

Defusing the Zoombomb:

A Discussion of Countering Virtual Attacks in an Intercultural Program Setting

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Tags

Crisis-Management; Cross-Cultural Issues; Ethics, Equity, and Social Justice; International Student and Scholar Services; Management and Operations; Student Services; Technology; University/Higher Education

Setting

This situation occurs within the context of a large R1 research university in the United States. The university has over 2,500 international students on a campus of 40,000 total students. A department within the university seeks to internationalize the campus experience for all students and oversees a variety of programs that support international students, build connections between international and domestic students, and promote intercultural learning on campus.

This case study takes place during the COVID-19 pandemic, in which the majority of programming and student support occurs virtually, predominantly using the online meeting platform called Zoom. The term “Zoombombing” used in this case refers to when people unexpectedly join an online meeting with the intention of hijacking the program to disrupt or to cause harm.

Case

One of the department’s programs is a student-led discussion series that promotes intercultural sharing and learning. Each month, a different group of students selects a cultural or global topic, issue, or current event to share and discuss. The program is student-led, and the majority of participants tend to be students, but occasionally faculty and staff join as well.

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Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this discussion program occurs on Zoom, so student facilitators have the opportunity to practice their virtual presentation and facilitation skills. While there is one staff support member running the technological back end of the Zoom meeting (managing the participant list, monitoring the waiting room, and coordinating the breakout rooms), the student facilitators serve as the face of the program by managing the presentation slides, answering the chat box comments and questions, and leading the breakout room discussions.

One group chooses to discuss belonging on campus and how to overcome obstacles associated with adjusting to life as international students. The facilitators are international students that are heavily involved in student organizations and university activities. They also each hold underrepresented identities at the university. At the beginning of the discussion, the student facilitators introduce themselves by sharing their academic background along with a bit about their identities as international students and their personal connections to the topic. The purpose of the discussion is to identify common obstacles that students may face while seeking belonging on campus, to share strategies for overcoming these obstacles and developing confidence, and to build community amongst international and domestic students.

After the staff member welcomes the participants and passes the facilitation over to the students, a few additional people request to enter the Zoom meeting. As students often join the programs after class or might need a few extra minutes to access the Zoom meeting due to technological difficulties, it is common that participants continue to trickle into the program for the first ten minutes or so.

The staff member admits the additional participants from the waiting room into the meeting and then notices that many participants have the same name. It is not uncommon that students have difficulty with internet, audio, or video connection so join on multiple devices in order to still participate in the program. Additionally, sometimes someone shares an individualized registration link with friends or colleagues rather than having them register on their own, and consequently multiple people may show up with the same name in the meeting. The staff member is unsure as to why there are multiple people with the same name but chooses to give them the benefit of the doubt and to leave them in the meeting based on past program management experiences.

A student facilitator privately messages the staff member mentioning that it seems odd that there are so many people with the same name. At this point, the staff member suggests that they personally handle the waiting room and participant list so that the students can focus on their facilitation and discussion.

The student facilitators proceed with their presentation. Suddenly, a screen annotation appears on top of the presentation slides and blocks a portion of the content. The screen annotation includes offensive hate speech directed towards certain identities that are represented in both the participant and facilitator groups. It is clear in this moment that the student-led discussion program is actively being Zoombombed.

The staff member quickly clears all annotations from the screen, moves all of the individuals with duplicate names back into the waiting room, and locks the meeting so that no additional members can join. The staff member privately messages the facilitators to let them know that they are closely monitoring the situation and to see if they would like to proceed with the presentation or pause to talk about the Zoombombing incident.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- Put yourself in the shoes of the support staff member, a student facilitator, and a student participant at the moment in which you realize the program is being Zoombombed. How would you react and respond to the situation in this moment? Do any factors impact how you choose to respond, and if so, how?
- How might you as a program manager proactively prepare for a situation like this? What would you want a protocol to include?
- What role does identity play in this case study?
- If you held the identity that was actively being targeted by the offensive screen annotation, how would you want the support staff and/or student facilitators to handle the situation? Also, how would you **not** want them to handle the situation?
- Imagine you are managing, leading, or attending a virtual program. What is an example of a topic or situation that would make you feel uncomfortable to the point of it crossing a line? As a challenge, draft a chat box comment that you feel like you would need to address and practice how you would address it with a partner.