

# Reflections on Webinars

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## Teaching Situation

I was a teacher in one of those courses that, at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, suddenly had to transfer everything to online teaching. We had approximately three days to rethink the whole course before the course started. My main contribution in this shift to online teaching was to introduce a teaching activity that I call Webinars.

A webinar is an online session where the students discuss the last lecture among themselves and with me, the teacher. The session starts with the students discussing in breakout rooms with three to four persons pinpointing: 1) What was hard to understand? 2) What seemed to be the most important thing? 3) What do we want to talk about today? Then, the entire group is gathered again in the main room, and I collect the topics brought up in the breakout rooms in a shared mind map. After this, we decide what topic to address first, and then the students get new breakout rooms. Then the entire group meets again, some groups share what they discussed, and together we fill out details on the mind map. This procedure continues until we have discussed all topics. If there are things that the students still don't understand, something that they have misunderstood, or critical points they have missed entirely, I explain these concepts to them.

I have had webinars for two courses now, and the attending students have highly appreciated the webinars. I have received great feedback from the students both during the course and in the CEQs.

## Analysis of Situation

**Active learning** The purpose of webinars is to complement the video lectures for the course. Webinars give the students a chance to discuss and ask questions about the material. Active learning is essential for a deep learning approach and improves the students' understanding and performance in the course. It is hard to know what happens inside the students' heads, but studies suggest that discussions encourage active learning [1, 2, 3]. Hence, it is probable that students attending webinars are likely to adopt an active learning approach.

**Taxonomies** Educational taxonomies differentiate levels of knowledge. There are many different taxonomies but common to all is that higher levels mean more complex knowledge, and they require the knowledge from the lower levels [4]. The lower levels are traditionally taught in class. The teacher introduces new material that the students try to understand and remember. The teaching of the higher levels, where the students work with the more complex parts of the understanding, is usually left as homework. In a flipped classroom, the order is reversed. The students cover the lower taxonomy levels at home and work in class on the higher levels (see figure 1) [5, 6, 7].

Webinars, together with video lectures, are some kind of a flipped classroom. Since webinars' purpose is to discuss the lecture material, one can argue that the higher levels of any taxonomy are never reached in a webinar. But I'm not simply leading the discussions as a repetition of the material. I'm actively involved in the discussions and try to help the students connect the course content to the real world and try to challenge them to "learn for life" instead of simply passing the course. In those cases where I succeed with this, I argue that the higher taxonomy levels are reached.

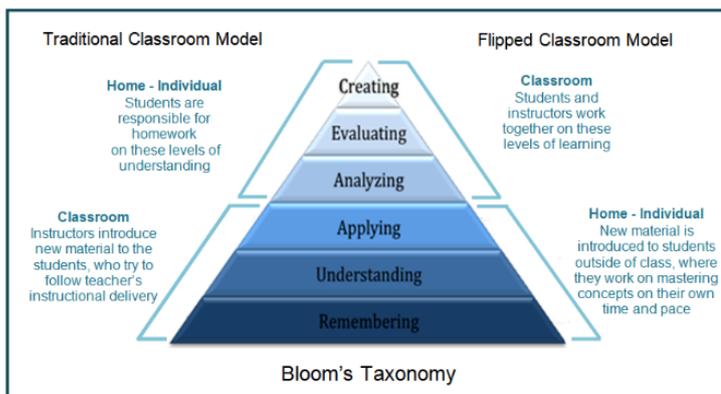


FIGURE 1: Lopes and Soares provides a clear connection between traditional and flipped classroom to the Bloom's taxonomy [5]

**Student motivation** A final reflection to make upon this teaching situation is what motivates students to attend webinars. In the two courses that I have had, 20-30 students participated in each webinar. A colleague of mine tried to do something similar, but only one person showed up for the first session, after which my colleague decided not to have webinars in that course. I have no reason to believe the reason is personal. I think that it has to do with student motivation.

One of six C's, presented by Turner and Paris that characterize a motivating learning environment is *Collaboration* [8, 9]. In the COVID-19 pandemic, webinars offer a rare opportunity to meet, discuss, and learn from peers. Even though this collaborative learning should increase student motivation, it might be discouraging to attend a webinar where you have to talk to strangers about things you are not yet comfortable with. The students in my courses knew each other from before while my colleague's students did not, which might be a crucial difference. It could also be that the different student groups have different cultures of individualistic or collaborative work.

Another possibility for the different attendance rates could be that we marketed the webinars in different ways. Hence the students' expectations of the webinars might differ. It has been shown that a student's view and expectations of online learning have a high impact on the academic performance [10]. So it might simply be that if the students have high expectations of a teaching activity they want to attend, if not, they choose to spend that time on other things instead. If this is the case, we should consider how our courses' teaching and learning activities are introduced to the students.

## Conclusions

Webinars are a terrific teaching activity that has, except for student appreciation, educational theory support for its benefits. Webinars encourage active learning, give aid for understanding topics in the higher taxonomy levels, and contribute to a motivating learning environment.

To further improve webinars, I would like to focus more on guiding students to discuss the content in the higher taxonomy levels. Today, I sometimes feel like I give too many answers and talk too much. However, since everything is online, it is hard to get a feeling for when the students have understood and when more explanation is needed. One concrete suggestion is to open the question for other students to answer before I start to talk. When the pandemic is over, I hope that I will be able to improve the interaction within the group and avoid some of the cumbersome parts of having discussions online by bringing the webinars into the classroom.

## Conversation with Critical Friend

My critical friend is a professor who has tremendous teaching experience. We discussed what webinars bring to a course that lectures and exercises don't and how webinars can be implemented as a classroom activity. He said webinars are a brilliant and, for him, novel teaching activity that I should continue doing. I bring a good feeling, a lot of new energy, and many ideas for the future from this discussion!

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