

Higher Learning

The benefits of teaching bridge online

By Chip Dombrowski

When in-person bridge was shut down last year, bridge teachers were forced to find ways to bring their teaching programs online. That's been a very good thing, for both teachers and students, according to teacher Silvana Morici. Online teaching isn't a substitute for live teaching, she says – it's a far superior way to teach bridge, and as a result, students are learning much faster in the online environment.

Morici owns the Sagamore Bridge Club in Syosset NY, which has been operating online, in conjunction with several other large clubs, as Alliance Bridge Club, the largest virtual club, which runs 11 games a day – more during special games weeks. In addition to all of the directing she does, Morici teaches 15 group classes and five private classes a week. She also served on the Future of Online Bridge Task Force last year and led its focus on teaching.

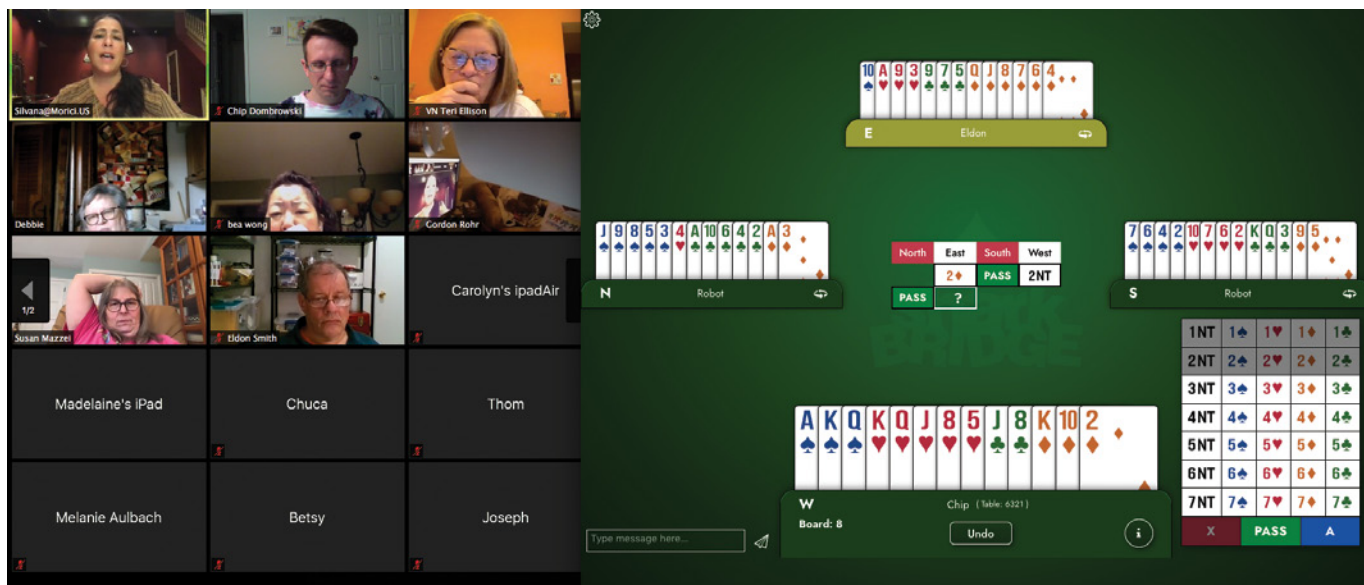
There's a simple reason why online teaching is better for bridge, Morici explains. In beginning bridge, auctions are uncontested. In a club setting, there are four students at each table. On any hand, two of them are passing throughout the bidding. If the focus is on bidding, half the class is sidelined

the entire time. If the focus is on declarer play, three people are sidelined.

"In an online platform, I can put everyone in the two active seats for the bidding – so everyone is getting a double try at whatever we're practicing," Morici says. "If we're playing a hand, if I'm not interested in practicing defense, I can put everyone in the declarer's seat."

If there's time for eight boards in a typical class, then in a live classroom, each student will get to be opener twice, responder twice and declarer twice. Online, they can open four times, respond four times and declare eight times.

Morici uses the Shark Bridge teaching console, which has been adopted as the standard platform for online teaching by the ACBL's online teacher certification program. As part of her work on the task force, Morici researched platforms to find what worked best. Shark Bridge was the clear favorite, because of all the features it offered, including the capability to swap students into different seats after the auction so everyone can be declarer. It also allows the teacher to swap cards from one hand to another, or to hide the auction or hide



the dummy if the teacher wants to focus attention elsewhere.

Shark Bridge was developed by Milen Milkovski and Plamen Panaytov, a pair of Bulgarian immigrants in Canada, to compete in robot championships, winning the World Computer Bridge Championship in 2011 and 2014. They worked closely with Morici and Adam Parrish in developing their teaching console.

The interface is simple from a student's perspective. Morici begins with a lesson on Zoom, screen-sharing her notes. Then, when it's time to start practicing, she puts a link in the chat which instantly takes you into Shark. A prompt asks you to enter a nickname and your partner's if you want to be matched with someone.

While frequency of practice is the main advantage of teaching online, Morici has found several others. The ability to review the playback and show what should be done is important. "I can say, 'Let me show you how I would have done this,'" Morici explains. "For people who need a visual, there's so much of an advantage."

Additionally, the online platform allows the teacher to see what every student is doing. "In a live setting, you can walk around the room, but you can't watch 13 tricks at five tables," Morici says. "Online, I can watch 13 tricks at 20 tables. I can see every mistake."

Morici cites a lesson on defensive signaling as an example of why this is important. It used to be that she would wait until students played the hand and then ask them whether they set the contract, congratulating them if they did, without knowing whether they applied the lesson or if the declarer went down for some other reason. "The playback and review is critical to being a great teacher," she says.

These benefits are having a real impact on the pace of students' progress, Morici says. After teaching beginners from scratch for 12 years, Morici knows how far she can get a group of them in 12 weeks. Because they're progressing so much faster, she's able to include the material from a second five-week class in the initial 12 weeks.

Morici wants to see these benefits going to bridge students far beyond her classroom, so she has been training other teachers on how to use the Shark Bridge teaching console. Lynn Chapin of the Jersey Bridge Club liked it so much that she got set up to use it the same day she saw Morici's demonstration in July.

"This thing is amazing," Chapin says. "You can activate



Silvana Morici

robots at all tables and set the level of the bots to match your students. Changing a hand to demonstrate how you might handle a slightly different layout is easy, on the fly, and can be applied to all student tables with one click. There's so much more!"

After Henry Meguid, president of the American Bridge Teachers' Association, attended a demonstration by Morici, he arranged for her to give a presentation to the ABTA. A video of it is available to ABTA members on its website,

abtahome.com. Morici also offers a Shark tutorial for teachers monthly, with registration at bestbridgelessons.com.

The ACBL online teacher certification program requires teachers to be proficient on Shark (and Zoom) before taking the certification class. But many teachers wanting to set up an online classroom don't know how to use it, or any other platform. At recent ACBL/ABTA teacher roundtables, the most common question has been, "How can I teach online?" Meguid says. "There's a learning curve, not just for students, but for teachers as well."

The kind of preparation a teacher needs to do is different for an online class, Chapin says. "It's less work this way, actually, but you need to be more computer proficient." She finds students' progress more varied, noting some are more easily distracted at home, and misses seeing the "lightbulb moments" in a live classroom.

While Meguid uses Shark primarily in his online teaching, he likes to keep abreast of other platforms – RealBridge, Vu-Bridge, EasyBridge, BBO – and occasionally use another one if it seems suited to the lesson. All of them are in development and constantly adding new features. "Shark still has the edge," he says, but cautions that platform isn't everything. "There are certain practices that transcend the platform. I like the teacher to have a big-picture view of how to be an engaging teacher online."

Meguid says his students, too, appreciate being able to play all the lesson hands in Shark, and he likes the flexibility it offers.

"But the best thing about this platform," Chapin says, "is that although it's working just fine, the developers continue to listen to the teachers and make new features available to us as we go."

Morici likes it so much she can't imagine teaching without it. "I imagine when I go back to live teaching, I would bring Shark with me," she says. "I would hand out tablets."

Meguid agrees that the advantages of teaching online will remain after the virus that made it necessary goes away. "Teaching online is terrific," he says. "It's here to stay." 🎧