos de reuniones en vivo incluyen orientaciones que inician a los estudiantes a

la clase, al instructor y entre ellos; revisiones de tareas que proporcionan pautas y estrategias para el éxito de las próximas tareas; y talleres que utilizan el trabajo de los estudiantes para la discusión y revisión colaborativa. Las sugerencias y técnicas brindan planificación y dirección de reuniones grupales en vivo, superación de desafíos y cumplimiento de la Ley de Privacidad y Derechos Educativos de la Familia (FERPA) y la Ley de Estadounidenses con Discapacidades (ADA).

Palabras clave: herramientas síncronas, reuniones en vivo, aulas en línea

网络课堂中引进实时小组会议：提示和技巧
美国公立大学系统

摘要

在线课堂上使用同步工具的实时小组会议通过增加社会、认知和教学影响来促进学生参与、增强学生耐心和帮助学生成功。根据一位导师在一所在线大学长达八周的写作文学课程教学经验，首次考虑实时小组会议作为部分在线课程的实用建议得以提出。三种特定类型的实时会议包括向全班同学和教师介绍自己的迎新活动；提供成功指导方针和策略的作业评审；以及通过学生工作进行合作探讨和修订的小组讨论。提示和技巧为规划和领导实时小组会议、克服挑战、遵守家庭教育权利和隐私权法（FERPA）以及美国残疾人法（ADA）奠定了基础。

关键词：同步工具，实时会议，在线课堂

While asynchronous discussions and videos are a staple of the online classroom, the use of synchronous communication varies widely among instructors and institutions despite most learning management systems including some types of synchronous tools, such as Adobe Connect, Collaborate, and WebEx. Such synchronous tools provide an online meeting space for real-time communication using audio, video, and screen and document sharing.

The use of synchronous tools in the online classroom adds to social, cognitive, and teaching presence as part

of the community of inquiry model developed by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000). Live group meetings build social presence by allowing participants, the instructor and students, to express their individuality as *real* people within the online environment; develop cognitive presence by adding to the construction of meaning and understanding of course content; and improve teaching presence by facilitating learning outcomes. Martin, Parker, and Oyarzun (2013) specifically point out the usefulness of synchronous meetings for becoming better acquainted with others, planning tasks, and discussing and demonstrating subject matter.

Live orientations, assignment reviews, and workshops attend to socialization, planning, discussion, and demonstration. Such activities provide a good starting point for instructors new to the use of synchronous tools in the online classroom because these types of live group meetings are easy to plan and implement. I base this on my experience using Adobe Connect in 8-week composition and literature courses of 15–25 students at a mostly online university.

Usefulness of Live Meetings

Live meetings strengthen the social presence of instructors by providing more opportunities for collaboration and social communication. In the theory of transactional distance, Moore (1993) explains that physical distance can lead to feelings of isolation and miscommunication. Live meetings reduce transactional distance between the instructor and students and create transactional presence as defined by Shin (2003), which can lead to increased learner persistence and success. Learners who participate in synchronous elements of online courses are more likely to stay on task, collaborate, and complete courses (Yamagata-Lynch, 2014). Watts (2016) reports several studies showing that when live interaction is included in an online course, students feel more socially connected to others, appreciate the immediate feedback, and report experiencing less transactional distance. Cao, Griffin, and Bai (2009) indicate improved student satisfaction overall. The body of literature aligns to my personal experiences.

Cognitive and teaching presence are increased by engaging in specific supportive interactions related to course content and student work, providing direct instruction through focused discussions, and confirming and clarifying course material. Instructors are able to provide immediate feedback on student work and answers to student questions, encouraging further application and consideration of skills or assignments being discussed in that live session. Live group meetings recreate more closely the traditional classroom experience, making the online classroom more comfortable for those students accustomed to face-to-face learning environments. Some students may be more likely to ask a question or discuss their work live with a group rather than in a one-on-one session with the instructor or by posting in a public discussion forum that may seem more permanent and open to scrutiny than a verbal conversation.

Live meetings have distinct benefits compared to prerecorded videos. Typically, a live session is longer (e.g., approximately 10–60 minutes) than a prerecorded video (e.g., approximately 2–10 minutes) because a live session provides opportunities for direct student–teacher and student–student interactions. Both live sessions and prerecorded videos can increase teaching and cognitive presence by providing lectures, personal messages, and demonstrations, but only a live meeting provides a space to answer direct student questions, revise student examples, discuss class content, and otherwise collaborate. Thus, live sessions are more interactive and engaging (e.g., similar to course forum participation) when compared to more passive and solitary prerecorded videos (e.g., similar to course announcements). A live session provides actual instructor presence in contrast to only a sense of presence in a prerecorded video.

Live sessions and prerecorded videos should be complementary and supportive of each other (Oztok, Zingaro, & Brett, 2013). For instance, if no student shows up for a scheduled live meeting, it allows time to record a lecture or update a previous video recording to implement like any other prerecorded video in multiple classes. Thus, the time set aside for a live session still benefits overall cognitive and teaching presence while giving students an increased sense of social presence by having had the opportunity for a live session. In the end, online students learn more through both synchronous and asynchronous tools (Moallem,

Pastore, & Martin, 2011), possibly due to the increased sense of social presence provided by the combined use of those tools (Yamagata-Lynch, 2014; Moallem, 2015).

Integrating Live Meetings

Live meetings work only if students know when and how to participate. It is important to include announcements about live meetings with instructions on how to engage in them in several areas of the class, so students can attend live or review the recording or transcript later. Many students have specifically chosen online classes because of flexible scheduling and have not encountered a live option in other courses. Therefore, live meetings should be flexible and easy to access by providing many opportunities and clear instructions for participating live and reviewing recordings and transcripts.

Determining a Schedule

Consider conducting a poll of students during the first week of class to determine availability and preferred day/times. Completing such polls in the past resulted in certain favored times emerging, such as Tuesday through Thursday afternoons and evenings. I vary the timing of live sessions based on these general preferences. For example, the first live meeting takes place on a Wednesday evening, and the next meeting is on a Thursday afternoon a few weeks later. Variation makes it more likely that a student will attend at least one live session during the term.

Promoting Attendance

After identifying meeting times, post a schedule of live meetings and information about specific sessions in the announcements, course calendar, and forums. Leveraging more areas of the course space allows multiple avenues for students to become aware of how to participate or watch recordings later. I also send an invitation by email, which seems to increase attendance because some students are more likely to pay attention to personal emails than general class announcements and forum postings. When appropriate, I personally invite students to live sessions to discuss specific examples, questions, or concerns expressed in the forums (see Figure 1).

To promote engagement, prepare students for the technology requirements of live attendance. I provide students a how-to guide with step-by-step instructions for accessing and participating in a live session. The instruction guide includes images and short videos to demonstrate exactly how to locate and use common tools, such as the raise hand button, file upload area, and microphone. Instead of creating a technical guide, instructors might opt to use links to resources provided by the company that offers the synchronous tools used in that classroom..

Following Up with Recordings and Transcripts

Offering recordings and transcripts as soon as possible after a live session in the class announcements and forum/ discussion areas of the course should be a priority. Summarize the main points covered during the live session and include a direct link to the recording and transcript. When posting the recording and transcript in the forum area, encourage engagement with specific material from the live session. Students who did not attend live should be encouraged to post any questions and/or provide confirmation of having watched the recording or reviewed the transcript. For example, I post forum replies that encourage students to apply content from the live session as part of the asynchronous discussion (see Figure 2). If a student was not present for a live session, but her work was a part of a sample during that session, I notify that student by email and/or post a reply directly to that student in the forum, referring her to the recording and transcript (see Figure 2).

Live Orientations

Providing just one live 30-minute orientation is a great first step in integrating live group meetings. Such orientations are suitable for any class of any size to introduce students to the course, instructor, and each other. Early in the first week of a course, it is ideal to post an announcement and send an email inviting students to attend an orientation later that week. The outreach efforts should include the meeting link for easy access along with the technical guide (or resource links) for how to participate live.

(Mar 6, 2017 1:08 AM) - Read by: 11 Reply
Email | Grade | Edit | Delete Message

Hello everyone! My name is   .
                                                                      I am super nervous about
this class simply because I was never very good at English when I was in high school. It's also been three years since I
took an English class so that makes me nervous as well! I was never very good with my vocabulary so we will see how
these next 8 weeks go!

Re:
Natascha Gast (Mar 6, 2017 6:10 PM) - Read by: 7 Reply
Email | Grade | Edit | Delete Message

Welcome   !

Don't be nervous! As others' introductions this week show, you're not alone. The purpose of this course is to provide
a foundation that will help you in your future courses. I'm also always more than happy to work with you one-on-one
or answer any questions you may have. Just call me at   , Message me using the link in the left menu, or
visit me in my virtual office (instructions are provided in the syllabus).

I also encourage you and everyone to attend the orientation on Wednesday. See the announcements (and the email I
sent to everyone last night) for when and how to attend. During that orientation, we'll walk through the course and
talk about what to expect, where to find things, and more.

After having some time to explore the course so far, do you have any questions?

Re:
                  (Mar 6, 2017 11:36 PM) - Read by: 6 Reply
Email | Grade | Edit | Delete Message

Ms. Gast,

I definitely don't feel alone anymore! I am definitely excited to see where this course takes me since I haven't had an
English class in a few years. I appreciate you letting me know my resources for the next few weeks if I need help. The
orientation sounds like it will be very informative so I will definitely try to be making that!

Figure 1. Forum exchange inviting a student to attend a live orientation to alleviate the student's expressed nervousness about taking an online English class

Establishing Community

During a live orientation, the professor may provide a personal introduction and welcome to the course, while students introduce themselves or participate in a brief icebreaker activity. This creates a foundation for a social community for the duration of the class. I encourage all students to introduce themselves using their microphones, or at least by typing a message in the chat box. These activities help introduce the students to the technical tools of the live meeting space in an authentic manner while helping to establish connections among one another. Associating a voice with other students and the instructor in a class makes the online experience much more personal for all, including others who only view the recording later. During the orientation, the instructor might mention details posted in the forum discussion by students not in attendance. For example: *You mentioned that you are interested in photography. You may want to say hello to Omar in*

Figure 2. . Forum exchange demonstrating active student engagement with live content by inviting a student whose samples were used during the live session to review the recording or transcript and inviting all students to practice additional revisions based on the live session

the forum discussion this week because he is also a photographer. Students not in attendance who watch the recording later may feel more included. As one of my composition students indicated in a forum reply, "*I am lol'g at the mention of my name in the live recording, as I write this!:-)*"

Providing an Overview

Live orientations should provide a walkthrough, or overview, of the class site, which is especially important for students who may be taking an online course for the first time. Go to each menu tab in the classroom to demonstrate how information and areas are organized. Demonstrate how to use specific elements of the class site, such as how to post a forum message, attach a file when submitting an assignment, and review gradebook feedback. I provide tips for navigating the classroom that even experienced online students may not know, such as how to expand all forum postings for quick and easy
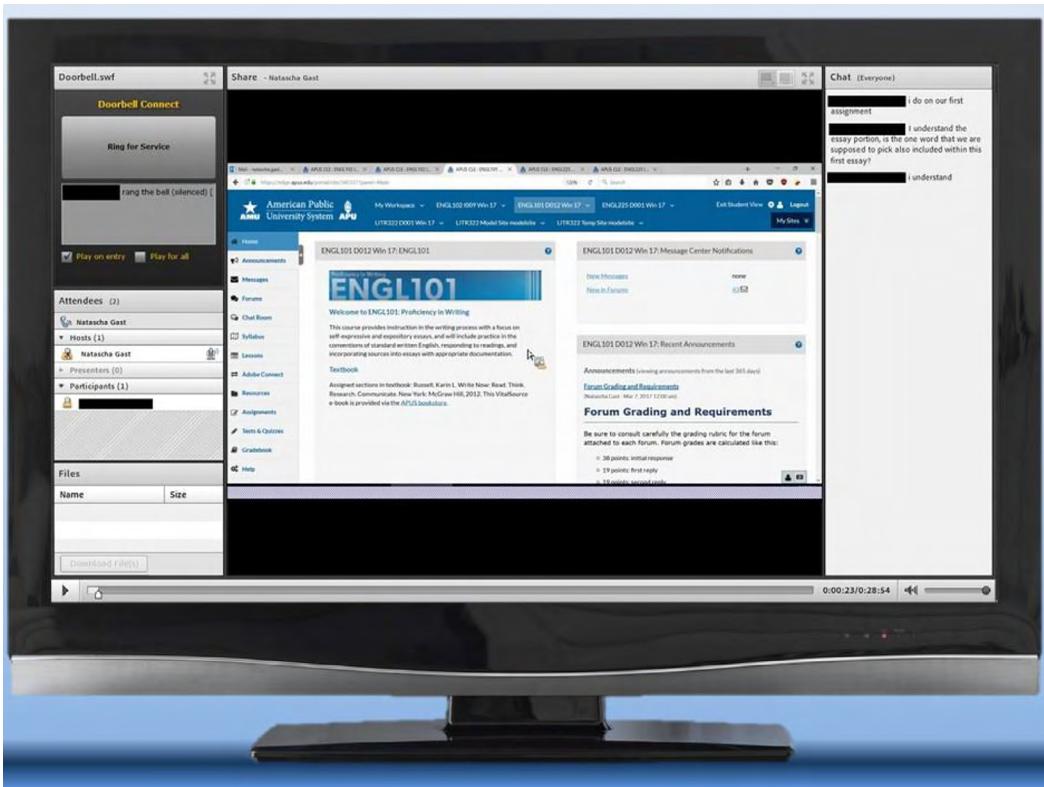
Figure 3. Screencap from a live orientation for a composition class

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Timesaving Tip: If no one attends the scheduled live orientation, record a video orientation. If no one attends a live orientation in a future class, a prerecorded orientation is ready to share.

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reading, search the class or forums for keywords, and post video or audio to the forums.

Reviewing Class Polices and Strategies

Live orientations should provide a review of class policies and strategies for success, addressing common concerns and questions students may have about that particular course or instructor's practices and expectations. For example: *When is the first assignment due? How will students be notified when feedback and grades are available? What is the instructor's late policy? How can the instructor be contacted?* Of course, these questions are typically addressed in the syllabus and assignment instructions, but I use a live orientation to emphasize specific policies and strategies for success that are often overlooked in that particular course and syllabus.
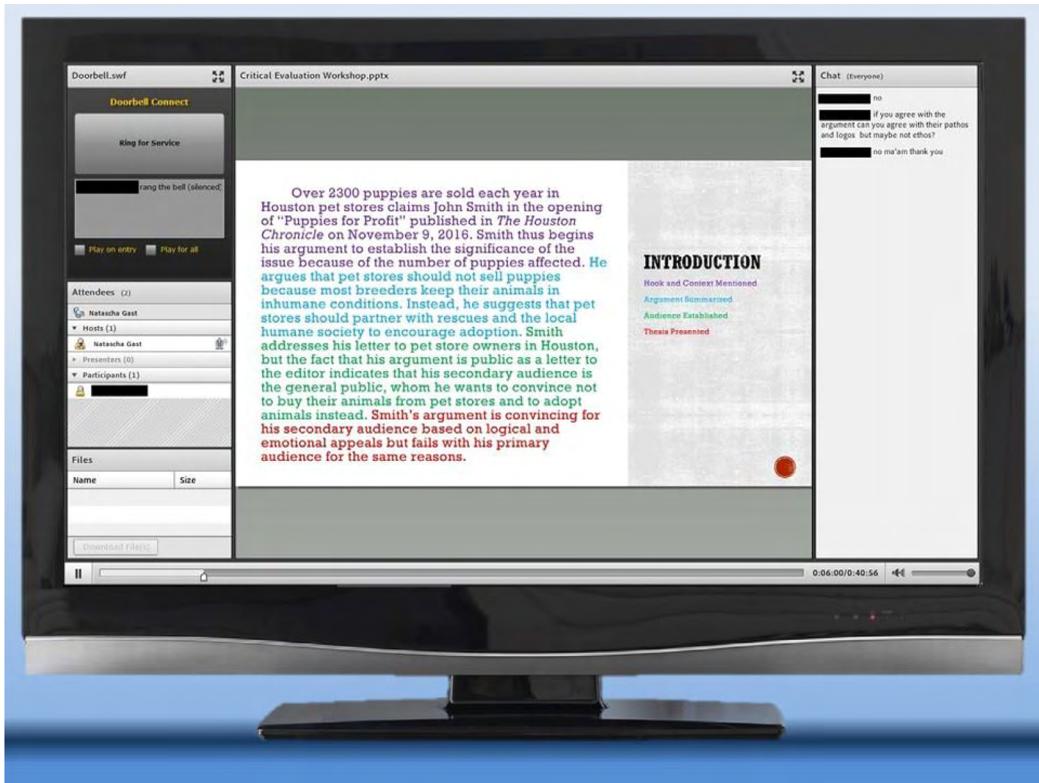
Figure 4. Screencap from a live assignment review for a composition class, demonstrating a sample introduction paragraph for a rhetorical analysis essay, and a student asking a question in the chat box and acknowledging the verbal response

Most important, reviewing these policies and strategies provides the students in attendance the chance to ask questions and receive immediate real-time answers. Students, or attendees, may ask questions via microphone or the chat box. I pause periodically to allow time for this and encourage students at throughout the session to use the *raise hand* button. Figure 3 demonstrates a student asking such a question in the chat box and acknowledging my verbal response at the start of a live orientation for an English composition class.

Live Assignment Reviews

Live assignment reviews, which are typically 15 to 45 minutes, provide an overview of requirements, objectives, and strategies for success for a particular assignment. These live sessions might include viewing model examples (see Figure 4), reviewing the grading rubric, and discussing common pitfalls to avoid in completing the assignment submission. Assignment reviews should be offered when instructors expect students to begin work on the assignment. Overall, the purpose of such sessions is to emphasize and clarify expectations and how to meet them.

During live assignment reviews, students have the opportunity to ask specific assignment questions and receive immediate answers (see Figure 4). Sometimes these questions have led me to revise future live sessions, and even assignment instructions as needed, to preemptively answer such questions for future students. These live assignment reviews provide the instructor a chance to reassess the assignment's instructions, rubric, and resources.

Although much of the live session can be prepared like a lecture, think about allotting time for student questions. Encourage students to discuss their plans for the assignment. At the beginning of the session, I ask students about their topics or current progress on the assignment. During the session, I refer to these topics when discussing strategies for completion of the assignment, making the review session personalized for the students in attendance.

Consider preparing polls/questions for the live session, so students can practice applying the principles discussed. For example, in my composition and literature courses, integrating research skills is key: so, I provide a multiple-choice question with several quotations and ask students to identify which one demonstrates integration most effectively. In one composition assignment, a common pitfall is writing an analysis rather than an argument. As a proactive measure, I provide several sample thesis statements and ask students to explain which one is best for an argument essay rather than an analysis essay.

Timesaving Tip: Prepare a presentation with the assignment instructions, grading rubric, samples, and other items for the session along with the polls/questions. This presentation may be an assignment resource for future classes.

Live Workshops

Live workshops, typically 30 to 60 minutes in length, provide an opportunity to collaborate directly with students on their work. During a workshop, the instructor and students discuss samples of student work to illustrate a specific skill or strategy. A live workshop extends the forum discussions and allows students to collaborate in the application of specific strategies or skills during a review or revision of student samples. For instance, in my composition courses, I typically focus each live workshop on 3–5 specific writing skills, such as citing sources, writing conclusions, avoiding fragments, and developing thesis statements.

A live workshop may be successful with any number of students as long as all are able to participate in the workshop process. While reviewing samples, encourage students to type their suggested revisions into the chat box. When groups are small, I sometimes

ask students to vote by microphone or in the chat box on which revision is the best. With larger groups, I quickly choose a few revisions to discuss. The goal is to guide students in revising selected samples, discussing the strengths or areas for improvement of suggested revisions. The success of a workshop may be gauged by the number of acceptable revisions offered by students during live sessions and through the forum postings made by those students who did not attend. Even students who do not attend live workshops find them helpful as indicated by representative forum postings and instructor evaluation comments. One student wrote, "*I found the workshop extremely informative. I am very fortunate you record these! I wish I could have been involved while live. ... I feel better prepared as I finalize my draft today.*" Another student shared "*I got a lot out of the live workshop recordings. A lot.*"

Student samples used for a live workshop should be chosen from work volunteered by students. Students do not need to prepare for a workshop, but invitations might request that students who plan to attend live have work ready to share and discuss. I select work already posted publicly by students in a forum discussion. Adding an optional or graded peer-review forum activity to obtain student samples is another option.

All student samples chosen for a workshop should be representative of common areas for improvement. When discussing them, emphasize they are good examples of the skill or strategy of focus. The workshop should not seem like a negative critique of a particular sample from any one student but rather as an explanation of how good work can always be even better and that a strategy or skill can be applied to anyone's work. For instance, I might note a strength of an essay followed by a strategy for improvement, mentioning by name other students not in attendance whose work in that class similarly needs to be revised to improve in that area. A live workshop might focus on just one student's work to discuss multiple issues but only in a way that does not seem to imply that the work is particularly bad or good. I typically use samples from

Timesaving Tip: Before the workshop, include notes on selected student samples to summarize advice and revision strategies to discuss during the workshop. These notes can later help to create the transcript. If providing sample revisions, type them beforehand in white font and during the live workshop, highlight the white text, select black font, and thus reveal the prepared sample revision. Figure 5 demonstrates notes as margin comments in a Word document and sample revisions in white font ready to be highlighted and revealed during a live essay workshop for a composition class.
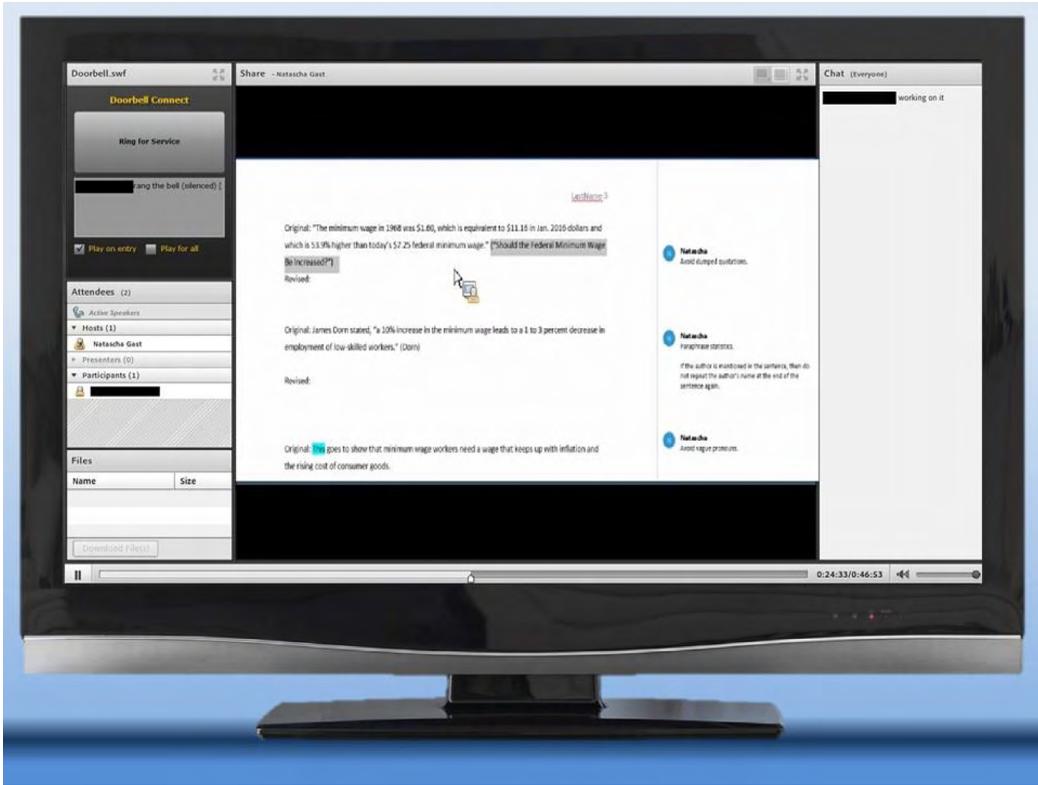
Figure 5. Screencap from a live essay workshop for a composition class

3–5 students per workshop, perhaps 1–2 examples from each student, so no student feels singled out. If holding multiple live workshops during a term, I try to use an example from every student in at least one workshop.

Overcoming Challenges

From my experience, the biggest challenge to live meetings is low or no attendance, which likely occurs because the institution is almost fully online. Thus, students are geographically diverse and across time zones. This makes it difficult for widespread real-time participation to be required. If live meetings are not mandatory, then incentives might be necessary. Perhaps offer bonus points or forum participation credit to anyone who attends live or does a short activity to acknowledge having watched the recording or reviewed the transcript. For example, during a workshop, I have offered bonus points to any student who posts a revision demonstration to the forum area based on an example shared in it. When I post that workshop recording in the announcements and forum discussion, I indicate students must watch the recording or review the transcript to find out how to get the bonus points. Another suggestion is to mention students not in attendance by name. I have found that doing so encourages students to attend live workshops in the future because they want to be present in case I refer to them.

Another obstacle I experienced when I first started offering live sessions is slipping into a lecturing mode. Remember the intent is not to create recorded videos. Welcome students by name at the start and encourage them to test their microphones and introduce themselves. Pause regularly throughout the session to ask students if they have any specific questions or concerns. During assignment reviews or workshops, I ask students to suggest a revision or apply a discussed strategy, which motivates students to engage rather than passively listen and watch. To prompt more in-depth dialogue and engagement, frequently ask open-ended questions.

As with any technology, technical difficulties are always a possibility. In addition to providing students with a technical guide or resource links ahead of time, encourage students to login earlier than the start time so that they can practice with the technology before the live session begins. I make the live meeting space accessible throughout the academic term and encourage students to enter and practice with the tools even when I am not present. Consider limiting some technical features, such as webcams or private chat, if such options frequently tend to cause confusion or distractions.

Finally, interruptions will happen. If a student interrupts with a personal question/concern not appropriate for public discussion, ask the student to wait until the end of the session to discuss the issue privately. Encourage anyone not currently speaking to mute microphones to minimize background noise. In the end, a dog barking or child crying provides an opportunity for building an authentic social exchange.

Compliance

To be in compliance with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), ensure all student information remains confidential and all content shared live is accessible to all. If not in the United States, be sure to investigate and comply with any regional legal requirements. The goal of such laws is to confirm that all students have equal access to all learning materials.

Avoid posting recordings of live sessions from one class to other classes. Although a student's name and posted content is public information for that class, it is not public for students in other classes. In any live session, only use examples students have volunteered or shared publicly within that class.

Provide a transcript at minimum and preferably closed captioning for every recording. The presentation file, such as a PowerPoint or Word document, used for a live assignment review or workshop provides a sufficient transcript as long as the content comprehensively covers the material provided verbally during the live session. Most integrated conferencing tools provide an option for saving the recording offline as an .mp4. A captioning service, such as the free tool MovieCaptioner, can add captions to the .mp4 file, which

can then be uploaded for student viewing. Some institutions may be able to provide captioning or transcription services through the disability or instructional design departments and some webinar tools even offer a live captioning option.

Conclusion

Live orientations, assignment reviews, and workshops are excellent ways to begin using synchronous tools in an online classroom to promote student engagement and success by increasing social, cognitive, and teaching presence. The instructor and students can engage as *real* people in an online meeting space that allows for immediate instruction and collaboration. My student feedback reveals that students overwhelmingly appreciate the opportunity to attend live sessions. Even though most students do not participate live, which is the biggest challenge, they seem to enjoy having the opportunity for direct interaction with the instructor and peers, reporting that live meetings, even just watching the recordings, make the instructor more personal, the course content more understandable, and the class more engaging overall. One student commented, "*I really enjoy the live group sessions when I am able to attend them. I feel that the students are able to get instant feedback from these sessions versus just watching a recording. ... If I happen to miss a session, I always watch the recording at least twice to gain as much knowledge as possible.*"

In addition to improving social presence and direct instruction, live meetings also provide the opportunity for continued course development. Specifically: (1) recording a live orientation may cause the instructor to notice a way to reorganize course content for easier navigation; (2) preparing a live assignment review might lead to clarifying instructions or the grading rubric; and (3) selecting student samples for a live workshop could reveal the need for further instruction or resources concerning a certain course objective.

To begin implementing live group meetings, the recommendation is to start with an orientation session during the first week of the course. Then later, add a live review for each assignment or just the major course assignment. Provide information about pacing for larger projects and suggested time lines for students. Follow with a live workshop using samples of student work related to that assignment.

Live sessions allow for many more possibilities. Live meetings may include open or problem-based discussions rather than those focused on specific assignments or student work. Live meetings might include guest speakers as co-presenters or in lieu of instructors being the leaders. Some live sessions may even be student-led, where students read their creative writing, provide peer-reviews, or share presentations. The possibilities are endless.

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