On "Being There" in a Pandemic: Are Classrooms Without Bodies Still "Real" Places of Learning?

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*I*n March 2020, schools and universities were abruptly shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Just as abruptly as they shut down, they were moved to fully online instruction. It was and continues to be an adjustment from classrooms with bodies to online classrooms without bodies, and now in-person classrooms with distanced masked bodies, or some combination of the two. As such, a discourse has appeared decrying the absence of what we know was the "real" educational environment. In this commentary, I use a series of vignettes to illuminate the ontological and epistemological dilemma of this discourse and then bring it into dialogue with literature and theory in order to present an argument that complexifies the assumption that real learning is in-person learning.

In the 2018, I was honored to receive the MWERA Distinguished Paper Award for a piece titled, *Virtual Ethnography: The Post Possibilities of Not Being There* (Angelone, 2019), which was eventually published here in MWER. I find myself uniquely situated, having studied virtual ethnography in a doctoral program with the complex acronym CFTQI (Cultural Foundations, Technology, and Qualitative Inquiry), an unlikely combination of cognates, to address cultural discourse around new and necessary uses of technology as a result of the global pandemic in 2020-2021. My piece on virtual ethnography made the argument that not only is a purely virtual ethnographic study not deficient in any way, but indeed it presents poststructural possibilities for rethinking what it means to be and to know. Similarly, the current discourse surrounding online learning is one that assumes that in-person learning is always better, and one to which we should return at all costs.

I write this commentary to complicate the emerging discourse that "in-person learning is better" or that in-person learning is "THE REAL" as Patti Lather, my doctoral adviser at Ohio State University, would say in an exaggerated way to emphasize the assumption that many researchers make- that through careful scientific inquiry, we can access an absolute truth. In-person learning is not the "real" way to educate. There is no absolute truth around the proper way to educate. In-person learning is the traditional way. It's one we are used to and with which we are most comfortable. It is the one with the largest research base and the longest list of best practices. But learning at a distance is not exactly new (Moore & Diehl, 2019) and a research base also exists that tells us that physical bodies do not necessarily need to be in the same room to learn. As such, I put forth the argument that if we, as researchers and educators, can shift our ontological and epistemological assumptions around being and learning, there are possibilities not just to survive this era of social distancing and remote learning, but to emerge with new methods of teaching and an expanded understanding of what it means to be and to learn.

Vignettes and Dialogue

As a form of narrative inquiry (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990), I use a series of vignettes to illuminate the discourse that in-person learning is better than online learning. After the first two vignettes, I bring literature on instructional technology and online and blended learning into dialogue with this discourse. After the third and fourth vignettes, I bring theory to bear in order to consider how the discourse is a socially constructed phenomenon. I conclude with a final vignette, caveats, and post possibilities for thinking otherwise.

Vignette #1: What is it like to teach in person in a pandemic?

In the fall semester of 2020, my small liberal arts university identified my classroom as safe for up to 19 students to be in person at the same time. The classroom had been measured and marked with the exact placement of students to maintain six feet of distance. A teacher zone had been defined at the front of the classroom with dashes of tape three feet from the white board spanning the front of the room. We had been told that the HVAC system in the aging building had been updated to increase air exchange. Every room was equipped with two spray bottles of disinfectant with a long list of directions indicating that it must be sprayed and then three minutes must elapse before the surface on which it was sprayed was actually disinfected. The list was attached to a new automatic touch free paper towel dispenser. There was a new and prominent flat screen monitor with a camera mounted to the top facing the teacher zone; it's location in the front of the room also carefully marked with tape on the ground. This was my new Zoom kit, which could easily connect with a video conference call to display my instruction for quarantined students as well as display my students' faces for me, should they choose to use their video.

On the first day of class, I entered the building, using my elbow to engage the handicap accessible doors plastered with signs reinforcing mandatory mask-wearing, then unlocking my classroom and hand sanitizing before wiping down my teacher station with disinfectant. I wore a smile mask with a plastic insert so that students could better read my lips as I talked. As students entered the room little by little, I reminded them to wait the full three minutes to be sure that their desks were disinfected. I set up my Zoom call that day for a student that was not quarantined, but living abroad. I prepared my presentation displaying it on the white board while I waited for the remaining students to arrive. What followed was a quiet and uncomfortable first class. It was difficult to match students' faces to the picture roster that I had printed. It was difficult to hear students share about themselves as we went around the room. Typically, we'd arrange desks into small groups or a circle, but instead students sat turning rigidly in their seats, eyeing those that brought a drink of water and had to remove their masks momentarily to take a sip. I paced along my teacher zone line, wondering about the aerosols and droplets while trying to focus on getting to know my students. In the last moments of our time together, I asked how students were feeling about being in person, as we would also have Zoom classes and I could easily switch as needed. "Thumbs up if you feel comfortable and would prefer in-person classes, thumbs down if you are nervous to be here and would prefer Zoom classes, and thumbs sideways if you are somewhere in the middle." Every student gave me a thumbs up. I ended class early and purposefully in order to allow students time to disinfect their desks again and get to their next class to repeat the same process.

Vignette #2: What is online learning anyway?

During the summer of 2020, I created a new workshop for K-12 teachers on remote teaching. Decisions at my university and at K-12 schools about how learning would look in the fall were not yet made. At the point when we were to schedule the workshop, it was obvious that the workshop itself would not be in person, as cases were on the rise around the state and country. It made more sense to teach a workshop on remote teaching remotely anyway and I envisioned a synchronous Zoom workshop with asynchronous work as well, in order to model the different modes of instruction in which teachers may find themselves. I found out that I had to select an attribute for the class per the registrar and thought an online designation would work, since the entire course would be online. I was informed, however, that all classes with the online attribute had to be completely asynchronous. There was no option for synchronous online meeting times of any amount. Online was synonymous with asynchronous. A blended/hybrid option existed, but was defined as mostly asynchronous with a few set in-person meeting times. I was able to select blended/hybrid, but had to explain to students that the in-person meeting times would actually be synchronous Zoom meeting times.

By the fall, the university sent out a lengthy email describing the various designations for classes, including a new designation of "Remote courses with some synchronous sessions." In addition, instructors whose classrooms were not large enough to hold all students with 6 feet of distance were asked to make their courses hybrid, meaning that some students would be physically present while others engaged in course materials synchronously or asynchronously and then the students who were present would switch with the remote learners in a routine way as determined by the instructor. This type of hybrid model did not need a specific designation. Instructors were encouraged to communicate early with students to explain the varying schedules.

Dialogue with the Literature. Online learning is defined in various ways and I use it as an umbrella term here, though is often assumed to be defined as my university's registrar did, as purely asynchronous worked through independently and at your own pace save for the ubiquitous discussion board. Terms referring to learning online abound and, since the pandemic, have come into the public vernacular. Some of these terms include: distance learning, virtual learning, remote learning, blended learning, hybrid, synchronous, asynchronous. All these surround the term online learning in that they describe various ways that learning can take place through the mechanism of technology. There are a myriad ways that this learning can take place, but as with my own university and I surmise, with my students' desire to continue in-person learning no matter how awkward, online learning is assumed to be an independent, asynchronous and, therefore, inferior experience.

Distance learning, though, goes back as far as mail in correspondence courses beginning in the 18th century (Moore & Diehl, 2019) and has evolved to include new forms of technology over time. Starting in the 1960s, outcomes in these sorts of courses began to be systematically studied and it was found that they could be as effective as traditional in-person modes of education. Current work comparing in-person instruction to online and blended learning continues today with similar results (US Department of Education, 2009; Tallent-Runnels et al., 2015). This

study of the comparison between technology-based instruction and its analog counterpart had been a staple of the instructional technology literature in which outcomes between a class that looked up information in books versus computer databases, for example, were compared. This approach was debated quite vigorously in a series of articles by Richard Clark and Robert Kozma in the 1980s and 1990s. Clark (1983) published an article making the argument that "media are mere vehicles that deliver instruction but do not influence student achievement any more than the truck that delivers our groceries causes changes in our nutrition" (p. 443). It does not matter, he would say, if you teach using a chalkboard or a projector screen, the same sort of learning will take place. Kozma (1994), however, complexified this argument saying that certain media "possess particular characteristics that make them both more and less suitable for the accomplishment of certain kinds of learning tasks" (p. 2). In other words, rather than being neutral, certain technologies, just as certain analog tools, are better designed to support certain tasks in the learning environment. As such, it's not about the technology so much as it is about the ways in which the technology support the intended pedagogy. These choices matter at the current moment, but the absence or presence of online technology is not the deciding factor in outcomes for learning, and perhaps, we could understand how to use these tools to better support learning.

Ostensibly, the studies of online learning thus far have been with willing online learning participants. The spring posed new challenges as it thrust many learners into this environment. Just recently though, a new study was released that provides data on the impact of the switch to remote learning in K-12 schools in the spring and it doesn't look as bad as many hypothesized it would (Kuhfeld et al., 2020). Using the MAP testing data, students scored similarly in comparison with pre-pandemic data in reading and declined only slightly in math. Taken individually, most students showed learning gains in both reading and math.

Vignette 3: Are your kids going back to school?

> "Most families agree that remote learning is a poor substitute for in-person classes, but some have said that despite the limitations of online instruction, the risk of illness is just too great" (Shapiro, 2020). -The New York Times

> "Meanwhile, virtual learning appears to be a giant failure. Not all students have internet access, so poor kids are falling behind. Even if they can get online, having a 7-year-old stare at a computer all day is generally not seen as advisable by child-development experts" (Khazan, 2020). -The Atlantic

In the summer of 2020, parents around the country were making the difficult decision to send their children back to school in person or to keep their children home to learn online. Awash in the discourse above, parents felt as if they were choosing between a greater risk of infection with COVID-19 and inferior instruction. Not only this, but many parents also rely on in-person schooling as a form of childcare so that they are able to work. Even if parents were able to work from home, working from home while facilitating online school is difficult.

In discussing the return to online school with friends and neighbors, a conversation would typically go something like this:

"Are your kids going back to school?"

"Yes, I can't have them home while I work! It was impossible this spring!" OR "No, we don't have enough data to determine if it's safe." OR "Yes, kids need to be in school. They are going to fall so far behind." OR "I wish we could go to school, but we have an immune compromised kid."

Vignette #4: What can "90 Day Fiancé" teach us about learning online?

"90 Day Fiancé" is a television show on The Learning Channel that follows the stories of couples using the K-1 visa to get married. What may seem like a silly reality show, uncovers not only deep cultural differences, but also showcases the ways in which human connection has expanded because of digital technology. These couples almost always meet, develop a relationship, and fall in love online. They use things like text, email, phone calls, video chat, synchronously and asynchronously to get to know one another and then maintain a relationship from different corners of the globe. For some, the K-1 visa can be difficult to get, taking years. Depending on the expense, they may visit periodically in that time, but most of their relationship takes place virtually.

Anna and Mursel are a couple from Season 7 of "90 Day Fiancé." Anna is from Nebraska and Mursel is from Turkey. They met on a site for beekeepers and started talking online, growing their relationship until eventually applying for the K-1 visa. Anna speaks only English and Mursel speaks only Turkish. They use a translator app to be able to talk online. When they meet in person, they continue to use a translator app. Their relationship was and continues to be mediated through technology, and yet, though there are difficulties, they got married.

And this isn't unique to "90 Day Fiancé," a recent story on NPR's Science Friday (Science Friday, 2020) reminded me of Second Life, now mostly defunct, but being revitalized during the pandemic. Second Life is a virtual world where individuals interact as an avatar of their choosing, where people also fall in love, have jobs, and even make real money all using digital technology. An entire virtual ethnography (Boellstorf, 2008) was conducted within Second Life, understanding the ways in which people interact in this second space completely outside of their physical lives.

Dialogue with Theory. So, what then is "real" schooling? What are "real" relationships? Do our bodies have to be in the same place and time in order for us to consider them real? Foucault would say that our traditional ideas about how schools function and what schools look like are a direct result of power creating knowledge. This knowledge becomes the real, a regime of truth (Foucault, 1971), culturally constructed by those in power. In America, what has worked well educationally for the white middle class (Bourdieu, 1977), has determined best practices pedagogically and environmentally. These ideas then become a sedimentation, which produces those who can succeed in school and those who cannot, which also determines how we see the "real" educational environment and how many of us are eager to return to it.

According to Judith Butler (1990), even our gender is separate from our physical body though. Instead, what counts as "real" in terms of gender are our performances of our bodies. Are bodies essential to the process of schooling? Without our bodies, perhaps there are new ways to understand how we connect and how we learn. In a similar fashion, Donna Haraway (1991) utilizes the concept of the cyborg to help us better address feminism without the binaries and unnecessary bodies. In my own dissertation (Angelone, 2011), I made use of Haraway's cyborgian possibilities and use the term "cyborg learning" to describe the types of simultaneous learning and transgressing of traditional notions of the feminine made available to bloggers in new digital spaces. Perhaps the use of technology can help us all to expand our ideas about what it means to be and to learn. Perhaps there are affordances provided by these new technologies, like the ability to look how we want, with avatars, or the ability to think carefully before we speak, asynchronously, that can allow something that couldn't be in a traditional environment.

Vignette #5: Impossible choices

In the summer of 2020, I had to make a personal decision about whether to send my own children, twin second graders, to school in person or online. Our district, like most in suburban areas of Ohio, gave parents the option. We had a deadline in July to make this decision. In early July, cases around the country were soaring to their highest during the pandemic at that point. Though my partner and I knew that the American Academy of Pediatrics (2020) recommended that children go back to in-person schooling with proper protocols in place, Governor DeWine had still not mandated masks for children returning to school, nor did we have adequate data on how and to what extent children were able to spread the disease. In addition, understanding the literature base for online learning, I felt comfortable that quality online instruction was possible, though I did know that our district set the expectation that online class sizes would be larger. Ultimately, after creating our own decision matrix, we made the very hard decision to keep our children at home to learn online. My children, who thrive in in-person school, were understandably disappointed.

When school started in August, we picked up a packet of materials. We already had Chromebooks that were handed out in the spring when the entire district went remote at the outset of the pandemic. I set up our dining room to serve as our home classroom. At the same time, however, Ohio had recently mandated masks, which included all children in K-12 schools, cases receded significantly, and more information was available from other states who had sent students back to in-person school at the end of July without a significant increase in cases. During the first week of school, we watched with envy as buses arrived to pick up our masked neighbors and received our schedule for instruction for the week. That schedule included one 10 minute synchronous meeting with the teacher and one 20 minute group synchronous meeting for the week, with a promise that that would increase over time. The rest of instruction took place via Seesaw, an age appropriate learning management system. In our district, in-person classes were limited to about 20 students, to be able to maintain the recommended three feet of distance. Online classes, on the other hand, included approximately 40 students. Between the improving conditions, the large class sizes, and the fact that my children have always done well in person, we decided to put our children back in in-person school. They remained there as cases surged to double what they were in July and eventually receded again.

Caveats and Conclusions

Even as I make the argument that "real" school and "real" learning do not have to occur in a shared space with bodies, I made the decision to put my own children back in a school building. I write from a privileged perspective, in a school district with top ratings in the state that provided devices to each student and that has been able to remain in person since the start date in August. I am also a mother with a flexible job in education, that can pick up and drop off her kids from school and could adequately support my children during remote learning (even though I was tired). I am also white. The first caveat is an obvious one. To learn online may present possibilities, but it also poses challenges that disproportionately affect black and brown students as well as students with disabilities and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. The digital divide has been narrowing with the emergence of mobile devices, but it is not closed and that makes digital possibilities impossibilities for many (Rogers, 2001). And not only the digital divide, but other inequities that have existed for decades have also been brought to the surface. "Like a tsunami that pulls away from the coast, leaving an exposed stretch of land, the pandemic has revealed long-standing inattention to children's developmental needs—needs as basic as exercise, outdoor time, conversation, play, even sleep." (Christakis, 2020).

I also want to include the caveat that, just because I think there are possibilities in online learning, does not mean that I do not think people, adults and children that might participate in cyborg learning, do not need physical contact or the in-person services offered by schools and universities. I recently had to watch a COVID-related funeral on Facebook Live and I had a difficult time seeing the possibilities, imagining loved ones at home that did not get to hug and hold their loved one as he died, nor do they get to comfort their loved ones that lived. I know that there are psychological and physiological reasons that we need touch and that there are reward centers in the brain that are activated by touch, and I don't want to dismiss the very real need for physical presence.

Do bodies guarantee access to the truth? No, but here we are living through the first pandemic in 100 years. Here we are in a temporary (though longer than we imagined) place and time in which physical presence must be used sparingly. As educators, we must exhibit innovation and determination, rather than demand that bodies be together. Digital technology and virtual presences are not only a lifeline to many for more authentic communication (Angelone, Warner, & Zydney, 2020), but hold real possibilities for educating students at least as well as before, and perhaps in new ways that serve students better. Not all students are happy and successful in the currently idealized in-person school setting. Students, teachers, and researchers have offered alternative possibilities at a large and small scale to accommodate student needs for decades. There have been problems and possibilities, and there are bound to be more. This is the work of "a thousand things to do" (Foucault, 1991, p. 274) and this how we must view this time, a time of great challenge, but a time of equally great possibility.

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