

How iAnimate.net and Zoom Educate the Next Generation of Animators



Stephen Melagrano
Instructor, iAnimate.net

Summary

- iAnimate.net hosts virtual classes on animation.
- Instructors use Zoom for their interactive video lectures.
- Favorite Zoom features include HD video and screen sharing.

Ever since movies like Toy Story debuted in 1995, there has been a resurgent interest in the prospects of animated films for family audiences. In time it became an enormous market and the demand for animators peaked. Of course, filling these shoes involves teaching new animation students how to create the masterpieces we see on the silver screen.

When most people think of modern animation schools, they picture rooms full of high-end computers and very expensive software where students sit down and learn to bring their illustrations to life. However, not all aspiring animators learn in these environments. iAnimate.net has taken a different approach to teaching students (see the latest iAnimate.net student show reel). iAnimate.net hosts interactive video lectures for students from many different countries. Its instructors are highly-experienced animators who have worked on famous films for the likes of DreamWorks, Disney and other studios that produce shorts or full-feature animated films. At present time, iAnimate.net has more than 300 students and holds 120 lectures per week.

“We do an hour and a half lecture every week. During that time, we must have the ability to share our screens to present material,” said Stephen Melagrano, an instructor at iAnimate.net who works with these students on a day-to-day basis (see a clip of Stephen teaching a class on pre-animation brainstorming). “On the weekends, we review all of the material presented and discuss ways to improve it in meetings with students all around the world.”

iAnimate.net’s main focus is on giving its students the best experience and the best education possible. They offer the most online content for students, the lowest instructor-to-student ratio, different tracks for different skill levels, flexible plans for busy students and strong connections with employers in the animation world.

Their international student body and the school’s emphasis on being flexible to their student’s needs meant that the only way to communicate was via live video. There really was no choice in the matter. iAnimate.



net had to find something quickly that was able to do everything necessary to give lectures and communicate with their students.

The first product they found wasn't exactly up to par. "When we were looking for a video meeting solution, we tried many different avenues," said Melagrano. "Nothing we saw really sparked our interest. They were either too expensive, didn't meet our expectations, or didn't allow a level of interaction with our students that was satisfactory. None of the demos we tried actually provided the video experience we were looking for. Eventually, we found something we thought was workable."

Over time, it seemed that the software they found was more trouble than it was worth. It started creating problems and Melagrano wasn't able to mitigate them all. Despite the number of issues, iAnimate.net was stuck on this platform for some time. There didn't seem to be a better solution out there.

"Our old software just wasn't working out," he said. "First of all, it was based on Flash, which was difficult to work with, given the hardware that some of our students were using. It was also very difficult to diagnose and troubleshoot, which slowed us down. We had to direct students to the software developer's support line, which usually didn't solve much. There were other problems, like the audio and video not being synced properly in recorded sessions. Students would hear things before or after they happened, which can get confusing during screen sharing. Quality-wise, it was better than other video products we've tested, but the frame-rate wasn't all that great."

After two years, he had had enough. It was time to move on and try to find something better. But what could he find? Everything else had been tried, and failed. To iAnimate.net, their video software is everything. It is what makes or breaks the school, so it had to give the most sterling video experience possible. In a moment of serendipity, however, Melagrano was contacted by Kent Braun, the owner of iAnimate.net who had recently tried Zoom himself.

"When I first heard about Zoom, I had a lingering feeling of skepticism after trying several products that simply failed to meet our requirements," Melagrano said. "I had a meeting the next day, so I decided it's a good time to try it out. With most products, it took a relatively short time to decide that they weren't going to work out. However, I was pleasantly surprised with what Zoom had to offer. Within ten minutes, things already started to look highly optimistic. Everything was much **faster, better, lightweight**, and easy to use. This was one piece of software that won me over very quickly."

His sudden cheer was not just brought on by Zoom's simplicity and smooth functioning. It also had much to do with the versatility the software presented. He wanted to make sure that his students would be able to communicate effectively, but he also wanted certain features that iAnimate.net needed to provide proper instruction and present materials.

"Since we've used Zoom, we've had an enormous bump in quality. The fact that we lost no functionality in the switchover was a big plus. We were particularly concerned with being able to have multiple students connected to the meeting with their webcam feeds and the ability to share our screens. These two were major 'musts' in the software we use. Without these features, our meetings just won't happen."

Through our conversation with Melagrano, we gathered that screen sharing is an intensely-used feature at iAnimate.net. In fact, it was so necessary, that it would be impossible to hold lectures to an international student body without it. He got exactly what he needed as soon as he started using Zoom. What he discovered soon after, however, was even more pleasant.

"In animation, you rely significantly on frame rates," he said. "Without a high frame rate, you won't see things as smoothly. Zoom allowed us to share screens and material at an impressive frame rate and with better image quality, which provided a great environment for us to collaborate with our students. We wanted an experience with instant feedback. In other words, we wanted it to look as if though we were watching video played back on our own computers, which meant that the frame rate had to be 24 frames per second or higher. Zoom did this better than any other video software we have tried."

The standard frame rate for movies is 24 frames per second, which is enough to produce a film with smooth movement that's pleasant to the eyes. This is greatly in contrast to the older software they had used, which had many issues that sometimes made it impossible to have meetings with certain students. Melagrano relates the experience he had with four students in the older software that iAnimate.net used for lectures.

"Four of our students found it nearly impossible to use our old software," he said. "They had fast, stable internet connections. One of them actually had fiber optics so the problem had nothing to do with their end of the line. To them, it was difficult to observe our meetings. The video would stop and skip frequently, but only on their end. I could see them just fine, but their ability to participate in meetings was completely paralyzed because of the fact

they were unable to see anything properly. I took the role of helping them with these technical issues, and since we've switched over to Zoom, I have not had to provide support to my students as much."

Since iAnimate.net relies primarily on screen sharing, it was inevitable for Melagrano to discover and take advantage of Zoom's remote control feature, which allows a participant to control another participant's computer. This feature allowed Melagrano to give students control over his mouse and keyboard controls to animate on his computer.

"Sometimes, when we share screens, I give over control of my mouse and keyboard to some of my students so they can better explain what's confusing them [about a particular process]," he said. "It was an amazing experience to see my students animate on my machine, particularly because the animation software we use is very resource-heavy."

In the end, iAnimate.net just wanted an environment that produced fewer glitches and made its students' lives easier. Zoom went leaps and bounds beyond this, and provided an environment with immersive collaboration that became an invaluable tool for the animation school and its students. All of its features fit quite nicely with what is important to iAnimate.net and its instructors.

"We don't want our students experiencing any stress," said Stephen Melagrano. "If there's anything we can do to make their experience easier, we immediately try our best to get it done. Since we rely on video meetings, this means making sure that students don't have to worry about their internet connections, their webcams, or the interface they communicate with. Zoom definitely made this easier for them."

To sum up, iAnimate.net couldn't be happier running its school through Zoom's interface. This is what it got out of opting for the Zoom experience:

- A **feature-rich and fully-immersive cloud experience** that rivals face-to-face encounters in a classroom.
- A **simple, stress-free** multi-platform software package that requires virtually no learning curve to use.
- **High-definition video** that rivals most other video platforms.
- **High frame-rate screen sharing**, a vital feature for their lectures.
- A **stable video meeting experience** that worked with every connection on an international level.
- The ability to **record** all of the meetings for later review by the students.

With this fusion between instruction and technology, iAnimate.net can finally operate efficiently as a school that will educate the world's next generation of animators. This entire experience is powered by Zoom's intuitive and immersive interface that augments the virtual world and turns it into a world that anyone can join and communicate in.



About Zoom

Zoom, the cloud meeting company, unifies cloud video conferencing, simple web meetings, and group collaboration into one easy-to-use platform. Our solution offers the first available mobile-screen sharing and an innovative hybrid cloud service, and works across desktop, tablet, mobile and room systems. Zoom services over 40 million participants and more than 100,000 businesses globally.

Website
zoom.us

Innovations

First 3-in-1 Cloud HD Meeting Platform
First Mobile Screen Sharing
First Hybrid Cloud Service