

***Converting to Online Teaching<sup>1</sup>***  
***A series of short guidance articles for educators and institutions***

**Facilitating Virtual Classes <sup>2</sup>**

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Setting the context for an online course to be most effective (just like a campus class), we assign various activities for the learners to prepare before class so that class time can be an active learning environment. Assignments before class may include videos, voice-over PowerPoint or animation slide decks, readings, problem sets, Google searches for information, pearl diving essays, etc. Short quizzes or knowledge checks before class encourage the learner to have prepared for class and they are easily administered on a learning management system (LMS). At the University of Maryland, we use Canvas. Feedback from our students informs us that the knowledge checks do motivate them to undertake the work in advance.

The virtual class can be managed just as though you are in a classroom on campus. When time for class arrives, the instructor should have a planned series of activities to engage the students during the video conference.

First however, we have to address the basics. Cameras must be on! Require the use of cameras and proper etiquette. Clearly state your expectations in the course syllabus and during the first online class session. Ask students to adjust the camera height and angle so they look straight into it (not down to it or up). This may require sitting a laptop on a stack of books or some other handy device! Backlighting will put their face in silhouette so instead they should have a warm light source so that their face is clearly visible to the community. The mic's that come with computers are not very good and pick up background noises. Suggest, at a minimum, that they use a good quality lavalier mic (we like "Purple Panda") or a really good headset. Students also need to pay attention to their background and be sure they are the main focus. A virtual background it is a very good option and a green screen behind you would minimize distortion.

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<sup>1</sup>This series of articles by the Director of the University of Maryland's Project Management Center for Excellence provides information and advice for converting from traditional in-person classes to online teaching, based on their experience before and during the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020. See Professor Cable's background at the end of this article.

<sup>2</sup> How to cite this paper: Cable, J. H. (2020). Converting to Online Teaching: A series of short guidance articles for educators and institutions – Facilitating Virtual Classes, *PM World Journal*, Vol. IX, Issue X, October.

Here are two YouTube videos that address presenting in a virtual environment that you might enjoy:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YO6utfQm7Bg>

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=1&v=bFIFFIN-4I&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1&v=bFIFFIN-4I&feature=emb_logo)

Finally, students should wear appropriate attire, generally thought of as business casual or casual but not tank tops ~ looking just like you came off the beach!

Generally, I start a class video conference by opening up the platform 10 minutes early and playing music while the learners assemble. It is a great opportunity for friendly chit chat and checking how things are going. When starting the class, the music is turned off and I ask for questions and comments about the week's materials. I then move on to address the discussion seeds (not more than a page of overarching questions designed to create discussions of key concepts for the week), case studies, projects, or other assignments.

In addressing questions to the class, if students are initially reluctant to speak up, I simply call on them by name and spread the discussion around so everyone has the opportunity to speak. Students earn points for participation not only by asking and answering questions, but also by sharing insights and commenting on others' remarks. For students that readily talk a lot, one of our faculty gives them an "exemption" for the day so they don't feel like they have to volunteer to share their insights and comments to earn their participation grade, thus giving more introverted students the opportunity to speak up.

One goal is to create a "safe space" for the learners to feel comfortable sharing ideas and encouraging the hesitant ones to participate. Some of our faculty divide the class into groups and host debates or have them do role-plays. The key is to spice up the weekly activities so that students are constantly challenged to step out of their comfort zones. This keeps the weekly sessions fresh and interesting. Use the gallery view to read students' facial expressions and body language to gauge their level of engagement. If their energy level appears low, give students a quick 5-minute break to stretch or grab a snack.

Zoom now has two features that really help to encourage student engagement. One is a polling feature. You may use quick polls to ask students' questions. The polling results are immediate and can be visually shared. Discussing poll results engages the students in the topic and offers the opportunity to discuss the different answers to the polling questions.

The second big assist is the breakout room feature. You can now subdivide the class into small work groups, have students work in teams on assignments, and then report out to the class. You can give them each a different assignment so the reporting is unique for each group. As the instructor, you can freely go between groups to answer questions and monitor performance. Reporting out to the whole class also provides students the opportunity to practice presenting. Invite students to volunteer to present and keep track

of the presenters to ensure that as many students as possible get to hone their presentation skills.

One technique that works extremely well to finish the class session is to save the last 10 minutes (the amount of time depends on class size) for "takeaways". Simply go around the room in order and ask each student to state their key takeaway for the week using laser comments (quick, to the point, no BS).

The future of higher education is going to look much different than today with blended and hybrid courses, designed using the Universal Design for Learning, becoming the standard. It is extremely important for us to become comfortable facilitating virtual classes because they are definitely here to stay.

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Shana Webster-Trotman, PhD, PMP, ITIL, an adjunct at the University of Maryland Project Management Center for Excellence, provided input to this article.

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## About the Author



### **John Cable**

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**John Cable** is Director of the Project Management Center for Excellence in the A. James Clark School of Engineering at the University of Maryland, where he is also a professor and teacher of several graduate courses in project management. His program at the University of Maryland offers masters and PhD level programs focused on project management. With more than 1,300 seats filled annually with students from many countries, including more than 40 PhD students, the program is the largest graduate program in project management at a major university in the United States.

John Cable served in the newly formed U.S. Department of Energy in 1980, where he was involved with developing energy standards for buildings, methods for measuring energy consumption, and managing primary research in energy conservation. As an architect and builder, Mr. Cable founded and led John Cable Associates in 1984, a design build firm. In 1999 he was recruited by the University of Maryland's Department of Civil & Environmental Engineering to create and manage a graduate program in project management. In his role as founder and director of the Project Management Center for Excellence at Maryland, the program has grown to offer an undergraduate minor, master's degrees, and a doctoral program. Information about the Project Management Center for Project Management at the University of Maryland can be found at [www.pm.umd.edu](http://www.pm.umd.edu).

In 2002, PMI formed the Global Accreditation Center for Project Management Educational Programs (GAC). Mr. Cable was appointed to that inaugural board where he served as vice chair. In 2006, he was elected as chairman, a role he held through 2012. As Chair of the PMI GAC, John led the accreditation of 86 project management educational programs at 40 institutions in 15 countries in North America, Europe, the Middle East, Latin America and the Asia Pacific Region. John was awarded PMI's 2012 Distinguished Contribution Award for his leadership at the GAC. He can be contacted at [jcable@umd.edu](mailto:jcable@umd.edu).