

Jenna Martinez
Oxford Scholars
2 January 2020

Living and Learning in the Age of Zoom

On March 13, 2020, campuses across the country were shut down due to the spread of COVID-19. The majority of the American population expected a two-week long, or perhaps even a three-week long self-quarantine. However, as we all came to know, this was not that case, as the virus persisted from March into April, then into May, to summer, fall, winter, and into the new year. My class, the Class of 2021, ended our junior year sitting within our homes as we took our AP tests and finished our final exams, and we began our senior year with online learning as well. For the past year, applications like Google Meets, Zoom, and the like have acted as our classrooms. This new aspect of online learning has brought about several changes to the lives and wellness of students. Living and learning in the age of Zoom has affected high school students' academic performance and mental health across the nation.

There have been several studies conducted that show the effect that online schooling has had on high school students' learning gains, the measure of improvement in knowledge, skills, work-readiness and personal development made by students during their time spent in higher education, and general performance in classes. According to a study conducted by NWEA, a pioneer in educational research and assessment methodology that explores foundational issues in education, practical challenges in today's schools, and the evolving role of technology in the lives of students, some key findings indicate that while learning through applications such as Zoom, "in almost all grades, most students made some learning gains in both reading and math since the COVID-19 pandemic started. However, gains in math were lower on average in fall

2020 than prior years, resulting in more students falling behind relative to their prior standing” (Source 2). This means that while students are still able to make learning gains in 2020, they’re still faltering compared to 2019. Factors such as

The emotional and mental health of high school students is something that should be taken into account just as seriously as academic performance. The shocking change to the learning environments of the students has undoubtedly impacted their mental well-being for a multitude of reasons, one of the most obvious being teenagers’ social life. I can guarantee that if anyone were to ask a high schooler what their favorite parts of school are, that within the first three things they list off, they will mention that school is where they get to talk and be with their friends. School isn’t solely about the learning that goes on inside it. It’s also about the connections that are built between peers, the jokes made at the lunch tables, the little moments in-between. Online school is ultimately absent of all those things. Yes, it’s possible to still talk with your friends in breakout rooms, and over FaceTime, social interaction over a screen is incredibly different from in-person interaction.

Social distancing and learning over Zoom also disrupted the routine that many students had, which potentially can cause adolescents to experience social isolation or loneliness which could then further spiral down into mental illness. Most schools usually have counselors, and systems in place to help with these feelings, and some students may also visit therapists. Though with orders to stay home, students have been physically cut off from that support.

My personal experience with online learning has been tolerable. It isn’t easy, not in the slightest, but it likely isn’t as difficult as others have it. I always have access to my own laptop whenever I need it. My house’s wifi and internet, though it does sometimes like to act up at inconvenient times, is reliable, which I know is more than what other people can say for

themselves. I'm doing alright in all of my classes. Just mediocre. I liked learning new things. I've always loved gaining more knowledge, discovering new perspectives, and words and equations. I especially loved math. It was my favorite subject. I find that I speak numbers more fluently than English sometimes, and solving equations has always been somewhat therapeutic to me. I don't really love math anymore. I don't hate it either. I simply don't feel anything at all towards math, towards any of my classes. When I first started feeling this way around early May, it scared me. I didn't want to stop finding joy in learning. It would mean that I'd given up on staying positive, and I knew that if I was going to make it through the school year I had to be strong. It happened anyways. Even now, going through classes is difficult. It's hard to get motivated, it's hard to stay focused, and it's especially hard to do that when you can't even visit other people without the fear of contracting a virus that you could spread to your loved ones.

In the beginning, it wasn't so bad. A lack of motivation was troublesome, but I've dealt with slumps before and I'm smart enough so that I could still churn out exceptional work. However, as quarantine persisted, the copious amounts of screen time really began to affect me. At the end of every day I would leave Zoom exhausted, even though I'd done nothing but sit in a chair all day. My eyes would hurt, and my vision would be blurry, sometimes I would even be seeing double. I was irritable. Even the smallest things made me want to lash out. Yell at my sisters to be quiet, scream in frustration when the phone rings, slam the doors behind me. I suppose I was just upset with everything back then. With the world, with the people who weren't following protocol, with the unfairness of it all. I never did any of those things however, and my irritability has died down since then, but it isn't gone. Instead it's more of a slow simmer beneath the surface, no longer threatening to overflow.

What has replaced it is something like a mix between sadness and detachment. It was the worst in October. Now, I've had downswings like that before. They usually occur during mid-to-late fall, and they usually go away after two or three weeks. This year it lasted two months. After returning home from evacuation from the fires, I found that I just couldn't fall asleep in my own bed. It felt wrong. So from October 2nd 2020 to December 24th 2020, I slept on the couch in my living room. I stopped reaching out to my friends and family. I practically lived on that couch, slept there, did class there. I was at my worst, a low that felt impossibly steep. Though I know that it wasn't entirely online learning's fault, it certainly didn't improve my mental health either. Despite all of that, I am holding out hope that I will be able to experience Easter with my grandparents again. That I will get to go to a prom, and that I'll receive my diploma alongside my fellow classmates. I am confident in my abilities to adapt and endure through any future obstacle, and I am hopeful for education that is more accessible to people around the world.

With the vaccine being distributed as we speak, many people are optimistic about the future, and returning to not only normal schooling, but normal life as well. Still, recovery from the pandemic, even after the vaccine is appropriately administered, will still take time. COVID-19 isn't going to simply vanish into thin air. It will continue to circulate and spread among the population, just like influenza and other viruses; it is our duty to remain vigilant, which could possibly mean continuing to practice social-distancing or the usage of masks. This also means that large gatherings of people, so for schools, the return to campus could still be some time away. With the future largely unknown, there is a question that we are all forced to ask: 'What happens next?' 'What do we do now, that there are decisions to be made that will ultimately affect the health and safety of millions students and teachers?'

The obvious course of action for most of us, is to continue the online classes under self-quarantine, at least until organizations like the CDC and WHO declare it is safe to return. This just means enduring through more Zoom, more screen time, more adaptation and sacrifices made by children, and teachers, and parents. Sacrifices made by freshmen who still haven't truly even been to high school. Sophomores who are still trying to get navigate, juniors who are forced to endure one of their most challenging years without easy access to support, and a senior class that lost their end of their junior year, lost their summer, lost their senior homecoming, lost their birthdays, their last Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Years, to be with friends and family before they become adults and leave for college. Who have had to sacrifice, as many adults like to call it, 'best years of our lives?' It isn't fair. None of this is fair, but we must continue to persevere regardless. We should continue to be supportive, responsible, kind, and concerned about the well-being of others. Though it isn't ideal, Zoom does provide a way for people to safely communicate during this pandemic. It makes education more readily available for those who could not access it before, and presents new possibilities for online work and learning.

Works Cited

Lee, Joyce. "Mental health effects of school closures during COVID-19." *The Lancet*. Web. 2 Jan 2021.

[https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanchi/article/PIIS2352-4642\(20\)30109-7/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanchi/article/PIIS2352-4642(20)30109-7/fulltext).

(Source 1)

Megan Kuhfeld, Jim Soland, Beth Tarasawa, Angela Johnson, Erik Ruzek, and Karyn Lewis.

"How is COVID-19 affecting student learning?" *Brookings*. 3 December 2020. Web. 1 Jan 2021.

<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2020/12/03/how-is-covid-19-affecting-student-learning/#:~:text=In%20almost%20all%20grades%2C%20the,winter%202019%2Dfall%202019%20period>. (Source 2)

Thakur, Aditya. "Mental Health in High School Students at the Time of COVID-19: A Student's Perspective." *US National Library of Medicine National Institutes of Health*. 26 August 2020. Web. 4 Jan 2021.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7448765/#:~:text=Increased%20incidence%20of%20mental%20health,in%20adolescents%20during%20a%20pandemic.&text=Quarantine%2C%20trauma%2C%20and%20grief%20during,risk%20of%20mental%20health%20problems>. (Source 3)