

Education | Essay

What is a university now?

Why face-to-face teaching is still valuable in a digital age

By Joe Moran



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A communal workspace in the University of Bolton, September 16 | © OLI SCARFF/AFP via Getty Images

In normal times, autumn for me means new beginnings. With the first damp chill in the air and the leaves fading, and just as our avian summer guests are heading south, the students arrive in a wave, hugging each other and screeching like swifts returning from Africa. This self-replenishing tribe of mostly young, loose-limbed, voluble people makes me wonder where the years have gone. I have files on my computer older than most of them. Still, I find their eagerness catching. That first day of a university term feels like a fresh start: the blackboard wiped clean.

This seasonal migration is also potentially lethal. Hundreds of thousands of new students travel up and down motorways in parents' cars and then flock together, exchanging germs. Timetabling software moves

them around buildings in minutely synchronized mini-migrations, forming corridor bottlenecks on the hour. Just walk into a recently emptied classroom and smell the stale sweat and perfume in the humid air. Here is a convivial habitat for those vampiric beings, viruses, that thrive by leaping on and off other living bodies. Most university lecturers have had several iterations of fresher's flu.

Gradually over the summer it dawned on me: come September, everything would have to be different. Universities would offer "blended learning" - more online teaching, fewer contact hours. Instead of the usual lively mingling, there would be face masks, one-way corridors and desks a regulation distance apart.

Meanwhile the news about universities was depressing. The huge market for students from China and India, who pay the higher international fees, had collapsed overnight. The Institute for Fiscal Studies warned that thirteen British universities or colleges were at risk of going bankrupt. Several universities asked staff to take pay cuts. Others announced closures of humanities degrees. Many lecturers on short-term contracts, who supply as much as a third of university teaching, were laid off before the end of the academic year. In July, Gavin Williamson's Department for Education published a "restructuring regime", outlining the conditions for universities seeking emergency loans. It amounted to a new higher education policy, including a sharp shift towards STEM and vocational courses, a threat to end funding for arts and humanities courses deemed poor value for money, and a warning that universities would not be saved from going bust.

Even in hard times, universities receive little sympathy. They inspire a persistent, low-level hostility in political and public life. As William Whyte argues in *Redbrick: A social and architectural history of Britain's civic universities* (2015), we tend to focus on the university not as a place but as an ideal. This engenders, he argues, "a constant sense that the university is in crisis, failing to live up to this exalted, fixed, and fictive idea". In recent years universities have been denounced as havens of hidebound practices, anti-market thought, smug Remainerism and woke politics - "left-wing madrassas", in Toby Young's words.

But a university is not any of these feverishly imagined things. It is, first of all, a building, or a group of buildings, made of bricks, glass, carpet tiles and dropped ceilings stuffed with pipes and cables. It houses not just students and lecturers but also office staff, cleaners, counsellors, caterers, librarians, accountants. Inside its classrooms you find people talking about contract law or *King Lear*, or singing in Gospel choirs, or rehearsing plays, or kneeling on prayer mats, or lying on yoga mats. The people and the buildings come together in millions of small acts that make up an intricate, evolving, collective organism. A university is as full of human virtues, quirks and flaws, and as difficult to summarize, as a small town.

In *How Buildings Learn: What happens after they're built* (1995), Stewart Brand sings the praises of a sprawling, ramshackle edifice at MIT known only as Building 20. Building 20 was a temporary structure erected during the Second World War for radar research. By the time it was finally demolished in 1998, this unpromising space had housed groundbreaking research on linguistics, acoustics, microwaves, video games and high-speed photography. Its horizontal layout, with lots of corridors and a lone vending machine to which everyone gravitated, forced people to meet and share ideas. It was a low-rent environment, free from turf wars because the turf - leaky, draughty, dilapidated - wasn't worth warring over. The nuclear physicist Jerrold Zacharias, working on the first atomic beam clock, simply cut holes in the floor to make room for his equipment. Just by existing, Building 20 made creative things happen.

What is a university when it is not a building? We now have some idea because, in March, universities stopped being physical spaces with flip-down lecture seats, polypropylene classroom chairs, acoustic panelling and laminated notices about fire assembly points. They turned into data packets passing through fibre-optic cables and wireless routers on their way to kitchen tables, back bedrooms and garden sheds. Lectures were recorded, webinars held, essays submitted and marked online.

It worked, more or less - but, speaking for myself, it was a desiccated and lonely business. I felt especially sorry for our final-year students, ending their university careers with a single click to submit their last assignment, perhaps after leaving a brief note to their tutor in the comments box ("I am aware that this file is called 'nearly done' but I assure you it is indeed finished", said one of mine). And with that their student days were over. Into the cold winds of a Covid-19 job market they were decanted, without the warming rituals of farewell hugs and degree ceremonies.

What made the online university possible is that the past two decades have seen a gradual digitizing of teaching. The first baby step was PowerPoint, which British universities adopted fairly late. My hard drive tells me that I only started using it in 2003, the same year that the Yale professor Edward Tufte complained that PowerPoint presentations "too often resemble the school play: very loud, very slow, and very simple". But PowerPoint had one big selling point: its bullet-point templates and off-the-peg designs allowed content to be easily slotted in. In a more market-led university system, it ironed out the individual idiosyncrasy of the lecturer and met basic standards of presentational competence. Lecture slides could also be added to VLEs, "virtual learning environments": electronic portals full of teaching resources. Recently these resources have included not only slides but also lecture recordings. VLEs respond to the same demand as TV catch-up and streaming services: the individual consumer's desire to access content asynchronously and at their convenience.

Used alongside face-to-face teaching, the new technology works fine. The sacred form of the hour-long, real-time lecture probably needed shaking up. This teaching method was invented before the printing press, when books and paper were scarce and texts had to be read aloud to be discussed. In his memoirs, Siegfried Sassoon describes his brief time studying law at Cambridge, dutifully attending "droning lectures" in which "note-taking seemed to be physical rather than mental exercise". In *Oxford Triumphant* (1954), a recent graduate, Norman Longmate, argued that this medieval invention, the lecture, "has lingered on into the twentieth century to become the biggest time-waster in Oxford". During one lecture, Longmate noticed a fellow student composing a sonnet and another sketching the woman next to him. The only student showing real concentration turned out to be filling in a pools coupon.

The golden age of universities never existed. I was a student in the dying days of full maintenance grants and light-touch government intervention in higher education. That world had too many inattentive, complacently dull lecturers who saw teaching us as an imposition. A purgative dose of student consumerism certainly seemed in order. Except for one recalcitrant detail: students are not consumers. They don't pay for their degrees (if they did, their degree certificates would be worthless), but for their tuition. Students are assessed, marked and graded, which doesn't happen to most consumers. Teaching is not a client-facing service but an inevitably hierarchical activity. It is also communal and collaborative. As catch-up and streaming services have transformed our TV-watching habits, all that has been lost is the diasporic, live viewing community scattered across millions of living rooms. But when students consume class material at

their leisure, the agora of the classroom is impoverished. What was a shared pursuit becomes, in the student satisfaction survey, a statistical aggregate of individual preferences.

Every lecturer knows this routine: the first thing students do when they enter a classroom is plug their phones into the room's available sockets. Like Bedouins carefully calibrating how far the water in their goatskin bags will stretch between wells, they are always on their way to or from a recharging point. I have come to think of classroom teaching as a corrective to their device-driven lives. A timetabled class is inescapably analogue. It can't be watched at double speed (a common student hack with recorded lectures) or split into bite-sized chunks. It teaches them to be truly present in a room and to know that thoughts and words carry real weight when they come out of this concentrated bubble of shared attention.

All human communication is embodied. The headache you get after a day of Zoom meetings tells you as much. Even thinking burns calories. We are sensual and tactile animals. That is why recorded music has not killed off the concert, why fans gather in city squares to watch football matches on big screens when they could easily watch them at home, why friends prefer to see each other in person than on FaceTime. We engage most intensely not with avatars or talking-head rectangles but with the physical presence of other breathing bodies. Why should teaching be any different?

Teaching is not a commercial transaction but an innately human act. Unlike most animals we are born prematurely, with our brains and nervous systems still developing. It takes years for us to master even simple motor functions. So we rely on our elders to teach us what to do and how to live. This turns us into needy, imitative creatures, easily bruised by a mere glance from another person, or raised aloft by the barest nod of approval. Teaching depends on gesture, body language, eye contact, vocal tone - those barely noticeable things that make every conversation different. A good university class hinges on what Elizabethans called "lively turning" - surprising links, embellishments and leaps of thought, made in the moment. Talking to your laptop camera while recording a lecture isn't the same, any more than reading lines is the same as live theatre.

University planners have begun to talk about the "sticky campus": one with lots of social spaces so that students stick around before and after class. Talk about reinventing the wheel. Some of us remember the sticky campus as "the campus". The plateglass universities that opened in the 1960s, such as York, Sussex and Lancaster, had very sticky campuses, partly by accident. They needed sites of at least 200 acres, and land prices in city centres were too high. So they were built on green fields out of town. The redbrick university student had often lived at home or in lodgings scattered around the city. But when my parents arrived at Lancaster in 1964 as part of its first cohort, they encountered a revival of the medieval ideal of the university as a self-sufficient society of scholars. After bed and breakfast in their digs, they were expected to spend their waking hours on campus.

Today's students, many of whom live at home and subsidize their studies with paid work, do not have this luxury. But because their lives are more fragmented, it matters even more that the university offers them a sense of belonging and community. Online teaching is often sold as a way to give students flexibility and accessibility, with everything a click away. But it also throws them back on their own unequally allotted resources. One thing lockdown has revealed is how many students have no access to a computer or a quiet place to work at home. Anyone who teaches young people will also have spotted the symptoms of an

epidemic of anxiety and depression. A common characteristic of a distressed student is that they live inside their own head - a whirring, wired mind that has become estranged from the shell of a body that they lug around. Routines and timetables help: getting enough sleep, eating regularly and well, and forming part of that ad hoc student community carved out of class time, corridor chats and coffee breaks. Students may be surgically attached to their phones, but that does not mean they should live their whole lives online, or want to.

University managers tend to be techno-optimists, attaching an incantatory magic to the word digital. The timetabled routines of a university can feel, by contrast, boringly old-school. And yet showing up at the same time every week is a vital life skill. It allows you to ride out the tedium, fatigue and loss of heart that comes with any attempt to learn something difficult over time. The scaffolding of habit shores up the patient, incremental effort that real learning requires. A timetable is also a peg on which we hang our loyalty and commitment to others. In a lecture at Oxford in 2001, Margaret Drabble told a heartbreaking story about the novelist Angus Wilson, a professor of English at the University of East Anglia. Long retired, in poor health and living in the South of France, he would sometimes rise from his bed at night with a start and hurriedly collect a pile of papers, saying he had to “go to give a lecture”. His partner Tony Garrett would eventually convince him that there was no lecture to be given, and persuade him to go back to sleep.

I worry that this may soon be me. Will I ever lecture to a packed room again? I fear that the pandemic will accelerate an underlying trend: the reinvention of the university as a virtual, atomized, hollowed-out space. The government’s restructuring regime says that adjusting to a post-Covid world may mean “maximising the potential for digital and online learning that the crisis has revealed to increase accessibility”. Online teaching needs fewer staff, cuts overheads and has vast economies of scale - at least if it is done on the cheap. The digital university, necessitated by a public health emergency, may come to seem like an improvement on its labour-intensive predecessor.

What would be lost are those unquantifiable aspects of a university education that can’t be reduced to packageable, downloadable content. Students are not merely human capital but creative, cussed, non-algorithmic, irreducibly unique human beings. They need time and space to develop their particular gifts in ways that feel true to them and useful to others. The ancient Greeks called this educational ideal *eudaimonia*, or “human flourishing”. As a justification for the university, it is a line of defence that fell several trenches back, being hard to audit or compute and easily caricatured as woolly-minded. But most university teachers still subscribe to it in some *samizdat* form. They believe that, without recognition of the value of the university as a series of organic and serendipitous encounters, the narrow pursuit of market efficiency is likely to prove both joyless and self-defeating. They think of the university as a place, and they hope that, when all this is over, it will be one again.

Joe Moran is professor of English and Cultural History at Liverpool John Moores University. His most recent book is If You Should Fail: A book of solace, 2020

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