

Show but don't tell: why silent Zooms are golden for focusing the mind

The Guardian (<http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/apr/26/show-but-dont-tell-why-silent-zooms-are-golden-for-focusing-the-mind>) · by Nosheen Iqbal

There are Zooms for pub quizzes, Zooms for dinner parties, Zooms for work meetings and now there is a Zoom (<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/zoom>) for sitting together and not talking at all. Behold, the silent Zoom!

On paper, the practice of logging on to a video-conferencing site to sit with strangers for an hour without communicating may hold limited appeal. In practice, silent Zooms have become a lifeline in lockdown (<https://www.theguardian.com/travel/2020/apr/25/lockdown-learning-surfing-and-yoga-virtual-retreat-holiday>) for users trying to focus on writing, reading, meditation and more.

We live in stressful times, a perfect moment to try to turn off and tune out
Nosheen Iqbal



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(<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/26/we-live-in-stressful-times-a-perfect-moment-to-try-to-turn-off-and-tune-out>)

Author Anne Penketh (<https://www.theguardian.com/profile/anne-penketh>) has been retreating to “a virtual monastic retreat” for an hour every day to work on her novel. Initially, she struggled to understand the concept: what would be the point of Zoom without conversation? Finding silence to write in was not a problem for her, so Penketh was sceptical about what would make silence so productive in a potentially awkward group setting. She became a convert from the very first session.

“[My friend] Carola said: try to imagine it as working in a library, and now I’m completely hooked,” she wrote. “Three of us continued our silent Zoom sessions over the weekend as they’ve proved so productive for us all.”

Anecdotally, concentration seems more difficult to harness in corona times (<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/26/we-live-in-stressful-times-a-perfect-moment-to-try-to-turn-off-and-tune-out>); research shows (<https://sdlab.fas.harvard.edu/>) that, during periods of stress, we see significant decline in our ability to hold information and focus. But having accountability partners is a proven way to boost success, be it in weight loss or curbing an alcohol addiction. The difference with silent Zooms is that the accountability partners are often strangers, and always silent.

I'm hooked - three of us continued our silent sessions over the weekend as they've proved so productive

Anne Penketh, author

Penketh says: “As soon as I call up my Word document, it masks the other Zoomers, but I can look at them at any time, with their heads bowed over their laptops. Mercifully, there’s no sharing or reading aloud the results of our labour.”

Focusmate (<https://www.focusmate.com/>), which uses the same principle online and claims its virtual co-working method could “boost productivity by 200-300%”, has been targeting procrastinators since it launched in 2016. But the new spaces fostering “ssshhh” online seem less rigid and a lot more enjoyable.

Silent Zooms have been booming with book-lovers for several weeks now: you join, say hello, mute yourself and get down to the business of quietly reading your books together, but alone.

Njeri Damali Sojourner-Campbell, a Canadian YouTube bookworm, began hosting silent reading sessions on Zoom last month. She called the project Quarantined Pages (<https://njeridamalicampbell.wordpress.com/2020/03/29/quarantined-pages/>) and teamed up with six more BookTubers from the US, Trinidad, Nigeria and beyond, to make it a daily club they each host in turn.

Sojourner-Campbell (@Onyxpages (https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC_reNHCI5mUeKgbvkN2_bTA) online) is a lawyer and self-confessed Afrofuturist literature nerd. The idea for Quarantined Pages came in response to the pandemic and her own inability to lose herself in books; her attention span had fallen off a cliff. She knew she couldn’t be alone, and made a plan to support and encourage readers to get on the same page.

“Reading has gotten many of us through some of the hardest and most uncertain times of our lives. This time will be no different,” she wrote. Now, once the trolls are booted out, up to 20 people regularly sign to join the group. Hosts, including Jessie (@Bowtiesandbooks (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCTIbjVYcbwhoqFeWdiJGfkA>)) and Saajid (@Booksaremysociallife (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCJWQahxmBl81gKs-OBls2Bw>)), are on hand to keep the session flowing. It’s a comforting support network, explains Sojourner-Campbell, particularly for those in isolation.

Speaking to the *Observer*, she says: “After our silent reading hour is over, we check in with each other on how our reading is progressing. We share snapshots of each other’s lives.” The community behind the book club is a real motivator for her.

“There is a simple pleasure in sitting down quietly and reading, knowing that a group of readers from around the world is doing exactly the same thing,” she says. “The simultaneity of it is magical and inspiring! And we need a little bit of that right now: magic and inspiration.”

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