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Pandemic Learning: Remapping the Classroom Space

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Pandemic Learning: Remapping the Classroom Space

My classroom space was about to expand from the compact seminar room in the English department hallway of the small liberal arts university where I teach across the Atlantic to Scotland. For some of the eight students my colleague and I were taking on this spring break study abroad experience, this was to be their first time out of their home state; for some, it was to be their first time off the continent; for others, it was to be their first time on an airplane. For all of these students, the world was about to get larger. They were about to embark on an academic adventure difficult to create in the confines of a traditional classroom. They were about to engage in the kind of discovery that cannot be found in test tubes or textbooks. In seeing the world, they were about to discover more about themselves. And while that kind of growth is not all about geography, leaving a familiar place certainly does have its way of opening one's mind. The plane tickets had been purchased, the passports had arrived in the mail, and our bags were packed.

And then, the world came to a screeching halt.

Instead of traveling overseas, my students were sent home for spring break. As the COVID-19 virus that grounded planes and altered plans became a pandemic that taught us new words, like "social distancing" and "self-isolation," we began to consider our personal spaces in new and unfamiliar ways. For shortly after being sent home, we all came to realize that this—our home space—was where we would now spend the remainder of the semester. These most familiar spaces were where we would aim to grow and discover, to stretch beyond the borders of the known.

And then, the way-finding began.

The break that I was to have spent traversing the hills and rocky shores of Scotland was instead spent wandering through "course continuity guides" that mapped out learning spaces like Zoom and Screen-cast-o-matic, Moodle and Google Docs. Instead of roaming the craggy and marshy landscape of the Isle of Skye, my eyes spent hours wandering over websites, my pen scratching new trails in syllabi that had to map out a different way of reaching the end-of-semester destinations. In just over a week's time, my three courses had to be moved from the familiar, comfortable classroom to the webbed expanses of the internet. The pods designed for face-to-face discussion and the seminar table routed for the interactive shaping of ideas had to be remapped onto virtual spaces that felt like "no man's land," a lifeless desert. If this feels like melodrama, you have never felt the thrill of exploring a piece of literature with curious and insightful 18-22-year-olds. Planted firmly in a chair for hours a day, my body and spirit longed for movement, for human contact, and for

the familiar rhythms of travel and learning. In short, while I sat in my absolutely familiar home and office spaces, I felt completely lost.

In her memoir, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, Rebecca Solnit writes, “Never to get lost is not to live, not to know how to get lost brings you to destruction, and somewhere in the terra incognita lies a life of discovery” (14). We have been living in something of a terra incognita—an unexplored, uncharted space—since the middle of March. “Never to get lost is not to live,” Solnit says, but what happens when we are in a constant state of the unfamiliar? And what if we are confined to familiar spaces that must be remapped to accommodate different kinds of exploration? As a faculty member at a small Midwestern liberal arts college, situated in what is, at this writing, the country’s COVID-19 hot spot, I have, along with my students, sought to discover how best to navigate this landscape in order to avoid “destruction.” When students and faculty feel disoriented in familiar spaces, when they are confined to the all-too familiar, we must remap these spaces and find new tools of navigation in order to pursue the educational “life of discovery.”

Education endeavors to open minds, create spaces for new ideas, and introduce students to unfamiliar terrain. One of the greatest joys of teaching is guiding students to “get lost.” In my literature classes, I delight in leading students to see a poem’s metaphor that was hidden to them, to probe a centuries-old piece of literature for its connections to their current lived experiences, to immerse themselves in a beautifully written passage. All of these things are best done in community. All of these things are best done in a communal space. Within the familiar space of the classroom—where students and professors know the rules, know how to act and interact, “*how* to get lost”—we explore the unfamiliar. Even first-year students entering a college classroom for the first time feel a certain amount of comfort in knowing more or less that they are invited to sit, that people take turns to speak, and that the professor will guide their learning. Students seem to feel a certain amount of confidence that even should they get lost intellectually, they will be able to find their way out the door and back to their dorm room, favorite chair in the library, or familiar corner of the coffee shop. While in the borders of that classroom space, however, they can be sure that they will begin to live the “examined life,” that they will be guided into new thoughts, new information, unknown ideas. They will, in short, be guided into and through the terra incognita that is the intellectual pursuit. In that shared classroom space, students and faculty experience a certain amount of safety in the communal aspect of “going it” together.

And then, we were together but separate in an unfamiliar familiar.

Even as we learned that we would not be returning to campus, would not again in Spring 2020 discuss a short story around a seminar table or life decisions over a cup of coffee in my office, my students and I were also learning to “social distance” or “physical distance” (the phrases serving simultaneously as verbs and

nouns, actions and states of being). Instead of reassembling our community, we were reimagining what it meant to live in community. The campus was locked up, the doors to the halls of learning now portals into Zoom meetings and online discussion forums. This abrupt shift was disorienting, and we felt very much alone in navigating our way through it. This scattering of the education community came with its own spatial challenges. As we fashioned small corners of our bedrooms or kitchen tables into classrooms and placed ourselves in imagined locales with Zoom backgrounds, our worlds simultaneously shrunk and expanded. The classroom borders had abruptly disappeared, replaced by partitioned squares on a computer screen. Suddenly, we found ourselves in a disorienting shared space that we did not, in fact, physically share at all. Abandoning the communal classroom in favor of distance learning and Zoom meetings, we shared the space of the screen but brought to that shared space myriad worlds. Some of these worlds were our very own and some were imagined spaces, but none of them belonged to each other. The physical space represented on the screen was vast. In Spring 2020, for example, my students were far flung from Texas to South Africa. The spaces gathered on the screen are, in fact, much wider than the space of the classroom. Visually, though, they are small and separate. We do not know how to “get lost” in this fragmented space.

This is a disorientation not at all like the welcome bewilderment one experiences when studying abroad. Learning in “unknown land” is not the problem. In fact, that sense of being in the unfamiliar, in a place where one could easily get lost, is part of the appeal of a study abroad experience. It’s true that travelers (like first-year students) may initially feel overwhelmed and homesick. The magic of exploring the unfamiliar has to sometimes wait until they have adapted a bit, but once they have, the possibilities for growth are endless. It’s visible on students’ faces: that openness to everything because everything is new. As they gaze out over Loch Ness or up at the Cuillins’ peaks, for example, students are poised to take in the historical, literary, political, cultural terrain—all of it. But this pandemic disorientation—whether we are online or in the classroom but masked and physically distanced—is not like that. This is a disorientation in which the space is familiar, but the use of that space and its rules are completely foreign.

At first, when we moved to all virtual learning (this phrase smacking with a state of almost and not quite), I went to my office to record the Screencast-o-matic lectures I posted for students on the cloud (also a distant, not-quite space). I thought doing so would give them a sense of “being in” a familiar space, the cinderblock wall behind me serving as a landmark. But as the semester progressed—and I was not deemed an on-campus “essential worker” by campus safety protocols—I found myself inviting students “in to” my home office, my living room, my kitchen, my outdoor patio. I wonder how disorienting it was for them to see their professor in these spaces, to be instructed on a play’s subtext as they read the spines of the books in my personal library or the color of the throw pillows on my sofa, to listen to the

rhythm of a sonnet as the clanking of my kids' making lunch in the kitchen echoed in the background.

When students invite us into the personal spaces of their lives, it can be startlingly uncomfortable. Recently, a colleague was bemoaning the spaces that Zoom invites us into. "I mean, they're practically rolling over and throwing off their blankets as class starts," he wailed. "I don't need to see that. I don't want to be in there." Of course, we're not "in there." And yet, we are. I am now at least somewhat familiar with the posters decorating my students' dorm spaces. I know that on the bed of one of my students is a quilt very similar to one that used to be on my own son's bed. I know which students have twinkling lights lining their lofts and which students have bedhead in the morning. While guiding my students into the "life of discovery," I am discovering elements of their lives that are typically quite hidden from me. I occasionally find myself distracted—disoriented, even—by the personal spaces that appear on my computer screen. As I endeavor to give students an experience, a thought, a story that takes them out of themselves, away from the familiar, they are literally wrapped up in the accoutrements of comfort and absolute familiarity—and I'm not at all sure how willing they are to leave that kind of space to explore the unknown.

Then, we returned to the virtually (almost) familiar.

"How is your classroom *normally* set up?" one of my students asked at the end of the fall semester. The other students nodded, indicating their shared interest in the answer to this question. My university had made the decision to give in-person classes with strong safety protocols a go in Fall 2020, and we had made it through the semester fairly successfully—all things considered. These first-year students had courageously entered college during an uncertain time. They had never been in a college classroom prior to this semester, yet they were certain that the terrain of my classroom would have looked different had we not been in a pandemic. The question made that clear; something in "how" we got lost in the content of the course suggested to them that the geography of the classroom was not quite suited to it. I had felt it, too. In fact, prior to the start of the semester, I had worried over it.

Over the course of the last couple decades or so, educators and institutions of higher learning have refashioned the terrain of classroom spaces, transforming lecture halls into environments that promote collaboration, small group work, and community. We have fostered brave spaces that invite all students to share their thoughts and ideas, their personal, political, and religious leanings. Now, though, COVID-19 protocols have required us to revert to lecture-style classroom set-ups. We have exchanged collaborative pods for increased personal bubbles of nearly six feet, and masking makes sharing personal ideas seem oddly impersonal. I could not imagine how I was going to teach and guide my students in a space where everyone sat in rows, where I was required to stand behind a sheet of plexiglass hung from the

ceiling, where I could not read students' faces. How would we build community when our personal bubbles were so large? How would we embark on learning expeditions that would lead us to important discoveries when we were absolutely confined to those bubbles? It wasn't that the space was entirely unfamiliar. The students seem to inherently adapt to the rows, the masks, the bubbles. Perhaps their adaptability is some epigenetic remnant from "old school" rules of classroom navigation, or, perhaps more likely, they have experienced this kind of classroom environment somewhere in their thirteen years of formal education.

Place is important. It tells us something about where we are and what we can expect to discover there. It also tells us something about who we are. As Kathleen Norris argues in *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*, our identities and ideologies, our spirituality and sensibilities are shaped by the places in which we spend time. The reciprocal relationship between a place and those situated within its boundaries means that while a person defines the space through his/her actions, the space itself also marks its inhabitant by transforming his/her knowledge. This is how the classroom functions. This is why the topography of a classroom matters. Rows and distance mark students for the journey differently than pods and collaboration do. When, during this pandemic semester, I asked my students to discuss a topic with two or three students sitting near them, I always (painfully) reminded them to keep their distance, to stay in their bubbles. This "quarantining" of space is counterintuitive to learning together. Something happens when students sit elbow to elbow or put their pens to the same sheet of paper. COVID-19 protocols prohibit all of that. In my classroom, I have found that some students are able to maintain the space. Many students, though, are unable to resist the magnetic pull of community. I have watched them inch closer and closer to one another to literally put their heads together as they work. As their ideas take shape, they feel the need to inhabit the same space, their shared thinking becoming a border for their personal spaces, their bubbles ebbing into one another's.

So, where are we now?

Kathleen Norris is right: "Being closed in makes us edgy because it reminds us of our vulnerability before the elements; we can't escape the fact that life is precarious" (66-67). My students and I have felt "closed in" this first semester of hybrid (in-person and virtual) learning—by Zoom squares and six-foot bubbles, masks and quarantines. And all of these suffocating borders have reminded us "that life is precarious." We have felt that daily. My university is situated on the Great Plains, and many of my students have been born and raised in these vast spaces. Their narrative—our narratives—are shaped by the land that speaks of expanses and faraway horizons, of plenty of elbow room and air to breathe. The Plains is a place where all there is to see is "[l]and, sky, and the ever-changing light" (Norris 155). Some would call that a whole lot of nothing. Those of us who have written our

stories on this space would call it everything. We are used to writing stories on *tabula rasa* and mapping out *terra incognita*. We are used to creating community by bridging great distances. In some ways, then, the larger spaces created by COVID-19 protocols are familiar to us Plains people. Perhaps, then, we have had an advantage in navigating them.

My students and I have figured out ways to create a sense of community, to bridge the spacious divides in the classroom. We have circumvented the six-foot bubbles and Zoom-square borders to safely find our way into one another's thought spaces. One of the most effective tools in bridging those spaces has been inviting students to share with their classmates how things are going for them. In one of my classes, we spent nearly an hour unpacking how students felt about the pandemic, quarantining, the social isolation, and the worry that accompanies all of that. Several of them told me later that though we didn't solve any of the issues in that hour, they felt more connected to their classmates just knowing that they weren't alone in their feelings and challenges. On a smaller scale, I find myself more frequently reaching out to students outside of class time (generally over email or in a note on one of their assignments) to find out how they were doing. Masks have forced me to be more intentional about looking into my students' eyes. End-of-the-semester evaluations tell me that students appreciate these attempts to get to know them and to acknowledge the difficulty of the journey they are on.

Giving students opportunities to connect with one another in smaller "spaces" has been important as well. One student in Fall 2020 (a student who, by the way, was especially insistent that we meet in the classroom rather than virtually when at all possible) Zoomed in from virtual fields filled with grazing cows or from the Little Mermaid's grotto. Whether this was to keep her private space private or just to lighten the mood of a difficult year, her inviting us into such an "unexplored" space created a certain amount of comfort. Other students quickly joined in the game. The effect was that we spent the first few minutes of class "exploring" one another's Zoom square spaces. Oddly enough, seeing Hogwarts Hall and the Great Wall of China on the same screen brought us into community. It acknowledged both that we were apart and that we were in this together. The changing Zoom backgrounds also had the effect of making the familiar (for the students were in their most familiar spaces) unfamiliar. It served as a way of marking the *terra incognita* of the pandemic and of the learning experience. Zoom breakout rooms and online discussion forums in learning management systems have been useful tools to map out community as well. None of this is perfect. But I do think that when we are intentional about leaving the familiar or remapping the familiar for other purposes, we can begin to "get lost," to lose ourselves in ways that create significant learning experiences. Whether we are taking students abroad or guiding them through content in a classroom setting, we must find ways to lead students out of the familiar and into the *terra incognita*.

Solnit begins her rumination on getting lost (which, ultimately, is the “life of discovery”) with a quotation from Plato: “How will you go about finding the thing the nature of which is totally unknown to you?” (4). I begin my first-year seminar with this same question. The students tend to focus on the unknown and the finding, but in the course of searching for this question’s—this quest’s—meaning, they eventually come to rest on the “how.” They eventually come to see that it is the method, the mode, the means of the journey that are the real quest. And so, the question in these times isn’t so much about how the space is configured, but how we *map* it. How do we navigate the spaces we’re given, even those that feel remarkably familiar? How do we find our way through the unknown? How do we find our way out of our bubbles and into that “life of discovery”?

Works Cited

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