Commonplace •

On Not "Returning to Normal"

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Published on: Sep 20, 2021

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After over seven months of teaching remotely, a student asked me how tall I was a week before I returned to the classroom. She said she didn't want to be surprised when I walked into the room. The class laughed, and I did too. The question encapsulated the strangeness of the months we'd spent in various hybrid, online modes. For over six months, I was just a face on a screen, and now I'd be a body in the room.

The question was both a new question and an old question, one that harkened back to student's questions before the pandemic, ones that happened before and after class—about one's background, life outside of school, and identity beyond the realm of education. These were questions I hadn't been asked in months, and so, when she asked the question, I was somewhat surprised and also somewhat delighted. I didn't know I'd missed those moments, or questions, those spaces in between.

Psychologist Carl Jung believed "what educators teach is *themselves* rather than their subject matter"[\[1\]](#). Perhaps another way to understand that is that teachers teach their humanity more than they teach the subject that they are meant to be teaching.

The question of what a teacher teaches was put into the limelight the moment teachers transitioned online during the pandemic. The challenges of wrestling with the online world were not new, but with teachers becoming embedded in the technology itself—becoming, instead of bodies in a room, heads on a screen—there was a new question about what we might be able to offer our students and how we might address their needs. If the teacher becomes a part of technology, then how do they teach their humanity?

At first, there was a heightened level of enthusiasm for what everyone might be able to accomplish online. Many said going remote would put education in the hands of the student, that it would allow us to build independent learners who would motivate themselves to learn. Others thought it would bring teaching into this century of technology, where the students live and breathe. Beyond being able to meet students where they were, there was another more destabilizing, and refreshingly radical, set of voices about the benefits of online teaching in dismantling the inequalities of the education system. If anyone could teach online, then couldn't we take great education to the masses?

For many of the administrators in the world of private schools—the world where I am situated—decentralizing education was a terrifying prospect. Having to compete with

fantastic teachers all over the country made our managers nervous. They didn't want to have to accept that perhaps the only thing that set us apart from teachers everywhere was our facilities. Once we were all on Zoom, what would we have?

For me, the potential democratization of teaching was the most exciting prospect of online teaching: if we could illustrate and prove that it didn't matter where you were or what school you went to or taught at, we would be better off. And yet, this vision slowly started to dissipate as I, and the nation, saw firsthand just how unequal online teaching was. Students with computers, good wifi, and a room of their own were the ones benefiting, and even then, it wasn't clear just how much. For those students, the "lost year" has meant something altogether different than to those who never had a year to begin with.

Beyond being unequal, it was uninspiring. Even within the very privileged, what at first was pitched as a new model of teaching quickly became messy, complicated and at times, even detrimental, not solely because the students were online but because they were being asked to learn online as if they were in the classroom. The model of education didn't change, but the context did, and rather dramatically. It occurs to me now that this is why students and teachers alike found online teaching so stultifying: not because it was online but because we brought the same teaching approach into that online space.

In her new book, *The Extended Mind*, Annie Murphy Paul argues the "human mind is contextual." She argues how we move through the world affects our thinking, and explores how the education system has always been built on a different understanding of the mind—one that sees the way we think as linear, like a computer. Instead of sitting in a classroom, she argues that we should be getting up and moving around, as well as playing, relaxing, and exploring the world around us. What we missed when we went online was an opportunity to implement those ideas; instead of changing the way we thought about school entirely, we stayed put, staring through screens at one another, further stifling our creativity.

As the year went on, I was aware of the ways in which being online forced me even further online. I found myself looking up videos, prompts, and projects on the internet instead of creating my own material. Less and less convinced that I had anything to offer as just a face on a screen, I was tempted to find other places to fill in the void. Many of my classes watched and read content created by other people, often created by white men, who are the creators of most of the online tools we use, and I started to find myself less and less inspired with my own content. If we could hand the students

something to watch, have them take notes and then turn it in, then wasn't that easier than teaching?

The longer I stayed on Zoom, the more the platform felt inauthentic to me, as did most, if not all, of the online tools I was provided with. I couldn't bring myself to use an app like FlipGrid, even though I was told that the students "really loved it" and I had a hard time engaging in real dialogue with students without checking my phone, opening a new tab, or staring at myself in the corner. The grand vision of online teaching with its promises of student independence and teacher growth felt stilted and strained, and I was not entirely sure why.

When I returned to school, I was anxious. I had grown used to teaching online and feeling both in control of my schedule and the way my classroom operated. Within minutes, however, I felt relieved. It felt good to see the students face to face, to walk around where they walked around, and to be able to see how they held themselves in the room. And yet: the room had changed. Students were less likely to chat to one another, participate in discussion, or even engage with me. I am sure this was in part because of the masks, but another part of me wonders if it was also because they'd experienced a change that we refused to acknowledge.

This year, schools around the country have nearly banned online education. Citing inequality, lack of engagement, and the idea of a "lost year," politicians and school administrators are putting their foot down when it comes to being online in any capacity. I am not opposed to this approach but am somewhat disappointed at the lack of reflection on imagining what education can mean or be. It seems to me that the pandemic's disruption is not opening a door for what could be, but instead closing that door and putting a padlock over it, hoping it will never open again.

My school has just opened its doors, and it has opened them with a commitment to "return to normal." This "normal" involves hour-long classes, rules about uniforms, and a determination to bring back the traditional classroom. But perhaps the traditional classroom was not the most human approach to begin with—perhaps we need something altogether different in our education system, something that acknowledges the disruptions that have occurred and allow us to actively change what never worked.

Citations

1. Hollis, James. Creating A Life. Inner City Books, 2001. [↵](#)