**Question of the week: this is a new feature on my website, where I try to answer questions posed to me by colleagues about current issues in learning, teaching and particularly assessment in higher education**

Q. Hi Sally  
Sorry to bother you, but I’m seeking your expert opinion. I teach a course to 150 students, which is usually done in the normal classroom lecture style. For the purposes of online teaching, I was thinking of shortening the syllabus slightly, and replacing my 50-minute face to face lectures with two 20-minute lectures, that are to be uploaded online. It would still remain a lecture type course, because of the numbers. Would this work?  
Thanks, (name supplied)

Ah. I can see this would work really well as I believe that 20 min online sessions are much more productive than 50 or 60 minute sessions, which students are less likely to sit through while completely paying attention. I know this because I am doing a Futurelearn course on the Book of Kells as part of my lockdown learning, and I know my attention wanders if the sessions are too long (these are just right at about 5 mins which is right for a leisure course).

But I would want to ask you a few questions:

1. In a live lecture theatre, you would normally use eye contact, Q & A and other means, I would imagine, to ensure that you are bringing your class along with you. What would you do within those 20 minute slots to emulate this?
2. Lots of people encourage active learning within lectures by setting little problems, posing questions for individuals and pairs, giving them tasks to do, including worked examples and vignettes and maybe showing short videos for illustrative purposes. How would you encourage active learning in your 20 minute videos?
3. Often in traditional lectures there are chances for students to ask you questions at intervals about aspects they don't understand. How will you build in opportunities for this in virtual form? To some extent this will depend on whether you are delivering the sessions synchronously i.e. expecting them all to participate with you at the same set times, whereby they could ask you questions live using Twitter, the text box in Zoom or whatever, so you can see them and respond. But if your sessions are designed to be used asynchronously, you might need to think about other means to enable this e.g. dialogue opportunities on the course webpages and/or FAQs for students to consult.
4. Quite often at the start of a 50 minute lecture, lecturers spend 5 mins or so setting the scene, linking this lecture to the previous one and signposting the content of the session, then at the end giving an indication of what territory the next session would cover. Would you make it clear that these two 20 minute sessions were effectively parts A and B of the same lecture, or would you aim to do something like that at the start of each individual session?
5. Often in flagging up the next session, lecturers will tell students what they should do in the way of advance reading or other tasks before the next lecture. Would you still have expectations of preparation work each time before the students tackle the next video, or would you make it equivalent to your longer slots by just setting them individual study tasks every other session (this would work if you labelled the two halves A and B).

In terms of shortening the sessions overall, there is no problem with you doing that if you are still ensuring you are helping students to achieve the course learning outcomes. If you think your Quality Assurance colleagues and indeed the students themselves might feel there was a diminution of content due to the shorter session length and you were worried about this, you could replace the ‘lost’ ten minutes by a 'flipped' task such as additional reading etc.

I hope these comments are useful: let me know how you get on.