

# How can digitally mediated teaching listen and care?

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## How can digitally mediated teaching *listen* and *care*?

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*The ethic of care rejects the notion of a truly autonomous moral agent and accepts the reality of moral interdependence. Our goodness and our growth are inextricably bound to that of others we encounter. As teachers, we are as dependent on our students as they are on us.*

--- Nel Noddings, *Philosophy of Education*, p. 237.

It has been a particularly tough year. I know that statement is true for everyone, but over here in the UK, we had many, many months of lockdown that saw teachers having to teach online to all school levels, and parents and guardians having to home-school their children, often while also keeping the household running, caring for isolated, elderly parents and vulnerable others, and working at their own jobs – usually also from home – all at the same time. The past year has seen most people trying to juggle numerous balls in the air without the usual support systems in place, and, believe me, balls have been dropped.

Against a background of increased stress, pressure and strain on domestic relationships, economic insecurity, health worries, terrible weather (the longest lockdown in the UK occurred over a long, cold, grey, miserable winter) and huge surges in the numbers of mental health problems and domestic abuse cases, we teachers have sought to continue teaching and learning activities in schools and universities alike. For this opinion piece on the theme of teachers' work during the pandemic, I will take a moment to reflect on whether digitally mediated teaching is able to listen (to what, to whom), and care (for what, for whom)?

I will start by providing some context to my reflections, because my situation and setting will not apply to everyone. I acknowledge that many had it much tougher than I did and yet I hope that the reflections I offer are useful in light of wider ethical considerations surrounding the use of digital technologies that suffuse all our communications and, increasingly, teaching and learning practices today. We already make use of technology and digital resources in teaching and learning, but what has been different over the past eighteen months was the speed with which we had to convert *all* teaching to online only. The pressure on teachers, and the time that took, increased our workload burden considerably.

I teach at university level in the UK and for the majority of last year, all of our teaching took place online in the virtual space. With a mixture of synchronous and asynchronous teaching, lectures were pre-recorded and uploaded on to the

online platform, (we use 'Canvas' which is similar to 'Blackboard') and Zoom plugins allowed for seminars to take place on the same platform. Library resources also plugged in and electronic resources (articles, eBooks, videos, etc) were accessible remotely via the internet and password protected logins.

We have a significant number of international students, many from China who were unable to travel to the UK during the pandemic, so our teaching timetable had to take into account the seven hour time difference and we held synchronous classes in the morning, between 9am and 11am, so that our Chinese student cohort could join us. The IT-wizards of the University had to work out how to support access for those based in China to connect to our websites given the restrictions the Chinese government places on the internet. Additionally, the internet connection for many Chinese students was not always the best quality, leading to difficulties in joining group discussions, remaining connected, or being able to use their camera or microphone successfully.

Straight away we can see that one group of students who suffered in terms of their learning experience more than others was our international students, especially those with English as a second language. It was obvious to us teachers that their spoken and written language proficiency was not improving as well as it would have if they were based in an English-speaking country and mixing in class with native English speakers. The students themselves stated as well that they were finding this way of study difficult as they still spoke in Chinese the majority of the time because they were still at home.

But there were other groups of students who reported finding some benefits in the use of technology to support teaching and learning more than we usually do. Students with disabilities reported finding the use of digital technologies helpful and accessible. They were pleased they could remain in the comfort of their home while engaging with lectures, classes, and other seminars, talks and conferences that were all transferred online. This also helped when students had a bad day, as they were able to catch up later, because everything had been recorded and was available for them to watch in their own time. The recordings were further supported by auto-captioning, which allowed for written text to supplement the spoken words. This assisted those with difficulty hearing as well as those with English as a second language to follow what was being conveyed. Another useful feature of the recorded lectures was that students could pause or re-watch them, ensuring they did not miss anything.

Another group of students who enjoyed the online seminars were self-described introverts. Some said they found it easier to engage either by speaking up in the more anonymous fora provided by online classes, or by writing in the chat box instead of having to actually speak or raise their hand in class. On a personal note, I did wonder if introverts were not having as tough a time as extroverts during the pandemic. As a massively social, outgoing person myself, I found the lack of in-person, face-to-face contact and socialising one of the hardest things about lockdown. That, and, as an Australian citizen, being locked out of my own country and unable to return home — a stressful situation many international students shared.

So, in terms of the student experience, we know it was not easy, but some groups found it even harder than others (such as international students), and others perhaps found it easier (students with disabilities and some introverted students). It should be noted that these sentiments are offered as reflections rather than hasty generalisations, and there are, of course, always exceptions,

and the experience, feelings and health of individuals varied throughout the pandemic. Overall, in student feedback, our teachers were praised for the support they offered to students throughout the pandemic. The students appreciated that the teachers really worked hard to still 'be there', albeit virtually, for their students. Teaching remains an undeniably caring profession, especially during a pandemic.

The experience of the teacher during the pandemic seemed uniformly more difficult, with some institutions insisting on face-to-face teaching even during the pandemic prior to high vaccination levels in the population. As online teaching became the norm, reports from all over the world saw university lecturers struggling with getting students to turn on their videos, to engage and speak up in seminars, or even to watch the pre-recorded lectures. Admittedly, it can be difficult to get students to attend classes even without a pandemic, and even if they attend, they may very well be on social media or internet shopping sites using their mobile phones or laptops rather than paying attention even if the lecturer is standing directly in front of them. But online, the silence was incredibly draining and it often felt as though one was teaching into the void. Coupled with online meetings and other work, the effect of so much screentime was one of feeling 'zoomified', exhausted, stressed, and claustrophobic from being stuck at home. Teaching postgraduate students was the notable exception as they were largely engaged, turned their cameras on, spoke up and used the chat function. This was a welcome relief and provided a stark contrast to much of the undergraduate online teaching.

So, considering these challenges, we have to ask the question: who does digital teaching *listen to* and *care for*? Much like within society and educational institutions more generally, there are groups that are more or less protected, acknowledged, privileged, neglected, or marginalised. The individuals and groups who are included or excluded are not uniform, but there are some systemic patterns that we need to reflect on, particularly if we plan to use technology more readily in future, even after we emerge from this current pandemic. This includes considering the ethical issues associated with the technological use of surveillance and access to students' and teachers' personal data (Buchanan & McPherson, 2019; Huis in't Veld & Nagenborg, 2019). Unsurprisingly, institutions with money and funds to spend on improving their digital and technological resources will be better positioned to make good use of the accessibility and resources they provide.

Universities have taken a huge economic hit due to the pandemic, associated lockdowns and border closures, the adverse impacts of health and well-being, social distancing and other additional health and safety measures. What has been obvious is that the gap between the haves and have nots has increased over the course of the pandemic – in society generally and in relation to education. The students who struggle and the schools in lower socio-economic areas have fallen even further behind. Society and politics have always cared unevenly, often with more attention paid unnecessarily to those who need it the least. We should aim at supporting policies that seek to turn this around and offer more care, attention, and resources to where it is needed the most.

In addition to this shift in focus and potential redistribution of resources, we also need an increased, widespread valuing of so-called 'soft skills' such as critical thinking, compassionate responses, media literacy, and critical and

compassionate engagement with what we are seeing and hearing, particularly online. Teachers and parents alike are becoming increasingly aware and worried about the vulnerability people (of all ages!) face when using online resources, particularly social media. Now more than ever we need to teach the skills associated with critical thinkers who are also compassionate global citizens (best taught using philosophical methodologies and dialogical pedagogies; see D'Olimpio, 2018; D'Olimpio, 2020; and D'Olimpio & Peterson, 2018), because the only way digitally mediated resources can be caring as well as critical is if the users of these technologies are consciously engaging in this manner. Digital natives may be using technology intuitively, but this does not mean they are necessarily using it *ethically*. An ethical attitude that is critical as well as caring is a contemporary necessity given our globally connected, technologically mediated world. Such 'critical perspectivism' (as I call it), must also be supported by technological companies, software creators, policies and governance, but supporting individuals to engage with technology and multimedia both critically and compassionately is a good place to start.

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