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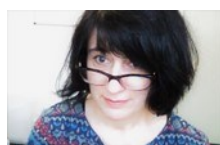
Being Ourselves in the Digital Context: Online Presences

Stephanie Aldred, Linda Matthews & Chrissi Nerantzi



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Linda Matthews works for the University Teaching Academy at Manchester Metropolitan University. Her areas of expertise include curriculum development, observation strategies and assessment literacy. Alongside her 16 years in academic development, she has maintained an enduring love for music and theatre, recently directing the Manchester Online Players in *As we like it*.



Chrissi Nerantzi is an academic developer in the University Teaching Academy at Manchester Metropolitan University and a National Teaching Fellow. She is the founder of the #creativeHE open community and cofounder of Creative Academic and the #LTHEchat and loves experimenting with alternative learning and teaching approaches. She was in a pantomime group and played the violin when she was a little girl but was not good at it...

A reflective narrative by three academic developers related to a short video clip co-created to explore personal dilemmas when teaching or supporting learning on screen.

Our clip is available at https://mmutube.mmu.ac.uk/media/Being+Me+Online+2020/1_9hx090rt Enjoy!

We shape our tools, and our tools shape us¹.

The abrupt pivot to online learning in the face of Covid-19 necessitated timely support, guidance and encouragement from us, as academic developers working from our University's Teaching Academy at Manchester Metropolitan University in the United Kingdom. At this difficult time, colleagues were experiencing high levels of anxiety associated with their teaching and supporting students' learning; as many of them reported, the 'physical' reality of higher education had suddenly become 'virtual'. Staff used to three-dimensional bricks-and-mortar environments filled with lively flesh-and-blood humanity had to adapt to the oddly muted world of the small screen. Teachers who liked to move around the room and use gestures were rendered static. Staff who enjoyed using humour missed the laughter. And those who normally used hands-on making practices said now what? Colleagues complained they were 'talking into a black hole', 'staring at initials', 'missing all the non-verbal communication'. Above all, they were worried about student engagement and students' presence or absence.

As staff worked to extract the essentials of the learning they were trying to facilitate from the familiar face-to-face context, they needed to learn to trust themselves and the students in the online sphere. The video we made was a quick, light-hearted response to the initial anxiety we encountered, when we were all getting used to encountering our digital selves in online classrooms. We wanted to recognise the challenges to colleagues of this new teaching environment and if possible address their stress in a humorous way but also show that we all feel similar. We wanted to convey that we ourselves were not immune to 'stage fright' in the new environment, and we had our moments of 'imposter' syndrome too or were looking for our perfect self perhaps.

Understandably, the sudden introduction of online delivery led to over-involvement with superficial appearances (one's face, one's hair, one's clothes, one's backdrop and make-up and jewellery too for some). Teaching to the screen involved looking in a close-up mirror, which, we wished to acknowledge, was discomfiting to many. Instead of looking into somebody else's face, we saw ourselves. We chose theatrical music for the soundtrack (overture to the opera *The Marriage Of Figaro*) to highlight the feeling some colleagues experienced, that presenting onscreen meant 'acting' the part of the teacher rather than inhabiting the role authentically. We also tried to convey 'production' interest in lighting, costume, make-up, facial expressions, scenery and staging. Teaching is a kind of performance although it differs from acting, so shifting the medium from 'theatre' to 'screen' work requires reorientation and adjustments.

Having described the more surface or visible elements of the digital teaching world through the 'silly video', as we called it, we explored deeper issues of 'presence'. We felt that it was important to help staff re-find their authenticity in the new environment. In a playful way, we hoped to show that we all needed to 'pass through' the stage of painful self-consciousness, in order to reach a more deliberate level of conscious 'presence' which would let us embrace the environment positively, and confidently, in order to promote learning in our students truthful to our real selves, with all our imperfections.

We had previously explored teacher 'presence' in traditional settings using a theatre model² looking at communication in three circles of attention:

1. Self-to-self utterances (e.g. the absent-minded talk of the teacher to herself, or to her equipment, as she orders her thoughts);
2. One-to-one (e.g. the highly present, intimate, focussed conversation with a personal tutee);
3. One to group (e.g. highly present, public style, 'loud and clear').

Listeners can perceive circles of communication as appropriate or jarring; for example a sensitive one-to-one conversation should not be carried out in the style of a public address. There were also opportunities to role-play communications in the different circles to observe and reflect on affect. Through this exploration we also considered aspects of 'function', that is, what teachers wish to 'do' with speech e.g. to persuade, to warn, to motivate, to celebrate student success. Bringing these aspects into the conscious awareness and control of teachers helped them use the most appropriate vocabulary, pitch, volume, tone and style of communication.

Techniques for managing communication circles and functions were revisited for digital spaces. With growing awareness of these nuances of communication, staff could develop skills and capabilities appropriate to the new environment. This meant that their 'screened self' could confidently, be developed and projected, in order to facilitate learning in the new context. Participants shared and discussed anecdotes as they reflected on aspects of their digital presence and approaches to communication. Using the Community of Inquiry (Col) framework³ as a basis for our thinking we introduced staff to the key features of online 'presences'; that is the social presence (the human contact which amongst other things provides vital motivation); the cognitive presence (attending to the student's intellectual development) and the teaching presence (whereby processes are structured and organised). In a review of the Col framework Armellini & De Stefani⁴ proposed an adjustment to this as they found that social presence plays a more important role than cognitive and teaching presence. If this is indeed the case, and we accept that social presence can be the most 'compromised' in the online environment, due to the lack (or alteration) of traditional interaction patterns, reduced non-verbal communication, decreased opportunities for spontaneous responses, creating an effective social presence online may be the greatest challenge.

So we explored with participants the real meaning of the elements in the 'silly video' and how these could be used to facilitate authentic relationships in the online environment. We considered not only our use of language and facial expression, but also the props, the images, and the kinds of tasks which would stimulate the most authentic interaction for their discipline and context, which together would add to our online presence. We shared examples of tasks from our own practice, such as 'show and tell' flipgrids for a leadership unit and activities where students had to draw pictures, or scavenge for objects, which could represent ideas and concepts in an introduction to HE unit, to encourage practice exchange. We aimed to show that there were advantages as well as restrictions to the new and alternative ways of working.

We know that making human connections with students is the best way to teach them⁵, and that the cognitive and structural matters might dominate the consciousness of the teacher as they struggle to find ways of redirecting the learning experience. However, we found that by maintaining a sense of fun and theatre, underpinned by a grasp of some key principles of communication, we were able to support staff in finding their own way to a stronger and more authentic presence in the online environment and sharing moments of enjoyment.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank our colleague Ben Davies from the University Teaching Academy who stitched the video clip together so expertly.

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