

Are You Zoomed Out? Dealing with Zoom Fatigue in the Virtual Classroom

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As I write this column in late May for a *Choral Journal* issue that will arrive in September, we are all anticipating the look of the educational landscape. By the time you read this article, you will be in the beginning of the academic year attempting to deal with physical spacing, virtual classrooms, and a host of other issues. No one really knows at this point what the beginning of the academic year holds.

My first inclination was to write on curricular ideas for the virtual classroom, or perhaps to enter the ongoing debate of how we can safely sing. However, having recently completed a semester in which all of our classes were transferred to online learning, I decided to delve into the issue of what we can do as choral directors and choral music educators to tackle the issue of Zoom fatigue in ourselves and our students.

If you have felt drained or exhausted at the end of a day of Zoom teaching and meetings and wondered if you imaged it, you did not. The further my students progressed into the online and Zoom semester,

the more they remarked about lacking motivation. A former student of mine, who now teaches music in a metropolitan area, referred to his seemingly endless meetings as Zoom Purgatory. Zoom is a wonderful virtual tool, which hopefully allows us to achieve a level of authentic communication with our students and colleagues. However, Zoom fatigue is much more than a byproduct of too many meetings. Social scientists present the view that Zoom fatigue is the “result of the sudden mass adoption of technology that’s disrupting the normal, instinctual and finely-tuned way of communicating that developed to help humans survive.”¹

In addition to teaching online, we find ourselves on meetings and social calls using Zoom. In some cases, pausing physical contact has caused our social lives to become even busier and social engagements harder to avoid.² The constant eye contact with numerous individuals at once compounded by the awareness of one’s own facial expressions can be exhausting in itself. Elizabeth Redcay, at the University of

Maryland, has discussed that many of the nuances of in-person contact that we crave, such as following the direction of each other’s gaze or mirroring each other’s gestures, are missing from most online exchanges.³ Therefore, we work even harder when online to achieve authentic communication with our students and colleagues.

Additionally, fatigue comes from nonstop hours at the computer. For those of us who are required to spend a great deal of time on the computer researching, writing, emailing, creating reports, committee work, and so forth, teaching online means never escaping the computer screen.

We love to teach. We love to make music. We love to create. We love to physically interact with our students. Not being able to do all of this in real time in a physical classroom is frustrating, to say the least. This adds to our feelings of fatigue. It feels unnatural to me to teach sitting down. I am sure I am not the only one with this feeling. So how can we minimize this feeling of fatigue for ourselves and our students?

Control Your Physical Space

When teaching, or in a physical meeting, our physical space is defined by role and choice. When teaching, we have an area from which we teach. Our students have assigned places or choose their seats. We use the physical space as a teaching tool itself. Now, the online world is our physical space as well as where we use technology.

Fatigue can be combated in the online world of Zoom in several ways. First, the Breakout Room feature allows students to be placed in separate discussion spaces. I teach using small groups in several of my class, so this feature has been an excellent tool. I still assign students a role, such as facilitator, recorder, and reporter. Students can examine different excerpts of music or have an in-depth discussion on an assigned topic. Zoom allows the host to enter and leave each of the smaller groups. Also, the groups can signal the host if they have questions or would like input. This allows your students to focus on fewer people and the discussion has more freedom. As host, it allows you as the teacher to focus on smaller groups of students at one time on screen. And yes, Zoom allows you to assign students to each room or in a random manner. It is limited in that, unlike walking around a room observing multiple small groups at one time, the host can only be in one small group at a time. However, it allows a freedom that does not occur within the one large group Zoom setting. Additionally, I instruct students who are experiencing fatigue to switch to a speaker view setting. This way they are not

focusing on multiple individuals on their screen at one time and can focus only on the one person speaking.

Second, especially as singers, be mindful of your physical set up with regards to your neck and back. Remember, your head weighs approximately twelve pounds. When angled down, the strain on the neck becomes equal to approximately sixty pounds. Therefore, keep your laptop at a comfortable height. Avoid using your cellphone for Zoom meetings, which may tempt you to constantly look down at the screen. Another option is to set up an external webcam instead of using the laptop camera. This way you can move the webcam into a more comfortable position with more distance between you and the laptop.

Third, plan breaks in your classes and between meetings. Even with varied activities, such as screen sharing, breakout rooms, presentation sharing and more, you and your students need built-in breaks. The fatigue from a three-hour graduate lesson on Zoom can still be felt the next day when trying to begin fresh with an early-morning ninety-minute class. Therefore, build in breaks away from the screen. Instruct your students to walk, drink water, and step outside for a few moments to help combat sluggishness. Remind your students that the break is not for completing other tasks. This goes for the teacher as well. Completing other tasks during the break defeats the purpose of refreshing the mind and body. Additionally, we may not be able to control the times we teach, but if at all possible try to allow time between your teaching and meet-

ings. When setting a meeting, be courteous to all by setting not only a specific start time but an end time as well.

Set Boundaries and Schedule Off-Tech Hours

Only you can protect your personal time. No one else will do this for you. Therefore, it is up to you to set office hour boundaries outside of teaching hours. Technology is wonderful in that we can take it anywhere. This is also what makes it dangerous.


If your eyes feel dry or achy or you are experiencing blurred vision or having headaches, this is a sign that you are dealing with screen-induced eye fatigue. This is an indicator that you are spending too much time on screens of all kinds, including laptops, iPads, cell phones, etc. If this is happening with great frequency, you may not be setting enough boundaries for your own well-being.

Physically leave your teaching/office space for the day. Have an actual ending time in which you physically change your environment. This will help you transition back into personal time mode. It is also beneficial to continue professional dress so that you can also change clothes, signaling you are done with teaching and meetings for the day. I made it clear to my music education majors that their appearance on camera was to be the same as their appearance in the physical classroom. Some may argue that since there is only a limited camera view, what is the point? However, neat appearance requires them to be in a state of preparedness



and signals inwardly that it is time for learning. Learning to be prepared is a trait that they need to develop as they transition into music educators. Additionally, this allows them to transition into personal space when classes are completed for the day by relaxing their appearance.

Unfortunately, the expectation with technology use is that we as educators and advisors should be available 24/7. Additionally, we as a collective group of choral educators want to help, assist, and be available. However, it is important to realize that personal time, family time, and creative time has worth. Highly productive people recognize and accept

responsibility, but they also recognize the need for rejuvenation. We need to teach our students this as well and lead by example. 

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the Answer,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 27, 2020, accessed May 29, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/why-does-zoom-exhaust-you-science-has-the-answer-11590600269>.

² Joe Sugden, “Zoom Fatigue is Real,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 23, 2020, accessed May 29, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/zoom-fatigue-is-real-11587652460>.

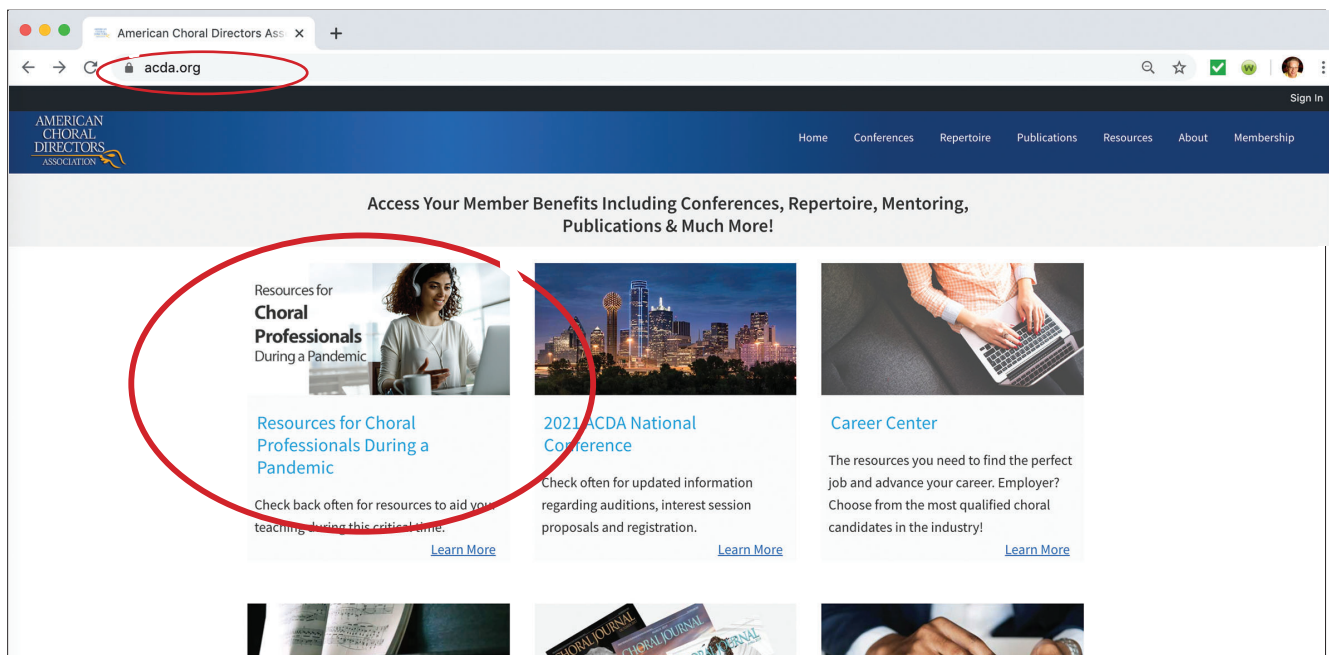
³ Elizabeth Redcay, et al., “Live Face to Face Interaction during fMRI: A New Tool for Social Cognitive Neuroscience,” *Neuroimage* 50, no. 4, (2010), 1639–1647, doi: 10.1016/j.neuroimage.2010.01.052.

NOTES

¹ Besty Morris, “Why Does Zoom Exhaust You? Science Has

CHORAL RESOURCES FOR THESE TIMES

ACDA is hosting a webpage that is updated daily containing resources that are particularly useful for choral professionals:
Resources for Choral Professionals During the Pandemic.



The screenshot shows the ACDA website with the following content:

- Browser address bar: acda.org (circled in red)
- Navigation menu: Home, Conferences, Repertoire, Publications, Resources, About, Membership
- Header: Access Your Member Benefits Including Conferences, Repertoire, Mentoring, Publications & Much More!
- Main content area:
 - Resources for Choral Professionals During a Pandemic** (circled in red): Check back often for resources to aid you teaching during this critical time. [Learn More](#)
 - 2021 ACDA National Conference**: Check often for updated information regarding auditions, interest session proposals and registration. [Learn More](#)
 - Career Center**: The resources you need to find the perfect job and advance your career. Employer? Choose from the most qualified choral candidates in the industry! [Learn More](#)