

# Care amid ambiguity or, more appropriately, a plea to go old school with the new tools

## *La cura nell'ambiguità o, più appropriatamente, una richiesta di fare alla vecchia maniera con i nuovi strumenti*

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**ABSTRACT** The following is a reflection on my experience with my students as we underwent the transition to virtual classes in the pandemic of 2020-2021. It highlights some of the problems related to reproductive labor and explores the absurd within beliefs about 'technological efficiency' and the discourse surrounding 'synchronous and asynchronous' instruction. It concludes with a realignment of philosophical and pedagogical aims under such conditions and calls on educators to rethink virtual teaching practices so they might help students embrace 3-dimensional, tangible learning activities that can be done without a screen and in their physical environment.

**KEYWORDS** Humanizing Pedagogy; Reproductive Labor; Philosophy of Education; 3-Dimensional Learning.

**SOMMARIO** Quella che segue è una riflessione sull'esperienza che ho vissuto con i miei studenti mentre affrontavamo la transizione alle classi virtuali nella pandemia del 2020-2021. Evidenzia alcuni dei problemi legati al lavoro riproduttivo ed esplora le assurdità relative alle credenze sull'"efficienza tecnologica" e ai discorsi che circondano l'istruzione "sincrona e asincrona". Si conclude con una ridefinizione degli obiettivi filosofici e pedagogici in questo tipo di condizioni e invita gli educatori a ripensare le pratiche di insegnamento virtuale in modo che possano aiutare gli studenti ad abbracciare attività di apprendimento tridimensionali e tangibili che possono essere fatte senza uno schermo e nel loro ambiente fisico.

**PAROLE CHIAVE** Pedagogia Umanizzante; Lavoro Riproduttivo; Filosofia dell'Educazione; Apprendimento Tridimensionale.

*Following an experience of intense isolation and ambiguity, where does one even begin her essay on care in a virtual classroom? Perhaps she should follow the path of the many ancestors who came before her – those who have attempted to chronicle history or to make sense of experience and the absurd amid chaos – and do one of the most human things possible. She should come at it by way of telling a story.*

## 1. A BRIEF RETURN TO THE POSITION OF STUDENT

The faculty at my university received notification in late spring of 2020 that we would be conducting all courses virtually in the coming school year. We then were offered a stipend if we agreed to complete a 20-hour training to help us design quality online courses, and like a majority of the people on my campus, I bit at their financial bait. This was, however, a complicated and begrudging concession on my part because, while I knew that broad health concerns made the shift to virtual instruction a somewhat melioristic solution to the problems at hand (Dewey, 1920), I was also familiar enough with the tendencies of capitalism and neoliberal logic (Apple, 2004) to understand how tech has long been *the* conduit that has allowed work and ‘school-work’ to increasingly creep into and gnaw away at the barely-protected time and home spaces of faculty, staff, and students. To be clear, I wish to note that my use of the terms ‘school-work’ and ‘instruction’ throughout this essay specifically refers to the problematics of schooling practices (Illich, 1971/2004) that are miseducative in the Deweyan sense (Dewey, 1938/1997a) and/or that are delivered by way of Freire’s (1970/1997) banking model, all of which leave students alienated (Marx, 1906) from their academic labor as they become conditioned to complete assignments as though they are hopping through institutional hoops. Schooling stands in contrast to education, which the aforementioned authors associate with liberating and meaningful experiences in teaching and learning.

Similar to many readers, I am sure, I could accept aspects of teaching online as long as they would be approached critically and viewed as a *temporary solution* to a previously unimaginable scenario. But mostly, I feared how we would be conditioned by the crisis, what habits we would acquire, and where we would end up as a result. Specifically, I worried that the unique circumstances of COVID would soon justify a willingness to allow work and/or school to permanently move into our homes and consume our personal lives; that it would establish the expectation that we all be accepting of not only our new work-lifestyle but also our own acquiescence to it; and that the beautiful qualities of teaching and learning would become further alienated by practices and rhetoric driven by fetishized beliefs in ‘convenience’, technocratic efficiency, and technological spectacle. It seemed apparent that this could easily turn into the scenario wherein we would be 1) strapped to our labor 24 hours a day, 2) simultaneously severed from the most human aspects that make teaching and learning worthwhile, and 3) thereby living out the contradiction of feeling that we are now incapable of ‘disconnecting from our own disconnectedness,’ even while in our own homes.

I progressed through the modules of the course as expected, all the while cautiously taking note of surrounding discourses about instruction as they were expressed not only by my university, but also in the sentiments of my students (all of whom are aspiring teachers), in my child’s experiences with public school, and in public conversations. With the exception of one truly valuable insight, which I will turn to shortly, I received *most* of what I had anticipated in my ‘online course about online courses.’ Indeed, there was a heavy focus on screen-based modules and, too, an emphasis on the inclusion of resources by creators who have diverse identities (as opposed to individuals who also have diverse/critical perspectives of technology and pedagogy). And while it was not explicitly stated so, I was left with the feeling that a 3-hour long course should mean that instructors keep students’ eyes locked onto their screens for the duration of the specified class time, and that my task was to fabricate courses with hyperlinked cookie crumb trails that would lead students through a labyrinth of digital activities: view this video, attend this archived webinar, read this pdf, complete this survey, type in this document, add to this slide deck, respond in that discussion board, and then upload your video reflection here. In the assignments that I was asked to complete, I had minimal interaction with other human beings, that is, aside from the notes I received in the discussion board, which very easily could have been fabricated by algorithm, and I might not have been the wiser.

There was, however, one assignment worthy of mention. We were asked to create an introduction video for

one of our classes that would detail something about ourselves and the content we would soon be exploring with our students. Simple and straightforward: it was supposed to be 3 minutes long, and we were asked to draft a script, record it, and then provide captioning in the finished piece. I set to the task of storyboarding, dedicating roughly an hour to digging through personal photos before moving onto filming, smoothing out the transitions, and captioning. In sitting down to edit, I realized that my filmed portion alone had hit the 3-minute time limit of the assignment and thus, in my effort to avoid going over, I decided to scrap the photo segment I had already spent time laying out. I quickly realized, also, how much better I sound when I speak casually. That is, I spoke both on- and off-script in my video, and in doing so, it was obvious that my emotionality in the latter was far more honest and therefore preferable to me, especially for the purpose of providing students with a first impression.

Up to this point, I had generally enjoyed the creative aspect of making a video for my students, as well as my personal challenge to do so in a way that might be visually engaging while addressing the circumstances of our situation in a humanized manner. However, after considering that I sound better when left unscripted, I started wondering why I would not just simply introduce myself to the students during our first virtual meeting while showing them my photos. My skepticism was further fueled when I considered the amount of time it took me to contemplate, plan, and then put the 3-minute video together, which was approximately 3 hours. Then I did the math. Given the same time constriction of 180 minutes, I could give a similar, off-the-cuff intro to my students 60 times! Being that I teach this course 4 times a year, this means that I could share a more natural and better sounding intro for the next 15 years and still break even in terms of my time spent on this assignment. Of course, it is important to note that in 15 years' time, I am likely to be teaching different courses, which will make the content of that video irrelevant in almost every case. Plus, you can guarantee that the technologies and the COVID-related circumstances will change as well (along with my physical appearance, unfortunately) and thereby make this video look outdated in about 3 years' time. Thus, the usability of the video would never survive to the 15-year mark, even if I wanted it to. There is the final fact too that, as a human, I can improvise and adapt as my courses and my personal narrative change, whereas that video cannot adjust to circumstance because it is, after all, just a snapshot. While some things are indeed worth capturing on video (like representations of student knowledge, for instance), a scripted explanation of me and my class should probably not be one of them. Though I never balk at the opportunity to do or learn something new, I do habitually question what is to be gained from the process and whether that path makes good sense in regard to growth, time, and quality of expression. In terms of labor, and given my clear realization about my preference for a more natural approach to interacting with students (scripted vs. free form, for instance), my time spent on this was simply not worth the product it yielded.

The irony was not lost on me that I had spent so much time creating a technologized tool that was, in my opinion, of far lesser quality than what I have been doing – naturally – for years in my classes. But of course, all is not lost on any experience just as long as one reflects upon it and then carries forward the lessons that are worthwhile (Dewey, 1910/1997b). I mentioned earlier that I experienced most of what I had expected from this training. What I had not anticipated, though (and what I am now incredibly grateful for), is how being placed in the position of 'student' again would only affirm the numerous reasons why I have remained so devoted to creating my classes around human needs and qualities, and why I have so vehemently resisted replacing these with a focus on digital technologies and all their spectacle.

Said simply, I learned from the online course about online courses that this is exactly what I should *not* be doing to my students. In so many ways, staring at a screen for long periods of time made me feel like schooling was being *done to me*. While being schooled has never been a pleasant experience, something about this seemed worse than the banking method (Freire, 1970/1997) of yesteryear when, at the very least, I had the benefit of being face-to-face with real human beings who – thanks to the genius of Mother Nature and thousands of years of evolutionary development – possessed the *potential* for empathetic capacity. In a

3-dimensional classroom setting, I could hold onto the hope that the teacher might respond to my grimaces amid the imposed misery, and when that did not work, I could break the tension by sharing a commiserating glance with my peers, or I could attempt to humanize the teacher and space with a playful gibe of critical humor. And even if everyone chose not to respond to me, then I could amuse myself with the gamble that *maybe* they would. In this virtual format, though, there was so little chance for human response that it only intensified the feelings of isolation (and now, alienation) that I had experienced upon the shift into quarantine and social distance.

### **1.1. Pedagogical implication**

My experience in this course reminded me of how essential it is for pedagogues to regularly seek out the opportunity to ‘return to student’, so to speak. Of course, a good teacher is always going to ‘remain a student’ when it comes to inquiry, knowledge construction, and eagerness to learn alongside our students. But this does not mean that we always subject ourselves – both intentionally and critically – to the very things our universities ask us to subject our students to. In fact, my own resistance to an overly technologized approach to teaching and learning caused me to focus primarily on avoiding it at almost every turn and to advocate exhaustively for face-to-face teaching in 3-dimensional spaces. While conscientious objection certainly has its place, mere refusal is likely insufficient to staving off digital creep, if that is utilized as one’s first response. By purposefully injecting ourselves into the student side of the interface, though, educators stand to build stronger critiques against the dehumanization of our students and the degradation of our craft. That is, we can preemptively provide an intervention in favor of our students and of deeper, democratic learning as these initiatives are rolling out. Additionally, the experience of being in the ‘position of student’ can become a commonality between teacher and students and thereby serve as a foundation for solidarity so that critiques and alternatives might be more fruitfully co-constructed within our classes. In effect, this allows the commonality between teacher-student to become the new curriculum. Finally, by making a return to student every once in a while, pedagogues immerse themselves in the empathetic conditions that might help us guard against the dehumanization that Stanley Milgram (1974) detected decades ago and which Sean Michael Morris and Jesse Stommel (2018) warn us of in our current time.

## **2. SHARING IN THE AMBIGUITY AS A MODE OF CARE**

When I met my students in the fall, I clumsily navigated virtual class meetings with them each week. My courses have always been heavily rooted in group discussion, so dealing with the network lags and the herky-jerky-stop-go-effect of people simultaneously trying to talk and then wait surely made me miserable in this medium. Despite the feelings of disenchantment about what was becoming of my craft, I refused to convert my courses to modules because, in all truth, I was incredibly desperate for human interaction and meaningful conversation. There was the fact also that when I asked my students a few weeks into the semester if they would prefer that I switch to doing assignment modules, many of them told me they appreciated my willingness to hold weekly meetings with them, to check in with them, and to share and vent with them for the first 15 minutes or so of our class. To further their point, several even admitted to me that their roommates and partners were also enjoying ‘attending’ our class each week by eavesdropping on our discussions. Feeling relieved (though also quite exposed), I reminded them, “Trust me, I need you all just as much as, if not more than, you need me!” Consistent interaction seemed to help many of us, and so we agreed to persist with shorter, weekly meetings that we would only allow to run longer when folks were energized by the conversation.

I relied primarily upon vulnerability and honesty with my students, readily critiquing our digital format,

but mostly humanizing myself and our virtual interactions by narrating my own experience with emerging symptoms of depression, my dwindling capacity to remember much of anything in an all-virtual workspace, and my seemingly changeless physical environment, as well as my lack of motivation and my startling inability to focus. Several of my colleagues had complained also of the latter two symptoms, such that it seemed necessary for me to keep this aspect of our experience at the forefront of many class discussions. I did not want my students to feel bad about themselves if they were feeling similarly, so I reminded them several times a semester, “Your professors have built most of their lives around reading and writing, and if a bunch of *them* are finding it difficult to focus and stay motivated, then you have every reason to be forgiving of yourself, especially when it comes to school. We are *all* struggling.”

While our species has endured innumerable pandemics, I personally knew no one who had lived through something quite like this. To my knowledge, there was no field guide on how to survive a pandemic, the horrors of racialized brutality and of country-wide political turmoil, *and* an indefinite but persistent duration of technologically-enabled isolation (though, it could certainly be argued that this was technologically-enforced isolation, especially when considering the way online schooling influenced the emotional and social well-being of children). Though it took me a while, I eventually remembered an insight of John Dewey’s that provided some help in my negotiation of the day-to-day. That is, his theory of inquiry holds that reflection on an experience does not occur until after it has concluded, meaning that we have to come through the mess before we can look back on it, and we must look back on it in order to make sense and meaning of it (Dewey, 1997b; 1920; 1934). This philosophical aspect gave me a way to view and then try to come to terms with my own intellectual logjam; I needed to forgive myself just as I was telling others to do. It reminded me also that we were not only all *mid*-experience and for an indeterminable amount of time, but for many of the people who I was in virtual contact with, there was a multitude of threats amid the flux as well (viral, racial, political, financial, etc.). In other words, our minds were inundated with too many unknowns, which in turn added another troubling facet to the overall experience: ambiguity.

The dread related to ambiguity was something I had felt keenly, but it was not something I was able to name for the first five months of isolation. Fortunately, Robert Saplosky (2020), a neurobiologist whose work I have long followed, published a particularly helpful essay explaining why the ambiguity of the pandemic brought on a mix of psychological symptoms that may have been uncharacteristic to what many people had faced prior. He explained that there is both a felt and an evolutionarily programmed difference between how our minds process *risk* and *ambiguity*. Risk is something that is relatively calculable and frequently negotiated by primates, whereas ambiguity is like a sea of “unknown unknowns” surrounding the ceaseless questions we have about the variables at play and about our own outcome. That is, in the absence of prior experience, apparent wisdom, or sufficient data upon which to draw, our ability to determine a risk level is impeded, and this thrusts us into the unknown about how we should proceed or what we might even expect of the future. Saplosky offered assurance that, “People typically dislike ambiguity more than they dislike risk,” and when we are left with so many unknowns – which were no doubt intensified by the contradictory discourses, erratic leadership, and inconsistent directives about safety – “our brains unravel and run amok in the empty moonscape.” This type of anxiety can sometimes bring out the worst in our species, but what matters, Saplosky pressed, is that we remember two things: even in the most uncertain times, some things can still be known and, too, we always possess at least some element of agency.

The efforts of countless writers, artists, activists, theorists, and therapists affirm that it is both cathartic and empowering to name that which burdens and/or tortures us. The lives and work of Friedl Dicker-Brandeis and Anne Sexton are humbling exemplars, to me, in this regard. Dicker-Brandeis was an artist who, while incarcerated in the concentration camp at Auschwitz, dedicated the last days of her life to encouraging the camp’s interned children to use art and poetry as a means of agency and expression (Makarov, 2001). Sex-

ton, on the other hand, was a Pulitzer Prize winning poet who openly embraced her melancholic experiences and worked through her existential struggles with the students who attended the college-level writing courses she taught (Salvio, 2007). Though my personal experience did not compare to that of these two women, I continually find guidance in their narratives, particularly in regard to what it means to care and to love, and how we might strive to teach and create honestly, even amid human horror, personal crisis, and the depths of depression. While I could not offer my students (or myself) comfort by providing details about the future, I could openly express with them and work to identify the ambiguity as it coalesced around my own concerns with the pandemic and the political turmoil in our country. In doing so, I could then foster opportunity for students to express and empathize as well, or to feel affirmed in their own experiences, and hopefully to find commonality and connection among the isolation (Veletsianos and Kimmons, 2020). And, of course, I could also share with others the philosophical and theoretical insights that were helping me name some of the facets of this experience. In effect, care demanded that a significant portion of our curriculum be devoted to the peculiarity and uncertainty of what we were enduring in that particular moment.

### **2.1. Pedagogical implication**

A key pedagogical consideration here is how conscious we are of what we are doing, and how well we are actually communicating that consciousness to our students. The sea of unknowns surrounding this experience worked on me in such a way that I grew increasingly meta-cognitive with my students. Initially, this was little more than a personal coping strategy I enacted in the moment as a means to acknowledge and talk through the uncertainty. But in hindsight, I can see how a year of growing ‘ever-meta about metacognition’ may have developed into a pedagogical habit and a deepened awareness that is now worth keeping. That is, because we were all attempting to grope our way through the unknowns, the very least I could do was to highlight when and how I was drawing upon and embodying philosophical and theoretical insights as a means to 1) interpret experience and 2) buoy my own modes of resilience and well-being. This striving toward intense consciousness is about more than just modeling our practice, though. I imagine it has to be one of the best ways to make evident the practicality and relevance of the very ideas we teach, at the same time that it permits us to demonstrate to the students (and to remind the teacher of) the fact that there should never be any disconnect between theory and practice. Of course, increased meta-cognition about pedagogy amid the precarious and novel, can be extended into our honesty about our emotional states as well, thereby humanizing the teacher and students alike. Then, the emotional concerns of the college classroom can be explored further in empathetic exercise as we encourage our students to imagine how our own experience with the complexities and quandaries of uncertainty might impact K-12 students and communities, and how we can all imagine paths toward becoming more humane and caring in our future classrooms.

## **3. A COLLISION OF SCHOOL-WORK WITH INVISIBLE LABOR**

In addition to dedicating class time to expression and empathy over the state of affairs, I encouraged my students to reimagine with me how we might construct class and rework the web conference tools and digital approaches to our educational benefit. Our conversations were good, but no matter what we tried, we were all still overcome with fatigue, helped no less by the fact that most of my classes started at 7:00 p.m. Physiological and cognitive analyses describing the roots of this exhaustion (Bailenson, 2020) as well as Foucauldian critiques (Caines, 2020) of the numerous problems inherent to video conferencing were timely and certainly helpful, but something more seemed to be increasingly at play for many of my students. I finally asked them one night to type into our chat box the average number of hours they were spending staring at a screen each day. I was disheartened when I saw so many of my students list 10 and even 12 hours

a day. What was worse, though not surprising as a mother, is that it was my student-caregivers who had the highest numbers. Many of them fought all morning long trying to both help and force their children to ‘stare at school’ long enough to gain something from their teachers. Afterward, they would spend several more hours attending their own virtual classes and then often be taken deep into the night by their screen-based assignments. Much as I had feared, technology and circumstance had induced the conditions wherein many of my students were now drowning inside their homes amid digital overload, a reality that seemed especially cruel and oppressive for my student-caregivers and their families (Brown, 2015; Federici, 2019).

Admittedly, I owe much of my own PhD to digital technologies. Through them I was able to access materials so I could study and write from home while I cared for my child, something that was uncommon for many of my older, privileged, male mentors who once spent many hours a day in the solitude of a library. Thus, I can see that the argument for equity by way of technological access, especially for women in higher education, has some merit (Veletsianos et al., 2021). But in the case of the pandemic, technology did not appear to be having a similar liberating effect on my student-caregivers, many of whom are working class and people of color; instead, it appeared to be having an inverse and more oppressive outcome for them. In February, an interview was published wherein Silvia Federici explained how her theory of reproductive labor was playing out during the pandemic and specifically in the lives of women. Reproductive labor, according to Federici, is: ...all the work we do that is sustaining — keeping ourselves and others around us well, fed, safe, clean, cared for, thriving. It’s weeding your garden or making breakfast or helping your elderly grandmother bathe — work that you have to do over and over again, work that seems to erase itself (Kisner, 2021).

This vital, care-based labor is rendered socially invisible in the U.S., even though it makes up the bedrock of its economy (Brown, 2015), and it is important to note that women of color unduly burden it (Kisner, 2021). A few decades ago, Arlie Hochschild dubbed the displacement of this additional “unpaid work of childcare and housework” onto caretakers as “the second shift” (Blair-Loy et al., 2015). Within this framework, and prior to COVID, students in higher education could rely upon K-12 schools, daycare, babysitters, extra-curricular activities, extended family, and friends to help care for their children, thereby making it easier to carve out time and space so they could devote their attention and energy to one sphere at a time: to either caretaking or school. Mid-pandemic, however, these two spheres effectively collided. Many of my students were confined to homes *with* their children for long periods of time and being that there was minimal likelihood for them to outsource this care, as is more frequently the case with families that are middle class and often white, technology instead deepened the burden on them as school-work and reproductive labor had to occur simultaneously. In effect, my student-caretakers were working two full-time but separate jobs prior to COVID, whereas in the pandemic, they were working two full-time shifts *at the very same time*. If they were anything like me and many of my care-taking colleagues, then they were likely burdened further by 1) the moral affects of having to choose work at times over their children and 2) being torn up by the no-win scenario of being stretched so thin that you feel like you cannot do well in either sphere. Needless to say, this feminist critique soon found its way into my theoretical and philosophical repertoire each week, but it also illuminated for me facets of gendered experience that I had not considered before, facets that necessitated my consideration about a structural change to my classes once we could return to campus again.

### **3.1. Pedagogical implication**

Often, the most transformative pedagogical move we can make with our students is to simply say, “I don’t know... Let’s figure it out together.” First and foremost, shared ‘adaptive design’ makes explicit the educator’s interest in collapsing the power hierarchy in the classroom setting (Stommel, 2020). But also, it provides the opportunity for students to observe teacher humility and to see themselves as co-learners of an experience and co-creators of both knowledge and the learning environment. What many of my student-ca-

regivers needed from me during COVID was care by way of patience and flexibility. But, of course, this need was not unique to COVID; it was only made more evident in its magnitude because of COVID. In fact, just a year or so prior to the pandemic, I started providing students teleconference access to our in-class discussions on an ‘as needed’ basis. I did this to increase accessibility for those who were pregnant and postpartum, ill and healing, or incapable of attending in-person because of unforeseen family and care-related complications. My attempt to be more open in my course format prior to COVID was an intentional push to break down structural barriers that are mostly sexist and disabling. Any gains that might have been realized in favor of equity then, though, appeared to disintegrate during COVID and with the force into the fully virtual mode. It became evident that what is needed, especially for my student-caretakers, is a hybridized format (Morris and Stommel, 2018) that allows students to choose for themselves the mode of learning that is most appropriate to their changing needs: face-to-face if they are well and in need of human interaction, or virtual via teleconference if they are experiencing family care concerns, ill health, or anxiety.

Importantly, though, we must remain ever critical of any broad sweep to push everyone into virtual learning because it is often bolstered by false beliefs that doing so will automatically result in good teaching and learning. Studies in the history of schooling demonstrate time and again that the mere application of a new curriculum, method, or modality rarely results in transformation because, in the end, changes in technique and content mean nothing if they are not accompanied by a solidly, humane and critically self-reflective philosophy. Stommel (2018) makes this distinction with the term hybrid pedagogy. That is, rather than focusing on the simple question of *how* we ‘deliver instruction’ (a phrase that is rife with problems and for many reasons), he argues, “hybrid pedagogy is a methodological approach that helps define a series of varied processes and practices.” It is intentional, strategic, and critical of structures and use, unlike conversations about course modality and delivery, which tend to be little more than tactical maneuvers that result in the types of shifts that many universities enacted with the onset of COVID.<sup>1</sup> Any teaching scenario – whether mid-pandemic or not – demands that pedagogues continually come back to the question of what the circumstances necessitate such that deep and meaningful learning can be fostered in increasingly accessible ways, and especially for our students with historically marginalized identities.

#### 4. PANDEMIC-INSPIRED AIMS FOR TECH

Throughout my teaching career, I have witnessed a myriad of interests – corporations, state and federal governments, administrators, as well as many parents – working feverishly to place tablets, instead of books, into the hands of children despite what critical research and practical wisdom might say about the good of doing so<sup>2</sup>. Because of this, I regularly encourage my students to avoid being thoughtless consumers and pushers of tech, and instead ask them to be metacognitive about the formats and materials that are most

<sup>1</sup> <https://criticaldigitalpedagogy.pressbooks.com/chapter/what-is-hybrid-pedagogy/>

<sup>2</sup> Williamson (2016) describes this as part of the broader movement toward ‘digital education governance.’ I have also written about the harm to and technologization of educational spaces as an activist in the opt out movement within the U.S. This was a grassroots response to national and state education policy that placed an inordinate emphasis on high-stakes test scores as a means to enforce neoliberal education reforms. People’s concerns were varied and spanned the political spectrum, but among these were concerns about the detrimental social, emotional, and intellectual consequences for children and their communities. Of greatest concern was that the harms disproportionately affected students of color, bilingual and disabled students, and those tortured by the effects of poverty. In protest, many families, students, teachers, and communities boycotted state-mandated and corporate-created tests, at first in analogue and eventually in digital formats (Noël Smith, 2018). The opt out movement was most active in the U.S. from 2011-2016, and there were simultaneous resistance movements in both Chile and Canada during that time as well (Campos-Martinez et al., 2015, April; Keess, 2015, April; Rosa et al., 2015).



conducive to their own learning so that they can soon help their future students do the same: “*Don’t fall prey to the belief that all tech is all good all the time, and don’t believe that the pdf is always the best choice just because it appears cheaper.*” I remind them that even though ‘technologies’ are conceived simply as being tools to help solve some problem, their designs are always value-laden and frequently exclusionary, regardless of whether they are being used to teach, to learn, or, as is often the case in politics and marketing, to manipulate people. Responsible use, therefore, demands a critical understanding of the inherent power relations reproduced through human inventions (Hamraie, 2013; Noble, 2018; O’Neil, 2016). In addition to maintaining a consciousness about this absence of neutrality, responsible learners (and teachers) must aim to choose the tools that are most beneficial *to our growth* and resist the imposition that digital technologies should be the first choice. I tell them: if you read better in all 3-dimensions, then get the book; if you remember best when you write by hand or when you color code, then close the laptop and pick up your favorite writing utensils; if you need to talk through ideas and concepts, then schedule some time with a friend, a classmate, or me; if you need to map out your ideas because they are bigger and more beautifully scattered than any document or application can accommodate, then grab for the butcher paper. Contrary to neoliberal and consumeristic logics, expressions of understanding do not automatically spring forth simply because we choose the newest technology for exploring or communicating. Rather, as Henriksen et. al (2014) explain, “*The trick in developing creative thinkers is to provide people with a rich range of ways of understanding and experiencing the world, thus enriching the concepts they have*” (p. 17). This includes those modes that are already of great familiarity to the learner, such as low-tech options.

In hearing my students’ confessions about the inhumane amounts of screen time they were being subjected to, I felt a stronger allegiance than ever to my philosophical and pedagogical adherence to the tangible, to the 3-dimensional, to the experiential, to the conversational, to the analog format, and to that which can be constructed from the bodies and energy of the human learners. The technological overload, the intrusion upon our home spaces, and the levels of exhaustion and isolation shared alike by my students and I, caused me to suspect that the most humane thing I could do was to start guiding my courses by two aims: 1) maintain meaningful connection and 2) decrease screen time. With these aims in mind, it became apparent that our high-tech tools should be used for two primary purposes. First, they should be used to facilitate our communication with one another so that we could foster a sense of community and care between us. For me, this meant that class should consist of getting to know one another; bonding over funny stories and shared heartache; conversing about current events; sharing philosophical and theoretical insights as a means to describe and clarify facets of our experience; and working through our content and weekly readings together. Second, these tools should be used for the purpose of allowing students to share with me the varying insights and forms of knowledge they derive *from* and create *in their physical environments*.

It was the clarification of this second purpose, specifically, that caused me to want to go radically old school and turn toward the inspired practices of teachers from the pre-digital era to a point in time that predates most of my students (I admit this presents a funny image, as in, ‘the professor is about to go rogue with the glitter and the crayons!’ But, in some fashion, this was exactly what I wanted my students to do.). I wanted them to draw, write, read biodegradable books, make art, talk on the phone with one another, meet pen pals and send handwritten letters through the postal service, construct dioramas out of tangible materials, sketch out diagrams, lead literature circles, and conduct writer’s workshops both within our class and in their internships. They were free, of course, to choose digital tools to make sense of our course content if it worked best for them. But my task amid this digital overload was to remind them that, if they felt physically inclined, it was entirely permissible (and likely better for their overall health) to shut their laptops, choose a preferred medium, make sense of our content in their immediate 3-dimensional space, and then simply share with me – by way of photo, video, etc. – their products or their reflections on the tangible experience.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Stunned by the ambiguity and caught up in crisis management for the sake of schooling and virtual instruction, discourses of *synchronous* and *asynchronous* learning have burgeoned among the public and in the realms of higher education and K-12, thus making it seem as if these concepts are ‘shiny new gadgets’ that emerged gloriously from the pandemic just in time to save us all. For those who find themselves also dealing with enamored technophiles and discourses that, if left unchecked, likely stand to dehumanize teaching and learning for the sake of spectacle or needless technological ‘advancement’, might I offer a reminder that the concept of asynchronous learning has been around for ages. We pedagogues have simply called it reading, writing, and doing a project. Synchrony, on the other hand, is a practice that is no doubt older than Hypatia and something we have merely referred to as ‘having a class meeting.’ In other words, not everything *has* changed as a result of the pandemic, and it is certainly not the case that everything now *needs* to change. Surely we must adapt to the changes we face, and this undoubtedly means taking on and using new tools as needed. But, this does not mean that in the process we should so easily sacrifice and discard the countless tools and modes of expression that have historically worked well for our learning and creative processes. By embodying and propagating this rampant a/synchronous discourse, we put way too much focus on the technology and mode itself, and I fear this only serves to displace the import of what we do by distracting us from what we are really supposed to be doing: learning and communicating with our students.

Caring for my students has come to mean seriously reexamining the projects and workload I require, as well as interrogating them for the level of meaningfulness they pose *to my students*, especially at a time when most of us are under mental duress. This has included co-creating with students the projects along with their guidelines and timelines; working together to revise the syllabus as needed; scrapping things altogether when students seem to be breaking under the weight of it all; occasionally cancelling class in the name of self-care; and, because of the fatigue and the inefficiency of the technology itself, it has meant focusing on only half the amount of content that I was able to get through in a pre-COVID, face-to-face course. Colleges and colleagues will sometimes press the belief that students prefer virtual courses because of the flexibility and efficiency. They may not be entirely wrong. But I have come to see that students tend to desire efficiency and disconnectedness only when they feel like the coursework and discussions are not meaningful to them. When we construct meaningfulness *with* them, and when we bring our own thoughtfulness and intrigue to each meeting, then they often do want to *attend* class. When we are honest about our own experience, they want to slow down so they can be present *with us*. As we move into the immediacy beyond this pandemic, the strength of this virtual-teaching/learning stranglehold is really going to be determined by us, how clear we are about our pedagogical aims and purposes, how steadfast we are in using these tools explicitly as a means through which to express and maintain the humanity of both us and our students, and how much we advocate for critical practices and barriers that can help safeguard all of our home spaces from the seepages of work.

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