Using Zoom to Connect Students to Professionals in the Field

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Rationale:

EVR 4940: Capstone Experience for Environmental Studies is a course designed to prepare graduating seniors for the careers they will soon be starting. As such, the course fosters interaction between students and people currently working in environmental fields. This includes projects in which student groups work with community partners and an assortment of guest speakers who talk to students about their careers and the paths that led them to their current job.

One challenge to online learning is incorporating experiential learning techniques when students are not physically present (MNPS 2020). Strategic use of guest speakers who can provide perspectives from relevant professions outside academia can be an important element of experiential learning (Paul & Mukhopadhyay, 2005). I'm suggesting that our new familiarity (as a society) with Zoom and similar applications presents opportunities for connecting students to professionals in relevant careers that were not previously available.

I am focusing on the management of the guest speaker Zoom sessions here, as that is likely more broadly applicable than the group projects performed remotely with community partners.

Description:

I. Pre-Session Work:

Have students complete a small assignment prior to the Zoom session with the guest speaker. For me this usually entails reviewing materials about or by the speaker (e.g., a published article, or the website of the speaker's organization/company) and submitting a couple of questions for the speaker. For asynchronous classes, these questions can be a good way for students who are unable to attend live to participate and have their questions addressed.

II. Zoom Session with Guest Speaker:

A. Keep talks short: Student attention spans decrease in a remote format, so presentation lengths should be cut considerably.

B. More focus on Question/Answer Section: In a face-to-face presentation, the question/answer session is often a few minutes tacked on to the end of a much longer talk. For these Zoom sessions, I tend to shoot for a 50/50 split between presentation and question/answer period. For many speakers, this makes their participation even easier, as the do not feel obligated to develop a long PowerPoint presentation for the class. I use questions from the pre-session work to supplement questions that arise during the discussion.

C. Spread Question/Answer Sessions: Instead of holding questions until the end, I ask speakers to call for questions a few times during their presentation. This makes the entire session feel more conversational.

D. You are the Host/Monitor: I try to make the experience as easy and pleasant as possible for the speakers. For example, I provide a bit of coaching to the speakers regarding interaction with students on Zoom and I monitor the chat box for questions. I have toyed with running the session more like an interview in which the speaker need only respond to questions from me and the students. While this achieves a conversational atmosphere, it loses the pictures that speakers would otherwise provide from their work, which I think are useful for the students to understand and visualize what the speakers do day-to-day.

III.   Confirmation and Reflection

A. The recorded session is posted online with a couple easy quiz questions to encourage viewing. Students have one week to respond these questions, based either on their participation in the live session or viewing of the recorded session. I use this primarily to incentivize viewing of the sessions.

B. At the end of the semester, students write a reflection in which they identify specific experiences, skills, knowledge, etc. from their work with community partners and interaction with guest speakers that they think will be useful to them in their careers. This stage of reflection is essential for experiential learning (Richmond and Cummings, 2005).

Appraisal:
The quiz questions I mention above are really just a way of confirming that students attended the live session or reviewed the recording. I have not yet received students' reflections on their projects and interaction with guest speakers. Anecdotally, I have gotten positive responses to these Zoom sessions from both students and from the guest speakers. Both sides seem to enjoy the conversations and engagement and find them worthwhile. Several students have also followed through on speakers' invitations to contact them later with any questions.

References:

Metro Nashville Public Schools. (2020). Virtual Experiential Learning Guide. Academies of Nashville. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57752cbed1758e541bdeef6b/t/5f232f02a40caa6b9f7eaaed/1596141318607/Virtual+Experiential+Learning+Guide+Summer+2020.Final.pdf

Paul, P., & Mukhopadhyay, K. (2005). Experiential learning in international business education. Journal of Teaching in International Business, 16(2), 7-25.

Richmond, A. S., & Cummings, R. (2005). Implementing Kolb's learning styles into online distance education. International Journal of Technology in Teaching and Learning, 1(1), 45-54.

Link or explanation: This is a link to the latest guest speaker Zoom session from earlier this week: https://ucf.zoom.us/rec/play/BLRLx0BFskzGNZJVdyf-1-92lGJoJ-A2LZ5OAiW213iGYqdPs9b2ZPyLVHljCTYqdcZG2rANAtqSqKUr.TCss6TXkhQDHD961?continueMode=true. Note, it starts with me making a few announcements, but gets to the guest speaker after a few minutes.