Leaning into Technology to Cultivate Student Engagement: Lessons from a Year in the Zoomverse

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In *Small Teaching Online*, Flower Darby and James M. Lang (2019) wisely advocate making modest, incremental changes to improve online teaching. But pandemic conditions in the 2020-2021 academic year necessitated that I make a host of rapid changes almost all at once. One year later, as I emerge, exhausted, from a year spent teaching online synchronous literature and first-year writing courses, I am wiser because of my virtual experiences and eager to transfer what I learned to my face-to-face classrooms.

As a faculty member at Elon University, a private, residential institution, I had no experience teaching online prior to the pandemic. I spent several anxiety-ridden months in the summer doing a crash course in online teaching through Darby and Lang's wonderful book, Doug Shaw's excellent *OK Zoomer* workshop, and a nuts-and-bolts course design institute at my institution. Driven by that learning, I transformed from a minimal user of technology in the classroom to a maximal one, and in the process, I was pleasantly surprised to discover both that I was a capable techie and that these tools could help me cultivate my students' attention and engagement and my own—even amidst the many opportunities for distraction online.

I began with interactive tech tools that invited everyone's contributions and renewed student attention when it was flagging. These enabled me to counter the natural tendency when online to watch passively or drift to seemingly more interesting digital spaces by making it impossible for my students to be passive participants. Frequent chat blasts where students take a few minutes to reflect and then simultaneously respond allowed everyone to give first impressions of a text, provide a brief analysis, or share key takeaways or questions. By summarizing these chats on the spot, I could identify common ground, highlight the voices of students who might not otherwise contribute, or answer lingering questions. Zoom polls offered a way to take the pulse of the class and prompt student input on a regular basis. And Google Jamboards, interactive whiteboards combining images and text, invited students to use anonymous, virtual post-it notes to engage in collective brainstorming, image analysis, or peer response.

While I initially experimented with these different tools to mitigate my discomfort with this novel form of teaching, I quickly discovered that these activities, though brief, enhanced overall participation and engagement. Moving forward, I continue to incorporate these new techniques for soliciting contributions from every student in the room, since they not only

changed *how* students engaged but also increased levels of engagement by being more inclusive. In my face-to-face classrooms, I am replicating these opportunities for anonymous or low-stakes participation through Google Jamboard, Padlet Backchannel for chatting, and Mentimeter for polls.

Another suite of tech tools allowed me to manipulate the spatial elements of the course through Zoom settings that interrupted the seemingly one-dimensional world of Zoom squares. In *Distracted*, Lang (2020) argues that changing the seating arrangements in face-to-face classrooms can renew and re-orient student attention by breaking "the symbolic plane between the front of the room and the students in their seats" (p. 121). Online equivalents to this practice included using speaker view to highlight individual students during presentations while the audience posed questions in the chat, deploying "hide self view" to spotlight cohorts for fishbowl discussions, and creating breakout rooms to divide students into small groups for collaborative work. Frequently "rearranging the furniture" on Zoom by changing up the configuration of our screens and our relationships to one another was essential to promoting student engagement. Adding in Zoom conferencing with students in small groups or one-on-one also provided an effective way to diversify our interactions.

While at times I felt like a frazzled circus ringmaster navigating multiple screens and settings on Zoom, doing so reminded me daily of the importance of changing things up in the classroom to keep students alert and engaged. As a result, I plan to experiment even more with different seating configurations in my face-to-face classrooms, including fishbowl discussions. Additionally, although I am glad to be back to in-person interactions in the classroom, where I find it easier to build relationships with students, I retained Zoom video chatting as an option for office hours, since it affords the chance to give efficient, just-in-time feedback to individuals or small groups.

Of all the technology I experimented with, the most transformative tech tools were ones that generated opportunities for collaboration. During class, students regularly created collaborative documents using Google docs, slides, or sheets while working in small groups, and I could monitor the progress of each breakout room and offer guidance as needed. In addition, these tools provided continuity between class sessions. Before class, students typically contributed to collaborative forums using a variety of tools. For example, they answered a prompt, framed a question, and responded to a peer's question in discussion forums; posted visuals or research questions to a Padlet; or annotated a shared text via Hypothesis that became the basis for student-led or fishbowl-style discussions. After class, they posted paper topics, progress reports, or visuals to a collaborative Padlet or Google sheet or responded to brief Google surveys about their learning.

This fall, I am capitalizing on the collaborative features of these tech tools in my face-to-face classrooms. Google tools remain a mainstay for group work since they provide students a clear structure and permit me to monitor multiple groups simultaneously. The other tools have also become part of my regular repertoire for assignments that encourage students to

collaborate before and after class. They allow me to preview where students are in their thinking about assigned texts by reviewing their discussion forum posts or Hypothesis annotations prior to class and to stay current on what happens in between classes by assessing and responding to student progress on larger projects through Google sheets or Padlets.

While I expected these tech tools to improve engagement for my students—and they did—I was surprised to discover how much these technologies rekindled my own interest in fundamental pedagogical questions about how best to solicit and sustain student attention. Prior to the pandemic, I typically asked students to stow their phones and use computers only at strategic moments—essentially imposing a soft tech ban to limit distractions and keep our collective focus on the texts at hand. But the move to online teaching jolted me out of those routines and into experimental mode, pushing me to innovate in an area I had previously been reticent to explore. As a result, I recently rewrote my technology policy to create a more adaptive and flexible strategy that affords new ways to engage in the classroom using a range of tech tools. If there is a silver lining to pandemic teaching, it involves these lessons I learned in the Zoomverse, which taught me not only how to cultivate my students' attention and engagement, but also, importantly, to renew my own.

References

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