

Revisiting *Teaching While Leaking*: COVID Edition

By

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Abstract:

This point of view essay offers my interpretation of some bodily breaches that happened while I was teaching remotely and synchronously during COVID. Online platforms produce an obvious and lamentable distance between faculty and student while at the same time and ironically this type of teaching transgresses some of the professional distance offered by the brick-and-mortar classroom. The essay also argues that this type of leaking is gendered with particular consequences for female bodies.

Key Words: Bodies, Embodiment, COVID, Remote Teaching, Boundaries, Norms, Social Solidarity, Gender

Introduction

The Time Before I Could Turn Off My Computer Screen

One of my most humiliating experiences happened when I was a new assistant professor at The College of Staten Island (CSI) in 1998. A first-time mother to a 4-month-old, beginning my career after a move from California, I was the most recent hire and therefore assigned a really undesirable teaching schedule. I was exhausted and overwhelmed.

Scrambling to impress all in my pursuit of tenure, I avidly pursued my colleagues' advice -- *make sure to publish at least three peer reviewed articles, sign a book contract, get top marks on teaching evaluations, present research at national conferences, join high profile committees and be collegial*. These guidelines were certainly in line with what my peers heard at other institutions. I was also the recipient of less official or sideways suggestions. My gender normative appearance and new mother status enabled me to pass as heterosexual among the faculty and the students. When erroneous assumptions about my identity came up by, for instance, correcting colleagues' presumptions that I was married or my daughter's eyes were inherited from my husband, I received direct and indirect guidance about my queerness. In fact, I was explicitly told not to 'come out' as a lesbian to my students because it

would be distracting, and maybe lead to low teaching evaluations jeopardizing my job security.

I felt an enormous amount of pressure this first semester at CSI. Even now, every time I cross the Verrazano Bridge that connects Staten Island to my home in Brooklyn, I remember my near daily bleary-eyed, mascara runny, anxious sobbing. At the same time that I was navigating individual and institutional homophobia and acute assistant professoritis, I was trying to keep my breastmilk supply robust through expressing milk every four hours. I'd sit at my office desk, locking the door from any overeager students who sometimes walked in without knocking, and surreptitiously fit pumping between meetings and classes. I was simultaneously finding my rhythm as a teacher and a mother, throwing myself into both my pedagogy and parenting, keeping my mind and my body separate.

In class, during one particularly escalated conversation about gender, race, and social justice, I got swept up in the passion of teaching and casually came out to my students. My lesbianism slipped out and I instantly panicked at my mistake. I was nervously thinking about the ramifications of my admission and how to walk it back when I realized that the emotionality of the moment had triggered the let-down reflex (also known as the milk ejection reflex). My milk began to flow from my breasts, leaking through my bra, down the front of my 'professional' silk shirt, and onto the floor. I was

dizzy and disoriented trying to pull down my shirt and collect my papers. I realized I didn't belong there, or at least my leaky breasts didn't.

As feminist theorists have explained, public space and professional expectations are organized around male fear of leaky female bodies (Shildrick 1997). Historically women's participation in the public sphere has been limited by patriarchal regulations. These regulations are justified claiming that women must be controlled, protected, or segregated; female bodies have insecure boundaries and are unruly and not under conscious control (Grosz 1994). I did not want to be reduced to 'nursing mother' or objectified as 'leaking breasts' as I worked to establish myself as part of the academy. But I couldn't help it. These embodied breaches of academic space are highly gendered; they are at the same time impolite or 'unladylike,' ironically drawing heightened awareness to my female body.

This entire experience is recounted in an essay I published in *Feminist Teacher* in 2007 (Moore 2007). That article explores how as professors our bodies are on display for our students, wide open to their interpretation. Importantly, however, our bodies are not always under our control despite our efforts to modulate our sometimes-theatrical performativity in the classroom. We aren't always able to contain our bodies -- our sweat, tears, flatulence, breastmilk or even our utterances.

The overlying themes of this point of view essay are multiple and interconnected. First, I am revisiting my experiential essay from approximately 25 years ago to discuss unexpected leakages of bodies in teaching spaces and to explain how this still happens in remote synchronous teaching albeit in different ways. Second, I want to articulate how this leakage is gendered and involves some invisible labor in the classroom as well as potential breaches of social norms. Third, I hope that my feminist point of view contributes to our collective recognition that teaching remotely does *not* necessarily take the body out of the teaching experience and that, furthermore, it creates new ways for bodies to leak and spill into the mediated classroom. Fourth, the point of view format is generative in that it enables the author to articulate a personal experience – in a C. Wright Mills fashion¹, whereby my very personal 'problems' (however disclosed in the classroom) are turned into social issues open to reason. This essay, as well as the text, lays bare my personal experiences in a public

forum as a way to bring some insight into how teaching and intimacy are socially experienced and interpreted during remote teaching. As a scholar, I am elevating my personal troubles to the level of the social as a way to engage a sociological public.

Tricky Boundaries

As professors, our words and embodied actions, including our slip-ups and our unconscious reflexes, are all information available to inquisitive students, potentially producing a certain familiarity, humanization, and intimacy in the classroom. This intimacy can be productive and exhilarating, enabling greater opportunity for the transmission of content, theory, or concepts. This intimacy can also be exhausting, embarrassing, painful, dangerous, and scary. Nearly 25 years later, I'm in a much different place professionally and personally and even still it both delights and irks me how much my body interferes with my ability to maintain a professional distance and sense of dignity with my students.

For me, maintaining some professional boundaries as well as personal integrity has been important when teaching. Especially as a younger woman, I vigilantly attended to impression management to manufacture my external presentation of self as a credible scholar and educator. I felt preoccupied by the desire to be taken seriously and establish a sense of legitimate authority. When students called me "Miss", I gently corrected them that I was "Professor." I dressed in clothes, blazers and slacks, that I considered distinct from student attire. I'd internalized the norm of the rational intellectual without a messy body as desirable, but my female reproductive body got in the way.

As I have aged, and grown as a professor, I have pushed at these boundaries and I've found them less imperative than I initially did. Part of this comes as I have gained more job security and proved myself as a professional. Part of it is also because I am white, normatively feminine and able bodied; each affording me certain privileges such as privacy, status, and conformity. Pre-Covid I always consciously modulated my embodied performance (my voice, my clothing, my facial expressions) and managed my unintentional bodily leakages (breast milk, tripping over cords, hiccups, migraines) in the classroom. I've also noted how revealing my embodiment (intentionally or not) creates intimacy, challenges personal dignity, rattles confidence, loosens rigid roles, and enables connections across the professor/student divide.

I would have thought that teaching during COVID

¹"What he ought to do for the individual is to turn personal troubles and concerns into social issues and problems open to reason" (Mills 1959/2000: 59).

over the past two years, there would have been less opportunities for these leakages. Clearly if my breasts leaked while on Zoom, I could have easily adjusted my camera or turned off my screen. However, this shoring up of privacy and erasure of embodied slippages has not happened. In fact, the blurring of public and private is rapidly reconstructed on many levels. The taken-for-granted tacit formal and informal rules of boundaries within higher education are being reorganized. For example, there seems to be no private domestic space any longer when Zoom offers unprecedented access to see and hear inside our homes. At the same time, the affective experiences of COVID and embodied vulnerability, facilitates bodies leaking into virtual 'classroom' spaces' in new and fascinating ways.

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'You Are Muted:' Adjusting to New Norms in Pedagogy

COVID-19 has reorganized academic work from the micro-interactional to the macro-structural. We have had to download software, become adept at televisual systems, figure out bandwidth, manage lighting, rewrite lesson plans, and navigate breakout rooms, to mention but a few. There are new rituals and routines, and new ways of speaking. I've uttered or been told "you're muted" dozens of times. And I've repeated, "OK let me just share my screen. Can everyone see that?" more than I care to count.

This reorganization is also happening with the pervasive sense of precarity brought by global pandemic and everyday acknowledgement of the fragility of life. The emotional work of teaching has taken on new dimensions for both isolated students and faculty members connecting through fiber optic cables in an era of great uncertainty. Over the past two years, I have been told several times that I am the only person outside of immediate family that my students interact with on a regular basis. And I have witnessed, as reported in the literature, that students are more anxious, distracted, and less motivated (Gillis & Krull 2020).

As we face these adjustments, news media reports in addition to warning us about rising case counts,

also offered helpful but activating stories about how to 'protect your family's privacy during remote learning' and preventing intrusion into one's private life (Caron 2020). The desire to protect the private living spaces of families and shield students from others' judgement has meant creating safe spaces on Zoom that do not require students to turn on their cameras. As a faculty member, in meetings and while teaching, it seems less optional for me to turn off my camera. I am not sure I am afforded the same degree of privacy as the students.

Many faculty members have experienced a Zoom meeting like this one. Our first Spring semester 2019 meeting with the administration was about enrollment and felt bizarre. The president sat in his living room dressed rather casually with his cat on his lap and delivered several grim statistics. I couldn't help but be distracted by the cat, so sweet and happy sitting there. I wonder if the cat was psyched to have him home all the time. The president seemed calmer as he stroked the cat--very Dr. Evil. One person was sitting outside, and their garden looked so lush and beautiful. I felt envious of her outdoor space and green thumb. The head of IT was in his painting studio, and I could catch a glimpse of canvases behind him. I tried to pin him so I could see the paintings larger. I mean, I am a sociologist -- makes sense that I continue to be really curious about these people and how they actually live. I'm still curious what they think of my bed behind me in my Zoom rectangle. Do they think it is inappropriate to see where I sleep while in a meeting?

Similar to looking into well-lit apartment windows on evening walks with my dog, I was, and continue to be, fascinated by the access to little bits of private lives of my peers. Maybe I am a sociologist because I am nosy? I do know this curiosity about people's private spaces is not limited to just sociologists. Students liven up whenever my dog makes an appearance on Zoom. And last semester, my 11-year-old bursting into my room with a technical glitch, led to many sympathetic nods from my Bioethics class, troubleshooting advice, and even compliments on her hair color. Students seem to like these opportunities to see behind the curtains and witness a tiny slice of domestic space.

'I'm Praying for Your Vagina:' New Leakages in Online Teaching

Understandably, some students, college administrators, and some faculty were eager to start up teaching face-to-face as we tentatively manage COVID in the SUNY system. I agreed to teach my Fall 2021 classes through

a hybrid model (i.e., delivering the lectures both face-to-face in a class with some students and simulcast on Zoom for other students). However, just prior to the semester beginning, I had to have a medical procedure to repair a gynecological side effect of giving birth to three children. This procedure required me to adhere to a recovery period of two weeks, limiting both walking and standing. This recovery protocol meant I started my in-person classes exclusively on Zoom.

This difference in location of class was explained to my incoming students as a medical recovery from a health procedure. During one class, I was screensharing my computer through Zoom to lecture from some slides. Typically, I turn off my text notifications on my laptop but this particular class I had forgotten. About a half-hour into class, my best friend from high school began to rapid fire text me about how annoyed she was at her children. Seeing the first text, “Just give me a little tranquility. These kids are so ungrateful,” I laughed glancing at the gallery of muted students smiling and giggling. “Whoopsie, forgot to disable that.” I apologized. Then I fumbled around trying to get my texts to stop, hearing several pings indicating her continued texting. A few more made it through to the screen but I didn’t read them. I continued teaching.

About an hour later when I ended class, I scrolled through my phone to read the texts and this is what her last one said,

I love you so much. I’m praying for your vagina and that the wall is healing well. I hope you are taking time for yourself. No more grocery shopping. Let someone else do that! Screw it, order in. Drink up. Take this time to unwind.

Stunned, I sat at my desk and in Proustian fashion, I was instantaneously transported back to the humiliation of my breast leaking. What are the chances that both my breasts and my vagina manage to be special guest stars in my classes? Am I now reduced to a broken vagina to these students? I felt so much shame at my private body parts being exposed. A deeper shame lurked beneath: the humiliation at not doing a better job at vaginally delivering my children and having a weak pelvic floor. And as is typical of female shame with a feminist consciousness, I felt ashamed of being ashamed and disappointed I didn’t feel more empowered about my vagina’s public appearance. I wondered, maybe I should email and explain to them that my friend was referring to my surgery, creating a teachable moment about rectocele and women’s health issues. Having a tendency

to over-explain things and make awkward situations worse, I thought better of this idea. I didn’t know how I would face some of them in person in a week. Maybe I could switch the entire class to exclusively online and somehow ‘break’ my camera?

As the shock wore off, I lost my breath laughing with my family about the entire event. My partner kept repeating, “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!” I called my high school friend to tell her about ‘outing’ me to the students; she said, “I wonder what they think is wrong with your vagina?” A few other friends sent me YouTube clips of people breaching a variety of social norms while working from home on Zoom.² “At least you didn’t pull a Jeffrey Toobin,” my friend Megan smirked, referring to the October 2020 controversy where legal analyst Toobin, during a Zoom meeting with his *New Yorker*-colleagues, began masturbating. At the time, he apologized by stating he didn’t know his camera and sound were on. Toobin is back on the air after an 8-month penance that included working at a food bank, doing therapy and “trying to be a better person.”³ Rehabilitation seems to be about demonstrating how civilized to overcome bodily urges revealed to be out of control. But what of my professionalism? Even now, I don’t know how much my students saw or what all they read. Weeks into the semester, and currently teaching in a hybrid setting, I never brought up the text and have just continued to teach my students.

In addition to personal exposure of my private medical procedures, there are other ways mediated bodies spill into the Zoom classroom. During my courses in Fall of 2020, a great number of my students’ lives were directly and horribly changed by COVID. There were many class sessions where students shared their stories through tears and sobs expressing such immediate grief and feelings of profound alienation. The crying was contagious sometimes leading to incoherent utterances that trailed off. Staying in this space with each other was both uncomfortable and consoling. It was also exhausting and while unavoidable, as bodies spilled raw emotion, an aspect of my job that I consider with some trepidation. I feel uncertain about the level of closeness and intimacy shared in my classrooms and unsure of what to do with all the excess. The emotional work of holding space or being ‘approachable’ enough

²For example, this clip is of a woman going to the bathroom while on Zoom <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BMlFtSISJq8>.

³See, for example, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/06/10/media/jeffrey-toobin-returns-cnn/index.html>.

for students to express their feelings is a blessing and a curse; it is also gendered.

CONCLUSION

COVID and higher education's reaction has shifted the previous architecture of professionalism -- the lecture halls, microphones, desks, projectors, transforming our bedrooms and personal computers into sites of public labor. This ongoing transformation has created new leakages, new challenges and new intimacies providing an opportunity for social solidarity expressed through compassion. We can see how each other live, how we decorate our spaces, how we 'feel from home'. Importantly, I don't want to glamorize this turn toward new intimacy because based on my personal experience, this intimacy comes at a cost not equally distributed across all faculty. Female embodiment is circumscribed by both emotional labor and the milky bloody leakiness; these forms of leakiness can be reinforcing whereby the unintentional embodied slippages loose rigid distinctions between statuses. Students might feel more comfortable crying to an obvious mother. From my experience, and from witnessing professional reorganization during the pandemic, the remote (the private and the home) is a complicated place for women who have always been tethered to it in some way.

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