A Reflection on the Sudden Transition: Ideas to Make Your Synchronous Online Classes More Fun

THE TRANSITION TO ONLINE teaching has been partially, if not completely, challenging for faculty teaching in colleges and universities. I am writing this article while reflecting on my own experiences since March 16, 2020, when our university made the decision to move to online teaching. Online teaching is not new to me; I have spent a great deal of time and effort learning and understanding best practices in online education, and I think I do a decent—if not stellar—job at it. But the speedy transition to online format has shifted my focus from student engagement and fostering the joy of learning together to "content delivery." I have experienced a sense of rush and inadequacy, and I feel a need to hide my fears and challenges with this online transition from my students.

When this online transition was announced, I had only two requests of my students: I asked them to please be patient with me as I figured out this change, and please trust me in this process. I have noticed that students have been extremely flexible, understanding, forgiving, and even sweet and supportive during this process. Although they have more at stake (in terms of grades and graduation) and additional concerns with housing, family commitments, and jobs, they have been my biggest support system. However, my biggest challenge has been limited engagement in online synchronous classes. Even students who are typically talkative and engaged in face-to-face classes, do not engage as much in an online format. I use a hybrid approach—part of my class is asynchronous and part of it is synchronous online.

For the asynchronous portion, I post lecture notes/discussion notes ahead of time on the course LMS (Learning Management System), and I record myself explaining concepts/terminologies based on the notes. I use free screencasting apps such as Yuja, Screencast-o-matic, or Loom for this purpose. Students can see me and my computer's screen in these recordings. I also hyperlink recordings in the notes that I post for students. Students can read the notes on their device and watch the recordings before they meet with me synchronously online.

I use synchronous time for reviews and discussions. I avoid lecturing during this time, and use several activities to clarify questions and confusions, provide feedback, and create discussion opportunities. I feel as if we, as educators, should build a relationship with our students online even if we have previously established a relationship in face-to-face classes. We want students to become more comfortable with this novel format, and trust us and the work we do.

Here are some ideas/activities that I have been using to shed light on my synchronous online classes, while fostering a fun environment. I basically put on my clinician hat as I began compiling these ideas. In some ways, I see similarities between online teaching and teletherapy. I do not know if these ideas are evidence-based, and I certainly do not know yet if these are appreciated by my students, but I do look forward to reading those student evaluations at the end of this semester more than ever before. If you are new to online teaching or a pro at it, I hope at least one of these ideas sparks interest for you.

Fun Activities for Online Classes

1. We play a **"This/That"** game. It is really silly, but both the students and I have fun with it, or at least I do. For example, I start the game with the first student who volunteers. "Do you like Semantics/Pragmatics? Why?" "Would you like to be the Broca's area/Wernicke's area? Why?" "Would you like to have a conversation with a toddler/a preschooler? How?" Then each student calls out a peer's name and asks them a similar question. We make

sure that everyone gets a turn.

2. We play **"Two truths and a lie."** For example, I start with the first student. "Intentional communication emerges around 8-9 months. Joint attention emerges around 6 – 10 months of age. Inflectional morphemes are mastered by age 3." The student has to select which one of these statements is a lie. And then, I give the students a checklist that they can use to ask the next person another "Two truths and a lie" question.

3. Another game we play is called **"Circle of questions."** One student starts with a question. For example, "What is decontextualized language?" The next student then responds and asks a question to the person that she / he tags. The next question needs to be in some way related

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to the first question. For example, it can be related to decontextualized language or language development in preschoolers. All students get a chance to ask and respond.

4. We play a **"Tell your grandma"** / **"Teach your grandpa"** game. I post questions ahead of time. If there are 10 students, I post 10 questions. Each student picks a question and spends about two minutes preparing an answer. I then pretend to be the grandma or grandpa, and I ask a question pretending to not know anything about it. For example, I say, "What exactly is phonological awareness?" And then I annoy them by saying, "Really? I can't understand that. Could you tell me what a phoneme is first? Why would a child need phonological awareness? What does it have to do with reading?" etc. So, I spend about five minutes with each student doing this.

5. Another game is called "EMOJI SLIDES." This is a great game to play before exams. I have a set of pre-made slides. Each slide displays a concept or a word or a question. I share my screen and present one slide at a time. Students have to respond by reacting to the word/concept/question on the slide with an emoji – 😃 Happy , 😔 Sad, or 😐 Neutral. If I see a 😃 happy emoji from all students, I move on to presenting the next slide. If a few students respond with a sad or neutral emoji, I stop and explain the concept or give examples, and then ask them to react with an emoji again. If the emoji is now happy, we move ahead. Students can also create

their own slides, share their screen, tag a person, and ask them to react.

6. Another game we play is **"Who am I?"** For example, I say, "I am a part of the cochlea that separates the scala media and the scala tympani. Who am I?" "I acquired two languages at the same time before the age of 3.Who am I?"

7. We do online **role plays**. For example, one student volunteers, and we practice asking questions as part of a case history while I pretend to be the caregiver and the student takes the role of a speech-language pathologist. We then reverse roles. We also role play to practice counseling. I provide a list of case-based scenarios that all students can look at. I read each scenario aloud, and students take turns to counsel me while I play the role of the client.

8. For review of concepts, we use **collaborative worksheets.** We use this activity every time we meet online as students like the structure and repetition of this activity. I post a worksheet with several questions (multiple choice, fill in the blanks, true/false, explain a term, give an example, compare two concepts, etc.). Students can then open this worksheet on their Microsoft Teams browser and start typing answers to these questions. Students can see each other's responses, and I can see both their names and their responses. They get immediate synchronous feedback. I respond next to their responses with a happy emoji if their answer is correct. If their answers seem vague or incorrect, I edit it online while everyone else can

see my edits. You can do this activity with Google Docs if you are not using Microsoft Teams.

9. Finally, we use short 15-minute quizzes during the synchronous class time. I create quizzes using Microsoft Forms because it is compatible with Teams. These quizzes are not part of the course grade; they are merely used for practice. Students can complete the quiz on their individual devices during class time, and I can review their responses, where they can get immediate feedback. You can create these on your course LMS, use Google Forms, or simply read a question out loud and have students respond in the chat screen or shout out the answers.

Bio: Siva priya Santhanam, Ph.D., CCC-SLP, is an assistant professor at the Dept. of Speech, Language, Hearing Sciences, Metropolitan State University of Denver, Colorado. She directs the Integrated Supports for Students with Autism (ISSAC) program. Her research focuses on (1) developing and implementing interventions for individuals on the autism spectrum across the lifespan, and (2) promoting communication access and health equity for children on the autism spectrum and their caregivers from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.