

Large Class Virtual Poster Session

Courtney J.W. Fecske

Indiana University Bloomington
coweisma@iu.edu

Abstract: As the spread of the 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19) became a reality during the Spring 2020 semester, faculty were forced to swiftly transition coursework to remote learning with little time for preparation. Course syllabi, schedules, and work needed to be adjusted accordingly, taking into account uncertainty and technological inequities. I outline my experiences as an instructor of a 100-student in-person course having successfully transitioned a semester-long group poster session into a virtual poster session using Canvas and integrated tools. Details in how to guide students and construct an effective large class virtual poster session are provided, as well as reflections on completing this process during the pandemic.

Keywords: poster, virtual, Canvas.

With the hasty transition to remote learning, the implementation of a virtual poster session became a practical solution to a semester-long project. While all courses transitioned to remote learning during the spring 2020 semester, searching for viable means to create a smooth transition to achieve coursework became an expectation for faculty. My course included a semester-long group poster project culminating in a presentation at the end of the semester. As opposed to doing an in-person poster session, a virtual poster session through Canvas and integrated tools was utilized. While asynchronous online group work can be complicated due to lack of physical setting and technology concerns (Chang & Kang, 2016), it was determined to be a reasonable option. Students were able to create posters through PowerPoint templates, upload these virtual posters through VoiceThread within Canvas, record their presentation as a group, and then embed these links to a designated Canvas discussion board. Asynchronous discussion boards are one of many online methods to encourage outcomes, such as connection and reflection (Han & Hill, 2019), so it was deemed an appropriate equivalency to the original project. Students were then able to watch and learn from each other's posters, much like they would in-person, and maintain engagement. Additionally, many students learned the technological skills to complete this presentation, which will assist their learning process in other courses.

Surprisingly, many students were unfamiliar with the capabilities of Canvas and online learning. Students did not have time to prepare for this transition, and student readiness for online learning is an important factor to take into account (Martin, Stamper, & Flowers, 2020). Thus, in order to assist students in the successful navigation and effective use of Canvas tools, I provided both written and recorded tutorials. For the recorded tutorial, I recorded myself by using Zoom while sharing my screen as I verbally explained and visually demonstrated how to use the necessary Canvas tools. I was able to record myself demonstrating how to upload a poster (PowerPoint slide/s), record audio and video to the upload, and post the completed recording to the designated discussion board. This recording was then posted within the course project module for students to access as a resource. Written step-by-step directions were shared in a PDF file and posted in the poster project module as an additional resource for students. Additionally, students had the opportunity to ask questions through virtual office hours, after optional synchronous lectures (lectures were offered synchronously but recorded for students to access asynchronously, as well), and via email.

Teaching Method

Students largely chose to use PowerPoint templates to create between 1-3 slides, which served as their virtual posters, guided by a pre-set rubric for content. Slides were then uploaded to VoiceThread, a tool available within Canvas. Once uploaded, students recorded their dialogue and video into the slide/s. Students were able to share dialogue or have one person do the entire recording when using VoiceThread, which continued the collaborative group process. This, when managed effectively, allows for a more collaborative and equitable workload for groups. It is important to note that this assumes all group members have access to internet and some type of camera or microphone. In order to accommodate students who have diverse access to technology, work could be divvied up in different ways. For example, one group could have some members complete additional content, while other group members focused more on the technology aspect of the project, and some students could write the poster presentation script while others read and recorded the script. Given the quick switch to remote learning this semester and that many students had access to varying levels of technology and were experiencing a wide range of circumstances, multiple methods of completing the virtual poster were accepted as long as students were able to meet the content requirements, learning objectives, and collaborate with their group. It is essential for instructors to be cognizant of social issues as well as ensure that appropriate teaching design-technology match (Dyer & Dyer, 2019), as well as be flexible during emergency circumstances.

After uploading the slides to VoiceThread, students could add audio and video to each slide. This step needed to be explicitly stated as students could not record audio or video within the PowerPoint; this must be done after the upload. The comments button within VoiceThread allows for audio, video, and written comments to be added to slides. To record, students only needed to locate the comment option on the tool bar, which can be found at the bottom of each slide, and choose either the microphone or video icon. Students then need to click to cease recording, and the comment automatically saves to the slide. Students can view, delete, and re-record their comments. Video is the option most similar to an in-person poster session as it gives a small talking head that viewers may watch while also looking at the slide. Given circumstances of the semester, I allowed students to choose to add solely audio content or video since not all students may have had cameras or easy locations to record. After the recording is completed, students can request Closed Captioning, which is a great means to encourage students to think about accessibility.

Once the project is uploaded and recorded, the next step is posting it to the designated discussion board. As the instructor, I created a discussion board within Canvas where students could post their virtual poster presentations. Within the discussion board, the text reiterated the technical directions, as well as deadlines and reminders. Only one student per group needed to embed the media file within the discussion board, as well as include a transcription of the audio. VoiceThread offers the option to request Closed Captioning but does take additional time for the process, so if students wanted to use this option, the recording needed to be made at least a few days before the assignment deadline. Transcriptions were required within the same post to enhance accessibility and accommodate students in case they had slower bandwidth so they would still have access to view their peer's text and poster.

In order to embed a VoiceThread on a Canvas discussion board, students needed to copy the embedding link from the VoiceThread and grant viewing permission. Thus, after the recording was completed and the presentation finalized, one student would copy the embedded link for the presentation, which often takes a few minutes. The student would then go to the discussion board, click reply, locate the tab with three horizontal lines on the right side of the tool bar, choose embed, and paste the copied link.

The discussion board created an easily accessible space for all students in the course to access all poster presentations. Students could watch presentations, click reply to each post, and provide insight and critical reflections, as well as ask questions. As an instructor, it was easy to grade the poster presentations as the discussion board was set to group settings with individual grades so that each poster presentation submission was viewable by group to grade with a rubric that had already been created. Additionally, individual grading allowed for different grades to be assigned if needed. Any written feedback in the form of comments within the created rubric was viewable to all students within the same group, although there is an option to write feedback specifically to individual students. Also, when grading, the instructor has the option to view the entire original post thread or all posts made by the individual student, which is helpful when noting the student's poster presentation and their feedback on other posters.

Conclusions

Similar to Day's (2015) reflections, constructing a virtual poster session was a viable alternative to face-to-face instruction since students were able to complete their posters on their chosen topics, listen to other student's presentations, and provide/receive engaging feedback on their work. Since this method was effective, I plan to use this method again in a large course if doing a group presentation because students had the opportunity to watch more presentations and take their time providing feedback. It is difficult to manage 28 presentations on multiple class days while also ensuring that students are engaged in-person, so in some ways having the poster session completed virtually allowed for more flexibility and accessibility for students. The challenges experienced with this format were largely situational as many students expressed feelings of stress and being overwhelmed given the quick transition to remote learning. Recommendations for doing a virtual poster presentation include ensuring that students are familiar with Canvas technology towards the beginning of the semester and monitoring the group work process (Chang & Kang, 2016) to alleviate asynchronous group challenges. However, with patience, directions available in multiple formats, and instructor availability, all 28 of the 3-4 student groups successfully completed and posted their virtual posters.

References

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