

Exercises in Communicating with a Black Hole

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Abstract:

Until several weeks ago, electronic distance teaching (including, not to forget, computer-mediated exams) mostly concerned students who self-selected for this mode. But suddenly, every student is – willingly or not – confronted with going 100% digital. This poses a huge challenge even to tech-savvy teachers. I report on what I have learned so far.

Participant's Summary

We are experiencing right now a very hard and sudden transition from 'analog' to 'digital'. Most German students (80+%) are not familiar with, for instance, MOOCs. We are now observing a natural experiment where students who did not choose this kind of teaching and learning are forced to experience it.

I want to discuss three topics that caught my eye:

- Anonymity

I asked my students to switch off their webcams and to use pseudonyms. This creates a "black wall" to talk to as a teacher. Anonymity may, however, have some benefits. For instance, it may reduce "math anxiety". However: Could students succumb to more media multitasking? Could anonymity lead to bullying (which happens in the comments to my public YouTube videos)? But so far I have not seen bullying in my distance classes.

- Interactivity

I created a [graphical audience response system](#) for interactivity in a f2f classroom (students can draw, the lecturer sees all their individual drawings). I [enhanced](#) it to work well for online classes, too. I see a 50% participation rate, which is larger than in my small f2f classes (it works far better in other lecturers' large f2f classes; I walk around rather than using fancy electronics in my f2f classes).

- Morale

I have been using flipped teaching for almost a decade now. As everywhere else, the primary issue is how to incentivize students to study the material before class. Interestingly, I've learned that some students are so bored during the Covid-19 lockdown that they rather watch my videos.

(Q&A removed as the answers are now in the summary above.)