

**Transcript: Delivering Engaging Online Learning with Betha Gutsche**

Oh, and I’m here to talk about delivering engaging online learning and acknowledging that we all got kind of thrust into deep water of virtual learning about a little over a year ago, very suddenly. And I think maybe, for many people, it felt like you’re thrown into that deep water without, with varying levels of knowing how to swim and having the right equipment. So, a lot of it is just really being more prepared and understanding what the strengths are of virtual learning. So hopefully I can turn some perceptions around of that fear of the environment or dislike of the environment.

There’s a wonderful book called *The Art of Gathering* by Priya Parker. It has nothing to do with libraries, but it really is all about gathering, no matter when you’re gathering people together in whatever form. And one of her rules is, she calls the 90% rule, that 90% of what makes a gathering of people successful happens before the actual event starts. This totally applies to virtual learning or virtual presentation.

And I like to talk about preparing everybody ahead of time, along the lines of the roles of the three P's. That would be the Producers, the Presenters, and the Participants.[[1]](#footnote-1) So, let’s look at each of those and what can be done to really get people much more prepared to be swimming safely and effectively in that deep water.

So, starting with Producers, and by producers, this could be you. Sometimes you’ll have the luxury of having a separate person who’s really in charge of managing the platform and the technology, but very often this is you. So, it’s a role that you will have to play. But things that you can do well: one - you probably have an online learning platform that’s provided by your school. So, learning how to use that effectively, or you may have the ability to choose something. If you are choosing another tool, you want to make sure that you understand the security settings that are required by your school environment, and make sure that those are set up securely and safely. In general, it’s a really good idea, when you have a scheduled virtual meeting or class, for you as producer to show up to start that meeting up to 30 minutes ahead of time, so that you can kind of check the setup. And you can also encourage classmates. I know it doesn’t function that way very well in a school because the times are very rigidly set. But if you can encourage people to show up early or spend the first five minutes sort of checking audio if you're going to want people to speak up, and make sure that everyone can hear.

So that's all part of this and Brianna put a [link](https://sites.google.com/btboces.org/bocesofnewyorkstateonlineconfe/instructional-use)[[2]](#footnote-2) into chat, which, if you go to that link and scroll to the bottom, will give you some various detailed instructions for specific tools. So, it has four tools: Google Meet, WebEx, Teams, and Zoom, that have a little more detail about the instructional use for those. You also, as producer, you’re the one who will be helping your participants be prepared with their technology. So, provide information really well in advance of what the technology requirements are. And this may be something that your school is already doing and then send them a link where they can test and have some person or some kind of tech support available to help them troubleshoot. Same with giving them details about the audio setup. And you might even consider scheduling a session that is just purely about orientation to the platform. So, no learning content, but just, “Hey, let’s all get familiar and comfortable, so we don’t, so the technology doesn’t get in the way.” That’s the whole purpose here.

The second P is your Presenters. And by this, I mean, possibly you, you might have a guest speaker—this might be a teacher that you’re working with—and helping them prepare. The link in chat is to document that WebJunction, our astounding WebJunction webinar producer, Jennifer Peterson, she sends out to everyone who’s going to be a guest speaker on a webinar, and it’s just some really good general things for them to be aware of and be able to prepare. So, there’s a lot more detail there than I’m going to be able to cover. But really good resources are available on WebJunction. So, a presenter’s one of the things that it’s really important to understand, is that there’s much lower tolerance for the amount of information online. If it’s a class, it’s already been trimmed to 50 minutes or whatever 30, 50 minutes. But in the online environment, it’s just really important for presenters to be conscious of focusing on the essential parts of their content and not trying to cram too much in. It’s a very common thing for presenters to want to say everything they want to say, and they only get halfway through it, and then everybody’s frustrated because they don’t get to finish. So, I mean that’s a really key thing. And it’s actually a difficult discipline for some people to really trim down that content, because you want to, you want to get across what is really important? And then you can provide additional resources, like we’re providing links here in chat. If you want to look at more details, you can do that in between sessions.

It's also, especially if people are new to presenting online, somebody who’s a really dynamic teacher or a dynamic speaker in-person is not automatically going to be dynamic online because it’s such a different environment. It’s very off-putting to people as presenters because they feel like they’re presenting to the void. So, you might be wondering why we have a teddy bear sitting on top of the laptop. This is a strategy, and I know of people who use this—putting a teddy bear or a doll or a picture of a group, of your group of students. Just something that, you as a presenter or speaker, you feel like you’re talking to something instead of talking to that black screen. I think when you get more accustomed to the environment, well, now we’re using video, which is great. But even without video, I kind of talk to the chat. I feel like there’s the chat and the people posting, it makes you feel like there are people in the room that I can talk to. And then preparing your participants, so this will be your students for the most part, is really essential to that positive online experience. So, you want to let, you want to have them prepared ahead of time. If there were readings that you wanted them to see, you want to maybe provide an agenda ahead of time. So, they know what to expect when they get into the real time.

And then for new groups, it’s really good to help them get connected to each other. So, you might have introductions in some sort of discussion forum beforehand. You might spend time in your first meeting, and I mean significant time, getting to know each other and just having people talk about themselves a bit. You also there’s this thing called “netiquette,” which is really sort of norms for behaving online. And I think it’s really important, especially in a classroom. And there’s that [link](https://drive.google.com/file/d/19XKI0OCn_zTVC0VZElf9A-Xbl5EueF4p/view)[[3]](#footnote-3) in chat, goes to some sample norms for students. And of course, it’s going to vary by age group. Your norms for your K through three or four or five are going to be very different from your norms for your high school students, but to just be clear up front so that there’s a clear expectation of how people are going to participate. Are you going to just put comments in chat, or you have a process for people raising their hand when they want to speak out loud? So just all those things that you want to be very clear about so that people know what to expect. So now, all of that was preparing. So that’s all the stuff that would happen before going into the virtual environment.

But now there are very important things that happen during, while you’re in the event. And I don’t know how many of you have had this experience of logging into a webinar or some sort of scheduled meeting, usually webinar, because there are generally more people, but having this feeling like, “Am I in the right place? Is there anybody else here? I don't really know how to move around in this environment.” So just it can be very, very disorienting. And I’ve had that experience even recently, even though the whole world has had a year to get a lot of practice on doing online better.

But just because you’re online, that environment does not have to be drab, and I’m a very visual person. So, I really like to add a lot of visual elements to slide presentations. If you don’t have any kind of formal presentation, this is where, and we’re going to talk about this in a little minute, really encouraging people to turn their cameras on because I love that. My team calls it The Brady Bunch view where you just have all the little boxes of people’s videos, and I just feel like I’m in a group of people. I feel much more involved and connected when I can see that. That, and even when you do have a presentation that’s sort of taking up the majority of the screen, having the participant panel open so that you can see, as the leader or the teacher who’s there, but the students can see each other. I’ve been to so many webinars where I can’t see who else is there. I have no clue and I feel like I might be the only one, although probably not.

And the chat panel. We are huge fans of chat, and I know there are various kinds of considerations in a school environment for whether and how to use chat, but it's just it's I always say it's like giving kids permission to pass notes in class. It’s a great way for them to connect with each other, while requiring probably some monitoring so it doesn’t get out of hand. But I’m just a huge fan of using chat. And then having some annotation fun. Brianna demonstrated that very nicely at the beginning. I really like that looseness of using the annotation tools because people, you can see here on the screen, people don’t just confine themselves to the checkmark, they start using the highlighter and they find colors and they get very creative, and it can get wacky and messy. But it’s just the kind of thing that kids love to do, and it gets some of that energy out and creates more of that connection. There are also more formal polling instruments, often there’s one built into your platform or there are tools like Poll Everywhere that can make that happen for you. And then using breakout rooms. I know we did this in our kickoff session. This is especially good for larger groups or larger classrooms, and it’s really good for connecting students with each other because if they are in a smaller group, they’re hopefully more likely to speak up, to feel less shy or less inhibited about speaking up. So, it can sort of ameliorate the situation where you might have a couple of dominant voices in a classroom that’s all together, and you have the opportunity maybe of mixing the groups up in different combinations. So, they get to spend a little more time with each other in that smaller, more intimate setting.

Now I want to talk about more sort of engaging students online. And I think one really important consideration is mixing... or acknowledging the integration between the virtual and the physical. And I know there's a lot of awkwardness for students joining from home. And I think it’s really important to not pretend that they’re not at home, to try to pretend they’re in the classroom, but to just fully acknowledge, “Yes. We are conducting class, and we are looking into your home environment.” And I think, I mean this has a lot to do with reticence about turning cameras on. So just sort of these straightforward, some activities that can really connect the two worlds intentionally. So that you’re admitting, you’re saying, “This is an unusual situation, and we don’t expect everyone to pretend that it’s not happening, because that’s ridiculous.” So, looking at some of those strategies for doing this, and I think, you know, everyone’s mileage may vary so I’m just going to throw out some ideas and you can take what you want out of them. One thing is to play this camera-on/camera-off game, kind of like Simon says. So, “Simon says, turn your camera off. Simon says, turn your camera on. Turn your camera off.” That kind of thing. And the ones, the rounds where the students are out, you know, because they didn’t follow or they missed the Simon says, they have to leave their camera on, so it’s kind of a fun way to get them in a gaming mind and maybe get them over the shyness of having the cameras on.

Another game is called I Spy in Your Background. And I’ll just say up front, use this cautiously and I’m just acknowledging the camera-on situation, where some students may be very sensitive about their home environment. So, they may have very personal and important reasons why they don’t want to turn their cameras on. So just being aware and sensitive to that. But it can be fun to say, “I spy something in your background.” Like I think a really great one is pets. You know, “I spy a cat sleeping in somebody’s background,” and then have the other students look at each other’s screens to try and find that, and then pop into chat or raise their hand when they found, they think they found it. So, it’s a way of making them more comfortable with the home environment and having them look at each other and connect with each other. Everyone knows my cats (comment in chat). Yeah.

And then a safer version of that is using Zoom backgrounds, but using them very intentionally so it’s connecting your artificial Zoom background, which masks the home environment, with something that that people are, that you're studying in class. So, for instance, if you’re studying Egypt, ask students to find backgrounds that have something to do with that and then you can actually take that opportunity to call on them and have them talk about why they chose that particular scene.

And then I’m really big on analog activities so actually having students, and probably this would be with cameras off, to say, you know, “Get a pencil and piece of paper and spend the next five minutes drawing.” Let’s say you’re studying engineering, you’re studying leverage, and have them draw some examples of weights and levers and lever arms, and then come back and share. So, one thing it does is it accepts that you don’t have to fill every single minute of online time with noise. You can have these times where everybody’s quiet and they’re often concentrating. We actually did this in our kickoff convening, when you all went off and did your sketches of your floor plans and then come back and shared. So just allowing that allowing that analog to actually come into the online environment is a great way of expanding opportunities.

And then more on the analog, and this is just sort of a general good teaching tool, is to have some sort of a journal notebook or workbook that’s associated with the topic of learning in the online environment. One thing it does is, there’s a really powerful connection between the brain and the hand and writing, physical writing, as opposed to typing on a keyboard. It triggers a unique circuit in the brain. So, in terms of learning and memory, it’s actually a very powerful tool that gets easily overlooked when everybody’s on the keyboard and always online. And it also accommodates different learning styles. I mean we work with adults who we provide, we call them learning guides, call them workbook, whatever. They love to print them out. So, they have a physical thing that they can track their learning in, and they can write notes in the margin and do all those things that pencil, and paper are uniquely suited for. So, I think this is a really important piece of the whole virtual or the whole learning environment, where the virtual event just being a part of that.

I think a really important ingredient for student engagement is having them create content. And the [link](https://youtu.be/N7S9kyk-odA)[[4]](#footnote-4) that’s in chat, that is a nice short video by John Spencer, and I will continue to give a shout out to Shelly for turning me on to John Spencer. He’s just a really great educator full of ideas. But this, and this graphic comes from him. This is so true; this is really about students creating a maker mindset. So not just memorizing content learning by rote, but when they start creating, they are just becoming those problem-solvers and makers and designers. That is just that really powerful application of learning.

So, I want to take some time here for us to do a bit of a brainstorm. You may already have things that you’ve done with students around having them create content. So, these are great ideas. I’ll just toss out a couple, a few things that that I found just sort of searching around for possibilities, one that somewhat relates to podcasts, but writing blogs. This is more old-school, this is more like two decades ago, but it is a way that students can record impressions, perceptions, discoveries in a way that’s shareable online or shareable with each other.

There’s also this idea of preparing a show and tell, I mean, there's been show and tell in classrooms forever. Why not do that online, because it really allows a student, it gives the student some agency, it allows them to find something. You know, they can bring in a subject matter expert who might be a relative or a friend, not necessarily a known entity. Or you know an artifact in their home, something that they are really proud of, and they want to share with other people. Why not do that online?

Another is creating a slideshow to present online. It might be related to a specific project that they're doing, it might be related to something fun that they did. But that process of creating it into a coherent flow that they’re going to talk about is, is a real creative challenge and then creating videos that would be sort of the next generation after doing the podcast, just like, can you take the next step and actually do a video? That is exciting to see, and I've seen a lot that cover the full range of, like, very, very early learning is stepping into it and then more polished. But really that’s how you learn things like that, is just having them actually do that and then making.

Well, we're going to be talking about inquiry-based learning in our next online session in April, but just along those lines, where a student comes up with their own question around something they’re interested in, and then researches and records the process is, of figuring ways that they capture that in a way that they can share back with the rest of their students.

So, and noting how important it is for them to record the process, because it’s not as much about the end product where they got to, as it is about what were the discoveries, what were the stumbles? You know, what were the, like, “Whoops! Back to the drawing board?!” So that can be really a good thing to integrate into inquiry-based learning.

*\*Small edits have been made for clarity.*

1. <https://www.webjunction.org/news/webjunction/delivering-engaging-online-learning-part-1.html>

<https://www.webjunction.org/news/webjunction/enlivening-the-virtual-environment.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://sites.google.com/btboces.org/bocesofnewyorkstateonlineconfe/instructional-use> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://drive.google.com/file/d/19XKI0OCn\_zTVC0VZElf9A-Xbl5EueF4p/view [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://youtu.be/N7S9kyk-odA> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)