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Untrammelled Ways: Reflecting on the Written Text, Nourishment and Care in Online Teaching (Dr Rebecca Bell)

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Abstract

As the Covid pandemic gathered momentum in 2020, it became clear that online teaching spaces risked a distancing from the embodied knowledge so necessary to creative education. Teaching written texts to creative practitioners is a process that calls for alternative spatial and visual literacies (Gimenez and Thomas 2015), for ontological methods, for honouring experience and reflection – especially in a neo-liberal climate of higher education. In my teaching practice, as well as writing and painting practices, I like so many others have sought spaces for nourishment during this era. Through my teaching and a collaborative research group, one space in which I located this was via hope. This is a time to ask if we can use this moment in history to encourage thinking in an untrammelled manner and to move more freely in the unfamiliar (Arendt 1968); to transform the classroom (bell hooks 1994, 2003); to seek materiality as a method of interpretation, even online; to encourage fearlessness, plurality

and relationality (Escobar, 2018); to use craft methods; and enter a space of care and emotional openness. This contribution will consider creative allyship between staff and students, with the written text as a place of beginning. This is a deliberately open-ended, exploratory, personal, and reflective piece of writing, gathered during teaching and research from 2020-2022. 'Ways of Writing' is equally explored in the method of this article as well as its content.

Keywords: nourishment, pedagogies, materiality, hope, craft, ontologies

My shoulders were locked, arms stiff and eyes aching. It was the lockdown in the UK and I woke most mornings feeling contained, moving the short distance from bedroom to the room which already combined sitting room and kitchen, but now also contained a small desk crammed into one corner where I would spend my working day. 'Make sure you find a space that belongs to work and allocate it to that alone,' said one colleague when we gathered online to share Tips for Working from Home During the Pandemic, 'Somewhere you can close the door at the end of the day and move away from it all' (Anon. 2020). I looked at the sofa jammed next to me on one side, the window opening onto a noisy walkway belonging the block of flats next to ours on the other side, the dining table with the breakfast things still on it behind me, and wondered at the different working conditions among us – while knowing I was one of the very lucky ones in this pandemic. I would see similar environments

behind the students we now taught online: family members sleeping, playing, working, walking by and looking in; intimately domestic objects; childhood bedrooms suddenly spilling over into the worlds that, until this juncture, had been the carefully protected domain of young adults forging independent lives.

I would only realise at the end of teaching sessions that I had slowly curled closer and closer to the screen, as if I was trying to peer in, to topple through the looking glass and find myself in a shared room. Physicality was compromised, both in terms of the loss of a shared three-dimensional classroom, and through the ways in which our bodies strained towards our devices. I became aware of the physicality of the computer, even more concentrated in its daily focus. My colleagues, students and I were increasingly 'at one with the glowing screens of our laptops' (Turkle 2007: 9). Through the newly learned actions of microphones on and off, cameras on and off, and chat functions, we entered spaces of corporeal and digital negotiation, generating combined data through our physical movements. For many of us, these were challenges to our material experience of teaching, of the relationship between mind and matter, a new instance of trying to 'make sense of life and relate to the world in both (distanced) reflexive and (immediate) corporeal ways' (Bosch 2012: 66 cited in Hofmann 2020: 175). Flann O'Brien's novel *The Third Policeman* played through my mind. The character Sergeant Pluck describes local inhabitants of rural Ireland who 'nearly are half people and half bicycles' from riding

their two-wheeled machines so often, Cartesian subject object dualism dissolving as human and machine particles mix: 'I realized that I had been communing with this strange companion and— not only that— conspiring with her . . . [we] both knew that the hope of each lay in the other, that we would not succeed unless we went together' (O'Brien cited in Duncan 2016: 152, 163). Similarly, we had to succeed together, my laptop and I, and more than ever forge connections to the students awaiting their education.

Despite the containment, the digital parameters, this was a chance for other senses to come into play – indeed, the ideas that creative higher educational pedagogies have grappled with in terms of visual and spatial literacy when teaching art and design students, took on an entirely new poignancy. There were similarities between the new teaching environment and issues I have queried during seven years of being a lecturer. The feeling of reaching out (this time across the ether) to students, wondering if they were ok, trying to connect to their thoughts and encourage discussion, was not unfamiliar: it resonated with the process of working with written texts, devised on academic foundations of word-based literacy, with practice-based students who thought in space, texture, colour, movement. Whilst vital to the learning processes of a creative education, texts also risk marginalising students who may not be 'engaged with the dominant practices and cultures of the academy' (Lea 2015: 13), bringing to the fore 'an epistemological tension between the distinct worlds [sic] of text- and object-based research practices' (Biggs and Büchler, 2012: 231 cited in

Gimenez and Thomas, 2015: 34). In the role of lecturer in Critical and Contextual Studies, Visual and Material Cultures (the name varying by institution, the intentions remaining fairly consistent), I have worked with students in fashion, textiles, fine art, art therapy, film, animation, dance, ceramics, glass, photography, animation, design products – and other creative media. The student's question of why the academic written word is still vital or enriching of creative practice, is a repeated echo.

As a writer, researcher, painter and educator, I too am in a constant tension of how to relate my areas of practice to one another. I believe there is a magic triangle in academic writing, one that I have yet to perfect, which combines personal narrative, relevant theory and contextual research, and – most importantly – practice. I have witnessed practice-based students achieve this again and again, with an agility that is humbling, even when claiming that the written word is not their medium. Teaching written texts in seminars during the pandemic required new online tactics. In physical rooms I would have handed out large sheets of paper, stuck things to the wall, created maps across the floor, put on music and provided out as many coloured pens and post-its as possible. In so doing, I hoped to encourage students to 'exercise criticality in accessing texts on their own terms', with the aim of 'loosening the sway of the author' (Barthes 1977: 143 cited in Gimenez and Thomas, 2015: 37) and finding ownership. I could not supply material in our new online forum, but we could use what we all had at home.

Reading out loud became a tool my colleagues and I used. As we read from articles, students were asked to respond through making. One instance of this was with a group of around 90 students responding to Arti Sandhu's 'Fashioning Wellbeing Through Craft: A Case Study of Aneeth Arora's Strategies for Sustainable Fashion and Decolonizing Design' (2020). The intimacy of sharing a screen enabled new connections and talking points as sketches, embroideries, digital images, and collage appeared in response to key ideas in the text. In another session, I slowly reviewed an article with the students and then asked them to draw the shape of the narrative, its twists and turns, its logic and evidence, its argument. The results, when shared collectively on a digital Miro whiteboard, were intensely varied: some a bundle of lines, others careful blocks, others made of disjointed words. Gathering together allowed for a quietly busy community, we could see each other's names floating about like little inquisitive arrows, and suddenly there was the joy of an image appearing, a slow line striking across the white, or words appearing letter by halting letter. It is notable that one of the early instances of using this in a large online room resulted in a crazed explosion of images, texts, lines, emojis, a huge copied and pasted photograph of Cher from *Clueless*, followed by a giant top hat, song lyrics and wildly expanding doodles. The need for play in this new universe became a demand, roaring from the screen.

In another session, I asked students to map bell hooks's 'Feminist Revolution: Development through Struggle' (2015: 159-166) according to the temperature of her argument. Via the use of colour, we co-created a document in which quotations gathered in pale yellow, hot pink, fiery red. In each instance of carrying out this session, I had some of the most collegiate experiences of Covid-era teaching: the students overlapped in their speech, microphones coming into life, laughter as they apologised then spoke over one another again – reading sections of text out loud, or typing them into the chat function. Discussions of the need for love and compassion became taut with emotion, especially in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement, Extinction Rebellion, the pandemic. At the end of the session, we repeated key lines from the chapter and ended on a slow reading of the words, 'The world in which we feel safe needs to change for real change to happen. 'Those revolutionary impulses must freely inform our theory and practice if feminist movement to end existing oppression is to progress, if we are to transform our present reality' (hooks 2015: 166). I left feeling warmed, inspired, hopeful. I hope they did too. It was an embodied experience, one that I missed from the physical classroom. It was apparent that the need for allyship was even keener in this particular online environment: finding a method of shared discussion as a democratic mode of learning became correspondingly even more important (Brookfield and Preskill 2005). Similar environments were produced through collaborative visualisations of texts, in which the students and I gathered

associative images, especially those indicating missing voices or narratives, in response to articles and chapters (Figure 1).

Like many educators during the pandemic, I found myself engaged in even more personal stories in classroom environments. The emotional cost was visible: students were facing grief and loss, deep anxiety, grappling with IT literacies on top of educational and institutional requirements, working alongside siblings and parents in home environments, and often coming to classes from highly varied time zones as students scattered across the world. It was important in these spaces to bring in personal narrative, to find community, but also to take this back to creative inspiration and grounding. I set up 'Inspiration' sessions in which students who wished to could bring books they were reading, films they were watching, creative projects they were working on, podcasts they were listening to, in order to find both light relief and nourishment. This was also a unique opportunity to invite programme and studio staff to join, making new conversations possible, which any lecturer working in this field will know is an area that intensive schedules and the strategic allocation of days to studio work versus Visual Culture makes difficult in 'normal' times. This unfolded in varying ways, Visual Culture staff being invited back to studio sessions – just as online talks and conferences found that speakers they may not have obtained in person said yes if they could drop in from their sitting room, so too did it become apparent in everyday teaching environments that the overlaps oft-discussed and rarely activated, could finally happen online.

This led to co-hosted sessions and lectures between practice-based and history/theory-based staff.

Such approaches aimed to encourage meaning-making, interpreting perspectives in ways that had resonance for the student, with the hope that this would deepen learning (Biggs and Tang 2011: 21-22). This aligns to a belief I hold dear in all teaching, wherein the learner’s viewpoint is more important than the facilitating educator’s, in acknowledgement of the student’s experience and the ways in which that forms their relationship to knowledge (Kahu 2013). The process of making – whether responding to a text through embroidery, drawing an argument, collaging a whiteboard – enables an embodied, material encounter with key concepts. It sets up a palimpsest of personal meaning, layered over and in combination with the theory of the writer. Rather than reiterating the official ‘voice’ of the discourse (Cain and Pope, 2011: 49 cited in Badenhorst et al 2015: 98) often required by methods of academic assessment, individual creative processes can be encouraged – the text can also be re-written as material object. In adopting the literacies of the practice-based student, a step is taken towards a form of unconditional acceptance of visual and spatial languages, analogous to Carl Rogers's (1961) notion of ‘unconditional positive regard’.

In pandemic era-online teaching, objects beyond the laptop, phone or tablet had to be brought into play in absence of three-dimensional classroom, and

these could be in many forms. Assignments that we had previously devised to include archival objects (from university, museum and gallery collections) instead utilised objects found in the students' homes. As Sherry Turkle writes, 'we think with the objects we love; we love the objects we think with' and, in relevance to dealing with written texts, 'evocative objects bring philosophy down to earth' (Turkle 2007: 5-8). During the first part of the pandemic, my colleagues came up with one answer to this call by sending out printed articles to students, so they could physically draw on them, highlight, hold them up in online sessions. Susan Stewart has written of the 'exteriority of print', the ways in which the body disappears in writing, losing 'what the body knows-the visual, tactile, and aural knowledge of lived experience', creating a concealment of the 'real' world via the 'fiction of linguistic representation' (2012: 44-45). Whilst this is still relevant to the written texts themselves, in the online teaching environment, the reappearance of text as physical object, delivered to the student's door when the library was closed and printers were inaccessible, seemed to reinsert some kind of lived experience that would not have felt so poignant in the usual handing out of paper printouts in the physical classroom. They seemed to introduce a kind of interiority in seminars focused on reading, a shift in ownership. The printed text held a fragment of embodied connection in a digital encounter.

These learnings may sound small, and many are known already by those who have worked in Distance Learning for many years before the

pandemic caused the untrained to gate-crash their field. But my reflections have personal significance as experiential and embodied: after sessions that seemed to work I would resonate for hours with the new energy of the pixelated classroom, reflecting on what it meant to myself and the students. bell hooks has described the classroom as conceptualised and activated, as a dynamic place 'where transformations in social relations are concretely actualized and the false dichotomy between the world outside and the inside world of the academy disappears' (hooks 1994: 195). In this context, thinking is action, specifically critical thinking, which is dependent on a longing to know (2010). To make this possible, the classroom has to be a space of radical openness, in which one cannot – as is often the case in academic environments – become protective of one viewpoint (hooks 2010). hooks calls to educators to dare to 'learn new ways of thinking and teaching so that the work we do does not reinforce systems of domination, of imperialism, racism, sexism or class elitism', but instead creates 'a pedagogy of hope' (2003: xiv). It is this hope which 'empowers us to continue our work for justice even as the forces of injustice may gain greater power for a time. As teachers we enter the classroom with hope' (hooks 2003: xiv). In the tentative space of pandemic teaching, these 'new ways of thinking' became even more fundamental. The classroom has shifted territory and through necessity became one of openness. There was hope in this process. A common anecdotal agreement amongst academics during this period was that one-to-one tutorials allowed for a

greater honesty and depth online, as if we were sitting in each other's houses. But it was also a classroom that revealed socio-economic discrepancies in the home, was affected by digital poverty, and required yet more languages to be learnt by students and colleagues alike, which potentially excluded those with learning needs even further. I have experienced many sessions composed of turned off cameras and complex silences, as have all educators during this time. But I understood it: the classroom pushes everyone uncomfortably into the front row – the world we usually felt was outside of the university was now in it, and we still have much to learn about how to handle that with care.

In these thoughts and pedagogical practices, I have also worked in collaboration with Dr Ana Baeza Ruiz (University of Loughborough, Prado Museum). Together we hosted a conference in 2020 (Middlesex University) where writers in the field gathered to speak on ideas of hope, responding to the question: How can we seize this critical moment to imagine a pedagogical space in which teaching happens differently? In our call for papers, we emphasised hope as the locus of possibility, as a grounding concept in radical pedagogies (Freire 2017 [1973]; bell hooks 1994, 2003, 2010), and its increasing application in a UK Higher Education context to query the university (Amsler 2016) and find space for creative re-imaginings of pedagogy. This resulted in a working group testing out ideas in an informal, collaborative space, which included decolonising the curriculum, embodied literacies, commensality, vulnerability, uncertainty,

questions of authority, emotional labour, risk-taking and modalities of care. As a group of academics in highly-pressurized working environments, responding to the increased pastoral care of teaching online during a pandemic, we too were seeking places of nourishment. In trying to test out how we could do that in online environments for ourselves, we sought to work out how to do this for our students – and vice versa. Many of the ideas in this article connect to a workshop that Baeza Ruiz and I ran for the Pedagogies of Hope working group in February 2021, entitled 'Material and Embodied Modalities of Care – Co-Creation in Online Teaching via Objects and Text', where we explored through spoken and visual form some of the ideas we were trying to bring to the classroom.

In this collaborative environment, I found myself turning back to Hannah Arendt, whom I refer to in the concept of 'untrammelled' used in this article's title. Arendt has noted that when we are pressed 'up against each other' the 'space between that is freedom' is destroyed (Arendt 1973: 466 cited in Spector 2016: 92). We need, as she phrases it, to 'stop-and-think' in order to communicate with others and change the systems in which we operate (Arendt 1978: I,78 cited in Spector 2016: 93). In these spaces 'in between' we may be able to move in an untrammelled manner, 'to move freely without crutches over unfamiliar terrain' (Arendt 1968: 10 cited in Villa 2000: 278). For Arendt, these notions are considered within the context of totalitarianism, and as such should be understood in relation to those specific parameters (Bell, 2019). However, her thoughts provide a

relevant departure for times of restriction and have implications for the administrative authoritarianism of UK higher education, where 'the "public of private interests" continually reproduces its own institutional hierarchies' (Nixon 2012: 11), resulting in a potential crisis moment. Arendt warned, when writing of education in the USA in the 1950s, that the danger of crisis is that 'simple, unreflective perseverance, whether it be pressing forward in the crisis or adhering to the routine that blandly believes the crisis will not engulf its particular sphere of life, can only, because it surrenders to the course of time, lead to ruin' (Arendt 1954). The solution is 'the power of human thought and action to interrupt and arrest such processes' (Arendt 1954). Arendt's thinking has been applied to education in relation to areas such as processes of thought, judgement, plurality, ethical responsibility, and crucially, freedom (Biesta 2006; Dillabough 2002; Phelan 2010; Todd 2009 cited in Spector 2016; Nixon 2012). The call to freely moving into the unknown resonates with a relational understanding of higher education, a need to have an expansive conceptual understanding of our pedagogical practices and environments. In teaching, this means an ontological and generative understanding, where, as Ronald Barnett defines it, the university is ephemeral, it moves and changes – it is made up of interconnected ecosystems (2017a; 2017b).

We need spaces to reimagine, to reconsider, which are hard to find among the pressures of marketized, neo-liberal educational environments. But we also need to envisage structural change: it is, as Arturo Escobar has

discussed in relation to design, necessary to move away from patriarchal rationalist and individualist models of capitalist modernity to a pluriverse, 'where many worlds fit', where we can enter a 'relational dimension of life' (Escobar 2018: xvi, ixr 1). We may be able to enter these notions in a spirit of utopia, in which we might be able to imagine things differently, to construct visions of a world or situation that 'could be' (2017a: 81). Arendt's definitions of space and freedom are key to this imagining. As are, in answer to Escobar's call, values such as tenderness, care, feminism, emotional experience, material and embodied knowledge, which should inform our creative responses to assessment and teaching. I had spent a great deal of time with these ideas in 2019, in reflection on my teaching and my purpose in higher education, through collaborative discussions and a PGCert. As the pandemic hit, the feelings of fragility, exhaustion and isolation shared by so many, made these tendencies even more vital. In teaching art and design, specifically through the emphasis of key writers and thinkers whose texts enable spaces for reimagining and requestioning – in close connection with visual and material practice – so must related pedagogies follow the 'material turn' in a process of '[rethinking] anti-ontologizing dualisms, such as those between the natural and the social, the human and the nonhuman, the material and the immaterial' (Munteán et al 2017: 3 citing Bennett 2010, cited in Jenss and Hofmann 2020: 4). The written text in relation to visual and spatial hierarchies is also a space to activate movement away from dualism.

Escobar's call is one that can also be answered through many of the values associated with craft. In my doctoral research in the field of craft and design under restricted political circumstances (2020), I repeatedly came back to Glenn Adamson's definition, that 'craft is not a movement or a field, but rather a set of concerns that is implicated across many types of cultural production' (2010: 3). These include slowness, valuing time, developing skill, and embodied and material relationships. In the process of making, the body, mind and imagination can together be 'integrated in the practice of thought through action', which in turn provides a sense of freedom and agency (Margetts 2011: 39). Just as in creative making processes, the body connects to haptic and tacit understanding, to physical and acted knowledge (Polanyi 1958: 55-57), so too can material or object-based encounters such as those I have outlined in classroom sessions, enable the *feel* of a written text. The latter can be inhabited in the classroom through processes that draw upon visual and spatial literacies, which connect to notions of dexterity, care, and learning through risk (Pye 1968). Indeed, we can also see the iterations of laptop and digital device movements – keys pressed, typing in the chat, sharing images – as related to craft process. If we adhere to Malcolm McCullough's definition that 'craft is the application of personal knowledge to the giving of form' in which a person using a computer is applying skill, using their hands to perform 'a sophisticated and unprecedented set of actions' – then tools, technology and the hand, as he asserts, do not need to be adversarial (McCullough, 1997: 310-316).

There has been a sense of precarity in the online pandemic classroom, and we need to be emotionally expansive enough to genuinely allow spatial and embodied knowledge to be held as highly as the authority of the written text in order to remove hierarchy, to 'build students' hope by teaching them to set goals that are connected to their values and strengths' (Schreiner et al 2009). I have been fortunate to work in environments where colleagues have agreed these values need to be constructively aligned to assessment structures in order to gain meaning (and modules have been revalidated accordingly), to truly allow practice to be integrated with theory. But there is much work still to be done.

In reading out loud to enable material responses, in taking texts apart and creating visual representations, in responding through objects, meaning can be disordered according to the academic convention of linear argument. Such disorder is positive, and a resulting creative satisfaction can be gained through these small-scale interventions in the higher education institution. In this I also draw upon the values of established craft forms such as domestic hobbies or zines, to open up spaces to 'those who would otherwise have been excluded by gender, class or lack of expertise to be independent of the professional and gain a sense of creative satisfaction' (Atkinson 2008: 306). Engagement in this context can take place 'through multi-sensory processes that activate material modalities of care: careful and slow looking; touching and feeling; listening to another, storytelling' (Baeza Ruiz 2021). The process of

interaction with student and text can activate care between educator and student, between student and the text, between student and the online seminar space.

Admitting the emotion of all of these attempts is a key to achieving untrammelled ways, to forging comradeship and co-production, to allow for warmth and ownership, intentionality and student/staff allyship. Everyday experiences and the making sensibilities of the creative practitioner facilitate new ways of being in the classroom, from which we can take inspiration. The digital spaces in which we have found ourselves teaching may not have been the original catalyst for these discussions around alterative literacies, but they have sharpened awareness of their need. Educators have been called to explore nourishment through the dislocation of a pandemic, through having to step onto unfamiliar terrain. Importantly here, as many of us return to physical classrooms, is the need to remember our desire for it. In this spirit, we can hope to approach this moment in higher education to build different visions of the classroom, in a necessary movement away from patriarchal rationality and marketisation towards the ontological, to responsiveness, to creativity, making and care.

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