

Saying Good-bye to my Students

(Robert Weldon Whalen is the Carolyn and Sam McMahon Professor of History at Queens University of Charlotte, in Charlotte, North Carolina. He can be reached at whalenb@queens.edu)

On Friday, March 13th – that unlucky day – the university where I teach dispersed its resident students. The president’s decision to move all instruction online was necessary and brave. I was struck, though, by just how deeply it affected me. As they hurriedly packed up, my poor students looked like refugees – their suitcases, boxes, clothes, pillow cases stuffed with who knows what, all tumbled along the curbs; the students hastily saying good-bye to each other, in the case of seniors maybe for the last time; their friendships, teams, classes all torn. It was heartbreaking, and moments of heartbreak get me to thinking.

I’ve already heard voices saying that if education were mostly online, as it may well be in the future, we wouldn’t have all this trouble. With few in-person courses or resident students, we wouldn’t have to endure the pain of disrupting all these personal relationships. If we were, to paraphrase Paul Simon, all techno-rocks and techno-islands, we would all feel no pain. Maybe the future of education is all online; I hope to heaven it isn’t.

I’m no Luddite. Transitioning my classes from in-person to online has not been a burden, because for years I’ve incorporated technology into my classes. All my syllabuses, assignments and resources are on line. Students submit work online and I return it online. My history students can research, on-line, sources that were completely unavailable just a couple of decades ago and connect instantaneously to students from around the world. Thank goodness for the Internet.

But the sudden and stark transition from my in-person classes to my new online classes has stunningly demonstrated the inferiority of the latter to the former. Here, I think, is why.

If human education is not simply data transfer but a matter of somehow enhancing and encouraging our humanity, we have to consider just what “human” means. That is no easy task. Narrow definitions of “human” have regularly served to dehumanize. Women, racial minorities,

immigrants, all manner of “outsiders” have been labeled “not quite human” or “subhuman,” and the consequences of all this have been inhuman. Ecologists warn that anthropocentrism has been deadly for the environment. I teach 20th-century history. I know the consequences of narrow concepts of humanity.

Still, if education is for and about human beings, some sense of “human” is essential.

For instance, I’d argue that Aristotle, for all his many errors, was right in thinking that humans are inherently social beings. We need each other. We are, as Dr. King wrote in his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, “caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” When person-to-person networks are torn, we scramble to re-weave them. As Jon Mooallem recently wrote in the *New York Times*, when Alaska was hit by a terrible 9.2 earthquake in 1964, people instinctively hurried to find each other. One woman remembered that she

had found herself on a thrashing staircase and, seeing a teetering child in front of her,

instinctively tucked him under her arm and strained to keep them both steady. Decades later, at age 93, the one cogent thought she could remember having through those four and a half minutes was: “I’m thankful I’m here. I’m thankful I’m here so I can hold onto this little guy.” (Jon Mooallem, “This is How You Live When the World Falls Apart,” *New York Times*, March 15, 2020, Sunday Review, 4;.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/12/opinion/sunday/coronavirus-disaster-response.html>).

This month, quarantined in their apartments, Italians leaned out of their windows and stepped out onto their balconies and began singing together.

I think too, with philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, that encountering another person is not a conceptual task; it’s not like solving a quadratic equation, but a practice, an action to take, and it occurs most powerfully when we meet “the other” as Levinas would say, face to face. This is what occurs when teachers and students come together and listen and speak and read the human clues we all share – smiles and frowns, eye contacts, tones and moods – and learn and practice again and again all the personal skills we need to be kind to each other.

Which brings me to technology. As I shift my courses from in-person to online, I wonder whether technology is being incorporated into the human, or the human is being incorporated into technology.

We've all seen movies about the former, in which, like some of the robots in *Star Wars*, machines become cute humans. We all know the warning signs of the latter. Watch films like Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*, or Stanley Kubrick's *2001 – A Space Odyssey*, and we can see what happens when the human is subordinated to the machine.

Of course we search for some middle ground, but such a search is, in my opinion, a false option. What is for whose purpose? Who is for what's purpose? What should our axiom be? I know what mine is. The technological must always be subordinated to the human, to the broadly and generously humane. We learn to live peacefully and creatively with each other by being immediately in each other's presence, flesh and blood, with all the risks that involves. There are, of course, costs to consider. A single teacher who teaches 20 students in person is vastly more expensive than a single teacher remotely teaching 2000 students online. But online teaching has even greater costs. In our "bowling alone" era, we need, I think, to enhance our person-to-person encounters, unscreened, unmediated. The Good Samaritan did not rescue the person fallen among thieves virtually. We need more social connection, not more social distancing; we need civic and personal engagement, not disengagement. It's education's job to foster that social connection and engagement, one with another.

And so I said a sad good-bye to my students and watched them pack up and disperse to who knows where, while all of us migrate online. I will use all the tech wonders I can think of to stay in touch – synchronous chats, asynchronous forums, photo exchanges, and video meetings. But it is not the same. This is what we have to do in this emergency, of course. But I hope that the emergency reminds us of how much we mean to each other, how quarantining and social distancing are inhumane, how no technology can replace persons, that the virtual is not the real. I'm near the end of my career at Queens University of Charlotte, but I hope that the Queens of the future will continue to be a space where real persons encounter real persons all gathered

around some great thing, where the technological will be subordinate to the human and not the other way around.

I return to my computer and pound away. Data flows out, data flows in. I miss my students.