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## More Than a YouTube Channel

Gaufman, Elizaveta; Möller, Sebastian

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# More Than a YouTube Channel: Engaging Students in an Online Classroom

*Elizaveta Gaufman and Sebastian Möller*

## Introduction: The Pandemic as Setback for Active Learning?

"University is not a YouTube Channel!" insisted students in the spring of 2020.[1] Under normal circumstances, nobody would doubt this claim. In a global pandemic, however, little if anything is normal. In 2020 and 2021, the Corona crisis has heavily unsettled mundane practices and perceptions within university teaching and learning in most parts of the world. Suddenly, the statement of a university not being a YouTube

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[1] This claim was made by Lijst Calimero, a student party at the University of Groningen in the course of a university-wide discussion on on-site and hybrid education (see Fabrizi & Siebelink, 2020).

E. Gaufman (✉)
University of Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands

S. Möller
Cusanus Hochschule für Gesellschaftsgestaltung, Koblenz, Germany
e-mail: sebastian.moeller@cusanus-hochschule.deen.de

channel makes perfectly sense to students and lecturers alike. Its very emergence is indicative of a severe ramification of COVID-19 on higher education, namely the danger of a reversion of the much needed and broadly welcomed shift from teaching to learning (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Biggs, 1996) under the special circumstances of remote seminars. In fact, the statement rather reads as "University should not be a YouTube channel!" or "University should be more than a YouTube channel!" Since we absolutely agree with this demand, in this contribution, we show how it can be met by engaging students in knowledge co-creation by means of creative digital active learning tools and techniques.

The perception of university education as a YouTube channel stems from the more conventional forms of instruction: frontal lectures that can easily be converted into a pre-recorded lecture for students to watch. This is a teaching mode that has existed for hundreds of years, but it certainly is not the most effective one: studies show that active learning works (Michael, 2006; Prince, 2004). Moreover, as Omelicheva and Avdeyeva point out (Omelicheva & Avdeyeva, 2008), active learning methods foster higher-order cognitive skills, such as application and critical evaluation skills, while frontal instruction is effective on a lower cognitive level, such as memorization. Recent trends in active learning in political science and IR include research-based learning (Healy & Jenkins, 2009), simulations, the co-production of blogs, podcasts, and other media as well as experimental learning (Forostal & Finch, 2020). Under regular conditions, active learning has proven to strongly support the achievement of learning goals and the development of student's skills and to improve learning experiences and student satisfaction. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, active learning became even more significant, as both faculty and students were not only struggling with new working conditions, but also with psychological challenges associated with isolation, anxiety, and motivation. Thus, pandemic-driven digitalization of higher education must not result in a didactical setback. Quite to the contrary, we should aim to capitalize on new digital opportunities to further develop and improve active learning.

In this contribution, we therefore address several challenges in designing and teaching interactive online learning and offer our tested solutions from two political science seminars at University of Groningen (Political Communication) and University of Bremen (Port Seminar) in summer of 2020. Specifically, we discuss active learning techniques, community building, motivation, and mental health challenges in a

pandemic-induced online learning environment. While we taught at different universities, both authors faced similar challenges and share a similar teaching philosophy. During the pandemic, we jointly reflected on our seminars in a spirit of collegial advice and support. This chapter elaborates on our individual and shared experiences and lessons learned. We concentrate on two asynchronous methods that were crucial to the success of our seminars: simulation in the political communication seminar and blogs in the port seminar. During the emergency mode of pandemic teaching (i.e., the sudden transformation of in-class seminars into remote online courses), universities and many colleagues were mainly concerned with the practicalities of enabling synchronous seminar sessions via online conference tools. In both our seminars, however, we focused on good solutions for asynchronous learning in order to better account for technical and mental problems associated with the pandemic.

Simulation is one of the best learning methods as it enhances the students' understanding of abstract concepts and theories that encourages active learning and creativity (Asal & Blake, 2006; Eagle, 1975; Shellman, 2001; Shellman & Turan, 2006). By carefully crafting the assignments that condition the application of theoretical material to the fictional situation, the instructor is able to maximize learning success in the seminar group. Moreover, in a setting where the environment is simulated, but the behavior is real (Jones, 2013), a simulation gives the students an opportunity to immediately apply their acquired theoretical knowledge in a safe, relatively low-stakes setting. Even though a simulation does require a synchronous component, it is also possible to conduct parts of it via discussion boards and vlogs where students are able to build a community and interact with each other in preparation for an active phase.

Given the increasing popularity of policy blogs, blogging is slowly emerging as a new active learning tool in the social sciences. Seminar blogs have several unique advantages. Firstly, blogs allow students to develop creative writing skills and to learn how to precisely and creatively summarize complex matters in a manner susceptible to the wider public. They, therefore, contribute to the development of crucial skills crucial for Political Science graduates (Hanson, 2016). Secondly, blogging is an effective way to implement student research and classroom peer review (Crowder-Meyer, 2019). Moreover, blogs can stimulate students to critically engage with both textbook knowledge and public discourses. Finally, and this has proven to be of important advantage during the pandemic,

blogs foster discussions among students and can boost student's self-esteem through positive feedback from within and outside the class.

In the remainder of our chapter, we briefly introduce the setup of the two seminars that serve as illustration of our argument (section "Setup: Moving Interactive Seminars Online"). This is followed by a discussion of four main challenges in designing and teaching interactive online seminars, namely community building (section "Community Building"), fostering discussions (section "Fostering discussions: Discussion Board & Seminar Blog"), active learning (section "Active Learning: Simulation & Empirical Research"), and mental health (section "Mental Challenges: Empathy & Staying in Touch"). For each challenge, we present solutions from our seminars. These solutions have been tested successfully in the online classroom. They are, however, neither perfect nor applicable for all types of Political Science seminars especially in light of workload. In fact, we ourselves have taught in a pandemic emergency mode that rendered much of what we did experimental steps rather than well designed and tested remote didactics. However, extensive positive student feedback indicate that we have managed to meet some of the challenges of interactive online teaching. This would not have been possible without our incredibly committed and creative students from whom we have learned so much in the course of our first pandemic semester.

## Setup: Moving Interactive Seminars Online

In summer term 2020, we taught the seminars "Political Communication" (University of Groningen) and "Bremen's Ports in the Global Political Economy" (University of Bremen). Both seminars were originally designed as interactive and intense in-class learning experiences. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, they had to be moved online in an ad hoc manner. Regardless of the overall trend to simply translate classroom sessions into virtual meetings, we decided to put more emphasis on asynchronous learning. In this section, we briefly describe the setup of both seminars.[2]

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[2] For more reflections on balancing synchronous and asynchronous activities see Lemke in Chapter 5 of this volume.

### *Political Communication Research Lab*

Political Communication was set up as a small research lab seminar. The seminar was intended for second year students of European Languages and Cultures program who chose political science as their minor. The seminar was supposed to combine both theory and practice of political communication on an introductory level, but also mimic the real-life challenges that students might face as individuals engaged in political communication. Because of the pandemic, the seminar had to take place entirely online and consisted of both synchronous and asynchronous activities stretched over 8 weeks, with 12 hour-long live sessions in total.

The seminar was divided into 10 theoretical sessions devoted to the following topics: public opinion and mass media, media and democracy, mediatization, framing, security, persuasion, branding, social media, objectivity, and infotainment. All of these topics can be subdivided based on the main focus: public, candidates, and media, i.e., the three character groups participating in the simulation. The culmination of the seminar consisted in the simulation of the presidential elections. The students were supposed to pick a role in the simulation and post social media contributions in character until the end of the seminar on the discussion board. The weekly social media posts constituted a formative assessment that counted toward 10% of the overall grade. A press conference participation in character as well as elections counted for a further 10% of the grade with students offering a break-down of their character's behavior and voting during the post-op after the elections. A research paper was replaced with a different summative written assessment—a memorandum, a piece, and style of writing more common in a policy-oriented environment. A more typical assignment was a group presentation that was replaced by a vlog due to the pandemic. Each vlog was supposed to offer an insight into respective sessions' theoretical frameworks and could be watched asynchronously.

Given the small scale of the seminar and above-average student access to technology, including high-speed internet, it was still possible to conduct live sessions that were shorter than usual seminar meetings. Even so, in order to minimize disruptions to the seminar, most of the presentations were recorded as vlogs instead of given live in order to reduce students' stress related to the in-class performance: battling technology on top of theoretical frameworks could hardly stimulate the learning experience. Given that the live sessions were mostly frontal instruction-free, it

was possible to dedicate them to the discussion-based activities, especially break-out groups. Break-out groups need a clear task and directives from the instructor, and yet they are an essential tool in active learning online (Gahl et al., 2020). Hence, the live seminar was roughly divided into the following blocks: vlog Q&A, input from the instructor, break-out sessions, and debrief remarks from the instructor.

The simulation took place in a fictional environment of the Republic of Genovia based on the country from the motion pictures "Princess Diaries" 1 & 2 starring Anne Hathaway and Julie Andrews. According to the seminar's brief, Genovia used to be a monarchy, but Queen Anne Hathaway abdicated the throne and became its first president 20 years ago. Genovia was a member of the European Union but after the Conservative party called for a referendum, its citizens voted for "Gexit" sending the country into political crisis as the conservative president failed to negotiate a deal with the EU. The elections were supposed to determine where the country goes next. Using popular culture to create the simulation's fictional environment was a conscious choice, as its familiar nature helps students acclimate to the classroom (Jester, 2020).

Against this backdrop, the students were supposed to comment on the ongoing electoral campaign from their character's perspective. This way, they could experience the power of such media effects as agenda-setting and framing, while the students who chose to be media outlets could see how their gate-keeping role was undermined by both presidential candidates and voters alike. Presidential candidates, on the other hand, had to contend weekly with issues related to personal branding and media strategy, as well as mediatization of Genovian society that forced them to pivot their electoral campaigns.

### Port Seminar: Studying Globalization Locally

Like Political Communication, the seminar on Bremen's ports in the global political economy was planned as a research-based seminar for students with a special interest in political economy and policy analysis. It presented a unique opportunity to study globalization and global-local interactions in the student's own backyard, namely the various ports of Bremen and Bremerhaven. In order to study world politics and political economy locally, the original course outline included a range of field trips and meetings with port actors, local policymakers, and former dockworkers. 45 graduate and undergraduate students from Political Science,

Sociology, Geography, and History took the class mostly as a general studies seminar or, in the case of Political Science students, as specialization in either policy analysis (port policy) or International Relations (political economy of globalization).

The port seminar was structured into 12 sessions on the history of Bremen's ports, colonialism, global trade and merchant shipping, port governance, the container as technical infrastructure of global capitalism, port competition, (de)regulation of dock work and urban (re)development. Students were allowed and encouraged to focus on individual topics since the main goal of the seminar was to stimulate their empirical curiosity and to conduct small research projects on rather small-scale questions. In this spirit, we jointly amended the syllabus by including sustainability of merchant shipping and green ports as additional topics after our first session. After the sudden need to digitalize the course, the seminar sessions were turned into asynchronous learning units with each unit consisting of an introductory video discussing core concepts and addressing central themes of the respective readings, an opening blog post on the seminar blog[3] including important sources for empirical data relevant to the study of the unit's topic and student contributions in the form of blog posts or podcasts which had to be uploaded to the blog three week after the start of the learning unit. Some students choose to write a term paper instead of a series of blog posts, allowing them to dig deeper into one topic of their choice. Nevertheless, the seminar blog was both the main output and the virtual home of this course. For some units, extra material was produced (like recorded interviews with port actors we would have met in person otherwise, snippets from documentaries and policy/business documents). Over the course of the term, the seminar only met four times via Zoom to discuss some readings and the progress of students' research in break-out sessions and plenary discussions. The main goal of these meetings was to stay in touch with students and create a sense of community. They did not include any presentations from the lecturer or students.

Given the character as an interdisciplinary and research-based course, moving the port seminar online was difficult and relatively easy at the same time. Difficult because its design deeply relied on jointly going into the field and observing the ports' operations and actors' behavior

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[3] Hafenblog: https://blogs.uni-bremen.de/hafenblog/.

in real time. This seemed hardly possible online at first sight. On the other hand, moving the port seminar online was relatively easy because, in contrast to most other seminars and lectures, it did not carry the burden of having to familiarize students with a fixed canon of knowledge. Rather we aimed to apply theories, concepts, and questions from fields already studied in previous classes to new but somehow familiar empirics. This took off some pressure from students and the lecturer alike. Therefore, however, the particular style of online learning chosen for the port seminar might not be applicable for most introductory courses. The port seminar was awarded with the Berninghausen Prize for excellent teaching under COVID-19 conditions in 2020 and with the teaching award by the German Political Science Association in 2021. Selected research results of the seminar were published as an edited volume in Bremen University's Institute for Political Science working paper series in January 2021 (Möller et al., 2020).

## Challenges & Tools of Interactive Online Seminars

Since we both argue that pandemic (or non-pandemic) online teaching must not fall back to traditional forms of instruction that forego experiences of active learning, this section is devoted to selected challenges and related tools and strategies in engaging students in an online classroom. These challenges include but are not limited to community building, fostering discussions, active learning, and mental health. Here, we are drawing from our pandemic teaching experience in both seminars that we have been jointly reflecting during and after the summer term 2020.

### *Community Building*

Most of us are familiar with marketing techniques that try to make us as customers to be active members of a community with a shared identity (Gruss et al., 2020). Community building is important not only for customer engagement, but also for student engagement as well (Adam, 2020). By creating a positive shared identity for students, we tried to enhance the learning experience and mitigate the psychological effects from the pandemic.

In *Political Communication*, several students naturally coalesced around the mass media outlets and maintained a social network among

themselves, where presidential candidates gave interviews to the press, voters offered op-eds and/or referenced the coverage in their weekly contributions. One of the characters was the instructor's alter ego in the simulation that allowed them to participate directly in the simulation without breaking anyone's character. That meant that the instructor had to provide input in character that ranged from debate moderation, op-eds, as well as "Talk Voting" cover of Jason Derulo's "Talk Dirty." This type of instructor engagement helped foster a sense of community and engagement, as well as built on the robust evidence for using humor in the classroom (Appleby, 2018). Not only did it contribute to self-motivation and increase of interest in learning, it was vital in keeping the levels of anxiety and stress low, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Granted, given a comparatively high number of live sessions, asynchronous community building was less vital. At the same time, live sessions also offered an opportunity to foster community building through break-out groups with students becoming ad hoc consultants for the two presidential campaigns. For example, after a discussion on the influence of branding in politics, the students were split into two groups, each containing a presidential candidate, where they were supposed to brainstorm the respective campaign. This type of break-out group activity offered yet another opportunity to apply the theoretical concepts that were discussed earlier on a concrete empirical example. Additionally, it lessened the burden on the students who were presidential candidates and equalized the amount of work they had to do on their own.

The *port seminar's* main working mode was an asynchronous one which raises questions about the need for community building. Successful student research, however, requires continuous guidance by the lecturer, feedback by fellow students as well as motivation and commitment through a social learning situation. Thus, building a community was also key for the success of this online seminar. This was achieved through at least four measures. From the very beginning of the seminar onwards, students were, firstly, encouraged to work in groups. During most of the summer term, it was possible for students to physically meet in small groups (not on campus but privately and outdoors) and to jointly work on their projects. In the port seminar, students were allowed to work in fixed and changing groups during the term (changing group for different blog posts or podcasts). This was also incentivised by relatively lower word counts for collaborative projects. In fact, many blog posts and

podcasts were produced by teams. Secondly, seminar-related interaction on social media was encouraged in order to form a learning community. For this purpose, a seminar hashtag was created on Twitter (#Hafenseminar) where some of the blog posts were featured by the lecturer, the department, and the university. While this increased the public visibility of the port seminar, it did not generate a significant amount of interaction and probably hardly contributed to community building since only few seminar participants are active Twitter users.

As the COVID-19 infections in Germany went down after the spring wave, the university allowed study trips at the end of the summer term under strict protective measures. This made a voluntary cycling trip through Bremen's old overseas ports possible which served as an active recapitulation of the seminar's topics in the field. Students and the lecturer visited some of the key places that were discussed over the course of the semester. On this occasion, some of the students met for the first time. In the seminar evaluation, this trip was mentioned by many participants as a highly valuable experience and one of their personal highlights in the so-called Corona semester. For our seminar blog, a student created a map of our field trip with links to related blog posts.

A final measure of community building was the formation of an editorial board (including 6 volunteering students and the instructor) for the seminar publication (Möller et al., 2020). In addition to the blog, this publication allowed the students to not only contribute to the seminar but also to a wider public debate in Bremen and Bremerhaven. It is published open access on the website of the Institute for Political Science with a preface by Bremen's port senator. Moreover, copies were sent to major actors in the local port community increasing the visibility of the student's research. Like the blog, the seminar publication has a rather elaborate and appealing layout expressing a certain appreciation of student research. The experience of the port seminar clearly shows that valuing student's contributions by providing publication opportunities strongly motivates and promotes learning and skills acquisition. Furthermore, students could familiarize themselves with the different steps of publishing research results (including peer review). Over the months of working on the publication, the editorial board members grew to a close community committed to publishing their work.

### *Fostering Discussions: Discussion Board & Seminar Blog*

One of the challenges in crafting a successful simulation in the context of P*olitical Communication* is to match the learning objectives to the creative process. This issue was addressed by combining the preparation and interaction phases of the simulation. By applying the theoretical concepts weekly and developing their simulation character, the students were able not only to test their knowledge in a short and low-stakes assignment, but also to build a long-term strategy and decision horizon usually unavailable in a 1-day or 2-day simulation. Moreover, all simulation participants additionally strengthened their media literacy and critical thinking skills. Additionally, given privacy concerns, the students were not forced to create or use their existing social media accounts but instead mimicked social media activity on the discussion board.

One of the situations that instructors (and students) dread the most in any classroom, whether virtual or not, is the pin-drop silence among the students. Discussion boards, where the students are supposed to post their input, provide an excellent opportunity to jump-start in-class discussions. For once, the written and short format offers a different medium of expression for students not entirely comfortable with public speaking and at the same time, those contributions give the instructor an insight into individual learning progress.

A seminar blog is another brilliant but rather time-consuming tool to foster discussions among students in online seminars. In fact, like discussion boards, blogs can also be used in analogous seminars. In the case of the *port seminar*, students, the lecturer, and some guest authors[4] were posting the results of their own empirical research on specific aspects of the learning units. The blog posts then could be discussed by others via the comment function. A longer discussion has emerged under some posts of general interest and high timeliness. Students, the lecturer, and other visitors of the blog would for instance post information on other relevant data sources or pick up an argument made by the author of the original post or another commentator. The great feature of blog discussions is that they can develop independently of time and space. If you do not have a comment right away, you might have one in two weeks' time and you

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[4] For instance, a colleague from the economics department working on maritime culture and a graduate who wrote their thesis on the EU's anti-piracy measures in the Gulf of Aden and the Gulf of Guinea.

can just post it then. This also allows for connecting contributions from different learning units in retrospect. Since the blog shows new comments on the landing page, everyone could see how discussions on certain posts developed over time. In addition, students were encouraged to post and discuss news related to ports, global trade, and merchant shipping and many actually did. In total, 143 posts and 378 comments were posted on the seminar blog. The posts are categorized by the respective learning units and additional meta-categories like research data, podcasts, Corona crisis, and port news.

The blog was part of a WordPress-based university-wide blog system (UniBremenLogs). This made it rather easy to edit and handle. All seminar participants were upgraded to blog authors so they could post and edit their posts without the final approval of the lecturer. This made the tool flexible and quick. At the same time, student peer reviews of posts prior to publication were encouraged. In an internal vote, the port seminar decided to make the blog publicly available so everyone (including the students' friends and families) could follow the seminar results. Students could still opt out and just submit their posts to the lecturer in case they did not wish to publish their work. This option, however, was hardly used. In general, the blog format and its online visibility created a highly welcomed upgrading of student contributions to proper learning contributions. Students were also encouraged to include links to other blog posts. In fact, this was a grading criterion. This resulted not only in students reading fellow student's work but also in the visibility of the interconnectedness of knowledge and the emergence of individual and collective learning maps over the course of the semester.

## Active Learning: Simulation & Empirical Research

Following Petranek et al. (1992) and Asal and Blake (2006), *Political Communication* was designed along the three phases: preparation, interaction, and debriefing. However, in order to adapt to the online environment and stimulate student engagement, the preparation and interaction phases were often merged, as the students had to enact their personas weekly following the theoretical input via reading, vlogs, and seminar discussion. Ultimately, the theoretical and conceptual input was spread throughout the duration of the seminar that also allowed the students to build on their political communication knowledge and develop their simulation characters. The final assignment capitalized on all

aspects of the seminar and the simulation in particular: Each student was supposed to compose a memorandum where they would provide specific political communication recommendations depending on their role in the simulation. For instance, students who chose a role of a mass media outlet were supposed to reflect on their media strategy and journalistic principles (e.g., objectivity and framing), while students who chose to be voters were supposed to map the political communication strategies that would work on their voter's demographic.

The *port seminar* was designed as a research-based course that inspires and enables students to raise and answer empirical questions about Bremen's ports, their history, management, and interrelations with politics, the regional economy, and urban (re)development. Students were conceptualized as co-creators of the knowledge that was to be acquired during the seminar from the very beginning. The learning videos and opening blog posts for each learning session served as a kind of thematic panorama of relevant issues and questions to provide some guidance and orientation for students who then could either choose a specialization topic from a prepared list or suggest an own topic within the scope of the learning unit. In fact, students amended the syllabus by introducing sustainable shipping and green port policies as research topics for our seminar.

Student research is probably the most effective and at the same time a very demanding type of active learning since student researchers need close guidance and support. To this end, the blog contains a section listing different types of accessible empirical data sources that were briefly introduced in the learning videos and jointly amended over the course of the seminar. Moreover, on the virtual learning platform (Stud.IP in this case), a continuously growing literature list was provided for the students. On demand, students were assisted in regard to methods of data collection and analysis. The main goal, however, was not to train students in the practicalities of empirical research, but rather to stimulate empirical curiosity and to develop a research attitude. Accordingly, seminar participants were asked to conduct exploratory studies on mostly small-scale issues to ensure they could complete them within the semester. Student research conducted in the context of the port seminar included the interpretation of trade statistics, comparative port analysis, content and discourse analyses of port policies as well as interviews with dock workers, seafarers, and members of parliament. Many of the student projects were conducted not only in the spirit of interdisciplinarity but

also of transdisciplinary research. Some research results were posted in the form of podcasts, which was encouraged by the lecturer and supported by an external expert on producing podcasts.

## Mental Challenges: Empathy & Staying in Touch

There is an overwhelming consensus that the pandemic has been the reason for a surge in mental health problems around the world (Pfefferbaum & North, 2020; Usher et al., 2020). As lecturers, our role often went beyond teaching but also encompassed counseling and mental health support. Given the increased levels of anxiety and uncertainty, it was important to provide a very clear and predictable online learning environment, communicate deadlines, and learning objectives. One way of addressing the predictability was introducing a weekly step-by-step online course template, where every week the students could have an overview of texts, tasks, and assignments on their plate. Even though these features should be a part and parcel of any successful class, be it online or offline, it was especially important to offer a sense of normality and continuity in some form as well. At the same time, it was also important to signal to the students that this type of instruction was not normal, it was an emergency solution to teaching in once in a century global catastrophe and we, as instructors, should center empathy and care, not just learning (Baran & AlZoubi, 2020; Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020).

Another issue that the instructors might consider is the importance of escapism (see also Dayal in this volume). Being bombarded with COVID-19 statistics on a daily basis, watching the frightening images on TV and often being affected by the pandemic personally, does not let the students escape the nightmare that was 2020. While discussing the setting for our fictional election campaign in the *political communication seminar*, students were asked whether they would like to factor in the pandemic in our simulation. One of the students gave a really poignant answer: "It would be nice if there was one place, where there was no pandemic." Everyone else in class agreed and it really gave an idea about how incredibly necessary such a respite would be. Genovia remained COVID-free and the students could emerge themselves into an environment that reflected other political challenges around the world—the rise of populism, green activism, or EU politics—but at least the students did not have to relive the daily pandemic challenges in class. In a sense, a part of our class mirrored role playing tabletop or online games, where both

grown-ups and children can reinvent themselves and enjoy a different, sometimes less painful, reality.

Introducing empathy to the syllabus[5] was another way to cope with the repercussions of the pandemic for students. In Germany, the summer term (April–July 2020) started shortly after a large-scale lockdown of public life was introduced amidst horrifying news on the pandemic from Northern Italy. Therefore, many students and lecturers were still in shock when the semester started and online learning was not a priority for many of us. In order to address anxieties and uncertainties of that time, we explicitly talked about the special circumstances and potential mental ramifications in our syllabi. The *port seminar* syllabus started with 10 principles[6] that should guide the handling with online learning and teaching:

1. Nobody signed up for this!
2. The seminar has no priority in light of fear and care for family and friends, the loss of student jobs, and volunteer community work. Also, other seminars and lectures might be more important than this one.
3. We cannot do the same online as we would have done in a normal seminar.
4. Course requirements will be lowered in light of the limited learning conditions in the pandemic.
5. We will mainly work in an asynchronous manner in order to account for technical problems and mental side effects of extensive screen time.
6. Feedback on how things work is more important and welcome than ever.
7. Work and learn in groups so you do not feel alone.
8. Please raise as many questions as you can in our Stud.IP forum or via email.
9. Make use of the lecturer's digital office hours if you have any problems.

[5] See also Ba and Glazier in Chapters 7 and 10 of this volume.

[6] Dayal in Chapter 6 of this volume talks about the foundational principles of *transparency, generosity, and flexibility* that are relevant for all pandemic syllabi.

10. We need more flexibility than usual in order to react to changes in the protective measures. Let's reevaluate our syllabus in the middle of the semester.

Another, more practical, measure to cope with potential mental ramifications of the pandemic was the introduction of a photo quiz on the port seminar's blog. This rather playful element was meant to engage students beyond screen time. Each week, a photo from somewhere within the ports or of something port related in the cities of Bremen and Bremerhaven was posted on the blog, often a very detailed picture that was not easily recognizable at first sight. Students were asked to find the place depicted in the photograph and post information on its history and meaning in the comments. In some cases, students actually went to the places and took selfies as proof of them going there. Moreover, some students posted quizzes on their own and thereby created learning opportunities for their fellow students and the lecturer. This was not only fun but also an effective tool of team building and stimulating individual field trips.

## CONCLUSION: LESSONS LEARNED & RECOMMENDATIONS

In coping with the challenges of pandemic teaching in the way described above, we spurred active learning, creative knowledge acquisition, and skills development amidst a global pandemic that unsettled many routines in higher education. A simulation-based seminar does not actually involve a lot of additional preparation effort: apart from coming up with a simulation premise and setting up a digital environment for the class (e.g., a discussion board, readings, etc.), the simulation is carried by students who take the election campaign in the direction they prefer with only occasional interventions from the instructor. After collecting the assignments and grades for the *political communication course*, it was obvious that the students managed to apply the theoretical concepts to their simulated environment. Especially the memos provided specific theory-based suggestions for electoral campaigns, media, and public. This resulted in relatively high grades for the written assignments. Therefore, students definitely achieved the learning outcomes of the course whereby they not only presented the theoretical concepts but actually applied them successfully to their simulated environment. While during the simulation the

students might have gotten carried away by the heat of the elections, the memos showed very robust evidence for the higher-level learning. Based on this experience, we would argue that a conventional summative assignment (memo in this case) was successfully accomplished because it was supported by the creative simulation components: digital input and elections proper. As the students were motivated by the gaming element, they approached the memos in a very serious manner.

In a similar vein, the *port seminar's* blog and publication have received wide recognition beyond the learning group and the university itself. The cooperation partners that have been interviewed for learning videos, blog posts, or podcasts or that have been approached otherwise by students were highly interested in our results. Students put a lot of effort and creativity into their contributions and identified research fields and questions for their further studies. The public visibility of their work created an incentive to produce high-quality contributions since this time, not only the lecturer would read their texts. Moreover, the share of students who turned in their coursework was higher than in most other online seminars and even higher than in previous regular seminars. This shows how students were motivated to meet the learning goals by means of community building, fostering discussions, active learning, and offering empathy.

Based on our own experience, we would give the following general recommendations for engaging students in an online classroom:

- Do not underestimate the need for structure and support for asynchronous learning. This part of the seminar requires at least as much attention as the synchronous meetings (which is probably also true for post-pandemic/analogous seminars).
- Reduce the amount and density of topics and readings. Turn some of your mandatory readings into additional readings (generally speaking: less is more).
- Instead of an extensive reading list, make suggestions for individual specialization (including audiovisual material, media content, and data sources). The goal should not be to make everyone read everything but rather to provide opportunities for individual inspiration for further studies.
- Utilize discussion boards and/or blogs. Miro and Padlet are more recent and very handy digital options to structure and save discussions in the online classroom.

- Put emphasis on content co-creation. Students can connect more easily with a seminar which they actually contribute to (as opposed to rather passive participation/consumption).
- Show your appreciation for students' contributions and encourage your seminar participants to publish their work.
- Integrate simulations or similar creative assignments if possible.
- Stimulate community-building activities and collaborative learning among the students!
- Offer empathy during a pandemic and account for limited learning conditions and access to technical infrastructure.

Following this advice might help you in turning your online seminar into more than a YouTube channel. It is worth noting, however, that students are not the only ones struggling during the pandemic. Instructors, especially those in precarious positions (adjuncts, non-TT faculty, temporary contracts, graduate students), also suffer from similar challenges of being overworked, burned out, and anxious, especially during a pandemic. We should also note that active learning methods and the suggestions we have made do take a lot of time, as most teaching preparation does. As most instructors might have noticed by now, online instruction takes even more time to prepare than f2f sessions. Moreover, in some cases, it is virtually impossible to convert courses, especially large lectures, into sessions centered on active learning methods without placing an incredible high burden on the instructors. Blogs and simulations worked very well in our seminars, but they are certainly not a one-size-fits-all solution for online teaching. For us, both collegial advice and counseling on the one hand and explicitly sharing the responsibility for a successful seminar with our students worked very well for stabilizing ourselves within pandemic teaching. In that spirit, we do not want the readers to regard this chapter as a criticism to their own crisis-mode teaching or as a call for a continuous self-optimization of lecturers, but rather as an inspiration for the time after the pandemic.

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