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Teaching and working during the Covid-19 crisis: lockdown lessons

Step through the mirror & reflect



Figure 1 John Tenniel's illustration of Alice stepping through the looking glass (1871)

Lockdown has probably given most of us time to reflect upon a lot of things: our work, our relationships, our friends, our status and the meaning of life! One of the most nurturing things I've done is to re-read Gillie Bolton's *Reflective Practice: Writing & Professional Development* (2010). It's an unpromising title for what is a truly wonderful book. In it,

Bolton shows how meaningful reflective writing can be transformative on many levels. Drawing upon evidence from a huge range of literary classics, educational theorists, psycho-analytical thinkers and the professionals she has worked with -- who include doctors, nurses and teachers -- Bolton shows how we can all benefit from 'writing to learn'. For Bolton reflective practice is 'paying critical attention to the practical values and theories which inform everyday actions' and involves both reflection, 'in-depth consideration of events or situations', and reflexivity, 'standing outside the self to...become aware of the limits of our knowledge' (2010: ix). 'Writing to learn' is a vital tool for the reflective practitioner because it enables the discovery of new things as opposed to representing learning. She advocates what she calls 'through the mirror writing' (Bolton 2010: Chapters 4 & 6): we need to step like Alice (Figure 1) into our own mirror worlds and see the world from inside the mirror (Figure 2).



Figure 2 Alice enters the mirror world

Like Alice we need to ‘jump lightly down into the Looking Glass room’, look around and see that things are ‘different as possible. For example, the pictures on the wall next to the fire seemed to be alive’ (Carroll [1865] 1954: 122-3). Bolton advises professionals to learn *through* writing (Bolton 2010: p. 23), to use writing as a tool for discovering things about yourself and the world around you. She advocates ‘free writing’ as her basic tool for doing this: you should do ‘unplanned, off-the-top-of-the-head writing: try to allow yourself to write anything’ (23). Then, she offers many strategies for reflecting upon this writing; re-reading it from the imaginary perspective of different audiences, re-writing it for a specific purpose or in a new genre, taking an unexpected point of view or form. This reflective writing generates ‘aha moments’ where you see a situation or problem afresh, and that it can also be cathartic (Bolton 2010: 44).

Since lockdown, I have been free writing at the beginning of the day, handwriting on paper with a pen. I and have also led several ‘through-the-mirror’ writing sessions with the beginning teachers and creative writers I tutor. They have reported that they’ve found these sessions useful: this reflective writing has helped them off-load difficult thoughts and feelings, see problems from different perspectives, and has been fruitful in generating fresh ideas for their work. One student told me, ‘I found it so much easier to write my assignment after doing the free-writing regularly. I was just in the practice of writing. I’m no longer frightened of it, of starting, and I have learnt that you learn so much through writing. And I’m not worried if I write a load of junk now because I know something will turn up that I’ll be able to use.’

Be kind to yourself

One of the things that ‘through the mirror’ facilitates is the consideration of your fundamental aims and values (Bolton 2010: Chapter 3) by getting you to ask basic questions such as: why am I writing? Why am I teaching this material? Lockdown has made many people reconsider many of their priorities. This can be a very painful process, but I would argue a necessary one and needs to be done with kindness. Instead of beating yourself up about missed opportunities and being negative about your perceived failures and mistakes, being kind to yourself can help.

I’d advise doing some reflective writing exploring these fundamental questions and trying to thread through some kindly thoughts about your perceived shortcomings. Carl Rogers’ concept of ‘unconditional positive regard’ is important to consider here: respecting and trusting yourself and other people (Bolton 2010: 162).

Some research shows that writing about traumatic experiences can be therapeutic and generate feelings of well-being, but that the people who benefit the most use a higher proportion of words which express positive emotions (Pennebaker and Seagal 1999). So, writing about what you feel grateful for, the activities you've enjoyed, the people you appreciate can have a beneficial effect.



Figure 3 Gardening can help generate kind thoughts

[Adopt a learning orientation](#)

You are a learner -- even if you think you're not! Many teachers, at times, feel reluctant to admit this, particularly to their students. To learn properly can be frightening because it will always mean making mistakes. This is possibly why lockdown has been so stressful for so many teachers: we've all had to learn how to adapt very quickly and move out of our comfort zones. We've inevitably made mistakes. Adopting a learning orientation, as opposed to a 'performance' orientation, can help. This chart, taken from Chris Watkins' article *Learning, Performance and Improvement* (2010: 3) illustrates the two mindsets.

Learning Orientation	Performance orientation
We believe that effort can lead to success	We believe that ability leads to success
We believe in our ability to improve and learn, and not be fixed or stuck	We are concerned to be seen as able, and to perform well in others' eyes
We prefer challenging tasks, whose outcome reflects our approach	We seek satisfaction from doing better than others
We get satisfaction from personally-defined success at difficult tasks	We emphasise competition, public evaluation
We talk to ourselves: when engaged in a task we talk ourselves through when the task is difficult	We display helplessness: "I can't do X"
A concern for improving one's competence	A concern for proving one's competence

Watkins's work draws heavily upon Carol Dweck's research, with the idea of a learning orientation correlating highly with Dweck's conception of the 'Growth Mindset' and the performance orientation being like Dweck's 'Fixed Mindset'. The reality, of course, is that we slide in and out of these two mindsets all the time. But being aware of them makes a significant difference not only to our ability to learn, but also our

teaching. Dweck argues we really improve as teachers when we are willing to adopt a Growth Mindset. She outlines her reasons why this is the case here:

The teachers with more of a growth mindset specifically confronted problems in their teaching head on. In our research with students, we consistently find that those with a fixed mindset want to hide from their deficiencies or mistakes lest they be measured by them, whereas those with a growth mindset try to address their deficiencies and mistakes and learn from them. (2014 pp. 12-13)

It's easy to see how in the context of the lockdown crisis why all of us might feel horribly exposed by our lack of knowledge. We've had to learn how to communicate with our students online, to use different technologies to do so; these are just a couple of the many issues which have faced us. Taking a Growth Mindset/learner orientation offers a useful way forward: instead of proving our competence, we aim to improve it and take satisfaction in achieving the goals set by ourselves.

[Learn how to engage online](#)

Equipped with a Growth Mindset, I have started to explore in more depth the whole realm of engaging learners online. Recently, the British Educational Research Association (BERA) have very helpfully made some of the top research on online teaching free:

<https://www.bera.ac.uk/news/covid-19-online-teaching-and-learning>

BERA only publish top quality research which has been very thoroughly peer-reviewed; it is generally regarded as the 'gold standard' for

educational research. All the articles are helpful, but one of the most useful I found was by K.F. Hew (2016) on ‘Engagement: lessons from MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses)’. It is worth reading in its entirety, but I have picked out here the key things that a teacher of creative writing might want to know about.

First, Hew offers a useful way of thinking about how and why students are motivated. He calls this the self-determination theory (SDT) of motivation and offers the following diagram to illustrate it.

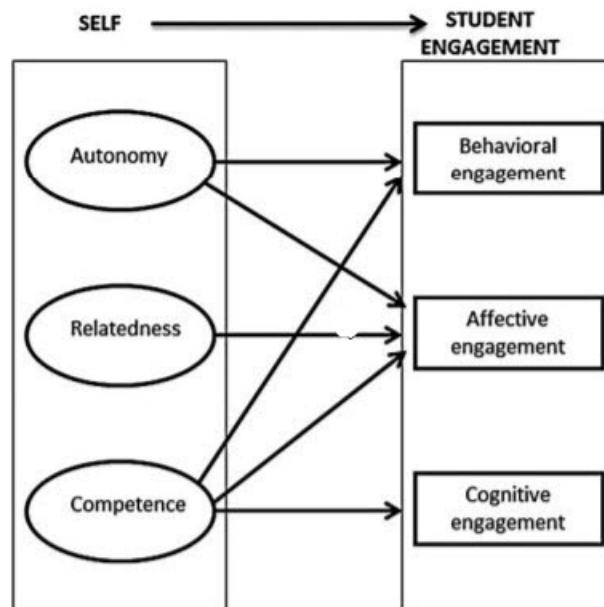


Figure 4 Hew's model of student engagement (2016: 324)

In brief, Hew posits that students are motivated by being given autonomy, feeling they are free to pursue, within reasonable parameters, their desires. This sense of autonomy affects their behaviour: they act and do things because they want to do them. They also need to feel that they relate to the tutor and their peers; this is their ‘affective engagement’. They feel happy, by and large, interacting with people on

their course. Finally, they need to believe that they are improving their 'competences', their skills and knowledge, in a subject; this is their 'cognitive engagement'.

An example of an online creative writing lesson using Hew's principles of good practice

To develop students' autonomy, relatedness and competence, Hew argues that online courses should offer 'problem-centric learning with clear expositions' (2106: 321). In brief, this means that teachers must pose relevant questions which inspire autonomous research. With a creative writing class, this might be such questions as:

What are the most suspenseful horror stories you have read?

Re-read some of them and reflect deeply upon what made them successful.

Consider not only what the ingredients that make a successful story, but also your own position as a reader of them. How did your age, gender, ethnicity, social class, mood at the time of reading etc. affect your reading experience?

Consider also the effect that other readers of the story had upon your reading experience: was the story recommended to you? Did you discuss it with them? If so, why? What effect did these discussions have upon your enjoyment of the story?

Notice here how the questions and task get the student looking ‘in the round’ at what interests them: they are not narrowly constrained to find a set of strategies, but need to consider their own ‘contexts of reading’: what they bring to the reading experience which makes a text work for them. Once they have explored these issues by themselves, they will be ready to discuss them with their fellow students and tutor using online discussion forums, presenting them if need be (see Use Breakout Rooms section for more on this). Having done the reading and discussion, the next task might be:

Write a story in the style of one of your favourite horror stories. If you wish share drafts of your work with trusted colleagues and students on the course, and write a reflective learning journal about the writing of your story, noting down what motivates you to write, when, where, how and why you write.

Here we have the second stage of the online creative writing task, the actual writing of the story. There is a suggestion that the student could share their work with other people, but this is just a proposal as giving the student a sense of autonomy is important: some writers do not like sharing early drafts. There is also the requirement to write a learning journal which gives the student a chance to explore their processes; to learn more deeply about what works for them.

Thus, we can see that such a series of online creative writing tasks meet to a certain extent Hew’s guidelines for effective virtual teaching: students are given choice and autonomy about what to do within reasonable parameters; they are encouraged to relate to their peers and their tutor in a positive way, and the task focuses upon improving their competences in creative writing by researching, practising and reflecting.

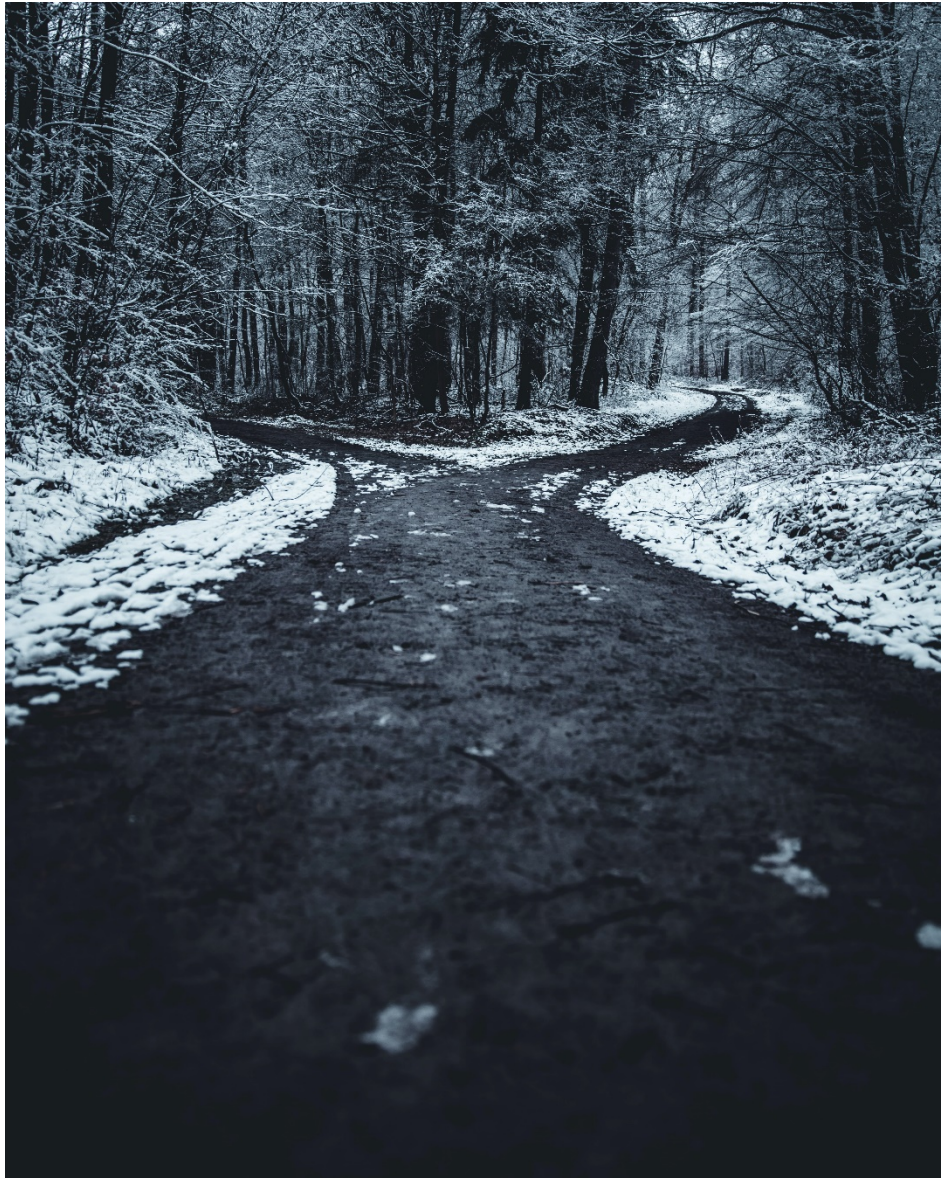


Figure 5 Giving students choices helps them feel more autonomous online

Tutor accessibility and assessment

Hew concludes his article with the updated version of Figure 6, which shows how the various elements of engaging teaching fit together.

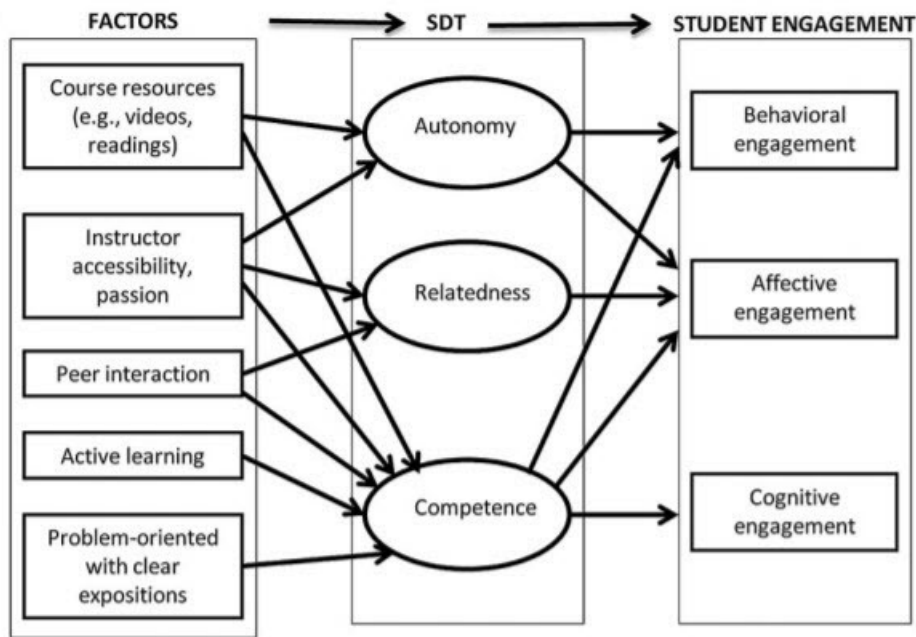


Figure 6 Hew's model of factors which engage online students (2016: 337)

The importance of the tutor's 'accessibility and passion' is a key message here. I would argue that these two factors are more important than all the others.

First, accessibility. This is both a 'value' and a series of strategies. Students can immediately tell if tutors 'have their guard up' and are not open to questions, inquiries, offering help. For me, Rogers' idea of 'unconditional positive regard' is a significant value to work upon: this means viewing one's students with kindness and positivity. This value also means that the strategies involved with being accessible are not seen as a chore. For example: I check my emails regularly and aim to reply to students as soon as I can to their inquiries. My replies are concise and friendly: I always have at the back of my mind that long discursive emails don't work. Similarly, when I am looking at and marking student drafts

of work, I take a ‘big picture’ approach, and aim to give ‘medal and a mission’ advice (Petty 2009: 79): I point one or two positive things, and then set them a ‘mission’ to work on to improve. I try to do this speedily. I have found that being responsive like this cuts down my workload because I do not develop a backlog of work to mark. Some teachers really struggle with marking because they tend to get bogged down in marking every error and writing long comments, which are sometimes not read and frequently misinterpreted (Petty 2009: chapter 8).

Often, I find that the positive and negatives of creative writing pieces and assignments are evident with a quick read; I point these out, and then ask the students themselves to carefully re-draft their work if there are errors in terms of punctuation, spelling or grammar. I also encourage them to assess each other’s work. Hew’s research shows this is particularly successful with MOOCs. He writes:

Overall, analysis of the participants’ reflections suggested that many students were positive about the use of peer assessment because it helped to generate diverse ideas or suggestions:

‘You write—and receive—peer reviews for each round of essays, which are so helpful. You share feedback with your fellow students. You begin to see the rich variety of students taking the course, and you learn from everyone.’ (Student C, Poetry MOOC)

‘I found peer review of other people’s codes particularly interesting and informative.’ (Student A, Python MOOC) (2016: 334)

So, setting up good peer and self-assessment practices saves time, and improves engagement and achievement (Petty 2009: chapter 8). This is where reflective writing as advocated by Bolton (2010) comes into its own: she demonstrates how asking students to free-write assessments to their own and other people's work is a great starting point for meaningful assessment. Answering the simple questions 'what did I learn from reading this work?' and 'what would I like to learn more about?' is particularly effective because it keeps the focus upon the learning rather than making performative judgements (Watkins: 2010). Bolton devotes a whole chapter in her book to this: it's worth reading fully and carefully because it may save you a lot of work and improve your outcomes as a teacher (2010: Chapter 8).

Conveying your passion online

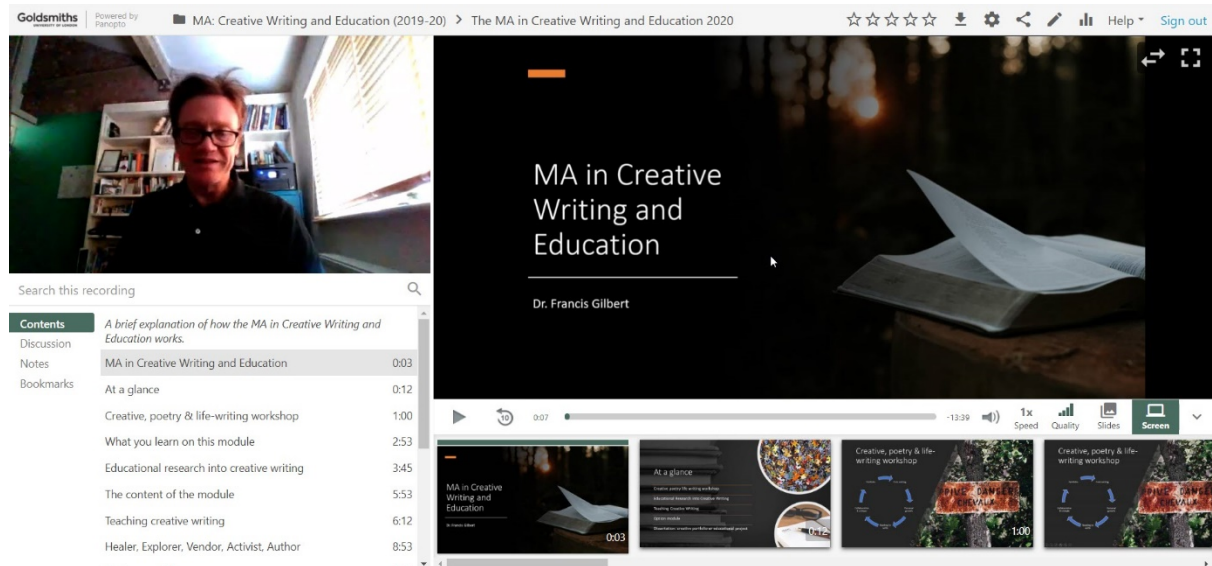


Figure 7 A screengrab of me talking about my course, trying to look animated!

But what comes across most strongly in Hew's research is the necessity for tutors to convey their passion for their subject through various online technologies. He writes:

Despite the large class size, the personal aspect (ie, the student feeling that the video was being directed directly at them) was obtained when the instructor appeared "to be only addressing me." This effect was largely achieved by filming the instructor in an informal setting such as a design studio as in the Design MOOC, or an office room as in the Python MOOC where the instructor often made direct eye contact with the camera. (2016: 336)

In my own experience, I have found that my students much prefer me to be on camera when I explain things like PowerPoint slides. Many of them have reported that seeing and listening to me gives the subject matter a human quality, which is lacking if all they hear is my voice. Similarly, I have experimented with using screencast software to mark drafts of assignments. To do this, I have filmed myself talking with an assignment in full view, highlighting the things I liked, and pointing out the sections I thought could be improved. One student said that this was more helpful than reading my written comments as she could intuit more easily from my expressions and speech what I was really getting at: I was able to convey my passion for what I liked, and she could work out from my tone of voice that what might have looked like harsh criticism in writing was, in fact, constructive.

Doing this sort of marking is too time-consuming to do for every draft, but if you pick out one assignment that is indicative then you can video yourself talking about the main issues, and with the students'

permission, show it to your class. When I've done this, I've found it's saved me a lot of time because every student has watched the video, and clearly learnt a lot from it when I've marked subsequent drafts. It's meant that I don't have to mark other drafts in so much detail because I simply refer them to the instructional video.

Embrace multimodalism

Gunther Kress (2005) explains the concept of multimodalism in this way:

A multimodal approach is one where attention is given to all the culturally shaped resources that are available for making meaning: image, for instance, gesture, or the layout – whether of the wall-display, or the furniture of classrooms and of course writing and speech as talk. Mode is the name we give to these culturally shaped resources for making meaning. Multi refers to the fact that modes never occur by themselves, but always with others in ensembles. Multimodality characterized therefore by the presence and use of a multiplicity of modes. (p. 2)

As Josie Barnard has pointed out in her book *The Multimodal Writer: Creative Writing Across Genres and Media* (2019) there is a real value in writers learning about the theory and practice of multimodalism. All writers are multimodal whether they like it or not, writing in different modes all the time: online, by hand, in print magazines, appearing in and producing podcasts, videos etc. Understanding how and why multimodalism works is of great worth. For example, I have noticed that

using objects, online can making lessons more engaging. I have a range of objects around my desk which I can use during my teaching.

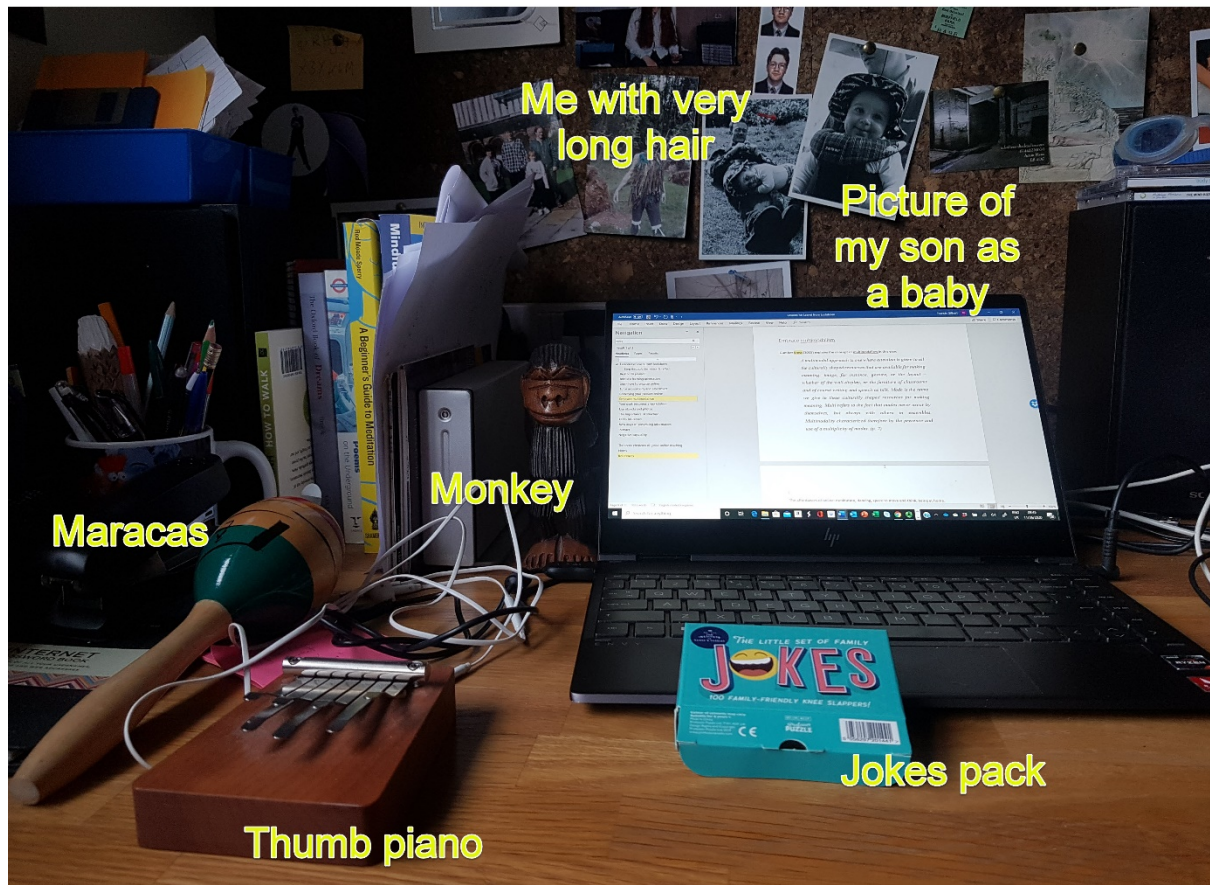


Figure 8 Objects around my desk

The thumb piano is great for starting lessons, ending tasks, creating a moment of the ‘uncanny’ online: it has a haunting, ringing sound. The maracas generate a sense of excitement. The pack of jokes are very useful if you have a spare moment – particularly when you’re waiting for everyone to join the class – and you want to put people at their ease: reading a cheesy joke makes people laugh or groan and trigger interesting conversations. The monkey (to the left of the laptop) is good for representing all sorts of concepts: playfulness, thinking differently, triggering creative responses etc. The photographs above my desk, particularly the one of my son when he was very little, smiling in the sling and (less visibly) hugging my legs as I am lying down, always brings

a sense of joy, so the photograph does help me if I am feeling I am losing my confidence with a lesson. The books at the side are there if I want to read a random poem or offer a meditation (the yellow book).

One of the benefits of using a webcam is that you can hold up objects which are very small and achieve a monumental quality on the webcam, which they could never do in the classroom.



Figure 9 Using the webcam to foreground objects

In Figure 9, I am holding up a small 'bald-headed eagle pen' to the camera so that my students can think about taking a 'bird's eye perspective', looking down on the events of the world from an elevated position. Obviously, you could use the object in any way you wish, but the point is that the camera is very good at giving the nuance and texture of small objects.

But... switch off that camera!

I have noticed as well that using short meditations can work very well with online teaching. Whenever I have done this, my students have been

very positive about the experience, sometimes saying that they found it the best thing about the lesson.

Meditation gets a 'bad rap' in some quarters because it's associated with mysticism and 'New Age' philosophy. However, having meditated for a number of years now, I see it as a very ordinary activity; most of the time you are simply noticing the sensations of your breathing and your body in a gentle, kind way. I've found it has really helped me during lockdown and many of my students have said the same thing too: it can have, though not always, a calming effect. Its ultimate purpose is not to calm, but to become aware of the present moment in all its fullness. It's very helpful for people who are very tied up in their thoughts -- as most writers and students are -- because it can allow a moment of 'being', a rest from goal-oriented thinking.

To do it well, you need to be a practised meditator yourself, and have experienced online meditations. There are lots of them available online. The ones I find work well focus upon developing compassion and kindness. Here is one is by Vidymala, the founder of the mindfulness charity Breathworks:

<https://youtu.be/PdllNod-8l4>

Here is one by Mark Williams, the author of *Mindfulness: Finding Peace in a Frantic World* (2011):

<https://youtu.be/pLt-E4YNVHU>

When I have meditated with my students online, I have found that I am less frightened of silences and more willing to embrace them. Some students have reported that they prefer online meditations to ones in person because they can cover their webcam with a post-it note, or switch it off, and not feel so self-conscious as they might in a room full of

people. Shutting your eyes in front of people can be quite a traumatic experience for some people, but that can be easily avoided online. Asking students to move mindfully or do some yoga also can have this safety valve. Staring at a screen for a long time can have negative effects, so it's worth breaking up lessons with little bits of movement and meditation.

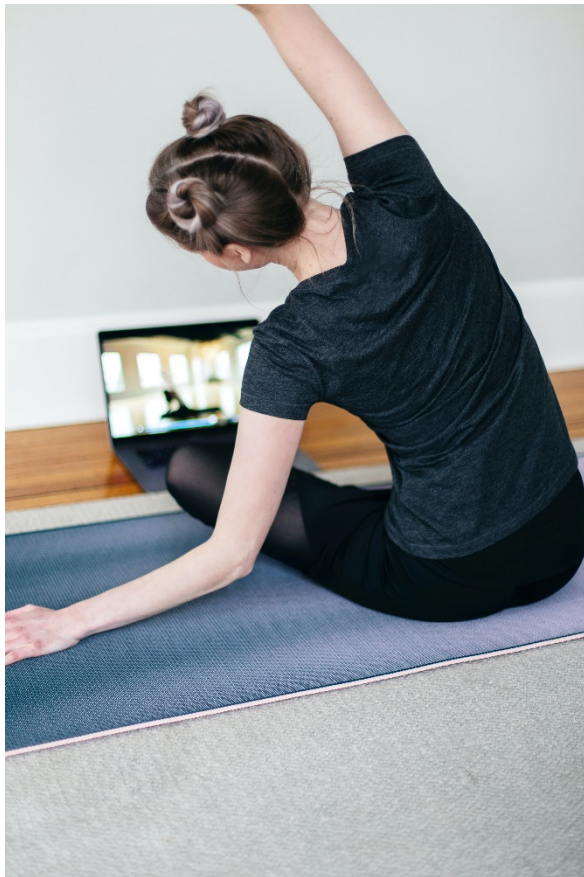


Figure 10 Online yoga

Similarly, with cameras off, you can more easily get your students doing more unusual things like dancing and role-playing in a way that is less intimidating for them than in a 'real' classroom. You can ask them to have a go at walking like a particular character in a poem/book; they can dance to a piece of music; they can make a frozen statue of a particular expression. All this can be done without them feeling embarrassed that they are being seen.

Togetherness

Writing together in silence online can be very rewarding. Free writing (Elbow 1998; Bolton 2010) has proved to be a very effective starting point for my creative writing classes. I do invite people to share their work and/or their thoughts and feelings about their writing processes. I never force anyone to say anything though. Getting students to reflect upon why, how and what they are learning fosters ‘meta-cognition’: mindful awareness of what works for them. This nurturing of meta-cognition has consistently been shown to be hallmark of effective learning and teaching (Watkins 2010: 4).

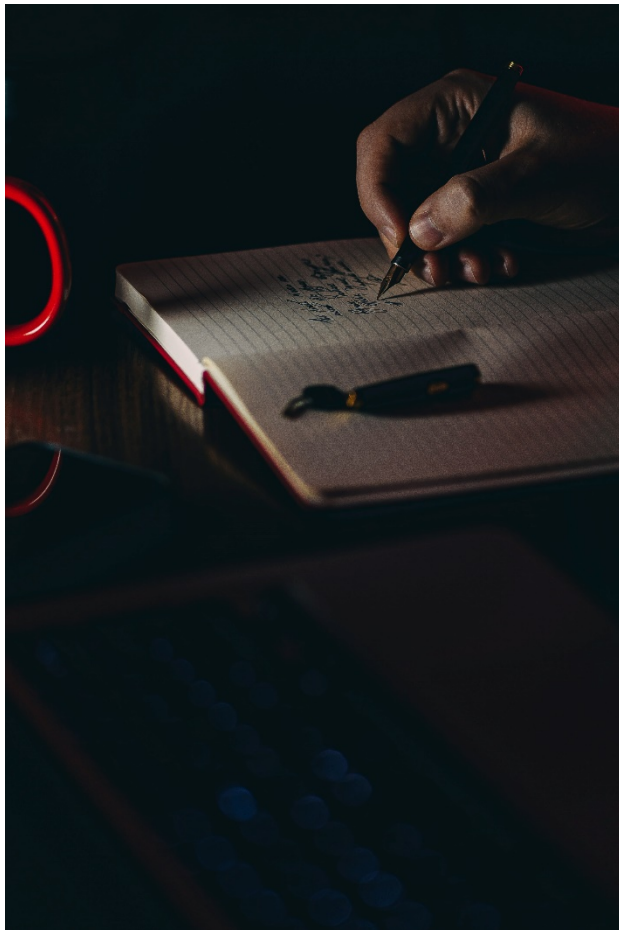


Figure 11 Free writing

Use breakout rooms

The best online platforms for teaching provide what are known as breakout rooms. I've found the easiest to use is on the open source platform known as Big Blue Button (<https://bigbluebutton.org/>). Zoom also has an easy-to-use breakout room facility. It is worth taking a moment to learn how to do this because it means you can work with big groups online in real-time and get them discussing things in groups of any size. With Big Blue Button, as moderator, you can hop from room to room easily and chat with the groups. This means that you can set a task, and then ask people to discuss in groups what they think they've been asked to do, and how they might do it; they can read work together in their groups; they can peer-assess work and prepare presentations. Students have reported that they've really appreciated the breakout rooms and found their online learning much less intimidating when put into smaller groups. It nurtures that hallmark of meaningful learning: dialogue.

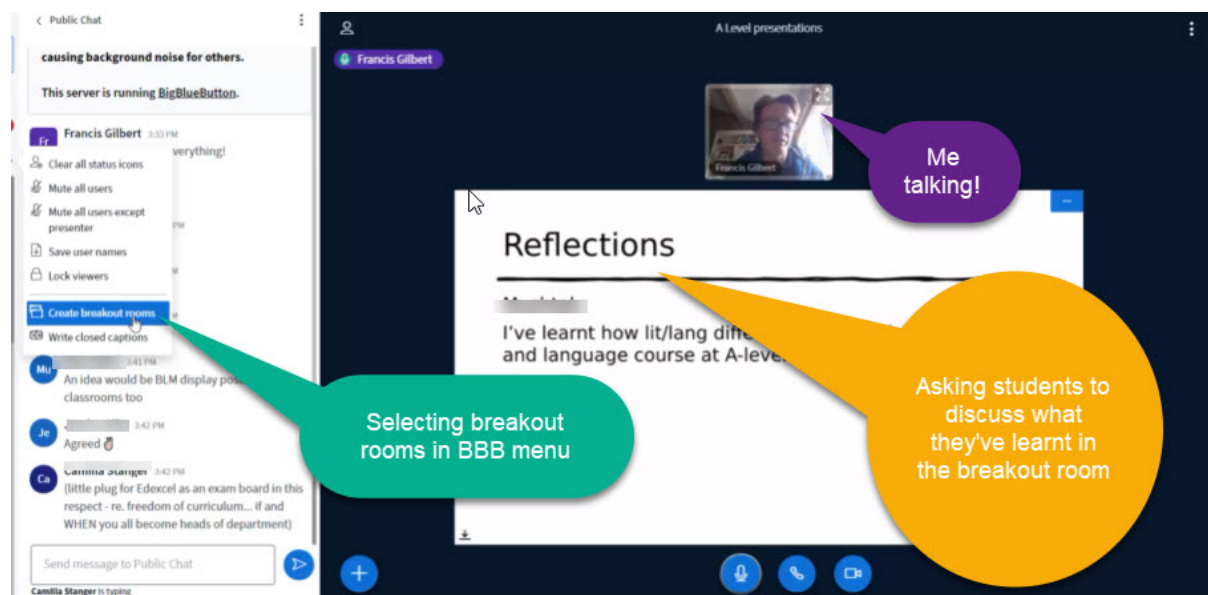


Figure 12 Creating the breakout rooms in Big Blue Button

In Figure 12, you can see I've selected the side-menu and I'm about to click on 'create break out rooms'; I've also set a task for everyone to

discuss what they had learnt in their groups as a reflective task: they'd just listened to a long lecture.

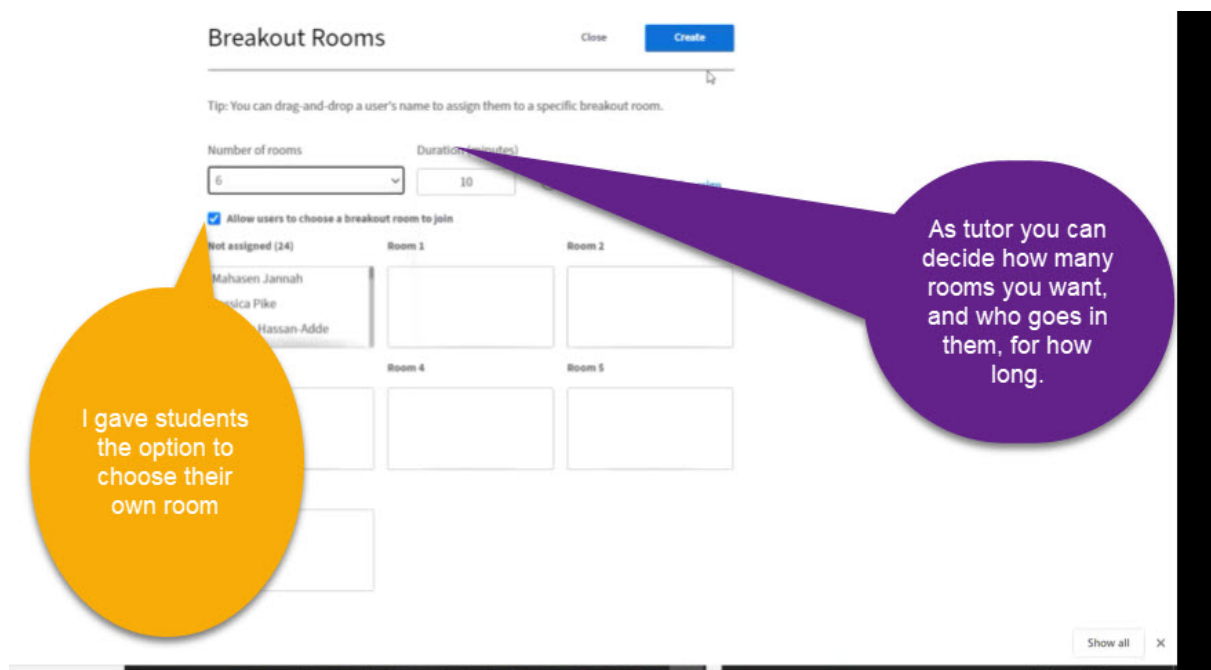


Figure 13 Choosing how many breakout rooms to do; who to go in them; for how long

Figure 13 shows how the tutor, or moderator as they are known in BBB, sets up the breakout rooms. The moderator has a lot of control, choosing who goes in the room, for how long and the size of the groups. To give students a sense of autonomy, I asked them to choose where to go. This worked well as the students felt they had autonomy.

The importance of structure: set a schedule, lie down, dress for dinner

A key lockdown lessons for me is how important structuring your day is. One of the best ways of doing this is to take a few moments at the beginning of each working day to handwrite a schedule in whatever way you see fit. My son – no longer a baby! -- rather sweetly gave me a 'Power Planning' notebook for Christmas, which includes categories like 'Happy Shopper' and a clock face; I've found this is a good place to scribble all my to-dos! It calms me down, and it's good to have it by my desk to

handwrite things that suddenly crop up. The point of showing this is that it is absolutely incomprehensible to everyone but me, but that's the point. It gives me a sense of structure.

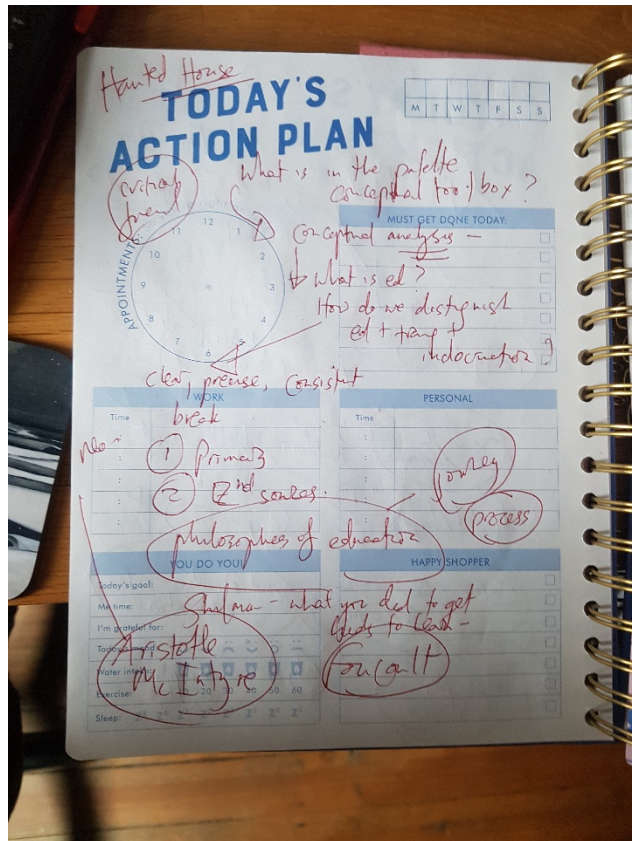


Figure 14 My scruffy action plan in my Power Planner

One of the most interesting books I've read recently is *Rest: Why You Get More Done When You Work Less* (2018) by Alex Soojung-Kim Pang. In it, Pang argues that the most effective creative people actually only officially 'work' about four hours a day and take plenty of rest. They have a good morning routine --- when most of their work gets done -- and then they walk, nap, exercise, play and sleep, taking plenty of time to recover. Pang shows that most successful people do this when they produce their best work. His case studies are fascinating and include

Darwin, Einstein, Bill Gates, Roald Dahl and Joyce Carol Oates. He shows that while these people might have 'dips' in their productivity this is because they didn't follow his recipe for success, having plenty of rest. He also argues that sabbaticals very important: taking a sustained break from work. Building in plenty of 'rest points' into your day makes you more productive because you can really focus when you need to. Bearing this in mind, I have tried to structure my working days so that I can do the following things:

- Lie down and shut my eyes on my yoga mat, doing a Body Scan (Williams & Penman 2011) or even falling asleep if I am tired
- Go for a run or walk
- Do Pilates to help my back, which gives me problems if I sit for long periods of time
- Have regular meals at set times
- Make sure I do things like play the piano, read a book, watch TV.

I have found that I like to mark a transition between working and not working by having a shower and changing my clothes for dinner in the evening. This gives me a sense of things having ended, which is important for me.

The elements of good online teaching

Summing up, Hew boils down good online teaching to three main elements:

- Good subject knowledge and genuine passion for the course topic

- Taking a step-by-step approach to learning, breaking down the study into manageable, meaningful and motivating chunks: using the technology to convey vital information in a concise way
- Interacting with students in such a way that they know their instructors are concerned about them and their progress.

(My summary of Hew 2016: 338)

One of the heartening messages here is not so much that tutors need to be whizzes with the technology. It is more important they should use it a mindful fashion, keeping their contributions snappy and enthusiastic. The more old-fashioned issue of caring about your course and your students seem to be the really important factors in fostering engagement.



Figure 15 Experiment: find out what works for you

But as has been discussed, it is particularly important for tutors to nurture their own wellbeing and that of their students. I have suggested a number of strategies for this in this article, but they do come with the

health warning that they are not for everybody. The best advice I can give is to experiment and find out what really works for you.

Permissions

Timothy Hew kindly gave me permission to show his diagrams. All other photographs are my own or taken from <https://unsplash.com/> which is under 'Creative Commons', and therefore can be freely used.

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Figure 1:

<https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/b9/Aliceroom.jpg>

Figure 2:

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Biography

Francis Gilbert is the author of many books about education, including *I'm A Teacher, Get Me Out Of Here* (2004), *Parent Power* (2007) and *Who Do You Love* (2017). He is the course leader for PGCE English and Head of Programme for its MA in Creative Writing and Education at Goldsmiths, University of London. His novel *Snow on the Danube* was published by Blue Door Press in 2019. He is a member of NAWE's Higher Education Committee, and was a guest editor of NAWE's academic journal *Writing in Practice*, Issue 6, 2020.

<http://www.francisgilbert.co.uk>

