



Staring at a Screen: Reflections on Remote Learning

PRACTICE-BASED PAPER

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ABSTRACT

A personal reflection on the experience of delivering seminars online.

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I'm sitting at the dining table at the moment, staring into the kitchen, a view of the garden to my right, the hall to my left, receiving occasional nudges from my cat, who seems to resent all the adults being home, for not giving her enough attention. It is the end of another day of dealing with a stream of emails from students wanting reassurance and seminars in which I feel more like a radio talk-show host as I burble away to silently staring avatars, while I keep a careful eye on the chat bar where responses and questions appear. Tea has become a teaching essential as I seem to have to do much more of the talking, not just to keep the air filled, but to encourage, goad and cajole interaction from the students who otherwise seem content to sit and listen. Without the sense of groupness and without the opportunity for free-flowing, eye-to-eye discussion, students act more like radio listeners. Their goodbyes are always lovely though, I enjoy the stream of "thank yous".

Things are not all bad. Some students are happy to put their microphones on and seem surprised at my delight at hearing another human voice. Not that there aren't people in my house, but I miss seeing and hearing my students. Of getting a sense of their energy and disposition, their confidence or concern from their faces and voices. They still get to see me of course and for that reason amongst others I still maintain the ritual of shirt, tie and waistcoat. I have not yet succumbed to the zoom affliction of casual trousers or worse. No cat filters here, though the students might enjoy that. I start every session with some welcome music, something up-beat, and a gentle enquiry about how things are going. The responses are usually convivial enough, but occasionally the exchanges prompt crying-with-laughter emojis, and just for a moment it feels like we are connecting as humans and not just as teacher and student.

I am disheartened by the frequent lack of attendance by a hardcore of students and the apparent disengagement away from the classroom. Despite my best efforts, lectures are often unwatched, activities undone and reading unread. The students are apologetic and I try to be supportive and non-judgemental. But there is a sense in which the bleeding of days into each other and the pall of indistinctness that hangs above us has led to a malaise where motivating oneself has become much harder. There is comfort in routines, but there is also a joy in the break from them. For many students, and I'm sure many staff, time seems to be waiting. Hopefully, spring skies and longer, warmer days will help us, like the flowers, blossom into a period of hopefulness and energy. As we stagger towards the end of another fraught year communication seems to be the key. Keeping in touch with students and creating dialogues in, on and through whatever platforms we can.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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