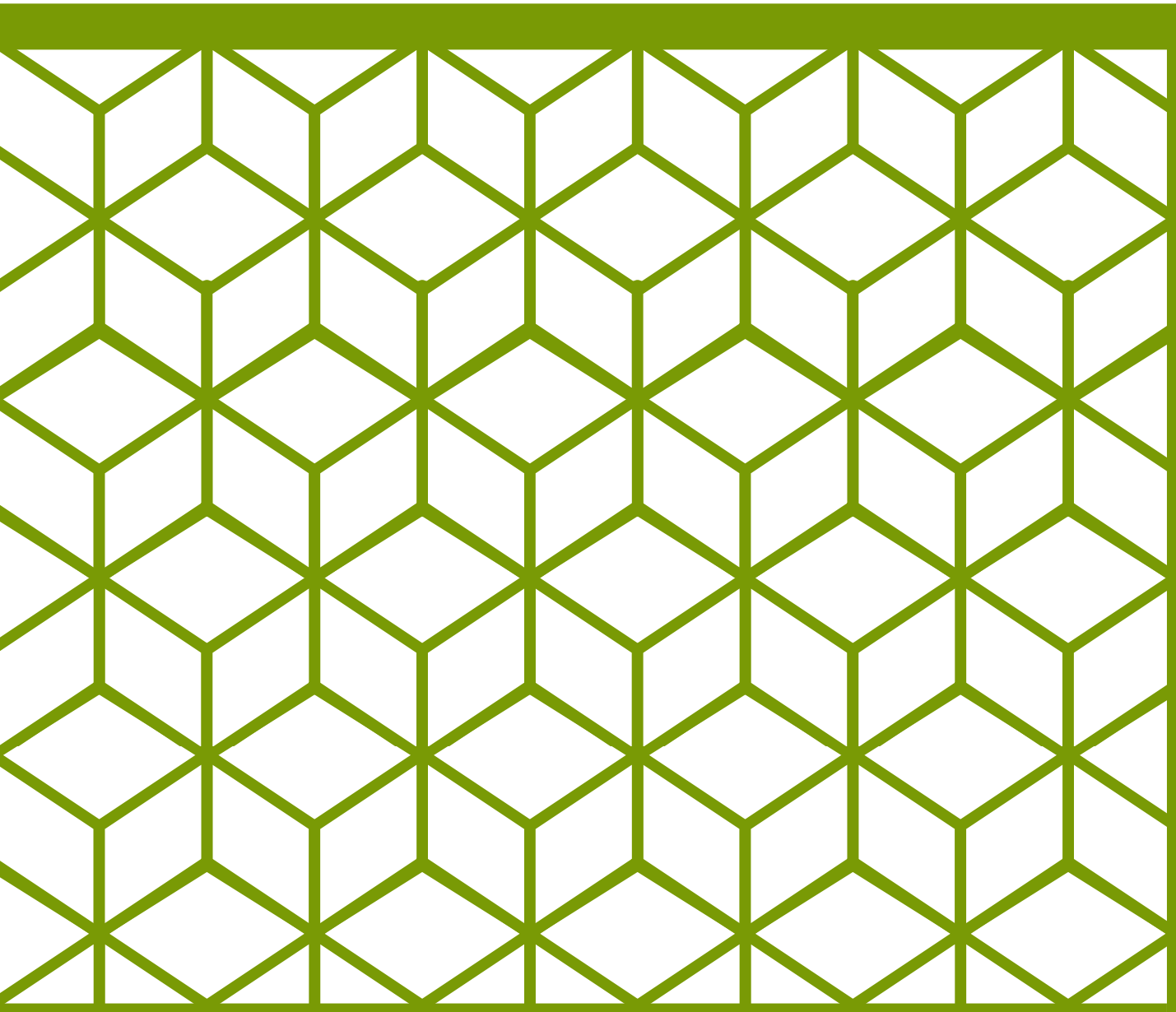


2021



Strengthening Jewish-Arab Relations through Online Community Building



WARM PEACE INSTITUTE

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INTRODUCTION

Following the signing of the Abraham Accords in September 2020, NYU's Bronfman Center for Jewish Student Life sought to identify opportunities to build bridges between Israel and its new Arab allies, particularly in the UAE. It became abundantly clear that Emiratis, Israelis and Jews from around the world were eager to connect. Ideally, encounters between these groups would have taken place in person, but due to the COVID-19 restrictions, building robust online communities was the only option.

Rabbi Yehuda Sarna, Executive Director of the Bronfman Center and Chief Rabbi of the Jewish Council of the Emirates, founded the Jewish Learning Fellowship in 2007 to create a space for Jewish students to discover and deepen their connection to Judaism on their own terms. Due to the program's success at NYU, Hillel International scaled JLF to nearly 200 university campuses across the United States, making it one of the largest educational initiatives for Jewish college students.

This year, the Bronfman Center decided to expand JLF to NYU's Abu Dhabi campus, initially to provide a space for Jewish students studying there to find a home away from home. We assumed this pilot JLF Abu Dhabi course would attract a handful of students at most. To our surprise, word quickly spread about an opportunity to learn about Judaism, and nearly eighty students signed up. This cohort comprised mostly non-Jewish students from around the world, as well as several students who just recently discovered that they had Jewish ancestry. As we soon learned, many of the JLF Abu Dhabi students came from societies with either latent or prevalent Antisemitism.

This essay examines the NYU Abu Dhabi JLF experience as a case study and model for how to build community online, to be used before and after an in-person encounter, adding a new dimension to the conversation and creating even deeper bonds between peoples.



ZOOMING IN ON JEWISH LEARNING

Working at NYU, I have had the pleasure to teach a program on Jewish philosophy connecting both Jewish and non-Jewish students at the NYU campus in New York. This year, we have extended our reach to connect to our students across the sea at NYU Abu Dhabi, teaching about Jewish culture in order to promote dialogue between cultures, and religious tolerance between our students in the different campuses.

We began with questions including, “what do you hope to learn?” and “what do you want this community to look like?” These questions immediately engaged students as we opened the floor for discussion. And the students loved it. Many Muslim and Christian students have said they want to unlearn harmful stereotypes and learn more about Jewish culture while Jews have said they hope to gain connections, and for their peers to better understand them. As we hoped, the students expressed a desire of what we anticipated to achieve with the program: to foster a safe space for people of all backgrounds to learn together, share cultures, learn philosophy through a Jewish and universal lens, and simply create a positive experience together.



UNDERSTANDING THE MEDIUM

Zoom is personal because it breaks down the barrier between home and school, or home and work. Students essentially welcome their professors and classmates into their houses or dorm rooms through their computer screens, thus creating a home-to-home relationship. Sharing our homes with each other can add a special element to teaching. During one of his weekly “Ask the Rabbi” sections of each JLF class, Rabbi Sarna recalled how, “in response to a question about kosher food, I walked my laptop through my meat and dairy kitchens, past the cereal box shelf and into our meat freezer.” This created a more experiential learning environment unique to online learning that could not be done in the traditional classroom.

UNDERSTANDING THE MEDIUM, CONT.



Hosting has another meaning on Zoom, and when we facilitate these encounters, we host the participants to meet inside of our homes, as they allow us a glimpse into theirs. Not only can we see the participants up-close, we invite each other into our homes, to see our bedrooms, offices, living rooms, and the people that pass behind us. With this home-to-home encounter, we automatically know each other better. During day-to-day life and especially during Covid, inviting people into one's home has become scarce, however, Zoom allows this closer look naturally, as homes and cultures can be shared on screen.

Lastly, Zoom has become a familiar place, a comfortable place. We may have had our family reunion, our college course, our meetup with friends, and game night all on the same platform. It has become the meeting point for all these encounters, so, when we invited students from Abu Dhabi to meet with students and staff in New York for the very first time on this platform, the meeting did not feel forced nor unnatural.

Zoom is a completely different medium than in-person meetings and it is important to understand the medium in order to fully utilize its capabilities. Unlike in-person gatherings, Zoom is a direct, and up-close conversation between the facilitator and all of the participants in the session.

If used correctly, the facilitator should feel in conversation with each student - no matter how large the group - and each student should equally feel in conversation with the facilitator.

If technology is the base of our lesson – i.e. stable WiFi, quality microphone and camera – tactics to engage are the building blocks. No matter where in the world, from New York to the UAE, the only way to build a positive environment for participants is by keeping each participant constantly engaged. While this may be more difficult with larger groups there are various ways of engaging students ensuring that they are not sitting idly in front of their computer screen.


Here, we discuss methods to break the tedium by inviting students to move, speak, write, create, and share so that they are constantly engaged, interested, and an active participant in the session:

- Intention setting - be clear about the goals of the session.
- Active listening - listen carefully when a participant shares, repeat it back to them in short to indicate understanding.
- Body language - using body language such as hand gestures can make the virtual setting feel more natural and authentic.

UNDERSTANDING THE MEDIUM, CONT.



- Humor - Zoom can be tense and unnatural. As with anything in life, humor can and should be used to alleviate these feelings and create a comfortable environment.
- Cameras on - invite participants to turn their cameras on.
- Breakout rooms - the constant use of breakout rooms creates dialogue between participants and eases the tension of long-form sessions.
- Presentations - these can be useful, but lose effectiveness when used for too long as there is less direct communication between the facilitator and participants.
- Ice-breakers: Starting sessions with ice breakers sets the tone and atmosphere. The attached Facilitator's Guide includes examples of icebreakers that have worked successfully in past sessions I have facilitated.



LAUGHING, CRYING, AND EVERYTHING IN BETWEEN

In order to facilitate a captivating session – whether extremely emotional or funny – a facilitator can ask deep questions to provoke emotion, as well as lighthearted questions to provoke laughter and ease tension. A balance between humor and depth is best, while at least one of the two should be utilized.

During our NYU Abu Dhabi sessions, we spoke about sensitive topics such as religion, politics, and identity among others. In a diverse group within a political and societal conflict, these topics can easily trigger disputes. By acknowledging the sensitivity, giving everyone the space to speak about their emotions, in addition to laughing when appropriate, students felt comfortable to share, and hear the opinions of others. For example, on Holocaust Memorial Day, we invited Leo Goldberg, a former NYU professor and Holocaust survivor to speak to the group. The entire group treated him with utmost respect, cried, laughed, and learned together. While for the vast majority it was the first time speaking to a holocaust survivor, for many it was also the first time they had learned about the Holocaust. In the course evaluation, this session proved to be one of the most highly rated.

LAUGHING, CRYING, AND EVERYTHING IN BETWEEN, CONT.



In a Zoom session, the energy of each person in the group is connected. An awkward energy creates more feelings of awkwardness as the expression and emotion upon each participant's face are apparent to the group, while a positive energy can easily spread. Ultimately, it is the instructor's responsibility to set the tone for the session, whether creating an environment of sharing, openness, or humor, they must take the first step, and maybe even the second and third, to bring about what they want to be seen in the sessions. In my sessions, I make sure to portray a good energy, and sometimes even my silly side in front of the camera, showing the students that it is okay for them to be themselves in this community.

While we expected a small group of 10-15 students to sign up, this invitation brought close to 100 registrations, expanding our class to two separate weekly classes.

Besides creating a space through leading by personal example, it is important for a facilitator to vocalize what they want to see from their participants. While it may seem obvious or redundant, I constantly remind my students why we are here, what they can add, and ask them as well to vocalize what kind of space they want to create together.

It is important to be open, transparent, and genuine about the goals. The students joining would be happy to be a part of an engaging space, yet it is often difficult to make the first step, especially in larger groups. When a facilitator creates a positive atmosphere and invites the participants to join, they may happily walk in.

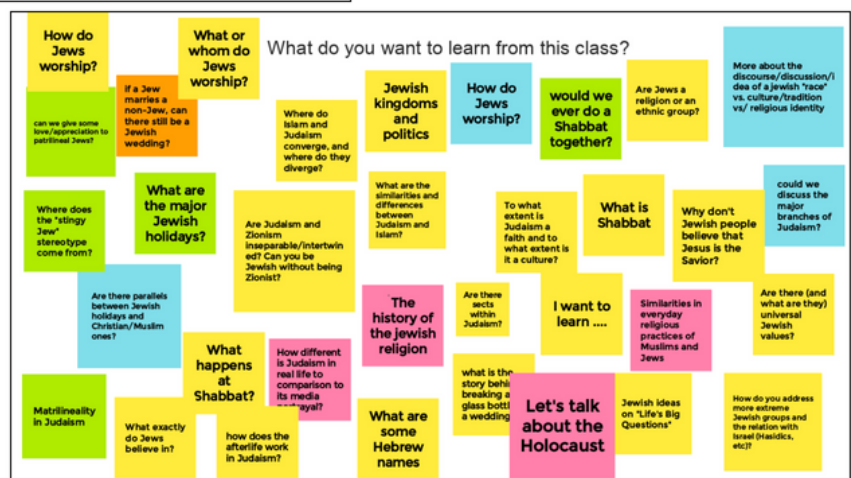
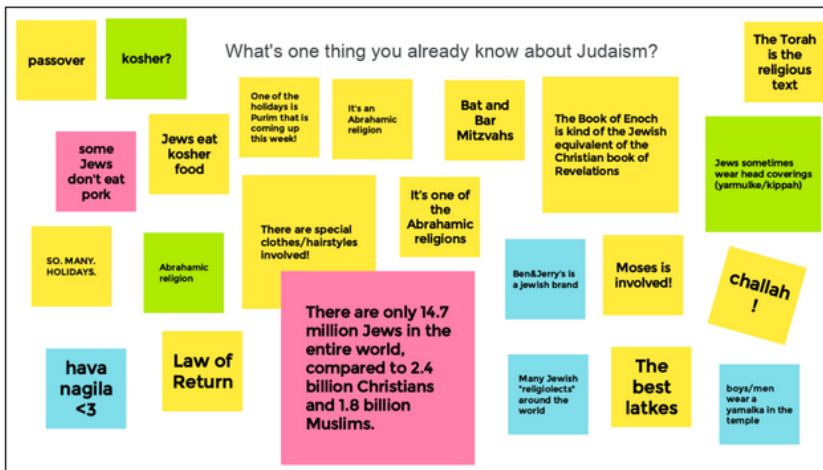
Examples of statements:

- "This is an open and safe space."
- "We want everyone to feel comfortable sharing."
- "What do you want to gain from this session?"
- "I really appreciate that you've taken the time to share and listen."

BRINGING THE COMMUNITY TO LIFE

We had people of many different religions including Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, Buddhism, and more, as well as atheist and agnostic students. This eclectic group led us to produce four steps to community building:

1. As a community is based on commonalities, we began the course by exploring what we had in common, despite our differences. Our first session included:
 - o Asking and fielding many students' questions.
 - o Ice-breakers such as splitting students into breakout rooms to find as many things as they had in common with their group.
 - o Using Jamboard to let students anonymously post their interests and find common interests. Below are two jamboards from the JLF Abu Dhabi class:



BRINGING THE COMMUNITY TO LIFE, CONT.



2. In the sessions following, we began to learn. Our learning was based on reading sources, discussing in small groups, and reconvening to share takeaways with the whole class. These joint experiences allowed the group to bond and relate to each other as people beyond religion, nationality, and ethnicity.

3. Once the group was established, we initiated joint creative activities in order for the participants to build something with their peers. Part of the curriculum included joining the students in a writing workshop where they were prompted to write from their personal experience and to create an anthology of their works. There are many benefits of creating together through writing. By prompting the students to think of their personal stories and how it ties in with the lessons of the group, it allows introspection in between sessions, and a deeper level of communication once the group does join together to share what they have written. Creating a joint collection of their work ties their writings together, solidifies the community in this new medium, and leaves something lasting in the world. The name of the anthology we have written together is called, "Let Me Tell You a Story..."

4. The last step is to take the community beyond the program. The facilitator should ask him or herself, as well as the participants, once the course ends, where do we go from here? How do we further develop the community? There are many different ways to keep the community alive beyond the course. Firstly, moving it to other platforms. One way is by exchanging emails and messages, continuing the conversation and notifying the students of future events that they can take part in. I have invited my students to join a conference along with students across America, to further the discussion of how to strengthen the Jewish-Arab relationship. During our course, we have developed these modes of communication by sending videos and content for students to engage with in between sessions. This way, once the course is over, the conversation can continue naturally. The Whatsapp chat group which we created also allowed casual conversation in which participants are equally able to contribute as well as take their chats privately.

BRINGING THE COMMUNITY TO LIFE, CONT.



Additionally, in our course, community leaders that facilitated within the group have met one-on-one with students during the program, laying the grounds for a deeper connection beyond. All of this encourages future encounters to take place. Another way the conversation continued was through the student initiated feature article on our class and its impact on students at NYU Abu Dhabi in the campus newspaper, the Gazelle. As one student noted, JLF offered an “opportunity for people to learn about Judaism, even just the basic idea of a world religion,” and that was worthwhile.

With these methods, the grounds for a community can be built online with the intention of growing these encounters further and finally taking it offline, visiting each other's cultures, and homes.

Meeting online takes away the trepidation we may experience when meeting others. With a secure and facilitated environment, we can begin to form these relationships. By going through the steps above – breaking the ice, getting to know our peers on a deeper level, learning together, and creating together – it can ultimately lead to a secure and strong foundation if in-person encounters are to occur.

Even post-Covid, Zoom sessions prior to in-person meetings between students from different countries and backgrounds can be a comfortable way to build these bridges and give students a chance to prove themselves, their dedication, and contribution before going through the effort to meet in person.

In our case, the students from the NYU Abu Dhabi campus which were mostly non-Jewish, and interested in learning about Judaism, met with their Jewish peers and facilitators from the New York campus. We plan to take these connections that started online and bring them to life, post-Covid by bringing the community together for a Shabbat weekend retreat in the UAE where we will fly staff and students in from New York to further learn and connect. As this community brings religious tolerance and coexistence, we intend to facilitate in-person interactions as well as continuing to engage online in order to keep the community alive and growing and extend these values of peace, dialogue, and tolerance beyond.



CONCLUSION

The outbreak of Covid-19 has presented the world with a new need to develop and preserve relationships at a distance so that an individual can take part in meaningful social interactions. These unprecedented times occurred simultaneously to the changes taking place in the Middle East where many countries showed interest in moving forward and creating a new Middle East. One in which Israelis and Arabs can work together toward a better future. Now, the political boundaries that have stopped us in the past have been lifted, and by the press of a button, the geographical boundaries can be lifted as well. We must take advantage of these changes, as we strive together to strengthen the warm peace between peoples in the Middle East and around the world.

In this guide, you will find methods and techniques that I have collected and developed through facilitating sessions online.

Designing a Class

It is important to conduct classes with trial and error, learning from what works for your group, and adjusting classes accordingly both from session to session and within a session itself. My classes have been 1.5-2 hours (depending on the content and interest of students) consisting of ice breakers, engaging activities, learning segments, and breakout discussions.

Below are examples of icebreakers that have worked successfully in past sessions I have facilitated that can be adapted and incorporated into any class:

- Name Change: invite participants to change their last to answer a question presented to the group. This can be serious or humorous.

Sample question structure: if you were <insert noun> which would you be?

Example questions:

- If you were a car part, which car part would you be?
- If your life was a TV show, which TV show would it be?
- How are you feeling now? Explain, using a noun.

You can prompt discussion and invite students to explain their choice. This gives everyone the chance to see a different side of each other through each other's interests. In our Abu Dhabi session, seeing my students favorite TV shows was particularly insightful as we were able to connect over common TV shows while learning about many new ones outside of our cultural norm.

- Show an item in your room: allows a glimpse into each participant's personal space.
- Request students to change their last name on the Zoom screen to something related to the discussion.
- Writing in the chat: What kind of space do you want to see? How do you feel starting this session? Asking the students to share in one word is a great opportunity for shared introspection when short on time.

Here is a sample class structure that I use when conducting a session:

- When building the class, the first 5-10 minutes should be dedicated to welcoming participants, setting community guidelines and expectations from the class, along with intentional ice breakers. I highly recommend using an ice breaker that connects to the class material for the day. While welcoming students into the Zoom room, engage as many individuals as possible, including greeting students you already know to demonstrate warmth and familiarity to new members and emphasize friendliness and comfort.
- In the initial introduction, outline and emphasize the day's structure and main takeaways. There should never be more than 10 minutes of consecutive teaching. Within these 10 minutes, it is best to utilize 2-4 class facilitators, each with different roles for different teachings. At times, I utilize and orchestrate conversation between facilitators to teach the lesson.
- Breakout room #1: Here, students will discuss what they learn and/or will read new sources, verbally answer questions and partake in discussions. There needs to be some structure for the conversation.

The breakout rooms should have at least three students or more at each time, and no more than nine students for most effective communication and relationship development. Four is often the ideal number for effective community building through Zoom (depending on the purpose or activity of the room and if a facilitator is required). Often, Zoom rooms include more participants so that each group has a facilitator). The facilitator should always consider the breakup of rooms in advance to ensure there is a balance of opinions, louder versus quieter voices, friendship dynamics, and other individual-based aspects to take into account. The facilitators/interns should maintain a dialogue across private chats or a Whatsapp group to be clear on what's taking place in other breakout rooms, offer support if there are issues, and communicate timing and requests for breakout room extensions or early closing if breakout conversations are stale. Typically, 10 minutes is a good amount of time for breakout rooms before returning to the main room.

- Debrief in the main room for 5-10 minutes (depending on subject and class) - the best way of doing this is by asking each room to choose a representative to summarize their discussions. The facilitators can also offer the summary if participants aren't volunteering to speak. It is okay to ask students directly what they thought if you know the particular student won't be too uncomfortable with the spotlight, and you ask in a sensitive manner. A smile and encouraging tone helps. Asking students to write summaries or discuss takeaways through the Zoom chat can also be an effective debrief.
 - Next education topic: Provide 5-10 minutes of teaching that will lead us to the next breakout room. Facilitators or conversation guides can continue the teachings in breakout rooms. However, the group should not be in the main room for more than 15 minutes.
 - Breakout room #2: Similar to breakout room #1, facilitators can utilize different techniques to make it more engaging. Students love breakout rooms as it gives them a chance to speak to each other, connect to peers and friends, and develop one-on-one relationships.
- Mix up the breakout rooms - as I have learned from complaints received from students, it is best to change up the breakout room throughout each class, unless there is a specific reason to keep the breakout rooms and conversation partners the same for the duration of that class.
- Debrief: Bring the class back together in the main Zoom room and facilitate another debrief, as explained in step #4.
 - Teaching: Repeat the structure from step #5, with the new topic or conversation point.
 - Breakout room: If there is time for a third lesson, then repeat step #3 & #6. Using different techniques, such as having the facilitator ask questions for participants to write out in the chat, can be useful in breaking up the time and also helping people with different communication styles use what is most helpful for them to learn and to share.

- Debrief and conclusion: Sometimes creating something together relating to the subject, including a jamboard, mural, or even a game (kahoot, scribble online) reinforces what was learned, connects the class, and ensures a high energy level ending, with students engaged and happy. Keep climactic activity for the end, and ensure that everyone participates together.
- At the end of the class, depending on the subject, the facilitator can ask students to share how they feel in different, creative ways. For example, participants can write a tweet in the chat on the subject of the class, or a noun that connects to how they are feeling, or even just writing out sentences expressing one thing they will take away from the lesson/experience. It can also be related to the topic of the day, such as What brings you peace, gratitude... for a session exploring wellness or meditation.
- If there is time, the facilitator can invite students to unmute one at a time, share what they wrote, and offer a quick explanation.

Technology: Do's and Don'ts

Good technology is the basis for a positive online experience. It is the environment in which we join, and while it cannot make a session if done right, it can break a session if done wrong.

Let's get through the basics one must have to conduct an online session:

- Fast, reliable Wi-Fi
- Good lighting (ideally frontal, white light, not too bright)
- Clean background (organized, neat – it is the backdrop you show to the group)
- Quiet environment (ensuring no interruptions and distractions)
- Earphones/microphone (proper sound equipment, ensuring that the sound is good, so that you are heard by others and you hear others clearly.)
- Angle (present yourself at your best angle, not too close or far from the camera – you should be able to extend your hand and touch the camera to your finger.)

Additionally, conducting sessions online allows many new techniques to employ. Zoom itself has the capacity to 'share screen' for presentations, the chat function for public and private chats, breakout rooms to divide the group for short periods of time, microphone and camera control – the facilitator can mute and turn the camera off, while the participants can keep them off if they prefer.

Students are engaged when they speak and contribute to the conversation. While conversation may flow more naturally in real life, there are ways of creating engaging conversation online as well. An important advantage online is that each participant on a Zoom call has a permanent 'name tag' under their screen so it is always easy to call a student by their name. It creates an automatic feeling of closeness and trust. Besides calling on students directly to contribute, here are a few ways of engaging a group to ensure that they each share:

1. Write in the chat - write each student's names in the chat and have them speak in that order.
2. Popcorn - give the stage for anyone to speak (students can raise a hand, and get called on by a facilitator)
3. Move it forward - each participant speaks and passes the prompt on to a student of their choice.

Of course, all the while, a facilitator must be mindful to find the balance between encouraging everyone to share, while giving those that don't feel comfortable the choice not to.

There are other platforms that can be used while teaching a session, including Google Jamboard for collaborative brainstorming; mural.co to create together; mentimeter.com for online polls; kahoot.com for group trivia games and many more.

Each of these features and platforms gives a unique opportunity for engagement.

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