

What happens to seminars?

Seminars, and more generally small group discussion and activities, are a well-established and effective way to promote interactive learning, offering students a chance to take ownership of their learning processes and to explore ideas with their peers. For some, the relationships forged during the first week of class will translate into long-term friendships and support networks.

So in thinking about how to re-invent the seminar for the online pivot, we need to think about building online learning communities. Students are likely to be concerned about losing immediate and personal contact – with one another and with their tutor. As Simon Usherwood (University of Surrey) puts it, there is a [danger](#) that ‘the soft stuff that happens around your classes – the checking-in, the responsiveness – drops away’.

But there is also much to cherish in the opportunity to explore what makes great teaching in a new and relatively untested environment. By setting out a variety of flexible activities that are self-paced and encourage students to become more aware of how they learn as well as what they learn, we will almost certainly find new ways to engage with our students. For example, we can engage them in co-creating ‘lesson’ plans and activities, re-designing seminars [with and not merely for our students](#). After all, encouraging students to be co-creators and [co-learners](#) can only benefit the learning process, whether it takes place online or on campus.

Things to think about:

- **The key thing to focus on is interaction.** [Student-Centered Remote Teaching: Lessons Learned from Online Education](#) by Shannon Riggs (Oregon State University) invites teaching staff to consider three main interactions at the heart of the online environment: student-content interaction, student-student interaction and student-tutor interaction.
- **Create chains of consequence.** Ensure that the focus is not just on a specific ‘session’, but that there are activities preceding and following it that link to the wider learning architecture of the module, and toward the learning objectives the students are aiming for. Gilly Salmon’s [Five Stage Model](#) offers an insightful approach to structuring what she calls ‘e-tivities’.
- **Focus on teaching, not the technology.** The design of the module and the engagements and activities that take place within it [matter more than the technology used](#). Sophisticated technology will not improve poorly planned and delivered teaching, just as modest technology can adequately support good teaching. (This infographic from Sophie Nicholls, [Low-Tech Online Learning Activities](#), offers a reminder that a mix of activities that keeps the focus on interaction does not have to be high-tech.)

Things to watch out for:

- **Clear communication** from the beginning is very important – make sure students understand seminar structure, resources, activities and [especially expectations of participation and engagement](#).
- **Accessibility** is more important than ever, so it is important to find **a careful balance between the provision of asynchronous and synchronous content**. Asynchronous strategies encourage students to manage their own learning process, and are often more

effective than synchronous ones. They also draw in participation from students who might hang back in a videoconference or face-to-face setting.

- **Consider Bandwidth.** Keep videoconferencing to a minimum. Not all students will be able to participate in regular hour-long Zoom seminars, whether because of bandwidth issues, personal circumstances, or [Zoom fatigue](#) (which can become aggravated for both staff and students when multiple modules require multiple sessions). Be sure to use alternatives to videoconferencing where possible. When the benefits of videoconferencing outweigh the bandwidth cost, see the following tips by Doug Parkin.

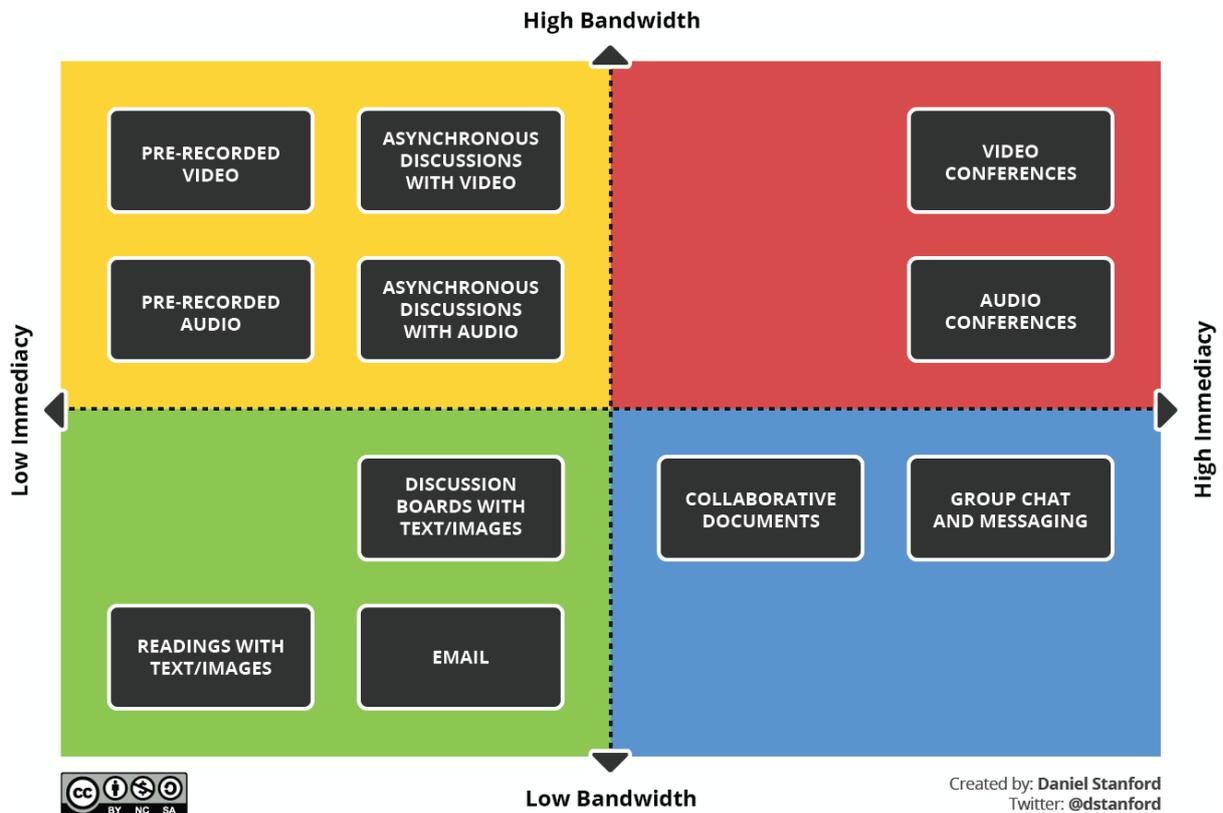


Image: Daniel Stanford's chart shows low & high-bandwidth tools (Source: Daniel Stanford, [Videoconferencing Alternatives: How Low Bandwidth Will Save Us All](#))

Further Reading:

1. [Fostering Student Participation in Remote Learning Environments](#) A short guide from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, which focuses on ways to establish opportunities for interactivity and social engagement, and to keep feelings of isolation or exclusion at bay.
2. [Designing learning and teaching online: the role of discussion forums](#) Useful tips on teaching practices in a remote learning environment, with advice on how to design online activities (which can be built into synchronous seminars or conducted asynchronously).
3. QAA UK's [Questions to Inform a Toolkit for Enhancing Quality in a Digital Environment](#) offers in-depth guidance; section 3 on student-centred teaching, learning and assessment is particularly useful.
4. On the History UK Blog, read Aimée Merrydew's [Building Online Learning Communities](#)