In Defense of the Gray Squares: The Benefits of the Chat Function in the Online Classroom

Carlos Cruz

This article examines the ongoing debate regarding participation in online classrooms. This conversation often centers on how to replicate best the nature of a face-to-face classroom in an online environment. However, recent scholarly work has highlighted various barriers to students turning their cameras on during class sessions. Beyond examining these barriers, this article highlights the flexibility of online chat as a teaching tool. Online chat provides students with two different ways to communicate with their professors and peers. The chat function also alleviates some students' concerns regarding their technology's effectiveness or accents. Being the only face and voice in the online classroom may be a jarring experience for instructors, but it may best fit some of our students.

Keywords: online pedagogy, online chat, class participation

Introduction

In March 2020, the world of higher education changed overnight as lockdowns took effect in the United States. Depending on their institution, faculty may have received a short adjustment period that ostensibly afforded professors enough time to prepare their content for online dissemination. However, this transition likely represented many faculty members' first online teaching experience. A 2019 survey of faculty conducted by Inside Higher Ed and Gallup found that only 46% of their sample had experience with teaching an online course (Lederman, 2019). Beyond being neophytes to online teaching, some faculty likely experienced a classroom environment unlike any they had ever encountered. Potentially gone were nonverbal markers of the traditional classroom, such as students quickly jotting down notes or quizzical looks after a difficult term was first introduced. These nonverbal markers and our students were replaced by a panel of semi-anonymous gray squares. Moreover, not only were the visages of the students gone but, in some cases, their voices were supplanted largely by messages in the online chat. While initially jarring, this nontraditional classroom has been an excellent fit for my students throughout the pandemic. The online classroom does not have to mirror the face-to-face classroom, as it has unique strengths that can address different student concerns.

Literature Review

Unsurprisingly, the number of scholarly studies examining online classroom management has increased dramatically since the onset of the pandemic. This work has been especially interested in investigating why students do not turn their cameras on and different techniques that could encourage, if not mandate, students to turn their cameras on. Finders and Muñoz (2021, para. 6) argue that both approaches implemented by professors, encouraging and requiring students to have their cameras on, can be classified as "an attempt to exert control over the bodies of their students." The authors (Finders & Muñoz, 2021) list several arguments against turning on cameras, including eye contact is not a universal norm across cultures; students may not have access to the technology needed for video conferencing, and students' concerns about being camera ready.

In addition to the arguments regarding control propounded by Finders and Muñoz (2021), other scholarly studies have yielded several explanations for student reluctance to keep their cameras on. A survey conducted by Castelli and Sarvary (2020) found that students turned their cameras off most frequently due to the following three concerns: their appearance, a person being seen in their background, and internet connectivity issues. Gherhes et al. (2021) found that students do not keep their cameras on

Carlos Cruz (PhD, The Ohio State University, 2015) is an Assistant Professor in the Communication Arts and Sciences department at Bronx Community College. Address correspondence to the author at Carlos.cruz03@bcc.cuny.edu.

for various reasons, including fear of being exposed/shyness, because other students do not have their cameras on, and a desire to preserve the privacy of their homes. Of course, one cannot examine why individuals do not have cameras on without discussing the ubiquitous Zoom fatigue. Researchers Toney et al. (2021) highlighted ways to combat Zoom fatigue, such as asynchronous lectures and small group activities. While this list of reasons for students not turning their cameras on is extensive, it is certainly not exhaustive. One can imagine students attending lectures from their workplaces or while completing errands. Some professors may not be thrilled about the prospect of their students engaging in multitasking. Nevertheless, it may be unavoidable as society attempts to develop a new normal following the recent lockdowns.

While students may opt to keep their cameras off for various reasons, that does not undercut their ability to participate or the importance of participation during online lectures. Rocca's (2010) literature review showcased studies that demonstrated several positive effects of participation, including increased motivation, improved communication skills, and higher grades. Another literature review completed by Czekanski and Wolf (2013) revealed that some scholars consider participation an indicator of active learning. Czekanski and Wolf's (2013) summary of the literature links active learning to a host of positive outcomes, including improved writing ability and learning. A recent study by Kim et al. (2020) found that student participation is a significant mediator in the relationship between attendance and academic performance. Kim et al. (2020) observed that the direct relationship between attendance and academic performance was no longer significant once student participation had been accounted for. While participation in the online classroom may take different forms when contrasted to the face-to-face classroom, scholarly work indicates that seeking participation in the online classroom is a worthy endeavor for faculty.

The Benefits of Online Chat for Students

As previously mentioned, participation in online classrooms may represent a stark departure from face-to-face environments. This is certainly evident in my classes, as maybe half of the students will ever unmute their microphones to participate. Most student comments, inquiries, and asides are written in the class chat. Hadi Mogavi et al.'s (2021) typology delineates three barriers to active learning in online environments: human-side concerns such as shyness, environmental concerns such as overcrowding in the student's workspace, and technological concerns such as internet bandwidth. The previously listed barriers represent some hurdles that make my students reluctant to engage in vocal participation. Fortunately, Ganeser (2020) argues that the affordances of online classes can provide shy students with convenient ways to participate in conversations.

While human-side concerns are common, technological barriers were significant at my institution. During the Spring 2020 semester, the Bronx Community College (BCC) Office of Institutional Research conducted a survey that found 22% of students had trouble accessing online courses (C. Efthimiou, personal communication, September 6, 2022). The same technological barriers that prevent students from turning their cameras on during class will likely impact their ability to speak on the microphone. However, the digital divide is one of many reasons students may opt to type instead of speaking their thoughts.

Every semester I have a few students that are reluctant to speak in the classroom. However, for some of these students, their reluctance is not indicative of public speaking anxiety. Instead, these students occasionally confide that they do not participate because they are worried about being judged because of their accents or concerned about their ability to articulate their thoughts in English. Bista (2011, para. 3), in discussing his experience as an international student, admitted, "I did not join class discussion out of fear that I would be unable to deal with the possible conflicts or misunderstandings." Some scholarly work (Kao & Gansneder, 1995; Tatar, 2005) has found that students who did not speak English as their first language were less likely to participate in classroom discussions.

Data from the BCC Office of Institutional Research found that 17% of all students enrolled in the Fall 2021 semester were more comfortable with a language other than English (C. Efthimiou, personal

communication, September 6, 2022). Concerns about accents are relatively common, so I address this issue early in the semester. I tell my students that an accent may mean they know two languages and that being bilingual is often a highly sought-after skill in the job market. Furthermore, I let students know that accents do not affect my performance evaluation. Despite my appeals, it is difficult for one argument to counter their lived experiences. In a face-to-face classroom, these students may be seen as "wallflowers" who would prefer to do anything other than participate in class.

However, the online classroom has three unique participation methods: vocal participation, typing in the public chat, and a direct message to the professor. For the moment, let us examine the latter two options. Typing, both publicly and privately, circumvents the previously described concern regarding accents. Typing gives these students a more straightforward method of engaging with the material and the professor. Campbell (2007) found that ESL students that were largely quiet during in-class discussions became more active participants when completing group activities on the discussion board. While the asynchronous nature of the discussion board affords students more time to compose their thoughts, there is still significant value in the chat function during a synchronous class session. A typed question may not pose the same level of "risk" for students whose concerns are primarily linked to their pronunciation.

In addition to bypassing concerns regarding pronunciation, the private chat function allows students to submit questions without worrying about the validity of their questions. The idea that "there are no bad questions" is undoubtedly a teaching cliché, but it is one that I wholeheartedly embrace. Nevertheless, some students may not want to attach their names to particular questions, especially if the rest of their peers presumably understand the material. If a privately submitted inquiry is connected to the lecture, I will read the question to the class without referencing the student's name. This integration of privately submitted questions into the lecture serves a bevy of functions: it provides immediate feedback to the student, demonstrates to other students the appeal of a privately raised question, and reinforces the concept for students with a firm grasp of the material. Of course, not all private messages are integrated into the lecture. For example, some students use the channel to notify me that they must temporarily step away from the computer or miss a future class session. The chat function lets me handle academic and personal concerns in real time.

Applications for Professors

Thus far, we have examined how online chat can be used to mitigate some student concerns regarding pronunciation and the validity of their questions. However, online chat provides faculty with options during their lectures. First, professors can use the chat to write down definitions, important upcoming dates, and to check in with students. Using the chat to list definitions is a great way to account for language barriers and the presence of specialized terminology. Furthermore, using the chat to record critical ideas addresses a few common technical issues such as audio interference in the student's background or internet stability.

Beyond listing definitions, providing students with important dates verbally and in the chat can help assuage some student stress. I use the first five to ten minutes of a class session for announcements. The announcements can refer to reminders for homework assignments, changes in an assignment's due date, or discussion of an important date for all students, such as the last day to withdraw from a course with a "W" grade. No matter the announcement, providing students with a written copy of information facilitates note-taking.

Significantly, these chat conversations can be aggregated and accounted for in Blackboard Collaborate using Session Engagement Insights. These insights provide hosts with valuable information, including how many hands were raised during the session, the total number of chat messages, and what percentage of attendees contributed to the discussion in the chat (Anthology Inc., n.d.). Professors can use these insights to reflect on lesson plans or activities that successfully capture student interest. These engagement insights can complement polls during the class session as unique ways to capture student participation. According to the engagement insights and polling data, professors can use the private chat

function to reach out to students that do not appear to be engaging with the course. These conversations can build student relationships integral to teaching effectiveness (Reynolds, 2022).

Conclusion

O'Conaill et al. (1993) once found that participants preferred video over audio conferences because audio-only can produce the sensation of "talking into a void" (419). For some professors talking to a virtual wall of gray squares may elicit a similar feeling. However, a change in perspective will allow faculty members to appreciate the richness of this online environment. Online classes may not have the same nonverbal signifiers of student interest and behavior, but this environment is replete with ways for students to express their ideas and concerns. In addition, this online classroom provides all students with participation opportunities instead of the conversation being dominated by those comfortable with public speaking. For these reasons, faculty should resist the urge to create a facsimile of the face-to-face classroom. Instead, they should continue to examine how to best use the affordances of online environments to teach their students.

References

Anthology Inc. (n.d.). *Session Engagement Insights*. https://help.blackboard.com/Collaborate/Ultra/Moderator/Moderate_Sessions/Session_Engagement_Insights

Bista, K. (2011, June 23). *Why some international students are silent in the U.S. classroom*. Faculty Focus. https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-and-learning/a-first-person-explanation-of-why-some-international-students-are-silent-in-the-u-s-classroom/

Campbell, N. (2007). Bringing ESL students out of their shells: Enhancing participation through online discussion. *Business Communication Quarterly*, *70*(1), 37–43. https://doi.org/10.1177/108056990707000105

Castelli, F. R., & Sarvary, M. A. (2020). Why students do not turn on their video cameras during online classes and an equitable and inclusive plan to encourage them to do so. *Ecology and Evolution*, *11*(8), 3565-3576. https://doi.org/10.1002/ece3.7123

Czekanski, K. E., & Wolf, Z. R. (2013). Encouraging and evaluating class participation. *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice*, *10*(1), 1–13. https://doi.org/10.53761/1.10.1.7

Finders, M., & Muñoz, J. (2021, March 3). *Cameras on: Surveillance in the time of COVID-19*. Inside Higher Ed. https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2021/03/03/why-its-wrong-require-students-keep-their-cameras-online-classes-opinion

Ganeser, A. N. (2020). A study on students' perception of online classes and effectiveness in enhancing active participation and communication skills. *Universal Journal of Educational Research*, *8*(11B), 5958–5964. https://doi.org/10.13189/ujer.2020.082231

Gherhes, V., Simona, S., & Para, I. (2021). Analysing students' reasons for keeping their webcams on or off during online classes. *Sustainability*, *13*(6), 1–13. https://doi.org/10.3390/su13063203

Hadi Mogavi, R., Zhao, Y., Ul Haq, E., Hui, P., & Ma, X. (2021). Student barriers to active learning in synchronous online classes: Characterization, reflections, and suggestions. In M. Christoph, M.P. Sanagustin, M.E. Specht, A.E. Ogan, (Ed.), *Proceedings of research, Eighth ACM Conference on Learning* (pp. 101-115). ACM Digital Library. https://doi.org/10.1145/3430895.3460126

Kao, C., & Gansneder, B. (1995). An assessment of class participation by international graduate students. *Journal of College Student Development*, *36*, 132–140.

Kim, A. S. N., Shakory, S., Azad, A., Popovic, C., & Park, L. (2019). Understanding the impact of attendance and participation on academic achievement. *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Psychology*, *6*(4), 272–284. https://doi.org/10.1037/stl0000151

Lederman, D. (2019, Oct. 30). *Professors' slow, steady acceptance of online learning: A survey*. Inside Higher Ed. https://www.insidehighered.com/news/survey/professors-slow-steady-acceptance-online-learning-survey

O'Conaill, B., Whittaker, S., & Wilbur, S. (1993). Conversations over video conferences: An evaluation of the spoken aspects of video-mediated communication. *Human-Computer Interaction*, *8*(4), 389–428.

Reynolds, G. S. (2022). It's about relationship (Yes, even online). *Ohio Communication Journal*, *60*, 175–179.

Rocca, K. A. (2010). Student participation in the college classroom: An extended multidisciplinary literature review. *Communication Education*, *59*(2), 185–213. https://doi.org/10.1080/03634520903505936

Tatar, S. (2005). Why keep silent? The classroom participation experiences of non-native-English-speaking students. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, *5*, 284–293. https://doi.org/10.1080/14708470508668902

Toney, S., Light, J., & Urbaczewski, A. (2021). Fighting Zoom fatigue: Keeping the zoombies at Bay. *Communications of the Association for Information Systems, 48*(6), 40–46. https://doi.org/10.17705/1CAIS.04806