Prioritizing presence in a post-pandemic world

By: Amy Bix, Gregory Grieve, Natasha Heller, Beverly McGuire, and Stuart Sarbacker


Abstract:

The COVID-19 pandemic has radically impacted human relationships and presence. How can those in Religious Studies prioritize presence in a post-pandemic world? How might we maximize presence in both face-to-face and digital teaching environments? This white paper brings together scholars in Religious Studies to talk about these very pressing, practical concerns. Here we share insights from our teaching experiences, offer resources derived from our diverse areas of research, and propose possibilities for prioritizing presence in a post-pandemic world. [Note: Illustrations/memes created by John Gibbs.]

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***Note: Full text of article below***
White Paper

Prioritizing Presence in a Post-Pandemic World

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has radically impacted human relationships and presence. How can those in Religious Studies prioritize presence in a post-pandemic world? How might we maximize presence in both face-to-face and digital teaching environments? This white paper brings together scholars in Religious Studies to talk about these very pressing, practical concerns. Here we share insights from our teaching experiences, offer resources derived from our diverse areas of research, and propose possibilities for prioritizing presence in a post-pandemic world.
Prioritizing Presence on Digital Platforms (Post Pandemic)

Altering Grading
- Contract Grading
- Score Cards
- Menus for Assignments

How emphasis on presence plays with the course

Community: making well-being over content a course objective

Things to think about

Perusall - An e-reader that allows student annotations and posting like on social media
Alts: VoiceThread, hypothes.is, NOWComment

Discord (works with Valheim, a survival & sandbox game)
- Gaming communication app that allows conversation outside the game, so everyone, not just players can participate
PROBLEM STATEMENT

The COVID-19 pandemic radically impacted human relationships and presence. Zoom quickly emerged as a technology that people relied on to connect with family, friends, and co-workers, and many welcomed and appreciated it as a means of maintaining important relationships during the stay-at-home and remote working situations. However, people soon discovered that over-reliance on Zoom (back-to-back meetings, school lessons, etc.) resulted in Zoom fatigue, eye strain, more sedentary lifestyles, and other adverse effects such as social isolation and loneliness. In addition, with boundaries between work and life increasingly blurred, some have found it challenging to maintain a sense of balance and long for the chance to return to the workplace, school, or university—to reconnect with others in person.

However, still others found working from home to be liberatory. No longer subject to work commutes or clocking in their daily 8 hours in the office, they had the chance to sleep longer, stay home with their partners and pets, exercise, and rekindle long-forgotten hobbies. They found it possible to do their jobs while working from home, and they shudder at the prospect of returning to a 40-hour work week at their offices and schools. Social presence, in other words, is no longer a priority for them.

These different pandemic experiences have occurred at the universities where we teach, and they have prompted heated debates about the extent to which faculty and staff should be required to return to campus in a post-pandemic world. Although certain staff members—such as custodial staff, some library personnel, residential directors, etc.—have been required to return to campus, many others have been able to work remotely for the first time, and there is significant push-back from those who feel that they can do their jobs effectively remotely, and who point out the inequity of faculty members having the flexibility of working from home when they are not teaching classes or attending meetings. However, many faculty members have seen students languishing under remote learning, and are eager to return to a campus where we can re-establish physical presence and in-person connections.
BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 crisis has spurred extensive debates about the future of employment, with many questions about the shifting landscapes of both physical and virtual workspaces. However, it is important to note that U.S. colleges have withstood previous crises that disrupted the campus “norm.” In the 1918 influenza pandemic, some campuses literally closed off their community from its surroundings, trying to contain the disease. Iowa State posted guards to prevent people entering or leaving without permission. Campuses rapidly converted gyms and dorms to infirmaries, since the 1918 flu hit hardest at college-age men and women.

In late 1941, after Pearl Harbor, rumors spread that colleges would shut for the duration. Instead, campuses transformed to adapt to the emergency. Faculty rapidly altered teaching and research to meet war needs. As male civilian enrollment shrank, campuses filled with enlisted men on special military programs. Normal college-life rituals were suspended or redefined. Rationing limited food and even engagement
parties. Patriotic rhetoric dominated campus life. Instead of buying corsages for dates at dances, students pooled money to buy a jeep in their school’s name.

The late 1960s and early 1970s student movement and campus unrest also created emergency conditions at colleges, plus tensions with outsiders. The antiwar movement and battle for free speech left students at odds with administrative authority and fractured community. Protesting students dominated headlines, but conservative or apolitical undergraduates also found their expected “normal” college life transformed.

The COVID-19 crisis hit community colleges, large public universities, small private colleges, and elite institutions in different ways. Partisan politics of pandemic often hampered dialogue and complicated campus decision-making on handling community risk. Some responses to COVID reflected the “undergraduate as consumer” mentality. As campuses quickly switched to remote learning in spring 2020, some parents and students threatened to sue over losing live instruction that tuition was “supposed” to buy.

But more than just dollar signs, complaints about pandemic-era students being “cheated” reflected a sense of the loss of community attached to campus life. For decades, colleges had invested in building physical community with dorms, student centers, and gyms; intellectual community with seminars and research experiences, and social community, with extracurriculars and traditions. Many college communities were also defined by who they excluded, and today’s welcome still does not always extend evenly. But over the decades, more teenagers than ever came to count on attending college as a rite of passage. In addition to the quest for credentialing and better job-market position, college became a shared-community social experience defining a certain period in life. Many faculty too rely on the intellectual, emotional, social and physical connections of community. The campus is not just another workspace.

It is the long history and emotional resonance of the ideals attached to campus life that made its pandemic disruption so upsetting. There is no perfect virtual replacement for the stimulus of face-to-face classroom dialogue and informal hallway conversations about ideas. There is no online substitute for building identity among first-year students mingling at orientation. There is no parallel for the physical, emotional, or social “high” of joining fifty thousand spectators cheering “your” basketball team to a prized victory.

It is not possible to wave a magic wand and restore campus “normality.” Too many students, faculty, and other community members have seen other stresses worsened by pandemic - job loss or economic precarity, housing and food insecurity,
family pressures, long-haul COVID and too many deaths. Over upcoming years, incoming students will have received interrupted K-12 education, disrupting preparation for upper-level work.

Higher education has always been full of tensions. In building back, it is important to recognize that the campus is a workspace. In parallel with other economic sectors, universities need to actively engage thoughtful decision-making about “the future of work” for faculty and staff. Yet students are not just customers, and the university is not just another workspace. Wells-Fargo, Apple, and other businesses have postponed return-to-office target dates indefinitely; colleges cannot and would not do that. Hundreds of years of history have done a powerful job building up the multi-dimensional sense of campus as a physical, psychological, social and academic community. College life will continue to evolve, but many hope that campuses will remain defined by emotionally, intellectually rich connections between students, faculty, staff and others.
SOLUTION

Concepts / Principles

The foundation of presence is establishing authentic and engaging connections between individuals and community, and so it is critical to establish a basic level of familiarity between participants from an early point in a group educational process. This might include exercises of formal greeting, discussion of life experiences and background knowledge, and the expression of motivations for engaging in group interactions. This might be further encouraged through the use of activities that have a component of active play, in which participants work together to solve problems, build creative projects, and collaborate in scholarly investigation and the construction of knowledge.

Ideas of self and of the body are a critical part of this process. Freedom of self-representation and the active pursuit of universal accessibility are essential to creating an environment of openness, respect, and engagement. It should be recognized that the venue for educational and other communal enterprises plays a large role in determining the parameters of physical participation, whether that be the classroom or a remote or virtual environment. An attempt should be made to recognize the importance of embodiment, including practices and exercises that bring reflection to the nature of embodiment and its experiential, cultural, and historical aspects. This might include providing a variety of options for physical participation, appropriate periods of rest and recuperation, and respect for privacy and difference. It might also include developing consensus on agreed values and practices both in general and with regards to specific environments/platforms, whether actual or virtual.

In educational contexts, “a bottom up approach” in which common values and purposes, such as the acquisition of knowledge, developing critical skills and literacy, and pragmatic life and career skills are reflected upon as the context for course-specific objectives serves to align a community towards common values. The adaptation of course materials, such as a syllabus,
to reflect the consensus of faculty and students also serves to foster active participation in the educational process and to help all develop a sense of agency and stakeholding. This process also benefits from an ongoing process of feedback, reevaluation, and renegotiation, such as to adapt appropriately to changing conditions and expectations. Practices and technologies that encourage interactive participation and a spirit of community also serve to enhance active participation and interpersonal presence.

It is also important to recognize and address socioeconomic and mental and physical health challenges students face, including and especially the range of ongoing traumas resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic era. Explicit recognition of these various socioeconomic, mental, and physical challenges helps facilitate an atmosphere of compassion and honesty regarding the difficulties many students, as well as faculty, face. Faculty are in a particularly privileged position to direct students towards resources for dealing with many of these challenges and should do so whenever possible. In some cases, acknowledging, in sensitive ways, one’s own life challenges can be a way of empathetically connecting with students and of helping to build a sense of shared community and care.

Overall, by prioritizing interpersonal presence, especially active participation, education can encourage students’ claiming agency over their own lives and education and help foster a sense of intellectual curiosity and wonder as well as critical literacy in understanding human knowledge and culture. Such efforts also have the equally important effect of helping build satisfying human relationships, a sense of compassion for others, and a commitment to social and environmental justice.
Classroom Technique

Strategies for engaging presence first focus on making students feel part of the community, by acknowledging them as individuals and as members of the class. Introductions are a standard part of the Othfirst days of class, but Zu suggests two rounds of introduction, one asking pairs of students to speak for one minute each beginning with the phrase “I am ...” and then to begin with “I am passionate about ....” This mode of introductions not only allows for in-depth introductions but also highlights the difference between an objective description of the self and a subjective one. Being part of the classroom community can be emphasized in each meeting, and Posadas recommends taking a few minutes at the start of class to call everyone in by name, having students call in each other in sequence. Applauding, cheering, and waving objects generate social energy and become a mode of personal expression. McGuire uses protocols (National School Reform Faculty) to provide consistent structures for facilitating meaningful connection and collaboration for students. Students can be invited to develop these protocols, which also include expectations for behavior within the community. Whereas the classroom is a space set apart, rituals help set apart the time of the class as well.
Acknowledging students as part of a community can be continued throughout the course. Jensen uses two check-ins over the semester to connect with students as individuals and to make space for both content questions and other kinds of student support. Borchert uses a “stop–start–continue” format to gather student feedback during the course, and to initiate conversations about course design. These methods acknowledge students both as individuals and as members of a community whose presence is valued.

The design of in-class exercises can be used to reinforce student presence. The collaborative use of Post-Its to categorize information and develop mind maps engages social dimensions of learning, creates a dialogue between individual ideas and collective effort, and uses movement as part of thinking. Protocols for student conversations (The Final Word Protocol, the World Cafe Protocol, Reflective Structured Dialogue) help create “safe enough spaces” and structures for connection and reflection.

All of these strategies can be adapted for use in both physical classrooms and in online settings.

*Digital Platforms*

There are a variety of free, open, and flexible digital media platforms that university teachers can use to prioritize presence in a post-pandemic world. A crucial platform, mentioned by many of the authors, is Perusall, an e-reader in which teachers can upload documents, and which then enables students to annotate the assigned readings and engage the reading material in a style akin to social media posting. Teachers can upload their own content and/or they can adopt the books through Perusall. Other social annotation tools, such as VoiceThread, Hypothes.is, and NowComment, provide similar opportunities for engagement with text and classmates. Grieve found the use of multiplayer videogames, supplemented with the gaming communication application Discord, to be a productive way of generating presence and thereby educate rather than just train students in online transformative seminars. *Valheim* is a survival and sandbox video game created by the Swedish developer Iron Gate Studio. It was published by Coffee Stain Studios in February 2021. Discord, which is a gaming communication application which allows communication outside of a game. Discord is important because it is free, easy to use and runs on any computer. Not every student in the course feels comfortable gaming, and not everyone has a computer capable of running a multiplayer videogame. Discord allows everyone to participate, helping to record, investigate and analyze, if not actually playing the games.

Instructors should also consider how an emphasis on presence interacts with the required components of course. Recognizing that assigning grades emphasizes the power
differential between instructor and student, prioritizing presence means considering alternative forms of grading, such as upgrading, contract grading, scorecards or menus for student assignments. These types of grading recognize students as individuals and give them the freedom to adapt the class to their own needs. Prioritizing presence also means putting community before content, and making wellbeing and connection an explicit part of the objectives for the course, as articulated in the syllabus and in the instructor’s goals of the course.
CONCLUSION

Presence implies that students and instructors can bring as much of themselves into the classroom as feels comfortable and safe. As we move back to face-to-face or hybrid environments, we must take the trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic into account. We can adopt a trauma-sensitive approach to teaching and learning by sharing power and decision-making with our students, creating and maintaining a sense of trust through connection and communication, adopting an intersectional lens when considering our students’ challenges, and being clear about the purpose underlying our course activities and assignments (Imad 2020). The Transparency in Learning and Teaching project can help us advance equitable teaching and learning practices to reduce systemic inequities in higher education: for example, by making the purpose, tasks, and criteria for our assignments clear and transparent to our students (TILT Higher Ed).
Technologies can help us create a classroom environment that prioritizes presence. We can hold safe space for students by attending to how we prepare our classroom and the structures we use to facilitate connection. Being intentional about the physical arrangements of the classroom, clearly signaling a transition into the learning environment, and creating an invitational and welcoming tone in the first moments of class, we can establish a sense of community.

For many instructors, the pandemic has meant moving between teaching modalities, and between online and physical presence. This back-and-forth has prompted new ways of thinking about what we do as teachers and how we create connection and community.
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