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2020

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/20267>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version  
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Herberer, Feng-Mei: SCALING DOWN WORKLOAD, UPPING CO-PRESENCE – Feng-Mei Heberer (NYU) Reflecting on Teaching in the Time of Corona. In: *Open-Media-Studies-Blog*, Jg. 3 (2020). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/20267>.

### Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here:

<https://mediastudies.hypotheses.org/2181>

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## SCALING DOWN WORKLOAD, UPPING CO-PRESENCE — Feng-Mei Heberer (NYU) Reflecting on Teaching in the Time of Corona

VERÖFFENTLICHT 15/04/2020 · AKTUALISIERT 16/04/2020



Whenever my friends ask me how «online teaching,» a shorthand for «[emergency remote teaching](#),» is going these days, I respond that it's a mess. I'm trying to find solace in the fact that even the [Frankfurt School](#) is still trying to figure it out. «It» being life in the time of Corona – and teaching remotely in the time of Corona in particular. It's hard to feel like I am doing anything right at this moment. It's hard to stay motivated. It's hard to not feel entirely depleted by the growing number of deaths and the all too slow responses by the US government. The following is a quickly written subjective reflection of my recent experience with remote teaching and some of the issues it raises in the midst of the pandemic's unfolding. You'll see a series of memes made by students I'm teaching that are meant to widen my perspective (I'm sharing with their consent, and credit as they prefer.)

A disclaimer: I have no recipe for teaching well. My hope is rather that we, as teachers and students and also administrators, can take the current historical moment as a chance to ask what teaching «well» means – both from a distance and in proximity, during and after a state of emergency. My suggestion is that **scaling down workload and upping mutual care** (or what I call co-presence) can be guiding forces in this endeavor, linking the classroom to the ways we relate out in the world. By taking this angle, I draw much inspiration from [engaged feminist pedagogy](#), reminding myself that it's not the time to be nostalgic about how things «always used to be,» even as we need to grieve, but to work toward the ways that [we want them to be](#).

I teach film and media studies at New York University (NYU), a large private US university located in the current epicenter of the Coronavirus outbreak. New York City's confirmed COVID-19 cases have quickly surpassed the large number of NYU students (50,000) that usually populate the stretch from Washington Square Park to Union Square and parts of downtown Brooklyn. As in many other places, the city lacks medical resources; frontliners are exhausted; unemployment is skyrocketing; and [the historically marginalized remain the least protected](#).

Across the country, students were asked to vacate their dorms – NYU gave them less than a week to find a new accommodation for the rest of the semester.



«6 Feet Apart or Be 6 Feet Under (Downtown Manhattan).» Photo courtesy of Marina Hassapopoulou.

Remote instruction started on Wednesday, March 11, two days after the university president sent out an email to inform everyone about the change. The decision didn't come out of nowhere, at least for those of us who had been following the virus' spreading on the ground, in the media, and in new waves of [anti-Asian racism](#) in and [beyond North America](#). I study how contemporary politics of visibility and inclusion shrink our lexicon to talk about racism. The flipside of the respectable model minority is this: students and colleagues of Asian heritage tell me they're afraid to leave the home out of fear of being verbally and physically attacked. I now cross the other side of the street when I see someone coming, and not just as virus precaution. We also know that [not everyone has a home to return to, and that domestic violence has tripled](#). Hate speech and abuse are alive and well. By March 22, NYU buildings were closed, library services moved online, and the student residence halls emptied, with few exceptions. The first NYU student dorms have already been refunctioned to house medical workers.

## How Does One Teach Under Pandemic Conditions?

As a teacher, I seek to excite. I teach for the [excitement](#) of making connections between the classroom and everyday experience, between media studies and the study of social processes both in our own lives and on a global scale. (Just think about the role of media at a time of [mandatory physical distancing](#).) Like [my colleagues](#), I work hard to create an environment in which students recognize the relevance of their intellectual and creative doings, and actively engage with each other. Their presence and investment give inspiration. Online platforms, from [Vimeo](#) to [Instagram](#) (both link to beautiful student work), have already been part of this world-building process. Yet excitement and connection require a different translation in the newly altered classroom.





*Meme courtesy of Nicole, Nick, and Jorge.*

We are three quarters into the semester; I'm teaching two courses, a large introductory lecture on television, and a small discussion-based seminar on surveillance culture. One has over sixty undergraduates (and an incredible teaching assistant, without whom I couldn't have done it); the other has nine participants composed of BA, MA, and PhD students. Classes used to be four hours long. Now, we meet in real time for about two hours, with students watching related video content in advance.

Why maintain real time exchange, especially given the important reminder that asynchronous teaching can better accommodate [lacking infrastructures and quiet space, daily schedules and different time zones](#), as well as a [variety of student talent](#)? I've been checking in with students weekly, and the majority of them continue to desire live meetings. There's clearly frustration about the [decreased quality of learning](#). Some students are sick, some are caring for their family, some already have lost loved ones, and almost everyone has trouble focusing on work right now. We can't simply continue «business as usual.» Yet there's something to be said about the feeling of comfort in coming together during times of crises and continuing certain routines.

For the time being, we're on Zoom – the platform that started as the default for many educational institutions transitioning online, and has quickly come under fire for [breaching privacy in numerous ways](#). So far, NYU is still embracing Zoom, and I'm using it because I'm too tired to explore another platform for the remaining semester. It also has a couple of perks (with the appropriate license), including the option to record and store lectures, which is helpful for students who can't attend live meetings. Still, it's a learning curve. My first attempt at proper recording yielded merely the audio transcripts. Discussion is certainly slower – imagine speaking to a wall of invisible, muted individuals. Audiovisuals are not always reliable either, and so-called [Zoom bombings](#) spreading hate speech have become unnervingly frequent. I will certainly look for other options if the fall continues remotely. But let's remember that [the university has never been a safe space](#), even as teachers and students jointly work on building supportive environments.



turning  
your camera  
on in Zoom



playing  
coolmath  
games in  
another window

*Meme courtesy of NYU students.*

The remainder of this post focuses on *scaling down workload* and *upping co-presence* – two moments that have helped me adjust (to) and find pockets of comfort in the current classroom, and that should be central to approaching any teaching environment, including and especially post-COVID. Like excitement and connection, up and down scaling can be helpful technologies in the pursuit of teaching well.

Class thinking  
they got Zoom bombed

Me, who joined with  
the nickname "Blarf"



*Meme courtesy of Kia, Karsten, Caleb, Jason.*

## Scaling Down, Scaling Up

We had less than 48 hours to transition online, just enough time to skip through a handful of Zoom links and videos. I am grateful for the [generous support by colleagues](#) with experience teaching online, and for the [ongoing guidance](#) by pedagogues of [hybrid teaching methods](#). Yet during that first week of change, my attention span and ability to focus were limited. Most of my energy went to managing logistics and anxiety. The following week, spring break, promised a tiny buffer. Those who could, took off. I'd made the plan to restructure courses and read up on online teaching. That plan didn't work so well. During those seven days, I couldn't stop consuming the news, barely slept, and found myself alternating between hypervigilance and paralysis. Mind you, in contrast to many others, I wasn't forced out of my place, can work from home, and still have a steady income. What caught my eyes early on, and felt immediately right, was the repeated call by experts in the field, to [scale down expectations and workload](#) right there and then. [Sometimes it's helpful to hear it from others](#).

**Scaling down is not a luxury**, nor is it optional. It means giving yourself the necessary space to breathe, reorient, and giving others the space to do the same. Scaling down means countering the deadly push for nonstop productivity that dictates already so much of the education economy. It does not mean to give up on learning but to prioritize life so that learning is possible. Scaling down is care: to care for our uneven co-presence by attending to the exigencies that arise in the present. **Why aren't we scaling down all the time already.**

Scaling down looks different for each class, but it comes back to prioritizing participants' energy, access, and needs. «Consider what co-presence means in any learning situation and how we relate to each other newly through screens and with various technologies.» (Thank you, [FemTechNet!](#)) I modified both of my courses through a combination of polling, check-ins, and gauging my limited capacity. Finals didn't make sense anymore (they were cut), neither did much of the syllabus (partly suspended, partly revamped). We need more free time mutual updates, play, and much needed rest. My small seminar has taken on workshop form. Mainly, we discuss each other's works-in-progress. Projects are optional, self-designed, and don't have to be completed by semester end. So far, formats include video essays, hybrid performance, film festival work, and paper drafts. I know this isn't ideal, but I'm genuinely relieved.

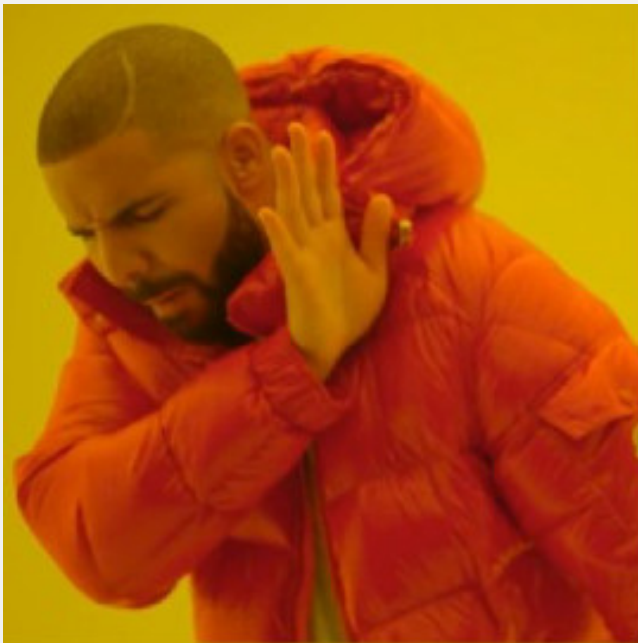


when u wake up at 12:29 and ur zoom  
class starts at 12:30



*Meme courtesy of Esteban, Joseph, Aspen, and Annabel.*

NYU is giving students the option of pass/fail over letter grade. My students will do well, grade-wise. But what I really want for everyone is to get through the pandemic OK, without any losses, and losses have already begun. At the same time, I want to acknowledge the fact that students pay a [stifling amount of money to attend class](#). A [non-semester](#), in whatever form, seems more feasible in a higher education system that is not controlled by tuition-reliant universities and the interlocking chain of investment and debt. Or does it.



Paying \$70k  
a year to  
learn in-person  
with a wonderful  
cohort of peers



Paying  
\$70k a year  
to play NYU  
Chatroulette

*Meme courtesy of Group 11A aka BANKSY.*

## What Teaching Well Can Mean (It's Not Just The Teacher)

The real question is: **how can we change the classroom, and the university, so that [pause](#), [scaling down](#), [taking care of our needs](#), are not merely emergency responses but become priority, always?** (Relatedly, I wish it didn't take a catastrophe for large publishers, distributors, and art institutions to take down their paywall, temporarily.) We can start by eliminating student debt, a primary barrier to education and [wellbeing](#) in the US. I'm also grappling with the institutionalized teacher-student relation that I'm very much part of, as a relation that is centered on institutional excellence (and simultaneous client service agreements) but really should grow out of mutual generosity and care. With care, I don't mean [performing that warm fuzzy persona](#) that those of us who [don't fit the image of white male expertise are too often expected to assume](#). I mean responding to the fact that we have needs, and that these needs are unequally distributed and accommodated in society. Care insists on reinventing collectivity and solidarity. As a reminder, to care doesn't diminish learning; it opens out the latter as necessarily and vitally imbricated in our lived experience.

I'm grateful for the patience students show me every week, and for the care they express in showing up when they can, in real time or asynchronous. In many ways, they are the real protagonists. I'm inspired by how students creatively respond to the current conditions and undo the limiting etiquettes of the unidirectional classroom. Take live chat. Zoom's chat box option has become one of their favorite tools. Undergraduate students in particular use it to comment on class content, clarify questions, and carry discussions into new directions («rip bernie»), but they also deploy it for connection («Anyone else excited about animal crossing lol?»). I've seen students set up virtual play dates through live chat, and no, I haven't felt distracted (at least so far). They enliven the classroom in studying television while also reaching out to each other – what I perceive as forms of presencing and care, excitement and connection. «[There can be creativity in laying low.](#)»



If pandemics are not just medical phenomena, but also technological and political ones that «reorganize» [how we imagine «collectivity and sociality»](#), teaching in times of Corona is more than crisis management: it can put a pause on the drive for constant productivity (and hyper-connectivity), «make space to rest, play, and tap out,» (I'm using the words of my friend and colleague Linde Murugan here), and in so doing opens up other ways of relating. Perhaps this is one way of what teaching well can mean: to hold space for each other in whatever capacity we can.



*Meme courtesy of Elizabeth Crawford and other NYU students.*

*\*I want to thank Sarah-Mai Dang for inviting me to write this reflection; Linlin Heberer, Linde Murugan, and Melissa Phruksachart for their speedy feedback; Marina Hassapoulou for letting me borrow her photograph; and my students for sharing their critique and creativity.*

[Feng-Mei Heberer](#)

Teaserbild: Markus Spiske auf [Unsplash](#)



## DAS KÖNNTE DICH AUCH INTERESSIEREN ...



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