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Grant: *What I Learned About Teaching Online After A Summer Of Virtual Conferences, Classes, And Meeting*

By Paul Caron

TaxProf Blog op-ed: What I Learned After a Summer of Online Conferences, Classes, and Meetings, by Emily Grant (Washburn):

When I first started teaching at Washburn University School of Law, I spent a semester sitting in on class sessions taught by as many other professors in the building as possible. It was such an illuminating experience to watch my colleagues teach and to learn some of their tricks and strategies for classroom management. But it was also incredible to be reminded what it feels like to sit in the audience of a law school class. (<shameless plug> You can read about that adventure here: *At the [Other Side of the] Lectern*, 64 J. of Legal Educ. 103 (2014).)

I had a very similar (and at the same time drastically different) experience this summer. One upshot of the global pandemic is that I took advantage of far more professional opportunities this summer than I normally do—legal education conferences, undergrad pedagogy conferences, happy hours with people from around the country, trainings offered by my school, trainings offered by other schools. My travel budget just had to cover my Diet Coke consumption, so I was excited about the many events to attend.



And attend I did. I learned a ridiculous amount from brilliant educators and technology gurus.

Mostly what I discovered is that there are soooooo many resources available, it can be completely overwhelming. Everyone's got a webpage of helpful tools. Heck, even I spent the summer helping my university put together a long list of resources for faculty, which unironically includes links to other school's long list of resources.

It's too much, particularly if you don't quite know exactly what you want or need. It's like browsing the cookbook aisle at The Strand for directions on what to do with an egg. My advice (because you need more advice after a summer of conferences): if you've found a "long list of resources" that speaks to you, use it. If not, turn to the internet and google exactly what you're looking for. Hopefully, you've had enough exposure to the basics of teaching online that you have some idea what you need—peer review tools, how to use zoom breakout rooms, multiple choice questions for trusts and estates.

If you're just getting started and don't know what you don't know, find a mentor and start asking questions. I'd like to have my students work in groups in our synchronous class; how can I do that? How do you use the gradebook on our learning management system? Any suggestions for breaking up my class time so I'm not just lecturing into the Zoom void the whole time?

Beyond the substantive content I absorbed, I found an added benefit of the many remote functions I attended this summer: I was in the role of student (or attendee, at least) in a remote learning situation. I had not really experienced that before in the online environment, and some of these lessons will perhaps be the most useful for me from a classroom management standpoint going into the fall. As a student/attendee, this is what I would want my teacher/presenter to know:

First, **Zoom logistics**.

- Send the link for the Zoom meeting the morning of the event or have it available on a webpage somewhere that I

know how to access. Don't rely on the email you sent me two weeks ago. I don't have it, I can't find the post-it note where I copied the meeting ID number, and I'm lame and don't know how to use the calendar function that integrates with the Zoom invitations you send.

- The chat function can be quite distracting. It certainly can be useful for some things (for example, one-way information sharing from the presenter out to the rest of the room, like links to a google doc we all need to access right now), but it's hard to follow, let alone participate in, a conversation in chat and also listen to the presenter. I appreciate it as a place to ask questions. But then everyone else is so damn helpful in answering the questions that all of a sudden, we're having full conversations in chat, and now I've tuned out the person speaking. And don't get me started on private chat. I was relatively well-behaved this summer, but I also really enjoy sending a private chat to a friend in the same meeting and watching to see if they crack a smile or lose focus. (NB: even private chats are recorded in the chat transcript that Zoom generates after the meeting.)
- Virtual backgrounds can be distracting when they're glitchy and cause you to pixelate in and out of the image. Sometimes they're fun or funny. But more often, over the course of an hour or more, they're distracting. Sorry!
- I know there may be any number of reasons why you choose not to share your video, and that's fine. But if you don't show your video, it would be great if you could at least have a picture of yourself instead of just a black box with your name. It somehow feels more... homey and like a real Brady Bunch-credits-style classroom.
- Speaking of, when my video is off, it's because I'm multitasking during the session—maybe just using the bathroom, but more likely handling email, playing Candy Crush on my phone, responding to questions from my son, or wandering around the kitchen. Just so you know. And I'm sorry!
- Make an opportunity to practice running a remote class session—practice with breakout room functions, practice sharing your screen (though no matter how much I practice, I will ALWAYS say “Can you see my screen now?”), practice using two monitors to manage the various windows during class.

Second, **classroom dynamics**:

- Personal greetings matter when you enter a zoom meeting. I can recall several sessions where the presenter or moderator greeted everyone individually when they logged in, either out loud or via chat. “Hi, Anne. How is Florida this weekend?” “Hey Steve, good to see you again.” It should not surprise me that the professors modeling this behavior were such lions in the legal academy as Sophie Sparrow, Michael Hunter Schwartz, and Suzanne Rowe. And I will happily admit that it made me glad I had chosen that session and that people recognized and valued me.
- I miss the murmuring of a group of people gathering together in a room. I miss being able to say to no one in particular “Hey, how are you?” and then to hear 20 people answer the question at the same time. Having everyone on mute is most definitely a good thing during a Zoom meeting, but I'm considering unmuting everyone, even just for a minute at the beginning of class, while I say “what'd you do this weekend?” and hearing my students mumble and talk over each other in my general direction.
- Even in a zoom session, the basics of a good presentation remain true. Use PowerPoint strategically and carefully. Don't read PowerPoint slides to the audience. For that matter, don't just read your notes. Have a conversation. Be genuine, be real, be natural. People will respond to you and to your enthusiasm for the material.
- I'm usually pretty easy going, but I was surprised how little patience I had for what felt like time-wasting in a Zoom session, far less than I imagine I would have had in person. And I wonder if our students feel the same. For example, I did not enjoy the twenty minutes of background information before a presenter got to the meat of what he was sharing. And in a departure from my usual personality (and frankly from my own teaching practice), I did not appreciate the dad-joke-level puns that involved a three-minute set-up and two entire PowerPoint slides. Please just say what you need me to hear so I can log off. (Hrmm... maybe I was just in A Mood that particular day. Regardless, it was a strong and lasting impression of the hour-long presentation.)
- I don't want to download your PowerPoint slides later. I mean, I might and I regularly do, so thank you for making them available. But please don't zip through slides while you're talking and tell me just to look them up later. I am afraid that after I wait until slides are uploaded on a website somewhere, I won't remember which presentation I wanted, where to find it, which slide I thought was important at the time, and what I wanted to write down about it. This particular reaction that convinced me to, if possible, provide my PowerPoint slides to students in advance so

they can use them for notetaking or to cut-and-paste into a separate document as necessary for them to document the class conversation. At the very least, I'll try to give them time to screenshot a particular slide during class if it contains a lot of information.

And finally, **teaching**. I was reminded this summer that teaching (or presenting) is *high energy*. When I'm at the office or in a conference hotel, I can tap into the necessary energy as I physically get ready to present—I read through my notes one last time, gather my books and pens and Diet Coke, walk downstairs to the room, get out my jump drive and start setting up at the podium. It is much more difficult for me as a teacher/presenter or even student/attendee to find that same level of energy when I'm wearing slippers and jammie pants and have only recently slid from my couch over to the dining room table.

For me (and maybe this is an introvert-specific thing?), the physical and mental act of teaching online is going require *intentional and deliberate effort*... energy that I don't ordinarily have to work to summon because I get geared up for class by being physically present in the school building. Think in advance about what that looks and feels like for you. I am planning to set up my space (including the Diet Coke) just as I would in Room 120 at the law school. I will likely get up and walk around (even just to the bathroom and once around the house) before settling in to start class. I am planning to log into zoom five or ten minutes before class to replicate the small talk of the physical classroom (the murmuring!) and to greet students as they arrive. I also hope to stay logged on afterward for the same reasons. I may actually *gasp* wear a suit and heels to channel my teacher persona.

Deepest thank you to the people and organizations who made the switch to host online events in lieu of in-person gatherings this summer. I was grateful for the chance to learn from so many different folks from a variety of backgrounds. And it was more helpful than I anticipated to play the role of a student, just to remind myself what it feels like to be on the other side of the (virtual) podium, particularly in this new online environment.

https://taxprof.typepad.com/taxprof_blog/2020/08/grant-what-i-learned-about-teaching-online-after-a-summer-of-virtual-conferences-classes-and-meeting.html
