

“To Zoom or not to Zoom-- that is the question...”

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First off, if you want to follow along or read what I’m saying later, go to my blog at stevendkrause.com. I have posted my presentation script.

Speaking of blogging, I also want to thank Sally Reynolds and everyone associated with this conference for inviting me, and I’m pretty sure the reason why I’m here in the first place is because I wrote a post on my blog back in September titled “‘Synch Video is Bad,’ perhaps a new research project?” Let me backup a bit and try to give a context as to why I think I’m still mostly but not completely right about Zoom teaching being bad.

I’m a professor at Eastern Michigan University, which is an unremarkable regional public university with 15,000 or so students that’s about 30 miles west of downtown Detroit and just about 10 miles from a university you probably *have* heard of, the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. I’ve been teaching online as a part of my regular teaching load for about fifteen years, and (also *not* like Michigan or other elite universities in the US), EMU has been offering many courses and programs online since the mid-1990s.

Unlike the University of Michigan, Eastern is an “opportunity granting” institution where most of our students are from nearby, many of these students are people of color, come from working class backgrounds, and are the first person in their families to attend college, and many of these students are older as well. We do have students who fall into that right out of secondary school and 18-22 age demographic, but the majority commute to campus, and I would guess about half of all of our current students have taken at least one online course as part of their studies.

Also, I co-edited *Invasion of the MOOCs*, which was one of the earliest collections of essays about Massive Open Online Courses, and I am the author of *More Than a Moment*, which is book that argues the “MOOC moment” was not a particularly new innovation but rather a logical continuation of the history of similar efforts in distance education, through things like correspondence courses, TV courses, movements like Open University, and what I call “traditional” online courses.

So my point is I'm comfortable with defending a number of assertions about online pedagogy, claims I think most people who study distance education also agree with.

First, there's no point in comparing what is “better,” face to face or online courses, and the research that's been done on this front has found that there is no significant difference in student outcomes between the two modes of delivery. Now, I'm not talking about secondary or elementary school because online classes in those settings are very different. I'm not talking about the comparison in instructor workloads for preparing online versus f2f classes, and I'm not talking about which format instructors or students quote unquote “like” better. I'm talking about what students do in the courses and what they demonstrably learn. If I showed you the essays my students wrote from the same course offered in these two different formats, you would not be able to tell the difference.

Instead, I think the focus should be on maximizing the *affordances* of these different modes of delivery. Face to face classes have the advantage of efficiency because having everyone in the same room at the same time means students and teachers can exchange a great deal of information with each other in a short period of time. Online classes have the advantage of access and flexibility because they enable students and teachers to engage in the course regardless of physical location, and, when they are asynchronous, regardless of time. The easiest analogy I can make here is comparing talking to a person on the phone versus texting with that person. Sometimes, depending on the person, the nature of the call, and the time available, the preferred mode is to talk. Sometimes, it's texting.

A slightly different but related assertion: What happened in the spring in response to Covid was *not* an example of online teaching; it was an emergency move to salvage and survive the school year.

My second assertion: online courses work best as asynchronous offerings. I'll come back to this, but the general wisdom has been that asynch online courses work better because synchronous technology can be complicated and unreliable, but mostly because the asynchronous format allows students flexibility. And remember this has always been one of the main points of distance education all the way back to correspondence schools: the reason to offer courses in these alternative formats is to extend student access to higher education.

Finally, video is overrated. There's a certain face-value *logic* to it as a quick and easy way to teach online, sure, and I am not saying *all* video in online classes is unnecessary or not

helpful. But videos of talking head professors are typically a replication of another not effective but common face to face teaching method, the “sage on the stage” lecture. Most faculty-- particularly those new to online teaching and with video recording-- overlook the importance of good production values in these lectures (I mean things like lighting, image and sound quality, and so forth), and they severely overestimate their own abilities to perform well in the format. Let me put it like this: when I was researching and participating in MOOCs, I watched a lot of shitty video lectures from faculty who I am sure are much better at it in a f2f classroom. And as Michael Wesch and his students pointed out in his 2008 lecture “An Anthropological Introduction to YouTube,” it is *really* hard to give an effective talk, recorded or live, by just talking into a webcam by yourself.

So, when colleges and universities in the U.S. decided to shift the bulk of their teaching online because of Covid, I was puzzled by how many of my colleagues moved to synchronous Zoom meetings instead of actually trying to take advantage of the affordances of the medium. Some of these decisions have been made by the universities, but most instructors made the decision to teach synchronously with Zoom on their own, and frankly I think most did so after having done no meaningful research on best practices for teaching online.

Let me offer an analogy to illustrate my point (and here I’m quoting myself from the newsletter article I contributed). Setting aside the pandemic, suppose I was scheduled to teach an asynchronous online course, and, for some reason, it was suddenly rescheduled into a traditional face to face course, something that meets Tuesdays and Thursdays from 10 am to 11:15 am. Then suppose I just decided to stick with my original plans and teach the class as if it were online. So instead of adjusting my course to the f2f format, I made the f2f format adjust to my online course. Everyone has to physically show up to the class at the scheduled time, but otherwise, everything takes place as if we weren’t in a classroom together. Other than some small talk at the beginning and end of the class, I’d allow no conversation or even acknowledgement that we were sitting in the same room. Students would only interact with each other in the class Learning Management System. Students would sit at their desks for 75 minutes, silently working and never looking up from their computers, and as the instructor, I would sit in the front of the room and do the same. We’d repeat this at all meetings for the entire semester.

Ridiculous, right? And yet this is essentially what an online Zoom class looks like to me. It's forcing a pedagogy that works best in face to face settings into the online classroom, forcing a square peg into a round hole.

There are other issues and problems with these synchronous classes I'll only briefly mention for now. Zoom and similar software have a host of security and privacy issues. There's the phenomenon of uninvited guests called “Zoom bombing,” but I also have in mind the ways in which Zoom can be used by administrators to surveil faculty against their will. A lot of my students do not have the required wifi or computers to effectively use Zoom. There's the question of allowing students to keep their screens darkened. It's a good gesture for enabling students the choice regarding privacy and personal appearance online, but it also can result in a teacher lecturing to a series of black and silent screens, and it isn't particularly difficult for one of these black screen participants to be logged in but not actually there. And we've felt the disembodied fatigue that can come from a couple hours of zooming. And so on.

On the other hand, we're in a unique moment and it might turn out that this conventional wisdom about synchronous online classes facilitated with a video technology like Zoom is not correct. And I should point out that I am not a *complete* Zoom hater. Last school year and before Covid, I had started experimenting with Google Meetings to have one on one conferences with my students about writing assignments and research. My department has been holding various committee meetings via Zoom this year, and I actually prefer that format to meeting f2f because it saves everyone time and the meetings tend to be shorter, too. I've read some folks arguing that we should have synchronous online classes because it's what these students want-- I believe Maha and I had an exchange about that on Twitter-- and I've also heard a lot of anecdotal stories on social media and elsewhere on the success of Zoom teaching.

So again, while I still think I'm mostly right about the problem of Zoom teaching in online courses, we are certainly in a moment where this and other assumptions and best practices about online teaching demand to be re-examined. Back in March, the education historian Jonathan Zimmerman suggested in a *Chronicle of Higher Education* column that it was the perfect time to revisit the effectiveness of online learning and teaching since all classes being online eliminates the self-selection problem of previous studies: that is, perhaps online classes have been found to be as effective as f2f classes because students in online classes opted into the format and were already comfortable with it. I disagree with Zimmerman about this, and March

and April 2020 was especially *not* the time to do that research because moving everything online in an emergency with no planning isn't actually online teaching.

But this is a different school year and we are teaching online under different circumstances. This global tragedy that has forced us to find ways to teach online-- and that includes faculty who previously would have never dreamed of teaching online-- is clearly a unique historical moment. This school year and the shift to online delivery will be researched and examined for years to come. I'm planning myself to put together a study that would involve surveying and interviewing faculty about their experiences this year. I have no idea how this will turn out, but it is entirely possible that the conventional wisdom and assertions I'm defending about synchronous video being bad are wrong. And that'd be interesting and a good example of why it's useful to do this kind of research.

I will stop now by just offering one more assertion about online teaching, this time about the future. I don't think universities are going to revert to their pre-Covid practices and attitudes about online learning. Of course we'll return to a place where *most* college classes are offered face to face and where we'll return to the other trappings of the “college life” experience in the US, particularly at places like the University of Michigan: sports, parties, bars, clubs, dorms, apartments, and all the other things only indirectly associated with education. But I do think we will see an increasing acceptance of online courses as part of the mix, particularly at elite institutions that didn't offer a lot of online classes before covid. And ultimately, I think the pedagogical differences between online and f2f classes will begin to diminish. We'll continue to have asynchronous classes that are entirely online and synchronous classes that are entirely face to face, but I suspect a lot more f2f courses will include more online and asynchronous elements, and a lot more online courses will find ways to include more synchronous elements as well.