What is it like for a learner to participate in a Zoom Breakout Room session?

Felicity Healey-Benson

International Institute for Creative Entrepreneurial Development, University of Wales Trinity Saint David felicity.healey-benson@uwtsd.ac.uk

Mike Johnson

School of Healthcare Sciences, Cardiff University johnsonmr1@cardiff.ac.uk

Catherine Adams, Joni Turville

Faculty of Education, University of Alberta cathy.adams@ualberta.ca, mcbethtu@ualberta.ca

Abstract

Though virtual classrooms are not new, the COVID-19 pandemic sent many teachers and students online for the first time. This paper examines the use of a web-based video conferencing tool, Zoom, and in particular, the use of breakout rooms as part of a student's learning experience. We ask: what is it like for a learner to participate in a Zoom Breakout Room session? Using Max van Manen's (2016) phenomenology of practice, we collected learners' lived experience descriptions of participating in a Zoom breakout room, then reflected on them phenomenologically as a way to generate new insights into this recently common online learning experience. Four moments are portrayed: a learner's arrest at the announcement of breakout rooms; a learner's transition into a breakout room as existential suspension; surveilling self and others in a breakout room; and exiting the breakout room as a moment of foreclosure and re-disorientation. The paper compares Zoom breakout rooms with aspects of video-gaming and notices a detriment to Freirean problem-posing education if students can avoid standing, unmediated, behind just their words, even in the relative safety of a small group of peers.

Keywords

Zoom video-conferencing, breakout room, phenomenology of practice, Covid-19, lived experience, presence, The Pivot, small group learning, collaborative learning

Introduction

> *The black Zoom boxes with faces, pictures and names begin to disappear from the main screen and suddenly, I'm sucked away into another room with four other people. I scan their names and faces to see who's there. There is an awkward silence when someone says, "Ok. What were we supposed to discuss again?"*

In early 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic abruptly forced many teachers and learners out of campus-based classrooms and lecture halls and into kitchens, bedrooms and corners of homes to reconnect via virtual learning environments, video conferencing sites and other online educational systems. This remarkable shift from face-to-face to virtual learning was perhaps most iconically represented by the spectacular rise of Zoom's web-based video conferencing software in education. Charged overnight with teaching online, educators scrambled to reimagine their undergraduate classes as a shared slideset in one window, a framed talking head in another, situated among a gallery of (semi-present) students, and sometimes augmented by a stream of comments and queries in the chat.

Lecturers began experimenting with different backgrounds, adjusting their lighting; they tried to eliminate the glare on their glasses, and to reduce wrinkles with Zoom's "touch up my appearance" feature. They read about security concerns and how to prevent Zoom bombs. Some instructed students on how to raise their hand icon if they had a question, reminding them to unmute—or mute—themselves. Others fretted about time zones, figured out how to use a Zoom poll, and schooled themselves how to set up, launch and then bounce between the eerie seclusion of multiple Zoom breakout rooms (ZBRs). Mostly they struggled to replicate the once vibrant intimacy of their in-person classes.

On the other side of the screen, learners were also experiencing new and unexpected challenges: some were tuning in to Zoom with children or pets underfoot, while preoccupied with unanticipated financial insecurity or grappling with mental health issues or other barriers to their learning. Some cursed (mostly unheard) about their unreliable wifi, or their painfully underpowered laptop; some were simply upset that they had been robbed of the campus-based experience they had been so looking forward to. They worried about their privacy and how to hide their messy bedrooms. In the midst of this pandemic-induced upheaval, we educators may have begun to wonder: what is it like for our students to learn via Zoom? In this paper, we home in on one aspect of this decidedly 21st century, networked learning experience: what is it like for a learner to participate in a Zoom breakout room session as part of their Zoom classroom experience?

But first: what is Zoom and what is a Zoom breakout room? Zoom is one of many internet-based video-conferencing applications—including Microsoft Teams, Adobe Connect and GoogleMeet—being used by Post-Secondary Institutions (PSIs) to convene recordable spaces for teachers and learners to meet synchronously. When launched, Zoom defaults to take over the user's entire screen with a mix of rectangular boxes re-presenting oneself and the other participants who are tuned in. Participants can choose whether they are visible, that is, streamed via live video camera, and too, may select a virtual background covering over their surroundings. If the webcam is turned off, the participant will appear as simply a name in white Arial font on black or as a preset image with their name listed below.

Zoom meeting software also supports breakout rooms (ZBRs) that allows the teacher (the "host") to divide a class—via random, preassigned or self-selection—into smaller groups to talk among themselves. When the breakout room feature is launched, Zoom takes over each participant's entire screen—just as happened when the participant originally joined the Zoom session. The breakout room space looks just like the main Zoom room, except with fewer participants. The teacher can also move between breakout rooms, broadcast short text messages to everyone in the breakout rooms. A help icon allows students to call the teacher to visit their room. A timer function can be set to force everyone back to the main Zoom room when the timer expires. Here, a warning may be activated, where 30 or 60 seconds pops up on participants' screen, counting down to let them know when they will be returned to the main room. Participants can then elect to return to the larger group; if they don't, Zoom will shortly do it for them. Zoom breakout rooms seem to promise to replicate the productive huddles of small group work and dialogue with peers in face-to-face classes. Yet, we may wonder: what *is* it like for a learner to participate in a Zoom Breakout Room session?

Literature Review

The use of video conferencing for synchronous teaching and learning is not new (eg. Goodfellow et al 1996; Watson 1996) but, within that context, breakout rooms, and research into them is more recent. Some of the benefits identified in using breakout rooms include increased flexibility, engagement, interaction and student support (Cadieux, Campos-Zamora, Zagury-Orly and Dzara, 2020; Chandler, 2016; Serhan, 2020). Cautions for using breakout rooms have also been noted, including that teachers and students must possess adequate technical skill, confidence and support to be successful. Additionally,participation can vary significantly, and "Zoom fatigue" can impact learning (Chandler, 2016; Lee, 2021). Saltz and Heckman (2020) posit that breakout rooms do not necessarily increase student engagement without thoughtful lesson designs that maximize the benefits of small group work. Missing from the research-to-date is a view of the lived-through, everyday experiences of learning online in breakout rooms.

Methodology

To study the lived experience of participating in a Zoom breakout room as a learner, we employed van Manen's (2016) phenomenology of practice. A phenomenology of practice orients the researcher to the prereflective dimensions of everyday life, demands they "cultivate unwilled willingness to stand in wonder" (Adams & van Manen, 2017, p. 783), and engages both philosophical and qualitative research methods in an effort to reveal taken-for-granted aspects of the phenomenon of interest. We began by gathering lived experience descriptions (LEDs) of our own (the four authors') experiences as learners in ZBRs over the past year. We edited them to remove extraneous detail, then together developed multiple themes based on micro (line-by-line), macro and existential analysis. For this conference paper and due to page limits, we chose four anecdotes (edited LEDs) among the many we had generated. Our selection criteria was whether the anecdote showed a different temporal or transitional moment of the ZBR experience, specifically: what it may be like for a learner just before entering a ZBR, what is may be like to enter the ZBR from the main room, to arrive in the ZBR, and finally to exit the

ZBR. Due to page limits, we necessarily could not include many other experiential aspects of learners' ZBR experiences that occurred outside these four transition moments. In the process of writing and reflecting phenomenologically on each of the four anecdotes, we performed different aspects of the epoché and the reduction including the eidetic reduction (van Manen, 2016).

The announcement of a Zoom breakout room may be heard by the learner as an inconvenient interruption and a demand to engage

> *I'm sitting at my kitchen table, cup of coffee in hand trying to concentrate on the Zoom session on my screen. I'm finding it hard to focus and sneak in a few emails. Half listening, I grab a piece of bread to put in the toaster. The instructor carries on, unable to see me wandering away from my laptop. I notice a few crumbs on the counter so I wet a cloth to wipe away the mess. My toaster dings. I hear the teacher announce, "Now, I'm going to send you to a breakout room to discuss your experiences with a smaller group." Oh great. I'm going to have to turn on my camera and really pay attention. I can't eat that piece of toast on camera either. I really don't feel like talking to other people right now.*

For a learner, a synchronous Zoom class may fade from their attention to become just another window on their computer display: yet another marginal activity in their busy, preoccupied life-world. Emails may be attended to, social media checked, articles scanned, papers started, online quizzes completed, calendars updated, daydreams dreamed and vacation breaks planned. In some ways, this "distracted", multitasking screened environment hardly differs from lecture halls, students staring at open laptops or tethered to smartphones (Aagaard, 2015). Yet in the shift off-campus to learning from home via Zoom, the warm-bodied surround of the learner's peers, the hum of their shuffling, coughing and keyboarding is now absented; the lecturer is no longer in a position to make eye contact, so there is no need for the learner to wonder whether to keep their eyes averted or available, "mutually enfolding glances" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 17) are impossible.

By comparison, the physical classroom walls and conventions may be the only limitations of the learner's ranging eyes, noticing someone, sneaking a candy so as not to risk sharing with others or flaunting their snack before devouring it whole. In a face-to-face classroom, classmates may become familial by being in each other's presence. They may notice a person's particular way of speaking or recognize a distinctive laugh or cough. Friendships may begin to form during the in-between moments of waiting for class to begin, at break time or while packing things up at the end of a class.

In Zoom, a learner can choose what they reveal of themself, and, with microphone and camera off, there is no audience to impress with repertoires of 'good student' behaviour, such as sitting up, looking at their notepad or the lecture being delivered. In the buffer-zone of Zoom, no one knows if they are in raptures or blowing raspberries. The absence of civilising obligations may disinhibit the learner in more subtle ways, where they may slip into a kind of monitoring, with the class on the brink passing into mere background noise. If using Zoom on a mobile phone or listening through wireless headphones, affording greater physical latitude, the radio wave connection offers a metaphor for the learner's even more tenuous connection to others in the class. Zoom may create a kind of shield where users can sit in solitary spaces such as an office, a kitchen, or bedroom, choosing how much to reveal. Much can be hidden if cameras are off and microphones remain muted. Perhaps all that is disclosed is a name whereas pajamaed bodies, a mess and marginal attention are a secret.

The insulated world afforded by Zoom may be threatened by the announcement of a breakout room activity, which can sound an unwanted demand for the learner to stop whatever they are doing, pay attention to the teacher's instructions, and ready themselves to engage with others in closer proximity. Fellow learners could also be expecting all to be present–to listen and to speak. The news that small group work is about to begin may jar the solitude and preoccupations of the learner's space. For others, the opportunity to converse with peers is a welcome change from a more one-directional experience. And technology itself can break down barriers to participation. Facilitators and learners can interact without having to be in the same physical space. Collaboration can take place using shared documents and applications. A randomized grouping afforded through ZBRs may enable learners to interact and work with classmates they would not have otherwise had a chance to talk to in a large lecture hall.

As the size of the ZBR grows there may be an increasing degree of insulation, intensifying a contradiction of the ZBR promise – the opportunity for intimate exchange. Perhaps the ZBR is experienced as differing experiences, depending on the size of the group, with increments of size. The more participant windows that may compete

for attention, the more distracted they may become. As cameras that are switched off the more learners may feel far from a shared experience, and fall back into their immediate world.

## The learner may experience the transition to a ZBR as being forced through a moment of non-existence

The facilitator announces that we'll shortly be moving into breakout rooms to reflect on the ideas shared so far. I immediately feel dispirited: Do we really have to? I am not enthused by the prospect of rushed, unstructured and surveilled chat with strangers. The facilitator says we will have 10 minutes. My heart-rate speeds up, my stomach churns. The urge to quit the session flashes, my mouse hovers over the red "Leave" button at the bottom right hand of the screen, a tantalising escape-route. A new box of text appears on the screen confirming the impending transition to breakout rooms. I float my mouse over the "Join Breakout Room" button as I flirt with freedom, but feel burdened by the potential scrutiny of the facilitator if I fail to decide quickly. I click "Join." There is a flash of quiet and I am vaporised for a split second. As the screen transitions, a green arrow points to four squares cycling two shades of grey...and I'm in.

To a learner an assignment to a breakout room (see figure 1) may present an unwelcome interruption and a Hobson's choice: acquiesce, hit 'join' to meet one's sub-group and start working with what may be unknown others, or stay stranded alone with the host, as if caught out of class in the school corridor without permission. The learner may wish to flee but feel forced on, yanked to the ZBR arena. Reluctance may be based on previous experiences of a ZBR, perhaps with a couple of incommunicado names where no-body talks. They may wonder if their efforts to engage will be successful or become drowned by mindless chatter or lost in a gulf of eerie silence.
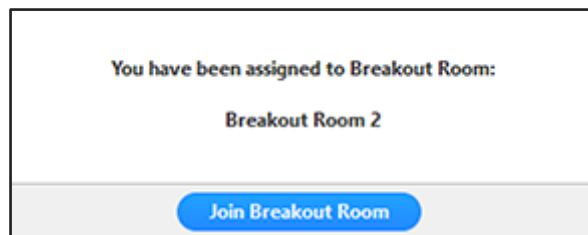
Figure 1: You have been assigned to Breakout Room

Each learner arrives at the breakout room from their own virtual trap-door, and, unless membership is preassigned or repeated from a previous ZBR, random allocation leaves the learner with no clue as to whom they will meet; no preemptive sociation is possible, such as sizing up others from across the room, or awkward snickering with an acquaintance before moving into a group. An embodied transition requires effort to move and steer weightful passage through the rich incidental world between places. In Zoom, the learner can select 'join', taking a virtual leap of faith or, even if they linger, a new box tells them about their conveyance, they are 'Joining Breakout Rooms…' (see figure 2), and this 'may take a few moments'. The learner can calmly await the results of being thus processed. But their virtual self amounted to little enough in Zoom and now perhaps even feel that has been snuffed out. They may wonder where they have gone and feel after themselves, like the instinctual and erratic maneuver of the hand when seeking a lost computer mouse cursor, an impulse to reunite soul, body and on-screened extended self.
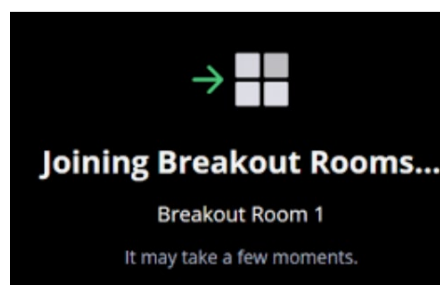
Figure 2: Joining Breakout Rooms

For Heidegger, Dasein is always 'up to something' (Inwood, 2000), but any subliminal scheming must surrender to the maneuvers of the facilitator actuating Zoom's levers, each fateful keyboard or mouse move palpably sensed by hapless participants as virtual juts into their world, this time as if casting each participant into a virtual vacuum, diminishing their ability to know what to do next, wondering whether this vitrification will end in reconstitution, or have they been vaporized, virtually terminated, condemned to drift disembodied in the swirl of Internet currents, falling away from the session that must have started without them. This weightless wait may be experienced as unnerving, although in others perhaps it is only barely noticed as a mildly frustrating moment in which to pause, sigh and gather thoughts, or dash to the restroom.

How much of the transition lag is designed in? What if opening the rooms were instant rather than prolonged in a micro-period of anticipation as group members free-fall from the main Zoom room? There may be less time to weigh ideas such as, 'do we really have to…?' Why not just leave the whole charade entirely and read a book? These questions may generate sufficient cognitive dissonant dithering to tip the participant into the breakout room before they knew it or chose it. Being 'done to' in educational settings may seem an unreasonable violation of an individual's autonomy. Even though anyone might expect a pedagogue to make pedagogic moves, resistance is futile in Zoom. Zoom's lack of transit time or "threshold spaces for indirection and improvisation" (Friesen, 2014, p. 22) leaves the distracted or unprepared student at a strait: to snap-decide upon their capacity to immediately sufficiently ramp up their availability and engagement *viz* the online class relative to their in-person situation. If they do not convey a positive vibe into the ZBR, this might affect the effectiveness of their latest, if randomly assembled, team, and they may not want to be that *fait accomplis* who, before it starts, perhaps jeopardises this fleeting opportunity to learn. Learners may dislike Zoom breakout rooms, but a sense of inertia and commitment to the educational enterprise and the particular session may be enough so that they passively aquiesse to meet their fate and play along with whatever game awaits them. As Gadamer (1992, p. 102) says, "Play fulfills its purpose only if the player loses himself in play.... Someone who doesn't take the game seriously is a spoilsport."

When breakout groups happen in-person, the entirety of a learner's presence in the room is harder for the educator to oversee and manage. A willful learner can remonstrate, if not negotiate; the dragging of chairs and heels, huffing and puffing - perhaps no-one would notice, but there may be some gratification in knowing they could. Even such low-level sedition can contribute to the group's nascent sense of identity on the way towards productive work. If the announcement of ZBR's comes as a surprise, the learner may feel cheated out of the necessary time to prepare themselves for new levels of engagement and cast around mentally: shorn of the micro-decisions entailed by equivalent maneuvers in the physical world, the invitation to 'Join Breakout Room' may strike the learner as insincere, rushed or forced, jolted, *'as if by cattle-prod', subsumed as one of* a *gallery of others*, which may excite anxiety's 'knot in the stomach'; disorientation is not much preparation for reorientation. Learners with ZBR experience know there is no seat at the back or way to slip out unnoticed once emblazoned on the newly intimate screen, no escape from scrutiny. Some may instead avert the spotlight by continuing with their camera off; some arrive with a knot in their stomach. Perhaps stunned by the prospect of a ZBR, the learner may try to retain what was just said about what they were supposed to be doing, but fulfilling that purpose depends on who else they end up with. The learner must quickly process their pending exposure and discomfort of the unknown others in p*ermutation of stranger, friend or voyeur'*. A feeling of 'being done to' may result in a ZBR opportunity being perceived as illusive; the mandate to perform may cloud the positive possibilities of closer engagement with others. The experience of being processed by the technology at speed may be unnerving, an unexpected dividuation from the main session may present as an ambush, inflicting a burst of physical or emotional trauma; trepidation of 'what lurks ahead', some pending awkwardness may negatively infuse one's mood.

The simplest option for Zoom hosts is to populate ZBR's by automatic random assignment. The main alternative is pre assignment, but this is less likely as it requires preparation. Reassignment is possible for the second ZBR in a session, allocating learners to their previous group. As the pandemic progressed, students were increasingly less likely to meet their peers in-person, and randomised large classes could throw learners into ZBR's with unknown and, as yet, untrusted others, obliging a repeat of stunted introductions where presenting the self in such a time and screen-constrained context may make the words, 'Hi, I'm Jennie', seem more perfunctory than when in-person, however nicely rendered - especially if the word Jennie is visible but Jennie is not. With so little of each other to go on, some may struggle to parley candidly or feel free to make the mistakes necessary to dauntlessly progress epistemic tasks. The square black hole with a 'name' hovering over its gape thins us out ontologically and, compared with the main Zoom room, this intensifies in a smaller ZBR group, which was supposed to provide a more intimate occasion. McLuhan (2001) suggests that sunglasses make a face 'cool media', drawing us out in mystified completion of what is hidden, but faced with Zoom participants

behind their uncanny black squares leaves the learner with no body to interact their settling down sociation audition with; the polite cough, gesture, looking and shifting around, that unveils their personality. For the learner to keep their camera on where others are presenting black squares requires resolution in the face of vulnerability akin to remaining at a masquerade ball without a mask.

A learner may find themselves preoccupied with the appearance of others in the ZBR or with their own video-streamed image rather than engaged with the assigned task at hand

> *Arriving in the breakout room, my image materializes among four others already doing introductions. I scan their faces and names quickly, trying to take everyone in at once. I'm immediately caught by a brightly lit show-room kitchen, its occupant wearing a dressing-gown. Two rectangles away, a dense and ordered wall bookcase stands as background to a professional looking male, though I'm not sure it's real. I'm only half listening to the breakout room conversation. Instead, I find myself focusing on a woman with a number of white spindles behind her, trying to figure out exactly where she is located; she appears to be in, or rather, has her back to a hallway. Another woman is sitting relaxed on what seems to be a dark coloured couch: there isn't much light. A new entrant—a younger man in a Hawaiian shirt—slowly materializes below me.*

Entering a ZBR, the learner may find themselves drawn to and preoccupied by the other participants, especially by their bright or unexpected attire, or a striking, unusual or incomprehensible background. Like Sartre (1956) "moved by jealousy, curiosity, or vice" peering through a keyhole and ear pressed against the door, Zoom's little rectangular windows offer the learner "a spectacle to be seen…[and] a conversation …to be heard" (p. 259). Each window opens a keyholed glimpse of another's life—housecoat, florid dress shirt, cluttered bedroom, drab lighting, strange objects or fancy furniture; each porthole offers an infinitely observable view of the other within the limits of the rectangular frame.

Yet unlike Sartre's keyhole peeper, there will be no distant footsteps to threaten the ZBR participant's unfettered freedom to surreptitiously observe and eavesdrop on their fellow participants. In a ZBR, the learner may quietly and at their leisure examine the other participants from a place of open concealment. As long as they direct their gaze in the general vicinity of their webcam and screen, the voyeuristic eyes of the learner remain shielded from the reproach of others. The target of their peering curiosity is hidden. Zoom's shadow box display of labeled and webcammed participants (Figure 3) is "at once both instrument and obstacle" (p. 259).
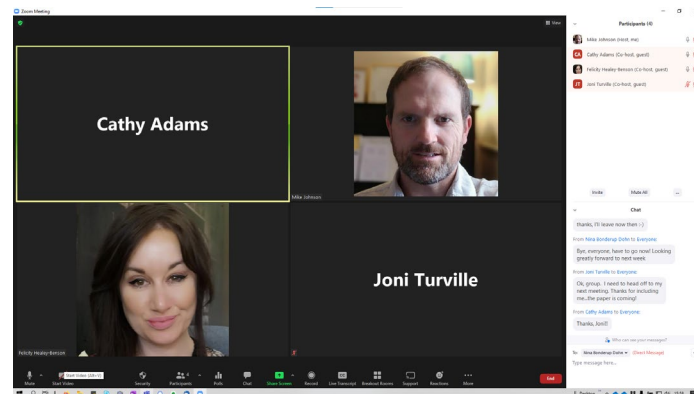
Figure 3. In the ZBR

Momentarily consumed with examining the others in the ZBR, the learner

> ...has no "outside"; it is a pure process of relating the instrument (the keyhole) to the end to be attained (the spectacle to be seen), a pure mode of losing myself in the world, of causing myself to be drunk in by things as ink is by a blotter in order that an instrumental-complex oriented toward an end may be synthetically detached on the ground of the world (p. 259).

The Zoom ensemble—screens, webcams, mics, hardware, software, wifi and networks—compels "new acts" (p. 264). Further, "every act performed against the Other can on principle be for the Other an instrument which will

serve him against me" (p. 264). Here, the learner is dimly or acutely aware that they themselves can simultaneously "be-seen-by-another". Yet they can also never be assured of this because in Zoom, there is no "convergence of two ocular globes in my direction" (p. 257). Instead, the look of the other is at best "probable." As Sartre shows, "it is only probable that behind the bush which has just moved there is someone hiding who is watching me" (p. 258). Further,

> What I apprehend immediately when I hear the branches crackling behind me is not that there is someone there; it is that I am vulnerable, that I have a body which can be hurt, that I occupy a place and that I can not in any case escape from the space in which I am without defense—in short, that I am seen. (p. 259)

I do not need to "see-the-Other" to know that I may simultaneously "be-seen-by-the-Other." Nor can I know "that those eyes which are fixed on me are eyes; they could be only 'artificial ones' resembling real eyes" (p. 275). For the learner in a ZBR, the impossibility of meeting the eyes of another person in Zoom also means that they may stare at and examine the other participants without impunity.

> *I'm the first one to arrive in the breakout room and I see my face looming large on the screen. What is going on with my hair today? I hurriedly try to slick down a piece that seems to be standing up straight. Oh wow…I can see my kitchen clutter in the background too. I quickly turn off my camera so I can straighten up behind me. I hadn't noticed the disarray when my window was so small in the larger group. Others quickly begin to appear; I turn my camera back on. We begin the conversation but I can't quit looking at the hair that just isn't behaving. My face looks a bit puffy too. I try to focus on the conversation but my attention keeps drifting back to my own image.*

Seeing oneself televised "live" in a ZBR, a sometimes larger-than-life version of one's face, neck and shoulders silhouetted against a backdrop of what otherwise exists unseen behind them, may similarly distract the learner from their educational task at hand. Like Narcissus of Greek mythology arrested by his reflection in a pool of water, a learner arriving in a Zoom breakout room may find themselves gripped by the webcammed version of themselves and their surroundings on screen. Preoccupied with how their appearance may be perceived by others arriving in the breakout room, the learner may seek to quickly adjust their windowed image in different ways: surreptitiously grooming themselves, jumping up to adjust their lighting or tidy their surroundings, turning off their webcam momentarily to push a pile of dirty laundry out of sight or to access Zoom Preferences to swap in a virtual background.

Fussing over one's appearance in a mirror is hardly a new phenomenon. Outside of one's home, walking by a mirror, a window or a shiny door, one may find themselves glancing at their reflection. Noticing something amiss, one may be briefly arrested in their tracks. But in the midst of a classroom activity, such preoccupation may be unfamiliar. In a Zoom class and especially in the intimacy of the breakout room with webcams on, a learner may find themselves staring at their own image but also examining, judging or "fixing themselves up." Further, it is not just one's face and upper torso, but one's background...

When presented with their image moment by moment, hour after hour, day after day, students may become more aware of their perceived imperfections and desire to do something about them. In their article, "A Pandemic of Dysmorphia: 'Zooming' into the Perception of our Appearance" in *Facial Plastic Surgery & Aesthetic Medicine,* Rice, Graber, & Kourosh (2020) discuss the trend of people becoming more self conscious and, in some cases, body dysmorphic disorders being triggered through the constant confrontation with their own Zoom image. Video meeting tools also create the opportunity for users to readily compare their image to others because of the way the tools position images next to one another. Rice et al. attribute recent increases in cosmetic procedures and treatments in part to the overuse of video conferencing during the COVID-19 pandemic. They label this kind of overly self-critical analysis as "Zoom Dysmorphia" (p. 402).

As the Zoom breakout room comes to an end, an engaging discussion may come to a perfunctory ending, midstream

> *I try to listen intently but I'm distracted by the countdown timer fast approaching zero. She is in mid-sentence when the screen tells me I'm being automatically taken back to the main room. The facilitator welcomes us back and wants us to talk about what we learned in our breakout rooms but I'm*

stuck thinking about how close I got to hearing about the crux of my issue from another participant. I wonder if I can somehow share contact information with her, but I feel the moment is lost.

Irrespective of how the ZBR session is progressing, at a certain point, a box may appear centre-screen, with the option to leave a little early or be ejected at zero (Figure 4).
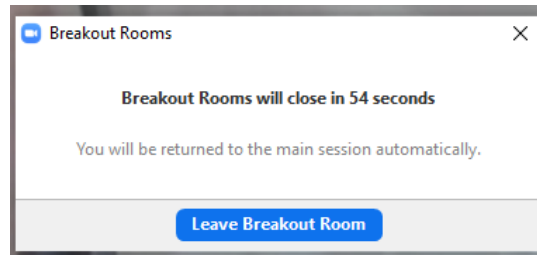
Figure 4: Breakout Room 60-second countdown timer

The unheralded arrival of this box may invoke a sense of panic, the speaker accelerating to conclude their point. The countdown timer ruptures and then threatens to imminently collapse of the co-constitutive togetherness of the ZBR conversational world that has finally convened. Some participants may just wait out the end in a suspenseful contortion of winding down, whiling away, scattering vain glances at the screen squares. Others may take the opportunity to sneak off early. Long goodbyes are just not an option, the final seconds like those of a concluding elevator ride. With so little time the learner's focus may be more acute, *a lá* Parkinson's law, and concentrated effort may make time fly.

Moments of understanding may be liminal or rare, so a participant may be riled and dismayed if their specific issue was about to be addressed but instead the line of thought is chopped and bereft of its promise. As if clutching at an escaping fish just landed, only determined ancillary effort might rescue something from this lost opportunity, with only ephemeral irrelevant traces of the group, of a notably Hawaiian shirt and that girl who looked far too ill to join if this had been held in-person. For others, where exchange has run dry, the timer may extend a form of Purgatory. The less brazen may act normal, whatever that is. An awkward smile, giggle, or vacant gazing, or the glazed autocue-tracking look that betrays a switch to other screen-based work. These busy types have broken out early - they will or can not be held zoom hostage, same for the one who fled leaving live footage of a vacant chair. Some decide there is little point trying to say more, while others may try, right up to the wire.

As the end draws on, clipped exchanges punctuate the awkward silence in the long seconds approaching expulsion. Time has the final word: no bore or rebel can hold forth King Canute-style in defiance of this tide. If a learner wants a last word, they must air it out around the T-minus sixty second mark or it may be lost in the cacophony of micro-partings. Time can change the experience of the space for learners, foregrounding the process and the technology over the human exchange, as a form of Heidegger's (1977) "Enframing" or "Positionality" (*das Gestell*). Technology is neither neutral nor insignificant in its role. It (re)shapes our thinking, being and doing in the meeting space: we may find ourselves performing in a more intense way, eye contact with conversational others is strangely elusive, and even our words can feel amplified and framed in our individual windows.

In the final few seconds, a participant may sneak a parting duck, smile or "Zoom wave", a gesture that resembles a young child hand-waving. These exaggerated gestures may signal a participant's attempts to make up for the sense that the situated, shared and embodied lifeworld is depleted in Zoom. Practically, the Zoom wave shows, mute or not, they were in it together for that event and, muted or not, a wave signals closure and release, unmistakably conveying farewells, transmitting a flicker of humanity and mutual appreciation - each waver valued others in the room sufficiently to survive to the end and share and frame this moment of parting, sealing it as an event. The time, never to be recouped, was spent together. Wavers show commitment in that attention levels are sufficiently maintained up to and through the shared finale vibe. Perhaps exaggerated waving will transfer to in-person valediction now that handshakes are dangerous in the world of COVID-19.

At zero, the final breakout room timer guillotines the group like a silent supervillain. Unless designed to blur them, the digital lends an unnerved and unnerving precision to virtual spatial-temporal boundaries. The learner's hardware is either in the ZBR or out of it. Five minutes is exactly 5 minutes—to the split nanosecond. The 'in'

and 'out' are sliced with stark precision. For the learner, however, with interpersonal connection rendered then rent, falling away may happen for long enough to feel it as they snatch at memory fragments of an unconcluded point or fading screen name.The ZBR's end is incomparably abrupt. Only in the strictures of the examination hall would teachers demand *all* activity cease, and even then, 'pens down!' is powerful but not omnipotent. In class, it would be difficult to imagine a teacher walking between two conversants, stopping them, gagging and blindfolding, and then escorting each back to their seats without a chance to conclude. In Zoom, when the timekeeper cannot be seen, students may feel "plucked" out of one conversation and dropped into another, mid-sentence, or even mid-word. Facilitators may soften the severing blow through visiting the groups to gain their assent to ending them or inject a text-based announcement that arrives as a 'voice from on high' as a warning that the ZBR time is coming to an end.

The climactic moment of release and rematerialising desiccates the small ZBR groups. It may invoke childhood memories of dizzily arriving at the foot of a grassy hill having rolled sideways down it with others—queasily coming to—where is everyone else? If the session requires group representatives to give feedback to the larger group, those individuals may still feel the need to confer with their group, but they are bereft of a group back-channel or in-person tactics, such as gesturing at flip-board headings. They cannot scatter glances around their group for affirmation or hear whispered suggestions or scan hastily scribbled notes. All these may be harder at a distance, of multiple screens of black boxes away - group members, only recently so close and productive, now sprayed somewhere among the checker-board of peers.The looming end serves notice on whatever level of usefulness, awkwardness or camaraderie that had developed in the ZBR.

Concluding Thoughts

During the COVID-19 lockdowns, video conferencing software established itself as a key technology in the pivot to online learning. Such webtools are likely to remain popular, especially where neoliberal aims of reduced financial costs and greater productivity are privileged. More difficult to predict is whether attending in person again will be a reminder of what was lost and once again in-person will resume as the 'old normal'—learners orienting enfleshed freedoms and limitations on the fly, especially in small group work. If *mitsein* (being-with) is noticed by entrepreneurs as valuable to education, networked learning technology will advance to emulate it. Dazzling refinements to holographic technology are entering the market, realising science fiction's predictions of life-sized, 3D images of people that share space, body language and eye contact (Murad & Smale, 2021).

In some respects, a learner's experience of a Zoom Breakroom seems to resemble that of the solitary videogamer launching a game and being flung into a new virtual existence to accomplish a pre-ordained mission. A ZBR arguably detracts from engendering a convivial scholarly learning environment: virtual violence to the learner's experience of time, screen locale, voice, and intersubjectivity may leave an enduring detriment on education, since Zoom host god-like powers are firmly in hands of already powerful pedagogues, reinforcing students as "adaptable, manageable beings" (Freire, 1970, p. 57).

Always a simulation, the mediated human may not be doing the same as their flesh, which adds a hermeneutic layer to transcend through trust when more intensively interacting, as in a ZBR. Perhaps learners will prefer to diffuse the ZBR spotlight using different veils than the crass binary of camera on/off, switching their avatar to 'burka' or 'pay attention' modes. The technical trajectory to make the virtual still more life-like might not equate to *more human* though. Learners may enjoy adding a virtual beauty spot or 'tidy room' background, but the facility to easily interact with their group before and after a ZBR would be better for collaborative learning in small groups. Such affordances could be integrated, however tools are never neutral: "We shape our tools, and thereafter our tools shape us" (Culkin, 1967) and, such shaping, broadened to Bildung, which, according to Gadamer (1992, p. 10), is more than "capacities and talents", even the mysterious cultivation of God's image in us. Thus the undergraduate vision for learners is stunted if, even in the relative safety of a small group of peers in these formative years, they never have to front up, and stand, without filters, behind their words, authentically enacting *alethea* (truth as *unconcealment*), putting their body on the line in the face of 'the They' (Heidegger, 1962). Zoom as *screen*, and ZBR's especially, may confound *alethetic* dialogue essential to *problem-posing education* (Freire, 1970).

While Zoom breakout rooms promise to provide more of a small-group learning experience, that is far from all they do, and we should still *wonder* about the impacts on relationships, engagement, presence, and identity in online classes and beyond them.

References

Aagaard, J. (2015). Drawn to distraction: A qualitative study of off-task use of educational technology. *Computers & Education, 87*, 90-97. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2015.03.010

Adams, C., & van Manen, M. A. (2017). Teaching phenomenological research and writing. *Qualitative Health Research, 27*(6), 780-791. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732317698960

Cadieux M, Campos-Zamora M, Zagury-Orly I, Dzara K. (2020). Journal Club Using Virtual Breakout Rooms: Interactive Continuing Education with No Learner Preparation During COVID-19. *Journal of Continuing Education Health Professionals*, ;40(4 Suppl 4), 217-219. https://doi.org/10.1097/CEH.000000000000032

Chandler, K. (2016). Using breakout rooms in synchronous online tutorials. *Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice, 4*(3), 16-23. https://doi.org/10.14297/jpaap.v4i3.216

Culkin, J. (1967, March 18). A schoolman's guide to Marshall McLuhan. *Saturday Review*, 51–53, 70–72.

Friesen, N. (2014). Telepresence and tele-absence: A phenomenology of the (in)visible alien online. *Phenomenology & Practice, 8*(1), 17-31. https://doi.org/10.29173/pandpr22143

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (M. B. Ramos, Trans.).

Gadamer, H.-G. (1992). *Truth and Method* (Second Revised). Crossroad.

Goodfellow, R., Jefferys, I., Milest, T., & Shirra, T. (1996). Face-to-face language learning at a distance? A study of a videoconference try-out. *ReCALL, 8*(2), 5-16. https://doi:10.1017/S0958344000003530

Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and Time* (J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Trans.). Blackwell.

Heidegger, M. (1977). The question concerning technology. (W. Lovitt, Trans.) *The question concerning technology: and other essays* (pp. 3-35). New York: Harper & Row.

Inwood, M. (2000). *Heidegger: A Very Short Introduction*. OUP Oxford.

Lee, A. R. (2021). Breaking through digital barriers: Exploring EFL students' views of zoom breakout room experiences. *Korean Journal of English Language and Linguistics, 21*, 510-524. https://doi.org/10.15738/kjell.21..202106.510

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1964). *Signs.* Evanston: Northwestern University Press

McLuhan, M. (2001). *Understanding media: The extensions of man*. Routledge.

Murad, A. & Smale, W. *How hologram tech may soon replace video calls.* BBC News. https://www.bbc.com/news/business-59577341

Rice, S.M., Graber, E., & Kourosh, A.S. (2020). A pandemic of dysmorphia: "Zooming" into the perception of our appearance *Facial Plastic Surgery & Aesthetic Medicine, 22*(6), 401-402. https://doi.org/10.1089/fpsam.2020.0454

Saltz, J., & Heckman, R. (2020). Using structured pair activities in a distributed online breakout room. *Online Learning, 24*(1), 227-244. https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v24i1.1632

Sartre, J.-P. (1956). *Being and nothingness: An essay on phenomenological ontology* (H. E. Barnes, trans.). Washington Square Press.

Serhan, D (20.20). Transitioning from Face-to-Face to Remote Learning: Students' Attitudes and Perceptions of using Zoom during COVID-19 Pandemic. *International Journal of Technology in Education and Science, 4*(4), https://doi.org/10.46328/ijtes.v4i4.148

Van Manen, M. (2016). *Phenomenology of practice: Meaning-giving methods in phenomenological research and writing*. Routledge.

Watson, O. (1996). A networked learning environment: Toward new teaching strategies in secondary education. *Educational Technology, 36*(5), 40–43.