

Education post-'Covid-19': Re-visioning the face-to-face classroom

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For better and worse, the Covid-19 crisis will necessarily advance a number of instrumental responses for online education under the global shutdown of face-to-face classrooms. Unfortunately, it will also be employed as 'shock doctrine' (Klein, 2007) to advance a much more aggressive move to online education that would be hardly possible in more normal times, but that is a different story. Covid-19 has accelerated but did not begin the move to online education. Artificial intelligence (AI) will take us even further as new technologies not only deliver text, audio and visuals but interactively engage with student learning processes and do so across longer periods of the learner's development. How AI will or might transform education, also, is another paper.

This essay asks its readers to consider the online environment and the shutdown of face-to-face (f2f) classrooms as a condition that represents *a new vantage* for thinking, and particularly so for re-imagining and perhaps re-visioning f2f pedagogies. Beyond coping and learning anew under these changes, might we consider the dramatic crisis as a new vantage from which to better understand educational ideals, those we hold to and those we have yet to fully develop? As the eminent political philosopher Hannah Arendt (2006/1954, p. 171) reminds us, in times of crisis or dramatic transformation we must not forget that "the answers" we normally rely on, were originally answers to *questions*. As actors working inside institutions, we will no doubt spend considerable energy tweaking 'old answers' to adapt them to the changing conditions brought about by the move to online education.

However, as Arendt warns us, most important in a crisis is to return to the *questions* themselves. In education, this approach would press us to rethink educational ideals in light of changing technologies and changing human literacies. Our movements out of f2f teaching, thus, represent a 'vantage' from which to view and re-assess what education (and the human) is or might be. With an immersive experience in a foreign country we (may) learn about the geography, language and culture of the new country. However, the most profound learning, the *transformative* shift, is constituted in the de-naturalizing of internalized assumptions produced in *our own* culture and norms (Tarc, 2013). Similarly, 'seeing' from the online vantage can lessen our grip on 'the answers' and "forces us back to the questions themselves" (Arendt, 2006/1954, p. 171), in this case, on the purposes or essence of education under contemporary conditions. Rather than (only) lamenting upon how our methods are constrained in new teaching environments, we might discover altered and more generative purposes for education in our current worldly conditions, which guide us to *transformed* pedagogies in the formerly taken-for-granted 'bubble' of the f2f classroom.

Rethinking educational aims and pedagogies in light of changing conditions is a demanding endeavor, both challenge and opportunity. And it is also important to keep in mind that the current limits and possibilities of online education are inflected

by already existing f2f environments, learning, relationships and identities. Online enthusiasts leverage this condition to suggest that the advanced technologies are not the problem, but the slow-to-change mindsets of educators beholden to f2f settings. But the converse is also true here and much less acknowledged. We must also understand that current successes, so to speak, of online teaching may be supported by or founded on prior f2f interactions. Just as private companies sometimes parasitically and inconspicuously rely on public resources to generate their efficiencies, so too most online education achievements are still reliant on relationships and identities forged within f2f settings.

As we return to face-to-face teaching next term or next year, how might we take our insights developed from our current vantage of online teaching to prioritize and optimize what f2f pedagogies afford in relation to our updated understanding of educational ideals, methods and our values as educators? Beyond the practical solutions to make physical classrooms work (face masks, hand sanitizers in every classroom, temperature probes), how will we re-structure our face-to-face pedagogies? And, what will we, perhaps, continue to leave to the online environment so that we can best use the in-class face-to-face time? What does our (not so) new environment of online education teach us about the importance of face-to-face classrooms and productive pedagogies for this setting? These are the questions posed to the reader, as the main intervention of this paper. In the remaining paragraphs, I tentatively respond to these questions from my perspective as an educationalist with f2f classroom teaching experience in K-12 schools and in f2f and online teaching experience in Canadian higher education.

For me, as an educator in higher education with considerable autonomy of my curricular materials and teaching approaches, the greatest lack in the virtual classroom are the *greatly diminished* multi-sensory communication feedback loops. These feedback loops are crucial to the relational, and emotionally-laden, labour of educating. The capability to quickly read the body language, facial expressions, class dynamic and circulation of ideas and affects is greatly minimized in the virtual classroom; in turn, so is a spontaneity and capacity to engage and expand the intersections of teacher (identity, experience and knowledge), students (identities, experiences and knowledge) and curriculum. In online contexts, the *building of these relations*—teacher-student, student-student, student-curricular knowledge—seems much reduced. Educating is often reduced to the act of knowledge dissemination and reception, but educators know that this notion is very skeletal. Yes, *learning*, is ubiquitous, life-long and life-wide, and especially so in the digital era. But, *education* is about building these social, affective and epistemic relations and channeling students' desires for knowing and being with others in the world (Mishra Tarc, 2015).

My greatest anxiety in synchronous online teaching a class of students is this feeling of being *disconnected* and not literally, but again socially, emotionally, epistemologically. I am facing my two-dimensional screen, telling myself that all is good and to stick to my plan—delivering content, directing activities, facilitating turns to 'speak'—all the while wondering...

Are you there? Can you 'see' me? Are you with me? Are you okay? Where are you? Are we okay?

Despite my inadequacies in teaching and in online technologies, this anxiety is pointing to the *emergent* aspects of pedagogy that bring life and significance to a collective engagement and learning in the classroom. The social/peer dynamic and working and broadening the intersections of teacher, students and curriculum as a 'border' pedagogy would seem to require physical presence and multi-sensory communication, as suggested above. Relationality's constitutive role in education is particularly salient in the earliest years of education. Admittedly, adult learners may have the experience and developed capacities to build relations and make attachments to knowledge under the thinner features of the online classroom. For this reason, that virtual education must currently take place in elementary (and secondary) levels is much more problematic than in higher education. Still, in teaching graduate education, it is readily apparent that similar teacher-student and group dynamics of building relationships and emotional 'hand-holding' is vital with adult learners as well. Thus the altered and 'thinned out' qualities of online pedagogy, begs the question I have posed above, how might insights developed in the new vantage of online learning reframe my vision and practices as a f2f teacher?

In re-visioning my f2f teaching *after* 'Covid-19,' my sense is that I will be much more committed to using our class time to work on the building of relationships, to engage in those intersections/borders of teacher, student and curriculum to cultivate students' social, emotional and epistemic attachments. Concretely, I think this means slowing down, worrying less about getting through the curriculum. While articulating one's pedagogical theories or inclinations is one level, one's teaching practice is another level. One's own schooling and internalizations of being professional and responsible also shape one's classroom teaching practices, and sometimes unconsciously. Thus, a relation-building 'border' pedagogy can be challenging in practice, because one can feel the pressure to 'give the knowledge' and the 'correct' readings. Despite my own rhetoric, I may still be focused on 'covering curriculum' rather than fully taking the time to draw out the student's thinking and really invest in the student's articulation rather than to 'race back' to the (authority of the) text or my own reading.

Although attached to progressive modalities I have become somewhat dissatisfied with the 'student discussion mode' in my class where we sometimes get caught in discussions that run peripheral to the prescribed course reading. I have been compelled to more frequently lecture students with my own interpretations of the reading that I understand as potentially useful to their prospective research studies. A shifting emphasis between more or less teacher-directed pedagogies I think is common across one's teaching career. The point I want to make here is that I see that this dissatisfaction has been pressing me toward lecturing, which is *not* an optimal use of f2f teaching. Rather, this exercise of re-visioning has produced the insight that a better response is not to turn to more teacher delivery (nor to student talk/discussion for its own sake), but to slow down and really listen to students' dialogue and take the time with other students to relate it to our common curricular object and wider course goals. My 'teacher learning' needs to refocus on the tendencies and patterns (and effects) of students' diverse interpretations, resistances and refusals of the readings as vital in working in the 'borders' of students' thinking and feelings, the curriculum and my own interpretations. It is this relation building that is the best use of my time in the class with students, and not re-focusing on (improving) my delivery of my knowledge/interpretation. The text is already in students' hands; my interpretation,

as well, exists in publications and these are readily available. Availability is not the problem but the desire to seek out what these texts offer. What the f2f classroom affords are rich opportunities for individual and collective dialogue, careful listening, re-reading, unpacking and questioning in the 'borders,' which can truly inform critical understandings and uses of curriculum as well as (the channelling of desire to) stronger attachments to knowledge and knowledge seeking. Thus, it is researching and deepening the student-teacher-curriculum intersections and not improved content delivery that the f2f classroom can afford me. This is my *transformed* perspective.

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