

With the onset of COVID-19, the traditional college classroom was forced to literally transform overnight. One day, we were standing in front of students, watching as they slid into their seats in overcrowded classrooms, pulling out notebooks and pens. The next day, we were in our homes, staring into a grid of tiny squares representing the people we had known as our students.

While the pandemic relieved us of long commutes and cramped elevator rides, it left many of us without the basics that we need in order to connect with students and evaluate our own teaching. Muted mics were required unless students were called on and acknowledged, and soon most students defaulted to “video off” mode. Whether to increase bandwidth or hide an embarrassing backdrop or distracting venue, it soon became clear that the Zoom classroom facilitated the perfect vehicle for students to mentally and virtually “check out” during class.

In short, Zoom-delivery soon revealed the *distance* in distance-learning, and the medium instantly deprived professors of the interactive advantage of seeing students’ facial expressions, body language, and raised hands.

When we first transitioned to remote instruction, I attempted to conduct class “as normal.” I would begin by introducing a concept. Then, as class went on, I would alternate between lecture delivery and posing questions to the class. In the beginning, I invited students to participate over Zoom any way they liked. While some students spoke up, over the course of the spring semester I began to notice students’ increasing tendency to register their answers to my questions in the CHAT box. Instead of interrupting the flow of class to physically or virtually raise a hand, wait to be called upon, unmute, speak, re-mute, and wait for the professor’s response, students were able to chime in to the discussion in real time without interrupting the flow of the lecture and question session.

During the summer of 2020, I attended a seminar to improve online pedagogy, and had the opportunity to engage as a participant rather than an instructor. I noticed others using the CHAT feature, and began to use it, too. I appreciated how it reduced the need to find a suitable space in the conversation to interject. It reduced some of the fear of speaking in front of others, in part because the response is written, and can be edited and revised before sending. The chat function also can be used to affirm others' comments – something which can be especially hard to do in a virtual classroom that is host to dozens of other students.

In the fall 2020 semester, I began to utilize the CHAT feature more intentionally in my own classroom. While I still sometimes invited students to raise their hands and speak, I emphasized that they could always interject, ask questions, or otherwise participate through the chat. The benefit of using the chat function is that I can see a collection of student thoughts all at once, rather than calling on students one by one.

By monitoring the actual number of responses, I can gauge whether students are actively listening. A lack of responses might signal to me that the question needs to be more specific, or perhaps rephrased to enhance clarity. The CHAT function works particularly well when I need quick, crowd-sourced examples. For example, when we talk about how marketing can address needs or wants, I provide examples of products that meet needs (e.g. housing), and products that address consumers' wants (e.g. fidget spinners). Then, I'll ask for examples of products that are somewhere in the middle. Usually a moment or two will pass, and then some answers will begin to appear in the CHAT log. As students' responses flow in, I can comment on them, at times addressing misconceptions, other times asking students to elaborate or explain their rationale, and many times simply observing as students agree or disagree with one another.

This process is efficient and dynamic, playing out much faster than it did when I used to call on students individually. The system is not perfect – for example, not all students choose to participate – but my hope is that the CHAT box levels the participation “playing field” by enabling students to share their thoughts more freely, while allowing me to better assess their understanding and draw out their lived experiences.

To a large extent, it is up to *students* to determine how they attend their Zoom-mediated classes. In my classes of more than 60 students, the students decide whether or not to log on, activate their video camera, and participate through raising hands and speaking live. However, I have found that encouraging use of the CHAT feature helps students stay interested and engaged, even when they choose to keep their cameras off and audio muted. By acknowledging and discussing those “muted and unseen” students’ real-time comments and responses in CHAT, *all* students know their answers are “heard” in tandem with the lesson, and valued as a contribution to our collective learning process.