

Finding a new path: Building affective online learning spaces for creative writing and arts practice

While we have seen a huge and justified focus upon schools during the C19 crisis, relatively little attention has been paid to how teacher-educators are adjusting their practice. From mid-March 2020 the vast majority in education had to radically challenge their practice, within the space of a few days. In our case, school visits were replaced by online tutorials with our trainees; in-person lectures modified to pre-recorded video lectures and online classes. Staff meetings also became 'virtual'. In May 2020, we met online to discuss how to respond creatively to the crisis and decided to do some 'free writing' which allows you 'to write anything' (Bolton 2010: 23).

Our rationale is that free writing is an immersive form of expression, of recording and communicating experience. It provides a space for feeling to exist. We felt that while educating teachers online had been a creative experience, in that we were constantly innovating, there was little chance to express how we were feeling. Working online can demand a perfectionist sensibility. Virtual learning spaces are tightly curated by the software's neat design: every keyboard tap, every interaction is logged somewhere. Both of us wanted to escape these 'sanitised' constraints and purposefully create an overspill, to be experimental. Experiences of risk and imperfection are essential for creativity (Biesta, 2013); in addition, we wanted to see if free writing might provide us with further insight into how to deal with the new paradigms of online learning, social distancing and the global pandemic.

The free writing made us realise we would like to question whether nurturing a similar 'lack of perfection' using this and other techniques, such as spontaneous drawing, might help our students. We argue that immediacy and rawness is an essential part of creative development, and would like to think about how more polished online interfaces for learning could accommodate the emotive in teaching practice. Tutors and students are bound by the structure of online spaces, following tight rubrics of assessment and control of interaction. Do students need to have a chance to find a new path? (Craft 2011)

Our thinking about this connects with a posthumanist research methodology (Fox & Alldred 2015). Posthumanists look beyond human interactions to explore how nonhuman and more-than-human forces affect us. One posthumanist approach is to see life as 'machinic' (Deleuze & Guattari 2013), in that human society has an interconnection with animals, matter and the spatial environment. Human agency is inseparable from materiality: as found in the push and pull of atoms, of ecologies, of weather patterns, of migrations, of social hierarchies, of institutional structures and of technological developments. These 'machines' form 'assemblages': they combine to create new machines of 'vibrant ecological matter' (Kuby and Thiel 2018, 493) which are synergies of 'intra-action' between social and environmental forces (Barad 2007, Jensen 2019, 659). So, for example, in the sea change of C19, the machines of the virus, of human bodies, of global travel, of computer technologies and of educational structures have led to an upsurge of 'online learning'.

If we approach the current situation by decentralising human control (Barad 2007, Braidotti 2013), we could recognise that the natural world has tried to take back some

of its presence in the spaces left between humans. Could we perhaps create 'safe breakout spaces' online that nurture affective and spontaneous creativity? What kind of online tools and processes could help this happen?

The authors propose that connecting with affect in learning spaces could counteract the alienation of social distancing. We would also need to face the possibility that raw discourses can be challenging and uncomfortable for others to take in. However, discomfort can be part of a necessary adaptation, as it is when we are encouraging a platform for social justice and inclusion in learning spaces.

References

Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the universe halfway: quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC.

Biesta, G. (2013). *The Beautiful Risk of Education*. Boulder: Paradigm Publishers

Bolton, G. (2010). *Reflective practice: Writing and professional development* (3rd ed.). London: Sage.

Craft, A. (2011). *Creativity and education futures: Learning in a digital age*. Stoke on Trent: Trentham.

Deleuze, G., Guattari, F., & Massumi, B. (2013). *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Fox, N. & Alldred, P. (2015) New materialist social inquiry: designs, methods and the research-assemblage, *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 18:4, 399-414, DOI: 10.1080/13645579.2014.921458

Jenson, M. (2019). Digital Literacy in a Sociomaterial Perspective. *European Conference on E-Learning*. Pp. 659-661, XIII. DOI: 10.34190/EEL.19.062.