Zoom Facilitation

Back in 2020, I interviewed Harvard University faculty member Dan Levy about teaching on the videoconferencing platform Zoom.[1] He mentioned a student who would sometimes attend Zoom classes live and sometimes watch the recording later. How did she decide? If she could fold laundry while listening to class, she would watch the recording, but if class asked enough of her that she couldn't fold laundry, she attended live.

With the goal of helping your class sessions pass the laundry test, I'm excited to share this guide to facilitating learning experiences on Zoom. Zoom classes can be as lively and engaging as on-site classes, but creating such a Zoom class requires intentional facilitation. I hope this guide provides you with new strategies for Zoom facilitation, along with deeper insight into why to use one facilitation technique over another.

Convening

When you and your students walk into a physical classroom, there is a natural feeling of social presence, that you are gathering with other humans at a particular time and place for a particular purpose. It's quite possible to foster a similar social presence in an videoconference, but it doesn't happen as naturally since these learning spaces are fairly new to most of us. Here, then, are some options for starting a Zoom class that can help foster social presence and bring a sense of convening to the first few minutes of the meeting.[2]

- Encourage your students to turn their cameras on, but don't mandate that they do so. There are very good reasons that people might have for leaving their cameras off. Some students may be participating in class from a location they would rather not share with the class or where video might tax their internet bandwidth. Other students report that "cameras on" requirements can exacerbate social anxiety or distraction. Asking students to turn their cameras on can help build social presence, but if you do ask students to turn on their video for a moment of convening, give them the option to turn the camera off when that moment is over.

- Take a moment at the start of the session to set a norm for microphone use. With smaller gatherings, it can work fine for everyone to leave their microphones on, since that facilitates more free-flowing conversation. With larger groups, however, leaving mics off when not speaking has its advantages. Some students will be more physically comfortable with their mics off, and there's always that one person who leaves their mic on with distracting background noises. Be sure to clarify if students can unmute and speak up at any time or if you would prefer they use the raise-hand tool and wait to be called on.

- We humans are not, as Susan Hrach says, just brains on sticks.[3] Be mindful of students' need for short breaks during class. If it's a longer class, you might plan one or two "bio breaks" during the class time. If so, be sure to let students know those are coming. Are you comfortable with students stepping away from Zoom for a couple of minutes as needed? If so, let them know that, too. Being transparent about such things will communicate an ethic of caring to your students and make it more likely a student with particular physical needs will volunteer that information to you.

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[1] See Leading Lines Episode 88.
[2] For more information on the concept of social presence see this resource from Indiana University.
[3] See Intentional Teaching Episode 1.

- The start of class is also a good time to remind students to check their screen name and update it if necessary. Since students are often using Zoom for multiple purposes and with multiple audiences, they might find themselves with a screen name that's not what they want for the current class.

Round Robins

During class you might pose a question and ask for students to volunteer a response, but these moments are often enhanced by inviting all students to respond, not just those quick enough or bold enough to jump in. These round-robin moments work especially well at the start of class as introductory activities, and they can work well near the end of class when asking students to synthesize their learning. Hearing from all students can help turn your course into a learning community, where students are learning from and with each other.

Roll Call. One option for a round robin is to ask your question or give your prompt, then have students volunteer their responses in whatever order they want. This "popcorn" approach is easy to use, but it does tend to result in the same students starting the process every time. An alternative is to play "tag," asking the first student who responds to call on a second student to respond. That second student responds and then calls on a third student to go next, and so on. This has the advantages of helping everyone learn each other's names, but some students find it stressful not knowing when it will be their turn and mispronouncing a peer's name can be awkward. Instead, consider posting an ordered list of students names in the text chat, and having students take turns responding to your question in that order. This will allow you to hear from every student, while giving students time to put together their thoughts. Note that a text chat response might be a better option than voice for some neurodivergent students, students with speech disabilities, or those experiencing background noise.

Ready-Set-Go Questions. Another option to hear from all students is to shift from the medium of voice to the medium of text. Consider the Ready-Set-Go Question, where you pose a question to students, have them compose their responses in the text chat, and then hit enter all at the same time when you say "Go!" This creates a space for all students to share their thoughts and perspectives and to do so in a way that has a bit more independence, since they compose their responses before reading their peers' responses. Depending on your class size, it can take a minute or two to read through the responses in the text chat, but you can invite students to do so along with you. Then you might call on a student or two to elaborate on their response via voice or chat, or invite students to call on peers they would like to hear from. This chat activity is sometimes called a "waterfall," but I prefer Ready-Set-Go since it more clearly communicates to students what they should do. Also, note that students responses are attached to student names, but if it would help for responses to be anonymous, just ask all students to change their screen names temporarily to the same thing, like "#" or "Student."

Polling. If would like a faster but simpler way of hearing from all students, consider the humble Zoom poll, which allows you to pose a multiple-choice question and then display a bar graph of the distribution of participant answers. There's a lot you can do with a multiple-choice question as a facilitation tool. You might ask a content question with a right answer, but since these aren't test questions, you're not limited questions with single correct answers. As I wrote a very long time ago in an essay, "Consider posing a question that requires students to weigh evidence for and against each of several answer choices—a question that asks students to select the one 'best' answer among competing alternatives."[4] After asking all students to weigh in on a one-best-answer question, you can use the distribution of answers to guide class discussion, asking students to provide reasons for and against different answer choices. See my 2009 book, *Teaching with Classroom Response Systems: Creating Active Learning Environments*, for many more ideas for using Zoom polls.

[4] "Multiple-Choice Questions You Wouldn't Put on a Test: Promoting Deep Learning Using Clickers," 2009.

Zoom polls are anonymous, but here's a trick I learned from Dan Levy: Present students with answer choices A, B, C, and D, and then ask them to edit their screen name to prepend their answer. Dan might change his screen name to "C – Dan Levy" and I might edit mine to say "B – Derek Bruff." Since the Zoom participant list is sorted alphabetically, you'll quickly see in that list the distribution of answers. And you can use the list to call on students to represent particular answers in the class discussion.

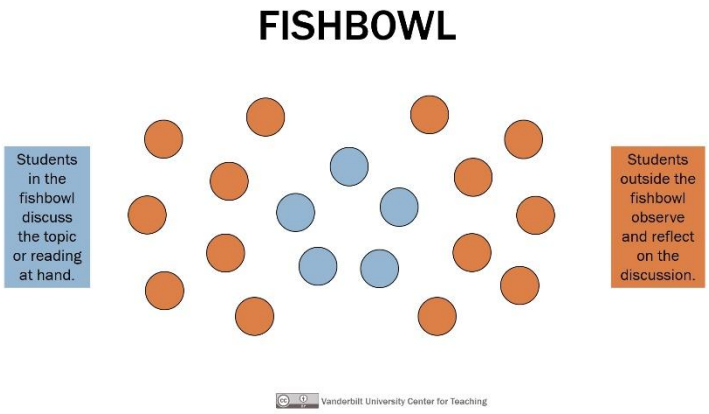
There are also a variety of other polling tools you might use—Poll Everywhere, Top Hat, Mentimeter, and more—that offer different question formats and interaction options than the basic Zoom poll. Consider what you might do with a "clickable image" polling question.[5]

Class Discussion

The kinds of class discussions we enjoy in physical classrooms can happen on Zoom. Many of the facilitation moves you might make on-site can work equally well virtually. For instance, "Let's hear from someone who hasn't spoken yet" is a simple way to encourage more students to participate in discussion in either setting. Some might argue that class discussion works even better on Zoom than in physical classrooms. If everyone has their cameras on, for example, Zoom provides better affordances for seeing everyone's face during discussion than a physical classroom with chairs pointed to the front of room. (Keep in mind that facial expressions can be tricky as an indicator of engagement, for example with neurodivergent students.)

Raising Hands. One difference in Zoom is that we can't rely quite as much on body language to determine who wants to (or should) speak next. For a very small class, this isn't as much of a challenge, but for groups of eight or more, you probably need some kind of protocol for handling who speaks next. I've been in plenty of Zoom meetings where I was guessing someone wanted to speak because they turned on their microphone, but perhaps asking students to use the raise-hand button is a more equitable way to manage this. When someone uses that tool, their video box moves to the front of the list of video boxes, and Zoom will even form a little queue when there are multiple hands raised.

Fishbowl. There is at least one discussion technique that really sings in Zoom: the fishbowl. In this activity, instead of having the entire class discuss a question or problem, you select a small group of students to have that discussion ("in the fishbowl") while the rest of the students observe and reflect on the discussion ("outside the fishbowl"). Often there's a part two where the observers have a chance to weigh in with their thoughts on the discussion. Fishbowls are useful for generating richer, more focused conversations, while also encouraging some students (the ones outside the fishbowl) to listen more deeply to their peers. Fishbowls work great on Zoom, since the students in the fishbowl can leave their microphones on and have a more natural conversation while the students outside the fishbowl can turn their cameras off. There's even a setting in Zoom where participants with cameras off aren't displayed at all which can be used to have the fishbowl students take over the entire screen.



Voice of the Chat. As noted above, voice isn't the only way that students can participate in a class discussion. The text chat can function as a lively backchannel where students take notes, offer comments, share

[5] For examples, see my 2024 blog post, "Clickable Image Polling Questions."

resources, and ask and answer questions.[6] Even when you're not conducting text chat activities like Ready-Set-Go Questions, your students can use the text chat to engage with each other and the course content. Some instructors (including me) find it challenging to monitor and respond to the text chat while also facilitating class. I recommend appointing someone, either a teaching assistant (if you have one) or a student, to be the "voice of the chat."[7] The idea is to have someone pay attention to the text chat and bring highlights from that backchannel to the main conversation and to make sure the instructor doesn't miss any questions asked in chat. You might plan times in your class where you call on the voice of the chat to turn on their mic and share selected comments and questions from the chat, or you could invite the voice of the chat to jump and interrupt when something in the chat could benefit the conversation.

Small Group Discussion

How can we have our students or participants interact in small groups? Zoom has a useful breakout room tool that supports this kind of interaction. Following are some options for making the most of breakout rooms for small group discussion.

How should you form small groups?

Zoom gives you three options:

- **Random assignment.** You can tell Zoom how many breakout rooms to create, and Zoom will randomly assign participants to those rooms. Alternatively, you can tell Zoom how many people should be in each room and Zoom will create the necessary number of breakout rooms. Either way, this is the fastest way to get students into breakout rooms, and it has the advantage of mixing up which students talk to each other, which can be useful for exploring multiple perspectives on a topic and creating more interpersonal connections among students. This is my go-to use of breakout rooms, but there are other options.

- **Self-selection.** You can set up a number of breakout rooms, then invite students to join the rooms they want. This approach is useful if you have permanent groups in your class; just set up a room for each group and have students assemble with their groups. Another use of self-selection would be to create rooms with different focuses or topics or resources, then invite students to join the room that matches their interest. This can take a little more time as students consider their options, but giving students a little more autonomy in this way can increase their motivation to engage. Just be prepared to intervene if one group has too few or too many participants.

- **Instructor assignment.** Zoom lets you do a little social engineering and determine which student goes in which group. The more your know your students and what they need, the more value you'll find in this approach to breakout rooms. For instance, you may find that a couple of students cause unproductive conflict when they're in a group together, so you might separate them. Or you may discover that some students already know each other well, so you might mix the groups up so they meet new peers. Or you may just want to have majors together sometimes and not together other times. Instructor assignment takes more time up front, but can be worth it under the right conditions.

What should you do while students are in their breakout rooms?

It might be tempting to drop into one or more rooms and eavesdrop on students. I have found, however, that eavesdropping on Zoom is more disruptive to student conversations than circulating around a physical classroom to monitor small groups.

A different strategy is to have students document their discussions as they have them using an online collaboration tool like Google Slides. For example, you can create a slide deck with one slide showing the

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[6] For more on the idea of backchannel in education, see my 2010 blog post, "Backchannel in Education – Nine Uses."
[7] This is a role I saw the late Steve Gilbert use years ago during his Teaching, Learning, and Technology (TLT) Group events, and I'm grateful for him introducing this idea to me.

discussion prompt and an additional blank slide for each of the breakout rooms. Invite your students to the slide deck as editors, and then ask students to take notes on their small group discussions on their slide as they are having those discussions. This strategy has at least three advantages: (1) It gives groups a deliverable to focus their conversations, (2) it gives you a preview of student perspectives that you can use to plan the post-breakout discussion, and (3) it provides a way to monitor the progress of your breakout rooms so you'll know when to wrap things up or intervene with a group that's not making progress.

Google Slides work well for this kind of notetaking, but other online collaborative tools are sometimes a better fit for particular activities. For example, when I sent my students into four breakout rooms to discuss the same three questions, I set up a Google Sheet for them to report out. Each question appeared at the top of a different column, and each group had its own row to use for documentation. Given the structure of this small group activity, the structure of the spreadsheet was a good fit. Other activities might benefit from a digital whiteboard tool like tldraw or Miro, something with virtual sticky notes.

How should you have groups report out when breakouts are over? When having groups report out, you can ask for a volunteer from each group to share a few highlights. This is a standard approach, but it works better if you let students know before breakouts that this will be expected. You can even ask each group to select a reporter at the start of the small group time so that student focuses on listening and synthesizing the group's discussion. When the reporter finishes their report to the large group, you can invite the other group members to add to the report if they wish. One caution here is ending up with a reporter who recaps everything that was said during the small-group discussion. That's rarely a good use of class time, so you might direct your reporters to focus on particular elements of the discussion or limit their reports to two or three important points.

I have found that sometimes reporters end up sharing more of their own perspectives than the perspectives of their fellow group members. If that happens in your class, you might change tactics. One option is to ask students to share a highlight from the group discussion that was contributed by someone else. Student A might then share a really good question asked by Student B, or Student C might identify a personal anecdote shared by Student D that shed light on the topic at hand. One risk here is that if Student D did all the talking in their group, the report out just shines more of a spotlight on someone who was taking up more than their fair share of time to begin with. Reporting out in different ways over time can mitigate this risk.

Structures for Group Work

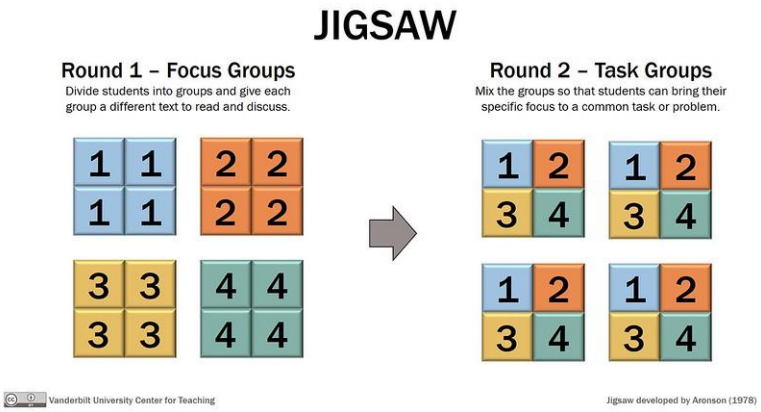
Active learning often involves having students talk with each other about course material, so here are a few more suggestions for structuring small group work. Keep in mind that any structured group work comes with some degree of cognitive load for students just figuring out what they should be doing. Try to minimize that load so that students can focus their attention on the discussions themselves. It's often helpful to share instructions verbally and also in writing, either on a slide or in the text chat.

Think-Pair-Share. In this activity, you give students a question or problem to consider, then ask them to take a minute or two to think about their own answers. Then you ask students to pair up and discuss their answers, perhaps coming to a consensus on their best answer. Finally you ask students to share their answers with the entire class, either by volunteering or being called upon. The think-pair-share can often lead to much richer class discussions, since students are more likely to share their perspectives with the whole class after they've had a chance to identify their perspectives and vet them with a partner.

Think-pair-share is a classic teaching technique in physical classrooms, and it can work on Zoom with a little modification. For the pair phase, you have at least two options: send students to breakout rooms where each room has two students or ask pre-assigned student pairs to discuss the question using direct messages in the text chat. The first strategy involves a bit of overhead sending students to and recalling students

from breakout rooms, while the second strategy requires pairing students ahead of time—and reminding them to switch their chat from "Everyone" to a direct message with their partner. Neither is quite as easy as asking students in a physical classroom to turn to their neighbor and discuss the question, but both can work, especially if you use this technique regularly so that students are accustomed to the logistics.

Jigsaw. This activity involves two rounds of group work. In the first round, you give each group of students a different text or resource to make sense of and discuss. In the second round, you mix up the groups so that each new group has one representative from each of the original groups. You then ask the groups to tackle a new question or problem, synthesizing the resources and perspectives from the first round of groups. Jigsaw is a great approach for helping students grapple with new material, and the structure means that students are more likely to speak up in the second round groups since each student has a unique role to play—and one they've prepared for. This activity can work very well on Zoom, although it takes a little care when setting up the breakout rooms. It also solves the problem of reporting out, at least for the first round of groups, since there's a clear task ahead of each group for the second round.



Sending Spies. I heard about this group facilitation move from math educator Chris Rasmussen. It works best if you have a long time period for group work, or if you have persistent groups that meet over time. Ask each group at some point during the group time to send a "spy" to the next group in line. The spy's job isn't to "steal" information, but rather to pick up a few ideas or perspectives to bring back to their home group. This can accelerate and expand the home group's discussion. It can also make the post-group discussion more interesting as students have already started comparing and contrasting their group's contributions to those of other groups.

Individual Work Time

Although it's tempting to make the most of a Zoom class session by using the entire time for collaborative activities, there can be some value in the occasional periods of individual work time during a session, especially if the session is longer than an hour. You might find it useful to have students take some time to read an article or watching a video or listen to a short podcast, then come back to the collective space to discuss the media they've just encountered. Be explicit about what you want students to bring back to the group space, whether that's a passage from the reading to discuss or three questions the video raises or something else. Also, consider having students turn their cameras off during individual work times so they can focus on the work.

Ending

For every convening of a class session, there is an ending. When you're planning your lessons, consider how you want to wrap up the class session, and be sure to leave yourself time to do so when teaching. There are a number of moves you might make to end a class, from thanking the students for their participation to reminding students of upcoming assignments and deadlines. Consider also if you want to end the Zoom session when class is over, or if you want to keep it open for students who might want a word or two with you. The latter option can go a long way toward fostering productive teacher-student relationships.

Minute paper. One classic classroom assessment technique that works very well on Zoom is the minute paper. In a physical classroom, you might ask students to pull out a sheet of paper and jot down one key takeaway from the class session and one question they have, then turn those papers in on their way out of the room. This is an easy way to get a broad sense of what students learned during class and what they still need to work on. On Zoom, you can ask students to do a minute paper in the text chat, either open to the class or through a direct message to you. You can then save the text chat to read later.

Where can I learn more about Zoom facilitation?

Dan Levy has written a great book called *Teaching Effectively with Zoom* which provides a deep dive into Zoom facilitation techniques with examples drawn from Dan's classes as well as those of other faculty. You can learn more. Dan's website has information about and resources from the book.

Liberating Structures are a set of activities designed to foster community and connection. Although they were developed for in-person meetings, many educators found these structures and adapted them for Zoom classes in 2020. See, for instance, Barry Overeem's blog post about using Liberating Structures on Zoom.

If you're in the challenging situation of teaching in a classroom with some students participating via Zoom, all of the above suggestions are harder to implement. For some ideas on adapting Zoom facilitation techniques to this kind of hybrid context, see my 2020 blog post, "Active Learning in Hybrid and Physically Distanced Classrooms."

This teaching guide was written in December 2022 by Derek Bruff and updated in January 2026 by Derek with input on accessibility considerations from Luke Rosenberger.