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## The affirmative power of presence through absence, online

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### Setting the stage

As I was preparing for my first fully online course in September, I remember distinctly that feeling of uncertainty, even anxiety, emanating from the fact that whoever would end up sharing the online space that I was planning, creating, crafting in that moment, would not have met each other in person. None of the students had met either their peers, or me, their instructor, face-to-face, and we all knew that it would stay like that for the entire term. We would hear each other's voices and see images of faces and upper bodies distorted by different intensities of light, framed by doors, pets, plants and accidental visitors. This was different to the switch to online teaching as an emergency measure that happened earlier in the Spring. After several weeks of 'conventional' in person exchanges, what had been built collectively and personally until that time – perceptions, habits, a *modus operandi* that comes with some element of trust – came to a test in a new setting; yet there was something there to be tested and probed into, and as such, to rely on. That subtle, invisible band of information that wraps around bodies and composes experiences as people move in and out of physical spaces was not going to be there this time. The affective, emotive hinges that we sense and make sense of, through which we work situations out and 'get' things and people, or at least the seeming naturalness of these unconscious mechanisms when bodies are co-present, would be limited. The intangible yet very much present trails of thoughts, feelings, and actions that belong to a person and carry their information, energy and 'beingness' within a limited distance, almost palpably, as a silent, unuttered, unconscious 'hello' to others, creating momentary exposures to the infinite complexity of another world, would not be accessible. 'Everyone will arrive in their own cocoon' – I thought to myself – 'and will remain there, at least for some time, if not for the whole course. What is my role as a teacher here?'

Somewhat more poignantly, this question begs another, more fundamental one: what would be my role otherwise? I have been thinking with and along Jacques Rancière's figure of 'the ignorant schoolmaster' (1991) for several years now. I had come to the temporary conclusion that my main task is not to explain, let alone, alluding to Freire, 'deposit' knowledge or information in anyone's head (Freire 2000, 72). There are several lines that I formulated for myself to actualise this sentiment for my own teaching practice, one of which sounded like this: 'I want to affirm to my students that they are capable of figuring things out for themselves'. That is, I just need to find a way to help them turn inwards so that they can tap into the infinite power of their own minds and learn how to work with it, how to own it with openness and curiosity. 'I will just hang around as a "vanishing mediator", and listen to accounts of how "sense" had been made. I will be there to prompt, provoke, instigate reflection, and "verify" the work of "attention" (Rancière 1991, 31–33). And then, I will step back and allow the rest of the process to be taken care of in everyone's own paradigm, to be integrated into their learning journeys in their own unique ways'. Then, my job – I thought – would be pretty much done.

I had realised some time ago, however, that I will, most likely, never completely vanish in my role. My authority will remain, the power to grade, to mark, and to evaluate, and with that the hierarchical order I am working to subvert, will also stay with and within me, and by extension, in the spaces that I create and nourish in and through my actions in the modern university. As imperfect as these structures may be, ‘there is always some room to manoeuvre, to negotiate, to mitigate’, I used to think, and ‘this should only boost our creativity and resourcefulness’. Yet I would never have thought that part of my job in the online setting will be to orchestrate my own absence so that this task could be shared horizontally, amongst the students themselves.

## Zooming out

It all started with the idea of breakout rooms and how we should capitalise on these inbuilt features of Zoom. It was not an easy decision in the light of a news article that reported traumatic experiences of the forced intimacy of this arrangement, of finding oneself enclosed with complete strangers. I was teaching a small group of eleven MA students scattered over the globe and I was aware that they will take the same courses from the limited online course listing, spending almost entire days in each other’s company in some other hierarchically organised space. They will see each other’s names and distorted images multiple times a week. I cannot remember what made me decide in favour of breakout rooms eventually, but I was somehow deeply convinced that those small, mundane, everyday gestures that only students can share with each other in corridors, cafés, before and after classes, outside and elsewhere – as per life in the previous ‘normal’ – were crucial not only for learning but also for growing, growing towards the light and into a different way of being, beyond the snapshots of badly lit appearances on Zoom.

Maybe this conviction to facilitate students’ connection with each other, despite the potential risks of the online environment, derived from my desire to take myself out of the learning processes, to consciously open new planes and stage encounters between ‘equals’, to curate experiences of how, in Rancière’s narration, an ‘ignorant’ can teach another ‘ignorant’ just by reference to the authority and integrity of ‘the book’, the text, as a third object, a manifestation of universal intelligence, positioned at the same level as them (1991, 12–18). I wanted students to learn from and through each other, to experience something I would never be able to teach them.

I incorporated two kinds of breakout sessions for each online meeting. The first was organised around a particular task or some open-ended questions about readings and reading experiences. The other was completely voluntary and served as a transition from the formal frames of the class into something undefined and for me, *by me*, undefinable: students were invited to stay on after the class discussion, return to the same group or join another one, and use the space for whatever they wanted. I logged out and assigned hostship to someone randomly. It was then all out of my hands. Not everyone stayed every time, but a few people at least always did. I continued with the practice, not knowing where it would lead, and to what use and whose benefit. I extrapolated from the smiles at the announcements at the end of the class – ‘now, the official part is over’ – that something meaningful was happening. But even the return from in-class break-out groups was light and relaxed. It took the pressure off me lecturing while I continued ‘teaching’ without really understanding what it was like for this group of students to start a new MA programme online, which was meant to be happening in person. Whenever I asked, the answers I received felt ready-made for the figure of their teacher, and her *polite* ignorance.

## Learning to understand

Once the term ended, I asked my teaching assistant to organise a focus group discussion with the course participants.<sup>1</sup> I wanted to learn about how it all went, and I wanted students to be able to reflect on their experience with as little intervention as possible. I was not sure how exactly my TA’s role had been perceived by them but ‘marking authority’ was surely not involved. What happened

on the ‘ground’, beyond the virtual haze of noises, appearances, uneducated guesses? I wanted out of my cocoon as much as I could, without having sensed, felt, understood responses, reactions, signals and signs through my own skin. Reading through the transcripts of two focus groups I learnt lots of new things, not only about the class, but primarily about some of the structural forces and collective processes that striated, moulded, accompanied these journeys.

I learnt that most students were afraid of being left out, missing out, feeling lonely, of not being able to make friends. ‘When you turn off your laptop, the person is gone’. There is no follow-up coffee or small talk in the library.

I learnt that the online architecture of the curriculum did not make space ‘to ask each other “How are you?”’ More department-organised online social events, such as yet another ‘constructed Zoom session’ would not have helped. The amount of time spent in front of the screen is already excessive.

I learnt that the lack of a physical ‘arrival’ to class made it harder to concentrate. ‘That start – when you go to Zoom. It’s not like you go to the university. During that time, you’re travelling; while you are arriving in the classroom, you’re clearing your mind. But there is no such a feeling in the online setting. You just open the link’ and after class, continue reading on the screen.

I learnt that the lack of personal connection triggered feelings of unworthiness.

I was really insecure in the beginning because I couldn’t talk with the others, so I didn’t know their challenges. . . . I thought maybe I am not [good] enough to be here, because I didn’t have that opportunity to see that the others were also struggling. I don’t want to say that it is good to see others struggling but it also somehow connects you with the others.

I learnt that there was a lot of pressure and stress arising out of faculty wanting to control the online learning environment. That the ‘opportunities’ of online instruction that presented themselves as innovative learning tools and community-building platforms easily slipped into the opposite effect. That there was an expectation for students to be ‘on’ all the time, and the on-ness often contributed towards the grade. ‘We didn’t even have an opportunity just to listen in class’ – this echoed across both groups. In a resonant sentiment,

my overall feeling about the online studying [is] that teachers actually want you to do more all the time. We end up in the position when we always have to prove what we did. We actually did all the readings! We did the summaries. At least I had that feeling that I have to prove that I did what had been required. And I feel negative about that experience. In the onsite teaching . . . you have the classes where you can afford not being always active. But online I think we did not have that opportunity, I felt I always had to prove . . . it felt forced that you always had to contribute to enrich the discussion.

And as a consequence, the same student remarks: ‘I really felt that sometimes my time was so limited, I had to do so many things. The first thing I had to cut off from my schedule was people – I felt I didn’t have time for them.’

I learnt that breakout groups also operated as sites of control. ‘The TA or the professor would drop in, and they would interject if the quality of the conversation isn’t up to a certain level and ask questions.’

I learnt that what was appreciated in break-out rooms was non-interference, which made space for enjoying the academic environment without the need to perform. Breakout rooms without faculty intervention in class were

more relaxed, because it was our space, just three students, so . . . we didn’t have that feeling that we have to say the correct thing. So, we asked each other how the day was, and then we turned to the readings, and we were discussing what we felt important. I think it was a good space where I could actually share MY personal take on what I read, and it was not that I had to concentrate on what the teacher wanted me to say, because I did feel in some of the classes it was the case. But I really felt that in the breakout rooms . . . personally, I think I had the richest conversations in the breakout rooms with three other people, because when there’s a limited number of people, you can concentrate your contributions better, and digest it in a different way. Usually, we had really

good conversations about the readings. It was not like we talked about anything unrelated to class. The setting was different. We did not have to concentrate or focus that much on the professor or the whole class.

I learnt that occasionally students stayed on for two hours in the voluntary breakout rooms after class.

I also learnt, and finally, understood in a profound manner that my authority as a teacher is inseparable from my embodied presence. If I show up in person or through my digital image, that authority begins to structure the space of interactions. Without me knowing, I am controlling. Something in me, that invisible thread of power that I carry with myself through my role, perceived as attached to my physical being, *controls*.

... the breakout rooms were relaxed. We were alone, we could talk about anything – of course, first about the task, but then if we had enough time, we could also talk about other things: how the other classes are going, how the person feels today and everything ... We could connect on a different level. We could be ourselves! There was no professor there watching us. We were really relaxed. It was really good.

### Making space, holding space

My pedagogical practice is built around gestures of encouragement to turn towards and explore 'the self', both as a site of social control and conditioning, and a source of transformation, of seeing, thinking, being otherwise. In the particular setting generated by the global pandemic my greatest resource to support students on this path turned out to be to make space for connection on their own terms, to affirm and nourish a non-hierarchical horizon of encounters, person-to-person exchanges in the classroom, and on their ways out of the classroom. During this time, I had not vanished from the scene – quite the opposite. I was able to experience the power that comes with my institutional position differently: through the acts of taking myself out of the conversations, of arranging, staging my absence and with that, assist the meeting of worlds at those subtle, invisible registers which are both vulnerable to control and evade it, escape it at the same time. At the end of the day, all these efforts returned to me as appreciation and gratitude for taking the pressure off and easing the usual competition among students, for having been there, still, through what could be described as a form of *caring* ignorance. This time around, in this particular context, besides the task of verifying the work of attention in finding things out in the classroom, there was a bigger need to open up and hold space where that attention, through the peer other, could encounter itself again and reconnect with its own potential, grounding itself in that place.

### Note

1. I offered the Master of Arts course Knowing, Narrating, (re)Writing International Relations (INTR 5043) online for the first time in the Department of International Relations at Central European University in the fall term of the academic year 2020–21. At the end of the course, two focus groups were conducted with eight participants (of eleven registered students) whose feedback and reflections inform the 'Learning to understand' section of this paper.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

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