

Communicating across Time Zones:

Some practical tips for connecting with students in different locations around the world

VU buildings may be partly closed, but learning has not stopped. One of the challenges faculties are currently facing is teaching students across multiple time zones. Our international student community, or VU students studying abroad, are logging on across the world to continue their studies. The difficulty collaborating across time zones is an issue the International Office hears a lot amongst faculty and students, both within VU as within our international network of partner universities. Depending on the geographical location of our students, time zone differences imply that some students will need to follow lectures or join interactive group sessions during night or early mornings. Questions also arise about alternative options to network, now that on-campus group work is less or not available. The assumption amongst our student population is that online or distance learning group work is inferior to live education, because of the lack of personal interaction students have in distant classroom settings. We also see some time or date related confusion when information on classes or deadlines for assignments is shared.

As we move to mainly remote teaching for at least the first two periods, it is important that sufficient interactive participation can be achieved for all, regardless the location or time zone of our students. With such scattered cohorts logging on from around the world, relying only on live – or synchronous – teaching events is not an option. Providing asynchronous activities, where staff and students participate when and from where they can, reduces the impact of time zone differences and will enhance the community feeling which is so much needed, especially in time of crisis.

Where in the world are your students tuning in from? And what implications does this have for revising your sessions for remote delivery? Herewith some practical tips for managing and supporting student participation when students are unable to attend live lectures because of time differences.

SOME PRACTICAL TIPS:

- 1. Ask for your student's time zones:** conduct initial research to determine where all of your students will be located. Understanding how many of your students are more than one, two, five or even more hours ahead of, or behind Central European Summer Time (CEST) may help with planning your approaches to teaching and student support.
- 2. Use an international time conversion chart:** you can make a chart specifically based on the location of your students on your canvas page. This allows all students to review how to convert the class standard time into that of the student's regional time. In addition, it will raise awareness among other students of the time zone differences as well. A link to an online source that contains an international time and date converter might also be an option (e.g.

<http://www.timezoneconverter.com/cgi-bin/tzref.tzc.>

- 3. Avoid using relative chronological terms:** today, yesterday or tomorrow might create confusion amongst students in different time zones. The requirement to avoid using these terms should also be communicated to your students. It will result in a more effective transmission of information among all parties involved in an online exchange.
- 4. Prevent time or date related confusion:** do not forget to link the presentation of all date-related information to the standard time used in the course (Central European Summer Time (CEST)). In addition, use a 24-clock structure which is widely accepted internationally, and avoids confusion related to determining whether a representation such as 9:00 is a morning or an evening time. Writing out the month of all dates used, regardless of the structure one uses, will prevent confusion related to different date structures.
- 5. Develop a detailed schedule:** give students enough time to make all necessary time and date conversions well in advance. Send around timely (e.g. weekly) reminders to prompt students to check their schedules and if the event times are noted correctly in their own time zone.
- 6. Pre-recording lectures and seminars:** lectures can be pre-recorded using the extra facilities made available at VU and can be uploaded in Canvas before release. Pre-recording will leave you with more time to interact with your students and some stress release during active teaching sessions.
- 7. Record live class sessions:** instructors are encouraged to record their live class sessions for all students to refer to as a resource later. Students unable to participate in real-time will have access to the recordings later. Continuing to hold live classes at the official time will avoid a domino effect with scheduling conflicts. Don't forget to press record before starting any live sessions!
- 8. Repeat or rotate live sessions if not recorded:** arrangements should be made to ensure that some videoconferencing sessions are rotated so they do not unfairly burden members in one specific time zone. Lectures and seminars, for example, can continue as live, synchronous events but should also be repeated for students who are unable to attend. To create equal opportunities for students to experience live interaction, consider varying the times (am/pm) of live seminars so students of differing time zones have the opportunity for synchronous sessions. Even consider early mornings or late afternoons to catch students in time zones with an 8 to 12 hours difference.
- 9. Group projects:** when assigning students to a group project take their home location into account, connecting students with similar time zones with a maximum of 5 hours difference. If for example some students cannot effectively contribute to the group, this might affect teamwork. Collaboration might be difficult and the quality of the group project might suffer.
- 10. Focus on interactive group work:** it exposes students to new ideas and teaches them how to work effectively with mixed teams. You can use the [Mixed Classroom Educational Model](#) for ideas and inspiration. Expand the timeframe for response: when other tools are used for communication, consideration should also be given to the fact that some students

might need some more time to respond and complete their group work when dealing with time differences and related challenges.

11. Instant versus delayed interaction: interaction in education is critical. Instant interaction during online live class sessions is a close approximation of the on-campus classroom. This is not always feasible nor sufficient. Creating sufficient possibilities for a delayed electronic interaction is therefore a must. A delayed response may even contain a more considered and qualitative interaction, both from student and staff perspective. Use the available Canvas applications to organize delayed response between peers and between teacher and student. It will give students a platform to interact although they may not be available at the time to respond when the message comes in.

12. Use discussion forums: text-based discussion activities can also provide rich learning opportunities and distant or delayed interaction. They are often simple to set up. Discussion forums can be used for icebreaker activities, Q&A conversations and group or individual active learning tasks and will provide a platform for peers to connect. See the Mixed Classroom Educational Model in an [online setting](#) for more tips and inspiration.

[Further information and resources](#)

On the VU Mixed Classroom Educational Model:

www.vu.nl/mixedclassroom

On online education:

www.vu.nl/online-education

Sources:

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