



ESSAY

Zoom Whiplash: The Paradoxes of Remote LRW

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Published: August 2021

The 2020-2021 academic year felt like an eon. It was an eeeeeeeeeooooooooonnnnnn—a tiny word, suspended, stretched into an unrecognizable form.

That eon ran its course in a flash. Time flew even as it stood still, with every moment predictably offering novel and surprising challenges. Somehow, the spring semester abruptly ended when we were simultaneously hitting our stride and suffering burnout. A seventy-five-minute class on Zoom often felt equivalent to twenty minutes in a physical classroom.

And so we were forced to focus. Obligatory online teaching invited us to reflect on our core objectives and increase our efficiency. This was a gift. We couldn't use all our ordinary classroom strategies, and we had no time for fluffy filler. So we reevaluated and prioritized. We tapped into our atrophied creativity and invented new, useful activities that helped us learn, grow, and improve.

But we were so distracted while we focused. How could we not be? Cats crossed in front of our cameras, and dogs snoozed behind our students' desks; some of those desks appeared in a new location during each class meeting. Children—often in their own academic Zoom rooms down the hall—called for our assistance. A neighbor trimmed a tree while UPS, FedEx, USPS, Grubhub, and others rang the doorbell, alerting us to contactless deliveries of items we didn't

remember ordering because we were so distracted. Perhaps we became better listeners. We had to.

We paused to appreciate what we had, simultaneously lamenting what we'd lost. How incredible that we could carry on safely, with minimal academic disruption, in the midst of a pandemic because of Zoom. What a powerful and fabulous tool! Some students even seemed to thrive on Zoom, feeling empowered to speak when they might have been more reserved in person. Zoom brought certain students closer to us, while it made others feel more distant. Still, how fortunate that, if this pandemic had to happen, it unfolded after the invention of the personal computer, high-speed internet, and accessible video-conferencing technology. Amazing!

And also the worst. Leading a conversation among a group of muted students simply cannot compare to the experience of sharing a physical space, which allows us to scan the crowd for subtle signs of understanding or confusion and hear students' spontaneous reactions, like chuckles or sighs. I missed their sighs.

Our computers were lifelines connecting us to our students and to each other, except when they froze, frustrating our attempts at communication. We got out of our comfort zones and upped our tech game. Some of us became legitimately tech savvy. But most of us, even after more than a year, still forgot to unmute ourselves on Zoom from time to time. Without access to printers, handouts became online posts; we spared trees, but we overlooked typos. We cut out our commutes. Then, with home serving as both office and classroom, our work-life balance eroded.

Yet our sense of camaraderie soared. We were all in it together, so we reached out to one another with teaching ideas, technology tips, and—most importantly—moral support. Our collegiality sustained us.

At the same time, we felt alone, isolated from one another. Our community was dispersed, and we had to work hard to connect. We missed the fruits of unplanned hallway conversations with colleagues and students. We moved our professional conferences online, which was better than cancelling them. But two-dimensional, mute-button-equipped, break-out-room-orchestrated coffee talks and cocktail receptions are always going to be more awkward than our discipline's old, formerly under-appreciated routines.

As the spring semester concluded, we felt relief. We had endured over a year of remote teaching and earned ourselves a vacation from the stress of leading online classes. We dropped our shoulders for the first time since March 2020. Having weathered emergency online teaching, then prepared and implemented a full year of our first-ever entirely online courses—all in the shadow of a global health emergency, a charged election cycle, recurring police brutality, and civil rights protests—we were ready to unwind. Yet much remained unresolved. Our anxiety continued. And sleep still did not come easily.

Moreover, some of our ordinary end-of-year satisfaction was missing. We paused to consider the wonder of our achievements, though we continued to regret the ways in which we fell short. Our students learned so much, but still there were important lessons we could not incorporate into our teaching during that exceptional year. We were confident that we had done our best—and our exhaustion confirmed it—but similarly confident that some classes or exercises had failed to ignite their otherwise reliable spark.

Still, buried beneath our worries and regrets, we were excited for the 2021-2022 school year. We had a moment to rest and distance ourselves, not from one another but from our screens. Over the summer months, we reflected on the equipment, skills, and teaching techniques we struggled with, mastered, and now can tap into further improve the in-person classes we anticipated delivering in the fall.

Then along came Delta. While we celebrated our expected return to in-person classes, a new storm was organizing offshore. The pandemic is not over. With new variants sparking new surges, we face a retreat from our expected return to “normal.” We trade mask recommendations on social media. We hope that our students and colleagues take care to keep each other safe. We marshal the physical and emotional energy required to plan for absences and quarantines, like arranging for class video recordings via Zoom. Fortunately, we have learned to prepare for the unexpected—to plan for an in-classroom reunion while we ready ourselves for a remote or hybrid one instead.

Oh, Zoom. We are resentful and grateful at once. We hate that we were forced to replace the traditional in-person first year of law school with a distanced one. We missed so much, and so did our students. We continued nearly without interruption only because of technology. We persisted by being mindful, emphasizing full presence in the moment. Now, we persevere because of our hope for the future—our longing to evolve into whatever new professional “normal” our discipline will achieve.

Regardless of whether we have reached the end of the eon—the brief but endless Zoom LRW era— or merely enjoyed a short hiatus, we are overwhelmed but ready. We are depleted and energized.

The whiplash made us stronger.