



Multimodality and the Affordances of Co-Presence for Inclusion in Higher Education

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RESEARCH



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ABSTRACT

This discussion paper reflects on the affordances of face-to-face interaction and co-presence in the light of increasingly digitized learning spaces in higher education. Especially in inequitable contexts, heightened dependence on digital platforms for teaching and learning can exacerbate inequalities in terms of student access and inclusion. This ‘digital divide’ (Van Dijk 2020) manifests in several ways, such as unequal access to laptops, lack of Wi-Fi, the high cost of data, and even basic issues such as quiet spaces to work. It is in this context that this paper considers the affordances of physical face-to-face environments in higher education. It looks at a range of higher education spaces and focuses on the way in which co-presence manifests in types of engagement and modes of representation. It begins by considering the affordances of the large-scale lecture. It then focuses on the way in which co-presence manifests in various types of engagement and modes of representation in various smaller-scale contexts (including design studios, service-learning courses and informal writing groups). It ends by reflecting on the function and importance of humour and laughter in face-to-face pedagogies, as well as the value of silence in co-presence. The aim here is clearly not to compare or to promote face-to-face pedagogies over online interactions, but rather to reflect on the importance of contextual factors as well as the gains and losses of different modes of engagement for teaching and learning. Through this discussion, the paper contends that opening up the semiotic space of face-to-face interaction through multimodal designs for learning can work towards inclusion and can address issues of diversity in interesting ways.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper argues that using multimodal designs for learning to explore the semiotic space of face-to-face interaction is useful for addressing issues of access and inclusion in diverse higher education contexts. Whilst the aim of the paper is not to compare face-to-face with the digital, it is important to consider co-presence in the context of increasing digital pedagogies. Gourlay argues that because digital technologies promote recording and monitoring, ‘unrecorded ephemeral experiences such as conversation may be overlooked; or in a more extreme outcome, opportunities for spoken face-to-face conversation may be lost altogether in a logic of efficiency which privileges technologies such as video conferencing over real-life meetings’ (2024: 4). By focusing on the affordances of co-presence for student inclusion, this discussion paper critically questions the notion of a ‘post-pandemic digital utopia’ (Gourlay, 2024: 4) and hopes to stimulate some thought and debate on these issues.

I locate the discussion in the context of South Africa, the place in which I work and teach. South Africa is multilingual and culturally diverse but is also one of the most unequal countries in the world. Thirty years after apartheid, differential access to education remains, resulting in low performance in global literacy and numeracy assessments, disappointing matriculation results and high university drop-out rates. Although the medium of instruction in higher education is predominantly English, this is not the first language of many of the students. In this context, it is important to focus on access and inclusion for diverse students. ‘Epistemological access’ (Morrow, 2009: 36) is about gaining entry to specific types of knowledge and meaning-making that are valued in academia. However, the 2015–2016 student protests in South Africa calling for the decolonization of universities highlighted that *physical* access to higher education institutions is important to consider alongside epistemological access. Students campaigned for the removal of controversial monuments and statues, and for buildings to be renamed. The protests highlighted the feelings of alienation experienced by first-generation students within historically white universities. From a decolonization perspective, Mbembe (2016) argues that increased economic access to higher education institutions is not enough, as it is also important for students to feel that they *belong* at these institutions. Amongst other factors, he points to the physical, including the iconography and buildings on campuses which often reflect apartheid era structures or colonial architecture. ‘When we say access, we are also saying the possibility to inhabit a space to the extent that one can say, “This is my home. I am not a foreigner. I belong here”’ (Mbembe, 2016: 30). I would argue that both physical and epistemological access could be partly hindered by increased dependence on

digital platforms for teaching and learning. The material aspect of the ‘digital divide’ (Van Dijk, 2020) manifests in several ways, such as disparities in the availability of laptops, the lack of Wi-Fi, high costs of data and even basic issues such as quiet spaces to work. In South Africa, additional challenges impacting online teaching include frequent electricity outages. These have recently amounted to up to 12 hours a day of power cuts. Even if the institution is able to generate electricity (through solar power or diesel generators), the students do not often have similar access in their environments. This very practical consideration hinders the ability to work and teach online in significant ways.

The increased dependence on digital platforms during the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated these practical aspects. In South African higher education institutions online teaching was mostly done in an asynchronous manner during this time because of the data costs, limited access to Wi-Fi and rolling electricity blackouts. Platforms that rely heavily on visual interaction, such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams, were not always feasible, and audio-oriented or text-based platforms like WhatsApp were more often used. In devising ways of navigating challenges related to access at my university, we utilized low-tech teaching materials whilst maintaining personal interactions through zero-rated chat rooms. The university supplied students with basic laptops, and students and staff were each given a limited data budget. We also offered students options by diversifying the formats of the learning materials. For instance, we provided audio recordings, transcriptions and captions alongside the videos, which allowed students with different data allowances to access the content through a variety of means (cf. Archer, 2022). The transition to exclusively online teaching resulted in some pedagogical losses due to the above-mentioned access issues. There were losses in interactivity and the personal connection of face-to-face interactions suffered, especially because of the asynchronous nature of many of the engagements. Some of these aspects are clearly specific to context (such as South Africa), but in digital environments in general, fewer communicative modes are available and there is limited access to ‘the pre-reflective, tacit understandings of another’s bodily being, voice and gesture, smell and presence’ (Van Manen and Adams in Gourlay, 2024: 5). The paper thus explores some of the affordances of co-presence and face-to-face pedagogies for inclusion whilst recognizing that these affordances are quite context-specific.

In looking at the value of co-presence for student access and inclusion into higher education practices, the paper begins by considering the affordances of the large-scale lecture. It then focuses on the way in which co-presence manifests in various types of engagement and modes of representation in smaller-scale and vastly different higher education spaces (including

design studios, service-learning courses and informal writing groups). It ends by reflecting on the function and importance of humour and laughter in face-to-face pedagogies, as well as the value of silence in co-presence. The aim here is clearly not to compare or to promote face-to-face pedagogies over online interactions, but rather to reflect on the importance of contextual factors as well as the gains and losses of different modes of engagement for teaching and learning.

LARGE-SCALE LECTURES AND DIALOGIC CO-PRESENCE

Large-scale lectures have often been criticized as a product of mass education and as potentially fostering a transmission style of pedagogy (Jones, 2007). However, it is worth thinking about the gains and losses of this pedagogical space, and what lectures can potentially enable in terms of inclusion for students. This is particularly relevant in postcolonial contexts such as South Africa, where financial limitations exist and lectures do still remain a dominant form of pedagogy. When thinking about the affordances of face-to-face lectures, it is clear that they are not just about the provision of factual information. Other resources like handouts, textbooks or PowerPoint presentations may be more effective if providing information is the main aim, because they remain accessible and can be reviewed by students repeatedly, over a period of time. However, the face-to-face lecture does appear to offer some additional benefits beyond the importing of information. Some of these benefits include the generation of enthusiasm amongst students for their subject, different kinds of participation, the opportunity for shared laughter, and the 'inspirational value of the live performance' (Nesi, 2012: 80).

In terms of access and inclusion, Thesen (2007), working in South Africa, introduces fresh perspectives on lectures that emphasize embodiment, performance, the multifaceted nature of meaning-making. This is a view of lectures as dialogic co-presence. She contends that lectures encapsulate the tension between 'the strong coding of authority, single expertise and routine transmission on the one hand, and performance that introduces meanings related to physical presence and students-as-audience on the other hand' (Thesen, 2007: 35). Even without directly asking for student input, a lecture can still elicit dialogic engagement. Although silent, a student audience can indicate engagement through non-verbal means such as nodding, smiling or taking notes. Conventionally, the lecturer has been perceived as an authoritative figure presenting coherent knowledge. However, Thesen (2007) argues that this expectation can be challenged or shifted by the participants in the lecture, leading to liminal moments

where the lecturer's authority may be questioned or undermined. In addition, she contends that for students from diverse backgrounds, there is significance in the opportunity to simply observe and absorb information as one does in a lecture. This is different to being required to actively communicate in spoken or written language, where aspects such as accent, language proficiency, handwriting or familiarity with digital technologies, may mark students as different. As teaching, learning and assessment are more and more conceived within online environments, 'resulting in the increased 'textualisation' of academic work, there may be an increasing need (and desire) for this performative face-to-face aspect to be kept alive' (Thesen, 2007: 49).

Lecturers can incorporate a range of modes and media for communication. For instance, Goffman (1981) delineates three types of talk that happen within a lecture: 'fresh talk', 'memorisation' and 'aloud reading'. 'Fresh talk' is the kind of lecturer talk that creates the impression of spontaneity rather than rehearsed or pre-prepared information. Along the same lines, Morell (2004) differentiates between lectures characterized by a 'conversational style' and those featuring a 'reading style', based on the level of student engagement and their degree of formality. In a 'conversational style', lecturers mostly keep eye-contact with their audience and rarely read directly from a pre-written piece. Lecturers typically follow a structured plan and prepare in advance what they will address and even possess a "repertoire of laughter provoking moves" (Nesi, 2012: 80) to deploy at appropriate moments during the lecture. In addition, lecturer gesturing and pointing increase learner's engagement and attention (Roth and Bowen 1998), also creating a feeling of spontaneity. Alongside talk, the lecture 'performance' (in the lecture 'theatre') is mediated by new technologies which can take a myriad of forms and can include live streaming of twitter or relevant web pages to link the lecture to everyday life. The lecture 'transforms the artefact of the text into an event – an event in which the text is brought into a conversational relationship with the audience and with the present' (Friesen, in Lacković and Popova, 2021: 535). A range of modes and media of communication thus offer different possibilities for meaning-making in the large-scale lecture, and these include non-verbal and material modes such as artefacts, gesture, posture and new multimedia.

In keeping with this performative aspect, face-to-face lectures can incorporate laughter in interesting ways. In large-scale lectures, lecturers use laughter for different purposes: to maintain control over students, demonstrate acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, and foster a sense of belonging within an academic community. Laughter often arises from shared understandings of student and lecturer behaviour or shared 'scripts' and efforts to cultivate a sense of group identity. For instance,

lecturer-student teasing is one kind of humour employed in lectures. Lecturers tend to tease their students about certain behaviours such as talking or falling asleep in class. As such, laughter can be used as a kind of social control (Baynham, 1996). Lecturer self-deprecation can also be used to prompt laughter. It follows the script of university life where ‘self-deprecation serves to signal modesty and approachability’ (Nesi, 2012: 86). There may be potential to incorporate laughter scripts such as these into recorded lectures for online platforms, but this would require a measure of sensitivity from the lecturer. According to Nesi (2012), laughter episodes are typically absent in mock lectures performed by actors, and different forms of laughter (like teasing), are often not found in recorded materials. This kind of laughter around shared ‘scripts’ would seem to be an affordance of co-presence in a lecture theatre, and the resultant sense of group identity that this kind of laughter can engender.

The discussion around lectures here has emphasized that there is a special quality of experience in the collective presence, especially where the lecturer discourse is interactive and dialogic. The next section will explore how co-presence and materiality are expressed through various representational modes and types of engagement in other face-to-face environments that operate on a more intimate scale than lectures, such as tutorials, small groups and workshops. In looking at these different environments, it becomes clear how strong the link is between the creation of an academic identity and a particular physical learning space.

THE VALUE OF CO-PRESENCE IN SMALL-SCALE CONTEXTS

I will briefly consider co-presence for student access in three different higher education environments that I have been involved in. The first is an example of the affordances of the face-to-face in formative assessment and is in arts and design pedagogy. Design studios are a feature of design education where students learn to work in various modes, including two-dimensional drawings and three-dimensional models, and engage with the conventions of design practices (Brandt et al. 2013). Assignments in studio courses are designed to reflect the types of projects as well as contexts in which design professionals work. A significant aspect of the studio culture is the ‘crit’. This is an informal discussion between the student and their peers, or lecturers about the student’s work, aimed at helping the student refine their design (Belluigi, 2016). Through the crit, students get introduced to the conventions and values of design practice. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to discuss a three-dimensional designed object in an online environment. The value of this pedagogy is the co-presence of students, tutors and artefacts, the

interactions between all three of these participants, and the sense of ‘making’ as a process. Here in-person interaction ‘involves embodied human subjects, co-presence, happenstance, serendipity, unpredictability, materiality, and all the physical and particular aspects of being in a room with people, sharing air, light’ (Gourlay, 2022: 8). Opening up the semiotic space of face-to-face interaction for formative assessment practices, is one way of engaging with student diversity, inequalities and access.

Another interesting example of face-to-face pedagogy and co-presence in assessment is a project in a fourth-year pharmacology course which blurs the lines between disciplinary and professional domains at a South African university (cf Weiss and Archer, 2020). In the project, students interview a patient in a clinical setting and create health promotion materials tailored specifically for that patient. The patient then gives the student feedback on the produced text. Afterwards, the students write a reflection on the process, covering aspects such as their design choices, selection of content, as well as ethical considerations. Producing health promotion materials such as these require students to utilize a range of resources. These include resources from clinical environments that offer academic knowledge about diseases, as well as professional environments that define the expectations and roles of a doctor. The goal is to empower medical students to learn how to customize clinical information for individual patients that come from different educational, linguistic, economic, and socio-cultural backgrounds. This project stresses the making of meaning through face-to-face interaction between students and patients. Many ‘service learning’ courses are based on this premise – learning through meeting, interacting and immersing oneself within a community, rather than through textbooks and lectures.

A final example which illustrates the value of co-presence, is the formal and informal organization of writer’s groups. Postgraduate students and researchers often complain about isolation stemming from the solitary nature of research projects and the absence of a cohesive community. Our institution, along with others globally, has started what is called ‘shut-up and write’ sessions or writer’s circles to give postgraduate researchers a space to work together and share their experiences of writing and academic life, to foster both a social community and a ‘community of practice’ (Lave and Wenger, 1993). These sessions follow a simple structure, such as starting with introductions, some kind of small writing task and setting goals for the session. This is followed by timed periods of focused work interspersed by short and timed breaks. The breaks are characterized by drinking coffee, having a snack and a chat, before commencing with the work again. Sharing goals and planned session outcomes with the group at the beginning of the session helps students to commit

to finishing their work within the given timeframe. The participants celebrate each other's successes and offer support and encouragement when things do not go as planned. These writing groups work because the individual makes a private commitment to writing at this time, acts on that commitment by turning up, and uses the mutual support of others to help them stay the distance. The successes and inspirations of this space are largely due to the co-presence of the participants – the laughter, the sighs, the page-turning, the informal chats, and drinking coffee together. (See [Thesen, 2024](#) for a more in-depth look at a particular writer's circle).

Thesen (2024) comments on the laughter emanating from these spaces. This is a key aspect to consider when people share a physical space, but also, interestingly, the opportunities for silence. It is to these two aspects that I now turn.

HUMOUR AND LAUGHTER IN FACE-TO-FACE PEDAGOGIES

Face-to-face engagements allow certain types of humour to emerge, that is not always possible in online settings. Everyday conversations are marked by spontaneous instances of verbal play and playful exchanges. This differs from jokes as jokes are often 'a ready-made unit, learned and repeated by a speaker to amuse an audience' (Coates, 2007: 30). Jokes can be understood independently of the context in which they are delivered, and as such are likely to be the dominant kind of humour used in an online presentation or workshop. Humour, however, is a much broader category than joking. Coates (2007) argues that humour in conversation involves setting up a 'play frame' where speakers collaborate in the construction of talk. She highlights five characteristics of talk in a play frame, namely simultaneous speaking, the collaborative construction of utterances, repetition, metaphor and laughter. Collaboratively constructed utterances typically involve people speaking at the same time, repeating parts of a previous conversation, and laughter often overlaps with ongoing speech. Collaboratively constructed talk assumes that the conversational floor is open to all participants at the same time. This differs from situations where only one speaker occupies the floor, which is often the case in online platforms. Overlapping speech occurs when participants jointly have control over the conversational floor. It adds multiple layers to talk, allowing speakers to show how they share a perspective on the topic and to display 'how finely tuned they are to each other' (Coates, 2007: 39). Speakers can construct utterances collaboratively: 'speaking as if with a single voice' (Coates, 2007: 41). When a play frame is established, 'locally emergent expressions' (Tannen, 1990: 45) emerge that then become infused with humorous meaning. This fluidity of language and

play is an affordance of face-to-face interactions where talking at once, overlapping conversations, echoing emergent sayings, employing a humorous tone of voice and diverse facial expressions are able to play out.

Verbal play and humour often result in laughter, and it is clear that laughter can play an important role in face-to-face pedagogies. Laughter is both audible and visual and combines different modes: vocal, facial expression, and movement of the body, such as 'the shaking of the torso' (Haakana, 2010: 1499). As such laughter encompasses both body language (like facial expression) and paralanguage (for instance, loudness) which suggests a large meaning potential for laughter as mode. It can be articulated as voiced or unvoiced (Knight, 2011). These have a distinctive sound and impact on attitudinal meanings – with voiced laughter often related to positive emotions and unvoiced perceived as related to negative emotions. These embodied aspects of laughter as communication are more easily discernible and interpretable in face-to-face settings than in online engagements.

Laughter can take on different forms and functions in face-to-face spaces. For instance, solitary listener laughter which indicates ongoing solidarity with the speaker or joint laughter as a 'signifier of actual solidarity that may also be used to mark status depending on which party typically initiates the joint laughter' (McLachlan, 2022: 29). These types of laughter take on a different form in face-to-face or synchronous online settings, but are not possible in an asynchronous remote teaching environment. The affordances of humour to create and solidify *intimacy* may be lost in an online environment, whereas the function of laughter to establish *solidarity and status* is more likely to remain. In one of our weekly Zoom meetings during lockdown, it struck me that much of the humour and the laughter was happening behind the screen on private messages between participants. For instance, participants counted the number of times certain stock phrases occurred in the meeting (scoring these on private WhatsApp chats).

In general, humour and laughter can 'enhance students affective learning, create an enjoyable classroom atmosphere, lessen students' anxiety, increase affect and liking for the instructor and the course, and facilitate students' willingness to participate in in class and out-of-class communication with instructors' (Zhang, in Nesi, 2012: 81). It is clear that humour and shared laughter are a 'manifestation of intimacy, with the voice of the group taking precedence over the voice of the individual speaker' (Coates, 2007: 31). This way of creating intimacy is an affordance of face-to-face interactions where speaking at once, overlapping with others, repeating emergent sayings, facial expressions, tone of voice and the varying timbres of laughter are present in a way that these aspects are not able to be performed in online spaces.

ALLOWING SILENCE IN CO-PRESENCE

The final aspect I will consider when thinking about co-presence is the unique forms that silence can take in face-to-face pedagogical engagements and how some of these speak to student inclusion in interesting ways. Silence does not necessarily indicate passivity, lack of action or absence. Because of its intangibility, silence can be quite a ‘flexible mechanism for different types of content (memories, feelings, beliefs, etc.)’ (Adler and Kohn, 2021: 3) and can serve various linguistic functions in conversation. It can carry an ‘exclamative, interrogative or declarative force’, as noted by Jaworski (1993), and can indicate consensus, disagreement or annoyance. It could also indicate that someone is nervous to speak. In a pedagogical context, it is important to listen to and understand silence, to notice students’ breaks, hesitations and pauses. Silence and pauses occur for various reasons when we speak. Pausing is essential for breathing, but pauses also serve functions in communication such as facilitating turn-taking in conversation. It is worth noting that additional language speakers tend to generate ‘more pauses of longer duration and in mid-clause position’ (Kosmala, 2019: 1), a pattern which can be attributed to limited language proficiency. Creating the pedagogical space to allow pauses and longer silences could enable learners the space to grapple with ideas, as well as to produce utterances in their additional language (which is often academic English).

Listening is crucial to inclusive teaching. When asked challenging questions, students may need time to formulate responses and process their thoughts. In face-to-face interactions, people generally tolerate longer periods of silence and allowing this silence can work towards student inclusion, creating the safe space needed to think through and articulate ideas without pressure to produce language. On the contrary, silence in online environments can often have negative indications. In online workshops, silence may be perceived as disinterest or detachment and it can be challenging trying to understand what it means. Often when confronted by silence, the presenter compensates for the lack of response by providing more information or answering their own questions. This can result in a transmission pedagogy. Silence can manifest both visually and verbally, such as when a person’s mic is on mute and their camera is kept off throughout an interaction. Kosmala (2019) suggests that speakers of additional languages tend to employ more gestures during moments of silence compared to mother tongue speakers. This can be problematic if cameras are not turned on during these interactions. Kosmala (2019: 13) has categorized five types of gestures that can be observed during pauses and silences. These include gestures that complement the spoken content; gestures that indicate specific

things in time and space; gestures used for emphasis; gestures that indicate thought processes and occur during breakdowns in communication; and gestures that help to facilitate communication. However, in online interactions, some if not all of these subtleties of silence may be diminished or overlooked. Although we may not be adept at interpreting gestures in such a nuanced way as meaning-making entities, educators do in fact develop an ability to ‘read’ their students through their gestures, pauses and silences. In this regard, face-to-face interaction is invaluable, as it provides a rich context for understanding non-verbal cues and nuances in communication.

CONCLUSION

This paper has shown how the rise in dependence on digital tools can exacerbate disparities in our society and potentially intensify data injustices (Heeks and Renken, 2018). It has interrogated some of the affordances of face-to-face pedagogies for inclusion, briefly looking at examples from different contexts, including lectures, design studio crits, patient interviews, and writer’s circles. Co-presence allows for diverse forms of student engagement in these different spaces. I am clearly not advocating face-to-face pedagogies over online or remote pedagogies. Rather, the attempt is to reflect on some of the possible affordances of co-presence for student inclusion and access. I have argued that higher education needs to continue to engage with diverse forms of knowledge production as learners interact with different modes, media and technologies in distinct ways. Aspects such as talk, laughter, gesture, pauses all have varying affordances in different pedagogical spaces and these aspects play out differently in face-to-face and online pedagogical settings. Both types of engagements can serve to create communities and combat isolation, but they create communities in different ways. The creation of communities is important in higher education institutions where certain students may feel alienated or ‘not at home’. These feelings of belonging are vital for success in higher education, particularly in contexts like South Africa with such diversity and historical inequality.

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