Critical Education

The Body in the Classroom after Covid-19
An Exercise in Pedagogical Reflexivity

Molly Wiant Cummins

University of Texas at Arlington

Abstract

In this essay, I use autoethnography to investigate the multiple adaptations of the (instructor's) performative body in the classroom, both online and in-person, due to Covid-19. Specifically, attuning to these adaptations makes space for reclamation of the (instructor's) performative body in pedagogical spaces by re-engaging embodied pedagogy. Through autoethnography, I offer insights on dis/connection in online teaching, especially in an emergency, remote setting; the adaptation necessary to move back to in-person teaching during a pandemic; and a recommitment to acknowledging the identity of bodies that enter pedagogical spaces together. The lessons learned require focus on the power and privilege, both institutional and societal, that instructors and students must navigate in the classroom. Ultimately, through this exploration of the performative body's adaptations, embodied pedagogy moving forward highlights the possibilities of our classrooms to be places where pedagogical bodies can re-engage one another.

The First Day

Every first day, I walk into the classroom with butterflies in my stomach, a mix of eagerness and nervousness. I turn to face the students, smile, and welcome them to a new semester. This semester is no different, except that it is. This is our first semester back in person after a year online due to Covid-19.

I walk into the familiar space that I haven't seen in a year to find the students in small clumps around the room. They have claimed the desks that will presumably be theirs for the semester. I'm curious about those who chose to sit near others and those who chose to sit apart. We are a small class, claiming less than half the available seats in the room, so their choice of seating intrigues me. I can't say I'm surprised by the mostly quiet room as even upper-level students can be quiet on the first day. Still, some students chit-chat with each other about their summers or about their experiences of being back on campus. These conversations are low murmurs as I imagine there is a touch of uncertainty about the class and me as an instructor.

As I walk in, I wonder which ones have made a conscious choice to sit where they did and which ones sat down, perhaps nervously, in the first seat they saw. Ordinarily, I might approach them and make small talk as we wait for the clock to signal the class start time. Today when I turn to chat with them, I find myself pulled up short. Here, again, is the reminder that this isn't like every other first day. There are the typical first-day butterflies, but now I'm also navigating wearing a mask for the first time in a classroom. It is this moment of being pulled up short that makes me question what lessons await this new experience of teaching.

Preparing for the class and wiping down the computer equipment and whiteboard implements I plan to use, I consider that wearing a mask is a choice I've made, and I am struck by *how* the class will proceed. How will I effectively communicate with this new barrier? Looking out at my students, I notice which of them are also wearing a mask, which seems to be only two or three across the room. I wonder about the choices they have had to make, about how they have arrived at the decisions that have brought them to this moment. I notice the student who sits next to a classmate, a mask over her mouth but below her nose. I notice the students wearing masks and sitting off by themselves, and I notice the students who use the sanitation wipes in the room to wipe down the communal desks but are not wearing masks. I wonder about all of us, about how we have navigated what seem like perilous choices in order to share this space on this day. Ultimately, as the clock strikes 11am and I convene class on the first day, I am aware that this semester will be unlike any other I have thus far experienced.

In hindsight, I realize instructors and students at all levels have viscerally experienced education anew due to Covid-19. Because the body is always already a fundamental part of the (pedagogical) human experience, teaching is a performative act (Pineau, 2003) in which I draw upon embodied knowledge, or the knowledge I have gained by paying attention to what I experience through my body as I interact with others (Spry, 2011). Moving from online back to in-person teaching, I am awash in the sudden realizations of how bodily understandings of the world have shifted in the last year. For me, the experience has necessitated a return to and a relearning of embodied pedagogy and embodied teaching, or teaching from a whole-body perspective (hooks, 1994). Engaging embodied pedagogy after the onset of Covid-19 in the attempt to return to "normal" is about welcoming the possibilities that exist in pedagogical spaces (hooks, 1994; Wiant Cummins, 2023). The performative body, or the doing body engaging in everyday life, for example, is dynamic and in flux, attempting to respond to the performances of other bodies. By

(re-)engaging in embodied pedagogy, we can attune to the adaptations performative bodies have made because of Covid, allowing us to reclaim performative bodies, especially in pedagogical spaces, as we move into a new era of sharing pedagogical spaces.

To attune to some of these adaptations, I use autoethnography which allows me space to process and reflexively learn from these experiences as I attempt to reclaim the performative body through embodied pedagogy. In embodied pedagogy, the mind and body are meant to be linked; Holman Jones (2005) reminds me that autoethnography attempts to entreat bodily experience (back) into the story because the story comes from the body (Spry 2001). Autoethnography is "an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)" (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 273). It is a humanizing research approach, meant to make author and reader alike recognize that their stories and actions matter (Adams, Ellis, & Holman Jones, 2017). Because writing is a method of inquiry (Richardson, 2000), autoethnography allows researchers to make sense of themselves and their experiences in ways that create important meaning for readers as well (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Pelias (2013) argues that "the 'self' becomes a rhetorical and open question, always demanding reflexivity and always carrying consequences" (p. 385) because author and reader are so closely linked.

Using autoethnography requires the writer to reflexively consider their relationship to the stories they tell. Autoethnography allows writers to reminisce on the experiences of our lives that affected us, writing them into understanding, into moments of clarity, despite how long that clarity might last (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). With storytelling as a mode, autoethnographers make the private public and make autoethnography "'powerful, comforting, dangerous, and culturally essential'" (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 87). The goal is to write in such a way that readers may resonate with the author's experience to reflect on their own (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). By extension, autoethnographers focus on creating meaningful discourse about the world, (Denzin, 1997). Specifically, I approach autoethnography as a performance method that attends to and theorizes the body, and, in pedagogical spaces, how those performances dis/invite embodied pedagogy. In this essay, I use Bryant Keith Alexander's (2003) concept of pedagogical reflexivity. Alexander (2003) situates pedagogical reflexivity as autoethnographic performance, which is "a critical-intellectually-embodied activity that bridges and binds time; the active critical process of analyzing the past in the present with the intent of informing and maybe (pre)transforming future performances" (p. 59). Autoethnography is a powerful and multifaceted method for this work because, as Denzin (2006) writes,

> Our research practices are performative, pedagogical, and political. Through our writing and our talk we enact the worlds we study. These performances are messy and pedagogical. They instruct our readers about this world and how we see it. The pedagogical is always moral and political, by enacting a way of seeing and being, it challenges, contests or endorses the official, hegemonic ways of seeing and representing the other. (p. 333)

Following in these steps, I take an autoethnographic performance approach to pedagogical reflexivity to interrogate the return to in-person teaching after Covid-19-related online teaching to explore past and future pedagogical performances and to transform them toward a deeper embodied pedagogy (hooks, 1994). Centering embodied knowledge brings the body back into the (pedagogical) conversation toward greater embodied pedagogy in the present and future.

Grounding in Embodied Pedagogy

I come from a pedagogical lineage that emphasized the teaching body is a pedagogical site, where reflection and learning from those moments of reflection are powerful pedagogical lessons (Warren & Davis, 2009). Performing teaching is also a negotiation of identity based on who we have been (as teachers) and who we imagine we might become (Warren, 2003). Indeed, Eastman (2006) explains that our bodies, especially teacher bodies, are read through observation and students make meaning of those clues (e.g., how a teacher dresses). The teacher body works ideologically because it is also an institutional body, participating in "rituals of regimentation, regulation, domination, and discipline" (Eastman, 2006, p. 300). Thus, teacher bodies represent institutional knowledge systems, systems which also shape teacher bodies, until students focus on what the teacher, as representative of the institution, wants rather than how a particular subject works in the world (Eastman, 2006). The body in teaching is deeply performative in meaning-making, institutional and ideological representation, and complex identity negotiations. These ideas frame how I enter pedagogical spaces, trying to remember that through my body, I am already performing. Entering pedagogical spaces as a performative body, I wanted a style that acknowledged the body. I wanted a pedagogy focusing "on the ways desire, passion, and curiosity are wrapped up in the body; they are bodily experiences" (Pensoneau-Conway, 2009, p. 185).

Like me, most of my students were also schooled in a culture that taught us to keep our minds and bodies separate—to enter classrooms as cognitive beings only, leaving all bodily sensation, disruption, and emotion outside the classroom. This separation, of course, is schooling, rather than education, "Schooling systematically domesticates our bodies; it incarcerates them in rows of wooden desks, robs them of spontaneity through rigid demarcations of time and space, and in fact devotes a great deal of energy to hiding the fact that we have bodies at all" (Pineau, 2002, p. 45). But when we come back to the body, when we enact an embodied, performative pedagogy, teachers become performers in the classroom, better able to subvert the mind-body dualism. With attention to the inherently somatic nature of teaching and learning (Pineau, 2002), a pedagogy of the erotic means valuing bodily experience in pedagogical spaces (Pensoneau-Conway, 2009). Entering our classrooms wholeheartedly (hooks, 1994) in this way is about creating pleasure in a classroom so often fraught with docile bodies devoid of passion in and for learning (Freire, 1970/2000; Warren, 2011).

My attempt at that kind of classroom pleasure is through eros (hooks, 1994), moving toward self-actualization or better versions of ourselves, and encouraging our students on their individual journeys as well. In Eastman's (2006) purview, teacher performances transform students from passive observers to active participants ("actors") involved in their education (p. 307). Embracing eros in an embodied pedagogy is about affirming the humanity of each person in the classroom (Pensoneau-Conway, 2009). An embodied pedagogy requires teacher engagement and investment in students, a community classroom environment, and, especially, reflexivity (Pensoneau-Conway, 2009).

In the classroom, this means we try to recognize one another's humanity as unfinished. As a teacher, I try to see students as whole humans with lives outside of the classroom. I try to meet them where they are, to engage in emotional labor (Wiant Cummins & Huber, 2022) that creates space for students to struggle toward better versions of themselves. Whether online or in-person, my goal was to enact the type of engaged, embodied pedagogy via eros that hooks (1994) expresses, knowing it was an imperfect process toward deeper somatic engagement. An embodied

pedagogy, founded on critical love, feels like the only way forward. But it's a continuous learning process. Considering Covid, Yoo (2023) says, "In our desperation to forget that the pandemic had ever occurred, we are prevented from doing the hard work of lingering in our losses to contemplate new ways to rebuild" (p. 320). To linger at this threshold of possibility, I reflect on three lessons sparked by shifts in Covid-era teaching.

Lesson One: Online Teaching

I'm sitting in a virtual meeting room on Teams, listening to my colleagues talk before our faculty meeting begins, trying to find comfort wrapped in a blanket in my chilly home office and watching the wind lazily sway the bushes in front of my windows. It is typical faculty chitchat, catching up and checking-in about how the semester is going. I notice some colleagues talking about how much they dislike virtual teaching, wishing for the chance to be back in-person. It seems less that technology is the issue and more that my colleagues find community-building in the virtual classroom difficult to navigate. They feel disembodied by online teaching and long to be with students again. I understand the lament even if I didn't fully grasp it at the time. I did feel that much of my body was less present in an online space, or I was less aware of it, and I wondered how my students viewed their embodied participation in the online classroom.

At the height of the pandemic, when connecting via social media or conferencing platforms was the only, or safest, option, it was easy to forget that our bodies still spoke across technological, spatial, sometimes even chronological boundaries (as in the case of international students who could not meet synchronously due to time differences) (Stern, 2011). After all, Aagaard (2022) explains that technology actively shapes our perception and sense of immediacy. I would log in to our shared classroom, frequently hoping against hope, that I would see another person looking back at me through the screen. As a Microsoft Teams campus, students could upload a picture of themselves that appeared as a colored circle amidst a dark background. Usually, I logged on and was greeted by pictures of faces or colored circles containing initials. In our student population, access to consistent and predictable Internet and bandwidth was not always a given, so I understood that not everyone could remain in the class meeting *and* use their cameras. This meant, though, there were times where I was the only person with a camera on in the room, talking to dark boxes and hoping someone was on the other end. Perhaps this made the disconnection easier for students, and the effort to connect with them sometimes felt futile. Maybe it was easier to disconnect with myself too. I sometimes found myself wondering if it was even worth continuing on or if I was simply speaking into an otherwise empty room—both the online classroom and my office at home. On the other hand, my students figured out how to use the chat well, for the most part, and I could count on some of them to actively participate in that venue. This was a boon to teaching virtually, especially for students who might have been quieter in a physical setting, to demonstrate another way of participation.

Still, disconnecting from the body was subtle and seemingly easy because I wasn't in traditional pedagogical spaces. Stern (2011) reminds me that the online classroom (e.g., via Zoom or Microsoft Teams) is "an extension of our teacherly bodies" (p. 256). At the time, I don't think I embodied that. I was no longer focused on my whole body in front of my students; rather, my focus narrowed to a small section of my body. For instance, teaching online changed my morning routine. As I dressed for the day, I focused only on the top-half of my body: What would my students see? What meaning might they make of this color or fabric of clothing, especially if I was wearing a t-shirt I might not wear in the classroom (where I typically dress business casually)? I

focused on my head: How did my face appear on camera? How did my hair look today? Although these might sound like vain questions, I wanted students to hear the message of the material rather than focus on how odd my head looked with my hair swept back, for example. I did not understand, at the time, how this adaptation became a disconnection point for me. Instead of remembering how I am part of the message, I was hoping students would gloss over my appearance for only the material. Yet, they're inextricably connected.

Knowing that students might be watching me, I became intensely aware of my face on camera/screen. I learned to make eye contact with my camera to appear I was making eye contact with the students versus watching them on screen and thus appearing to be looking down or away from them. I learned to give frequent nonverbal feedback via facial expressions to demonstrate listening and responding. I became aware that this performance of teaching online required different muscles; I could not rely on muscle memory from years of in-person teaching. Instead, I had to reorient, to adapt, to what worked and did not work in this new context.

Thus, to engage in embodied pedagogy, teachers must be "accountable" for their "own bodies and voices," which means engaging pedagogy with an "impassioned approach to our own bodies" (Stern, 2011, p. 262). For example, arguing for antiracist and liberating online teaching, Humphrey, Jr. and Davis (2021) argue that an antiracist online space first needs "an articulation of online learning as an embodied digital discursive space," as an antiracist pedagogy is centered in the body (n.p.). As they claim, an antiracist online pedagogy requires students and teachers both to bring "their full *selves*" into the online classroom (Humphrey & Davis, 2021, n.p., emphasis original).

At times, teaching via Teams felt lonely in a way I hadn't experienced in-person. When I can sense the presence of other bodies around me, like in a physical classroom, I know I'm not there in the room alone, engaging the material alone. Rarely could I be so sure on Teams without students having to consistently show—literally or via participation in the chat—that they were there too. Still, the connection was vital for me to not feel like a talking head, but to feel student participation and active (embodied) learning even in this unusual space. Some days, I'd leave the virtual room wondering if my students had learned anything, had participated in their education; indeed, I wondered if they were even there at all, or if they'd merely logged in and wandered off. I wonder now how the experience might have changed had I entered with my full self in the classroom and invited my students to do the same.

Gourlay (2021) argues that the perception of online teaching being disembodied is erroneous, that online teaching has always been a "material and embodied practice" (p. 63). The ease with which I disconnected from the body is based on this misperception. That first week teaching back in-person helped me see how much my body had adapted to my misguided understanding of online teaching. I quickly learned that being accountable for my body in the classroom in the way Stern (2011) contends means reckoning with the ways my body continued to communicate in a space not physically shared with other bodies.

Lesson Two: Shifting Back in Person

On the first day back in person, I look up when class starts with the brightest face I can muster, especially behind a mask, and greet this new class with a smile. I introduce myself and the class, projecting my voice through the mask. Throughout the fifty-minute class, I am grateful I've chosen the KF-94 masks that I have, ones that sit away from my mouth so I'm not breathing them

in nor are they muffling too much of my sound (at least to my hearing/able-bodied ears). The class is small, so I spend time trying to make consistent eye contact with each student, trying to nonverbally welcome them to the class.

With mask recommendations or restrictions in effect in some parts of the U.S., many colleges and universities offered a list of teaching tips for teaching while wearing a mask. Among their tips, Cornell University's Center for Teaching Innovation (n.d.) suggested adding more body language, building community and connections in the class, and checking-in with students regularly. As a communication instructor, these are suggestions I utilized before Covid-19. As I reflected on this first class back in-person, however, I realized that while tips can help, nothing could have fully prepared me for the experience. For example, I did not feel as prepared for this first class as I typically do. Some of that may be attributed to my university's last-minute decisions to have larger classes split so that half the class comes in-person half the time and accesses material online the other half of the time (a process that lasted for the first few weeks of class before we all met back in-person all the time). This left instructors (and students) scrambling to figure out the *how*, *where*, and *when* of classes in addition to both the chaos of the first semester back in-person and the usual chaos the beginning of a semester brings. I left that first day of class feeling harried and as though I had missed important information I wanted to cover or had downplayed the importance of expectations, effectively undermining myself on the first day.

Additionally, recognizing that adding nonverbal communication was imperative, I didn't count on how difficult that might be. Ordinarily, I'm very nonverbally expressive as an instructor, trying to create a welcoming feeling in communication classrooms (e.g., public speaking) that can be fraught with apprehension for students. With my face partially covered, I felt I had to work harder to be nonverbally expressive, willing my eyes to communicate interest as best I could. Moreover, teaching through a mask required a different stamina for breathing and speaking. It took a while that semester for my body to adjust so I didn't feel out of breath and tired at the end of a class session. However, like learning how to present in any new context, this eventually became muscle memory. Most starkly, between the mask and being back in physical space together, I suddenly became aware of my body in a different way.

The realization that teaching online for a year had taken a toll on how I viewed my body in the classroom became especially visceral after the second day of this in-person class. We have just finished a class briefly covering major paradigm shifts in communication, and I am feeling good about the content and class participation that day. I feel that after my (in my mind) bumbling first day, this has been a stronger teaching performance. As I erase the board and prepare to leave, one of the students stops me. They tear up readying themself to discuss a matter with me. As the student talks, though, I have trouble focusing on their words. I am suddenly overly aware of what my body is doing—how I am standing, what my facial expressions are, how my hands are or are not moving. Over my years as a teacher, I've found a particular comfort zone for myself in the classroom, but it is a comfort I have cultivated from focused awareness and learning based on times I have felt awkward or out of bodily sorts. So, this moment of high self-monitoring, especially as a student is opening up to me, feels jarring. Not only am I suddenly concerned with what my body is or isn't doing, and the potential messages I am thus sending, I am now consumed with why *this* moment is becoming such an issue. "Is this how I hold my hands in this situation?" I think. "Do I typically lean against the table, or should I stand tall?" "Despite the mask, what are my eyes communicating?"

Replaying the moment later, I am reminded that the teaching body is always already a pedagogical site (Warren & Davis, 2009) for both teacher and student. While my body is part of the pedagogy, I cannot forget I am learning from it as well. Returning to in-person teaching makes me aware of how I have spent the last year training my body for a virtual classroom. The in-person, physical classroom is once again foreign. The nervousness I felt at this moment of high self-monitoring, which might not be uncommon for me in other social situations, became a turning point where I realized just how much had changed, me included, during Covid-era teaching. My body was communicating that I had not prepared for this reentry, that I was out of practice, that I had adapted and the familiar had to become a new adaptation of the performative body as teaching shifted back to in-person. Again, in hindsight, it felt obvious. *Of course* things were different; *of course* there would be a new learning curve returning to in-person teaching still in the midst of a global pandemic. Yet, re-orienting to this adaptation of the performative body in pedagogical space sent me reeling.

What might have happened, I wonder, if I had more explicitly marked this with that group of students? Could the next day of the class have allowed us a stronger reconnection to eros in the classroom by naming the ways our bodies had adapted to differing pedagogical spaces? I wonder, with the benefit of hindsight, if my students and I were ready to acknowledge or have those conversations at that point. Perhaps the reorientation required a longer processing. Still, attending to bodies became an invaluable lesson as I found my footing in this new semester.

Lesson Three: Attending to Bodies

Trying to be present with the student, I try to shift my attention back to what they're communicating. With tears in their eyes and emotion in their voice, the student begins, "I don't really feel like I'm learning anything in class so far. I mean, my education is really important to me. Is this going to be the format for the class?"

I'm not sure how to respond at first. Honestly, I'm dumbfounded. It is day *two* of the class, and we have only skimmed the surface of the material we will be covering this semester. For me, today was about setting up a good foundation for the rest of the course, situating ourselves in communication paradigms. I remember the student asked specific questions these first two class days, like, "What's your favorite comm[unication] theory?", and I'm wondering if I didn't answer those questions as the student wished I had. Perhaps they do not see me as a competent enough professor for what they imagine this subject matter is. I try to breathe, to remain open to the student and to answer their question without jumping to conclusions.

"The class is typically discussion-based," I explain, "so it will be different than these first couple of sessions where it was more of me talking. We will be moving into more of the discussion format next week as we settle into the routine of the class a bit more."

It sounds to me like the student is concerned that this format would be outside what they are used to, and they might not like it. I try to ease the concern by saying, "My style is definitely different. I've had students tell me they hated it at first but love it by the end of the semester, so you wouldn't be alone there. But sometimes people dislike it the whole time, so I understand that my style isn't necessarily for everyone. It's possible you may not like it the whole semester. I wish you could give it about a week so you can get more of a feel for the discussion format. I also understand, though, that if you're going to switch classes, this first week is the time to do it. So, if you want to drop the class, it's really up to you." I am doing my best to remain open, to answer the

questions honestly, to help the student make the best decision for themselves about whether to remain in the course.

The student asks, "I mean, after this, would you even want me in your class?"

This is a difficult question. Intuitively, I wonder if the student is asking about their ability to belong and thrive in the class by asking if I might punish them in some way for this moment should they continue in the course.

I pause before responding, "It's really up to you. You would be welcome in the class, but I can't make the decision for you. You need to choose what's best for you and your education." I want them to know that if they choose to stay in the class, they will be welcome here.

Meanwhile, I am trying to process my own reactions and emotions to this moment. I am trying to connect with my body as I process. I'm spending so much brain power on my body language that I'm having trouble being present with the student. Simultaneously, I am trying to assuage the student's fears and offer enough information they can make an informed decision about how to proceed with the semester. After the interaction, when I am sitting back in my office and reflecting, I think about how differently this moment might have gone. I tried to enter in embodied pedagogy, to bring my whole self to the moment and engage the student in a way that recognizes our humanity. Yet, I wonder if I accomplished that. Moreover, I want to feel frustrated that a student would be so bold as to say they're not learning anything on the second day of class, but my reaction to the student's emotions filters this frustration. I see the student's concern in their tears, in what feels like anxiety about making the correct choice right now to secure the future they've dreamed for themself.

I cannot ignore our bodies in this moment either, as this is part of embodied pedagogy. Many of our identities can be read on/through our bodies (Pineau, 2002). Our identities become part of the pedagogical space. My average size, cis, white woman body and the student's tall, Brown body are not silent as we engage in this encounter. Hamera (2003) claims that we "teach and study *as* bodies" and our bodies are affected by the material practices of our pedagogy (p. 63). Regardless of the ways my students and I attempt to make a more democratic space in the classroom, our bodies are already infused and molded by various social and institutional power differentials (Pineau, 1998).

In the moment I am floundering having to reconsider how my body communicates, I forget that our bodies are always already communicating. When the student and I each walked into that classroom, we made guesses about one another; we read one another's bodies through our various cultural contexts. So, in the same way that I spent time processing my self-monitoring after this interaction, I had to spend time considering what privileges and capital I walked into that moment with and how those may have affected my conversation with the student and the dis/connection with embodied pedagogy. This adaptation reminded me that the performative body is always communicating at various levels and the importance of engaging in teaching and research:

> motivated by a gnawing disturbance at the inequities that plague our society, funded by compassion for those who stand outside the circle of power and privilege, cognizant of my own complicity in perpetuating that circle, and driven by a committed vision that our world can be other than it is. (Pineau, 2002, p. 52)

Teaching and researching in this way highlights "new and better ways of being in the world" (Huber & McRae, 2014, p. 278) It was a stark reminder that reflexivity is a dynamic process; I can never reach a point at which I've effectively fulfilled my reflexive duties.

Ultimately, the student chose to drop the course. We didn't have any more conversations about the class, but I would say hi as I passed the student in the hall. I hope that meant something to the student; I hope the student still felt seen and welcomed regardless of whether we continued to share pedagogical space. I wonder what the classroom would have been like with that student's continued presence, how they would've affected and changed the embodied pedagogy I attempted to build with my students. Regardless, I am grateful for the students who did continue that journey with me, who worked to eventually untangle their understandings of learning online versus learning in-person and how those lessons may affect their continued education.

Looking Forward

I sit in my office on the first day of a new semester, reflecting on what I've learned over the last few years since we shifted online. The state in which I live and teach has long-ago decided that Covid is not an overwhelming threat, and other than some local government entities (e.g., mayors), offered no mask or vaccination mandates for faculty, staff, or students on our campus. At the university level, administrators highly encouraged all these measures, but the pressure to resume in-person instruction prevailed. This is no less a politicization of bodies than when we walked into our classrooms pre-Covid. Yet, when I walk in with a mask, keeping distance from my students, I recognize the variety of ways I might be read. I recognize now, especially, my choices might seem overly cautious (or overzealous) to some students. How students read my body and my choices (and I theirs) immediately changes the way we engage in relationship and our overall classroom community. Once I make the choice to stop masking in the classroom, how do students, especially those who've had me as an instructor while masking, make sense of my body and choices? It affects our pedagogical performances for and with one another, our performative adaptations, and our ability to engage embodied pedagogy.

I reflect on the last few years and wonder what might change this year. I imagine how many people, struggling to survive and endure the worst of the pandemic, felt disconnected from their body—whether educationally or in life. I do not know the extent of personal traumas due to Covid or otherwise in my students' lives, nor am I claiming students should have no accountability in their courses. But recommitting to eros when I engage embodied pedagogy allows me to presume the best about my students, to lead with love, compassion, and boundaries, and to create a space where we all can hopefully thrive and explore ideas. As I prepare to adapt my performative body to whatever this year might bring, I remember that the classroom is a space of possibility (hooks, 1994), but I do not imagine I am solving the world's problems in that space and time. Instead, it is in the liminal space of possibility that I imagine the students and I can create something new.

In this autoethnographic essay, I engaged in pedagogical reflexivity to critically analyze the past in the present to perhaps transform future teaching performances—the space where possibility lies (Alexander, 2003). So much of the cultural conversation has focused on the "new normal" without recognizing the possibilities we face in defining it. Defining the new normal provides opportunities to engage embodied pedagogy through pedagogical reflexivity to change how the future might be different if we learn from the past. We bring new somatic knowledge with the many adaptations of the performative body to various modes of teaching since the onset of

Covid. Interrogating through pedagogical reflexivity forefronts the body during a time when it has been easy to forget that the body, too, learns and communicates. I do this work cautiously as Alexander (2003) warns that I cannot "overextend" what I imagine to be possible in the classroom. Still, he invites me to do this imperative work, saying it is an opportunity to "look at the relationship between pedagogical performative practice and the impact of identities as intervening variables in the educational endeavor" (Alexander, 2003, p. 60). As he says, objective reflection cannot be the sole form of knowledge for this work; instead, "It has to be a deeply penetrating critical reflexivity that is engaged both after the act (of teaching and learning), as well as in the moment of the engagement" (Alexander, 2003, p. 60).

To understand the lessons my body has learned through these adaptations, I must engage in the work of feeling out that knowledge. The somatic, emotional responses matter as much as the stimuli I interpret through my other senses. Namely, I walk into this new semester with three major lessons learned. First, I find online teaching not to be a disembodied method but one that shifts my focus to smaller or different parts of my body. Certainly, all of me is still engaged and necessary in online teaching, but students make more meaning of my eyes than my feet when we're online. Second, moving from the focused embodiment of online teaching back to in-person teaching requires a deep consideration of nonverbal behaviors, especially facial expressions. This lesson was compounded by my use of a face mask and whether my students also chose to use one. The major lesson of this shift was recognizing that although much of teaching is muscle memory, those muscles still require regular movement, stretching, and strengthening. I cannot move into in-person teaching without expecting that I would be rusty and having to confront that experience. Last, as we find our footing in this new normal, we must recognize the liminal space of possibility in which we currently exist. Inasmuch as we can control, at least in our individual classrooms, this is an opportunity to (re-)commit to embodied knowledge and embodied pedagogy grounded in eros, to engage with students more deeply in teaching and learning (Wiant Cummins, 2023), to linger in our collective losses and rebuild together (Yoo, 2023).

Another first day, and the familiar butterflies mark the possibilities that expand before me. When I walk into the classroom this year, it is a space I haven't taught in previously. I immediately notice how chilly it is in this room, wondering if that's due to the hotter weather outside or if it's always this cold. I see students spread around in the rectangular room, half to my left and half to my right. And I wonder about them, as I do every first day of class. What will the personality of the class be? In what ways will they surprise me, challenge me, teach me? In what ways might I challenge, teach, and encourage them? I am one of two people in a mask this semester (and I will ultimately stop masking next semester), so I wonder what presumptions they are making of me as I try to be conscious of the presumptions I am making of the students. The clock strikes 11am and I still smile with the brightest eyes I can muster to welcome them to this new semester together, more confident that the lessons I've learned after another year of in-person teaching can guide us into a deeper, engaged pedagogy where we work together to see the possibilities that abound in the classroom as we engage one another in embodied pedagogy.

Funding and Disclosure Statements

References

Aagaard, J. (2022). On the dynamics of Zoom fatigue. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies, 28*(6), 1878-1891. https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565221099711

Adams, T. E., Ellis, C., & Holman Jones, S. (2017). Autoethnography. In J. Matthes, C. S. Davis, & R. F. Potter (Eds.), *The international encyclopedia of communication research methods* (pp. 1-11). Wiley & Sons. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118901731.iecrm0011

Alexander, B. K. (2003). Critically analyzing pedagogical interactions as performance. In B. K. Alexander, G. L. Anderson, & B. P. Gallegos (Eds.), *Performance theories in education: Power, pedagogy, and the politics of identity* (pp. 41-62). Routledge.

Bochner, A., & Ellis, C. (2016). *Evocative autoethnography: Writing lives and telling stories*. Routledge.

Cornell University Cetner for Teaching Innovation. (n.d.). *Tips for teaching in person with a mask*. https://teaching.cornell.edu/tips-teaching-person-mask Denzin, N. K. (2006). Pedagogy, performance, and autoethnography. *Text and Performance Quarterly, 26*(4), 333-338. https://doi.org/10.1080/10462930600828774

Denzin, N. K. (1997). *Interpretive ethnography: Ethnographic practices for the 21st century.* Sage. Eastman, N. (2006). Our institutions, our selves: Rethinking classroom performance and signification. *The Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies, 28*(3), 297-308. https://doi.org/10.1080/10714410600873209.

Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2011). Autoethnography: An overview. *Historical Social Research, 36*(4), 273-290. https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-12.1.1589

Freire, P. (1970/2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (30th anniversary ed.). (M. B. Ramos, Trans.). Continuum.

Gourlay, L. (2021). There is no "virtual learning": The materiality of digital education. *Journal of New Approaches in Educational Research, 10*(1), 57-66. https://doi.org/10.7821/naer.2021.1.649

Hamera, J. (2003). Exposing the pedagogical body: Protocols and tactics. In B. K. Alexander, G. L. Anderson, & B. P. Gallegos (Eds.), *Performance theories in education: Power, pedagogy, and the politics of identity* (pp. 63-82). Routledge.

Holman Jones, S. (2005). Autoethnography: Making the personal political. In N. K. Denzin, & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 763-792). Sage.

hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. Routledge.

Huber, A. A., & McRae, C. (2014). Collaborative directing and teaching: Applications and extensions of critical performative pedagogy. *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research, 3*(3), 264-282. http://doi.org/10.1525/dcqr.2014.3.3.264

Humphrey, Jr., D. L., & Davis, C. (2021). "The future started yesterday and we're already late": The case for antiracist online teaching. *The Journal of Interactive Technology & Pedagogy*, (19), n.p. https://jitp.commons.gc.cuny.edu/the-future-started-yesterday-and-were-already-late-the-case-for-antiracist-online-teaching/

Pelias, R. J. (2013). Writing autoethnography: The personal, poetic, and performative as compositional strategies. In S. Holman Jones, T. E. Adams, & C. Ellis (Eds.), *Handbook of autoethnography* (pp. 384-405). Left Coast Press.

Pensoneau-Conway, S. L. (2009). Desire and passion as foundations for teaching and learning: A pedagogy of the erotic. *Basic Communication Course Annual, 21*(Article 12), 173-206. https://ecommons.udayton.edu/bcca/vol21/iss1/12

Pineau, E. L. (1998). Performance studies across the curriculum: Problems, possibilities, and projections. In S. J. Dailey (Ed.), *The future of performance studies: Visions and revisions* (pp. 128-135). National Communication Association.

Pineau, E. L. (2002). Critical performative pedagogy: Fleshing out the politics of liberatory education. In N. Stucky & C. Wimmer (Eds.), *Teaching performance studies* (pp. 41-54). Southern Illinois University Press.

Pineau, E. L. (2003). Teaching is performance: Reconceptualizing a problematic metaphor. In B. K. Alexander, G. L. Anderson, & B. P. Gallegos (Eds.), *Performance theories in education: Power, pedagogy, and the politics of identity* (pp. 15-40). Routledge.

Richardson, L. (2000). Writing: A method of inquiry. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 923-948). Sage.

Spry, T. (2011). *Body, paper, stage: Writing and performing autoethnography*. Routledge.

Spry, T. (2001). Performing autoethnography: An embodied methodological praxis. *Qualitative Inquiry, 7*(6), 706-732. https://doi.org/10.1177/10778004010070060

Stern, D. M. (2011). You had me at Foucault: Living pedagogically in the digital age. *Text and Performance Quarterly, 31*(3), 249-266. http://doi.org/10.1080/10462937.2011.573191

Warren, J. T. (2011). Social justice and critical/performative communicative pedagogy: A storied account of research, teaching, love, identity, desire, and loss. *International Review of Qualitative Research, 4*(1), 21-24. http://doi.org/10.1525/irqr.2011.4.1.21

Warren, J. T. (2003). Performative pedagogy, at-risk students, and the basic course: Fourteen moments in search of possibility. *Basic Communication Course Annual, 15*(Article 8), 83-116. https://ecommons.udayton.edu/bcca/vol15/iss1/8

Warren, J. T., & Davis, A. M. (2009). On the impossibility of (some) critical pedagogies: Critical positionalities within a binary. *Cultural Studies <-> Critical Methodologies*, *9*(2), 306-320. https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708608321517.

Wiant Cummins, M. (2023). Locations of possibility: Reengaging embodied pedagogy as an act of resistance. *Feminist Pedagogy, 3*(1), Article 5. https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/feministpedagogy/vol3/iss1/5

Wiant Cummins, M., & Huber, A. A. (2022). Documenting emotional labor: An exercise in critical communication pedagogy. *Journal of Autoethnography, 3*(2), 187-202. https://doi.org/10.1525/joae.2022.3.2.187

Yoo, J. (2023). In contemplating loss: The creative power and possibility of suffering. *Cultural Studies <-> Critical Methodologies, 23*(3), , 320-325. https://doi.org/10.1177/15327086221147732

Author

Dr. Molly Wiant Cummins (she/her) is a tenure-track, Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication (College of Liberal Arts) at the University of Texas at Arlington.

Critical Education

criticaleducation.org

ISSN 1920-4175