

Simple Tips for Engaging Students in Zoom

Posted By *Linda M. Boland and Claire Howell Major* On January 11, 2021 @ 5:01 am In COVID-19, Teaching Strategies and Techniques | [No Comments](#)

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, relatively few instructors had used web-based conferencing for teaching and learning. With the shift in the spring of 2020, many instructors suddenly found themselves teaching online courses, and many others found themselves teaching onsite with some students using videoconferencing to attend remotely. Having used videoconferencing for both fully online and mixed-format courses ourselves, we have found several ways to use videoconferencing tools, such as Zoom, to promote student engagement and inclusive teaching. Our approaches are flexible enough to accommodate small and large classes and a variety of educational levels and disciplines.

1. Greet each student by name as they enter the Zoom space.

Say their names to give you a chance to welcome them and to allow you to check whether they can hear and see you and vice versa. It's a built-in sound and image check.

Consider opening up the room for some social interaction before class starts (~10 minutes before class time) and encourage students to chat with each other. This approach simulates the informal atmosphere of walking into to class and getting ready for classwork.

2. Begin with an activity.

Get students thinking and set the tone for participation by asking them to do something. This approach serves as a way for students to connect and opens the doors to more interaction as the class continues.

You can approach this activity in many different ways. For example, you might use a short question and ask students to respond in the chat or ask them a question on a poll. Or you might start with small groups in breakout rooms and give the students a question to work on together.

3. Break up any lectures with short questions or polls (this applies to other modes of teaching too, but it is critical to online engagement).

About every 10–15 minutes, add a poll or a question in the chat or ask students for an emoji or a thumbs up to vote on something to engage them. This approach helps to focus attention; human attention span, especially on Zoom, is limited.

Don't just tell them, but explain something and then ask students to solve a problem, make a prediction, or identify a difference between two concepts or approaches. You could also work a sample or show them a strategy and then ask them to use it. Another approach is to prompt them with an image or graph and ask a question about it.

4. Have a strategy for calling on students and explain it to students; if you change your process mid-course, explain that too.

If you intend to call on students to answer questions, plan for how to do this inclusively, and also allow processing time. Ask them to write answers on paper before sharing verbally or in the chat. This approach provides students with time to compose their thoughts and to give better responses.

To further enhance their thinking time, when you ask them to type in the chat box, also ask them to *not* hit “enter” until you ask everyone to do so. That way, each student can type without interference from the other responses and then everyone will see all of the responses at once when you ask them to hit enter at the same time (“one, two, three, go”).

then consider using something that allows them to submit anonymous responses, such as a Google Doc, [Jamboard](#) [1], or [Padlet](#) [2] activity.

5. Have a strategy for students to ask questions of you or their classmates.

Explain to students how you want them to signal that they have a question for you. Providing them direction helps reduce confusion and can actually encourage more questions by eliminating a barrier to participation.

Consider using the nonverbal feedback tools in Zoom, the chat, or verbal responses when unmuted.

If you find it distracting to look for hands raised, then consider a rotating role in which a student can help you identify who has a question so that you can call on them to engage with you and the class. If you miss seeing their hand raised, they may not persist, and you will have missed an opportunity to clarify their understanding.

Consider a way to let students ask questions anonymously or tell them to message you questions privately in the chat; this approach allows students to ask questions without fearing embarrassment.

Ask students to evaluate how student involvement is working from time to time, and adjust your approach if they offer suggestions that may help them engage to ask and answer questions.

6. Be intentional about the size of any breakout rooms.

Set a specific size for the breakout room, and determine that with intentionality in advance.

Breakout rooms can be unwieldy when too many people are in a group. Keeping the size small can help to ensure engagement and participation.

Typically, you’ll want a breakout room of no more than five students.

Consider breakout rooms of two students only for a think-pair-share type of activity.

7. Provide a specific task, a time frame for the task, and a plan for reporting out to the larger group whenever you use breakout rooms.

Use breakouts with care and make sure you have a good reason or learning goal for using them. You can eliminate common problems with breakout rooms, including that students in the

breakout room sometimes don't know exactly what they should be doing or what product is expected of them and that they don't have enough time for complex tasks.

Let students know if you plan to join any of the breakout room sessions and what you will be doing when you join; also convey whether students can ask you to join their room if they have questions.

Remember that breakout room tasks seem to take more time than if students were working together at a shared table in a classroom. If the task has multiple parts, break them down in order of priority or consider whether different rooms can take different parts and share them (like a modified jigsaw activity). Make sure students have the question or task in writing (in the chat or in a collaborative document or your slides).

Plan for additional time to comment and respond. You can also respond at the start of the next class.

Ask the students to produce a summary (use the chat or Google Doc or Jamboard for a version of the "minute paper").

Give each breakout room a two-minute warning when the time is up.

Don't place breakout sessions at the end of class, since doing so will mean more students are likely to leave; explain that the activity will be brief and let them know how it will fit into what you are doing for the remainder of the session.

8. Embrace pauses.

Use pauses to good effect; they are inevitable in videoconferencing sessions. There will be pauses between questions asked and the answers. There will also be pauses for fully embracing the technology. For example, you will need time to share your screen and students need time to open files you share or navigate to collaborative documents. Slow or unreliable internet connections may also cause delays or interruptions.

Embrace the pauses rather than displaying frustration about them. Students will benefit from your positivity and your confidence. Moreover, pauses can be beneficial to learning as they offer students time to process.

9. Select "record" at the start of the session *if you plan to record.*

There are good reasons to record class sessions; indeed some institutions require it so that students who were not able to attend can watch the session later. There are also good reasons to not record, as it can be intimidating or challenging for students in a number of ways. Make sure that it is essential to do so before choosing this option, and always be sure to let students know that you are recording if you choose to do so.

Note that if you are discussing sensitive topics or topics that may be censored in a remote student's country, consider alternative methods. Reach out to your teaching center or faculty colleagues for consultation.

How teachers and students use videoconferencing software for teaching and learning will likely drive future technological improvements. In the meantime, educators can apply creative adaptations to use current technology in ways that promote student engagement even in the

absence of a physical classroom.

More information on using Zoom in your teaching:

Breakout rooms: <https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/206476093-Getting-Started-with-Breakout-Rooms> [3]

Chat: <https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/203650445-In-Meeting-Chat> [4]

Nonverbal feedback: <https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/115001286183-Nonverbal-Feedback-During-Meetings> [5]

Polling: <https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/213756303-Polling-for-Meetings> [6]

Recording Zoom sessions: <https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/sections/200208179-Recording> [7]

Screen sharing: <https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/201362153-How-Do-I-Share-My-Screen-> [8]

[Click here to download a handout version of these tips](#) [9]

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Article printed from The Teaching Professor: <https://www.teachingprofessor.com>

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URLs in this post:

[1] Jamboard: <https://jamboard.google.com/>

[2] Padlet: <https://padlet.com/>

[3] <https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/206476093-Getting-Started-with-Breakout-Rooms>: [**https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/206476093-Getting-Started-with-Breakout-Rooms**](https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/206476093-Getting-Started-with-Breakout-Rooms)

[4] <https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/203650445-In-Meeting-Chat>: [**https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/203650445-In-Meeting-Chat**](https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/203650445-In-Meeting-Chat)

[5] <https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/115001286183-Nonverbal-Feedback-During-Meetings>: [**https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/115001286183-Nonverbal-Feedback-During-Meetings**](https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/115001286183-Nonverbal-Feedback-During-Meetings)

[6] <https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/213756303-Polling-for-Meetings>: [**https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/213756303-Polling-for-Meetings**](https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/213756303-Polling-for-Meetings)

[7] <https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/sections/200208179-Recording>:

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