

20 Tips for Online Teaching of Medical Ethics

Fistein, Dunn, Ekberg and Vivekananda-Schmidt (2020)

A key element of facilitating learning in medical ethics and law is promoting discussion. It may be perceived that the natural way forward to achieve this is often through small group dialogue or interactions. However, the lockdown due to the pandemic has necessitated changes to how teaching and assessment is implemented; with a move to online delivery. This short paper aims to provide teachers of medical ethics and law with tips on how to maximise quality and effectiveness of this online medical ethics and law teaching. The tips are organised into four subsections of what to consider to make the most of online sessions, maintaining wellbeing, effective use of breakout rooms and tips for asynchronous teaching.

Making the most of your online Sessions

1. A face to face session almost always requires appropriate adaptation for online delivery. For example, a 50 minute lecture on the four principles may need to be broken into bite size chunks as overview of theory, example cases, application in day to day context and further reading/activities. If left as a monologue delivery of 50 minute lecture it may stress listener's attention span.
2. Check the full functionalities that your Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) offers prior to delivery so you know what is on offering to deliver your session.
3. You maybe able to supplement the limitations of your VLE by adding external apps, e.g., Kahoot for adding quizzes
4. Apply flipped classroom principles and encourage pre-reading and immersion prior to the session.
5. Encourage students to post questions in advance through email or a shared document. These can then be used to facilitate discussions organised into themes.
6. An alternative to tips 4 and 5 is to set the students a pre-reading task from a journal or book chapter, accompanied by a set of specific questions. Refer to these in the session, and ask students to post their answers in a live chat.
7. Design your session with multiple methods and offerings (presentations, videos or quizzes) to appeal to a diverse learner group.
8. Use case studies from the news or social media; there is plenty right now with all the coronavirus debates.

Being Mindful of attention spans and wellbeing

9. Set the ground rules and etiquette at the start. Do you want everyone to be able to see each other at the start or throughout the session? Would you like your audience to mute their microphones for better sound quality? Are you happy with less video so delivery is not interrupted if there is a drop in internet speed?

10. Use shorter sessions. Concentration spans are shorter on-line than when in a room together where you can offer coffee breaks so participants can move around, get a drink have a comfort break etc. Therefore, encourage participants to take a break even whilst online.

Effective Use of Online break-out rooms

11. Use 'break-out rooms' to enable students to discuss issues/cases in small groups, and practice justifying their positions to each other.
12. Groups of about seven work best - too big and people feel they can just watch, too small and the activity fails if someone has connection problems.
13. Students may feel a little lost when discussing issues/cases without a facilitator to guide them - this activity probably works best for experienced students who have participated in facilitated discussions earlier in the course.
14. Give clear instructions (spend 10 minutes discussing this case, focussing on the following questions...) and ground rules (everyone must contribute something and everyone must be given a chance to contribute).
15. If your platform doesn't enable break-out rooms, you can give students material to discuss and ask them to collaborate via whichever platform they use to keep in touch with friends (WhatsApp etc) - as long as you are not asking them to discuss real cases! Alternatively or in addition to this, encourage students to contribute to the open chat function.

Some tips on asynchronous teaching (virtual lecture content)

16. Attend to how the presentation of virtual content on VLEs is situated - emphasis on 'easy-to-navigate' content for students accessing what are typically non-user-friendly webpages
17. Provide a mix of content; e.g., do not just convey knowledge on slides, also potentially make use of audio and video clips, cartoons, illustrations to provoke reflection and engagement.
18. Break up delivery of lecture into bite-size, manageable chunks of about ten minutes (think of it as sections or subsections)
19. Make use of novel techniques to promote two-way engagement and skill development
 - a. Use 'strategic pauses' to enable students to answer questions posed to them; cases presented for analysis
 - b. Model reasoning skills as well as conveying key knowledge: case analysis, deconstructing arguments, presenting counter-arguments, applying legal and ethical principles to context, 'talking heads' using more than one tutor to reason through an ethical problem.
20. Make curriculum time for 'virtual office hours' for 1-1 discussion of questions or uncertainties that students have after watching the materials (and that they cannot ask 'live' as would be possible in a normal lecture or seminar).

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