

LINKING LOOP: Zoom Fatigue for Educators / Student Digital Divide / Editorial on Loss of Graduation Ceremony / Thespian Award

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By Anne Scheck

ZOOM FATIGUE NOW A THREAT

In an unexpected development, “zoom fatigue” may be a risk for teachers and other school staff members, according to a look at this new condition by the Oregon Educator Network. It’s a form of technological burnout characterized by physical and psychological discomfort from multiple meetings via a shared screen.

Online searches for the term peaked in early May; A few days later, “zoom fatigue” came under consideration for inclusion in the Merriam Webster dictionary.

And, as reliance on zoom continues, the biggest threat seems to be loss of informal colleague interaction. The benefit of “overlapping talk” is lost since turns have to be taken to address the screen, noted John Hellermann PhD, professor of linguistics at Portland State University (PSU). He and his colleague, Steve Thorne PhD, also of PSU, have been studying zoom interactions, including virtual happy hours, to determine how they differ from the real thing face-to-face. They presented their findings at a PSU webinar Thursday.

Talk that occurs “in the corridor or at the water-cooler” often is where professional information is shared and social connections are strengthened – spontaneous encounters that just don’t happen elsewhere, Dr. Thorne said. Also, the ability to fully understand conversation often means being able to interject and to ask for clarification – and such interruptions are more difficult on zoom. They can seem intrusive, perhaps even impolite, Dr. Thorne observed.

One approach to make such sessions friendlier is to elevate hands so that gestures can be seen – personal animation conveys warmth and engagement. Also, there may be times when it’s wise to turn off the camera – that small self-image can be distracting. “I constantly think ‘Who is that old guy on the screen?’” Dr. Thorne said.

As zoom use continues, strategies are likely to evolve that relieve the emotional strain from heavy utilization, just as emojis were invented to help make email more understandable. Before tiny images of cartoon faces could be inserted in sentences, email messages were liable to be misconstrued, particularly when humor or irony was intended.

The *Harvard Business Review* recently issued recommendations to avoid becoming “zoomed-out,” including periodically switching to traditional phone calls for one-on-one conversing. For colleagues with zoom fatigue, this alternative yields an essential personal touch, according to the publication.

SOME DISTRICT PUPILS FACE INTERNET CHASM

Some students in Central District 13J still don’t have good internet access but this digital divide

doesn't come as any surprise.

A survey conducted by the Polk County Board of Commissioners months ago indicates that rural parts of the county often have sub-standard connectivity, including some outlying areas serving Central High School. The switch to distance-learning in the pandemic has shown "some of these kids aren't connected," said Mike Ainsworth, chair of the Polk County Board of Commissioners.

Central School District determined that more than 80 families were without internet capability, and about half that many had service only intermittently, according to results announced at the last school board meeting. Schools across Oregon are facing the same problem. A report in *Education Week* earlier this month highlighted Beaverton as a district in which e-learning couldn't be offered to all students, resulting in a mix of "high-tech and low-tech" resources for students.

"It has been a real challenge to deal with inequities created by lack of internet access for some of our students," stated Ben Gorman, language arts teacher for Central High School. Initially, some local parents seemed concerned when the district spent time to carefully develop systems to reach out to all students, he said. "Most people here don't know that the Oregon Department of Education treated Central School District as a model for how smaller districts should be responding to these inequities," he added.

EDITORIAL: GRADUATION DAY

Jennifer Flores, an active volunteer in the community and an employee at Central High School, was deeply saddened when she learned that high school graduation would be so different this year. Like so many parents in Central School District 13J, for years she had looked forward to a traditional cap-and-gown ceremony for her child. In this editorial, she explains why the changes this year are so disappointing for her, her daughter Drew and her entire family. Her essay below also will be published in the June issue of The Independent.

This is a kid who overcame some tough challenges.

On the day she was born, we didn't know if she'd ever reach this milestone. Drew is our youngest child, and she pushed her way into the world a full seven weeks before her due date. At more than seven pounds, she wasn't a tiny preemie, but she had problems with basic reflexes, like breathing and swallowing. She had to stay in the hospital for weeks after I went home.

There are no adequate words to describe just how painful it was for me to make a trip home while my fragile newborn was in the NICU. Eventually, she came home with us and we went on with life with our three kids.

But the health problems were far from over for Drew, who was eventually diagnosed with epilepsy and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). It was debilitating for us all. Before she even finished elementary school, she underwent an intensive outpatient program at UCLA that specialized in the treatment of childhood OCD. And when I say "intensive" I mean it: five days a week, five hours a day, for five months. She missed half of her fourth-grade year. And, while she was undergoing all this treatment at UCLA, we were figuring out the medicine that she'd need to stop her epileptic seizures.

We're all tremendously proud of Drew.

Our entire family from California and Nevada had planned to come to the actual graduation ceremony to be here for her. And, as an employee of Central High School (CHS), I would have been able to hand this child her diploma. To be the person to hand this young lady her diploma, after watching her battle all that she's battled in her heretofore short life, meant more to me than I can describe.

Now the high school graduates will be allowed only two guests.

Groups of seven kids, in alphabetical order, will be met on the football field by the superintendent, the principal and a school board member. They will be handed the sleeve for their diploma, be given the opportunity to have a photo taken, and then – alone – be allowed to walk the halls of Central High School one last time as a student. There is no opportunity for them to say a final a good-bye to teachers; There is no opportunity for us to hug or “high-five” the graduates as they take the field for the ceremony.

Devastating is the best word I can come up with.

When we all left the building on March 13, no one knew we wouldn't be back this year. And now here we are.

Nothing can describe the sense of loss. I hope it goes away with time. I was asked how I could compare this to something that happened at the same time in my life. Obviously, there was no pandemic then. However, I was in LA when HIV arose, but I was only 18 years old when the first case was announced in Los Angeles. So, I was teenager – not paying attention to the global goings-on. Maybe this will just become a blip in her past for Drew, too.

Today the world in general puts more pressure on young people than ever before. Who knows how this pandemic will affect the economy in the long term? College costs are one example. The first year I went to a community college, in 1989, I paid seven dollars per credit. So, one three-credit class cost \$21. Today, a single credit costs \$105, so that same three-credit class now costs \$315. That's one class. And now what will happen? Will tuition increase to make up for the shutdown?

Over the past weeks, Drew has been teaching herself to bake. So far, we've had made-from-scratch chocolate chip cookies, Disney-inspired treats, like the tarts from "Brave," and so much more. Dealing with the quarantine, she has been an inspiration. Just yesterday she was crowned CHS's 2020 “Virtual” Prom Queen, as the kids lost out on their prom as well.

FINAL NOTE

Central High School teacher Jeff Witt, who for years has directed students in Broadway musicals as well as chorale concerts at CHS, has been recognized by the Oregon Thespians for outstanding achievement. He was honored with the Melba Day Sparks Henning award for extraordinary service and accomplishment in CHS theatrical productions.