HOW TO TRANSFORM STUDENTS WITH ZOOM FATIGUE INTO ENGAGED PARTICIPANTS

Christopher Dean
E-mail: cdean@writing.ucsb.edu.br
University of California Santa Barbara - UCSB

ABSTRACT

This essay seeks to offer some methods that teachers can use online to enable students to move from what Jean Piaget calls passively receiving knowledge to constructing new knowledge. Especially in our remote classes, we must discover new methods to perform higher-order thinking, not just for the purpose of learning in our own classes but also for the types of learning students will be required to perform when they leave the university. This essay delineates three core methods for online teaching: Flipping the Classroom, Creating a Safe Environment, and Storytelling. The article then moves to five fundamental strategies to improve engagement: Giving Up Control of the Class, Guided Discussions, Asking Questions, Just-In-Time Learning, and Write First, Then Share. The essay concludes with two techniques to use in online classes: About Me, and Paired Writing and Editing. Together, these methods, strategies, and techniques offer teachers new ways to drive the kinds of thinking, learning, and connection that will set students up for success at college and beyond.


INTRODUCTION

When times have so dramatically changed, when the methods we relied on pre-pandemic are not working as well, we must discover new ways to engage students online. In search of better ways to engage students in our synchronous sessions on Zoom, I looked to best practices at conferences to see if any methods to connect and engage people outside of the traditional "broadcast" method of instruction could work Zoom.

In his book *The Power of Participation: Creating Conferences That Deliver Learning, Engagement, and Action*, Adrian Segar contests the view that lecturing is the best way to learn. Segar argues that the kinds of information we need in order to do our jobs today is gained more informally, from on-the-job
experience, social networks, or self-directed learning. (12). In fact, Segar says that on how adults learn indicates that "informal learning—experiential, social, and self-directed—makes up about 90% of the learning modalities that professionals use today. Only 10% of adult learning uses formal classroom or meetings presentation learning formats" (p. 13).

This essay delineates three core methods for online teaching: Flipping the Classroom, Creating a Safe Environment, and Storytelling. The article then moves to five fundamental strategies to improve engagement: Giving Up Control of the Class, Guided Discussions, Asking Questions, Just-In-Time Learning, and Write First, Then Share. The essay concludes with two techniques to use in online classes: About Me, and Paired Writing and Editing. Together, these methods, strategies, and techniques offer teachers new ways to drive the kinds of thinking, learning, and connection that will set students up for success at college and beyond.

Flipping the Classroom

Covid-19 gave me the opportunity to experiment with flipping my classroom, something that I had been thinking about for years. Flipping the classroom was, by far, the most dramatic change I made in my teaching in the last year. The premise of "flipping," as described by Salman Khan in his 2011 TED talk "Let's Use Video to Reinvent Education," is that students should learn important concepts at home, whether that is from a textbook or a recorded video. That frees up classroom time to apply the concepts and to get students working together to teach and learn from each other. As students work together through peer instruction, the teacher can move around the room to help students precisely when they need it: when they are having difficulties with a lesson.

Recorded lectures allow students to watch from home the lessons I would have normally given in class. By posting video lectures beforehand, I was able to experiment with new methods on Zoom. On a number of fronts, I found this method to be successful:

I covered more content by addressing major themes and lessons before class and then used class time to address questions about more nuanced topics, and to get students to apply the concepts, often collaboratively.

Students said that they understood the concepts better on video, where they could pause when they lost focus, rewind to review concepts, or re-watch the entire video. Then we used class time to apply and test concepts through exercises, short quizzes, and collaborative work.

We used class time to focus on topics more relevant to them. For example, in my professional editing class, I brought in small editing projects for students to practice editing a real document with a short turnaround time. This mirrors the freelance consulting that many of them are interested in pursuing after graduation.

The videos before class, followed by the application of the lessons in class, improved students' retention of the information.

Students enjoyed class time more when it is not dominated by long lectures. They appreciate time working on projects and short exercises, where they applied concepts to real-life scenarios.

Perhaps most importantly, class time becomes a space where they build and cultivate social networks. When teaching live, I often found myself pressed for time to get both the necessary content communicated in class and the individual and group exercises I wanted them to experience. With a flipped classroom, class time becomes much more useful and enjoyable for teachers and students.
Our synchronous Zoom sessions functioned as discussion sections to review concepts, work collaboratively in breakout rooms, and address upcoming assignments. We can think of the Zoom breakout room as the easiest way to engage students with collaborative work. In line with what Segar writes, Bruffee (1984) says that collaborative learning "harnessed the powerful educative force of peer influence that had been—and largely still is—ignored and hence wasted by traditional forms of education" (638). Further, collaborative learning in the classroom and in our online sessions "can model how knowledge is generated, how it changes and grows" (p. 647).

If we choose to organize students into groups for collaborative learning, I would advise the following in terms of pairing students together:

When possible, create the groups yourself, because students tend to work with their friends. This limits the diversity of opinions and restricts ideas from being voiced. People are often more likely to talk openly with strangers, perhaps because they fear the judgment or social rejection that could occur if they express values or beliefs counter to those of their friends.

Teachers can facilitate new social networks in the class, helping students meet new people and discover new ideas. The more diverse the group, the greater the potential for learning.

If not for the "flipped classroom," I would not have been able to try out many of the methods below. It provided me the space and time to try and fail, or try and succeed.

A Safe Class Environment

If we as instructors want to facilitate lively debates in our class, where students share their ideas with others, we need to create a safe environment for that to happen. I have to remind myself of that fact often, because I sometimes just expect anybody who has an idea to share it. But that will more likely occur when I have laid the groundwork to make the classroom as safe and receptive to all kinds of ideas as possible. Segar (2015) sends all conference participants the following ground rules for the conferences he organizes:

You have the freedom to talk about the way you see things, rather than the way others want you to see. You have the freedom to ask about anything puzzling. You have the freedom to talk about whatever is coming up for you, especially your own reactions. You have the freedom to say that you don't really feel you have one or more of the preceding three freedoms. (p.107)

What I like about these freedoms is that they make explicit what most teachers implicitly expect students to think and feel. By explicitly sharing these ground rules, students will much more likely engage in the course as active participants rather than as passive observers.

Storytelling & Stories

Storytelling completely changed my whole approach to teaching. For the sake of this article, I want to separate "storytelling" from "stories," because the first is a method of using the narrative structure to organize a speaker's information, and the latter encompasses a wide range of information, from simple examples to anecdotes and even facts, to be put into a presentation. I'll introduce storytelling first.

The premise for storytelling is that, as Robert McKee puts it, "Storytelling is the most powerful way to put ideas into the world today," because stories entertain, inform, persuade, teach, motivate, and inspire (mckeestory.com). Compared to a "traditional" lecture, which involves sharing one bullet point-filled
slide of text after the next, where the audience is expected to take notes on exactly what is on each slide, storytelling employs a completely different kind of exchange between speaker and audience.

Storytelling means organizing the information in the following order: situation, complication, and resolution. The situation shares the "status quo," the way things are right now. The complication elaborates upon the problems threatening future prosperity. And the resolution addresses how to overcome the challenges and create a "happy ending."

By organizing my lessons in this manner, it takes the audience on a journey, where they get to experience the problem vicariously and share in the solving of it. To do it well, presenters should rely on images rather than slides with bulleted text so that the speaker becomes what Garr Reynolds calls the "translator" of the slides.

The beauty of this method is that the audience moves from passive recipients of the information to active listeners and learners, for they are experiencing the story as engaged participants operating on a logical and emotional level. Neuroscience tells us that when people listen to a story, the brain activity of the listener mirrors that of the speaker. In a similar fashion, storytelling creates a strong emotional bond between teacher and students, which is particularly important in an online environment, where there are additional barriers between class members.

Teachers can also ask students to write "stories" (in contrast to "storytelling" as a presentation method) to bring a subject to life. When we create freewrites about a concept or about events in their own experience, students are much more likely to retain the information, share it with others, and find uses for the lessons in those stories. Incorporating the story into our teaching, as in the *Frankenstein* example in "Write First, Then Share" below, allows teachers to address the rhetorical effect that the story can have on an audience. When I ask students to draw upon stories relating to the course content, they connect with the material in a more powerful way.

**Give Up Control of the Class**

Adrian Segar, writing about ways to share decision-making with participants at a conference, says the following:

When you explicitly release control over some of what happens during your conference sessions, you are saying two things:
I believe that you possess valuable knowledge and experience and are willing and able to share it with others.
I am confident that you can decide what you want to learn, with whom, and how. (p. 97)

Although this advice is directed toward conference sessions, the advice is equally valid in our classrooms. This exercise is similar to the "About Me" exercise below, in which students are organized based on their knowledge or desire to learn about a topic. Here, though, the teacher puts aside the lesson plan for the day in order to provide a venue for students to share and learn about something that is relevant to them right now.

At different parts of the quarter in my professional editing classes, for example, I ask students to share what they would like to do in the next class sessions. Sometimes, they want to hear about a topic, like how editing can prepare them for law school or how editing can help them with writing careers in technology or publishing. In these situations, I bring in guest speakers who can offer a unique perspective and field questions from curious students. At other times, students say they would like to form study groups during class time so that they can meet outside of class afterward. My job as an instructor is less to "teach" them and more to, as Segar writes, create the conditions for them to satisfy their own needs (p. 98).
Just as John Dewey (2018) wrote about the importance of engaging students with situations outside of school, giving up control of the day's content often means exposing students to the kinds of experiences they will be asked to do when they graduate. Students often find these exercises satisfying because they are so relevant to their needs.

In an advanced public speaking class I teach, for example, we designed the three presentations with their professional needs in mind. The first asks them to develop a one-minute elevator pitch about themselves. One asks them to create a three-minute TED-style talk on something they love to do, and another assignment asks them to present to the class an "insider's view" on how to break into their industry of choice. Because these topics connect to things students love or are curious about, they are motivated to put a lot of work into them.

Guided Discussions

Discussions are the most common way to move beyond the broadcast method of teaching, because students can benefit from the collective wisdom of the group. However, there are plenty of pitfalls to discussions: extroverts can dominate the discussion, people who are not confident with the material are unlikely to share, they can be difficult to get started, and they can fizzle pretty quickly. When students participate, though, discussions help teachers see the diverse views within a class and the different levels of understanding across the class. Discussions also help students connect with each other, which is so important right now, when most students cannot meet face to face.

Guided discussions in Zoom breakout rooms often work best when they are preceded by a short writing exercise. The writing topic makes it more likely that students crystallize their thoughts before getting into their group, and it is much more likely that they will share if they have done that first. One last component that could improve equity and connection within the group is to put one member in charge of timing. If each person gets two minutes to share, then extroverted students will be less likely to dominate and a diversity of views will more likely be shared. If somebody does not take their full two minutes, then the other group members should ask the person questions until the time is up.

Although discussions are more challenging on Zoom, I have found success when students come up with discussion topics that matter to them and when they drive the discussion. Because directing a discussion on Zoom is more difficult, I have thought more about how to ask questions and how to let students' questions become the basis for a class.

Asking Questions

A daily part of our job as teachers is to ask questions of our students. I find myself repeatedly asking, "Does that make sense?" and "Do you have any other questions I can help you with?" At a certain point, students become immune to these questions. In a live class, I can tailor my questions to the mood of the room, and I generally give them about 10 seconds to answer. On Zoom, however, I need to double that. They need much more time to understand the question, reflect on it, then unmute themselves and answer it. One recent student told me that "Zoom makes it harder for shyer people to talk." He then added, "Unmuting the mic takes extra energy for shy students."

Student comments like this led me to reflect on how I could be doing a better job of reaching students and creating the right conditions for them to thrive. Creating the proper conditions, though, is demanding in a remote environment, so I reminded myself of Marshall McLuhan's "rearview-mirror syndrome," in which we tend to view new things in light of older things. The locomotive was not an "iron horse," and the lightbulb was not a "powerful candle." Clearly, school on Zoom is not just "online" school. These technologies represent completely different experiences that have totally new effects on us.
Instead of asking my two questions over and over, I needed to get them to start the conversation by asking questions that were meaningful to them. I returned to Postman and Weingartner's *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* to better understand their proposal for an "inquiry method" of education. My goal became to gauge my own success as a teacher based on the quality of questions that students were asking. As students realized that the content of the course was really about their needs, they became more invested in the class.

When they would ask a good question, I would follow up with, "How do you know if you have a good answer?" and "How could you check to see if you've found a solution?" Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg created the "miracle question," which asks people to imagine that a miracle occurred overnight and the next morning, everything is improved. The question is, "What would be some of the things you would notice that would tell you that life had suddenly gotten better?"

Basically, what it comes down to is that I have tried to move from teacher-driven questions to student-driven questions. When the motivation to learn is coming from them, they are more likely to work hard to discover the answers. If we can travel with them on a journey from their initial questions to their answers to an assessment of their answers, they are modeling the way they will learn after they leave the university.

**Write First, Then Share**

Many writing teachers I know use this method in order to draw out a more dynamic discussion from the whole class, as well as to better ensure that more introverted people participate in the discussion. In a recent writing composition class with first-year, first-generation college students, I wanted to address the role of genre in regard to our discussion of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. I asked them to take 10 minutes to write down a story that they had heard, at any point in their lives, that scared them and stayed with them through the years. This story could be a horror movie, a book, something that their uncle or cousin had told them, or something they had heard from friends. As Peter Elbow advised, the freewriting would be the first step toward something more complicated, more reflective.

Every year, students eagerly share their stories, and it is exciting to see how the fear manifests itself in their very telling of the story. Many of them get nervous at key moments, even shivering to seemingly shake loose the hold the story has on them. I then ask them to identify some of the elements that the stories have in common, which forces them to think beyond the plot in order to move to the underlying purpose of the stories. Some of them are didactic, with clear lessons at the end. Others are more emotional. Further, the reflection leads students to better understand the rhetorical effects of the genre.

Techniques like this work well on Zoom (and in the classroom) because the writing down of the story primes them to tell it later. Writing it down is almost like a practice run, where they test out what they want to say and how they want to say it. It also moves them from passive "attendees" into active participants who will influence the content and structure of the day's discussion. I have not tried this in breakout rooms first, but I think it would work well to share the stories in small groups and then return to the main room for thoughts and reflection.

**Just-in-Time Learning**

If students need to know something now, they are much more likely to use it now and then remember it for years to come. Perhaps more importantly, just-in-time learning is what most adults rely on in the workforce. When adults need to learn something at work, it is often right now, not nine months from now.

In the professional editing track of the Professional Writing Minor at UC Santa Barbara, students must fulfill an internship requirement, where they work with an organization and experience real projects that
require problem solving on the spot. In our class time together, students bring up the real issues they might be having with their manager, such as a manager who is not returning emails in a timely manner. Or they might be having trouble with a new genre of writing. In many cases, they are writing or editing sentences that are really hard to resolve. We tackle the problems together, sharing our advice on how best to address the issue. Often, other students have experienced similar problems and share how they solved it, which lets students lead the discussion by drawing upon insights from their own experiences.

Whether students are motivated to learn based on extrinsic reasons ("I want an A in this class!") or for intrinsic reasons ("I'm curious to learn more about rhetorical grammar") or a combination of the two ("I need to learn these writing principles so I don't embarrass myself at my internship"), these activities focus on what students want to learn. The benefits of just-in-time learning are twofold: students learn how to solve problems they are experiencing right now, and other class members either contribute to potential solutions themselves or get a blueprint for solving similar problems for themselves in the future. Just-in-time learning satisfies students' desires to tackle problems in what Dewey calls "ordinary life" outside of the university.

At this time especially, when students are paying full tuition for a fraction of the resources and access usually available to them on campus, students want to spend time on projects and exercises that are relevant. They are living through a pandemic that has completely changed their world, and they are starving for classes that will help them adapt to this new environment. Many of them are questioning the value of a university education, because they are unsure if it is worth the financial costs. They want to be able to see "the use" in what they are studying.

In my academic writing classes, I try to create exercises that will help students build connections and knowledge. By connecting the principles of good writing to essays they wrote in previous quarters, students assess how well they held true to those principles. After learning about the function of subjects-as-characters at the beginning of the sentence, for example, students highlight the subjects across one of their paragraphs. If they can see that all of their subjects across the paragraph are the same or closely related to each other, they will achieve a tight focus in the paragraph. When they identify how writing principles apply to their own writing, the process feels more emotionally and conceptually significant to them. They come away from this exercise saying things like, "That really helped me see what I do in my writing and how I can improve it!"

I do a similar exercise in my upper-division grammar class, where I ask students to record a screencast of one of their essays while they talk about their intentions while writing each paragraph. This metacognition helps them discover the patterns that they tend to fall into, both the strong and the weak. This metacognition is in line with what Charles Bonwell and James Eison propose to get more active learning: we should get them "doing things and thinking about what they are doing" (iii).

So often, students associate the quality of their writing based on the last thing a teacher told them about it, rather than having tools themselves to evaluate their progress. These kinds of exercises help students self-diagnose their writing, which helps them feel empowered and more self-sufficient.

About Me Exercise

Along the same lines as just-in-time learning, the "About Me" is a good way to move beyond the standard "get to know me" questions on day one of a class. For his conference participants, Segar recommends creating custom badges that focus on attendees' expertise in a particular area or in their interest in learning more about a topic. Instead of the standard conference badge with the person's name and hometown, company, or university affiliation, Segar recommends a badge that includes "Talk to me about…" or "I'd like to know more about…"
If instructors ask students to answer these two questions before the first class, they could create groups based on knowledge or interest:

Students could be organized based on a shared interest in learning something.
Students could be organized based on a shared knowledge of a topic.
Students interested in a topic could be paired up with students who have knowledge of that topic. (SEGAR, 2015, p.153)

Regardless of how the groups are constructed, it moves the focus of students from passive learners to active participants. Before they even enter the class, they could be thinking of how they could contribute to the class members' knowledge and how they could learn about things relevant to their own lives.

Another tip from Segar is to ask people to share some information about themselves before a class or conference begins. These questions about themselves and their expectations for the class focus more on getting to know the person and will foster better networking in class:
"How did I get here?"
"What do I want to have happen?"
"What experiences or expertise do I have that others may find useful?" (p. 158)

If instructors then organized students in breakout rooms to share their answers (about two minutes per person), students would get to know each other better on day one, instructors would understand what students hope to learn, and peers would understand that each person has something important to share with the class.

**Paired Writing and Editing**

One last technique for getting students to work collaboratively on a document is adapted from what Adrian Segar calls "paired coding," a method that Chip and Dan Heath reference in their book *Switch*. Paired coding occurs when two programmers work together, one coding while the other programmer reviews the code. This method produces better-quality software, with fewer errors as well.

This method has worked well for editors to better understand how other writers produce documents, and it helps writers to discover some of the patterns they fall into when writing. By sharing a Google doc, for example, a writer and an editor can pair up to work on a document, demonstrating to students how writing can improve when two people work together on it. When editors and writers are communicating back and forth about how to create the best document possible, they are, as Segar writes, engaged in an "in-the-moment experience" and bonded together "through their shared interactive experience" (p. 204). As one writes and the other edits, they become more aware of their habits as writers, as well as the huge number of options available to them as they write.

Most people associate writing as a solitary effort, but exercises like these demonstrate how writing improves when it is a partnership. Just as students recognize, eventually, the benefit of multiple peer-reviewed drafts, they experience the benefit of writing collaboratively. After working collaboratively in this way, they often reflect upon how much they learned about their own writing from working with others.

Online learning environments exaggerate everything. Zoom tends to make apathetic students more apathetic. Students distracted by their phones, the internet, or social media in class are more distracted on Zoom. And quiet students tend to be quieter. In the same way, though, it has put a mirror up to our own teaching. I didn't realize how much the classroom environment itself influenced what I did and how I did things. This reminds me of a story that David Foster Wallace shared in his 2005 commencement address at Kenyon College:
There are these two young fish swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, "Morning, boys, how's the water?" And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, "What the hell is water?"

The pandemic made me aware of the water that I had been swimming in since kindergarten at age 5. From elementary school through graduate school, I experienced different classrooms but similar teaching methods most of the time. Only when I was forced into a new Zoom environment did I truly question all of the methods I took for granted.

I now see how the classroom environment itself shaped my perceptions, my attitudes, and my beliefs about how teaching should be practiced. Marshall McLuhan's famous aphorism "The medium is the message" and John Dewey's belief that "we learn what we do" speak to the power of the medium, the environment, to control the perceptions of those immersed in it. Although the content of my lessons (pre-pandemic versus now) was the same, I became much more aware of how the method of transmission—lecture versus video recording, live versus remote, lecture versus collaborative exercises—could be more dynamic and engaging. I learned that, as Postman and Weingartner put it, "It is not what you say to people that counts; it is what you have them do…What students do in the classroom is what they learn" (p. 19). I have tried to use our synchronous time on Zoom to enact the kinds of exercises that will get students learning together, to solve problems that students actually want to solve.

It took a dramatic shift in the learning environment to see the educational realities that were right in front of me all these years. The insight I gained, as a result, has made me a better teacher. After teaching online for one year, I appreciate the tools we have available to teach remotely. And I no longer believe that the traditional classroom and online education are incompatible. In fact, I plan to use many of the tools I have learned, such as my video lectures, long after we return to campus. I also plan to use the methods I wrote about in this article in live classes and in remote sessions in order to increase the engagement and active learning for my students. What I find satisfying about these different methods is that they can work well in a traditional classroom and online.

References


