

# ENGAGEMENT *in the age of*

BY BRIAN SINGER-TOWNS

In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus tells his disciples, “Then every scribe who has been instructed in the kingdom of heaven is like the head of a household who brings from his storeroom both the new and the old” (13:52). Jesus of course was talking about how his disciples would take the truths of the Old Covenant and teach them in light of the New Covenant revealed by Jesus. It has struck me that in this pandemic we modern disciples face something similar, not in terms of content but in terms of method. Long story short, here are three “old” truths about educational methodology that the pandemic has challenged me to implement in new ways.

## **Help Students Discover Their Voice**

**I believe in the importance of having students give voice to what they are learning**, what they are wondering, and what they yet don’t understand. It is hard in a face-to-face classroom for many students to do this. Many reasons—shyness, embarrassment, distraction—contribute to this. Sometimes it feels like pulling teeth to get students to say a few words. But in the Zoom space, I have found it easier to deal with this.

The chat box in Zoom (or whatever platform you are using) can be your best friend for this. I use it frequently to have young people post their reactions, answers, and questions. It’s a great way to encourage everyone to contribute and

gives me a record that I can refer to and build on. And when I want to ensure anonymity, I just ask the students to reply to me using the private option. I’ve found both the quantity and quality of sharing have improved compared to face-to-face meeting time.

## **Try, Teach**

When I was first learning to create digital learning experiences, the constant message was to use the Try, Teach methodology. That is, don’t start with a reading or video delivering the content, but start with an interaction that “tests” the user on the content. It took me a while to wrap my head around this, because as a student most of my learning was in the teach first, then try, methodology. But the more I thought about it, the more it made sense. Just watch any child play a video game. They don’t spend hours reading about the game’s rules and mechanics. They just dive in and start playing, learning along the way.

The Kahoot quiz app has been my best friend in applying the Try, Teach method during the pandemic. (If you have never used, it go to [kahoot.com](https://kahoot.com) to check it out.) I use it by just sharing screens in a Zoom session! It’s even better than playing Kahoot in a face-to-face class because it eliminates the advantage of some students sitting closer to the screen if you don’t have a large projection screen in

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your meeting space. I start most of my sessions with a Kahoot activity—sometimes just a few questions, sometimes twenty or more. The students love playing, and they retain more knowledge. I can follow each question with a short teaching as needed, often eliminating the need for a content presentation.

Whether in person or through distance learning, employing discovery through the Try, Teach method makes learning much more engaging for all!

## Encourage Students to Lead

I'm a strong believer in encouraging student leadership in educational settings. We all know the truth that if you really want to master some knowledge or skill, teach it to someone else. By putting a student in a teaching leadership role—whether that be as a facilitator or content expert—their potential to master the teaching is greatly increased.

The breakout rooms in Zoom are a great resource for encouraging student leadership.

In those breakout rooms, I often have students take the lead. I might have one student take the “hot seat” and respond to the other student’s questions as they think Jesus would respond, or the Holy Spirit, or the bishop. I often marvel at the student’s wisdom and understanding when doing this! I also ask students to create their own questions about the topic and put them in the chat box. Then we take turns answering them together. In these smaller groups, there is the opportunity—and the emotional safety—for each student to take a leadership role.

Teaching effectively during the pandemic has been a tremendous challenge. If there is a silver lining, it might be that it has forced us to explore what works in distance learning. **Even after the pandemic, it seems that distance learning will continue in some form or another**, becoming another tool in our teaching repertoire. We hope these three ideas spark your own creative reflection—possibly with colleagues—about how best to achieve your educational goals in distance-learning settings.

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