



Zoom and Active Learning: Oxymorons?

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Due to COVID-19, face-to-face instruction was suspended on most U.S. campuses and faculty necessarily transitioned to remote teaching. One would think that Zoom delivery might preclude active learning. On two large university campuses, faculty were encouraged to quickly move classes online. Both campuses created websites through their teaching and learning centers and offered seminars to help faculty transition. Good suggestions were given, but most required learning more about various available technology (for which there was little time), rather than developing the best possible learning experiences for subject matter content in a new format. For faculty who were somewhat to moderately tech-savvy, these efforts did little to alleviate the stress associated with such a pivot in teaching. Most of us had to cope as well as possible in two weeks. There were many challenges, not the least of which was finding a way to maintain active learning strategies in the Zoom classroom. What follows is a case study for teaching social psychological concepts of dress in the new format.

Active learning is not new, has considerable research support, and requires more than passive listening (Bonwell & Eison, 1991; Meyers & Jones, 1993). Students must move away from simply memorizing, recalling, or paraphrasing and move to completing higher order thinking tasks (Chickering & Gamson, 1987); to actively learn, students need to engage in application tasks and use what they have learned (Meyers & Jones, 1993). Students learn actively when they think and talk about what they have learned. Research shows that retention is improved when people use and apply information (Auble & Franks, 1978). Seminal cognitive psychology research (e.g., Bruner, 1966) provides a basis for active learning and shows that when people generate or construct knowledge, it is better retained than when presented in a lecture. Much experimental research shows that a minor amount of active construction has large positive effects on memory performance (Auble & Franks, 1978; Graf, 1980; Jacobi, 1978; Kane & Anderson, 1978; Slamecka & Graf, 1978).

Two strategies used to maintain active learning in Zoom format were online chat activities and live discussions. Chat activities are short items to which students respond using the Chat function in Zoom; these were sometimes paired with watching video clips, such as viewing a clip of Susan Boyle from Britain's Got Talent.¹ Students were instructed: write your immediate impression of the woman in the video. (1) Did you change your impression of the woman as you watched? (2) What caused you to change your impression if you did? A YouTube video² of

¹<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RxpZh4AnWyk>

²https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zraf_rf1Qrw

Winnie Harlow and April Star, both of whom have vitiligo, was also used. The chat activity was to answer: (1) What kinds of behaviors did Winnie Harlow have to respond to growing up? and (2) What kinds of emotions (affective body image) did she experience? The chat questions helped students focus while watching the videos and their responses indicated active learning. For example, first impressions of Susan Boyle were based on her looks and body movements, but were quickly updated positively when she began to sing. Student responses were consistent with research they had studied showing that initial impressions can be wrong and often change.

Live discussions, instead of typed chat comments, were also effective in engaging students in active learning. Students evaluated media images that focused on body form or function. In live discussions on Zoom students engaged in higher order critique and analysis, posing questions to each other about what specific media presented more positive messages and what types of body positioning, clothing and appearance considerations impacted these messages. In another example of live discussion students were asked to respond to images of makeup on men, women's curvy backsides, and facial and body hair. Students had to engage with the images to critically evaluate them and comment. These examples demonstrate that students were actively engaging with the subject matter.

Another issue was making students feel comfortable with the Zoom format and taking attendance. One successful serendipitous strategy was to open each class session 10 minutes early for discussion of any topic; students were very frank, creating a sense of trust and interest. Another strategy was to download chat comments to take attendance. Students had been told that attendance would be taken from chat responses; this was done to solve the problem posed by needing to take attendance, monitor the waiting room, and lecture simultaneously. Monitoring the waiting room was also found to be problematic if a video was playing at the same time since admitting someone from the waiting room would stop the video.

Finally, we both underestimated preparation time required for this successful transition to Zoom delivery. One of us recorded all lectures and activities ahead of the course in case the live Zoom class failed for some reason. These lectures were posted immediately after each class in case a student had missed class or wanted to review. Development of chat activities was also time-consuming and included posting and integrating them into the class conversation or using them to demonstrate consistency with previous research.

In conclusion Zoom delivery and active learning can co-exist in the soc/psych classroom. Success was gauged by the extent to which students engaged in the Zoom chats and discussions, and the quality and depth of their responses; providing evidence of higher level thinking between material presented in lecture and student responses. Discussions would move, for example, from responses to images, or course content, to observations and challenges of current practices of appearance modifications in their immediate worlds, showing that students had moved into synthesizing constructs. We both plan to continue revising our Zoom courses to draw students into even more active learning engagement.

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