

What We Lose When We Go From the Classroom to Zoom

Like other utopian dreams, the fiction of equality has its value.



Bianca Bagnarelli

By **Karen Strassler**

Dr. Strassler teaches anthropology at Queens College.

May 4, 2020



When life was normal, my students and I gathered in classrooms.

My favorites are the small intimate ones where we face each other around a seminar table and conversation flows easily. Midsize classes meet in a square room with windows along one side. Around this time of year it becomes unbearably hot in the afternoon, as the spring sunshine streams in. My students slouch drowsily in those uncomfortable chairs with built-in desks, arranged in haphazard rows, while I pace at the front of the room, trying to arouse their interest in some arcane anthropological subject. Sometimes I'm successful. Introductory classes are held in a large lecture hall, and from my vantage point at the bottom of the room, I see rows of students fanned out neatly before me. I recently started wearing prescription glasses so I could distinguish their faces, which were beginning to smudge together as a result of encroaching middle age.

Each type of classroom presents distinct challenges and pleasures, but they all have one thing in common. In these classrooms, students meet one another as apparent equals. They sit in the same chairs.

Now we have lost our classrooms and, I fear, something vital along with them.

At the entrance to the building on the Queens College campus in Flushing, Queens, where I have taught for 14 years, I am greeted with a quote by the cultural critic bell hooks: "The academy is not paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created." In the book from which these words are taken she continues: "The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility."

When City University of New York campuses shut down, I hastily began turning the remaining lectures for my 130-student Introduction to Cultural Anthropology course into videos. With schedules radically disrupted, limited computer access, spotty Wi-Fi and other obstacles, synchronous virtual classes of this size are impossible. Students can now watch my lectures on their phones.

ADVERTISEMENT

In my small seminar course, we use Zoom to recreate the classroom experience as best we can. As we discuss our readings, I observe the posters, photos and tapestries that decorate my students' walls. I watch their partners and pets moving like shadows in the background. I see work areas improvised out of cramped and awkward spaces. I hear distracting background noises when a student unmutes her microphone to speak.

These Zoom intimacies are often endearing, and at times I welcome the strange, unexpected ways this period of enforced isolation brings about new kinds of closeness with others. I like knowing that this student drinks tea from a big ceramic mug, while that one seems to be good with houseplants. But I'm also aware that these glimpses into my students' homes violate the implicit contract of the classroom, where students have some measure of control over what parts of their lives outside of school come into view.

It's not that the classroom is ever sealed off from the outside world — nor should it be. When students bring their divergent life experiences to bear on our discussions, they make insightful connections and render abstract ideas vividly concrete. One of my favorite parts of teaching is seeing students link the concepts I teach to the lives they lead. I often feel that my primary role is to give them a vocabulary to think about — and put into words — what they already know.

Sometimes their personal lives leak into the classroom in less welcome ways. A student apologizes for falling asleep in class; he has increased his hours working at night as an Uber driver because his father was laid off from his job. Another misses class, explaining later that he had to translate for his mother at her doctor's appointment. One student apologetically asks permission to keep her phone on her desk during class so she can watch for texts from her son, who is sick at home. Another comes to my office in tears, worried she will fail my course. She has been unable to study since her family was evicted from their apartment.

These are ordinary occurrences when one teaches at a public, commuter school like Queens College. And now comes the pandemic, which both reveals and worsens the inequities in our city and country, rendering lower-income people of color — the majority of CUNY students — more vulnerable in terms of health and livelihood. I see this clearly in my inbox, which has been flooded with emails from students who are ill or tending to stricken family members. A student misses a quiz because he has to rush his grandmother to the hospital; a few days later he writes to tell me she has died. Some students are working longer hours as "essential workers," while others have lost their jobs. I worry most about the ones I haven't heard from at all.

ADVERTISEMENT

Equality in the classroom is a fiction — it would be absurd to suggest otherwise. It's painfully obvious that only some of my students benefited from strong high school educations. Others start college inadequately prepared in foundational reading and writing skills. Many are immigrants who struggle with academic English and miss the cultural references that would make our readings more readily accessible. Race, gender, class, sexuality, citizenship status and other factors shape who feels confident speaking up in class and who feels afraid of saying the wrong thing.

When we pretend such inequities don't exist, we allow them to persist unchallenged. But like other utopian dreams, the fiction of equality — cultivated by those generic rooms with their uniform chairs — also has its value.

Unlike many of their middle and upper-class counterparts at residential colleges, most of my students live at home. The closure of campuses and the sudden shift to online learning is perhaps less of a shock to them, because college has never been a cloistered experience away from the complicated demands of family life and the pressures of putting food on the table.

But that's exactly why the classroom is so crucial. It is not a space apart from the damaged and unfair world in which we live, but it is a place where students meet each other, first and foremost, as fellow learners. As a teacher, I cannot level a deeply unequal playing field. But within the classroom, my students and I can try to forge a community where we listen to one another with respect, where everyone has a right to the floor, and where students share their experiences because of the trust we've built together, not because their private lives are on display via Zoom.

CUNY students and faculty are resilient; we know how to get by with more limited resources than we deserve. For now, my students and I make do, as we must, teaching and learning from our crowded and sometimes chaotic homes. But as soon as it becomes possible, we want to be sitting in those uncomfortable chairs again, reaching for our paradise of learning.

Karen Strassler, an associate professor of anthropology at Queens College and the Graduate Center, City University of New York, is the author of "[Demanding Images: Democracy, Mediation, and the Image-Event in Indonesia](#)."

ADVERTISEMENT