

Intimate, intimidating or interminable? Lecture chat culture v live Q&A

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Holding lectures online caused a shift away from the raising of hands in lecture theatres, to widespread use of text-based chat facilities, altering the nature of instructor-student interaction. While students no longer need to wait with their hand in the air, their names are visible alongside their comments and chat facilities don't easily replicate the organic conversation associated with the in-person interaction at the end of traditional, offline lectures. In this paper we examine this important shift in instructor-student communication by analysing the chat content from two different chat facilities used in large, introductory economics lectures. The first is the chat window within the lecture platform (Zoom) itself and the second is a parallel, live Q&A option (through EdStem) with the option for students to remain anonymous to their peers. Large numbers of participants readily used the Zoom chat, but a subset of students used the live Q&A alternative to ask questions which they were unwilling to ask in Zoom, particularly in busy lectures when the chat was fast-moving.

Online lectures held through Zoom meetings allowed students to easily interact with both instructors and peers through the standard chat facility, without leaving the application. From the beginning of the year, students readily used this for phatic expressions, administrative questions, simple clarification questions and short responses to oral questions from instructors. As the year progresses, the proportion of higher-level questions and comments which build on the lecture material increases, but some students prefer to keep to phatic expressions and responses to oral questions. There are many possible reasons for this: students may not have the confidence to pose more complicated questions, they may find it difficult to organise their thoughts while following a busy chat, or they may simply find it difficult to type complicated questions and statements fast enough.

To address some of these concerns, in the second of the two terms, students were given the option to ask questions through a text-based 'Live Q&A' run simultaneously with the Zoom lecture. Live Q&A features are increasingly available on discussion applications used in education settings such as Piazza and Slack. For these courses, the Live Q&A ran through the course's discussion board, EdStem, using the megathread ability. In contrast to standard discussion board use where students might create a separate item for each question or comment, the Live Q&A megathread creates a single page (thread) where students and instructors can post comments and questions throughout the lecture. Students and instructors can then use a 'reply' button to create a sub-thread directly under the question asked, and not simply at the bottom of the chat as it would appear in Zoom. Although it requires monitoring of a page outside the lecture platform, the key advantages for the instructor over the Zoom chat is that the instructor can keep track of which comments have been addressed using a 'resolved' mark. This is especially important in large, busy, online

lectures where questions might otherwise be easily missed. Unlike the zoom chat, both students and instructors can also more easily write in mathematics, paste diagrams or use code snippets. A key feature for students is the ability to appear anonymous to their peers when posting a question or comment.

Since the Zoom chat was always available to students, using the Live Q&A feature was entirely optional. Students did not opt to use the Live Q&A in all lectures, but did make use of it in lectures where the Zoom chat was very busy. Despite this, the Live Q&A cannot simply be considered an overflow platform for Zoom conversation. Many students opted to use both forms of chat communication, but the type of question or comment differed. Questions and comments in the Live Q&A were predominantly longer and went beyond simple clarification, building on the lecture material and furthering the discussion. Not all students took advantage of the opportunity to be anonymous to their peers in the Live Q&A. Those who kept their names visible, asked building questions in both Zoom and the Live Q&A, although the Live Q&A items were longer. However, for those students who chose to be anonymous in the Live Q&A, the nature of the comments and questions was very different. These students used the Zoom chat for short responses or phatic expressions only. By contrast, their comments and questions in the Live Q&A were much longer, building questions that they did not ask in any lectures in Zoom.

Although it is unclear whether this is because it is difficult to engage in busy Zoom chat, or because they value the anonymity, the Live Q&A offers a subset of students a means to more meaningfully engage with the lecture when they might not be otherwise able to do so. If the Live Q&A can be run in parallel and at low-cost by using features on existing discussion boards, then this offers a simple way to increase the accessibility and inclusivity of the lecture to a greater number of students. Such considerations might be particularly important when a large percentage of the course's teaching is online or where cohorts are large and students are new to the given education setting.