



# Connection and Inequality in the Remote Classroom

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The switchover to remote teaching in the wake of COVID-19 has prompted a flurry of conversation among academics regarding technology's (in)capabilities in replicating the conventional in-person classroom. Among my colleagues across institutions, reactions have ranged from flat refusals to meaningfully engage with video software to hours spent meticulously pre-recording lectures that many students will probably not watch with the same level of enthusiasm. On the administrative side is the familiar corporate push for educators to become more



knowledgeable, if almost excited, about the transition. We are encouraged to maximize our creativity, to attend workshops on how to use breakout rooms, to read this and that article on disseminating course content online, to let our productivity surge—or, as I see it, to justify tuition as still appearing worthwhile in the face of a face-to-face-less classroom.

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But there is also an unexpected silver lining to remote instruction for those who are able to participate in learning online. Despite its reputation as being somewhat inherently impersonal, engaging with each other online can also bring about new ways of seeing each other, a different kind of connectivity, and greater visibility of students' diverse needs. Learning from within their own homes (or, in contrast, not having a home to learn from) highlights students' individuality and exposes inequality in important ways that typical university classrooms are built to ignore.

At the beginning of the spring semester, which now seems a lifetime ago, I did an ice-breaker with my 18-person seminar class on culture and mental health. It was one of those requisite getting-to-know-you exercises that carries much higher expectations than are ever met in practice. On that somewhat awkward first day, we may have learned each other's majors and favorite movies, but the playful nature of the exercise made us all aware that we weren't digging too deep here – that's what the rest of the semester was for. Just as in fieldwork, there was a certain expectation that our collective time together would bring about a sense of community and with it, a greater sense of confidence and trust. And, as this was a course that would be discussing mental health, it seemed especially important for students to ease into their own comfort with each other.

This is how human connection works—for educators, anthropologists, and people



in general. Whether we're in the field, in the classroom, in the work place or in any sort of collective environment, the more time that we spend with other people, the more we are able to create relationships with them, share thoughts and experiences, and get to know each other.

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This is what we anthropologists affectionately refer to as “building rapport”, and it's a wonderful thing when it happens organically. With the abrupt shift to online instruction when the pandemic hit, I shared my colleagues' anxieties that this rapport may no longer be possible, that it would vanish along with the rest of our planned activities for the foreseeable future. I anticipated that my class, which was just finding its rhythm as a group, would be replaced with static, asynchronous discussion posts in those last few weeks of the semester. But as our course took on a new (and admittedly sometimes clumsy) shape, we instead became differently connected to each other in ways that our in-person classroom might have restricted.

One of these ways was the addition of new voices. For those with some anxiety about speaking up in class, the comfort of remote learning allowed them a chance to thrive in our discussions. Those who had been more subdued in-person were suddenly vocal, sharing their opinions and reactions to our course material. Likewise, the more confident students who had formerly dominated our in-person discussions were forced into a more structured turn-taking style of conversation. The side-effect of this online technology was an evening-out of the classroom's participatory mechanics, and it resulted in a more democratic learning process for everyone.

There was also an important reconfiguration of the physical space of the classroom that happened when it was translated to the internet. In the university classroom, students are typically clustered together, stuck in their too-small desks



as the educator teaches from a slightly bigger desk at the front of the room.

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In the conventional classroom space, you can visualize the process of learning as a flow of information from one part of a room to another. The hierarchy implied by this setup can create something of an imbalance where learning becomes directional—teaching *at* your students—as opposed to more interactive. But in the online classroom, we became positioned in a much more neutral way relative to each other. In the case of my class, everyone occupied the same size space, positioned on the screen in the order that they logged in. Those who were speaking would light up green, taking their moment while the rest of us remained red, silent. The more egalitarian setup of the classroom seemed to relax the overall mood of the class from the start. This physical-to-virtual shift is a simple change-up, sure – but it's also an opportunity to rethink the stubborn academic dynamics that can flatten the experiences of students and elevate the educator in ways that don't enhance the learning process and, more significantly, don't at all reflect reality beyond the institution.





On a Pittsburgh University campus in early/mid May (picture by the author)

Just as this pandemic has revealed the fragility of our society in so many other ways, the move to online teaching has further exposed the reality of the stark inequalities that exist among university students in America. The move to remote teaching was a privileged one. The efforts of university administrations to adapt to this new format cast some broad assumptions on the abilities of a “student body” that simply does not exist. Those who cannot afford the machines, the time, or the luxury of safe, personal spaces were placed at an immediate disadvantage. Some students have been forced to fall off the radar completely while others have never missed a single class. Some students, already plunged deep into debt to pay for their college education, will be refunded for living costs; most others will not.



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The slightly softer reality of my classroom, for those who were able to continue the semester online, was unexpected and surprisingly endearing. For those of us who chose to share our video screens, the familiarity of meeting and seeing people’s pets, partners, family members and hobbies allowed us to connect in everyday, humanizing ways that were less possible in the space of our on-campus classroom. We tagged along as some students went on walks or showed off their apartments, their artwork, their views from various windows, their sprouting seedlings and overflowing houseplants, or cluttered counters. Some students attended our early morning class still cocooned in blankets and some, on the other side of the world now, were shadowed in warmly lit rooms as the sun went down around them. We watched people’s cats step on keyboards and heard parents interrupt our discussions with breakfast requests. We learned who drank coffee and who preferred tea in the morning. Likewise, my students overheard the chaos of my own home, seeing my toddler burst in on my lecturing more times than I can count.

These kinds of micro-encounters might seem unimportant, but on a wider scale, they can reveal a diversity of life experience that otherwise struggles to exist within the homogenizing halls of a university system. While small, these nuanced enhancements of our personal lives can make us more aware of *who* we are talking with, *who* we are teaching or learning beside. Viewing each other on a screen simultaneously brought attention to the class as a collective of individual people, all there for different reasons, from and going to different places. Online, students were no longer just bodies in classroom chairs—they were people with interests, with connections to others, with altogether unique lives, taking up the same amount of space. This simple recognition of others’ lives, including the awareness of their own spaces and the joys and difficulties encountered in those spaces, can be just as important as any content covered in a course’s syllabus.



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In looking ahead to the next academic year, more students than usual will fall through the cracks as COVID-19 reshapes the economy of our everyday lives. As universities move quickly to adapt to the remote model, we must challenge the assumptions that come along with this sudden change. This extreme cultural moment reminds us that equality in education, and in so many other critical areas in America, is an unfulfilled promise.

Because of this, and certainly magnified by the overall sense of loss that this pandemic has brought upon us, the absence of a student from class somehow felt more significant to me online. Whether just a name missing from the group chat list or a student's video being replaced by a muted gray square, it sometimes felt like we were much further away from each other—because we were, and not just by our physical distance.