



Adventures in Teaching

Setting up and Optimizing the Virtual Learning Environment

The pandemic has presented us with numerous challenges, including how to create authentic, meaningful, and effective learning experiences in a virtual environment. Here are some strategies to help you set up and optimize the virtual learning environment using ZOOM when facilitating small or medium sized groups.

Set Up Your Physical Environment

- Set up the camera so that your face and upper body are visible and you are looking up towards it.
- Direct lighting towards your face, and minimize backlight wherever possible.
- Choose an appropriate background (i.e. neutral, tidy, [U of T virtual backgrounds](#)).
- Minimize noise and distractions (e.g. turn off notifications, your phone, etc.).

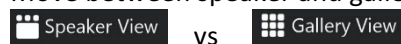
Start by introducing yourself and allowing the students to introduce themselves. Build community by sharing a fun fact about yourself, inviting your students to do the same, or use an icebreaker such as two truths and a lie.

Set Expectations by Setting the Stage for Engagement, Communication and Collaboration

- Remind students to mute their mic, but get ready to jump in and participate.
- Encourage students to leave their video on, particularly when speaking, respecting that this is not always possible (see [Resource for Small Group Tutors](#) for recommendations and response to use of cameras).
- Get to know students' names and use them - have a student list in front of you. Make sure everyone's name is correctly displayed by their Zoom image or ask students to rename themselves.
- Discuss how communication and collaboration will occur during the session (e.g. let students know it is OK to jump right in even if it may interrupt discussion).
- Discuss how you would like questions to be asked and answered during the session (e.g. in the chat box, raise your hand in the participant field, jump right in, use the annotate function to write out the question.)
- There might be technological difficulties. Invite students to help out if needed.
- Provide a reminder to adhere to the standards of professionalism set by the MD Program, and that we are responsible for our own and the group's learning by actively listening and participating.

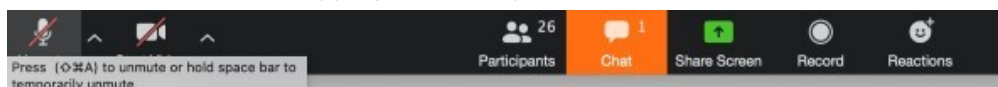
Select the Appropriate Views of Your Participants

Move between speaker and gallery views to change your view of the participants (top right):

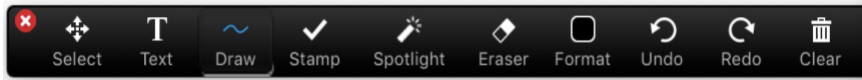


Orient yourself and the students to Zoom Features that encourage interactivity before the session starts:

- Press space bar to unmute temporarily
- Raise hand (in Participants area)
- Use the Chat Box
- Offer reactions (clapping, thumbs up) as feedback



Annotate allows you and the students to draw, type, stamp, etc. on a slide, text, or diagram. The annotation toolbar can be found under OPTIONS. Watch [this video](#) for more information.



Share your screen on zoom by clicking on “Share Screen”:

- Ensure you are able to share your screen ahead of time by adjusting your privacy settings.
- Open the PowerPoint presentation on your desktop then select it to share only that window instead of your entire desktop. You can also share Word documents, use a whiteboard, or connect an iPad.
- Watch [this video](#) on how to share your screen.

Interactivity and student engagement during the sessions

Engage students early and often¹

- Ask good questions, reward student for building on the points of others, set bounds for questions and discussions, and be enthusiastic!¹
- Change things up every 10-15 mins (e.g. ask or answer questions, add a new activity or different interactive feature, take a brief pause).
- Use breakout rooms. Orient your students to the task before they breakout as they cannot see any of the materials you shared in the larger group. Have them select one student to report back.

Using Breakout Rooms in Zoom

1. Click BREAKOUT ROOMS
2. Select the number of rooms to create
3. Assign your participants to rooms automatically or manually
4. Click CREATE ROOMS
5. Click OPEN ALL ROOMS
6. Set a timer or click CLOSE ALL ROOMS when time is up

Watch [this video](#) and see how it works.

**Be kind, especially
to yourself, and
remember to
have fun!**

Create and Maintain a Psychologically Safe Environment

- A psychologically safe environment is one where learners feel comfortable asking questions, taking risks, making mistakes, and asking for help. They feel respected, and that their efforts and skills are valued.²
- Communicating in a virtual environment is more challenging than in person. It is easier to miss non-verbal cues and read the energy and mood in a room than when in-person. It might be more difficult to build relationships and trust.
- A supportive and safe environment must be created to allow students to feel comfortable participating. Encourage critical thinking while validating student responses, gently correcting misconceptions, and avoid shaming.

References:

1. Schiano, Bill and Espen Anderson. “Teaching with Cases Online.” Harvard Business Publishing. May 25, 2017. https://s3.amazonaws.com/he-product-images/docs/Article_Teaching_With_Cases_Online.pdf
2. Edmonson, Amy. Psychological Safety and Learning Behaviour in Work Teams. Administrative Science Quarterly. Vol. 44, No. 2 (Jun., 1999), pp. 350-383. http://web.mit.edu/curhan/www/docs/Articles/15341_Readings/Group_Performance/Edmondson%20Psychological%20safety.pdf

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The following individuals contributed to the development of this faculty development resource: Susanna Talarico and Jana Lazor