

The Virtual OLLI Experience – A Teacher’s Perspective from Instructor Charlie Chadwick

What is it like to teach an OLLI class virtually rather than to take one as a student? Like many I was wary of going on-line to teach this semester. Let me telegraph my message: it has been a great experience.

The details? Let me start with how to convert from five in-person sessions of 90 minutes to a virtual class session of 60 minutes. I wound up with eight 1-hour sessions. Why? I was scheduled to teach a class on Shakespeare’s play *Measure for Measure*. I did not want to alter the approach to the study (view the play, lecture material, lots of interactive class discussion) or to cut content. So, keeping the course intact was the decision. This required some adjustment in the lesson organization so that each 1-hour session would make sense by itself. I wound up with seven sessions with the seventh being over 80 minutes long. Instead of cutting 20+ minutes of material, I went in the other direction. I split the seventh session into two sessions, and I took the opportunity to add new discussion elements to sessions 7 and 8. In other words, I added content!

And that brings me to discussion via Zoom. This has been the most pleasant surprise of the whole experience. I need to be clear about one thing. The number of people matters. I have 12 windows open on my computer screen to monitor. I think 12 to 15 participants is ideal for interactive discussion. I don’t use the “Chat” function at all, although if you’re going to do discussion with 20 or 25 people, I think it would be necessary. I sent an email to all the registered students two weeks before class and discussion was one of the things on which I went into detail. I told the students that I wanted to try to handle the discussion in a way as much like an in-person classroom as possible. This is what I told them:

- Just raise your hand (physically, not electronically) and I can call on you and even give you a place in line (“Let’s hear from Bob, then Mary, then Paul”).
- Unmute yourselves as appropriate during discussion. If I have not seen your raised hand and start to move on, please unmute and call that to my attention.
- I also have no problem with you politely cross-questioning each other directly or sharing a different opinion spontaneously. It’s my job to make sure that no one gets skipped over when that happens.
- In short, I’d like this to be as natural as it would be if we were together in person. I’m guessing we will all learn as we go. And common courtesy will work wonders.

This approach worked better than I could have hoped. We have run over the 60 minutes more than once because of the spirited discussion – and no one left early. To my surprise, discussion has been better than some of the in-person classes I have previously taught for OLLI.

How about the technology? Yes, it took some effort to get comfortable with it as a teacher. But the OLLI staff (particularly Tay and Steve) went far beyond the call of duty to make sure the instructors were comfortable using Zoom. In my case, that meant (among other things) ensuring that I could share a DVD of the play during class. A lot of trial runs told me what the issues were and how I could handle them. Steve and Tay helped me solve the problem of an unreliable internet connection at home. I could have

done it from home, but the video performance would have been less than ideal. I used a conference room with an excellent high-speed internet connection at the new OLLI offices. (The coffee shop in the lobby was a bonus.)

The class participants have been a delight, even helping each other get comfortable with being on Zoom. I'm sure that other OLLI teachers have variations on my story since we all teach differently. If you've been reluctant to offer a course as a teacher because of the virtual environment, I urge you to contact the OLLI staff and talk about it. They can help in many ways. And if you have held back on taking a virtual course, it's easier than you might think – and OLLI offers a lot of help to you as well.

I can't wait to get back in a classroom, but until then, the virtual OLLI experience shouldn't be missed!

Charlie Chadwick