



TECHNOLOGY

What I Wish I Knew Before Teaching My First Online Class

An Audio Interview with HBS's Yael Grushka-Cockayne

Guest: Yael Grushka-Cockayne, Visiting Associate Professor at Harvard Business School

Host: Mark Rennella, Editor, Harvard Business Publishing

Mark Rennella: Hello, I'm Mark Rennella, editor at Harvard Business Publishing, and I'm with Yael Grushka-Cockayne, visiting associate professor of business administration at Harvard Business School. I reached out to her a few weeks ago to discuss her course on applied business analytics, but since then, we've had a massive move to teaching online in response to the coronavirus. And as luck would have it, she is also very adept at online teaching. Most notably, she taught a MOOC [massive open online course] on fundamentals of project management and planning that had an enrollment of about 150,000 students. She's also involved with an important project at HBS around online learning.

Yael Grushka-Cockayne: I don't know if you're in the loop with what's going on around here at HBS, but we're slowly training all the faculty to go online. Some people have a lot of experience teaching online and some have less. Those of us with experience have been put in a task force to try and onboard the faculty. I was supposed to do my first training session tomorrow. But one of the other trainers was unwell, so I stepped up to do a session today. I thought it went really well. Like any other teaching online, there were hiccups, but we got through it.

Rennella: And you've been there before?

Grushka-Cockayne: Oh, definitely. Yes.

Rennella: Right. So, tell us about that experience. What did you learn today?

Grushka-Cockayne: It was interesting today, because we had a very diverse group of folks who joined the training session. So, this is like, training people online to do online teaching, right? I had a very useful audience of students. We had people sign up to become students and to play the role of a student. That was super helpful. I also put the faculty in the, what I like to call the driver mode, where they're leading the conversation. I gave them all the hosting Zoom responsibilities to control everything. I think that hands-on type of experience is the most valuable part of it. And I do something similar when I teach



analytics. Even in class, as I think you and I have talked about, I've been using Zoom as a method for students to share their screen. So again, that's them kind of revealing themselves to the students, to the class, and they're the ones leading with their mouse and what they show us on the screen is really what we end up talking about. That, for them, is a really good experience, and I think that's how they learn the most.

Rennella: Oh, great. So, we're talking to a lot of people, hopefully who are making this transition. I'm going back to you, you know, first experiences. What do you wish you had known before teaching your first online course?

Grushka-Cockayne: It's a great question, and I'm trying to remind myself of me, you know, four or five years ago. First, one thing I don't think I fully appreciated is the different types of classes and instruction that you do online. So, in 2015, I recorded a MOOC for Coursera. And I have a course online that is, by and large, asynchronous—meaning folks watch the videos, they do the assessments, they watch the material, they do the reading, but it's mostly self-led. Putting together a course like that is very different than live sessions and having a conversation live, a discussion with 40, 50, 60, 90 people simultaneously. Just recognizing the sheer difference and richness of the medium and knowing that online doesn't only mean one thing, right, I think is really important. It was hard for me to fully grasp the difference, but now that I do, I recognize that it's almost like a different set of skills. Some people can put together a set of amazing videos for the students to watch that are hugely useful and beneficial, and some people can conduct an online discussion. Those aren't necessarily the same type of capability or the same type of engagement. It just means that we as faculty or instructors have to choose. We have to think about what it is we're trying to accomplish and what kind of online instruction would be the best for that.

Rennella: Right, given our own talents or your own talents.

Grushka-Cockayne: Given our talents, given the material, given our students, given the combination of those facets. Even now, teaching analytics for instance, sometimes I'll say, *You know what, we don't have to waste time in class, or I'm not sure that the students will benefit from a discussion, let's just film a video and give them the URL.* So sometimes we'll do that. That's like an online delivery. Sometimes we'll have them do some work on their own online, [and] sometimes it'll be a discussion. So, choosing which parts of the conversation and the content. The pedagogy goes: asynchronous discussion and synchronous, or individual, work. That's important and requires some thinking through.

Rennella: Okay, that's my next question, like, what are a few keys to success in running a class online? So, this assessment of, you know, is it asynchronous? Is it live? That's one of them, right? Any other that come to mind?

Grushka-Cockayne: Live discussions are amazingly powerful online, but they also have some limitations, meaning, it's only going to last an hour and a half. And the conversation online sometimes is a little bit slower paced than it is in the classroom. And my comparison is a very rapid-paced classroom. When I think of online, I have to think very carefully of what it is that I want to use this time for all of us



together to accomplish. One of the keys to success is be thoughtful about your teaching objectives and your teaching plan and make sure that you don't overwhelm yourself with trying to accomplish too much in one session.

Another thing is that, like anything else, it's not going to be perfect. Even classroom instruction has its mishaps. Acknowledging that and not getting overwhelmed by a video that doesn't work or an audio that doesn't work, and knowing how to deal with that and admit to the students, *Yeah, we can try again. Let's keep practicing.* Having that humbleness is always going to be important. But online, I think it's really important because people don't feel totally comfortable and they're not sure how they're going to engage with you. And you want to develop that personal repertoire in a very 2D kind of environment. Talking about those challenges [and] acknowledging that you have them too will make other people who sometimes forget to do something more comfortable.

Rennella: Right, sort of being transparent about whatever problems you're running into. I could see in class, if you wanted to hand out a two-page article and for some reason you left it at the office, you could say, *Oh, I'll make a summary of it. Sorry, I didn't bring it, here it is.* You know, it's the same kind of thing, right?

Grushka-Cockayne: Exactly. I mean, we're all people. We are all humans, and [being] online doesn't make us more invincible. So, making students more comfortable about it and adhering to their sensitivities is always going to be useful.

Rennella: Here's another great transition. I was going to ask, there's so many people making this transition right now abruptly, you know, students and teachers. So, you know, what are some ways that educators, for instance, can support students who are feeling disoriented, either technically or emotionally?

Grushka-Cockayne: Yeah, that's a great question and one that's on my mind to try to overcome and master. I found that having some kind of forum where folks communicate on a regular basis helps. Because we're missing the physical factor of knowing that I'm going to see you in class, things like Slack or Microsoft Teams or other types of team-based communication environments help, because they give you another avenue to reach out to folks. We're going to be together in a discussion, a synchronous session, let's say for about an hour and a half, but it's going to be with a lot of other students, and that might not give us the opportunity to make sure that everybody's okay and to have all these other conversations that we want. Having some other forum to communicate is always going to be helpful. Slack, I think, is a really helpful opportunity.

Also, thinking about schedules a little bit is useful. It's hard to be online for so many hours. Your eyes get tired, your voice gets tired; it's different and you need a break, or you need something else to do. I have the elective course on analytics [where] I'm trying to reimagine a few of the classes, maybe not all, to do something different: to let them work in teams or to let them do some work in different time zones or to change the beaten path. It's not necessarily everybody having to be up and in Zoom or online at 8:30



in the morning, Eastern time. That's not as practical for everybody. So, we have to be thoughtful and creative, and in a way, it gives us new opportunities to break some of those habits that we had around everybody being in a physical classroom at once.

I'm trying to provide opportunities for that to happen. Until now, I didn't necessarily have to plan for it because they were all expected to be here physically. But now that they were basically sent home or to wherever else they felt safe, now we're going to have a bunch more people scattered around the world. So why not take that to our advantage and say, *You know what, instead of showing up at 8:30 tomorrow for class, you make sure that you meet with your team at some given time and work on this assignment.*

Rennella: That's great.

Grushka-Cockayne: Yeah. I think it's going to give us some more flexibility to cater to their comforts. And we'll still learn a lot, but just on a different schedule.

Rennella: Right. So, what are some unambiguous or really clear advantages of online teaching?

Grushka-Cockayne: The first advantage, I think, is kind of related to my previous point, that we don't need them all physically here. We have our students home with their spouses, their parents, their children, wherever they need to be at a moment of challenge like we're faced with today. Even if it weren't an emergency situation like we have right now, if students could not physically take the time, or they had an emergency, or they had to be somewhere that was not Cambridge, Massachusetts, this way of learning enables them to join and not miss anything. I think that's tremendously powerful, and by and large students and learners are very appreciative for the opportunity to get the knowledge.

Second, things get recorded and documented. It's easier to keep log. I can annotate an online conversation very quickly and go back to my notes. I can have breakout rooms in very creative ways and have them discuss among smaller groups. The technology is tremendously rich and allows us to do things that were not naturally doing in our classrooms. Sometimes I like to have my students, as I mentioned, share their own screens. Well, if we're all online, it's just a click of a button and any student in the classroom can share their screen. So, they get into really good habits around that.

Rennella: Yeah, sharing your screen. I mean, I taught a couple decades ago for a while and that's just not in my repertoire at all. It sounds like such a great thing to be able to say, *Hey, what's your project? Let's see it.*

Grushka-Cockayne: Show me your analysis. Let's change your analysis. Show me that. And let's edit it together. This definitely works for analytics, which I teach a lot, but not necessarily only for analytics. I've taught, as I mentioned, my MOOC on Coursera. That's a project management MOOC. I have a course on project management, and I've [often] taught an elective course. Even there, I would have somebody share their project plan and walk us through the ins and outs of their plan. It's super insightful and useful for other folks.



Rennella: Again, thinking about a lot of the teachers who are used to being in the classroom, what things don't work online that people lean on in the classroom?. What things do they have to relearn in a sense when they go online?

Grushka-Cockayne: The whole notion of lecturing is very different online. I think attention span has been shown by many to be short. So, if you're going to lecture and you plan on lecturing, you want to chunk up your lecture into small bits and record them in short instances. The students themselves are likely going to pause and walk away or do something if it's too long. By recording it and having it saved in a recording format, everybody becomes a little bit more conscientious. If I'm in the classroom, I can muddle my words and I'll just correct myself. But if you record it and it comes out wrong, you suddenly get this overwhelming sense of, "Oh, it wasn't perfect." Like, you need to rerecord everything. That sense of being natural, fumbling your words, and doing another take and breaking it into smaller chunks is really important in online delivery.

Rennella: Oh, see, that's not at all obvious, I don't think. I didn't think about that attention span thing at all.

Grushka-Cockayne: If you're going to do an hour and a half of class, you have to make it interactive. There is no way in my mind—and this is only my opinion—that you're going to keep your students' attention for an hour and a half if you're just talking at them.

Rennella: I think that's the case in person as well, but when you were talking about the little chunks of attention, that's something that did not come into mind.

Grushka-Cockayne: Yeah, I agree with you. I'm also a very big skeptic of lecture mode in general. Even in the classroom it's hard for people to keep up. But there, I think with the physical presence of people sitting in your room, you might have a better chance of keeping folks' attention for a little bit longer. It's notoriously hard. I can be here on my phone without you noticing, I can be distracted by something else, I can have something in the back—there's just a lot of different things that go on, even if I'm well behaved, so to speak. So, either make it interactive or break it up and have animation, have a video, have other things for them to keep on Segway-ing through, because we're just not used to single-tasking online. We're so used to multitasking online, but it's very hard to change that habit.

Rennella: It's sort of like the Amazon effect. Everybody's used to multitasking when they're online.

Grushka-Cockayne: Correct.

Rennella: That is another great segue. I was just thinking about what teaching approaches work well online. You were just talking about interactives and having variety—talk to us about that.

Grushka-Cockayne: So again, videos and links out to the web and being spontaneous work really well online, especially in discussion formats. So synchronous classes. I like to have the students talk and have them share something about where they're at. I always like to start off with an icebreaker at the beginning: *what is the temperature where you are at or who's in the coldest location* and all kinds of



jokes like that to get a sense for what people have done to make it to the class. There's a really interesting appreciation when you realize that somebody is on vacation in the Bahamas or somebody is skiing somewhere or just working all day in Germany and they log on at 2 a.m. just to be in the class.

Suddenly you're like, *This is serious, people are really taking their time and waking up in the middle of the night.* So, we must make it useful for all of us. So that's how I like to break the ice.

I tend to cold call often. I do this physically as well. But I also try to bring into the conversation students who I want to make sure are with us. And once you are known for doing that, then they show up for the next class well prepared and ready to go. Zoom, which is a very commonly used tool these days [and which] we use here at HBS, allows you to have what we call breakout rooms. I find them hugely beneficial for the online space because it breaks up the class a little bit and gives us a different dimension. It allows smaller groups to talk amongst themselves and everybody gets a voice.

One really huge difference, possibly the biggest difference between online synchronous sessions and in-class discussions, is the chat feature. Some faculty disable the chat; it can be distracting because we're really doing a few things at once. But I actually love having the chat window there and having folks debate and discuss and post ideas. Once you get used to it, typically the comments are more additive to the class than distracting. People post things that contribute to the main conversation. For instance, in the class discussion, I might say, *Give me an example of a company that has X.* And whoever I call on may have an example in mind or might take a moment to think of it—because examples are hard to bring to mind immediately. But the moment a fellow classmate types in something, it triggers a whole waterfall of ideas. It really allows them to share their thought processes and to really have that creativity and burst of ideas and just float it out there pretty quickly.

Rennella: Sort of break the ice or get rid of the inertia with one suggestion. Then everybody can play on that.

Grushka-Cockayne: And it's a *Wisdom of Crowds* thing. The more people type and the more ideas you have chiming in, the more fruitful the conversation can get. So, the chat feature can be really rewarding that way. I monitor it, meaning, I always have it open next to me. If I see somebody typing that hasn't raised their hand or join the conversation in other forms, I might cold call them and say, *Hey, you've just typed in the chat. Share with all of us what it is that you typed in so we can all benefit.* Not everyone can multitask that readily, so we try to strengthen some ideas that come out of the chat and we can talk about them in the larger forum. The chats get saved, so we can also post them and share them later. But again, it's a narrative that complements the class, and in a physical presence we don't have that—there, no side conversations, right?

Rennella: You can always get a great idea and bring it up in the next class.

Grushka-Cockayne: Yeah, you could, and people do sometimes. But it's more linear. And it's not done in parallel, which is just different.



Rennella: Using chat to spark ideas sounds like one answer to this next question I have, which is how do you engage students who might not be comfortable in an online environment. That obviously might be one way. What are some other ways you do that?

Grushka-Cockayne: Yeah. That's exactly right, what you just said. The chat is also a place where some folks, who don't immediately raise their hand or speak up, will prefer to chat, and we can do that.

Sometimes, and think I mentioned this, I have some folks share their screen. I push them a little bit more to be that leader of the conversation. And if they know in advance that they're going to do that, then they can practice and get ready, so it's not that I'm surprising them. I think that helps them get comfortable as well. The small breakout rooms allow them to do that, too. You can also do surveys and polls online. Those are the main ways in which you can get students that are uncomfortable to join. It typically takes one or two times, but eventually people get more comfortable with it.

Rennella: If they're quiet, for instance, it's not a problem online, in a way, because you can type in your idea. You don't have to shout it out or anything like that.

Grushka-Cockayne: That's true, but I'll cold call. I'll come into class with a list of people who didn't speak last time, and I'll go to them and ask them to join the conversation more proactively.

Rennella: Gotcha. I think you made an allusion to this earlier about making sure that you do other things during the day. That things are tiring, sometimes, online. I'm just thinking about time management tips for teachers and scheduling their day around teaching online so they don't get fatigued, or so they are energetic when they come to the online environment.

Grushka-Cockayne: I found that online teaching, especially synchronous sessions—and I suspect it's the same for lecturing—but I teach discussion synchronous sessions where all 100 students are online, and I have them chime in with their perspectives. I find it maybe not as physically demanding as in the classroom, but not far off. More than I think people realize. It still requires energy levels on my part to deliver the class. I'm concentrating on two or three screens at once and I have a lot of things going. It's a lot of attention to multiple parts and a lot of energy spent on talking to a lot of people.

Don't ignore or neglect your own energy levels and what's required from us as faculty. It's not that I can do a typical day of work and then tag on an online session. If I do too much of that, it's tiring. I like to give myself an hour or two before class—sometimes I go to the gym or disconnect in some way or I come back fresh and have some free time before the class to get in the zone and get into the mood.

Rennella: Are you saying that sometimes people might consider, here I am with the screen? I know what that's like; that's pretty easy. No big deal. Is that what you're saying?

Grushka-Cockayne: Yeah, it's not like just being in your office. While I don't have to walk over to the physical classroom, I still need to be here and deliver and be on, so to speak. And it's not just another meeting in your office, it still requires teaching energies that you would need for other environments. And so just plan for that. I have a little bit of a drink. I have my snacks. I can prepare things, so I have



them here. Actually, that's an advantage. You know, I would never snack when going into a classroom. I sometimes come in with a cup of coffee. But here, there's opportunities. I'm sitting, not all people sit down. I tend to sit down. Some people stand up in their offices when they're teaching. But finding ways to manage your energy and keep yourself going are as important in the online space as they were in a physical space.

Rennella: Well, let's wrap up with a question that I'm sure people worry about, which is academic honesty, in this environment where you're maybe not as present with the students all the time, and who knows where they're getting their information from, or how they're producing their work.

Grushka-Cockayne: That's a great question. I like to give the students the benefit of the doubt. Maybe I'm wishful thinking here, but I think if you get the students to talk about what they did and to talk about their work, it's very hard for them to fake it. In my analytics course, I have forecasting competitions. They have to create predictions and we have competitions and the winners win a prize. They are supposed to work as teams, and in a world where you can get code everywhere, who knows where they can find it.

What they know is that I'm going to ask them to describe their model. And then I'm going to ask them to [explain] why they chose to model things in a certain way, or what kind of experiments they ran. And once you ask them to talk about something, it's very hard to fake it. If they didn't do the work, it would be obvious. It's almost like an oral exam has some real benefits that we forget over the years because we're so used to giving handwritten exams. We forget that if you just have a dialogue with somebody, you know if they did not put in the work.

Rennella: That's very good. And that brings back the human element into this online environment. Right. There is a lot of humanity involved here. We're not forgetting that.

Grushka-Cockayne: Exactly right. My sense is that that really helps. Even in group presentations, I have them present as a team, and I have different people answering questions, because you hear them talk about it and articulate their thought process and you very quickly understand what kind of effort they put into it.