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Beyond Breakout Rooms: Multisensory Learning in the Virtual Classroom

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Proponents and practitioners of multisensory learning are experiencing a loss as it becomes clear that the shift to virtual and hi-flex learning has become a norm in many institutions, not the short-term solution it once seemed it would be. How can we learn in an embodied way when all we can see is sea of talking heads? How can we use all of our senses when half, if not all, of the class is on a screen? We experience grief at the loss of favorite lesson plans and the ability to observe the shifts that take place when learners engage with their whole bodies. The initial thrill that we could still at least do small group discussions using breakout rooms has long since worn off. When can we get back to embodied learning? In truth, we never stopped. The bodies have always been there behind the screens. We just have to find new ways to get materials into learners' hands and trust that our entire bodies are learning even when we can't share space with one another.

I used to have an insuppressible grin on the days that I walked from my office to my classroom laden with Play Doh, markers, construction paper, and any number of materials my students associate more with Sunday School than graduate school. Although I can no longer count on the ability to spontaneously distribute craft materials, I can still make use of them so long as I plan sufficiently ahead. Unique materials can be sent in the mail and a good "care package"

can contribute to building community at a distance. If I know (or highly suspect) I will be using easily acquired materials such as crayons in a course, they are now a part of my required “book list.” My first-year students are particularly surprised that they will need six colors of Play Doh for their introductory Bible course!

I have discovered that in addition to making sure students can learn with their senses from any location, making sure that everyone has a similar collection of creative implements sets the tone for the learning community we are about to create. A playful tone is present from the outset without the need to wait for a particularly exciting lesson plan. Learners also experience viscerally the usefulness of having such materials at the ready. I used to be the one who always had chenille stems on hand; now we all do. With easy access to a variety of materials, students can create models and symbols to express what they are learning whether the entire class is in one group or doing small-group learning. Even without physical materials, shared control of the virtual whiteboard can allow a learning community to communicate collaboratively using multiple senses. The digital format does not limit us to expressing ourselves with words alone. We can color-code Pentateuchal traditions or create images for our understanding of theological concepts.

Once everyone has multisensory materials available to them, the initiative for embodied learning can come from anyone in the community. When learners take the lead in designing course material or creating a learning activity, they can anticipate, like I do, that everyone will have the basic materials at the ready to learn with their senses. This provides the necessary support and encouragement for learners to become leaders in embodied education. They are freed to develop creative lesson plans for class presentations and leadership because they know that when they come up with an idea they can run with it. I have had keener student leaders think far enough ahead to mail supplemental materials to the entire class in their homes, while asynchronous learners video or photograph their results to share with one another for ongoing conversation.

It is not just a relief—but a joy—that I haven’t lost the ability to play and use a variety of multisensory materials in the classroom when my classroom became partially or entirely virtual. It surprised me into giving learners more agency in including these necessary learning implements in their repertoire. The learning continues to be embodied, even if our bodies are physically distanced from one another.

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