

Engage360 | Episode 50: Excelling at Online Teaching and Learning

- Introduction: Welcome to Engage360, Denver Seminary's podcast. Join us as we explore the redemptive power of the gospel and the life-changing truth of Scripture at work in our culture today.
- Dr. Don Payne: Hey, welcome back to Engage360 at Denver Seminary. I'm Don Payne. We're glad you're with us. And this week we have what may be among the most immediately helpful and practical conversations we have had thus far in the Engage360 podcast. So if you are a teacher or if you know a teacher, or if you know a student, you're going to want to listen to this because our guest this week is Aaron Johnson. Who's our Associate Dean of Educational Technology here at Denver Seminary. Aaron has just recently released a new book called *Online Teaching with Zoom*. Now this topic and the whole Zoom conversation will automatically make a lot of people tired because we are pretty widely experiencing a lot of Zoom fatigue. That's like a thing now, but Aaron has learned how to redeem this thing in a really helpful and unusual way. So his recent book *Online Teaching with Zoom* fairly recently was number one on Amazon in the educational category. I just checked it. It's gone down a little bit today, but not much. It was number one. It's been rave reviewed as far away as Australia. One of my theological colleagues, Dr. Michael Bird in Australia. Got it. And raved about it on Twitter. So we're going to be talking about that book, but talking about online teaching with zoom. So if you're a teacher or if you're not a teacher, but you know, a teacher, here's what you need to do. You need to tell everyone, you know, who is a teacher or learner online about this, use your Twitter, use your Instagram, your Facebook, even email them, or maybe here's a thought, just tell them about it, tell them about the podcast, get them to listen and tell them about the book. Now, this is not merely for those in Seminaries. Aaron has been a high school teacher and his book has already been very helpful to other high school teachers. So Aaron Johnson, welcome to the podcast.
- Aaron Johnson: Yes. Good to be with you, Don. Thanks.
- Dr. Don Payne: We are so glad you're here and thankful for your time. So give us an overall sense of some of the key topics and the needs that you address that are related to virtual teaching. I guess whether it's Zoom or any other platform, what are some of those key topics and needs that you try to get after in this book?
- Aaron Johnson: Yeah, there's really two big ideas. The first one is that Zoom is a tool and like any tool, it takes deliberate practice and practice takes time. And we have this kind of idea with most of our learning technologies, almost any technology is that we expect it to be intuitive and Zoom is great. I think it's probably the best video conferencing tool out there. And there's some other good ones, but it's, and none of them are intuitive. And that really gets in the way of our learning. If we expect something to be intuitive, we kind of set ourselves up for disappointment because any tool. I remember my dad telling me this, he's like

here's a broom, a push broom. Let me teach you how to use it. Most people don't know how to use it in our wood shop because they would push it along and create a bunch of dust. And that dust would settle on our products and we'd have to re-sand and repaint those products. So I had a learning curve actually.

Dr. Don Payne: To use a push broom.

Aaron Johnson: In learning how to use a push broom.

Dr. Don Payne: Man, I never would have thought that, learning how to use a push broom.

Aaron Johnson: And I think folks in the past and, and let's see, what's his name? It's Cal Newport from Georgetown University, he's a computer scientist. And he said in the past we had a more intimate connection with our tools cause they were in our hands. We'd use shovels and hoes and rakes and all these things, and many of us still do in gardening. And we realize that there's that learning curve cause we're more attached to it. But the things that we use now are a little more distant and digital and they still take actually, they may take more time because they're more complicated and sophisticated.

Dr. Don Payne: What are some of the misconceptions that you have had to combat when it comes to online teaching in general and maybe, Zoom in particular, but just online teaching in general, that's your wheelhouse? What are the misconceptions that you always have to work against?

Aaron Johnson: Probably the biggest one is that it's impersonal and that it's, you know, one of my colleagues doesn't like the words, distance education, because of the word distance, it assumes more than just physical space, but maybe interpersonal space. But I got thrown into online teaching as a way to keep connected with students after I moved to Colorado, the students, I had high school students in Ohio. And what I learned really quickly is a lot of the introverts came out of the woodwork because everybody's talking and I was interacting with not just about 10% of my class during class period, but a hundred percent. And that was, it was really encouraging, really enlightening. One of our professors here, Professor Emeritus Dr. Bruce Demarest, he, and I've worked together on several spiritual formation courses. And one of his comments has been that he thinks because it's a little more deliberate and that everyone's really communicating with one another, that it may be more conducive to spiritual formation doing it online.

Introduction: Yeah. That's really counterintuitive to what would be, what people would instantly think about the effect of online platforms with something like spiritual formation, wouldn't it? Very counterintuitive. So in a sense maybe, is it fair to say that it's not a choice between personal and impersonal, but it's a choice between different types of personal or a reconfiguration of the interpersonal, is that fair?

Aaron Johnson: It's like relearning, say you're a missionary going into a new culture. You're learning about that culture and you're learning the language. I remember spending just a, I spent a summer in England and they speak English, but they don't speak my English.

Dr. Don Payne: Probably a different sort. Yeah. Yeah.

Aaron Johnson: It became, I remember one day just trying to buy a sandwich and it was so frustrating. And then it was terrible. The food was terrible and I just threw it in the trash and I thought, I just, I can't imagine being a missionary. And I think that's a lot like learning some of these digital tools like Zoom, is it's so cognitively demanding, you're managing different windows and learning new features and all that. But after you give it time and you learn the language of it, then you're able to be proficient. And then you hit this place where you're not really thinking about it anymore, but it takes time.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. Nothing's natural at first, right? Yeah. What are this may be a different version of the same question, but what have you found to be some of the biggest hurdles people have to overcome in teaching and in learning for that matter with Zoom?

Aaron Johnson: You know, I was just helping out a few of our faculty who are teaching right now in our classrooms. And so they're teaching with an audience who's there in the classroom and one that's also on Zoom. And so there's just an increased cognitive load because you're managing software, you're managing your presentation. You're managing, you're thinking about what you're going to be saying next. And you've got two different audiences who have two different sets of needs. And so in that cognitive load place, that's so high, we can typically we tend to freeze and we tend to forget. And so it, it helps to really take it slow. And I found it, it helps to just be able to say to our classes or students, the folks who were on the other end, Hey, I'm, I'm figuring this out and I'm putting in the time, but this is not easy and I'll get better. And they tend to be, students really tend to be very gracious and helpful. Another thing is just, there's a lot of things with video in particular, I studied video production in my undergrad, there's unintended communication that can happen. So if our lighting is really dark, we can communicate that we're disinterested or distant or that we're angry.

So learning how to do our lighting, which is not super technical, but it's pretty important. I would say most of my, if I'm in a Zoom meeting, I'd say a majority of people have bad lighting and it could be fixed in probably 30 seconds with a few easy fixes, like just moving a light source. So it's not behind you having a window in front of you, maybe closing the blinds to diffuse the light. So it's not so harsh. And the other thing is a camera angles. So if you're sitting way below the camera, it communicates different power differentials. If I'm sitting way above the camera, looking down on my students, it's communicating that I'm kind of looming over or domineering. And I don't mean to communicate that, but the camera is going to say those things.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah, interesting. You know, when whatever end of Zoom, we're on. I always find it interesting when people are using Zoom with two different screens and their cameras in one screen, but they're watching the other screen. So I'm actually interacting with the side of their face, which is quite odd.

Aaron Johnson: It is. And what it communicates is that I'm not interested in you and I don't mean that.

Dr. Don Payne: Or I'm not really talking to you, I'm talking to the side of your head, right.

Aaron Johnson: And if you're in a classroom where you're teaching in a physical classroom, and then you have students on Zoom, it's really easy to forget that they exist. And so it's really important to turn to them and look directly at them, speak to those students by name.

Dr. Don Payne: You know what, this may be more from a learner's perspective, but it does apply both to teachers and learners. Just this morning, I was conducting a training session by Zoom for an external organization, not the Seminary. And so I didn't have a lot of control over what the participants did and I don't know if they were introverts or what, but almost all of the participants kept their cameras off while I was trying to talk to them. And I was amazed how difficult that was. I'm just talking to black boxes.

Aaron Johnson: Right. It's kind of, I tell students when you turn your camera off, it's kind of like coming to class and putting a piece of cardboard in front of your face. So I can't see the person. So I really want to see you. And there are, I think, legitimate accommodations where you may have say a student who's in a housing situation that they're embarrassed by.

Dr. Don Payne: Or maybe it's just a bad hair day, you know.

Aaron Johnson: Maybe it is. And that's where things like virtual backgrounds can help or, but yeah. So having that conversation with students, like if there's a reason why you may not want to turn your camera on, let's talk about it kind of offline together. Because there might be something, you know, they're not all in that same shared space anymore. They're all in each other's living rooms and bedrooms and offices, and there can be quite a lot of variables.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. Yeah. Let's follow that line of thought for a moment. How would, what would you say to online Zoom based teachers to help them help students engage Zoom well?

Aaron Johnson: I'd say, you know, getting the really requiring students to get in a space where they're not going to be interrupted, not usually means a door that you can close, it's that simple. And that may not be available to all students, but I'd say to most students. And then second would be to talk about, talk with them about the expectation of self-awareness, you know, what you wear and how you, how you

present yourself really matters. We're in a professional setting, we're in a setting of Scholastic setting, academic setting. And so I'd like you to be able to sit in a chair instead of laying on your couch or on your bed, that's going to help you to focus and bring your best to the class. Probably the biggest thing is to keep them active. And that is where you're not as a teacher doing all the communication, but you're really giving them the mic, putting them in small groups, active learning. And that's the second big idea in the book. And that is that Zoom as a technology has a tendency, it was built for interaction. It was built for conferencing. It was built for conversations. So if the teacher's doing all of the communication, you're actually working against what it was designed to do.

Dr. Don Payne: Interesting. Well, that makes a lot of sense of what you and your staff have trained us on the faculty to do for several years now, when we record online classes and this was a, I confess, this was a bit odd to me the first time I did it. But what you ask us to do is to cut our lectures up into 20 to 25 minutes segments. Which for people who professionally love to talk is a bit of a challenge. Yeah, yeah. It is having to reorganize the lectures and record them only in 20, 25 minutes segments. But I've received enough feedback from students over several years time in those online courses, that, that was really helpful having these digestible chunks of thought and then having something to do with them and not having to listen to any of us drone on for, you know, 20, 25 minutes at a time.

Aaron Johnson: Yeah. And Zoom, I think can help us with that become better communicators. If we're speaking for 10 or 15 minutes, putting them into an active learning setting for 10 or 15 minutes and just creating this rhythm of that, we become more intentional with our words.

Dr. Don Payne: Well, and it can discipline us to get to the point. Which is not as easy as it may sound. Right. Right. Yeah. What is it about Zoom that you find people have the most difficulty with? Are there any patterns?

Aaron Johnson: One theme has been that you need to slow it down, that even in the pacing of your voice, there's something about a microphone that you're speaking through this piece of equipment that the faster you speak, the more difficult it is for people to hear. And that's always true, but it seems to be even more true in a digital space because literally your voice is being broken up into bits and bytes being carried a thousand miles away and being patched back together. And so you're, you may not notice that in the moment, but your brain is doing some of that stitching. It's an extra work. And so when we talk about Zoom fatigue, some of that's just our body and our brain being part of our body is having to do more work. So for instance, there's latency, which is that little gap in communication. And you can see that if you're on Zoom, you just look at yourself in the camera, blink your eyes, and there'll be like a gap there and you'll see yourself blink your own eyes. Right. And so your brain is actually trying to smooth that out and it does a great job of it, but that takes, you know, say 5% more energy. So the students going to be a little more tired, so slowing it down. And I think even just

narrating what you're doing, what the students can't see, like, you know, I'm right now, I'm bringing up a slide presentation for this next part of our class. And while I'm doing that, I'd like you to think about this question. And so what you're doing is you're creating these transitional spaces, you're helping students stay oriented to what's going on instead of kind of the magic always happening behind the scenes or having all these unknown spaces because students have a really hard time with that.

Dr. Don Payne: Okay. So that's where at least in part Zoom fatigue is coming from, that extra work the brain is doing?

Aaron Johnson: And the fact that you're sedentary, right? You are in a meeting you're usually able to, I think, shift more in some settings you get up and walk around. You can still do that with zoom, but we tend to, cause we're so habituated to a television set, just sitting there. And so it's really important to get up, move around, take breaks, probably, you know, really need to feel out where your learners are. Is it every 20 minutes? Is it every 45 minutes is every hour and a half, really depends on the age, the developmental level and what you're doing.

Dr. Don Payne: Okay. Okay. Do you have any other ways of kind of mitigating or compensating for that Zoom fatigue, or maybe even for other difficulties that people tend to encounter when they're teaching by Zoom? Any other suggestions?

Aaron Johnson: Yes. So some of it is Zoom and some of it is just our bodies that our bodies are made to move as much as we can. So not just taking breaks, but getting up and going for a walk. So it's great to tell your students, Hey, I got this one question for you. I want you to take five to seven minutes and I want you, if you can get out of your house, if you need to pace your room, that's okay, but get your legs moving. If you can, and get a change of scenery. It's also really good for us to be able to focus on far distances. If we've been looking at a screen that's anywhere from 10 to 30 inches from our eyes, our eyes are just doing the same thing. And they need to look into the distance, even if it's just out the window every once in a while. So in the midst of a meeting, maybe just taking a pause and say, Hey, I'd like, if you can look across the room or look out the window, give your eyes a break for a minute and think about this. I find that just taking a pause and asking students to ponder, I love the word ponder or linger on this thought for a moment is really good for mitigating Zoom fatigue, but also just really great for learning in general, to create this kind of a culture of wonder in the classroom.

Dr. Don Payne: That's interesting because somebody many years ago gave me a very similar piece of advice. When I started a doctoral studies, knowing that, that was going to be a very reading intensive of, I was going to be spending hundreds of hours reading. And this friend told me, you know, your eyes were not made to focus that long, that intensely on things that close to you. So every hour or so, at periodic intervals, you need to simply look up, look off into the distance and let your eyes relax a bit, which I found really beneficial. I think that's the same phenomenon you're describing.

Aaron Johnson: It is. And an akin to that is, is having students do tactile things. And in particular taking, taking notes and maybe helping redefine notes for students as, Hey, this time during class, I want you to have a sheet of paper out in a pencil or pen. And I'd like it just to write down questions. Like you're not trying to get everything I'm saying to be, you know, put it back on an exam or something. It's just, I want you to wonder with me about things. So try to try to write down five questions over the course of this next hour and a half.

Dr. Don Payne: Aaron, you're also the author of a previous book called Excellent Online Teaching Effective Strategies for Successful Semesters Online. I may have gotten the title messed up a little bit.

Aaron Johnson: It's close enough.

Dr. Don Payne: Okay. Excellent Online teaching. You've been at this for some time. What are some of the big shifts in your own thinking or big learning moments for you when it comes to online teaching and learning?

Aaron Johnson: Probably the biggest one. This is kind of funny is really taking time to think through what you grade. In the online space, particularly asynchronous online learning. So not Zoom where students are a little more at their own pace, at least during the course of a week, they've got assignments and due dates, but they're involved in these online discussions that might use video, they might not, might be text discussions, annotation, software, stuff like that. We tend to proliferate graded items in those types of courses.

Dr. Don Payne: How so? What do you mean?

Aaron Johnson: Well, there's all these opportunities for different links and assignments and small things that you maybe you can even do in five minutes. Like, so for instance, when I looked over one of our online courses, I think it had 326 unique different things inside of it. And we have a tendency as human beings. I don't understand this totally. I'm sure some psychologists have studied this to want to assess everything and not everything is really valuable to assess, some things just really need to be an activity. I think of it as you know, you're giving students this really potent content, like a blueberry. And a blueberry, I guess if you took the fiber out of a blueberry, it'd be really difficult to digest because it has so many powerful sugars in it, but that fiber allows it to metabolize in the body. So I think of like, you know, delivering just incredibly thick weighty content to a student, and then they have this time to spend discussing it or working through it, to metabolize it. And then assessment is this third thing where we say, okay, what are those few things that are most important that I need to assess as a teacher?

Dr. Don Payne: That's interesting because the assumption embedded in what you just said is that learning can still be taking place, even if I'm not assessing it. It can still be happening.

Aaron Johnson: I can do what are called informal checks, which are participating in the discussion, asking further questions, observing what's going on in the discussion. And I'm seeing the learning, I'm seeing the evidence of learning, but it doesn't mean I need to test it. I just need to take it in and get a sense of where my class is. So I can be an effective teacher. So where I've really changed then in practice. When I first started teaching online courses, I would grade all of my discussions, but then I thought, would I ever stand behind my students in a small group, in person with a clipboard and grade their discussions? I'd never do that. In fact, if I did that, that would put pressure on them to perform and they'd write essays. And I think that's what we see a lot of in graded discussions. And in online courses, students feel pressured to write essays. So they don't really talk with them

Dr. Don Payne: Because they feel like they're being assessed all the time.

Aaron Johnson: Exactly. Yeah. Yeah. And it doesn't just wear the students out. It really wears the teachers out. So for instance, let's say I had 10 discussions on a course with 20 students in it. And I had two posts in that. I think it's like 400 different things that I might actually grade with a rubric that I don't really need to.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. Who can do that.

Aaron Johnson: People do. And actually some institutions require that. That's amazing. Yeah. Yeah.

Dr. Don Payne: Please don't ask me to do that. Hey, we got started today with a question about what you cover in your book and there are a number of books and I'm sure many of them are helpful out there about online teaching. I've seen quite a number of them on Amazon. What sets yours apart? What are you trying to do that will push this conversation forward helpfully in this book?

Aaron Johnson: I think I try to be to the point, okay. I had an author friend and she looked at the first draft of it. She said, you need to cut about half of it out. And so I did, I think I took 42%.

Dr. Don Payne: That always hurts an author, that's painful to hear

Aaron Johnson: It's rough, but it was so it was so needed. My first book, I think the strength of it was that it was very succinct. And I think, I think this one is too, so very practical. I think the other piece is it gives a lot of ideas that you can put into play, you know, right after, as you're reading it, I had a surgeon contact me, a consultant who teaches, I think teachers how to teach surgery online. And she said, I took 12 pages of notes from this thing because she was finding it very applicable to what they were doing. And that was really encouraging to me because that's a very skills based thing. It better be.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. They better be veterans better be very skilled. Yeah.

Aaron Johnson: So, the book really has four parts of the first part is short about 40 pages where I go through the technical, how to's, the real basics of getting your audio set up, getting your kind of visual screen set up and the room where you're going to teach. And then we move into, which I think is maybe the most important part of the whole book and is getting a real student perspective, how the students experience the Zoom or video conference classroom. And then how do you play to that? How do you not, not work against that, but work with that. And with that, I deal with classroom management. So what are protocols like, Hey, you can't come to class driving a motor vehicle, those kinds of things, or be in a space where you can close that door or have earbuds or a headset to help localize your sound, those kinds of things. And the third part is taking more of probably a lecture driven classroom, how you add to it, how you augment that with like segments of active learning. And then the fourth part is more of a shift to collaborative learning and tasks where you've got students working in groups. And so we take that breakout rooms tool in Zoom and use it for learning. But I think what makes the book probably unique as a Zoom book is that it's not focused on doing meetings or really the ins and outs of the technology as much as, how do you do this unique thing of teaching with Zoom?

Dr. Don Payne: I know that a lot of teachers at various levels are secretly, if not publicly hoping that things are quickly going to come back to the way they were. And we'll be less reliant on this technology, maybe in our more realistic moments, we know that whatever the new normals are, we're probably not going to return to the way things were educationally in terms of educational delivery systems or modalities. Where do you see us headed in the future? Do a little bit of maybe forecasting. Where do you see us headed in light of how the pandemic has shifted our teaching and learning modalities? I ask this because we're going to have to be making some rather long-term, maybe even permanent adaptations as teachers. What do you think those are going to be? What's it going to look like going forward?

Aaron Johnson: Got to keep a pulse on our students and not the tech. The tech tends to eclipse the bigger question, you know, because the tech says here's what is possible. And the students tell us, here's what we need. So right now our students are changing. I've having students come up to me and say, I never took an online course before. I didn't want to. And it turned out to be an amazing experience. It works better with my life. And I have other students who were saying, yeah, it's not really for me. And so what we're having is really, we're starting to see several different audiences will emerge and you need different types of distance learning or online learning for them. So for instance, for us, at least, we have a lot of people who are adult learners, they're working full time and they might be able to come to one class in a semester that meets from six to nine o'clock on a Thursday night. But most of them can't, they need something asynchronous. It's more on their timeframe. But then we also have a group of students who moved a thousand miles from the Midwest to come to Colorado to study. And they really want to be in the classroom. In the COVID situation though, what if their spouse gets ill? And that means they're also quarantined. And then let's say they get ill after, you know, 20 days of quarantine. Now they're out of class

for four class sessions and they've paid for that class, right? So how can we accommodate them? Which is what we're doing with a Zoom technology in the classroom.

If they hit that kind of situation or their, or their kid's school closes and they need to be home and they can't come to class anymore. So there's really getting to know who our students are. And then we really have to honor, the limitations of the human body, the limitations of people, particularly teachers. And I see a lot right now, institutions really requiring very complex modes of delivery. And the technology is making so many things possible, but no one really knowing where to draw the lines. For instance hearing parents talk about getting literally scores of notifications in 24 hours from the learning management systems where these online courses live for their K12 students. And you've got, let's say four kids, you know, you get over a hundred notifications within just, you know, 48 hours.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. How do you keep up with that?

Aaron Johnson: Yeah, you can't, we're not built for it. And so the key is always asking the question, I think, with online learning, how can we make it more straightforward? How can we make it more simple? Because the tendency of these technologies is to lead us down a road of complexity and not all things are. And then Paul say that like, you know, not all things are available for me to do, but they're not all beneficial. That's just a great rule of life to say, Hey, that's all possible, but what do our students need? What our faculty need? Let's keep it as basic as possible. And then let's build on top of that rather than trying to meet everybody's needs and use all the bells and whistles.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah, that's great. This is really helpful. Aaron, thanks. We've be talking to Aaron Johnson. Who's our associate Dean of Educational Technology here at Denver Seminary. We are really proud of him because he has become and has led our whole educational technologies department to be, I think something of a front runner, a Vanguard among Seminaries particularly, and has published this work. That's going to be widely applicable far beyond the boundaries of the Seminary world. So let me encourage you again to get a copy of it. It's called Online Teaching with Zoom, by Aaron Johnson. And on that note, I want to thank our production team who Christa Ebert, who is again, basically on the soundboard and does our editing and works heavily and intensely with our online program. And we want to give a shout out to her as well as everybody else who make this happen. We're going to have more engaging conversations coming. And so we hope you will check in with us again next week. This has been Engage360 from Denver Seminary. I'm Don Payne. Thanks for listening.