



Tips for the implementation of synchronous online courses (web conferences)

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At Heidelberg University, there are many software solutions in order to design and conduct synchronous courses online as web conferences. Key elements are audio and video connections as well as screen sharing (documents, applications). Depending on the software solution, there are other functions like text chat, polls, whiteboards, notes, breakout rooms, different layouts and further features.

Technical Requirements

In any case, teachers need a web cam (either included in the laptop or per USB connection) and a headset, e.g., microphone & headphones (per jack or USB). If a web cam microphone is used, please use it in combination with headphones in order to avoid technical disturbances and carefully check your sound beforehand. High-quality audio by teacher is key for online seminars and web conferences.

In addition, a good Internet connection (DSL) is required, both from teachers and from students. It is recommended that web cam use is limited to situations like welcoming and when necessary didactically. During the meeting, you should concentrate on audio and other functions in order to save bandwidth.

Note: Most web conference systems offer access directly via modern web browser. However, as this means functional limitations in some cases, there are also web conference applications, which have to be installed locally. With mobile devices, there may be device-related functional limitations. Therefore, as teacher, please communicate beforehand, which kind of web conference access should be used by students.

In which cases should you offer an online seminar / a web conference?

Online seminars / web conferences, where you communicate in real-time are useful to keep up a feeling of "Präsenz" (face-to-face-teaching). Usually, web conferences are conducted for different purposes like virtual lectures, online seminars, research group meetings, informal learning groups or online consulting. Due to Corona, many teachers have changed their teaching from face-to-face to synchronous web conference formats and therefore in individual cases, you might get in a situation where too many users might overload the system. And please note that students might have insufficient bandwidth at their disposal.

Therefore, please think carefully about why you would need a web conference format for your teaching and which alternatives might be considered as replacement. Do you need a web conference, if you wish for a frontal lecture format or wouldn't it be sufficient to offer the

script/slides with audio plus good assignments? Could students offer their handouts with audio in the learning management system and be available for forum discussions? Could a consulting be done via phone or University chat service? Asynchronous alternatives like recording videos, in combination with assignments, are also an option.

In order to create media for your course (teachers and students), there are simple tools available free of charge for image editing, audio or video creation.

If you commit yourself to a web conference format, prepare and design the interactions you would like to use: select from text chat, status options (requests to speak, ...), audio discussions, polls, whiteboard etc. For group work and strengthening the feeling of "face-to-face-teaching" and social cohesion, breakout-rooms are useful – this requires a little practice and a concept, what you want to achieve during the (hopefully sufficient) group time.

Steps & procedures of an online seminar / a web conference

Before the meeting: Good pre-planning is very important. Think about your goals and how you want to achieve them didactically and with the features of the resp. web conference system. If necessary, add a co-moderator to the mix. Clarify in advance what, who, how, when, and in what order should be done. Prepare your files/presentations and check that they work in the web conference system. Communicate to your participants not only URL, date + time of the web conference, but also the technical requirements - if necessary, test in advance. Only use a web conference system with which you are comfortable and where you know the meaning of the symbols/buttons and how to assign roles/permissions.

Shortly before the meeting: Test your audio connection, web cam, file upload etc. well before the start of the meeting. Coordinate the joining of participants. The immediate agreement of a back channel (beyond audio and video) is favorable - per default the text chat.

During a meeting: In small groups, a short welcome round, using the user list top-down, is helpful for engagement and to clarify any questions right at the beginning. Take advantage of the system's interaction capabilities in order to avoid that the online seminar / web conference ends in frontal teaching. Web conferences can be stressful and shouldn't be longer than 60-90 minutes. Depending on the didactic scenario, you should implement breaks. And keep an eye on the text chat - this also can be done by a co-moderator.

End of the meeting: A summary of the meeting, securing the results (download whiteboard etc.) and clarification of further steps (when will we meet again? assignments?) is a usual way to end a session. In small groups, a short feedback round via audio - similar to the welcome round - might be a good idea.