‘Out of touch’
University teachers’ negative engagements with technology during COVID-19

Jesper Aagaard, Maria Hvid Stenalt and Neil Selwyn

ABSTRACT
In the wake of COVID-19, enthusiasm is growing for hybrid and other blended forms of teaching. Before celebrating the hybrid future of education, however, it is instructive to interrogate its hybrid presence. Accordingly, this article explores pedagogical challenges prompted by the pandemic pivot to online teaching. Analysing qualitative survey data from Danish university teachers (n = 488), we identify five critical stances towards educational technology: (1) technologies are fine when used correctly; (2) technical issues are a major obstacle; (3) hybrid teaching is overwhelming; (4) one’s sense of students suffers online; and (5) students hide behind their screens. Based on these results, this article identifies two challenges for the hybrid future of education: the problem of presence and the webcam-related tension between surveillance and care.

KEYWORDS
educational technology, hybrid, interaction, online education, presence, surveillance

For years, digital technologies have become increasingly ubiquitous and unremarkable parts of university classrooms and lecture halls. In 2020, however, this background status abruptly changed as the COVID-19 pandemic shut down those classrooms and lecture halls and digital technologies became the only thing that allowed us to carry on teaching. According to UNESCO (2020), nearly 1.6 billion students or more than 90 per cent of total enrolled learners were affected by these school closures. As descriptors like ‘online’, ‘remote’ and ‘distance’ became part of our educational vocabularies, online learning was hailed as a panacea in the time of COVID-19 (Dhawan 2020). As a result, global investment of venture capital in
educational technology more than doubled from $7 billion in 2019 to $16.1 billion in 2020 (Fleming 2021). Major international organisations readily endorsed this development: UNESCO, for instance, claimed that ‘investment in remote learning should both mitigate the immediate disruption caused by COVID-19 and establish approaches to develop more open and flexible education systems for the future’ (Williamson 2020: 20), while OECD’s education director Andreas Schleicher argued that ‘all the red tape that keeps things away is gone and people are looking for solutions that in the past they did not want to see. . . . You will not stop the momentum that will build’ (Williamson 2020: 21). In statements like these, the hybrid future is taken as a starting point for further discussion but is never itself drawn into question. Accordingly, the very idea that we could (or should) go back to the pre-pandemic forms of education is rendered unthinkable. Before celebrating education’s hybrid future, however, we find it worthwhile to interrogate its hybrid presence. This chronological shift is akin to what Neil Selwyn (2014) calls a movement towards the ‘state-of-the-actual’.

Indeed, Selwyn has recently argued that we need to pay attention to how the emergency pivot to online teaching is now being used as a justification to alter educational practices and that we need to develop ‘counter-narratives and alternate sets of discussion points’ (2020a: 9). In an effort to heed this call, the present article looks at some of the ‘digital downsides’ (Selwyn 2016) that have appeared in the swift transition to online teaching. On a larger scale, this transition has already been seen to have brought along a host of problems: ‘Online exam proctoring software and its biases, unequal access to hardware or internet connectivity, politically motivated algorithmic grade standardisation, and the use of online learning platforms for cheating are among the most contentious issues in education over the last year’, as an editorial concisely summarises these issues (Williamson et al. 2021: 118). What this article explores, however, is a lesser-discussed aspect of this transition, namely the pedagogical challenges it has prompted. The rest of the article is structured as follows: after first outlining our ‘constructively critical’ approach to educational technology and discussing current research on teachers’ lockdown experiences, we proceed to our own empirical study. Analysing qualitative survey data from Danish university teachers (n = 488), we identify five critical stances towards educational technology: (1) technologies are fine when used correctly (‘handy tools’); (2) technical issues are a major obstacle (‘stumbling along’); (3) hybrid teaching is overwhelming (‘feeling cross-eyed’); (4) one’s sense of students
suffers online (‘out of touch’); and (5) students hide behind their screens (‘faceless anonymity’). Based on these results, we identify two challenges for the hybrid future of education, namely the problem of presence and the webcam-related schism between surveillance and care.

Background

Taking a ‘constructively critical’ approach to educational technology

In one sense, there is ample room for a critical approach to educational technology or ‘EdTech’. Despite its forty-year history, academic scholarship around the topic of EdTech remains a relatively optimistic yet anodyne activity – what Selwyn (2020b) describes as an essentially ‘positive project’. Research tends to focus on questions of how technologies could be utilised, exploring potential uses, detailing cases of ‘best practice’ and asking questions of ‘what works?’ When it comes to EdTech, it could thus be argued that there is a need to more openly acknowledge and address its actual failures in contrast to its potential successes. Nevertheless, it is important to undertake any such critical work in a constructive and useful manner. In focussing on teachers’ perceived barriers, shortcomings and dissatisfactions with EdTech, this article is not simply looking to indulge in what Bruno Latour (2004) derides as the ‘debunking impetus’ of critique – pointing out problems that we presume to be hidden to others and then offering up predetermined explanations of choice. On the contrary, we approach this article in a constructively critical manner that also adds to knowledge about the potential uses of EdTech in higher education in distinct ways.

First, we hope that mapping teachers’ negative experiences and perceptions of EdTech allow us to ‘cast a certain shadow’ over the field (Felski 2015: 21) that portrays the object in a different light than it is usually seen. Focussing on negative experiences and perceptions helps us draw attention to often overlooked axiological matters of value and lived human relations. These sentiments chime with Naomi Hodgson’s pursuit of ‘post-critical’ approaches in higher education scholarship (Hodgson et al. 2020). The emphasis here is placed on affirming what is of value and fostering collective concern for protecting and caring for fragile aspects of educational practice that are usually left out of the picture (Hodgson 2020). Second, a critical approach allows us to ask the important question: ‘how might things be otherwise?’ Thus, we use our investigations of teachers’ current
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In short, focusing on problematic aspects of the recent turn to hybrid teaching can be used to generate, in Rita Felski’s (2020) words, ‘a richer vocabulary to capture the value’ of how digital technologies might come together with education in more affirming, nourishing and edifying ways.

Pandemic lockdown: COVID-19 and educational technology

Scholars have highlighted the urgent need for researchers to ‘take the pulse’ of universities in the time of COVID-19 (Watermeyer et al. 2021). It is of course vital to consider students’ perspectives when discussing online teaching and learning tools (Abdel-Rahim 2021), but the bulk of pandemic research so far has focussed on student experiences, and we also need to explore how teachers have experienced this transition (Damşa et al. 2021). In one of the first studies published on this subject, Charlene VanLeeuwen and colleagues (2021) conducted in-depth interviews with twenty Canadian faculty members who described the early months of the pandemic as a never-ending loop of repetitiveness, sadness and loss. In another study more directly focussed on teachers’ experiences with educational technology, Richard Watermeyer and colleagues (2021) analysed 1,148 survey responses from faculty members in the United Kingdom and found both positive and negative aspects of the emergency online migration. Positive aspects included the opportunity to rehaul the educational system, while negative aspects included a range of different worries and anxieties. For example, only half of the respondents (49.5 per cent) felt adequately prepared to deliver online teaching, and many feared that online migration would add to their workload for weeks, months and even years.

Some respondents also worried that online migrations would exacerbate existing inequalities, since only the most prestigious universities were expected to thrive. Finally, some respondents highlighted a pedagogical deskilling or ‘dumbing-down’ brought along by digitisation and feared an enforced online migration despite this disadvantage. As one respondent described this Catch-22: ‘Our students will now expect flexible or online
delivery, even though they loathe it, in the name of convenience. They will use teaching evaluation surveys to punish staff for the fact that they loathe it’ (2021: 631). Suffice it to say that teachers did not perceive online teaching as a straightforward panacea. While these hesitations and critiques pertain to relatively global educational challenges, the rest of this article focusses on more localised pedagogical challenges that occur ‘inside’ classrooms.

Methods

Data collection: Open-ended survey

We here explore the digital downsides of EdTech through an analysis of qualitative survey data. As scholars have highlighted, qualitative data is our best method to capture social responses to the pandemic (Teti et al. 2020). In our case, our data was collected from teachers at one of the five faculties at a major university in Denmark as part of a larger study of teaching in universities. All teachers from this faculty (n = 1,470) were invited to complete an online survey gathering relevant demographic information (position, years of teaching experience, nationality, age, gender) followed by two open-ended questions about their personal experiences with educational IT: (1) ‘Identify the best examples of digital elements you have encountered in your own or others’ teaching and explain why these elements were particularly helpful or meaningful’; and (2) ‘Identify the worst examples of digital elements you have encountered in your own or others’ teaching and explain why these elements were unhelpful or meaningless’. To avoid framing a complex issue as a simple cost–benefit analysis, this article focusses on responses to the latter question, but the survey itself included both questions (responses to the first question will be covered in another article). Some contextual information about the institution’s pandemic timeline follows here: the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a pandemic on 11 March 2020, and the Danish prime minister announced major restrictions on the same day. By April 2020, the university had closed its buildings and adopted Zoom as its primary platform. From 16 November to 7 December 2020, at the time the survey was open, contagion numbers had dropped significantly and the university began experimenting with a hybrid model in which half of the students were allowed to be physically present in classrooms and lecture halls, while the other half stayed at home and attend livestreams on Zoom. Such chronological details are likely to have affected
participants’ responses, as we shall see. Ultimately, the self-selecting sample who chose to respond to our survey consisted of 488 teachers (or 33 per cent of the sample). As Table 1 illustrates, there is a slight over-representation of male and junior teachers.

**Data analysis: Thematic analysis**

Given the exploratory nature of this study, we proceeded to analyse the survey data using a flexible approach known as ‘thematic analysis’ (Braun and Clarke 2006). Practically speaking, our analytical process transpired accordingly: first, each of the two first authors read through the data set

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Table 1. Survey respondents by individual characteristics (n = 488)</th>
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<td>Other</td>
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<td><strong>Age group</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Position</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Professor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teaching or external associate professor</td>
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and inductively generated initial codes from the data. In the next step of this data-driven process, we clustered related codes into preliminary themes. According to Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2019), themes can be defined as ‘patterns of shared meaning’ (2019: 5), and although the development of themes is not unrelated to quantitative prevalence, this emphasis on shared meaning points to an indelible element of qualitative interpretation in the analytical process. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that while we agreed on what was at stake in the data set overall, we had developed slightly different themes. We therefore proceeded to review and discuss each individual theme to decide which themes could be merged and which themes seemed essential. Finally, after completing this negotiation, we asked a student assistant to reread and code the entire data set from scratch. This triangulation led to a further refinement of our themes. Finally, inspired by the work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980), we used bodily metaphors to name our themes in an attempt to emphasise their internal coherence. We hope that this recursive process of coding, analysis and naming has ensured a reflexive engagement with the data (Braun and Clarke 2019). Danish responses have been translated into English, and major spelling errors have been edited for clarity. Information on gender and age group is provided in brackets after quotes.

Results

In this section, we will go through our empirical results, which we have grouped into five critical stances towards educational technology: (1) technologies are fine when used correctly (‘handy tools’); (2) technical issues are a major obstacle (‘stumbling along’); (3) hybrid teaching is overwhelming (‘feeling cross-eyed’); (4) one’s sense of students suffers online (‘out of touch’); and (5) students hide behind their screens (‘faceless anonymity’). As we shall discuss, these themes criss-cross, conflict and co-exist in various ways. For example, while the first two themes concern the extent to which teachers felt prepared to use educational technologies and the issue of technical glitches and mishaps, the last three themes revolve around interactions in the classroom. The timely nature of our research question lends relevance to all five themes, but we will delve into greater detail with this latter cluster of themes, as these issues pertain to an often-overLOOKed dimension of EdTech, namely the social dynamics afforded by educational technologies.
Handy tools: Technologies are fine when used correctly

First, it is worth acknowledging that a few respondents were unable to identify any ‘worst’ examples of educational technology use. Where expanding upon their lack of complaints, these staff members conveyed a sense of rising to taking on a new challenge (‘I rather enjoyed the novelty and getting used to it’ [M, 50–59]), or else reflected negatively on colleagues who had struggled:

I can’t think of a digital tool that was meaningless . . . the real problem tends to be that the tool is not used effectively because the teacher is not competent enough with it to use it professionally (even something as trivial as navigating PowerPoint can be disturbing then). [M, 20–29]

Sorry, but I can’t think of a good example here. If anything, some teachers could have benefitted from using more tech in their teaching. For example, I don’t always understand why some teachers are reluctant to share PPTs and other material. [M, 30–39]

Stumbling along: Technical issues are a major obstacle

That said, most respondents were able to identify ‘worst’ experiences. First, many identified various ‘technical’ impediments that they had encountered. For a few respondents, hybrid teaching suffered from familiar technical inconveniences and breakdowns experienced when teaching fully face-to-face classes, with ‘in the room’ technology subject to various incompatibilities, glitches, and breakdowns:

Technology in the lecture hall is a messy patchwork of devices and settings – it needs upgrading. [M, 60–69]

The projector was turned off every twenty minutes. But it was fixed after two weeks. [F, 20–29]

More common, however, was a doubling-up of technical issues associated with having to simultaneously broadcast the live class to an online audience. This primarily related to poor-quality sound and visuals – from cameras and microphones not working at all, teachers forgetting to unmute, low-resolution cameras, and ‘slow’ [M, 30–39] and ‘abysmal’ [M, 20–29] internet connectivity, meaning ‘that it’s hard for students to see what’s being written on the blackboard’ [F, 20–29]. These disruptions and these
‘unstable’ conditions were understandably experienced as an additional source of stress:

We’ve had big problems with sound and image, which occasionally haven’t worked properly or have had to be configured and adjusted[a] few minutes before the lecture. That in itself is really interruptive. [M, 40–49]

Technical difficulties, e.g., unstable connections over a longer period of time that destroy the flow of the virtual classroom and frustrate everyone. [M, 40–49]

One often-mentioned technology was videoconferencing software – almost exclusively the Zoom platform. Again, repeated experiences of Zoom ‘suddenly and repeatedly crashing’ [M, 20–29] led to a sense of unease and fragility regarding any teaching activity. All told, this was a technology that had yet to become fully trusted:

We had a lot of challenges with Zoom. Uninvited interrupting sessions, crashes, poor sound, and image quality. [F, 30–39]

There’s been a lot of technical issues connected to teaching on Zoom. . . . frozen screens and in some instances getting kicked off the meeting and having to start over. [M, 20–29]

_Feeling cross-eyed: Hybrid teaching is overwhelming_

At the time the survey was open, the university had implemented a hybrid model in which teachers were teaching online and in-person at the same time. In this setup, educators simultaneously taught students attending face-to-face and students attending remotely. Importantly, this model was not a straightforward case of blended learning or flipped classroom as known from the academic research literature, but sprang primarily from pandemic concerns about health, reproduction numbers and social distancing. Perhaps for these reasons, respondents gave a recurring sense of various ways in which hybrid teaching was felt to be diminished, dispiriting and distant. Many of these issues related to an underlying sense of altered presence when teaching a mixture of in-person and on-screen students. Another set of responses extended this theme in terms of feeling dislocated
and ultimately distracted by the challenge of dealing ‘with both types of students simultaneously’ [F, 30–39]. As one respondent put it: ‘Teaching online and in a classroom simultaneously is a horrible solution to the corona restrictions. It is basically impossible to be a present teacher in both directions at once’ [M, 30–39].

These comments often pointed to the difficulties of multitasking and splitting one’s attention evenly: ‘As a lecturer, it is very difficult to involve and integrate the two different audiences’ [M, 50–59]. As a result, most of these respondents admitted to privileging the face-to-face students (‘I sometimes forget that half the audience is sitting at home’ [M, 50–59]), even when these constituted a minority of the overall class. As one respondent described it: ‘Hybrid teaching. Some students in the classroom, but the majority online. Results often in the online element being neglected’ [M, 40–49]. All told, attempting to attend to both groups was felt to inevitably result in ‘sub-optimal’ [M, 40–49] teaching and ‘a bad product’ [M, 50–59]. The sense here was that teachers were inevitably involved in ‘a poor version of the physical teaching’ [F, 40–49]:

Teaching combining both physical and virtual presence of students can be necessary, but lowers the quality of teaching, not least for those attending online. It is difficult to organise in-class teaching activities that work well for two media at the same time. [M, 40–49]

The hybrid teaching. It is really challenging to teach . . . It was much easier to find proper activities and do proper teaching when all of them are on Zoom or all of them are present. [F, 20–29]

Out of touch: One’s sense of students suffers online

While hybridity was widely critiqued, many teachers also homed in on the altered interpersonal dynamics of the virtual classroom itself. These issues covered a range of perceived disconnections and dislocations. For example, some respondents raised issues relating to the disembodied pedagogy of teaching to an online group of students. One teacher lamented ‘the inability of technology to convey body language and facial expressions. . . . this is a key element of teaching to me’ [M, 20–29], while another said: ‘I feel a lack of connection to the students, which I used to have when teaching physically’ [F, 20–29]. This notion of compromised physicality was also
experienced in the form of feeling ‘tethered’ to the technology – not being able to move out of the camera shot or being literally tied down by a microphone cable. This was seen to compromise teachers’ energy and will to teach:

I generally have the feeling that it’s a lot harder (at least for me) to deliver a dynamic and engaged lecture when I’m not in direct contact with the listeners and the microphone moreover has to remain immobile and I can’t move around. [M, 50–59]

This sense of diminished dynamism was reflected in several responses. One teacher candidly offered the observation that they found online teaching ‘like sex through smartphones – sterile and restricted’ [M, 70–79]. This sterility was related to a perceived lack of liveliness and opportunity to react to unexpected events, to improvise and generally perform as they would hope to in a live classroom scenario:

Digital teaching lacks the live possibilities that make traditional teaching alive and dynamic. [M, 40–49]

Another aspect of the interaction that changed dramatically is the way that I give ad-lib parts of the discussion, for instance when sharing some humour or cracking some jokes. Before the pandemic, I would always insert some small jokes in class that could easily get small laughs or giggles from the students. With the classes now moved online and I have to talk to blank screens and muted microphones: sharing jokes is no longer that easy or practical. The discussions generally leaned towards being more formal and serious compared to pre-pandemic [times]. [M, 30–39]

Such responses highlighted a sense that teaching is fundamentally a relational process, and that any interactions with students were ‘markedly worse’ when mediated through online platforms such as Zoom. Respondents bemoaned their inability to ‘get an understanding of the vibe of the class’ [F, 40–49] and ‘to get a feeling for students’ [M, 20–29] and the general ‘difficult[y] to get a sense of the audience’ [F, 40–49]:

In online teaching, it is more difficult to ‘read’ students and get a sense of to what extent they’re ‘following’. It’s more difficult to get a spontaneous dialogue and interaction going among the students as well as between the students and me as a teacher. [M, 60–69]
Faceless anonymity: Students hide behind their screens

This sense of teachers struggling to engage with their students was complemented by a recurring inference that students were reluctant to engage with teaching (and their teachers) online. A surprisingly regular attribution was that students used online teaching as an opportunity to ‘hide’ themselves from the views of teachers and peers. It was noted that ‘a lot of students don’t want to turn on their camera’ [M, 20–29] and ‘people hide’ with ‘webcams turned off’ [M, 20–29]. This was felt to be a deliberate distancing tactic: a ‘large parts of the students choose not to participate’ [F, 50–59]. And one respondent said that ‘students are more hesitant to pitch in virtually’ [M, 30–39].

Teachers reported feeling demotivated by this – ‘this makes it a slog’ [M, 20–29] – as well as perceiving students to be more emboldened and less polite behind the relatively distant position of ‘a dark screen’ [M, 50–59]. For example, ‘students can hide behind the screen and questions thereby become sharper, but not in a positive sense’ [M, 20–29].

Faced with the prospect of ‘talking to a blank monitor’, these respondents reported a tendency to resort to largely ‘one-way communication’ [M, 40–49] and teaching in a ‘broadcast’ mode – thus running the ‘risk that dissemination becomes a one-way alibi-exercise’ [M, 50–59]. Although one might argue that the ‘faceless anonymity’ experienced in an online class is basically the same as the ‘faceless anonymity’ in a lecture hall with one hundred or more students, educators evidently experienced as significant difference between the two settings. All told, the online mode of teaching was therefore not portrayed as a fulfilling or enjoyable experience:

Asking questions and just meeting the pure, awful silence of muted microphones. [M, 20–29]

I think Zoom is a nice tool to facilitate and stream online teaching, but I’ve experienced a poor culture around the use of Zoom in which students, despite suggestions, do not turn on their cameras, are passive, and leave the teaching when it’s time for group exercises. [F, 30–39]

Discussion

The fact that teachers readily voiced frustrations about educational technology when invited to do so is relatively unsurprising and, as such, unremarkable in and of itself. Indeed, the value of the data just presented is not that
it confirms the existence of pedagogical challenges but that it illuminates the reasons underpinning why teachers experience such challenges. In this sense, it is noteworthy that our respondents pointed to a variety of reasons for things taking a bad turn: students (‘faceless anonymity’), teachers (‘handy tools’), technologies (‘stumbling along’), social dynamics (‘out of touch’) and the uneven nature of hybridity (‘feeling cross-eyed’).

Hybridity as the worst of both worlds

Let us start with hybridity, which was univocally denounced as an unpleasant format. Not even the most eager technology optimists seemed willing to stand up for this setup. The main problem with the hybrid format was the increased difficulty of stage-managing sessions – that is, managing the logistics of the teaching performances. Here, respondents described the difficulty of ‘juggling’ online and offline audiences at once, a metaphor related to the idea of multitasking or distraction. They found it hard to ‘involve and integrate the two different audiences’, as one respondent [M, 50–60] put it. Thus, while doing either face-to-face teaching or online teaching may be fine, doing both things at the same time is very likely to result in distraction. As a result, teachers unwittingly developed tunnel vision and ‘neglected’ or ‘forgot’ the students sitting at home. In that sense, hybridity seems to combine the worst of both worlds. We will not dwell much more on this issue, however, since hybridity was explicitly staged as a temporary and liminal solution born out of pandemic necessity.

Outdated teachers, outdated technologies?

We also found that some teachers were quite satisfied with their own performances and viewed failure as a sign of deficiency on behalf of others. Interpreted along these lines, digital downsides only arise for bad or uninspired teachers who simply need to acquire the right skills, motivation and attitude to do their job. According to this ‘othering’ approach to digital downsides, then, any issues concerning EdTech can be ascribed to a lack of aptitude or – more charitably – to the steep learning curve demanded by the abrupt switch to online teaching. While it might be hoped that all staff are better equipped to handle online teaching in the event of future pandemics, this explanation is limited by its unwillingness to acknowledge any actual problems occurring in educational practice. Instead, it seems to draw on the
remnants of long-standing (and much debunked) instrumentalist ideas of educationally beneficial technologies that ‘good’ teachers can make full use of – paying little attention to issues of institutional structure, local social capital and other contextual issues (Frank et al. 2004). It seems unwise to perpetuate this false distinction between those teachers that can ‘do tech’ and those that do not (or cannot). Instead, universities should seek to make failure when teaching with technologies more acceptable and to talk about the complexities of tech use and its frustrations.

This brings us to the next theme arising from our survey, namely teachers who complained about laggy connections and malfunctioning equipment. These digital downsides are mundane yet also profound: if the setup is not working properly, we really cannot teach online. At first glance, this explanatory model stands in stark contrast to the former: while the first model ascribes digital downsides to inept human subjects, this second model directs its critical gaze squarely at the technological objects instead. The problem is no longer (other) teachers but malfunctioning equipment. While this contrast should not be downplayed, it is worth noting that both models ultimately construct the issue of digital downsides in distinctly similar ways: Both models locate the problems ‘within’ individual actors, whether these actors are teachers or technologies, and both models construe these problems as contingent and highly amenable to improvement: whether through educating teachers or modernising technologies, digital downsides can be solved by ‘fixing’ and ‘upgrading’ current educational actors. Both ideas also maintain the common-sense instrumentalist notion of educational technology as essentially beneficial (e.g., Storme et al. 2016). While these ideas are not necessarily wrong (in fact, they may be very helpful), we do want to emphasise that their joint emphasis on individual ‘fixability’ stands in stark contrast to the latter categories, as we shall now discuss.

**The problem of presence**

Another set of concerns focusses less on individual actors and more on the _interactions_ between teachers and students, or what other educational scholars call the ‘pedagogical relation’ (Friesen 2017). Our survey responses highlight the extent to which such interactions are always shaped by their material surroundings, however, so perhaps it is more apt (and less anthropocentric) to discuss ‘pedagogical assemblages’ (Sellar 2012). In any case,
referring to the spontaneity, aliveness and dynamics of traditional face-to-face teaching, many teachers conveyed the notion that students are more ‘present’ in conventional classrooms. In contrast, they lose their sense of students when teaching moves online. As such, these teachers seem to imply that proper teaching is something that takes place in traditional physical space. But how are we to interpret this sentiment? Well, we might suggest that it stems from older teachers having little experience with internet culture, which means that they do not perceive digital contexts like Zoom as authentic teaching environments. The problem with this framing, however, is that it ultimately undermines itself: if digital downsides are caused by an age-related lack of experience, these problems will surely diminish as older cohorts of teachers are gradually replaced by subsequent generations of teachers. Furthermore, the idea that physical teaching is more ‘authentic’ than virtual teaching rests on an untenable digital dualism, because the virtual does not constitute a second-rate reality but quite simply is real life (Gourlay et al. 2015). This framing thereby turns the problem into one of inexperienced teachers and ill-advised beliefs about virtuality. EdTech walks away scot-free.

There is another way to frame the problem of presence, however, which is both theoretically stronger and more interesting: perhaps the problem stems less from essentialist concerns about ‘authenticity’ than from an acute sensitivity to technological mediation, the idea that technologies shape our everyday perceptions and actions in non-neutral ways (Verbeek 2005). As an example, one respondent to our survey laments ‘the inability of technology to convey body language and facial expression’. This complaint parallels the long-standing observation from media scholars that the ‘geometry of videoconferencing’ prohibits eye contact (Bohannon et al. 2013). Thus, when you actually look at your conversational partner during videoconferencing, you seem to be looking downward, and when you give the appearance of making eye contact, you actually have to look away from that person and into the camera (Friesen 2014). This mediated asymmetry of gaze interrupts the embodied, interactive and improvised nature of everyday teaching (e.g., Yin 2013) – taken-for-granted dynamics that do not transfer easily to Zoom (Aagaard 2022). This argument echoes the broader educational observation of ‘no education without relation’, as other scholars have put it (Bingham and Sidorkin 2004). Thus, while virtual and physical teaching may be equally ‘authentic’ in metaphysical terms, they are not equal in terms of the social dynamics involved. Not only does this framing escape the charge
of digital dualism, it also applies equally across the age spectrum – from nostalgic old-timers to tech-savvy newcomers. Even when COVID-19 one day loses its grip on society, schools reopen and emergency remote teaching evolves into more purposeful forms of online teaching and learning, the problem of presence persists.

*Surveillance vs care*

A fourth and final set of concerns stems from teacher perceptions of hidden students and/or students’ hiding. This category lends itself to two very different interpretations: on the one hand, we can see teachers’ concerns about faceless anonymity as a straightforward extension of their lost sense of students’ presence. According to this positive, relational interpretation of the issue, the problem with webcams being turned off is that teachers are suddenly performing to no-one, to black squares of nothingness. This creates a friction in what we have called the ‘pedagogical assemblage’, an experienced distance between teachers and students. Following this interpretation, we might point out how difficult (if not downright unnerving) it is for teachers to establish a lived human relation to an empty void. On the other hand, when some educators insist that cameras should always be turned on to avoid this issue, this statement also fits into a much darker educational pattern, namely the rise of ‘surveillance pedagogy’ that has occurred in the wake of COVID-19 (Selwyn et al. 2021). According to this second, more critical interpretation, the problem is that many teachers simply do not trust online students (Bayne et al. 2020).

This clash of interpretations brings us to the ‘cameras off’ debate that has been going on since the pandemic pivot to Zoom and other videoconferencing technologies: While the first interpretation points out the relational importance of students having their webcams turned on, the second interpretation brings us to all the valid reasons students may have for turning their cameras off. As one educator puts it:

> We have students who are parents, whose children need homeschooling. We have students who don’t have a room in which they can close the door. We have students who are couchsurfing, or students with very personal home environments, and students across the world 13 hours ahead of time, who would wake up their family if they talked (Nicandro et al. 2020).
It seems exceedingly difficult to bridge this schism between care and surveillance. Thus, Levinasian scholars surely have a point when they argue that turning off cameras and hiding one’s ‘face’ impairs our ability to attune to each other (Berenpas 2021), but so do Foucauldian scholars when they argue that demanding students to have their cameras turned on constitutes a form of surveillance (Finders and Muñoz 2021). Once again, the continued adoption of online teaching may be facing an intractable or ‘wicked’ problem. Accordingly, this issue needs to be taken seriously before universities keenly accept the notion of future hybrid campuses (Fawns et al. 2019).

Conclusion

In this article, we have discussed university teachers’ negative engagements with technology during COVID-19. By deliberately focussing on these digital downsides, we hope to have given a voice to the disgruntled and to deflate overly grandiose visions about the hybrid future of education. If educational scholars do not do it, who will? It does not look like it is going to be UNESCO or the OECD, and it certainly is not going to be Zoom or Google. In fact, during the writing of this article Zoom’s EdTech chief boldly stated that traditional bricks-and-mortar universities will be next to face digital disruption (Lee 2021). Instead of falling prey to such determinist rhetoric, we want to emphasise the importance of staying vigilant and critical. At the same time, we do not want produce critique for the sake of critique itself or to dissuade people from using educational technology. Instead, we want to use critique to foster collective concern for protecting and caring for fragile aspects of educational practice. By pinpointing and discussing the problem of presence and its relation to the ‘cameras off’ debate, we hope to have highlighted the importance of lived human relations in education: if digitisation is an unstoppable force, perhaps presence is an immovable object? Having said that, we hope to avoid an overly romanticised and harmonic take on the problem of presence by raising the contentious issue of surveillance vs care. Hybrid education is certainly a different – rather than a necessarily better or worse – proposition for higher education. We need to continue to explore and acknowledge these differences at length.
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Note

1. While educational technology specialists might refer to this educational setup as a ‘blended synchronous learning environment’ (Bower et al. 2015), we will follow the official terminology of the university and refer to it simply as ‘hybrid’. As we shall see, this is also what our respondents do.

References


Lakoff, G. and M. Johnson (1980), Metaphors We Live By (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).


