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Finding a new path: Building affective online learning spaces for creative writing and arts practice

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While we have seen a justified focus upon schools during the C19 crisis, relatively little attention has been paid to how teacher-educators are adjusting their practice. In the UK in mid-March 2020 all of us working in education had to radically change within the space of a few days. In our case, school visits were replaced by online tutorials with the beginning teachers we train. 'Real-time' lectures were pre-recorded, and seminars conducted via video link technologies such as Microsoft Teams and the Big Blue Button. Staff meetings also became 'virtual'.

In the midst of this massive upheaval, we met in mid-May to discuss how to respond creatively to the crisis. Feeling constrained by such much phrenetic, regulated activity, we decided to do some 'free writing' which allows you 'to write anything' (Bolton 2010: 23). Our rationale was that such writing provides a space for feeling to exist. We reflected that while educating our trainees online had been creative - we were constantly innovating - there was little chance to express our emotions. Working online can demand a perfectionist sensibility. Virtual learning spaces are tightly curated by the software's neat design: every keyboard tap, every interaction is logged somewhere. Both of us wanted to escape these 'sanitised' constraints and purposefully create an overspill, to be experimental. Experiences of risk and imperfection are essential for creativity (Biesta, 2013); in addition, we wanted to see if free writing might provide us with further insight into how to deal with the new paradigms of online learning, social distancing and the global pandemic.

The free writing encouraged us to consider whether nurturing a similar 'lack of perfection' using this and other techniques, such as spontaneous drawing, might help our students. We came to perceive that immediacy and rawness is an essential part of creative development, and would like to think about how more polished online interfaces for learning could accommodate the emotive in teaching practice. Bound by the structure of online spaces, following tight rubrics of assessment and control of interaction, do teacher educators and students need to have a chance to find a new path? (Craft 2011)

Our thinking about this connects with a posthumanist research methodology (Fox & Alldred 2015). Posthumanists look beyond human interactions to explore how nonhuman and more-than-human forces affect us. One posthumanist approach is to see life as 'machinic' (Deleuze & Guattari 2013), in that human society has an interconnection with animals, matter and the spatial environment. Human agency is inseparable from materiality: as found in the push and pull of atoms, of ecologies, of weather patterns, of migrations, of social hierarchies, of institutional structures and of technological developments. These 'machines' form 'assemblages': they combine to create new machines of 'vibrant ecological matter' (Zapata, Kuby and Thiel 2018, 493) which are synergies of 'intra-action' between social and environmental forces (Barad

2007, Jensen 2019, 659). So, for example, in the sea change of C19, the machines of the virus, of human bodies, of global travel, of computer technologies and of educational structures have led to an upsurge of 'online learning'.

If we approach the current situation by decentralising human control (Barad 2007, Braidotti 2013), we could recognise that the natural world has tried to take back some of its presence in the spaces left between humans. Could we perhaps create 'safe breakout spaces' online that relate to this shift in the natural world, and nurture affective and spontaneous creativity? What kind of online tools and processes could help this happen?

The next steps in our research will be to see if freedom of expression in online creative breakout spaces might build a forum for social justice and inclusion in learning.

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Biographies

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Dr Francis Gilbert was a teacher for twenty-five years in various UK state schools. He is the author of many books, including *I'm A Teacher, Get Me Out Of Here* (2004), *Analysis and Study Guide: Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (2015), *The Mindful English Teacher* (2018) and *Snow on the Danube* (2019). He is now a senior lecturer in education at Goldsmiths, University of London, where he is the course leader for [PGCE English](#) and the head of the [MA in Creative Writing and Education](#). He is a member of the Higher Education Committee of the National Association of Writers in Education (NAWE) and a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. Francis is currently researching creative ways of teaching online.

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Dr Miranda Matthews lectures in Art and Education and is Head of the Centre for Arts and Learning at Goldsmiths University of London. Miranda's work at Goldsmiths has included being a tutor on the PGCE in Art and Design since 2016. Miranda researches issues of freedom, autonomy and representation in the arts and learning. Her writing often looks at theoretical mapping of practice. She is currently researching responses to recent policy in practice with Teachers of Art and Design, and interdisciplinary approaches to visual and discursive practice in Higher Education. In the new paradigms of social distancing, Miranda is researching affective and creative online spaces.

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