

Zoom Teaching and Establishing New Classroom Norms

Cory Davia

Claremont McKenna College

When it first became clear that classes would be moved online due to COVID-19, I was gearing up for my last quarter as a graduate student at UC San Diego. I'd been assigned to TA for a course on Kant, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche. Normally I'd have been anxious about teaching so far outside my area, but this time I felt lucky to be playing a supporting role, and relieved to be letting the instructor of record take the lead on figuring how to adjust to teaching online.

The adjustment turned out to be bumpy. We tried several things to create space for students to engage in different ways, but as the quarter went on, we saw more and more videos turned off, fewer and fewer questions in class, and less and less happening on the discussion boards and in office hours. I can't speak for the instructor, but I felt helpless. For instance, I'd gone to some length to learn about best practices for asynchronous discussion boards, and it was frustrating not to see that effort pay off.

I see one of the primary roles of philosophy courses as helping students learn to reason their way through disagreement and uncertainty, identifying common ground and working from there to draw further conclusions. So, one of the main learning goals for my courses is that students develop skills related to reasoning together, things like charitably representing others' reasoning, asking fruitful questions, and identifying inferential relations between points different people make. To that end, I write assignments and activities in which students treat each other's contributions the same way they treat course texts, for instance by reconstructing classmates' reasoning, building on or challenging a point made by a peer, or reflecting on which questions a discussion settled for them and which it left open. All of this starts with in-class discussion, so my first experience with teaching online left me very nervous.

The following fall I started a job at Claremont McKenna College. In the run up to the first day of classes, my new colleague Suzanne Obdrzalek organized a series of workshops in which members of the philosophy department could compare notes about teaching online. I took three main things from those conversations. First, one obstacle to student participation in online course is the felt lack of community compared to being in person and hanging out outside of class. As a start toward mitigating this, Adrienne Martin shared her experience with building social spaces for her students online, like in a class Slack or Facebook group. Second, drawing on advice from Rima Basu, I decided to use collaborative word processing, e.g., a shared google doc, to facilitate group activities. That way, I could share prompts with a link to the document, students could add responses in real time, and I could draw from their contributions to the shared document when checking in on groups in their breakout rooms. Finally, we talked about taking advantage of the move online to bring in guest speakers who might otherwise not be able to travel. I was set to teach environmental ethics in my first semester, so I

invited some friends working in that area to present their research (thanks to Joyce Havstad, Anncy Thresher, Daniel Callies, and Aaron Chipp-Miller for wonderful guest appearances that fall).

These strategies ended up accomplishing two things, both of which surprised me. The first had to do with establishing classroom norms for discussion. To scaffold students' work of reasoning together, I often set aside time early on in a class to set expectations. This involves both how to have a productive discussion (like establishing ground rules for respectful engagement) and what kinds of philosophical contributions it's possible to make (like making an argument, providing support, raising an objection, asking for clarification, or giving an example). Talking with students about what they'd like out of a class social space – which platform to use, to what extent I should participate – helped lay the groundwork for those conversations. Student interactions with the guest speakers, who often were presenting work-in-progress, also helped reinforce the idea that philosophy is a collaborative pursuit. Similarly, working out how we wanted to use Zoom functionality – like what kinds of contributions were appropriate to make in the chat versus via a raised hand – forced us to reflect on how those choices of norms would affect our conversations. For example, one use of the chat came to be expressing appreciation for a classmate's contribution ("I was thinking that too!" or "Cool idea!"). That the chat feels informal, and does not require stopping an ongoing conversation, created more space for comments like this.

The second surprising success had to do with the way using a shared workspace made it easier for students to look back on a record of their classmates' contributions. When moderating a discussion in person, I'll often take notes on the board, summarizing what students have said and making note of inferential connections and what's a response to what. Doing this in a shared document meant that students could always refer to it when thinking about points from their classmates they'd like to follow up on, or about possible topics to investigate further in a paper. I'm used to students expressing trepidation about assignments that ask them to engage with their classmates thinking; that can be an unfamiliar task, and they're not sure how to get started. When I asked my spring semester intro students for feedback on those assignments, many mentioned that reviewing the class google doc helped put them in the right frame of mind. That squared with my experience of reading their work, which was consistently more specific about how it was engaging a classmate. More often, papers would respond to a particular argumentative move a classmate made, rather than more obliquely to a topic that came up during discussion.

Some of these lessons are easy to carry forward. CMC is in-person for fall 2021, but I will still be Zooming in guest speakers. For others, there are choices to make. To me, the lesson of our conversations about how to use Zoom was not specifically about Zoom; it was that it's helpful to give students some critical distance from the classroom norms they're familiar with. One way to do that would be to incorporate the same technologies we used while online, perhaps an electronic back-channel students could use during class. Another way to do it that would be change the classroom environment in other ways, like by playing games, or trying "discussion cards" in which students identify the kind of conversational move they're making, and play the appropriate card. Similarly, I take the lesson of our class google doc to be that it's important to maintain a record of class conversations students can access after they leave the classroom. One could do that by substituting a class google doc for a physical whiteboard or transferring what's on the board to a shared document after each class. But there are other possible strategies, like asking students to contribute to shared

notes or rotating responsibility for a post-class recap. Whatever the specific implementation – I expect I'll end up trying several of them – my hope is that even though we'll be back in a more familiar classroom environment, we can maintain the critical distance from classroom norms that moving online helped us achieve.

Author's Note

My decision to collaborate with students on how we'd use Zoom, rather than settling on preferred policies in advance, was inspired by Mary Ann Winkelmes' work on the pedagogical value of transparency. Check out her paper "A Teaching Intervention that Increases Underserved College Students' Success" for more on transparency. See C. Thi Nguyen's "Zoom Classes Felt Like Teaching into a Void – Until I Told My Students Why" for a related reflection of being honest with students about how teaching online affects us. The idea of using discussion cards to recreate the opportunity for reflection provided by moving online was inspired by presentations at American Philosophical Association meetings, one by Kaija Mortensen and one by Rebecca Scott and Ann Cahill. Thanks to all these authors for helping me think these things through.

References

- Mortensen, K. (2020, January 9). *Using discussion cards to balance philosophical conversations* [Conference session]. The Eastern Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association. Philadelphia 201 Hotel, Philadelphia, PA, United States.
- Nguyen, C.T. (2021) Zoom classes felt like teaching into a void – until I told my students why. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from: https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/zoom-classes-felt-like-teaching-into-a-void--until-i-told-my-students-why/2021/03/11/024afb2c-81e5-11eb-81db-b02f0398f49a_story.html
- Scott, R. Cahill, A., & Lockard, C. (2020, February 28). *Using metacognition to improve classroom discussions* [Conference session]. The Central Division Meeting of the America Philosophical Association. Palmer House Hilton, Chicago, IL, United States.
- Winkelmes, M., Bernacki, M., Butler, J., Zochowski, M., Golanics, J., & Weavil, K. (2016). A teaching intervention that increases underserved college students' success. *Peer Review* 18(2)