

One of our Virtual Ruck facilitators, **PJ Flynn, Maryland '08**, is a professor at NC State University. Like many others, he had to transition from in-person to online courses this past semester and, needless to say, learned a lot from this experience. Similar to Virtual Ruck, his teaching philosophy rests heavy on discussion and interaction which can be difficult to achieve in an online environment. Below are some of the tools and techniques he used to help increase the engagement level with students:

Breakout rooms

Zoom has a breakout room feature where the host can send all attendees to smaller chat rooms. There is a lot of flexibility here for group sizes and pairing. You can set up the room assignments ahead of time or use random assignment during the call. I opted for both at different times. I used these groups for smaller discussions where I would give the students a question to discuss and then ask them to report back to the group. I always gave them much more time than they needed to answer the question and encouraged them to socialize. A huge benefit of Ruck is networking and this can help to virtually fill that need.

Warm and cold calls

Building off of breakout rooms, a colleague told me about warm calls. Specifically, this describes giving individuals or groups notice that they will have to answer a question/solve a problem and then report back to the group. Conversely, this colleague encouraged letting students know that I'd also use cold calls. This describes simply calling on students at random to answer questions. I found that cold calls worked well for extroverts but generally were really rough for introverts. However, they did keep the students on their toes. Warm calls were always successful following breakout rooms but more extroverted students tended to be the group speakers.

Communication

Moving my courses online required more frequent and proactive communication about assignments, due dates, etc. My students reported that this increase in communication and formal structure was valuable. Apparently many other classes moved away from formalized structures which was challenging for students. Using a formal structure will likely be even more important in the summer.

Energy

Bringing positive energy and a smile was really important for my students. There was (and still is) so much uncertainty in the world so I tried to always be energetic and positive while also being approachable. The students found this engaging.

Checking in

I always ask students for feedback on an ongoing basis. This is usually a source of successful adaptation. However, from my course evals it is clear that there were a few students in one of my classes who let the material get away from them and didn't feel comfortable speaking up about it. I have a good sense of who they were and wish I had personally checked in to see how the course was going. This will be important in virtual Ruck because there are likely to be a few participants who start to fade away as the summer goes on.