

The New Room

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Spring 2020: Jessica jokes, at the end of office hours, that they should just cancel the rest of the year, just call it all off. Other schools are doing it. “The virus” will be gone in a couple weeks anyway: no big deal.

Outside: it’s 95 degrees already, desert-hot, I’m baked from the inside out, unspooled from a week of meeting with a hundred students one-on-one. I’ve marked each sheet of their essays, scrawled feedback in the margins, my hands cramping, stood on my feet all day sweating through my shirt while folding at the corners of my papers, a tic that still lives in my body even after 12 years of teaching. I’ve swept my arms in broad strokes at the whiteboard, run down the hallway to refill my water bottle at least a hundred times, told the same joke I tell again and again, carried out the performance I’ve made ritual over the years.

We’re all tired. I joke back to Jessica at the thought of it, absurdity with a hint of truth without knowing: *sounds good, see ya later, have a nice life!*

A week later: the email says we’re shutting down. *But what about my coffee mugs, already moldy in my office? What about my plants? What about our visit to the art museum? What about peer review? What about group-work? What about Jessica, who I’ll actually never “see see” again?* I feel bad for the joke gone stale over time, the semester left open, a sentence unfinished.

I panic first at the idea of space: used to teaching in too-small classrooms where each desk each student sits at is an obstacle, I suddenly dread the absence of the warmth of an awkward closeness.

I panic at the idea of silence: used to filling every moment with noise, jumping from point to point, quick exchanges with voices layered, always pushing forward, moving through my script each day made to look perfect but not *too* perfect, a routine where nothing ever *really* goes wrong, at least not that my students can see.

I worry that nobody will talk online: that I’ll send my students into breakout rooms and they’ll sit in silence, that I won’t be able to monitor the conversation, that I won’t be able to guide, steer, direct, or re-frame. It’s difficult for me, above all, to imagine giving up control of the room.

At the time I think: *breakout rooms must be the closest equivalent to group work*, wanting, foolishly, to replicate the in-person experience entirely. I know now that each new room we enter is a new experience, a new dynamic, and the new rules can't, and shouldn't, be the same. The old model assumes that all students should be comfortable talking in small groups. The old model assumes that all students should excel at speaking quickly when prompted. The old model assumes that all students should be extroverts, unself-conscious, expert communicators, both in text and voice, that all students have had the same opportunities, backgrounds, socio-economic opportunities, identical training and practice in the vague and confusing art of being a "good student."

These old rules, that constrained me too, were never true: I know now that there's magic in the unexpected, the messy, the unrehearsed. I know now that we must challenge these rules, push up against them, and in changing them we will see how a room can open, that the space of a room does not need to contain just *one thing*.

During our Zoom class, I open the tabs for each group on my screen: five at once for each Google doc where students are tasked with analyzing a different image, of finding meaning entirely on their own, without my real-time nudging.

I'm nervous for the first time in years: shifting rapidly between each document, rearranging my legs beneath me, waiting for each circle to illuminate and each student's picture to appear in the top right corner of the screen.

Red for Alyssa. Purple for Charlie. Blue for Jen. I pop in and out of each document: each group member leaving their mark in the form of a different color of text, the conversation happening in real-time, without my prompting, without needing my narration or my control over the room. I enter each breakout room, sometimes interrupting conversation, my students doing *fine*, sometimes even annoyed that I've entered the shared space I've designated as *theirs*.

Each document is a new conversation that fills the space I've made for it: a record of their connection, each room a different dynamic, different voices all speaking in parallel yet at the same time, some not even speaking at all but typing quietly, using the time and space to gather their thoughts, to let the conversation breathe.

I've learned the rules of space: of leaving openness, room for silence, room for me to disappear, room even for students to *get it wrong* on their own. In wanting to replicate, I've transformed. I'm dynamic again, alive with excitement as I negotiate between windows, the shock of surprise and anxious frustration when something goes wrong, when the document glitches, when I accidentally kick my students off the call and have to restart my computer. Gasp of breath inward to see that they're still there, eager and waiting for me to go on. This new room is bigger & more free: open with space to edit, change, and expand the way we connect with each other in real-time.

A year later: the countdown begins. 9:28AM. Readjust the coffee mug. Pull at the buttons on the shirt, smooth the hair in the reflection of the screen, move the cat from her position, perched and ready to jump into frame once the Zoom meeting begins. Almost as routine as any ritual now, Ben logs on, says “Hi, Instructor McHugh!” on cue.

We are the cliché of the pandemic: apart but together. The warmth is real as any cliché is in its semi-truth. Not knowing what the future holds, or where our bodies will be and how they will fill the space of the next year, I know now that I’ll keep this new room where the only rules are to expand, to include, and to change. I hit the “Create breakout room” button, breathe out, and we begin.