

Transpersonal Teaching in the Face of Adversity: How can a Teacher's Inner Process Work or Innate Qualities Support Creativity for a Transformative Online Experience During COVID-19?

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The aim of this study was to explore how a teacher's inner process work or innate qualities can support creativity for a transformative online learning experience during an adverse situation, such as COVID-19, a global pandemic which emerged at the end of 2019. Many teachers were forced to quickly pivot to online teaching, prompting me to engage in heuristic inquiry (Moustakas, 1990), a qualitative research method, to explore the subjective living experiences of these teachers, including my own. Taking all ethical aspects into consideration, I carried out semi-structured interviews with eight teacher "co-researchers". Analysis of interviews uncovered themes which were illustrated through individual depictions and a composite depiction. The discussion looked at findings in the data in relation to relevant literature and through a transpersonal lens. The data suggested that it is the quality of the teacher-student relationship, emanating from teacher presence, which could potentially overcome the challenges of pivoting to online teaching and create transformative learning. Finally, the limitations of the study were explored and areas for future research identified.

Keywords: teachers, transpersonal, heuristic, online teaching, COVID-19

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I had an intuition that there was a *transpersonal* aspect to teaching when I first stepped into a classroom more than thirty years ago. Braud (2006), in his article on transpersonal holistic education, describes “the transpersonal” (p. 135) as ways in which individuals, organisations and disciplines are able to honour their more spiritual aspects and become more expansive and inclusive in terms of transformation, development, and personal identity. While having no cognitive or contextual explanation for transpersonal experiences in those early days of teaching, I was aware of feeling unusually expansive, joyful, invigorated and deeply connected with my students.

Over time I came to know the work of Parker Palmer, and became particularly interested in how often a teacher’s *innate* qualities or inner processes, which in terms of this study relate to the practice of facilitating one’s subjective awareness (Mindell, 2000), could become more of a catalyst for creativity in the classroom than their methods, techniques or learning strategies (Palmer, 2017). Our own school, Asana International School (asanairland.com), grounded in the humanistic principles of Erikson, Roger and Maslow (Khatib et al., 2013), holds relationship with *Self, Other and Place* as its three pillars of learning (Figure 1). Teachers relate to themselves and their students in a way that often leads to what Mezirow (2000) describes as a shift in an individual’s perspective or attitude which enables them to go beyond conceptual learning and to make meaning of their lives.

Figure 1

The Three Pillars of Learning at Asana International School



Note: Adapted from Brooks et al. (2006)

Like many other teachers, I was deeply affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The prolonged closure of schools and the sudden move from physical classroom to online learning plunged teachers like me into unfamiliar territory without any prior preparation. My study aimed to explore how a teacher’s self-awareness and presence could bring about creativity for transformative online learning. While educational organisations such

as Alef Trust (alefrust.org) had shown that online learning can be very transformative (Suissa, 2018), my research looked specifically at teachers who had not been teaching online prior to the outbreak of the pandemic. My subsequent literature review led to my research question: “How can a teacher’s inner process work or innate qualities support creativity for a transformative online experience during COVID-19?” This had the following four distinct parts.

Inner process work and innate qualities of teachers

Before looking at the impact of online teaching, I was interested in gaining an understanding of a teacher’s innate qualities and inner process work which Palmer (2017) refers to as one’s “inner landscape” (p. 3), key elements of which are *identity* and *integrity*. Teacher qualities and processes include an ability to notice what is happening within oneself while teaching, having a capacity for connectedness beyond techniques, and the courage to be authentic. I was curious about Palmer’s assertion that “we teach who we are” (p. 2) rather than a subject, a syllabus or curriculum, and the benefits, he claims, of teaching from the “undivided self”, an integrated state of being.

Creativity emerging from these qualities/processes

There seems to be some debate as to what creativity is, especially as in a lay sense it is often used only in reference to artistic processes (McIntyre & McIntyre, 2007). Palmer (2017) asserts that teaching and learning create a heightened sense of awareness, mentioning a link between heightened awareness and creative tension which he also calls paradoxical tensions. Pope (2005) also recognizes paradox at the heart of creativity and notices “how order can emerge from chaos and then dissipate back into disorder” (p. 5). Csikszentmihalyi (1996) says that all creative people have one thing in common and that there is enjoyment in what they do, highlighting the link between intrinsic motivation and creativity. The question arose of whether creativity emerges in a learning context where teachers can drop the identification with the *role* of teacher and focus more on *being* than *doing*.

Creativity promoting transformative learning

Mezirow (2000) equates transformative learning with learners who can critically evaluate and reflect on past ideas and understanding, while obtaining new information, expanding both personal meaning making and their worldview. Rosebrough and Levertt (2011) describe transformational teaching as “an act of teaching designed to change the learner academically, socially, and spiritually” (p. 16). Of interest to my research study was whether, as Hart (2000) posits, the process of human transformation is activated by the force of creativity or creation and by an expansion of awareness.

Pivoting to online learning because of COVID-19

Teachers’ initial concerns about pivoting online were rooted in their lack of preparation and technical prowess, especially as during the early days of the first lockdown it was more about Emergency Remote Teaching than online teaching (Marshall et al., 2020).

Schleicher (2020) tells us that most teachers, prior to the arrival of COVID-19, had not been trained in the necessary technical and pedagogical skills to engage in online learning. Interestingly, Stafford (2020) observed that teachers learnt how to be more empathetic towards their students because of their own challenges in navigating digital platforms at the beginning of the crisis.

However, technological factors were not the only challenges for teachers: Teachers' own attitudes and fears about a diminishment in affective learning were considerable (Daumiller et al., 2021). Compounding this fear, a study by Castelli and Sarvary (2020) showed that most students had their webcams turned off during synchronous classes on Zoom for several reasons, with 41% stating that they were worried about their appearance.

Furthermore, teachers may have experienced Arnold Van Gennep's (2019) *transition phase* of rite of passage, or Turner's (2017) state of *liminality* in that they found themselves in an uncertain, unclear, transitory state. However, prior to COVID-19, a few scholars, artists, and designers had already explored the creative, liminal, and transformative potential of online learning environments, such as Ayiter (2012) in her work on Second Life, and Moore (2018) in her formulations of online "learning fields" (p. 132) and online rituals as "networked rites" (Moore, 2015). What was missing in the literature was whether an awareness-based classroom teacher could suddenly transition to a telematic mode of teaching and if this could create opportunities for transformative learning. My study set out to answer this question.

Method

I chose to engage with heuristic inquiry, a qualitative research method designed by Moustakas (1990), which allows the researcher to bracket themselves into the research and to tap into the revelatory nature of tacit knowing. This involves engaging in self-dialogue "to use *feeling* to enter the tacit dimension" (Sela-Smith, 2002, p. 63). As my research topic was extremely close to my heart, and one in which I had been fully immersed, both experientially and intuitively most of my working life, this research method had huge resonance for me. Another key factor in my choice of method was that heuristic inquiry sees participants as 'co-researchers', which provides a great opportunity for what Sultan (2019) describes as "communion" (p. 3) between what is already known and that which can be learnt from others who have shared the same experience.

The stages and processes which I underwent as part of heuristic inquiry (Moustakas, 1990), are as follows:

- *Initial engagement* with a question that was very meaningful to me as researcher.
- *Immersion* in my question leading to a definition and clarification of its terms.
- An *incubation* period allowing time and space to develop in my subconscious mind.
- *Illumination* happening when concealed inner knowing and intuition became revealed to my conscious mind.
- *Explication* was consciously examining what had awakened in the tacit dimension

and the various layers of meaning that were disclosed in the form of individual and composite depictions as well as a creative synthesis.

- *Creative synthesis* allowed me to weave the main themes together in a way that produced a tool kit for other teachers.

Throughout the six phases of inquiry I used seven processes (Moustakas, 1990): tacit knowing, intuition, indwelling, focusing, internal frame of reference, identifying with the focus of inquiry, and self-dialogue.

As the aim of my study was to understand the subjective experiences of teachers (including my own), I recruited eight co-researchers (see Table 1) drawing from my own teaching colleagues, Alef Trust students (teachers in their professional lives), and from members of other educational networks I belong to. My criteria for inclusion in the research project were for teachers of any age (above 18), gender, nationality, and ethnicity who engage in inner process work or who self-identified as experiencing states of presence related to promoting creativity, and who had experienced transformative learning experiences, and who were forced to teach online in recent months because of COVID-19.

Table 1

Participant Information

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Country of residence	Education	Years teaching	Subject(s) taught and pre-Covid teaching context
Jamie	Male	34	U.K.	Drama studies	5	English, Math (private tutoring)
Minerva	Female	51	Spain	MEd	20	Teacher training for kindergarten teachers (Third level college)
Shanti	Female	50	Canada	MEd	30	Mindfulness in schools (Secondary schools)
Con	Male	70	Italy	BEd	40	Art (group retreats and classes)
Jack	Male	28	Italy	CELTA & Sound engineering	10	Music in a private college for teenagers
Gabriel	Male	57	U.S.	Film studies/ theatre	15	Acting (University)
Alice	Female	40	U.A.E.	Drama studies	5	Drama & English (Secondary school)
Linda	Female	56	Italy	TEFL	30	English language training (community adult courses in town hall)

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews which gave my co-researchers as much freedom as they needed to be able to reflect, explore, and express their inner subjective experiences while providing a way of ensuring that we stayed focused on the topic of research (Table 2). Co-researchers were also invited to share their individual creative expressions following our interviews.

Because our interviews took place during a pandemic, all of our one hour interviews were conducted online. This was particularly enriching for my co-researchers and I, as we had the opportunity to discuss our subjective experiences of having to teach online, while being obliged to conduct our interview online as well. In hindsight, the challenge of conducting the interviews online provided me with a direct experience of how my co-researchers and I were navigating the shift to relating with each other in an ‘alien’ environment. All ethical considerations pertaining to consent, confidentiality, and data protection and storage were fully respected and implemented.

Table 2

Key Areas for Interview

To be able to answer my research question I asked my co-researchers to:
A. Share their own innate qualities and /or inner processes and practices that support their teaching.
B. Describe the processes that impact on creativity in their teaching, if at all.
C. Share how creativity might lead to transformative learning experiences for their students.
D. Describe their experience of having to pivot to online teaching.

Data analysis

Each interview was recorded with the permission of my co-researchers and was listened to several times before transcription. Heuristic inquiry requires each co-researcher’s *individual depiction* to be created and brought to completion before moving on to the next person. Thematic analysis, (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was employed to analyse each individual co-researcher’s data. This involved a six step process: familiarising myself with the individual transcript, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and then writing up the depiction. Once I had finished the individual depictions, I then began to look for themes across depictions in order to be able to create a composite depiction. To supplement this process, I colour coded transcripts, created visual word clouds, sticky notes, drawings and engaged in a lot of self-dialogue while walking in nature. *Creative synthesis* was the final part of my research process which enabled me to integrate my findings in a way that was meaningful for my own personal and professional life. Weaving together all of my co-researchers’ experiences resulted in the delivery of an experimental online workshop and the creation of a tool kit for online teaching for teachers (Vickers, 2021).

Results

Article limitations allow me to present *one* abbreviated individual depiction and themes from the composite depiction.

Individual Depiction: Minerva

Minerva, a teacher and teacher trainer at a third level college in Spain, described herself as heart-centred. She practices meditation and engages in several other inner work processes such as art work, journaling and archetypal astrology (Figure 1A). She normally starts a class with an opening ritual, in the form of a meditation, which she has discovered leads to insights in herself and her students that can often lead to creative ideas for that day's lesson. For Minerva, transpersonal and transformative teaching is teaching that brings inner coherence to the lives of teacher and student (Figure 1B). As well as subject knowledge, she believes her students benefit from having social, emotional and transpersonal intelligence in order to enhance their well-being. Although Minerva felt that the online experience is not quite as transformative as the face to face classroom, especially because of some audio technical problems, she observed that she could still ask students to meditate and practice yoga from their own homes. "I like when I'm teaching from the place with my energy. It's my house and they are also at their houses and they look relaxed". She also observed the transformational capacity of online breakout rooms to enable working with students in a "more individual and confidential way".

Composite depiction

Six themes were identified representing the shared experience of the phenomenon among co-researchers.

Teacher presence

All of my co-researchers were aware of their own inner landscape and had a strong ability to be present with themselves and others. Alice's self-awareness stemmed from constant self-reflection in the form of journaling, while Shanti's was framed in mindfulness, and Con's in his ability to notice the inner workings of himself, others, and his online or face-to-face classroom environment. He says that change can happen when "you're fully awake and noticing what's going on with yourself, whatever the learning experience might be with the students... whether it's online, or off, in the classroom". Shanti, Minerva, and Linda spoke about embodiment and how they experienced dropping into the body, being present with heart and breath, and feeling awareness as "a warm flow...just going through you". Gabriel mentioned that the ego has a survival strategy of playing a role but that "the Self ...can show up as that individual authentic person". Con talked about how time alters for him and having the experience of going to "the zone" or that "special place."

The teacher-student relationship

At the heart of my findings was the quality of the teacher-student relationship. All of my co-researchers demonstrated a capacity for deep connection with their students which seemed to arise from their ability to be present. Jack and Gabriel's connection with their students

“intense” position of having to face his students via a camera instead of being able to sit *beside* them in a peer to peer fashion. Minerva felt that virtual platforms needed to upgrade their auditory features. Jack missed his ambience-setting resources and being able to bring students into his environment. He also felt that the limitation of having only visual and auditory modalities available online made it hard for him and the 25-30% of his students who were also kinaesthetic. Shanti and Gabriel reported body image/self-conscious issues for their students who “were disturbed and disorientated by seeing themselves on camera”. My co-researchers were also aware that social inequality could be an issue with students having to share bedrooms and limited resources with family members. Gabriel and Linda noticed that students were far more adept in the virtual world than older adults and were multitasking; doing other work in class which showed a lack of engagement and presence.

Creative and transformational potential of the online space

It appeared that the uncertainty caused by the COVID-19 pandemic forced all of my co-researchers into a liminal state which required them to surrender to the current situation. Gabriel captured it beautifully, when he said: “It felt like changing tyres while the car was still moving”. Shanti appreciated the opportunity offered by the pivot to online teaching to be both in her own physical space, which is imbued with her energy, while simultaneously getting a glimpse into other people’s worlds, which she called their “thirdness”. Con observed that by noticing and verbally acknowledging something in someone’s physical room— for example, a book on the shelf, it made the person feel noticed. He sensed that his students pick up on “Oh, you’re noticing *me*?” Shanti and Alice discovered the power of intention to make online teaching work, and Alice found that it was easier to transfer the teaching of drama online because her in-person drama classes had rituals. She noted “there is something about ritual that holds a space, and for me that makes me present in their minds in a way, because they respond to that ritual, remembering and being reminded of the drama room”. Alice’s online classes involved listening to the same piece of music for two minutes at the beginning of each lesson and inviting a closing reflection and a round of applause at the end of every class. In this way, her students were able to experience an “echo of the drama room”. Gabriel found that he was able to transfer his use of rhythm to the online space. He would start a rhythmic breathing exercise interspersed with the content of the lesson, “and we’re going to breathe in 123 out 123”. Gradually, the students began to trust the rhythm of their breath and allowed the content to be absorbed a little further.

Discussion

I embarked on my research journey feeling certain that presence-based teachers would not be able to transfer their creative and transformative approach to an online setting. Certainly, as my co-researchers moved online because of COVID-19 lockdowns, they were propelled into a new situation without any preparation. Like Petzold (2020) who found that professors converting their classes to distance learning often did not have the expertise required for online teaching and learning pedagogy, my co-researchers were intimidated by the lack of control over classroom layout and the reduction in learning experience for kinaesthetic students (Stamm et al., 2021).

Similar to Castelli's and Sarvary's (2021) findings, my participants stated that their students were not always fully present in the online space due to cameras being turned off because of body image issues, embarrassment about their living places being visible on screen, and a desire and/or ability to multitask while in class. There was also an awareness that digital poverty could be an issue for students affected by social inequality – not having access to mobile phones, laptops, or problems with internet connectivity (Arora & Srinivasan, 2020).

However, despite these obstacles, my co-researchers reported some surprising benefits of working online which completely transformed my own previous beliefs. Finding themselves in a place (their own home) that was imbued with their own energy and being able to see someone else's living space virtually, they spoke about being part of another's "thirdness", a concept arising in Peirce's semiotic theory which divides consciousness into three levels of "firstness", "secondness", and "thirdness". Peirce (1993) considered semiosis as a triadic process of the relationships among a sign or representamen (a first), an object (a second) and an interpretant (a third). My co-researchers revealed that teachers and students situated in their own homes and using their own digital devices, could create something completely new in the virtual space. Jung (1970) speaks about two positions generating "a tension charged with energy and creates a living third thing (...) that leads to a new level of being, a new situation" (p.90). This can be seen in my co-researcher, Gabriel's experience of what happened when he very creatively introduced rhythmic breathing into the online space as a solution for his students' inability to learn because of exam anxiety, and his own frustration at having to teach online.

The concept of the emerging "third" arising in my co-researchers' virtual classrooms, relates to Lefebvre's (1991) *Thirdspace*, "a fluid, flexible, multi-layered territory that bridges different communities of practice" (Tatham-Fashanu, 2023, p. 866). According to Soja (2009), "Thirdspace is a meeting point, a hybrid place, where one can move beyond the existing borders ..." (p. 56). According to Cole (1998) and Gutiérrez et al. (1999), creativity and transformation are characteristics of the Thirdspace.

Kosari and Amoori (2018) redefine the concept of Thirdspace as a blend of both the real and virtual spaces, creating a new mental space or field (Moore, 2018). My co-researcher Shanti talked about the online experience opening her up in a different way, removing at times the barriers that we have when we are "in- person" with someone. She felt that this "opening" could allow someone to engage and lean in, but at a distance, maybe referring to the liminal or in-between spaces that Bhaba (1994) mentions, which can create an opening for transformative interactions.

Alice's discovery that it was easier to transfer the teaching of drama online "because drama has rituals", brings to mind Maya Deren, the experimental filmmaker who reminds us that art and ritual share similar functions (Moore, 2018), "as they both conspire to cause an effect in others by triggering a process that at best generates new knowledge and transformation in perception or comprehension" (p. 124). Alice's initial challenge was to help her students see

that the person they saw on the screen was the same person that they had known in the drama room. She did this by setting an intention and playing the same piece of music that she would use in the physical classroom, inviting a closing applause and reflection, and shaking out her hands and feet, and even though they could not see her feet now, they began to recognize her and open to her again, Alice's observation that her students seemed to be seeing her as two different entities, is reminiscent of Moore's (2018) sense of *cyberperception* (Ascott, 2003) as she experiences as a performer "the dual state of being both self and cyberself, self and double, both embodied and disembodied" (Moore, 2018, p. 123).

Another interesting discovery was the transpersonal element which was experienced by my co-researchers. Con, like Csikszentmihalyi (1996), spoke of his time-altering experiences and going to "the zone". Linda and Jamie talked about heart connection and going beyond the role of teacher to abide in authenticity which enables them to teach who they truly are (Palmer, 2017). Linda spoke about energy, acceptance, and surrender in which she included the notion of "a dynamic flow between beings" so incredibly reminiscent once again of Buber's (1958) I-Thou relationship, which is one of communion and wholeness, rather than the more role-based student-teacher relationship.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

Apart from the obvious limitations of this study due to its brevity and small sample, it would also have been useful to consider what other aspects could contribute to a transformative teacher-student relationship. Student readiness, social and economic considerations, cultural mindsets, as well as strategies for supporting teachers to be more aware and present would benefit from further research. Future research could also incorporate existing studies of transformational teaching in virtual spaces (Ayiter, 2012) and further investigate insights from other studies regarding deep, non-hierarchical connections that can emerge among participants in an online space (Moore, 2015).

Conclusion

My findings suggested that a teacher's ability to be self-aware and present with their students may be instrumental in creating the kind of teacher-student relationship that transcends the egoic self, societal conditioning, and the limitations of mechanistic approaches to education. Findings indicated that this intersubjective, dyadic relationship can create a Thirdspace where something new can emerge, ensuring that the potential for creativity and transformation remains, even when classes go online. My study also showed that the virtual or online space itself, like the physical one, can possess an unexpected depth, richness, and aliveness.

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About the Author

Adi Vickers is a holistic educator who has worked in Italy, Ireland, Spain, Laos, and India. She co-founded Asana International School in 1993. She is a trained counsellor, NLP practitioner, hypnotherapist, and integral facilitator. In 2021 she created and delivered an online programme called “Integrative Practice for Heart-Centred teachers” as part of Alef Trust’s Conscious Community Project. Adi is currently involved in a project called a “Place for Us”, an integral educational programme for rurally marginalized children and teenagers in Ireland and India. This project is part of Alef Trust’s Conscious Community Initiative and Nurturing the Fields of Change programme. Adi is currently doing a PhD in applied transpersonal psychology with Alef Trust and Liverpool John Moores University. She is passionate about “transpersonalising” education.



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