What I Have Learned About Teaching From Teaching Online

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I have just experienced a new first in my teaching career: This week I had to re-design a course *for* a face-to-face format *from* an online format.

I recently switched jobs. After teaching for half a dozen years in a school that exists primarily online, I am now back in a residential context, working for a school that exists primarily on a brick-and-mortar campus. I have been invited to teach a course next year, and I thought it would be a simple matter to adapt one I had offered at my previous institution. So, without hesitation, I accepted the invitation. Then, the Registrar asked me if I could teach in the school's evening program—one class session per week for 2'45". Two hours and forty-five minutes?! I realized with a gasp that I no longer knew what I would do with such a sustained block of time.

Lengthy lectures are a thing of my distant past. When I first started teaching online, I had to work to pare my presentations down to twenty minutes. Recently, I attended a workshop where I learned that the average student attention span--before the mind starts wandering--is something like nine minutes. "Limit your presentations to twelve minutes, max," the leader admonished us, "and even then, make them funny or catchy in some way."

Discussion, of course, can use up a lot of minutes. But there, too, I have become accustomed to disciplined time management. I developed the habit of checking in to my online course discussions daily, spending only about thirty minutes monitoring and guiding each thread; an

hour, max. Online courses have so many elements to attend to that online instructors learn not to get sucked too deeply into every discussion.

I forced myself to recall what I used to do in the old days of classroom teaching because I had a vague memory of class sessions flying by with never enough time before students were stuffing their books into backpacks and dashing out the door. Oh, right: Debates. Case study exercises. Role plays. Problem-solving. Guest speakers. In-class writing. All of which, I realized, I had at one point modified for the online environment. Versions of these learning activities still populated my syllabi; it was just that they happened in smaller chunks, spread throughout a week rather than concentrated in an evening.

In addition to how differently time gets used in online vs. face-to-face teaching, my conversation with the Registrar also brought to mind the difference between virtual and live presence. I realized that I would once again have to muster up the energy to regularly face a room full of live bodies. Would I have to stand on my feet in front of them the whole time? Would they sit there and stare at me? I recalled the adrenaline rush that always made my palms a little sweaty before walking into class and the dissipation that left me feeling drained for several hours afterward. For six years my body had been spared all that. You don't get particularly nervous sitting in your familiar, quiet office reading discussion posts, watching videos, and answering emails. And if for some reason you do, you can always take a break and leave for a walk or a snack or even some errands, with no one becoming the wiser.

Speaking of quiet, I started recalling how *noisy* classrooms could sometimes become. Or, worse yet, pin-drop silent. I sighed, remembering the dual agonies of having to cajole speech out of taciturn participants and having to serve as traffic cop during swift-moving exchanges where everyone talked at once. Like all students, online students naturally vary in terms of their participation levels, but the format makes it possible to require that all of them contribute at least the same minimum to every activity. As another blogger in this series put it, "Discussion dynamics online become more democratic when each student is equally invited and expected to contribute to conversation" (Miriam Y. Perkins, "How Teaching Online Enhances Residential Pedagogies: The Big Picture," *Online Teaching, Online Learning*, February 12, 2019).

I am confident that come next year when I am teaching again in a traditional classroom, I will re-adapt, and eventually relish the immediacy and liveliness and spontaneity it affords. But I am also reasonably confident that I will miss the steady, measured egalitarianism of my former online world, and the kind of teaching it made possible.

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