Unprepared humanities: A pedagogy (forced) online

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Abstract

The forcing online of higher education classes should have constituted a major reckoning of pedagogical practices in universities, particularly in the humanities. Such a reckoning seems to have been muted by a focus on logistical concerns and by what might be called a false sense of preparedness within university departments. This study attempts to counter that general trend by taking seriously the cognitive and emotional demands of the online transition through a philosophical lens. This essay presents a phenomenological study of the abrupt transition from physical to online classes during the COVID-19 lockdown of universities. Reworking two central theses of Marshall McLuhan’s (1994) study of media, the author proposes two dispositions as necessary to encountering the role of new media in the teaching of the humanities: a state of wilful unpreparedness and a state of artistic creativity. These in turn pose educational dilemmas that require changes to the relationship between teachers, students and the learning environment, wherein these relationships become subjects of conscious study by the participants. The article draws on a range of classroom experiences in which the instructor and students attempted such a study. In encountering the shock of the new media, a series of concepts emerge that can help promote an artistic approach towards the medium itself.

KEYWORDS

online pedagogy, phenomenology, Marshall McLuhan, Critical theory, humanities
FALSE PREPAREDNESS

There was, indeed, anxiety among academics when, in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic closed physical classrooms and forced higher education online. By all rights, a profound shock was in store. Would online classes be engaging? Would students have equal access to technology? What would happen to discussions, to interactions, to communities? Is the university obsolete? Are we prepared?

Should we not, then, be surprised at how smoothly the humanities have changed their habitat and made the move online? Surveys of faculty and student experience underline not so much the pain, but the ease of the transition. About 52% of undergraduate students in the United States said they were satisfied with the new online experience (EY-Parthenon, 2020). Dismal as the numbers may be, they closely hound pre-pandemic trends: in the past 14 years, no more than 58% of students have expressed satisfaction with their college education (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2019). By June, 74% of faculty felt confident about teaching entirely or mostly online in the coming fall (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2020). The process was by no means painless, but it also did not give rise to widespread debate, protest and soul-searching. The laboratory sciences, engineering, and studio arts have had a more difficult time with the transition—a difficulty caused not by the remoteness of people, but of equipment. But in the liberal arts, the only cries of protest we hear are from students demanding tuition remission, from social justice advocates who correctly point out the inequalities of access to online resources, and from a single philosopher in Italy, Giorgio Agamben (2020), one of the very few (see also Daniels, 2020) who cannot reconcile himself to the mandate of virologists to abandon the physical environments of his work, the university.

There is a reality to the readiness displayed by the humanities, but it is not a pleasant one to consider. The average humanities classroom, long before the pandemic, had rejected interaction, the body and spontaneity (hooks, 1994). The traditional role of the professor—a talking head, practically disembodied, explicating texts, introducing concepts, etc.—fits the design of online meeting platforms quite well. A nationally representative survey of more than 480 professors of philosophy we conducted just before the lockdown shows that more than 60% of all philosophy classes are made up entirely, or almost entirely, of lectures. Where there is discussion, the chief purpose, according to the professors themselves, is to correct student misconceptions. Even Agamben (2020), who encourages professors and students to refuse the move online at all costs, ignores the problem of teaching. ‘We are not so much interested’ he says, ‘in the consequent transformation of teaching, in which the element of physical presence … disappears definitively, as we are in the disappearance of group discussion in seminars, which was the liveliest part of instruction.’ All that remains, apparently, is to figure out how to hold ‘lively’ discussions online, and then there is almost nothing left to be ‘interested in’. Send in the ‘how-to’ experts of online teaching—they can tell us what to do. In less than 3 months since the lockdown, The Chronicle of Higher Education, the chief news and opinion outlet on academia in the United States, published 42 how-to guides for the online classroom. The idea (albeit within a single publication) that a whole slew of experts know how to get the move online right, coupled with scarcity of debates and provocations within the same publication, might signal the general readiness of the field for what is to come—but it also signals a profound anxiety that announces itself by reaching for the numbing tonic of readymade solutions.

This is not a pedagogic problem. The explicative order (Rancière, 1991) of the classroom rests on the idea that someone has already understood the situation, that the right concepts have already been developed, that the right attitude entails humbly following these footsteps before making a minor contribution of one’s own. Already problematic in the physical sciences (Duckworth, 2006), this idea is anathema to the searching, artistic core of the humanities. Its maintenance requires, to begin with, an absolute disavowal of the situation that surrounds the speaker and the listener, the teacher and the student. No social situation fits what the speaker has dreamed of in his philosophy; and so when that philosophy is delivered in the presence of others, that presence itself becomes a primary case study.

In other words, the conditions of labour within a humanities classroom impact what is learned there (Harouni, 2013), and therefore should become subjects of study. As a rule, every semester I begin the graduate courses that I teach with a declaration of the name of my employer (the university) and the amount of money I am paid to teach. The
disequilibrium the announcement causes is deeper than if I had danced, or declared my political allegiances or waved a knife. It colours the discussion that follows, whatever it might be, and I need only to fall silent for a few minutes, let the discomfort brew, before a student points out our unreadiness to deal with the hidden contracts that bind all we might study of theory, justice, art or pedagogy. Many teaching moves, as well as many discussions about the importance of the liberal arts, merely mask the general unreadiness to encounter directly the conditions of labour under which the workers in the humanities operate.

To encounter a reality which one can only perceive with pain or loss, or a reality that demands to be transformed without presenting the means of that transformation, constitutes a shock to the individual. False preparedness is any mental mechanism that parries this shock away. With the shock goes also any sense of wonder—that moment in which one embraces the undoing of one’s preparations, the first and only source, according to Plato (Theaetetus, 155d, 1990) and Aristotle (Metaphysics, 1, 982b, 1981), of all philosophy.

UNPREPARED HUMANITIES: TWO COMMANDMENTS

We need, I want to suggest, an unprepared humanities—a fundamental attitude that embraces the shock of encountering phenomena. Such an attitude would lead to a different pedagogy, one that, for example, would make of the move online an opportunity for study and experimentation. But to posit the idea immediately gives rise to a dilemma that cannot be easily solved: what are we to do with what we have learned, with the concepts we already know, and with the preparations we have already made? Even an unprepared humanities is a learned thing, that is, a state of preparation. What would it be like to enter a real situation, such as the lockdown and the move online, with this dilemma pushing against one’s thinking?

What, for example, can we do with what we learn from media studies—the field designed to help us encounter new, often digital media? It is useful to remind ourselves of the origins of that field, when, in 1964, Marshall McLuhan stood at its threshold, trying to make sense of the vast changes that traversed the world on television waves. The unnerved editor of his seminal Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man had told McLuhan that ‘seventy-five per cent of your material is new. A successful book cannot venture to be more than ten per cent new’ (McLuhan, 1994, p. 4). Nearly every page of that very new study, particularly in the opening programmatic chapters, contains the same jeremiad: we are not ready for the blow of technological transformation that has already landed on our ‘chins’. We, the human race, have never been ready, and ‘[it] can only be repeated that human history is a record of “taking it on the chin”’ (p. 66). Our nerves, our desires, our social structures, even our reactions are ill-prepared, and so the counter-irritants we devise ‘usually [prove] a greater plague than the initial irritant, like a drug habit’ (ibid.).

More than five decades later, can we say that we are more prepared? It would be difficult to claim that we are less prepared. Media studies is now a behemoth of a field—tens of university programmes, hundreds of professors and many thousand books and articles. Grafting multiple disciplines, students of media have looked into the sociology of digital ‘spaces’, the anthropology of online ‘communities’, the political economy of algorithmic codes and the phenomenology of virtual creativity. The field, in its gestalt, lays a sagely hand over the uncertainties (and, therefore, curiosities) that facile recommendations for running a ‘successful online classroom’ cannot calm. If I were to wonder the implications of the private ownership of Zoom, the platform through which my classes are to meet, with a little research I find myself assured that someone else, at least, has tried to think through a similar problem (Bolter, 2012; Edwards, 2015). It only remains to acknowledge that we do not have time to read all these studies, not even the most relevant to our problems. We can then choose between anxiety at not-knowing and the false comfort of someone else having known.

We can, however, read McLuhan’s warning differently. It is not that we are unprepared and, therefore, we must get the ducks in row before technology makes off with our senses. Rather, the injunction is to encounter media as if unprepared, despite all that spells otherwise. This implicit as if provided the initial motive force of media studies, now almost forgotten. It is an attempt to alienate oneself and one’s readers or students from all technologies that seem
integrated and commonplace, a blow against false preparedness. It is a motive underlying much of social research, even if the urge to arrive at conclusions and best-practices tends to limit its expression.

An unprepared humanities would be the overcoming of the above tension. The idea would be to have learned without feeling prepared. I will dedicate the remainder of this paper to trying to describe this idea in practice, but it suffices for now to say that I am not advocating for childlike wonder or a constant state of shock, but for an educated attitude that constantly questions its own reactions. The learning entailed here extends one’s thinking in just the same way that media act as ‘extensions of man’. The learning can amplify, streamline, diversify, disintegrate, etc. what one can do in the world. It gives form. But just as the form of media can become content (the medium, the message) and undermine freedom of thought and action, just as amplification, streamlining, etc. are by no means purely benevolent changes, the more one learns, the more one must view oneself critically. Unprepared humanities then requires an extremely high threshold for uncertainty and disequilibrium, to the extent that one must cultivate, among other tools, an internal mechanism for disrupting equilibrium on purpose—a lesson that business schools, with their promotion of agile leadership, adaptive leadership or transformational leadership, have learned with much more urgency than the social sciences (see Rorty, 1989) that inspired them in the first place.

When, for example, I announce my academic income at the beginning of a course, I am drawing on a previous learning that tells me of the importance of the means of production; but the announcement itself and the waiting for the reactions of the students declares that neither I nor they have really understood the implications of that learning, and we will only manage to understand ourselves through facing each other as if unprepared to conduct a regular classroom. A classroom approach where thought is reduced to a step-wise understanding of someone else’s writings, or where a lecturer hammers home the relationship between this and that school of thought without paying attention to the literal school that surrounds the lecture—these might betray, more than a lack of teaching skills, a fundamental rigidity and disengagement in the theories and minds that create them. To state the same problem positively: to walk with a group of students into an instigated place of uncertainty is to enter the very place from which theory can arise. Unprepared humanities is an active seeking of such spaces in reading and writing, teaching and learning.

We can observe this attitude in practice. I will recount an example from my notes on my own teaching

In a graduate course on social transformation, in the last in-person class before the COVID lockdown, when it has become clear that we must move the work online, the students are vacillating between grief and anger—one faction holding this, one faction the other. There is almost no attempt to address the assigned readings. When a student begins to cry, saying she will miss being in this room and with these people, someone else accuses her of taking attention away from the ‘real pain in the world’. Someone mentions that the woman who cried is white and her tears, therefore, are ‘white woman tears’. And now we are neck-deep in a battle whose futility is mentioned by many, even those who are instigating it. There is, in other words, no exploration of the change in conditions of learning and labour that is about to take place.

After a break, I, the teacher, ask everyone to turn around in their seats, to face the walls rather than the center, and to think about and discuss the removal of bodies from the classroom. 60 chairs, including mine, swivel. A very long silence. The same discussion as before takes over again, but now voices are both sadder and angrier. Comments become shorter and shorter. For the first time in the history of the class, people begin to voice one-word approvals or disapprovals for this or that statement. Some merely snap their fingers to indicate agreement. Some call for the class to turn around, to seek full-bodied connection. We are, it seems to me, in a Facebook battle, with snaps serving as ‘likes’ and hisses as ‘dislikes’. It has become easier to hurt others and to grieve alone. This is as much as I can ‘see’, and I state it. ‘But how would we,’ I add, ‘fulfil the desire to turn around and connect with each other, when we go online? How do we accomplish that turning?’
To move all classes in a university online should rightly constitute a shock that goes far deeper than finding the right platform, training people to use it, making sure there are enough computers and—what seems most important to administrators—reckoning the financial losses. Many mechanisms, however, go into high gear to disavow this shock in favour of a rapid and smooth transition—continuation of business as usual. Are we not, in any case, used to cyber-life already? Have the phone, voice-chat and social media not prepared us for interaction without bodies? Combine this with the fact of a global health crisis, and it can seem positively indecent to dwell on questions of psyche or culture or pedagogy, unless the aim is, once again, to soften the blow. It is in the face of this resistance that the humanities, whose business, beside tuition fees, is the psyche, culture and pedagogy, would need to mount a counter-resistance, a leaning into the disavowed tremors.

The teacher is by no means the sole motive force behind this movement. Where students have taken on the work of thinking, the encounter can be far more nuanced, because the group can manage the movement between shock and retreat internally, without reliance on a source to insistently pull towards the former. Nor does the experience, to use the words of Walter Benjamin, have to be ‘shot through with explanations’ by the teacher (Benjamin, 2007, p. 89). The experience of thinking the problem and formulating more precise or more encompassing ideas already accomplishes the work of the humanities. Another example, from a different course than the one I described above, might demonstrate this point:

In the last session before the move online, the students are divided between those who want to continue to meet in-person (pandemic be damned) and those who find the suggestion dangerous and disturbing. Finally, Shelly, who has been in the danger camp, who has found the mourning over a physical classroom counter-productive, acknowledges the validity of the desire to continue in-person. ‘I don’t want to dishonor [your mourning],’ she says. ‘I don’t want you to dishonor it. And I think it’s sacred enough, that it doesn’t matter what I say... I am a melancholic, forgive me. I am always mourning. My partner lives in New York and I am probably not gonna see him for a few months. A lot of relationships have been virtual. Do you know how difficult it is to speak on a phone cam? I love the awkward angles! It’s not the same. Would I rather have his body there? Do I miss it? God, of course! But what do I gain? What a test! And, God, the beauty of that man’s voice! Could I have heard that [without the distance]? Oh my god! He speaks the languages, he has an accent, it’s lovely. He reads me to sleep sometimes. I mean, my god, his voice is like...’ Here she pauses and looks at her classmates. ‘I’m excited for your voices!’

Here, in what happens to this student’s language, one encounters the second, active aspect of an unprepared humanities: the attempt at artistic creation. In these classes, students were encouraged to think as much as possible about what they had read, their own experiences, and what was happening in the here-and-now. Becoming aware of their modes of perception and interaction, they saw also the possibility to transform them. The separation between learning and action is shattered, and in the wake of that breakdown, within a dialogue, what can emerge often has the shape of an artistic creation—an attempt to express an internal state that is not pre-figured in the mode of expression. To speak of the possibilities of learning online, Shelly has to connect the classroom to the bedroom, the voices of classmates to that of a lover, and transform the word ‘test’ beyond its place in schooling into something semi-spiritual.

McLuhan’s sensitivity to the role of media had also awakened him to the role of those who create or play with media—the artists: ‘The effects of technology do not occur at the level of opinions or concepts, but alter sense ratios or patterns of perception steadily and without any resistance. The serious artist is the only person able to encounter technology with impunity, just because he is an expert aware of the changes in sense perception’ (1994, p. 18). McLuhan, however, could not shoulder the full implications of his own discovery. Having confined the artistic sensibility within ‘serious’ artworks—in Shakespeare, for example (pp. 9–10, 58–59, 149–150, 175–176)—he could not study it in every-
day encounters. He could only, and very briefly, dream of a more commonly held sensibility: ‘If men were able to be convinced that art is precise advance knowledge of how to cope with the psychic and social consequences of the next technology, would they all become artists?’ (p. 66). That is as far as he could go (Browne, 2015). We can see the pattern of his thinking more clearly in his much earlier, firebrand writings: ‘The media are not toys; they should not be in the hands of Mother Goose and Peter Pan executives. They can be entrusted only to new artists, because they are art forms’ (McLuhan, 2011, p. 14). *New artists* is a much more active (and far less pre-figured) formulation than *serious* ones. Today, with so much of one’s life given over to undecipherable, algorithmic art forms (iPhone, Facebook and, in the case of the online classes in this study, Zoom) run, indeed, by Mother Goose executives, the call for new artists has the clear ring of a battle cry. But instead of searching solely in the works of ‘serious’ artists, we must watch precisely for the dilettante, the desperate teacher, the failing student, the regular user awakened to a sense of agency.

The corollary to the first command that one has to read into McLuhan (‘you must encounter new media as if unprepared’) is a second: ‘You must encounter new media as if you are an artist’.

### THE WORK OF BEING UNPREPARED: A PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE MOVE ONLINE

For the remainder of this writing, I will draw on my experience of teaching two graduate-level courses as the COVID-19 pandemic forced classes to migrate online. One course was on social transformation, the other on alternative modes of education. I have, however, combined the two contexts, in part to protect the identities of the students, and in part to distill the events into singular encounters with a widely shared experience. My approach will be phenomenological, drawing on the unpreparedness through which the method encourages attention to, and questioning of, lived experience. Since the early days of the Internet, researchers have used phenomenology to study people’s participation in virtual environments (Markham, 2017; Van Manen & Adams, 2009). It is an essentially subjective approach, and the descriptions it provides of an encounter with technology should not be seen as applying to all people and situations. Rather it is the encounter in its specificity, as a possibility among others, that is of interest. I will follow this tradition, asking two interrelated questions: First, what changes in sense perception does a teacher experience when entering the online platform as if unprepared? And, second, how can these changes in perception be taken hold of by students and worked into artistic encounters with media?

Answering the first question not only confines us to exploring subjective experience, it also might convey a sense of the teacher and students as *inactive*, as subject to the new environment. The problem is at the heart of the debate regarding the effect of algorithms on humans (see Harrison, 2018; Magalhães, 2018). On the one hand, there are those who hold with the ‘moral harm paradigm’, focusing on the powerlessness of users before algorithms that shape their lives (Mittelstadt et al., 2016); on the other hand, the school of actor–network theory holds that users shape the experience of digital media as do producers (Neyland, 2016; Ziewitz, 2016). In the latter paradigm, there is no common experience of media to be ‘revealed’ (Ananny & Crawford, 2018).

What, however, seems like a debate between two opposing conceptions is, at the core, the result of an unwillingness in both camps to perceive the emotional force behind their split. Each side is the corollary of the other. To see users as victims is an expression of excessive despair—a despair that exists and is justified by the overwhelming force of media and the inactivity of people. To see users as co-creators of media is an expression of excessive hope, and this hope, too, is justified by what we know of human activity. It would be more accurate to go back and forth between an icy plunge into despair and a rising into the heat of hope—to remain awake to both feelings at the same time. One must simultaneously keep green in the mind the two commandments: ‘enter as if unprepared, and remember that you are an artist’.

For the unprepared, the change from physical to digital classroom, can include a set of experiences that involve one’s relation to space, time, movement (or conduct), self and group. I will begin by describing these experiences in
terms of the shock they engender in me, the observer (others will tell different stories). The idea is not to paint a dystopian or hopeless picture, but to describe the impact of the new conditions of learning at a first glance. The actions that arise in relation to these shocks will wait until a later section.

**Vanishability**

Bodies can appear and disappear. There is no transition between entering the class and getting to your seat. There is no lingering afterward. In an instant, someone can log out and not ‘be there’. The temporal continuity that physical space guaranteed is no more. If you offend someone, they will not walk out (moving from one point to another, step by step) giving you time to protest. You work under the threat of disappearance—your own as much as others’.

**Absolute/hybrid space**

When you are in the online classroom, you are extended across many different spaces (your room, the computer code, your screen, other people’s screens, their rooms, the other screens you have open, etc.). The hybridity of online spaces has already been pointed out in many studies (e.g. Fuller, 2005; Mulcahy et al., 2015). What Kitchin and Dodge (2011) call the code/space, “when software and the spatiality of everyday life become mutually constituted” (p. 13), is amenable to extraordinary transmission and extension, because it is partly pure digital data. The vanishability of online participants, however, suggests a complementary phenomenon: so far as your presence is concerned, the online classroom is an absolute space, a constellation that can vanish instantly, cutting off the process of extension. We recognise this from our experience with television. The actors and sets we are watching exist as bodies on a different ground, as waves in the air, as images on countless screens, including the one in our room. Turn off the machine now, and the space, so far as it involved you, has vanished. But you yourself were never in television. The physical classroom, too, was a hybrid. It included the chats that took place before or after each session, the phone screens students secretly turned on, the small group meetings in different rooms without the teacher. Online hybridity, however, is of such a different magnitude that it suggests an entirely different quality. You gaze into the houses of other students. You can mute yourself, call another participant, and speak privately just as the class continues—each voice whispering in the other’s home. The physical classroom, too, had finality (walls, a time boundary). But the space stretched into the doorway, the hallway, the school as a whole, until little by little you were completely elsewhere. The absolute/hybrid space of the online class has deep consequences. Students were never before in an equal position to hybridise, to shape the space of learning. At the same time, they have never been so much dependent on the spatiality created and administered for them by other powers.

**Inherent recordability**

Events could be recorded before they moved online. My own classes were nearly always taped. The difference now is that the recording of an online event corresponds almost exactly to the actual experience. It is a recording of a recording, a codification of a codification. And whereas the old video camera stuck its lens into the midst, had a perspective absolutely its own, made one uncomfortably glance at it mid-sentence, was, in other words, external to our experience, the online recording is so part of the platform that it hides. The impact is there. Everyone knows that whatever sounds or images they commit to the event will be there forever. It does not matter at all if the ‘record’ button has been pressed or not, because the potential is inherent to the situation. Behaviours have changed, but the source of this change is so obscure that we might not even think to study the change. We can guess how great the impact is by remembering to
what extent the mere fantasy of recordability, of an exact record of one’s actions kept in God’s Heaven, used to shape
the lives of the pious.

Encoded norms

What were tacitly agreed upon forms of etiquette, with the potential of punishment always looming in the background,
become actual, readable buttons with instantaneous enforcement. One button to ‘mute’ participants, one to ‘remove’
them, one to turn off their image. The platform software even forbids two people speaking over each other. Edwards
\cite{Edwards2015} has talked about the ‘hidden curriculum of software’. In the online platform, however, we have cases of what was
hidden becoming apparent, without becoming any more painful, without necessarily being forced into awareness. The
violence of the verb ‘to mute’, for example, is softened to a basic option, coupled with ‘unmute’ as a whimsical corol-
ary. These buttons do for interactions what gestures (raising your hand, crossing the arms, snapping fingers, leaning
forward) have always done: to codify a complex of thoughts and actions into an instantly communicable act \cite{Kendon2004}. The difference is that the physical gesture carried the complexity of the body and, at any point, was marked by
the specific state of the person. Raising a shaking, uncertain hand and shooting a hand up into the air do not signify the
same thing. The encoded gesture—the image of two hands clapping, the musical signature (a doorbell) that announces
the arrival of a new participant—is the work of absent artists, and, if deployed in isolation from other communicative
acts, relates only to the general milieu and not the individual. Two digital ‘thumbs up’ look exactly the same, even if
the thoughts behind them are wildly different. With diminished specificity, there is diminished risk of revealing oneself
and also diminished responsibility.

Sensory disintegration

As with the written word, which preceded them, the photograph and telephone have already taught us that senses
can operate in separation from the integral self. In the first online session of one of my classes, a student, Joshua, has
finished saying how much being online allows him to focus on individual voices (those very voices that Shelly, earlier,
had linked to that of the lover). Another student begins to speak—but we cannot hear her. The Internet on her side is
too weak for the transmission. We can only see her gestures in choppy staccato and hear only a static. She is separated
from her image and her sounds. This is an accident, but here one can turn one’s own image off and only come through
as a voice, or vice versa. The key difference with the telephone call or the recorded lecture is that the online platform
can switch rapidly, and even arbitrarily, between one sense and another. You, therefore, curate yourself along separate
sensory channels. There is also an impact on what bell hooks \cite{hooks1994} calls ‘the erotics’ of education. hooks focuses on
the separation between mind and body in academia—the denial of the body. But if the body has been traditionally
disavowed in the teacher–student relationship, it was always a loud presence in the student–student relationship.
The separation of person from senses in the online environment, compounded by the pandemic lockdown that bars
students from meeting one another, takes away the possibility of any physical adventure. No longer repression, this
is disintegration. More than ever, there is a demand to focus only on the ‘task’—a demand instigated, and at the same
time made more difficult by, the dissipation of erotic tension between those who are supposed to perform the task
together.

Curated gaze

The platform has the capacity to curate what you see and hear. The visual representation of the ‘space’ can be left to
the algorithm. So, gazing at the screen, we all see a grid of images, and in large classes, where not all faces can fit on the
same screen, the algorithm dedicates the first page to participants who have recently spoken. A uniform image of the collective gazes at us, and in return, our own gaze is received by others as part of a digital curation. One is not prepared for what happens when speaking the word ‘you’ into the camera: it can refer to any of the participants and all of them, unless one mentions a specific name.

Photographic self-representation

You can see your own face, returned to you as a photographic image, unless you take steps to turn off this feature. What others see of you, also, is no longer dependent on their vantage point and the general milieu. The near-complete control over what others see of you (one can digitally change the background, retouch one’s face, manually add or subtract lighting, turn off the image completely) translates also to a near-constant awareness of how you are seen. In physical reality the distribution of gazes across a group, the fact that there is no single image of what we do, leaves some measure of freedom from one’s self-image. That freedom might have narrowed. The control over the image, it bears mentioning, in most contexts does not inspire artistic care over the image.

We can test the strength of the above observations, and the concepts developed to hold them, by analysing the discussions that surrounded the anxiety of the move online. The concerns listed above took up a very small part of the public discussions. They paled, of course, in comparison to some large, practical concerns. What was to be done, for example, to ensure adequate Internet access for all students? In the first 2 weeks, quite a few of my students, almost all from working-class backgrounds, could not make the online classes, because their computers or Internet connections failed them. How to train teachers to use online platforms was another concern, although this turned out to have been overblown: the rudimentary management of the software interface is quite user-friendly. It takes very little mental prowess to set up a generic meeting, if one does not feel the need to test the limits of the platform.

There were, however, at least three pedagogical concerns that did find their way into the public conversation: multi-channelling (i.e. the possibility of students being distracted by many tasks), ‘Zoom fatigue’, and ‘Zoombombing’. Each of these corresponds to the recognition, through anxiety, of a media-related shock. These anxieties link directly to the teacher’s fear of losing authority over the event, though they can also be read as expressions of paternalistic altruism—the desire to protect students from distraction, exhaustion and intrusion, respectively. There is also a secret facet: each of these is also a form of protest, just as passing notes, putting one’s head down on the desk and occupying classrooms have served as acts of defiance. To think about what is new in the current situation, we need to hold on to our understanding of the old phenomena and our unreadiness before the current. Most classrooms, for example, have forever been drudgeries, or Shakespeare would not have depicted an entire age of man as ‘the whining schoolboy … creeping like snail unwillingly to school’ (2000, 2.7.145–6). Is there anything specifically tiring about sitting in an online classroom, or does it simply make more obvious an old fatigue? The concepts listed above can shed some light on the distinction.

Multi-channelling

The norms of the physical classroom—from etiquette to seating structures (Harouni, 2014) and the blackboard (Phillips, 2015)—were designed to maximise the transmission of information from the teacher to the students. Any action that distracted from this transmission was either an act of defiance or explicitly sanctioned by authority. The codified norms of the online space are different. Technology companies that develop computer software are interested in maximising the transmission of information—period. The direction of transmission is secondary. The Zoom platform offers the ability to text-chat (between individuals or with the whole group), a polling software, closed captioning, links to other social media and so on. To sit behind a computer, in any case, is to have almost immediate access to a vast set of texts and people. Software companies like Zoom, of course, have understood that they need to help
clients replicate the traditional classroom or meeting as closely as possible (profit being more important than information transfer). To reach this traditional mode, the user must actively block the extra channels. What was in the physical classroom a historically agreed upon arrangement, supported by the architecture, in the online classroom becomes an obvious limiting of the participants' extended faculties. Traditional pedagogies are possible to replicate online, but only with extra effort from the participants to limit themselves and mask their frustration.

**Zoom fatigue**

The added effort to keep oneself from multi-channelling is only one avenue for the extra expenditure of mental energy. The sensory disintegrality imposed by the environment also requires the mind to work across various channels to seek the information it is accustomed to gathering simultaneously. Body gestures, for example, become dim and partially cut-off in their photographic representation. Voices lose some of their nuanced quality. A participant can begin speaking, but the position of their photograph might not be immediately known, sending the eye searching for the right place to look. All of these, however, might be minor mental efforts compared to the immense difference in terms of the relationship to one’s self-image. The constant awareness of how one appears to others, as described above, is taxing on its own. It is moreover coupled with an attack on the conditions that help many people maintain a differentiated and complex sense of self—a fragile so-called ‘self-complexity’ (Linville, 1987). A lowering of self-complexity, research showed almost three decades ago, exacerbates fatigue and depression (Dixon & Baumeister, 1991). Whether this is the main cause of zoom fatigue requires more empirical research. We can, however, speculate that the hybridity of the online space erodes the once sacrosanct barriers between home and office, family and work. The mind has to either reconcile itself to the hybrid space and create a new sense of self-complexity, or to constantly perform gymnastics to maintain the old separations. Both options require work. The fact that reconciliation can be seen as ‘development’ does not take away the shock that instigates it or the loss (of a private self, for example) that follows.

**Zoombombing**

That people online are vanishable gives them also the ability to enter and exit a space with more impunity. This is the simple root of the widespread fear of what is called ‘Zoombombing’: the intrusion and interruption of an uninvited person into a video conference. There was a scramble by Zoom and other platforms to minimise the threat. Events began to require a password, and many open conferences became one way transmissions, with the audience disallowed from speaking or even appearing on the visual grid. There is nothing inherently wrong with any of these efforts. Lost in the conversation is the fact that Zoombombing is not always the work of unwanted strangers. It is an impulse present in many participants, to which technology now gives a definite shape. Juster (2020), teaching an elementary class during the COVID lockdown, describes the impulse:

The troublemakers have gone quiet. Zeke’s paper airplanes are grounded. Dara’s audience dispersed. For the first time without complaint, Kamil writes an entire paragraph, as if in penance for the possibility that his wish has been granted: no more school... The autonomy they were discovering is no longer as satisfying in isolation. Gideon changes his name display to read ‘gideon is the best’! Evan changes his: ‘n0 eVaN i$j!!!’ They change their names back when I ask, but I’m actually disappointed. I scan the grid, looking for a smirk, hoping for an outburst, praying for a challenge. Five weeks ago, when we were together in the classroom, we spent most of the day pretending I could mute us with a bell, a lecture, or a glare. Our deepest fear and greatest solace came from knowing it wasn’t true: I can’t keep you quiet. Now the buttons on my screen mock the myth that once sustained us.
The changing of display names signals the arrival of a different kind of stranger: the aspect of the student that the classroom norms had stifled. Like those adult Zoombombers who broke into serious meetings to display pornography, or those who broke into liberal tele-conferences and displayed ultraconservative or anti-Semitic slogans, the children are also expressing a disavowed aspect of the psyche of the organising authority. To treat all these kinds of intrusion through the same technological solution (e.g., disallowing changing one’s name) is as reactionary as treating all these intruders in the same way.

THE WORK OF ARTISTIC CREATION: VIGNETTES FROM ONLINE CLASSES

To approach a situation as an artist is to approach it, primarily, as a failed artist. For every work of art that a McLuhan can analyse or a society can cling to, there are many that never reach the desired level of intensity or sophistication. These attempts are spread across the life of the individual creator on the one hand, and the surrounding society on the other. For every *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, there is also a *Stephen Hero* —the first draft, wobbly and petty, that James Joyce's wife had to save from fire. Modern division of labour turns the artist into a figure to which entire clusters of society can outsource the translation of their inner lives into outward forms. Failures become shameful records that are better thrown into the fireplace or hidden in archives. The democratic impulse that demands artistic creativity from everyone, however, runs the risk of turning failures into final products that are then celebrated—a levelling down of all intensities, every attempt becoming as valuable as another. The faculty evaluation surveys that went out by the thousands in the aftermath of the COVID-19 lockdown exemplify the most banal aspect of this risk: it was enough that students feel satisfied, that online classes be reported as engaging. Most surveys flattened all the different attempts into a general state of satisfaction. Very little could be learned and still less could be hazarded. It would be a great misfortune to go through the ordeal of social isolation and ubiquitous digital life without learning anything substantial.

When, in the description offered earlier, I asked my students to turn around in their seats as a way of dealing with the coming loss of physical bodies, I was heading into a failure. I was not prepared for the results in advance, and what followed showed more resistance than realisation. It was as much as I could do at the time, and it was not enough to instigate the intensity of exploration and thinking I desired. But it is possible that nothing would have been enough, because I and the students were all unprepared, and at our disposal we only had a clear failure to build from.

It would have been a poor creation if the artistic impulse in the classes came solely from me, the teacher. At the same time, the desire to either give in or outright reject technology, the tendency to disavow the shocks, was so strong that without attempts from the teacher, the work would likely have circled around the customary and familiar, made even poorer by the change in environment. From the very beginning of the online classes, I tried to bring attention to the new experience. I would, for example, switch off my video and speak from a blank screen. I would change my own name according to how I felt the students were treating my role (‘The Authority,’ ‘The One Who Knows,’ ‘The Unwanted Guest,’ etc.) I would suddenly unmute all participants at the same time, sending the soundscape and the display grid into confusion, highlighting the fact that the medium had given us the display grid based on who had or had not spoken in class. I would describe the background of my own image, that is, my living room, in detail. On one occasion, when the group focused on a student who was in quarantine across the world, asking her when the sun would rise, I created a false sunrise by shining a flashlight into the camera, the lens flaring as it would in sunlight. My teaching assistants changed not only their own display names, but also the students’ names. When there was a deep conflict between two students, or when there was a pregnant pause, or just as a student had said how happy he was that he did not have to ‘face’ his colleagues, we ‘spotlighted’ individual images of participants, enlarging them to take over the entire screen, forcing a reckoning with the possibility of one face extending over the entire display field. We gave ‘host’ privileges (the ability to control the meeting) first to one student, then another, then another.
The performative aspect of all these attempts is akin to what Bertolt Brecht called the *alienation effect* in theatre—devices ‘designed to free socially-conditioned phenomena from that stamp of familiarity which protects them against our grasp’ (Brecht, 1964, p. 192). In Brecht’s formulations, creating this alienation was the work of the artist. The division of labour persists: the artists have the role of seeing things clearly, creating interventions and pushing others towards ‘grasping’ phenomena, and the audience are the subjects of this intervention, as mute as the phenomena that somehow evade them. We must entertain a greater possibility than Brecht imagined: the possibility that audiences or students, if sufficiently self-motivated and curious, should be able to alienate themselves, which is to say, explore their own responses.

Instead of an ‘alienation effect’, in unprepared humanities, we can look for what we might call a *koan effect*. In Zen, the koan is a question, a story or a gesture that binds the student and the teacher in such a way that only a shift in the students’ understanding can break open. The koan deals with problems for which everyday or even specialised language prove insufficient. The teacher cannot explain the koan away or solve it for the student, because its real subject is a change within the student of a magnitude and quality that would allow a different perspective on, or approach to, the world. When the Zen master Hyakujo (720–840 C.E.) wanted to choose an abbot for a monastery, he devised the following test: he took a pitcher, placed it on the floor and asked the monks: ‘This must not be called a pitcher. What do you call it?’ The best response the head monk could come up with was ‘Well, you cannot call it a wooden sandal.’ At this point, another monk, Isan, walked up, kicked over the pitcher, and left the assembly. Hyakujo awarded Isan the abbotsiphip (Shibayama, 1974, p. 279). Hyakujo’s question, a koan, requires an active, internal understanding of language, of decisiveness, and of social norms (it is significant that Isan walks away after kicking the pitcher). The teacher cannot anticipate the responses of the students, nor can he consider his work finished without a response. He cannot set a rubric for the proper response, nor can he hold all responses to be of the same value.

When in an online classroom, the teacher, as I did, creates a fake sunrise using a flashlight and the computer camera, he is also creating a koan effect. I could say directly to my students:

> please notice that we are dealing with photographic representations of ourselves, and yet we take almost no advantage of this fact. We seem to be wishing this photographic situation away, hoping to be seen as really present, wanting to be in each other’s rooms, where we could share a sunrise or a sunset. Now, please grasp all of this in your actions. Please use the medium to express all these problems and desires, etc.

It would be a legitimate lecture to give, and I have given it. The rub is that what I want from my students is an artistic disposition that should go into effect without a direct prompt from me. They do not treat their images on Zoom artistically, in part because something stops their trying: something maybe that disturbs, saddens or disappoints. My fake sunset gives them a glimpse into this shadowy zone, which, with luck and effort, they might incorporate as such—that is as a set of feelings with real effects.

**The Zoombomber**

From our second online session until the end of the semester, there has been an extra participant in the class. He (or she) never shows his face and never speaks. All we see is a black screen, over which the participant’s name is printed, and this name changes many times during a session. ‘The Teacher’s Desire’, reads the name at some point, and then it changes to ‘The Student’s Lack’, and later, ‘A Dirty Sock’ and later still, ‘The Disavowed’. Sometimes the uninvited guest takes on more concrete identities. When we talk about the response of the university to COVID-19, suddenly the black screen shows the name of the university president. Via this device, the president and his policies enter the discussion. In a later class, discussing China, the screen reads: Xi Jinping. The intervention is something that could have come from the teaching team, but in fact it is the work of one of the students, who logs into the class using two devices.
First the backgrounds, and then entire images begin to speak in a visual language. Tsing, in the discussion of a text that refers to prisoners, transforms her background to a jail cell, and the group begins to talk about confinement as a social and philosophical construct that refers both to prisoners and to themselves, though not alike. Someone, in an argument with Tsing, tells her: ‘I’m trying to tell you “you have spinach in your teeth!”’ Almost immediately another student changes his background to a cartoon of Popeye holding a can of spinach, the source of his strength. Mahdah, for an entire class, refuses to look directly at the camera. She looks to the side, or just above, and the entire time, she paints her face. Layer after layer of paint, on her face, on her neck. ‘I’m trying to look beautiful’, she says, when finally questioned—beauty having been a regular concept in the class, but here having become tied to the gaze, to an addressability, that both displays itself on the body and refuses to become a display. Joshua has turned off all the lights in his room, sitting in total darkness, save for a candle that does not have enough power to light up anything but itself. When someone asks him to let the class see his face, he holds up a photograph of himself to the camera, and the light from his screen illuminates this image of an image. Raul spends an entire hour with half of his camera covered with a piece of paper, his face perfectly positioned so that the paper cuts it in half, too. Irena does not turn on the lights in her room, and as the sun goes down, all her surroundings turn into darkness, while her face remains lit by the computer screen. The image now resembles a painting, like a Georges de la Tour, with the figure deep in concentration before a small flame. It’s a simple, painful and beautiful composition. I spotlight it. I have seen nothing similar to it on a videoconference before and will not see one like it for months to come.

The beach

One can make sensory disintegrality into a statement. On one occasion, Bessie tries to make a point, but feels unheard by the class, and misunderstood. After she is interrupted for a third time, she changes her background to the moving image of a beach, with an open sapphire sky and the waves claiming, then pulling back from, the white sand. She is on mute, and she begins to speak to someone real or imaginary off-screen. We cannot hear her, we can only see her wide smile, her animated hands, and the beach. This is the clearest expression of ‘I’m checking out’ or ‘I am multi-channeling’ that we have seen; but having been communicated in this way, we know that something of Bessie, something more than her ire and resistance, is with us.

Dancing together, alone

The exploration of the backgrounds eventually opens the real backgrounds, all the disparate rooms that form the hybrid space of the class, to exploration. ‘All this time we have been talking’, says Jamshid,

I have pinned [i.e. made large and brought to foreground] the picture of only one of you, and this is the person with the water bottle and the background that’s most similar to mine. And I have been hoping, probably falsely, that the similarity of backgrounds is a point of shared understanding for us.

The context of the discussion makes it clear that ‘background’ refers both to the physical space behind the unnamed student and a social background and identity. A little while later, Janice returns to the idea: ‘I’m caught up more in the sadness than the newness of this [online space]. I mean... almost all of us have like eggshell white walls and like, well, like we are a part of the same thing, but it’s a sad thing [we are a part of].’ Mahdah replies:
In one of my classes, the professor...she put on music and she was like 'everybody dance!' And it was a strange experience of...I was like, you can dance alone and you can dance in a group, but this is a new space of dancing alone together...Based on what you just said. I feel like a lot of the time in our physical classroom, we were alone together, too.

She is referring to an aloneness that is tied to the industrial blandness of eggshell walls, to people who, even when close, are apart, unable to meet each other. One cannot decide easily if the online space, even the COVID lockdown, exacerbate this isolation or merely throw it into relief.

You

Twice in one course, as I address a point raised by a student, I finish my comment by saying: ‘When I say this, I am talking to you’ and I stare, for a few moments, into the lens. It’s not clear who this ‘you’ is, since the platform unifies the gaze. Once, when Celia is commenting, rather harshly, on something I had said, I ask her: ‘Who are you talking to now?’ ‘I’m talking to you’, she says, and gazes into the lens. The class holds this moment in silence.

Empty rooms

We do not end class at the designated time-boundary. We turn off the recording, the teaching team log off, and students remain behind. The absolute space of the online platform remains absolute (at any moment, it can be turned off). Only it has been stretched, at the very least beyond the jurisdiction of the school or the teacher. In one session, I forget to turn off the recorder. The students remain behind for 90 minutes. At first there are 25 of them, discussing the class, the texts, their own actions. After 70 minutes, six of them have remained, the rest having said goodbye or simply vanished. And then the six say goodbye, too, and one by one begin to log off. At the end, there is only Tim. He is by himself, sitting in silence for about two minutes, looking at the screen. ‘I know this is being recorded,’ he finally says. ‘I like being the last person in a room...I just like being in empty rooms, I find myself in empty spaces a lot. There is something liberating about being in an empty space where there’s nobody else around’. And then he goes on, rambling from topic to topic, from the concept of authenticity to the pain of isolation, from the virus to the role of God in the mind, and every few minutes he reminds himself that he is being recorded. ‘What is my work?’ he asks again and again. ‘I don’t have the answers’, he finally says. ‘Plenty of questions’. And just at that moment someone knocks on the real door of the real empty room in which he has been sitting. He looks up and smiles: ‘Alright. I’m outie!’ The classroom vanishes.

All these attempts differ essentially from the need to ‘get the online classroom right’, or to be engaging, or to go around an already interminable meeting and ask everyone how they are doing with the COVID crisis. They differ from any of the major models proposed for designing online courses and programmes (for a review, see Potvin et al., 2020). There is no pretending here to be prepared where one cannot possibly be so. There is planning, reading, attention to the environment, listening to other participants, remembering the past—in brief, there is learning that is put to use, but not at the expense of the encounter (and how short we are on encounters these days). Precisely for this reason, those involved in such an attempt have more agency over the media that govern their environment than those who try to ‘fix’ a problem they scarcely have described. The ‘empty room’ to which Tim addresses himself has always been there, right at the centre of any humanities class, or wherever people have gathered to think their conditions. The pandemic has enlarged this room to unbearable dimensions. Technology has made it more recordable, shareable—just as writing had done before. For a moment, the empty room does loudly what it usually does silently: it speaks back. What it speaks are questions.
At the time of this writing, the promise of a vaccine is gleaming bright on the horizon, and the workers in schools (those who retain their work) are readying to go back to the physical classrooms. I should also, at least in theory, return to the old humanities classroom: because what has been described above does not pertain only to the mediation of digital technologies. Maybe, once we return to the physical walls, the conditions therein will strike us as strange as they really are. It is possible then that in a few classrooms, people will ask how the modes of interaction and study impact what is being studied, or what the environment is making of the people, or vice versa. It is possible to cultivate a state of learned unpreparedness where false certainty and rhetorical questions had dominated. And it might even be possible for people to approach each other, the environment and the ideas with the wilful artistry that, in its failures and master strokes, elevates the classroom to a place worth partaking in.

END NOTES

1 Of the first 120 relevant articles that Google Scholar produces for the query ‘Teaching online coronavirus’, sorted by date of publication until 31 May 2020, at least 55 concern teaching medicine. Of the rest, only five concern higher education, and four of these five are how-to guides for professors. The proliferation of articles on medical teaching can in part be explained by the tendency of the field towards producing rapid, quantitative research. At the same time, it can also correspond to a need to understand a felt, radical change in the work of medical educators.

2 In the data, professors report that for 50% of their small or medium-size courses and 86% of their large courses, sessions are either fully or almost fully composed of lectures. In a multiple-choice question regarding the purpose of discussions, the two top choices are ‘practicing philosophical discourse’ and ‘correcting student misconceptions’.

3 The same publication does not offer almost any accounts of pedagogic experiments, actual failures or an in-depth look at what is lost or gained in this process. Only 12 articles could be rated as explorations of the complexities of online teaching. To arrive at these numbers, the complete output of *The Chronicle*, between 15 March and 15 June, that related to classroom teaching was coded and checked for inter-rater reliability.

4 All sessions from which this and other examples of teaching practice have been drawn were recorded. I have used pseudonyms to protect students’ identities, and all quotations have been used with the permission of students who spoke them.

5 The idea was suggested by Joe Pinto, who acted as a teaching assistant.

6 I am grateful to Gianpiero Petriglieri for pointing out the relationship between self-complexity and Zoom fatigue.

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How to cite this article: Harouni, H. (2021) Unprepared humanities: A pedagogy (forced) online. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 55:633–648. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9752.12566