Instructor Resource

Planning and Facilitating Web-conferences with English Language Learners

Web-conferencing or synchronous virtual classrooms allow real time communication in which multiple users can simultaneously interact with each other. Creating synchronous virtual classrooms through web-conferencing applications will allow your learners to communicate with you and with each other using features such as audio, video, text chat, interactive whiteboard, application sharing, instant polling, emoticons, and breakout rooms.

Web-conferences can provide a place for language learners to practice course-related language and cultural strategies, focusing either on a specific language point from the content or on a language point that emerges from the discussion forum. Web-conferences also allow you to deliver course content in a way that is interactive, that is engaging, and that contributes to the overall variety of media used in your course or learning activity. Opportunities for speaking and listening practice are often limited in online learning. Web-conferencing tools offer language learners these needed opportunities to practice their speaking and listening skills.

Synchronous components in a course or activity can help reduce potential miscommunication in your online environment, in that they provide a space for immediate feedback both for learners using language and for the facilitator to observe learners and their proficiency with language and digital technology.

Communication is also facilitated by web-conferences in that they foster the growth of communities. As learners experience interaction and language use in real time, they can begin to can build relationships with a sense of who their classmates are and what they are like. Web-conferences provide the opportunity for classmates to associate a profile with a personality, making learners more sympathetic and understanding about potential miscommunication that may occur later on in the course discussion forum or through email.

> **"Web-conferences provide the opportunity for classmates to associate a profile with a personality."**

Web-conferences can be used in many effective ways; however, they involve several types of media and many working components that have the potential to derail your language learning activity. On the next page are some selected steps for planning and facilitating a web-conference. Once you have planned your content, use our resource *Checklist for Planning-Web Conference Interaction* to help you add suitable interaction into your web-conference.

Selected Steps for Planning Web-conferences

SELECT THE PLATFORM

There are many different web-conferencing platforms to choose from. Your institution may already use one. If you do have a choice between different platforms, select the most suitable technology and familiarize yourself with the tool before using it in an instructional setting. See our resource *Online Tool Checklist*.

DECIDE HOW AND WHEN TO USE WEB-CONFERENCES

Real-time synchronous interaction can be used for a variety of purposes, including instruction, collaboration, and socialization. There are numerous ways to include web-conferencing in a course or activity, such as:

- a place to hold regular offices hours and conduct meetings with learners
- a place to facilitate informal class discussions or virtual meet-ups
- a way for facilitators to share information and present course content, which can also be recorded and archived for future viewing
- a planned activity to discuss, debate, and explore in-depth concepts presented in the course material
- a place for learners to meet with each other for one-on-one or small group discussions
- a place for learners to present to their peers or record a presentation for submission
- a place for guest speakers to present to the class

DEVELOP YOUR CONTENT

Create visually engaging slides with images that support the course content presented and include multiple opportunities for learner engagement. When you are planning your presentation, be especially aware of the cognitive load expectations you are putting on your learners. Cognitive load increases when learners are required to split attention between several modes of information in a presentation, for example between the chat box, the presentation slides, and the instructor's voice. Many different language skills converge in an online web-conference, creating the potential to tax a language learner's cognitive load.

PROVIDE TECHNICAL SUPPORT

It may be the first time that your learners are engaging in a web-conference and it is crucial that you minimize the barriers that they may experience in accessing the technology. Include an orientation to the web-conferencing tool either as part of the course orientation or at the start of the activity. Language learners will benefit from an introduction to web-conferencing related vocabulary, as part of the orientation. A great practice is to provide your learners with the links to the conferencing space in advance. That way, they will have time to troubleshoot any technical difficulties and navigation

problems.

PROVIDE PRE-EVENT SUPPORT

Arrive at least 15-20 minutes early to the web-conference space so that you can greet learners as they arrive. Instructor presence in the virtual classroom creates a feeling of connection between learners and the instructor who are geographically dispersed. Small talk during this time can play an important role in the success of your activity, helping to calm any learner anxieties about their language use and build rapport among the class. Conduct audio and microphone checks if needed, troubleshoot any audio issues that learners may encounter, and post a discussion question to help early arrivals establish their own presence.

PROVIDE AN ORIENTATION

The first part of the web-conference activity should include information about the functionality of the space. Introduce learners to any tools that they are expected to use, and ensure that everyone is comfortable using them. Give learners an opportunity to use the chat box and other engagement tools before moving on to the main content. Be sure to mention if you are going to record the web-conference and post it online. You should also remove the attendee list and chat box from the recording – doing so will create a safe learning space. Because a web-conference is a real-time event, it may also be more suitable to focus on fluency rather than accuracy in the chat box. Do not correct learners' chat unless it is tied directly to a web-conference learning outcome.

BE AWARE OF THE TIME

One of your main duties as web-conference facilitator is to keep the event running on schedule. Learners will have allotted a certain amount of time out of their busy schedules to attend this synchronous event, so it is important to set an end time and stick with it. Keep learner discussions on track, and keep any presenters aware of ongoing time limits. Develop a system for letting people know about time restrictions (e.g., through a private message, or in bold text in the chat box) and explicitly go over this system with them beforehand.

> **"Develop a system for letting people know about time restrictions and explicitly go over this system with them beforehand."**

INCLUDE WRAP-UP TIME

Use a closing exercise with your learners to tie the activity together and identify what you have learned. Explicitly state any next steps to the learners both orally and in a slide. Plan on staying in the virtual space after the meeting is over in case learners would like to ask further questions and chat. Some language learners may be self-conscious about their language use in a digital environment and may prefer the casual setting of a post-activity chat. This type of support will further reduce any miscommunication and increase feelings of connection between learners and yourself.

FOLLOW UP WITH YOUR LEARNERS

After the web-conference is completed, send an email to your learners or post a follow-up message in the discussion forum. Elicit information from them about their experience with the technology and about the suitability of the language level. The email can include supplemental language learning additions such as vocabulary lists or further reading relevant to support the web-conference. Let learners know about any related course activities or next steps that they are required to make.