Zoom 'n Gloom: Performativity and Inclusivity during the Pandemic and Beyond

Sarah V. Seeley
University of Toronto Mississauga

Abstract
The pandemic has variously amplified, eliminated, and otherwise transformed the experiences and meanings of work across sectors and nation states. In the context of higher education, this transformation has taken many shapes, which have been molded by pre-existing, if not predictable, inequalities. If we set up all the well-documented pandemic-induced obstacles to work alongside the performative nature of academic work, there is a notable uneasiness. Insofar as the nature of work is changing— becoming more challenging, in general—there must be further implications for work that is "on display." Within this context, the article focuses on the experiences of teaching and learning in online, synchronous, seminar-style classrooms. It further considers how pandemic-induced shifts in the parameters of teaching and learning can offer opportunities for cultivating more accessible, inclusive pedagogies that acknowledge the cross-cutting types of work that encase student learning.

Since many North American universities are still offering remote course delivery in some formation, questions surrounding classroom engagement landscapes are more visible than ever. The importance of cultivating online academic cultures that account for a wide range of lived experiences could not be clearer. Inclusive, accessible pedagogies that aim to engage, empower, and otherwise "see" students across a full spectrum of identities, abilities, and circumstances are essential.

Sarah V. Seeley is an Assistant Professor in the teaching stream at the University of Toronto Mississauga. She teaches first-year writing as a member of the Institute for the Study of University Pedagogy. Sarah holds a Ph.D. in anthropology, and her research interests include language ideology, writing pedagogy, and academic labor practices. Sarah loves to cook and craft, and she practices yoga daily.

For example, Hays and Mallon have written about the inclusivity affordances offered by open educational resources (OER). More to the point, they discuss how the use of OER sets the stage for all students to "learn and grow with equitable access to information that represents diverse perspectives and voices" (Hays and Mallon 21) . The Ontario Human Rights Commission has similarly focused on facilitating accessible educational experiences through its endorsement of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (46-50), and we can see the many ways that UDL principles, like offering multiple means of engagement and representation, have shaped the great shift online. I also want to suggest that, when invoking the lived experiences that exemplify the urgencies and exigencies of accessible pedagogies, labor practices must be centered.

This is because the pandemic has further highlighted the need for pedagogies that account for the lived experiences of simultaneously enacting multiple types of work. I'm thinking here of the interwoven nature of care-based and domestic work, the work of concentration, the work that pays the rent, the work of keeping healthy, and so much more. The fact that all manner of work intervenes on processes of learning is not unique to the pandemic, but it has certainly vitalized a conversation around such connections. For example, 2021 saw a strong focus on the fact that many students juggle their studies with all manners of other work and family responsibilities. To that point, George Veletsianos, a Canada Research Chair in Innovative Learning and Technology, suggests that "the pandemic has made clear for many people that online and blended learning allows more students to continue working or caring for their family while studying" (qtd. in Munroe) . This is surely true, and the need for such flexibility is not inherent to pandemic contexts.

As conversations about the parameters of pandemic life continue to unfold alongside new variants, the shift into a post-pandemic world is clearly prolonged, uneven, and perhaps overestimated. For example, two years into the pandemic, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report that just under 63% of the American population is fully vaccinated. The Public Health Agency of Canada reports slightly better numbers: Just over 77% of the Canadian population is fully vaccinated. Booster campaigns are prevalent in both nations, but this is to say nothing of vaccine infrastructures outside of the global North. Moving forward will require a continued recognition that we are not all as we once were. By this, I mean that the transference of pandemic-era mindfulness will be essential for traversing continued challenges to our collective work and well-being.

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work, there is a notable uneasiness. Insofar as the nature of work is changing— becoming more challenging, in general—there must be further implications for work "on display."

The role of performativity within higher education is well documented. The sociologist of education Stephen Ball has suggested that "performativity is a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change—based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic)" (216). This phenomenon has been critiqued at length from the faculty perspective. For example, Hayes and Cheng recently critiqued the role of performativity in measuring teaching excellence. The phenomenon has been otherwise studied in terms of neoliberal managerialism (e.g., Kalfa and Taksa; Kenny) and, more recently, in terms of the presentation of the self (e.g., Macfarlane) and professional identity formation (e.g., Wilson et al.). While performativity is certainly not a universal feature of teaching and learning, it is implicated in many toxic academic labor practices. We can also see its reach in academic publishing cultures, the neoliberal casualization of labor, and the over-reliance on graduate student labor. Further, many contingent faculty roles paradoxically demand the material trappings of performative excellence—like stellar student evaluations—yet offer limited and limiting socioeconomic resources.

What's more, Bruce Macfarlane has drawn attention to the growth of *student* performativity. Linking the expectations that are foisted upon students and faculty, Macfarlane suggests that ubiquitous performative sensibilities are negatively impacting student learning. "Students," he argues,

> are now expected to demonstrate more visibly that they are 'learning' rather than simply being offered the opportunity to attend lectures and seminars. What it means to be a student, not just the product of their intellectual endeavors undertaken in private, is now observed and evaluated. (339)

In their 2009 examination of distance learning, DePew and Lettner-Rust similarly observed that "simulated classroom interfaces often reduce the students' identities to their performances" (180). Surely, pandemic-era shifts to online learning have only amplified these pre-existing circumstances. Since much learning will continue to occur online, many educators continue to carve out the space to more fully consider the degree to which face-to-face (F2F) and online pedagogies are transferrable and commensurable.

Since this work is playing out amid pressing conversations about social justice and antiracist pedagogies, I believe there is an opportunity for extending Jane Tompkins' (1990) critique of the performance model of higher education. While Tompkins only really focused on the effects of

understanding teaching as performance, I will explore how this model problematically casts *learning* as a performance of intelligence, knowledgeability, and preparedness. This perspective privileges the student who, perhaps in the image of their teacher, successfully performs these qualities. Performance-centered assessments are reductive and exclusionary, yet, in my own experience, they may be stowed away within an otherwise mindful pedagogical framework. Because of this, I believe we are obliged to consider the degree to which performativity paves pathways to success within our classrooms.

To situate this reflection, I would like to focus on the experiences of teaching and learning in online, synchronous, seminar-style classrooms. Educators have, of course, had wildly different experiences with teaching under these circumstances. Viet Thanh Nguyen, for example, has written about his self-proclaimed "unpopular opinion" that teaching on Zoom is enjoyable. Regardless of personal stance, experiences with pandemic-era online teaching have been shaped by all manner of institutional structures, labor hierarchies, and social variables. I will be reflecting on how the great shift online created an exigency for reimagining classroom engagement landscapes, which prompts the question of how to manage expectations for student engagement in ways that do not contribute to what Asao Inoue has called "unevenness in classroom assessment economies" (79) . In short, this article considers how pandemic-induced shifts in the parameters of teaching and learning—as experienced within online, synchronous contexts—can offer opportunities for cultivating more accessible, inclusive pedagogies that acknowledge the cross-cutting types of work that encase student learning. First, I map the socio-visual landscapes of online synchronous teaching and learning and then move on to consider how the constellation of possibilities for classroom engagement may be expanded in ways that side-step student performativity. In doing so, I will suggest that performativity-based assumptions obstruct empathy and inclusion.

Mapping the Socio-Visual Landscapes of Online Synchronous Teaching and Learning

A wide range of family experiences, technological hurdles, job responsibilities, and all manner of other social circumstances and forms of work encase the experiences of both teaching and learning. While these variables were always there, the pandemic brought them into clearer focus, and this clarity will be important for developing late-pandemic pedagogies. To frame the importance of retaining this awareness, I will draw on some vastly pre-pandemic pedagogical discussions. In particular, I will draw on the work of Jane Tompkins and Miriam Wallace.

"The classroom," suggests Tompkins, "is a microcosm of the world; it is the chance we have to practice whatever ideals we may cherish. And I wonder, in the case of college professors, if performing their competence in front of other people is all that that amounts to in the end"

(656). It is important to put a finer point on what Tompkins means by performing. She framed the "performance model" of education in terms that could not be timelier in 2021:

> I had finally realized that what I was actually concerned with and focused on most of the time were three things: a) to show the students how smart I was, b) to show them how knowledgeable I was, and c) to show them how well-prepared I was for class. I had been putting on a performance whose true goal was not to help the students learn but to perform before them in such a way that they would have a good opinion of me. I think that this essentially, more than anything else, is what we teach our students: how to perform within an institutional academic setting in such a way that they will be thought of highly by their colleagues and instructors. (654)

From the current vantage point, one cannot help but notice how Tompkins' critique of teaching-as-performance shines light on a challenge many educators have faced in the last year: How does one enact, evaluate, enjoy, and otherwise understand the work of teaching now that audience reactions have largely vanished? A looming question has been: "Are my students understanding concept X?" And there is only a fine line between that and another question: "Do my students see how knowledgeably I am explaining concept X?" Of course, effective teaching and learning hinges on being able to answer the first question, but the pandemic has highlighted the degree to which perceived answers to that second question may be problematically entangled with responses to the first.

Turning to Wallace's work, we can further explore the tacit role of performance in education. Drawing on a psychoanalytic framework, she details and critiques two models of education: the "battlefield model" and the so-called "love relationship" (184-5). The battlefield model is the adversarial vision of higher education wherein students succeed via sustained, vocal performances of critique. Or, as Deborah Tannen has put it:

> The way we train our students, conduct our classes and our research, and exchange ideas at meetings and in print are all driven by our ideological assumption that intellectual inquiry is a metaphorical battle. Following from that is a second assumption, that the best way to demonstrate intellectual prowess is to criticize, find fault, and attack.

In contrast, Wallace conceptualizes the love relationship in terms of emotional transference that is centered on the idea of "nurturing, caring for, or liking each other" (185). Stacey Gray Akyea and Pamela Sandoval have similarly discussed the complexities of sharing power within feminist classrooms and critiqued pedagogies that may fall under the "love

relationship" model. Regardless of name or specific flavor, it is clear that acts of performance factor into various pedagogical orientations, which may help to explain why Zoom rooms can be experienced as unsettled and unsettling "places." In the spring of 2020, classroom audiences went through an unforeseen transformation. Indeed, addressing the gallery of tiny photos, avatars, black boxes, and the occasional live camera can feel like the academic equivalent of an athletic competition being staged in an empty stadium.

Debates over student camera use emerged quickly and continue on (e.g., Reed; Finders and Muñoz), but as we move into the second pandemic school year, evidence-based findings and approaches are becoming more widespread (e.g., Castelli and Sarvary; Lin and Gao). Course policies that facilitate students in making purposeful choices about camera use—without requiring it—are an important part of cultivating an inclusive, accessible Zoom room. Leading "camera optional" classes is the right thing to do, but this can—at least in my own experience—raise the question of what constitutes effective teaching. Gone is the ability to discern reactions, to notice glimmers of understanding, to see a student connect "the dots" before our very eyes. Instead, "bad" classes, can feel like shouting into the void, and "good" classes may amount to little more than feeling like we're test-driving ideas in real time. This idea of "good" and "bad" classes is not particularly productive, but there is something there—something worth our attention. As Wallace has suggested, "our emotional responses are important clues to the underground dynamics of the student/teacher/learner interaction" (185) .

I've found myself struggling to teach in the absence of the visual cues that come along with a traditional classroom audience. This absence is palpable, and it demands much more cognitive work. After all, Zoom classes demand more even when the cameras *are* running. For example, linguistic anthropologist Susan Blum has discussed the increased labor involved with processing and searching for the visual cues that are so central to orderly turn-taking conversation. Shahidha Bari has similarly drawn attention to the fact that effective teaching often hinges on being able to read students' faces. A rich socio-visual landscape enables educators to "read the room for responsiveness or reluctance, adapting when we sense incomprehension, clarifying when we find confusion." The camera issue is clearly a flashpoint for questions of participation, comprehension, and accessibility. In figuring out how to read the Zoom room, one may be confronted with some interrelated questions: Are my students understanding concept X? How can I gauge comprehension without a larger socio-visual context? How much stock have I been putting in these socio- and audio-visual cues? Since we are inhabiting a new kind of "room," how can I read it in a way that isn't steeped in memories of my old classrooms? Could figuring this out help to mitigate Zoom fatigue and pandemic-induced inability?

Expanding the Constellation of Possibilities for Classroom Engagement

I'd like to turn now to engage some of these questions as I consider how pandemic-induced changes to the work of teaching open up space for cultivating inclusive pedagogies that acknowledge the cross-cutting types of work that encase student learning. I believe the present context calls for a lasting redefinition and reassessment of what classroom engagement might look and feel like across both online and F2F contexts. We are in a pivotal moment for examining how the weight of performativity props up systems of privilege. Scholars have long drawn attention to the racism and exclusion that comes along with understanding and otherwise assessing writing in terms of a not-equally-accessible set of 'standard' sociolinguistic practices (e.g., Condon and Young; Inoue; Lu; Martinez; Lockett). There have also been longstanding conversations among linguistic anthropologists that locate, theorize, and otherwise problematize what Rosina Lippi-Green has referred to as the standard language myth (e.g., Irvine and Gal; Bhatt; Shankar).

It is against that epistemic backdrop that pandemic-induced changes to teaching and learning have prompted me to consider an additional layer in this massive set of problems. Assessing classroom engagement in terms of performativity reproduces the same ideologies that prop up the standard language myth. Recall Stephen Ball's definition of performativity as "a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change—based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic)" (216). When students are rewarded—or not—for classroom engagements that demonstrate intelligence, knowledgeability, and preparedness, there is an assumption that everyone has equal access to the sociolinguistic habits, technological and economic resources, and cognitive and corporeal abilities necessary to succeed within those parameters. Such an assumption is exclusionary in its racist, classist, and ableist manifestations.

The performance model is, furthermore, out of step with the current realities surrounding what may be referred to as pandemic-induced inability. So-called brain fog or Zoom fatigue may be considered a by-product of such "inability," but the situation is more complex than those terms may suggest. People have experienced an inability to concentrate, an inability to write, an inability to manage time, an inability to control space, an inability to stay motivated, and the list goes on and on and on. When I initially experienced the Zoom room, it felt like there was a complete absence of student engagement. This forced an examination of how my own performativity-based assumptions were obstructing empathy and inclusion, even as I was trying to be mindful of the various "inabilities" my students could be facing.

As is very clear by now, platforms such as Zoom can only go so far in approximating in-person communities. Since questions of how to

cultivate and measure student engagement are typically found in relation to small class contexts, I will focus on what I know best: the writing classroom. Writing classes tend to be conducted in a seminar-style, wherein students are invited to analyze texts and practice different writing techniques, and a common strength of small writing classes is their community-building capability. I can say that the "community of writers" imagery, along with its supportive culture of critique, has been central to my own teaching philosophy. Yet, the purpose, tone, and potential of this community looks and feels very different online. The "look" of and possibilities for online student engagement *are* more diverse, but there is no clear-cut framework for valuing these multiple means of engagement.

For example, it may be challenging to situate actions like pressing the "yes" button or typing into the chat. This is especially true when the participatory landscape is shaped by memories of the lively conversations that took place on campus. The visual features of the Zoom room are similarly uneven. Students who run their cameras dominate the screen while quiet or silent students literally fade into the background. And students' opportunities for selecting from the various means of online engagement are mediated—if not delimited—by a whole host of shifting and largely unknowable social factors. For example, students from Canada's York University have discussed how learning from home has been problematically characterized by a lack of privacy, an inability to stay focused, and a waning sense of motivation (Ong et al.).

The question, then, is how to go about expanding and otherwise equalizing the list of activities that constitute valuable student participation and engagement. I am thinking about how to level the participatory field so that a "gold-standard" means of participation like vocal critique or active listening could become commensurable to other types of participation like yes/no polls, the use of Zoom "reactions," typing in the chat, or just silently attending class.

In his book on labor-based grading contracts, Inoue suggests that "a classroom writing assessment economy calls attention to the various, diverse *habitus* of people in the economy, and how we are all always situated in larger social systems" (84) . While he is squarely focused on the assessment of written texts, this commentary can be stretched to help reimagine assessment schemes that account for the often-invisible social circumstances that frame student engagement.

To begin such a reimagining, I will make two suggestions. First, I will question whether "participation" grades can actually be reimagined or resuscitated. The means of participation I listed above certainly aren't exhaustive. Regardless, any such list will always be enveloped by (in my case) North American sociocultural contexts that prize vocal critique and "active" engagement. For example, entrenched knowledge infrastructures can make it particularly difficult not to privilege one student's critical observation over another student's request for additional information. The Zoom context has definitely made it clearer to me how some forms of

engagement—like vocalized critique—may come to represent a performance of intelligence, or a performance of knowledgeability, or a performance of preparedness. In contrast, other forms of engagement—like regular, but silent attendance—may come to unfairly represent a *lack* of knowledge or a *lack* of preparedness. Yet, one may never know if that student who is in regular, silent attendance is grappling with the inability to be healthy or the inability to control their workspace, or if they are simply emersed (as I once was) in a social system that casts students as passive receptors of information.

Insofar as the traditional participation grade privileges visible, vocal classroom engagement, it promotes exclusion. Yet, programmatic standardization may prevent many faculty—myself included—from doing away with participation grades altogether. Variables like contingent contracts, social precarity, top-down managerialism, and the pursuit of community or departmental standards all contribute to the faculty performativity that obstructs the taking of anti-racist, anti-classist, otherwise inclusive stands against student performativity.

Again, in response to the question of how to reimagine assessment schemes, I would secondly like to suggest the value of integrating very structured opportunities for engagement into daily plans for online classes. Instead of trying to lead stilted discussions, this can mean offering clear-cut, learning outcome-centered opportunities for engagement that do not hinge on (or even really invite) the use of audiovisual modalities. This is a broader, more accessible view of engagement, one that helps answer the question of "are my students understanding X?" in a more socially responsive, neutral manner.

For example, my online classrooms have become increasingly focused on self-directed learning and time management. These skills help students to meet learning outcomes like being able to revise the content and form of their own writing based on peer and instructor feedback.

I have re-purposed spaces for online engagement to work directly with these outcomes. During a recent online summer course, all of this became even more pressing because of our compressed schedule, so I periodically queried the students on what kind of time and resources they would need in order to succeed with a given assignment. For instance, during one class we "discussed" an anonymized sample portfolio written by a former student. I note that we "discussed" it because this activity—the former bread and butter of my F2F class discussions—looks wildly different in the Zoom room. Regardless, we reviewed my on-screen annotations of the document and students had opportunities to add to and otherwise comment on the annotations. During this portion of the class, student engagement took place entirely via non-audiovisual means of communication (e.g., the chat box and reaction emoticons).

At the end of class, we reflected on the fact that the portfolio exhibited many, many strengths, and I concluded class with this question: "What kind of time and resources will you need to produce your own

version of a strong portfolio?" Students were instructed to think of this as a "read, write, think" activity wherein they had already read and thought about the portfolio. Now they were being given the opportunity to think more deeply about the logistics of its production, and in imagining how their writing processes would similarly unfold, they were being invited to practice self-directed learning and time management. I started this activity in the last 10-12 minutes of class, so students would have sufficient time to think and respond via direct message in the chat. The responses were rich with detail and specificity.

Exercises like these are valuable for several reasons. They offer low-stakes opportunities for reflecting on class concepts and expectations. This particular activity tacitly acknowledged how circumstances and "inabilities" might impact individual students' work. The responses to this, and other such queries, helped to confirm whether students were understanding the tasks at hand. And, importantly, students were able to engage in this activity with relative sociolinguistic evenness. An invitation to participate via direct messaging (DM) could, for example, allow a student without a microphone to participate nonverbally. It could similarly allow others who are sharing a workspace to participate. Approaching the situation from a different angle, it could allow students habituated into attending class silently to practice adding their voices in a clear-cut, low-stakes manner. This is all to say that there are many ways to invite engagement that account for the wide range of largely invisible student labor and social circumstances that encase any given class atmosphere.

Concluding Thoughts

Writing in *The Chronicle of Higher Education,* Shahidha Bari has noted that "the veil between work and life has been rent". The degree to which anyone has actually experienced that veil to begin with is, of course, debatable. Responses to that question would undoubtedly vary greatly and, like the bodies that produced them, be scattered across hierarchical systems of privilege. Academic labor paradigms have seemingly always relied upon—and exploited—a false distinction between "work" and "life." Beginning in graduate school (if not earlier) , professorial hopefuls are socialized to embrace the precarious, inherently competitive, and subsuming nature of the academic ethos. Though it takes different shapes across disciplines and ranks, this baseline is undeniable (e.g., Birmingham; Gagné) . I suppose, then, that it's not terribly surprising that performativity consistently re-appears as a guiding principle of higher education.

Depending on where one is standing, the pandemic has cruelly heightened or simply enumerated inequalities across social institutions. They have always been there. The pandemic caused me to question how to educate in a manner that is responsive to all manner of exigencies requiring empathy, kindness, and mindfulness. They have always been there. As Jane Tompkins has long since suggested, "our actions and our

interactions with our students week in week out prove what we are for and what we are against in the long run. There is no substitute for practice" (660). Perhaps it's a by-product of living in a frozen digital time loop, but Zoom has, for many, brought on a draining gloom. For me that gloom derived from recognizing the reach of performativity in my own classroom. Institutional evaluation forms orient teachers *and* learners to value performative labor with common questions like whether a particular course is intellectually stimulating or whether an instructor created an approachable presence. And, when teaching effectiveness is assessed in performative terms, it creates the space for performativity to wiggle its way in to shape expectations for student learning. Circling back to Tompkins once more, the following assertions couldn't be timelier in 2021:

> A kinder, more sensitive attitude toward one's own needs as a human being, in place of a desperate striving to meet professional and institutional standards of arguable merit, can bring greater sensitivity to the needs of students and a more sympathetic understanding of their positions, both as workers in the academy and as people in the wider world (660).

Perhaps performativity has always been there, but that doesn't make it good.

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