

Zoom In: An Option for Remote Attendance

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Coffee in hand, I hustle into the classroom five minutes before our writing workshop and begin setting up. I greet the students already sitting at square tables, pull the rolling podium to the front of the classroom, and place my laptop on it. As I log into the classroom computer and pull up our Canvas page, I hear a few doorbell chimes emanating from my laptop. I greet the two students joining on Zoom and chat with them for a minute. “How’s the foot?” I ask one, who excitedly responds that he will be getting the boot off next week. “Thanks,” he says, “there’s still some icy spots on campus this morning.” The other student and I check in with less detail; last night she emailed me that she was struggling with an anxiety attack and might be joining on Zoom today. The rest of the class filters through the door, carrying cups of various shapes and colors from the coffee shop just outside.

As we get started, I guide the students to the PowerPoint uploaded to Canvas and point the laptop camera at the large screen where the PowerPoint is projecting. “Let me know if you get lost or have any questions,” I say, as I begin a short, interactive lecture. Next, we switch to a shared Google Doc, and everyone clicks a Canvas link to join. I check with the Zoom students to ensure they are following, and they respond with thumbs up emojis. I demonstrate the concept we had just learned and then ask students to cut and paste from their own writing into the document. Next, they will work in groups to revise these excerpts. I ask a couple of students in the classroom to join the Zoom. Then, I create two break-out rooms, turn off my sound and mute myself, and let the groups get to work. I roam about the classroom, observing the students working. Afterwards, we come back together and review the activity.

This experience seems so familiar to me now that I forget it has only been a few semesters since I first integrated Zoom into my everyday classroom. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, students at our institution were given the choice to learn in person or remotely the following

academic year, and faculty were empowered to make their own decisions about how to offer their courses. Though I taught only on-campus students, I still only held class in person on Mondays. I felt that first-year students would benefit from some in-person class time and balanced that with my own fears about the virus, childcare responsibilities, and an understanding that students were dealing with similar concerns and responsibilities. On Wednesdays, we engaged in asynchronous activities, and on Fridays we met on Zoom. Soon, though, I realized that some students still struggled to attend on Mondays. Some contracted COVID while others had to return home to help with siblings or sick parents. Another developed severe social anxiety. I decided to open Zoom during Monday classes for those students who wanted to attend but could not make it.

The following year, we were back in person in the classroom three days a week, still masked but not as distanced as before, and I was excited to be in the same space with my students, writing and learning together. But things had changed too. My first-year students were not accustomed to being in groups and some were fearful. Many shared accommodation letters, more than in years past, and others spoke openly about challenges they were facing both in and out of school. My teaching had also changed; I had grown more interested in the ways that technology could provide stronger accessibility and enhance the classroom experience. Over the course of the past two years, I had developed strategies and best practices for using Canvas, Zoom, shared docs, and other tools to deliver a high-quality learning experience to all students. I was also wary of another outbreak and aware that students might still need to isolate or travel home, so I decided to keep the Zoom option to accommodate these possibilities. I framed my policy so that students could benefit without over-relying on remote attendance. Students could attend via Zoom twice per semester without explanation, as long as they contacted me prior to class. After that, they would need a communicated, reasonable, and documented reason. When students attended via Zoom, they were encouraged to have their camera on (if possible) and be responsive to earn attendance credit for the class period.

When the 2022-2023 academic year commenced as a “normal” year, many did away with the adaptations they had made during the pandemic. However, I saw no reason to discontinue the Zoom option in my classes. In fact, I saw sixty reasons to continue it. In my most recent evaluation (Spring 2023), in response to the question “What are some ways the instructor created a climate of mutual respect?” one student wrote: “[The professor] has an option to join the course through Zoom, which has been very helpful during the days where I may not have otherwise been able to join class. The option itself gave the impression that she was willing to work with students regardless of whatever may be going on in their lives, and instantly made me more comfortable.” This student indicated that the Zoom option allowed them to actively participate in class despite their challenges and that the option made them feel safe, respected, and valued.

In many ways, the pandemic made me rethink how I could make my classroom more accessible for students, many of whom face obstacles to their learning outside of their control. Because the circumstances demanded it, I had to experiment with course delivery, be willing to try something new, and practice flexibility and empathy to provide students with a valuable learning experience. It did not take long to realize how small changes like offering a Zoom option could make a significant difference.