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“Bringing you into the zoom”: The power of authentic engagement in a time of crisis in the USA

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ABSTRACT

In the chaos shrouding 2020, students have been tasked with another challenge: finding meaningful connection in an age of virtual classrooms. To counteract the silence and emotional distance of e-learning, educators have tried everything from break-out rooms to Google Jamboards. However, our team of researchers and teachers found that educators don't need an arsenal of digital tools to engage students. Throughout this pandemic summer, we developed and taught a series of online interactive workshops with students from middle school and high school. In our experience across grades, we found what made students come alive was the opportunity to share themselves – their passions, pets, and the issues close to their hearts – with us and their peers. We draw on Kearsley & Shneiderman's engagement theory of technology-based teaching and learning into the reality of 2020 by reflecting on the question: How can we help students and educators “Bring you into the Zoom?” How are opportunities for genuine, meaningful connection within the confines of digital space created? We suggest how three activities (show & tell boxes, personal capstone projects, and deep appreciations) used in our teaching may help spark authentic engagement in educators' digital classrooms – and even moments of joy.

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Introduction

Against the backdrop of fear and uncertainty during the pandemic, the unprecedented shift to online learning has proven difficult for students and educators alike. A recent survey found the majority of students felt online learning was worse than in-person schooling, largely due to the challenges of staying engaged remotely and the absence of meaningful connections (Wronski, 2020). Many educators are also feeling burnt out by the demands of teaching online. Teaching to black screens and muted audios is hard, and almost 45% of educators said that strategies to keep students engaged and motivated is a major need (Hamilton, Kaufman, & Diliberti, 2020).

Like many other educators, this was the predicament we found ourselves in as we began teaching interactive online workshops to middle and high school students in a pandemic summer. As a team of researchers, educators, and social workers, we had

felt the painful silence of Zoom classrooms before and wanted to leverage communication theory to enrich our practice of online teaching in a time of crisis.

Initially, we thought technocentrically – believing the problem could be addressed with a more diverse set of digital tools (Salomon, 2002). Yet, despite adopting digital learning “solutions” from break-out rooms to Google Jamboards to engage our students, the “gloom” of Zoom persisted. Talking with students, however, helped us realize that the remedy to the emotional distance of online learning lay in the human art of connection, rather than multi-tech mastery. What our students were craving was not another teaching tool, but rather the humanization of the digital classroom. We wondered: how should we use technology to create opportunities for meaningful connection within digital space?

We found comfort and guidance in knowing this is not a new problem. A similar challenge emerged in the late 90s, when computer-mediated distance learning was first made possible (Tolmie & Boyle, 2000). Educators asked to teach online were worried about how to translate strategies for student engagement designed for pens, paper, and lecture halls to a new digital modality. For such moments of technological upheaval, Kearsley and Shneiderman (1998) proposed an engagement theory of technology-based learning and teaching that urged educators to reframe computers in education as communication tools, to complement existing pedagogical practice. They emphasized creating an authentic, meaningful setting for learning by encouraging educators to make activities personal, to encourage collaborative or personal projects, and to ground activities in what students care about.

These principles guided us in creating opportunities for authentic engagement in the digital classroom through our own teaching with middle and high school students. In hopes of sharing what we learned with other educators, we reflect on how three activities – show & tell boxes, personal capstone projects, and deep appreciations – sparked authentic engagement and even moments of joy.

Show & tell self-boxes

Creating opportunities for students to richly introduce themselves is a cornerstone of authentic engagement online (Scollins-Mantha, 2008). Beginning class with “biographies” where students share about themselves not only welcomes students into a new learning environment, but also encourages students to notice shared interests and appreciate classroom diversity (Weiss, 2000).

We invited students to “show and tell” themselves by making and presenting a digital self-box. Every student was added to a shared Google Slides presentation, where they were given a slide they could decorate with things that were meaningful to them. This activity let students share as much as they felt comfortable, giving them a blank canvas to create something that said “This is me.”

Every self-box was truly a microcosm of each student’s world. They filled up slides with pictures of family and friends, logos of sports teams and clubs, and covers of favorite bands and TV shows – not to mention their beloved pets. While one student included Polaroid-esque snapshots of ballet, architecture, and Lana Del Rey, a proud student-athlete filled his with shots of heroes Kobe Bryant and Bruce Lee. In addition to fun bits like preferred snacks, many students also included powerful symbols like the LGBTQ+

Pride Flag, homages to their family heritage, and references to social movements like #BlackLivesMatter.

Sharing our own self-boxes as educators also helped humanize the Zoom classroom. In line with previous work on self-disclosure from teachers, this activity helped students get to know us as “real people” and bond over shared love of dogs, travel, or games – a connection that strengthened the teacher-student relationship and helped build a welcoming, positive classroom climate (Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2007). The simple act of sharing personal information can have powerful benefits for both teachers and students by improving feelings of closeness. In addition to helping students get to know one another better, self-boxes also sparked new friendships as students filled the Zoom chat with comments pointing out shared interests (“I love that show too!”) and voicing plans to connect in the future (“We should play Smash together sometime!”). By going deeper than just an icebreaker, we sent a signal to students that we *want* them to bring their full selves into the classroom.

Personal capstone projects

We brought students’ personal interests to class with a month-long personal “capstone” project (Kearsley & Shneiderman, 1998). Following principles of engagement theory, students prepared a 20-minute presentation on a topic of personal significance relating to class content (in our case, issues of technology). With scaffolding and support from instructors, students explored issues that were close to their hearts – ranging from light-hearted pastimes like “Art and the Internet” and “the ASMR community” to serious issues like racial injustice, online sexism, and mental illness. As one student said before his presentation, “This is the community that raised me. Let me take you into our world.”

We could hear the passion in their voices as they spoke, and we knew students dug deep to present on topics that they truly cared about. We were particularly struck by how many students chose to use their capstone presentation to speak out on issues that have defined 2020, like political polarization, racial justice advocacy, and challenges to mental health. There is power in being invited to share, among a community of peers, their perspective on the crises of this year. One freshman, for example, talked about the strategies teens were using on social media to raise awareness for the Black Lives Matter movement by sharing petitions and educational resources on racial justice. She spoke with vulnerability and strength, concluding with, “This is something that’s really important to me. Thank you for hearing me.”

Deep appreciations

After every capstone, we wanted to ensure all students felt affirmed for sharing. One of the most powerful experiences of our summer came from practicing deep appreciations. Creating opportunities for students to give and receive positive feedback can help make learning environments a place where students feel “a sense of safety and trust, as well as openness” (Weiss, 2000). After every presentation, all students and educators were asked to share something they appreciated about the presentation, in the Zoom chat or out loud. Guided by research on effective and meaningful feedback, educators modeled

appreciations by pointing out students' passion and hard work (Herrington, Reeves, & Oliver, 2010).

Bringing your whole self into a classroom, particularly a Zoom classroom, can be intimidating – especially when speaking about something personal that you care deeply about. It's easy for students to fixate on what they could have done better. However, as we went around the Zoom and the chat filled with positive messages from their classmates, we watched every student light up with pride. Hearing personal compliments (“I was so blown away by your presentation, your style, your speaking, just everything!”) and affirmations (“This is such an important topic, thank you for teaching me!”) created a sense of mutual support and positive regard as students learned to feel comfortable expressing authentic appreciation with one another. By the end, the Zoom was aglow with the warm energy of students in community and the joy of learning together.

Conclusion

In our experience across grades, we found that what made students come alive was the opportunity to share themselves – their passions, pets, and the issues close to their hearts – with us and their peers. While authentic engagement and meaningful connection may look different online, our students are no less vibrant: we just need to find ways to bring them and their voices into the Zoom. Through activities like self-boxes, capstones, and deep appreciations, we hoped to help students feel seen, heard, and welcomed into a classroom community. Through the challenges of this year, hearing students use their voices to tell us who they are and what they care about has truly been the highlight of our increasingly digital world.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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