Building student engagement with Zoom

At this point in the pandemic, most of us have developed our habits with Zoom: we groan before we log on, unmute to say hello, adjust our sweatpants a couple of times through the call, and then wave goodbye with enthusiasm before awkwardly trying to navigate to that red "LEAVE" button. We are burnt out on Zoom, on being on camera, possibly even on sweatpants. But we also need these things right now. We may not be able to change our pants (who still fits into regular pants?), but we can change how we use Zoom to make the experience of online synchronous sessions more meaningful for everyone.

Encouraging interaction among students is essential because the more students connect with each other and with the instructor, the more connected they feel to the course overall and the more likely they are to thrive. Here are a few basic tools and practices you can use to encourage students to actively engage during a Zoom session:

1 **Interrupt yourself:** If you're lecturing and sharing a set of slides on your screen, stop speaking and screen sharing every five to 10 minutes to check back in with the room. Toggle back to Gallery View so you can see everyone (who has cameras on) and ask, "What questions do you have?"

2 **Breakout rooms:** Get students working and talking in small groups by sending them to breakout rooms. Give the groups a specific prompt for their discussion or a problem to solve together as well as a set time limit.

3 **Zoom's whiteboard + annotation:** While we're used to interrupting ourselves with, "What questions do you have?", you might instead share a whiteboard and ask everyone to annotate that space with an image or short sentence of reflection. "What's your big takeaway so far?"

Need help with some of these advanced Zoom features or a refresher on Zoom basics ? OIT is offering semimonthly Zoom trainings throughout the year. View options, the calendar and register here.

While it's tempting to limit students' interactions with each other to engagement through course content, most of us are starved for social connections and play right now. Make time in your Zoom sessions to help students get to know each other.

Here is a list of "relationship-building" games you might play on Zoom. And below is a selection that you could easily implement by setting aside five to 10 minutes in your Zoom sessions.

- Scavenger hunt: Create a list of items most people might have in their homes, and give everyone a chance to go on a "scavenger hunt," then return to Zoom and share. Oftentimes items come with stories.
- Human bingo: Treat your Zoom "Gallery View" as a bingo board, and ask get-to-know-you questions that participants can respond to and fill out their board.
- Big Wind Blows: A simple game of prompting the group with get-to-know-you questions, and discovering who shares different experiences.
- Doodle game: A fast-paced, silly drawing game that challenges participants to create animals out of simple line drawings.

Finally, Zoom fatigue is a real thing, founded in the fact that we have to work harder to connect with one another through a screen (Jiang, 2020). Working harder is tiring, and the best advice out there on how to resolve this is to reduce the number of Zoom meetings you're in. Instead of a full hour (or three) on Zoom with your class each week, could you share your lecture via video and use 30 minutes on Zoom to check in and answer questions? Could students have a video-based discussion in Flipgrid rather than Zoom?

Ready to work through some of these ideas with others? Join UAF eCampus designers at the new "eCampus Workbench" on Friday afternoons. Bring your questions and ideas and work together with a small group to try new things!

References

Jiang, M. (2020). "The reason Zoom calls drain your energy." BBC. https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20200421-why-zoom-video-chats-are-so-exhausting

Relationship-Building Games on Zoom (2020). Public domain.