

Are We Outsourcing the Personal?

Remote Learning and the Challenge of Interpassivity

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It is common for a disinterested student to slouch their way through class, projecting to all, “I’m not into this.” They suck those around them into the black hole of their malaise, draining the classroom of that particular energy we crave from face-to-face teaching. But to me, that student has always been a discomfiting magnet. I crave their engagement; I’m an addict for it. They are the one who lingers in my mind after class, and I find myself leaning most toward them. How can I help them connect the journey of this learning community with their life? What are their connection points, and how can I access them? Yes, of course, in the end their most productive learning depends on their own engagement, but I want to find every possible way to get there.

However, in my first hybrid class—which met partly in person and partly through Zoom—that student elicited in me an entirely new and very unsettling thought. It arose in me without invitation. At the time, I had no idea what to do with it: “I wish they were on Zoom.”

I’m not proud of that reaction, but I now understand it, and it helps me remember a priority of effective teaching and learning, whatever its medium. I now realize that I take this for granted when teaching in person: *education is personal*. Effective education is the process whereby humans help each

other grow, and our mediums for doing so will help and hinder simultaneously.

For instance, my preferred medium is the shared classroom space of in-person teaching. It has a unique effect on attention, as Boumgarden and Van Engen perfectly describe: there is a “communal aspect of attentiveness crafted by coming together in a shared space. When the speaker is in the same room with you, maybe even right beside you, the sense of listening—and the importance of speaking—each become elevated.”¹ Yet at the same time, the medium of in-person teaching can hinder students dealing with social anxiety disorder, hearing impairments, and other potential obstacles. A letter is also a medium of education, which Paul the apostle employed to good effect, but it too can hinder. Words can be misconstrued or rhetoric misunderstood.

Zoom, or whatever cloud-based video conferencing platform one uses, is no different as a means for education. It can help and hinder. However (and this is a very big however), Zoom especially jeopardizes the personal dimension of education. Why? Whether you love it or hate it, Zoom gives the impression of personal connection while simultaneously inviting distance. My tacit knowledge of this—gained through only a couple weeks of using the medium—prompted my thought, “I wish this student were on Zoom.”²

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WILL YOU TEACH FOR ME, PLEASE?

When teaching through Zoom, I have at least two options for releasing myself from the burden of personal engagement. I can follow the counsel of communicator-coaches who advise me to give the impression of eye contact by looking into the black dot of my camera 90 percent of the time.³ What does the black dot ask of me? Not much; surely not pursuit. As Lovink aptly describes, the medium invites me to shift from the mode of personal interaction to a “strange mode of performance.”⁴ Or I can rest my attention on my *own* face, which is vastly more reassuring than the tiny, disembodied faces of my students. As Abrahams and Pinheiro explain, when we use videoconferencing, “we are never sure we are ‘there,’ that the connection still exists, and so we check our own image all the time.”⁵ Attending to my own face, the face of the disinterested student effectively disappears into the Brady Bunch-like thumbnails on my screen, and I’m free from the discomfort they cause and the cost of my magnetic pursuit.

To borrow a term from the cultural theorist Robert Pfaller, Zoom invites “interpassive” teaching. “Interpassivity is delegated ‘passivity’—in the sense of delegated pleasure, or delegated consumption.”⁶ A delegated pleasure would be the canned laughter of TV shows, which laughs *for us*. A delegated consumption would be a professor photocopying texts she will never actually read, but the mere copying of them provides a sense of relief from the act of reading itself. The copying replaces the real act of intellectual work by delegation. Canned laughter will laugh for me, the photocopier will read for me, and without realizing it I may come to trust Zoom to *teach for me*. I will delegate the personal dimension of teaching to the mere presence of students in the Zoom space.

Interpassivity lies near to the heart of Jesus’ criticism of the Pharisees’ wide phylacteries, long tassles on their robes, and lengthy prayers (Matt 23:5, 14). They trusted these to replace the real work of prayer, which is honesty of heart and mind in devotion to God. They delegated their attention and devotion to external rituals, not unlike Slavoj Žižek’s observation about Tibetan prayer wheels: so long as we keep them spinning, we can occupy our minds and energies with anything else.⁷

Zoom invites (though does not determine) a similar delegation of the energies required to teach the disinterested student. Sharing their physical presence is discomforting even as it elicits a magnetic pursuit, but Zoom invites me to delegate all that to the mere presence of their thumbnail image. If I can just keep Zoom “spinning” (like the prayer wheel),

then I’m tempted to trust that teaching is actually happening. I can’t escape them in class, but I can in the Zoomverse. I can replace teaching with attendance and the magnetic pursuit with the blinking icon of their face. Zoom gives the illusion of presence while inviting distance.

KEEP IT PERSONAL

I have no tenured-professor-as-master-of-teaching solution to offer, but I do wish to sound the alarm and make a plea. As cloud-based video conferencing continues to change education (and it will, as universities and graduate schools intensify their efforts to enroll students from afar), we must not delegate the personal dimension of teaching and learning to any medium that enables us to avoid the discomforting presence of the disinterested student. My tacit awareness that this was possible surfaced with my unsettling thought, “I wish this student were on Zoom.” It offered a way to escape the discomforts of personal encounter.

Lord willing, our pedagogical wisdom will catch up with the technological tidal wave we’re riding just now. In the meantime, we must work to keep education personal in whatever ways are possible. **D**

¹ Peter Boumgarden and Abram Van Engen, “In Praise of Classrooms,” *Avidly: A Channel of the Los Angeles Review of Books*, 19 May 2020, avidly.lareviewofbooks.org/2020/05/19/in-praise-of-classrooms.

² By “tacit” I mean the knowledge we have that we do not consciously know we have, knowledge gained through experience. See Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (New York: Doubleday, 1966).

³ Briar Goldberg, “7 Zoom Mistakes You Might Still Be Making—and How to Raise Your Video Skills,” *Ideas.Ted.Com*, 9 February 2021, ideas.ted.com/7-zoom-mistakes-you-might-still-be-making-and-how-to-raise-your-video-skills.

⁴ Geert Lovink, “The Anatomy of Zoom Fatigue,” *Eurozine*, 2 November 2020, eurozine.com/the-anatomy-of-zoom-fatigue.

⁵ Annie Abrahams et al., “Embodiment and Social Distancing: Projects,” *Journal of Embodied Research* 3.2, 9 October 2020, jer.openlibhums.org/article/10.16995/jer.67, doi:10.16995/jer.67.

⁶ Robert Pfaller, “Little Gestures of Disappearance: Interpassivity and the Theory of Ritual,” *European Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 16.3, 2003, psychomedia.it/jep/number16/pfaller.htm.

⁷ Slavoj Žižek, “Will You Laugh for Me, Please?,” *In These Times*, 18 July 2003, inthesetimes.com/article/will-you-laugh-for-me-please.



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