

Pandemic Life: Adventures in the Virtual World

Xinqiang Li

TEACHING

On the first day of my online teaching, I decided to wear my grey Uniqlo V-neck sweater for a decent look before the screen, and pajama pants and slippers to put me at secret ease during the class. I cleaned my room which had been a mess for weeks, tested the background light for the computer camera, hid all my diaries and shopping lists from the computer desktop, and then clicked “start meeting” on Zoom.

“Okay class,” I managed a strangely gentle voice and spoke to a group of white names on black screens: “Why not free write about your life during the pandemic for ten minutes?” Then, turning off my camera and microphone, I quickly sneaked my way into the bathroom. Ten minutes later, I was back before the computer, tea in hand and enjoying the students’ stories. Smiling and applauding, I was trying to deliver the same care and encouragement as I did in a classroom. The difference was there were fewer and slower responses online. I began to worry about what was going on behind the black screens. Might they be chatting with their friends on cellphones, or falling asleep, or walking away to play a video game? Still, I tried not to request for them to turn on their cameras, just to make themselves at home. “Making oneself at home,” I believe, is one of the greatest advantages of the work-at-home mode. Rarely could students enjoy such home comfort to improve their learning in a traditional classroom. Realizing this, I felt fine with students who attended the online class in pajamas or eating dumplings, only if this enabled them to listen to me better. Besides, when facing computer screens, we often suffer a shorter attention span, and it will be very helpful to give them the choice to turn on or off the camera. I even suggested that they close their eyes from time to time to concentrate on the lecture. Such freedom, though it might be easily abused, could accommodate students’ learning with more flexibility and enhance the effectiveness of lecture and communication. This is what could hardly be achieved by traditional class.

The self-paced learning with the recorded class video adds even more of such home comfort to learning. Actually, it turned out there were few students drifting away during the class, and I could almost always hear their voices when asking them questions. Gradually I got used to the silent but still attentive online audience. At the end of the class, I asked them to turn on their camera as a fun way to take attendance. I was glad to see their smiling faces eventually and many “thank you” left in the Zoom chat box.

At night, however, when I watched the recorded class video, I sadly noticed my uneven teeth mirrored in the camera, the countless “you knows” in my speech, and my wrong pronunciation of the word “quarantine.” It seems that the Zoom video has exposed and enlarged all the obscure defects unsympathetically before students’ eyes. Now I have to speak and perform more carefully before the camera. Besides, I saw some students sharing the screenshot class photos on social media, which made me click “like” for the fun moments, but in the meantime worried about the privacy of the class. Despite these problems, to teach online is still fascinating to me. I felt like stepping into the wonderland of virtual space and having the whole world in my hands without a single step out of my apartment.

This is my first work-at-home experience in the COVID-19 pandemic, saving me all the errands to school and immersing me more in the comfort of home. There is, however, the unromantic side. I sadly found it is equally time consuming to prepare for the online class, and, once again, I ended up having instant noodles for lunch due to a busy schedule. To adapt to the new online environment, I still need time to reimagine and evaluate the practicability and effectiveness of all the class tasks online—lectures, discussions and activities, and goodbye, those warm-up short videos and fun activities. As a result, some of the original lectures have been transformed into online group meetings, and some short presentations have been changed into document sharing in the chat box. It seems the new online environment has set new rules on what works and what does not, and I still need to keep testing, verifying and developing new strategies for teaching.

On top of that, most of my students were international students, some of them heading toward airports, some staying in a hotel in China for a fourteen-day quarantine, some already getting back home in Saudi Arabia, and some still staying here in the US. Because of the time difference, I had to teach both synchronously and asynchronously,

inviting those who were still in the US to attend the online class and recording the video for those who were not. Such complexity posed many challenges to my teaching. A student got stranded at an Ethiopian airport and asked for an extension on homework, and another disappeared without a trace during his fourteen days of quarantine. Because of these unexpected incidents, I was trying to personalize my teaching, offering more online office hours, being more flexible with homework deadlines, trying to figure out and follow a “rhythm” of the class, and knowing better when to give intensive lectures and when to relieve students’ burdens.

In spite of these challenges, online teaching could easily fly beyond the limit of travel, time and expense, and such increased mobility helps to break different borders in different ways. Now that my students were located in different parts of the world, I was trying to make good use of this special situation and ask them to observe their local environment and write weekly photo blogs. Their contributions, ranging from the delicious barbecue served at the unknown street corner in Xian, to the gasping view of the Avatar mountains in Zhangjiajie, or the long-time-no-see plum juice and pineapple bun found in their quarantine hotel, all enriched the diverse culture of the class. Specifically, I felt the world in my hand when students from different parts of the world attempted to attend the same class despite the time difference, and one student from China even played the background music for a video I was showing here in the US.

SOCIAL LIFE

The stay-at-home rule in the pandemic did not come totally as a shock to me, as I have been living like a recluse for years: alone, confined in my apartment, most of the time preparing for teaching or contemplating at the window. Still, the missing social life did have an impact on me. There was no CCCC conference, no department lounge chatting, no end-of-semester party, and this struck me even more as I have been living alone. However, before long, people realized the power of online social gatherings. As one remote access tutor in my school said: we are “socially distant but virtually connected.” Gradually there appeared more online school talks, departmental meetings, academic webinars and even virtual parties. With the limits of travel and expense erased, I could actually enjoy access to more social gatherings online, sometimes hiding behind the screen listening to the school president’s

announcements, sometimes sitting before a background image of a tropical beach and planning summer activities with colleagues, sometimes even attending a virtual film festival held in a neighboring town or discussing a fantastic TV show with an international group in London. Through these meetings, I could gain almost all the things physical meetings have to offer: meeting different interesting people and learning various new ideas, even though the physical intimacy could hardly be totally replaced. Watching and listening before the computer screen with more attention and composure, I could now know and understand my interlocutors much better: I finally understood Nathan's complex but wonderful ideas for scaffolding students' learning, noticed Brooke's silent but faithful presence in each meeting, and enjoyed the linguistic talent behind some New York City grassroots comedians' foreign accents.

Gradually I realize the online activities are reconstructing a microcosm of virtual society which I have missed in the real world. Now I could not only participate in various online academic webinars from home and abroad, but also enjoy free online TV shows, plays, museum tours and other various online events. If I want to take a class, Coursera provides tons of self-paced course videos; if I need to buy groceries, Instacart and Chowbus offer me a variety of choices ranging from whole-wheat bread to Lee Kum Kee soy sauce. All of these have fundamentally changed the pattern of my daily life.

Actually, the virtual world could also bring me a sense of real life in many ways. With convenient online technology, my mom video chats with me from China more often than before, specifically to make sure I am doing well in the pandemic. Every time she worried about me, I turned my camera to the beautiful trees outside the window, or the kitchen cabinet full of rice and flour which I have stocked up during the pandemic, to assure her my life here in America is still safe and beautiful, still remote from the statistics of coronavirus reports.

RETURN TO NATURE

However, there are drawbacks of online surfing. Before the pandemic, I had quit the internet for a while to improve my time management. Now, I had to reconnect it due to the work-at-home requirement. Then, the old bad habits bounced back, finding me again crazily browsing news on COVID-19 cases, and the ten minutes of after-dinner rest helplessly expanding into a four-hour indulgence in

Netflix movies. The long-time addiction to the internet racked my nerves and gave me a headache. Eventually, I decided the computer world is also poisonous and could harm both my mental and physical health. Until one day, fed up with news on coronavirus and finding little gained from online surfing, I unplugged the internet again. Immediately my world was quieted down. There were no more noisy and distressing discussions on the virus, and gradually my mind gained peace, and I could even hear the pulse of time. Once again, my life was assuming a healthy rhythm, and I could spend my time in a more constructive way. So I decided to disconnect the internet most of the time and only use it when necessary. Consequently, I could concentrate more on my work and physical exercises, and every time when I accomplished the tasks, I could taste the sweetness of my productivity. Now I realize my internet addiction could be even more harmful than the coronavirus, and, ironically, it is the pandemic that has confronted me with this issue.

The fatigue from long-time online work also makes me embrace nature again. From April to August, I have watched different seasons passing by my window: the spring snow that gorgeously floated around, the first touch of green that sprouted out of bold tree branches, the pink May flowers that sent off a delicate fragrance in the wind, the full moon that was shining peacefully in the midnight sky, all making beautiful paintings and attracting me to go outside for a walk. Though my daily walking route remains quite the same, all the trees and buildings seem to be a view I never get tired of. My phone is stuffed with photos of different shades of green of trees and grasslands, under blue or grey sky, in sunny or rainy days. I have never missed a single chance to take these photos.

After a month of stay-at-home life, I decided to visit my school. As in my apartment, all the trees and flowers on campus looked so fresh and dear to me, and I simply had no chance to put my camera back in its case. I passed by the classroom where I taught for a half semester. The students' laughter still echoed in my ears. Now its door was attached with rules of entrance during the pandemic. There were few people around, and only some carefree squirrels happily jumped here and there. Like them, I began to enjoy a campus of my own in such beautiful weather. With no people around, I could jump in the air for an amazing selfie photo or stop my car on the deserted street to take more extraordinary pictures. My walking tour mingled

Emerson's peaceful communication with nature, the great escape from work fatigue, and greedy photo captures of each eye-catching view. The pandemic ushers me to the wonderful virtual world, but, in the meantime, attracts me to return to nature, once more. This seems to be a sustainable new life balance.

Of course, my life in the pandemic also involves endless search for facial-mask deals online and YouTube explorations for dozens of new ways of cooking potatoes. More imminent, the financial crisis and political conflicts between China (my home country) and the US has worried me so often and so much. Despite these worries, however, I try to see things positively, just the way I welcome the coming of a new virtual world. I believe many of its advantages are irreplaceable and could be further developed during the pandemic and preserved even after it. Like a successful businessman who grows richer and grudges every penny he spends even more, I now cherish each day of my healthy and beautiful life more than ever, trying to adapt to the new lifestyle and seize new opportunities. As I believe, there is always hope for a better life.