

## Improving the online classroom atmosphere using Gather

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Roundtable discussion

### Abstract

Online teaching is often deemed challenging and many teachers indicate difficulties in providing a good classroom atmosphere. This is particularly evident during jigsaw group discussions, where juggling between breakout rooms in Zoom hinders a good flow, limits the students' autonomy, and can lower students' motivation to actively participate. A way to restore students' autonomy together with motivation to learn is to provide them with a feeling of control over their own self in the digital environment. Such solution is provided by Gather, an online digital space. The teacher chooses among many types and sizes of space (office, classroom, but also rooftop party, forest, beach bar, etc.). Each participant chooses an avatar and is themselves controlling their avatar in the digital space, similarly as in a 90's video games, which makes it fun for participants. Private sub-spaces can be set in order to organize separate group discussions, and students can freely move from one space to another by themselves. Both teachers and students have an overview of the room, providing a feeling of being in a classroom without the overwhelming noisy environment. A large majority of my students report preferring Gather over Zoom (at least for seminars). As stated by one of my students: "It is the closer I feel to a real-life event. It was quite easy to be myself (which does not happen in Zoom)". With more courses being provided online, it is necessary to take advantage of digital tools to make sure the quality of education remains as high in online settings compared to IRL. Gather is, in my opinion, one of them.

Questions to discuss in roundtable: Which types of teaching session would benefit from using Gather over Zoom, and which would not? What are the barriers for using Gather, and how to overcome them?

### References

Gather, San Francisco, CA, USA. <https://www.gather.town>

Lasselin J, "Gather Town for teachers": a step by step instructions to get started with Gather Town as a teacher; "Gather Town: tutorials for students": tutorial for students to navigate in Gather Town. Openly available on OSF. doi: 10.17605/OSF.IO/FVC9B