Responding to COVID-19: Professors Reflect

Katherine Angell[1], Alan Hertz[1], John Woolf[1]

Abstract

In this article, three professors teaching a liberal arts curriculum reflect on the sudden move to virtual teaching during COVID-19. This initially disrupted the location-specific nature of their courses, taught in London to international students from around the world, but in the pedagogical disorientation came a new orientation. By offering personal reflections, the authors outline their errors and successes in continuing location-based education virtually. They argue that many of the adopted strategies enriched their teaching and are transferable to other forms of location-based education, such as study abroad. The innovations that were forced under COVID-19 will, they suggest, become permanent features within educational institutions and study abroad.

Keywords:

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1 Hult International Business School, London, United Kingdom

Corresponding author: John Woolf, Hult International Business School, john.woolf@faculty.hult.edu

Introduction

COVID-19 has forced practitioners of study abroad and location-specific education to redesign modes of delivery: an exogenous threat has led to endogenous change. Our teaching has had to be rethought; we and our students have had to adapt to new technologies and new circumstances. The authors of this article have had to revise and even abandon location-specific strategies developed over decades. In what follows, we reflect on some of the consequences of that traumatic change.

First, a bit about our workplace: the London undergraduate program of a large private university. Although we do not teach courses designed for study abroad students, our learners and faculty are overwhelmingly international and come from around the world to live, study, and teach an American-style business/liberal arts curriculum in London. The experience of being abroad is a key part of the students' learning. We teach liberal arts courses, all of which use London as a subject of study and an educational resource. We normally subscribe to the instructional strategy known as the 'flipped classroom' and structure our courses on the experiential learning theory (see Roberts et al., 2013).

During lockdown, some students remained in London, but most Zoomed into virtual classes from their home countries, and our normal practice was impossible. Confined to the virtual classroom, we lost our distinctive link between what we teach and where we teach it. The disruption caused by COVID-19 augured a Huxleyan Brave New World of talking heads, PowerPoint slides, and screened images.

In this article we each offer our personal reflections on this sudden and disorientating change. We share our pedagogical experiences and tackle a number of interconnecting questions: how could we continue location-based education if we no longer had collective physical access to the location? Were our answers to that question merely temporary responses to an emergency or will they transform and perhaps enrich the way we approach our work in future? Finally, are the answers to those questions relevant or transferable to other forms of location-based education, such as study abroad?

Writing Online

When COVID-19 hit, my course was derailed. *Writing London* introduces students to a range of literary representations which are then critically evaluated and used as inspiration for the students' own creative writing. For example, we explore divergent visions of London as expressed in William Blake's *London* (1794) and William Wordsworth's *Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802* before visiting the plinths in Trafalgar Square which articulate alternative notions of London: an imperial capital exemplified in Nelson's column and a transitory, modern narrative installed on the fourth plinth. Students reflect, then write their own poems about London, establishing their own narrative about the city.

The entire course is premised on the experiential learning theory which contextualizes knowledge and meaning in actual experiences. But due to COVID-19, actual experiences became virtual. There are great technological tools for engaging with London, from online tours to Google maps, but they are inherently distancing, individualized experiences. Visits to museums and galleries were replaced with online tours, but these quickly became tedious and could not sustain an entire class.

Moreover, the course content for in-person learning did not easily translate in the virtual setting. For example, halfway through the course, I introduce students to 'acoustic ecology', developed in the late 1960s by Raymond Murray Schafer. Through a series of 'soundwalks' through London students come to appreciate the unique auditory character of the city. In the course, this exercise creates a new urban experience and directly impacts students' creative writing as they appreciate the importance of using all the senses for descriptive pieces (see Schafer, 1997). But in a virtual setting, I was forced to set the soundwalk as an assignment in an effort to allow students to complete the exercise in their own time and location. This devalued London's soundscape as many students were not based in the city. In class, I bastardised Schafer's carefully developed techniques and used the London Sound Survey, a web project which has collected over 2,000 recordings of everyday life in London, as raw material. The Survey has a wide range of historical resources on the theme of urban sound which enabled me to chart the changing sounds of London through time. In one class students responded positively; in another class they were less than impressed. And this was the general tenor of my experience: sometimes the adaptations worked well, and at other times they fell flat.

But there was another challenge which I did not anticipate. The physical classroom breeds an intimacy which is absolutely essential for students engaged in creative writing, particularly when they share their work with others. The virtual classroom killed that intimacy and, in turn, hampered student motivation. They were distanced from me, each other, and consequently the work. As a corollary, student concentration was impaired, especially as they had to sit through multiple 80-minute classes each day and were often dealing with fatigue due to managing different time zones. I even had one student Zoom into my 10am class (UCT) at 4am their time (CT).

In response, I adopted a number of strategies. Firstly, I introduced 'participation points' for each class. Students had to upload all class activities and were awarded 100% for uploading; 0% for failing to upload; and it was at my discretion to offer 50% or 75% for incomplete notes. These marks contributed to their final grade and proved to be a successful motivator. Secondly, while I have always attempted variety in my classes, this became an absolute necessity in the virtual classroom. I packed in a range of activities— quizzes, breakout groups, video presentations, writing exercises, reading reflections, video content, and individual research. This brought a dizzying variety into the class as we moved quickly between different modes of learning, but this approach helped with concentration levels. Thirdly, I introduced games completely disconnected to the subject matter being taught: ice breakers and moments of silliness which got students laughing and reset the focus.

I also found that guided reading and writing exercises were the most productive. For example, in my class 'Creating Character', I led students through a series of interactive steps which resulted in them constructing a fully formed fictional character. I used to favour a more laissez-faire approach to creative writing, but online it proved more effective to be directive. The results were impressive! Finally, to counter the loss of intimacy, I asked every student to meet me during my virtual, face-to-face office hours for a general catch-up. This established a bond that went someway to mitigating the distance I felt with my students.

At the end of the course, I was pleased with the student feedback. However, one student's evaluation hit the nail on the head: 'this course is better in person' and, ultimately, I was forced to agree. But I will be making some of the COVID-19-enforced innovations permanent: participation points incentivize

students; silly games reset the focus; and the virtual world offers a rich resource of tools that can bring variety.

Objects Online

One of the benefits of location-specific, in-person education is working with objects found in the immediate environment. Tactile learning helps students understand the relationship between the human and non-human as necessary to their being in the world. Teaching the history of medicine in medical museums and pathological collections enables students to see, touch, smell, and listen to objects from the past that have been important in increasing knowledge about our bodies and how they work. Perhaps medicine, more than other subjects, exemplifies the materiality of the body and the ease in which matter transgresses its perceived boundaries. In January 2021, as the UK went into a third national lockdown, I was left asking myself: how can I continue location-based education when the collective physical access to collections of objects has been halted? With students unable to leave their homes, I considered three ways of re-creating the learning potential of working with objects at a distance.

First, I started by showing my personal collection of medical objects to students using my laptop camera from my make-shift classroom at home. In the first week, I held up a piece of shrapnel from a WWII mortar bomb that exploded on the Dover high street in 1942. I used my hands to provide perspective on the size and weight of the object: I stroked the soft melted metal, used the tips of my fingers to draw attention to the sharp corners, and described the coldness I felt, the sting of the serrated edges, and the pain caused by the torn iron catching my skin. Students were encouraged to direct my hands over the object to help them consider the damage shrapnel would do to a body. This approach had limited success. It made demands on me both physically and linguistically. Moreover, its success relied on the imaginative power of the students, as well as the quality of their laptop cameras. In subsequent weeks, I found that the students rarely returned to the discussion about the shrapnel and did not apply what they had learned about impact injuries to discussions of experimental surgery later on in the course.

My second attempt used home-sourced substitutes for medical objects. In trying to communicate the brutality of early dentistry, I could usually rely on students holding a shattered jaw-bone from a collection at Bart's Pathology Museum, but this year they re-created the act of removing a tooth from the jaw using a glass beer bottle and a pair of pliers. I asked the students to film themselves holding the neck of the bottle with one hand while the other clasped the cap using pliers and pulled upwards in an attempt to remove the cap as

quickly and cleanly as possible. The physical demands of the task were clear to see as the students sweated, slipped, and struggled to remove the cap. After the task, students described how the muscles of their hands and arms worked to achieve the desired removal and how the bottle was damaged in the process. The physical activity of removing a 'tooth' clarified their imaginative response which could be measured by the accuracy of descriptions of the potential damage caused to bone and flesh in the patient's mouth. The class repeatedly returned to this experiment in subsequent discussions about medical interventions showing that the physical engagement had resulted in deep learning. I certainly felt that a more embodied approach to medical objects enriched my teaching and is certainly one I would use again

My third approach encouraged students to use their bodies (and those of their families) to help understand the size and weight of a cadaver within experimental medicine, notably the study of anatomy. I challenged students to find out how many people it would take to lift and transport an average-sized human body 25 meters (to re-enact the movement or corpses to and around medical schools). The experiment was conducted in their own time without breaking COVID-19 restrictions, and the students described the results in our virtual classroom. Again, student engagement was high, and importantly their results were accurate. What hampered this approach was that it was conducted in isolation, and therefore students could not learn from the techniques used by their peers. I concluded that if this method was to permanently enrich my teaching, it would need to be done with the class present and preferably on location in an anatomy theatre.

The three approaches taken were all relevant and successful in the absence of teaching on location, and the latter two helped me reconceptualize modes of teaching on this course. The importance of physical activity in enhancing deep learning is one that I will take away from the virtual experience. I am now determined to incorporate as much of the embodied experience as I can when teaching on location.

London Online

The arrival of COVID-19 sparked a series of questions. How could I adapt London arts appreciation courses which had revolved around visits to galleries and attendance at performances to a new world of shuttered museums and dark theatres? How could I adapt a very physical, anecdotal, improvisational teaching style to Zoom?

My first task was a kind of imaginative self-liberation. An odd experience – as I and everyone around me were locking down; in my head I had to open up. Let me explain. I have always based classes on local resources. Indeed, one of

my goals as a teacher has been to get my students engaged with and embedded in London, to get them to think of it as an educational treasure chest and of all aspects of their lives here as educational treasure-hunting. Now, suddenly, my students could be anywhere, and their education had to be based on materials available everywhere.

At first that was disorienting and disheartening, but I soon discovered some compensations. For example, in the past I built my Shakespeare course around the plays being performed in London during the term – and that inevitably meant a lot of *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Suddenly the *Henry IV* plays were as available as *Macbeth*, and the result was a much more balanced course than usual. Moreover, we could compare stagings and performances in ways that I had never tried before. A whole gallery of Falstaffs! Of course, watching a show online is a different experience from seeing it live, but that difference itself became a subject for fruitful discussion. We found ourselves exploring the importance of "liveness" more profoundly than ever before.

My visual arts courses have been similarly transformed. I quickly realized that I was no longer limited by particular collections and displays. I could teach a class on Hogarth, for example, using works from the National Gallery, Tate Britain, Hogarth's House, and the Soane Museum. I soon realized that I could use images from any collection with a website and my options expanded enormously. Once I became technologically fluent, moving from one image to another became almost instantaneous, easier, and less anxious than moving from one picture to the next in a gallery. Moreover, I could zoom with Zoom; I could bring students close to details in ways that would get us all evicted, if not arrested, if we had attempted them when visiting museums in person. I have chosen Hogarth advisedly: his detailed, anecdotal work responded wonderfully to this treatment; more painterly painters – Turner, for example – proved more recalcitrant.

These changes were forced on me, but my initial disorientation has become a reorientation. Let me use my course *London 1500-1900: The History of a Business City* as an illustration. In Week 3, I take students on a walk from St Paul's Cathedral to Leadenhall Market and the Lloyd's Building. The subject is the emergence of a new business culture in London between 1500 and 1700. We begin with a late medieval economy based on religious institutions [the cathedral, the monasteries, the guilds] and Christian values. We then trace on foot the emergence of secular structures [the Royal Exchange, the Merchant Adventurers, the chartered companies, the coffee houses] and the profit motive. I will be teaching the course again in the summer in a hybrid format—most of

the students will still be online. How can I adapt this field trip to current circumstances?

This time, I plan to put the students into teams, with at least one student attending in person in each team. The teams will be responsible for creating online presentations about key locations on the walk – the cathedral, Paul's Cross, Goldsmith's Hall, the Guildhall, etc. The online students will be the leaders in this task, using a range of digital galleries and cartographic resources to supplement to show us how the places we visit have developed over time. The students who are physically present will film the walk so that their virtual classmates can share that experience. They will also act as experts on the location which their team has studied. With luck, the hybrid will combine the best of two kinds of information resources: the density of the internet and the immediacy of live experience.

Lessons Learnt

As we moved into lockdown, the Huxleyan Brave New World felt like a fitting image for our collective sense of dread. But in responding to COVID-19, we found new positive possibilities and garnered new insights which have largely dispelled our initial anxiety. There are of course some caveats. Not all courses easily translate to virtual teaching and not all students embrace and enjoy online activities. We were also adapting to the new virtual classroom ourselves, so there was trial and error along the way. But we have learned some valuable lessons.

The importance of physical activity enriches learning and can be effectively deployed virtually. The acquisition of knowledge moves from the realm of the abstract to become a concrete experience that particularly appeals to kinesthetic learners but can be developed for all four modalities of students learning: visual, auditory, reading/writing as well as kinesthetic (see Fleming and Mills, 1992). Furthermore, our experiences show that the virtual world can become a source of liberation, overcoming the constraints of geography. London appreciation courses can be enriched by online resources, expanding the available materials, and subsequently deepening analysis. Technological tools can be utilized to highlight hidden beauties and features of paintings which can be lost in guided tours. And we have discovered an array of online platforms and tools which can be employed to enhance learning virtually and in the classroom. These tools are proliferating too—real-time feedback on presentations, polls, virtual escape rooms, 'real world' 3D design experiences, and collaborative programmes that allow students and teachers to create presentations, flashcards, and diagrams collectively.

Indeed, we cannot see all these developments disappearing; we envisage many educational institutions permanently adopting a hybrid model which

merges virtual and in-person teaching. This form of 'blended' learning is already being deployed, discussed, and theorized, and it is not wholly new. Arguably COVID-19 has accelerated the digitization of the classroom, and it is here to stay. This might pose a more existential threat to study abroad, which arguably ceases to exist if students are not abroad, but we think this hybrid model might also be effective there.

A course on Shakespeare, for example, could begin virtually before the students travel, with online units on Tudor history and culture, drama theory and past performances. These could make use of some startlingly powerful online resources, e.g. the *Layers of London* website. When the students arrive in London, they will be prepared for live performances and field trips: plays at the Globe, tours of the British collection of the V&A, and excursions to Hampton Court and Stratford. They have the contextual knowledge to benefit fully from their limited time abroad. So a merger is possible and even desirable: studying about the abroad and studying abroad can be unified into a more total, holistic experience.

In summary, then, COVID-19 forced three Liberal Arts professors, all of us more comfortable with a book than a kindle, to embrace a technological world which we initially feared. We met this challenge with varying degrees of success. But we have all taken something positive from the challenge, experiences which we hope will continue to enrich and improve our teaching. Indeed, even Aldous Huxley in a forward to Brave New World envisaged a benign new space wherein lies 'the possibility of sanity': technology 'made for man, not...as though man were to be adapted and enslaved to them' (Fleming and Mills, 1992). We have been forced to adapt, and we are stronger as a result.

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Author Biographies

Katherine Angell is an Associate Professor of Humanities at Hult International Business School in London, where she teaches courses in History, Gender Studies, and Academic Writing. She has previously taught at the University of Salford and Queen Mary University of London. Her current research investigates the role of the imagination in the development of nineteenth-century scientific investigations claiming similarities between methods of analysis in medical research and the literary imagination.

Alan Hertz is a Professor of Humanities at Hult International Business School, with a background in Victorian Studies; he has been teaching arts appreciation courses and the History of London for more than 25 years. He has also taught visiting students from several dozen American universities, including most recently: Texas A&M, George Mason University, University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point, and Cal Poly Pomona.

John Woolf is an Adjunct Professor at Hult International Business School, teaching creative writing and the visual arts. He is the author of *The Wonders: Lifting the Curtain on the Freak Show, Circus and Victorian Age* (2019), and co-author of *Stephen Fry's Victorian Secrets* (2018) and *The Halifax Slasher* (2020). He holds a History BA and MA from the University of Cambridge and a PhD from Goldsmiths, University of London.