

Affective digital presence: how to free online writing and drawing?

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Abstract

Online learning can be an alienating experience; students can feel their emotions are disregarded, marginalized or even viewed as hindrances as they try to motivate themselves to learn, staring at the dancing pixels of their illuminated screens. They feel at a remove from other students, trapped in other rooms, far away from them. The closeness of bodies in a shared physical space is raised as an absence. And yet, we contend in this article that connecting with affect in online learning spaces could build connectivity that counteracts the alienation of social distancing. Raw creative affective discourses can be challenging, and uncomfortable for others to take in but they are necessary online. We show that using non-digital practices such as drawing and writing freely, without inhibitions, can immeasurably enhance the online experience, giving a space for affect to be expressed in a safe but emancipatory learning architecture.

Section 1: Introduction

How can we create affective online spaces that enable free expression and inclusive engagement in learning? In our explorations of free-writing and drawing we have explored creative practice as it can enable criticality, enhance wellbeing and build self-representation. It helps form embodied breathing spaces for releasing responses to the liminality of our professional/domestic situations. Online learning spaces could be seen as liminal interfaces between our interior reflections and our external connections in the world. The liminal interfaces of online learning spaces could form more empathic relations between our interior reflections and our external connections in the world. Team building and a sense of belonging in the multiplying forums for online learning participation are aspects of this interior-exterior interface. Can freewriting and drawing facilitate such team building and feelings of belonging? It is this quest to generate authentic feelings of connection in the online sphere that has led the authors to ask their central research questions which are:

- How might we create 'safe breakout spaces' online that nurture affective and spontaneous creativity?
- What kind of online tools and processes could help this happen?

We argue that drawing and writing can be complementary forms of self-expression that enable layered affective responses and decision-making in how to voice and feedback for increased intersectional presence in online learning environments. This article discusses how our practice research in freewriting and drawing enters into questions of how agency works in collaboration, to encourage learning identities as ontologies that acknowledge the human geography of online interactions and our empathic ecologies in practice (Guattari et al. 2014). To explore these questions this article contains a reflective analysis of an online workshop and two examples of connected practice research by the authors. The article shows how arts practitioners and educators use their own solo practice to inform their collaborative pedagogies.

We begin with an analysis of an online workshop we delivered in November 2020, in which participants were set specific activities to explore the affective properties of free writing and drawing in online spaces. A full explanation of these

activities is given in sections 4 and 5. We will then relate the issues that emerged through this workshop to elements of our own practice research that works in the interstitial spaces of writing and drawing.

We are in online learning spaces that started in fear, anxiety, tragedy and necessity in 2020. Our affective relations to these spaces could not sit by the experiences that we observed all around us. There was an insistent urgency in the formation of new learning environments from March 2020, in the first lockdown. Many were caught in an inertia of inaction, trying to work from home and to home school their children. Many were in limbo of furlough or lost employment. Some were privileged to be able to develop projects, as some of their prior responsibilities were withdrawn. The wave of necessity urged us to make multiple connections with others in our fields of work, to try and sustain those lifelines and to see our students and colleagues through the pandemic, into adjusted creative patterns of connection.

The Covid 19 pandemic brought new attention to online spaces. Those who had access to the technology suddenly found that many of their social and work-related interactions were transplanted to new platforms of communication. In the case of the authors of this article, their in-person teaching, their work-related meetings and even socialising with colleagues went almost entirely online.

It has become increasingly apparent that new technologies are forming digitised extensions of self, avatars in online activity and cultural participation. Sometimes these digitised experiences are empowering: they can enable international access and the participation of those who have physical disabilities. Digital learning can accommodate immediacy of response building co-existent 'chat', simultaneous input of questions and ideas that can be addressed during a learning session, and acknowledging – albeit through simple emoticons, the need for participants to express an affective reaction to learning content.

There was a brief time in September and October 2020 when some lessons were delivered in-person, then in November 2020 everything went back online. At the time of writing, an end to the crisis is in sight with some return to meeting in-person. However, hybrid spaces of online and onsite learning are still needed: the vaccine has not reached everyone yet. One thing is certain: experiences of teaching online have changed the way we think about teaching and learning forever. Why is this? In part, educators in schools, universities, galleries and museums have become more adept at teaching via online media, and there are high expectations that

everyone will learn at a distance. Online learning could be viewed as a form of 'banking knowledge', whereby learners accumulate nuggets of knowledge like money in the bank (Freire 1996). In a sense, the digital domain lends itself to thinking about knowledge in this way because this is the way knowledge is stored in the silicone chips that power our computers as coded information. However, human beings do not learn in this way, knowledge is always embodied and reviewed in the moment, it is a dynamic assemblage (Deleuze & Guattari 2013: 8) offering 'lines of flight' happen (3). These lines of flights can arrive at striking points. It is such lines of flight this article aims to achieve in the reader's mind when considering online teaching.

The most common interactions are probably by email with an estimated 320 billion emails sent every day (Statista 2021). While video calls are not as common, during the pandemic they increased hugely, with video-calling software showing massive increases in use (UC Today 2021).

The authors' students are now habituated to watching pre-recorded lectures, reading from E-books, interacting via online discussion forums and so on. We could consider what is gained and what is lost in these pre-packaged learning experiences. Unlike in-person meetings and classes, online spaces are more contained. In pre-recorded content there is less space for spontaneous, responsive learning and teaching. The authors' words are surrounded by the design, the fonts, the shapes of the email providers they use, their faces and spoken words are framed by the bright edges of the video conferencing software, their knowledge squeezed into boxes of PowerPoint presentations and Word documents. There is a neatness here which is both reassuring and unnerving because of the way knowledge is parcelled up and banked in silicon chips, in cloud computers and hard drives. We have also experienced the shrinking of arts practice to the scale of domestic technology in many cases, as exhibitions have gone online and university studio spaces have been closed at times. These technologies give some users validation in the way they so deftly present and construct our thoughts. Our embodied beings and words are framed by their carefully curated and surveilled spaces but these spaces can encourage creative thinking and enable different forms of expression. For other users the technology can act as a scaffold to frame performative ways of viewing learning, offering statistics and easy designs which pass for credible learning materials but actually lack pedagogical substance; but they also frustrate and

alienate in that they suggest an authentic form of human interaction but never quite provide it.

During the pandemic, the authors have missed the rawness of spontaneous, in-person talking and movement: the swish of bodies in the same room, eyes darting about, ears attuned to the emotional nuances of what people are saying, the sense of sharing an embodied communal space. It was a yearning for this sensory connection and rawness, this desire to find a space to express discomfort, unease, anxieties, panic, anger, terror even that led to the authors of this article deciding to see whether free writing and drawing might offer an antidote to the constraints of online learning platforms, a vaccine as it were.

The processes involved in developing online learning often focus on a perfectionist performative, transcendent approach. We wanted to work with creative expressive media that can leap imaginatively out of this confining virtual perfection, towards more experimental risk-taking and lateral patterns of growth in education (Biesta 2013). Feeling imperfect, raw and uncomfortable are familiar transitional phases in new learning experiences that can result in withheld student voices. However, these stages are arguably essential for significant learning to take place. We argue that the release of affective responses, that allow resistant energies to rise to the surface, can build more inclusive and socially just atmospheres for learning. Spaces to share such potentially challenging responses could build more trust and safety, as a necessary adaptation to the presence of different sensory expressions.

There are numerous ways to approach the paradigmatic shifts of online learning in socially distanced academic communities, we decided to take on our experiences through free writing, and its relation to affective sensory drawing. Free writing is an immersive experience that releases the liberating feeling of being able to 'write anything' (Bolton 2010: 23) and to communicate this 'anything' into a space of self-acceptance, that can be recorded, then edited and communicated to others. Exploring the expansive spaces of free-writing and drawing in our own practice, we began simultaneously to think about how students could access the enjoyable, liberating and affirming experiences of these processes, when finding themselves on new learning pathways (Gilbert & Matthews 2020).

Section 2: Methodology

When planning the workshop, we drew upon the experiences of our own creative and pedagogical practices. Our experiences indicated the need to foster a mindful, safe space for the possibility of challenging emotions to arise, and be expressed in spoken responses, drawing and writing. The research ethos embodied an ethics of care for participants in their freely spoke accounts of their online experiences (Springgay and La Jevic 2008). Before the workshop, Miranda had taught Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) students the sensory displacement drawing exercise, explained in section 4, and Francis had also taught freewriting to his PGCE and Masters' students over many years. The originality of this methodology is in the way two practitioners who work in the often separated disciplines of art and writing – came together to compare the different modalities of these practices (Kara 2020) in an online workshop.

The workshop *Affective Digital Presence in Creative Practice*, took place on 3 November 2020, for two and a half hours. We felt this length of time would give participants the space to offer sustained responses but not be too tiring in an online context. The workshop was recorded with the permission of the participants, collecting their responses by watching the video again. The video is in the public domain of the Centre for Arts and Learning Events page (CAL 2021). We knew a few participants as students and colleagues, though not everyone was known to us; thirty five people attended. Participants were informed that the workshop was being recorded and that they could anonymise themselves by keeping their cameras switched off and/or not supplying their names. In the article we explore the responses from several participants, all of whom have been given pseudonyms in order to anonymise their identities. These pseudonyms are: Jo, Ay, Jay, Caro and Cee.

The approaches we have been working with in free writing and drawing seek to create spaces that release practitioners and students from performative control patterns, with the awareness that humans are affected by their interconnections with matter and non-human beings in physical and digital environments. Our methodology has explored the concept of learning communities of practice as machinic assemblages (Deleuze & Guattari 2013: 17), and of self-motivated practice as a sensory relation to the issues, desires and immanent experiences that we are

faced with. Still we are intrigued by the decision points and directions when human agency asserts itself, amid the often observed 'vibrant' materiality (Zapata et al. 2018) of practice ecologies and environmental fields of energy (Barad 2007, Jensen 2019) the insistence of social and institutional hierarchies, and the often overwhelming sway of technical developments. There is a potential for subtlety, in aiming for a decentralisation of human control – to build understandings of these environmental forces, while recognising points of agency and action, that can create safe break out spaces (Gilbert and Matthews 2020) with the potential to 'overspill ready-made channelings into the dominant value system' (Manning and Massumi 2014: 87), as we now begin to move between hybrid online and onsite learning. Our practice research questions how we can encourage affective learning communities of self-expression in these changing frameworks for how we can connect with one another.

Section 3: Resistant collaborative pedagogies

There are strong fields of resistance. School students used to playing outdoors, and university students who meet peers and form learning relationships outside the formal lesson interaction have missed their embodied spaces and calming or activating human presences. Sometimes students have a phone instead of a classroom, and may just see initials on a screen (Burgess 2021) many are still working in digital poverty, waiting until they can afford technology before attending classes: there is a very strong link between economic and digital poverty, with Covid exacerbating the situation considerably (Burgess 2021: 4). Arts practitioners in visual and performing arts have missed encounters with gallery, museum and theatre spaces – that take us out of our small-scale domesticity, and have cultural histories that enable us to form questions, experience matter and emotions that are larger than ourselves and our personal histories.

The small screen forces dimensions of self into spaces of a hair's breadth sometimes. (Minkel 2007) perhaps you have had 8 hours of screentime in one day? Educators and other professionals who build developments and plans in the freedom and breathing spaces of social interaction have found their presences contained in

screen interaction. Bodies began to suffer in screen usage – eyes and vision were overused in the 2020, people took to many forms of creative exercise in their domestic environments to shake out the physical tensions that had built up in knots. We wanted to question how we could maintain embodied and environmentally aware learning, as substance and content.

If we view these experiences and actions as affecting the social formations of humanity, we could refer to rhizomatic theory through Deleuze and Guattari (2013: Chapter 1). In this approach, human social and cultural interactions are seen as parallel to organic forms in nature that build intricate, moving hubs of energy and production as ‘machinic assemblages’ (13). A rhizome is a root-like structure, that grows in its environment, sometimes with lateral connections – not upwards like the teleological, and perhaps hierarchical, imagery of a tree. In the same way that a hive of bees or a murmuring of birds form a connective, inter-reliant multiple, a rhizomatic human interaction is formed through the input of all present. Deleuze and Guattari see the foraging exploratory learning investigations of members of a rhizomatic community as ‘lines of flight’ (9).

The lookout, scout investigates the terrain, then returns to the main group and informs the direction of their movements and processes. Sometimes however, the lookout does not return, or is not meant to return: they need to form a new multiple – like the grown swan that is cast out from the lake by its parents, or the lion that moves to a new territory. Deleuze and Guattari view this change as a ‘drift’ in which the rhizomatic assemblage, or the sole lookout on a line of flight (2013: xvi), does not return to its original place. One could say that a student starting out at university can experience being on a ‘line of flight’, that might feel like being set adrift from their communities, if we do not consider how our machinic assemblages of learning, on-line, or on-site, are inclusive of their cultural and creative self-expression. If we are to bring the world ecologies and pedagogies of posthumanism into our learning environments, there is a recognition that everything, and everyone affects everything else, so that small changes in our approaches can have an increasing impact in their follow on effects. This understanding recalls Gaia and Chaos theory in the environment (Pahl 1996), and the inclusive affective relations of critical pedagogies in which oppressive actors are also liberated by lateral approaches in the learning milieu (Freire 1996). However, there are vast differences between human

experiences, and it is these 'painful disparities' (Bennett 2001: 88) that need to be brought to our surfaces for immediate attention.

With access to this affirming and energising theory, we are still called upon to think about what is different and particular about being human. Covid-19 has taken the lives of many of those who are vulnerable and disadvantaged in society (Burgess 2021). If we are to make use of the best of millennia of thinking about how we can best support and develop society, our learning and social strategies are called upon to build pedagogies that nurture, care and include. Initiatives such as Isolation Art School, the NSEAD Life after Lockdown project and the Centre for Arts and Learning's Finding Comfort within Discomfort research project (Matthews 2021), have found ways of forming structures for support and sustenance. The creative organisation of social protest has also demonstrated the strength of care for minority groups, as the mass movement Black Lives Matter calls out the need for the privileged white global minority to care more about equality for people of colour. There is a call for not a drift, but a swift movement of change in response to global conditions.

Perhaps the ethical and pedagogical movements away from exclusive hard houses of learning towards porous multiples of layered and hybrid online and onsite interaction could be seen as a Deleuzian drift: as a clear movement away from previous ideas of presence and engagement, and as a form of survival mechanism in the ontology of environments. What can we take with us therefore? What can we keep of a sense of agency and choice, even the smallest of nano-decisions can feel like a choice. What about the life changing decisions that many are having to make about their choices of study and their environments? Their means and media for expression?

We took up this momentum for change, to work with the 'affective turn' (Clough and O'Malley 2007) and with what could be experienced as material engagements with online learning environments as creative machinic assemblages. in which the affect of free writing and drawing moves to the agency of creative choices in self-representation. We wanted to create breathing spaces, resting the urge for productivity and perfection, and aiming for joyful, playful creative experiences.

Section 4: Miranda's part of the workshop: what, why, how

To introduce the Goldsmiths Centre for Arts and Learning theme of Affective Digital Presence, we brought together an assembly of students, educators and members of the public to explore free writing and drawing. We wanted to look at how all of the senses may be engaged in online learning, for expressive spaces of sensory literacy. Practice research activities in drawing and writing were planned to explore the affective and emotive, and to think about how people could care about each other in learning environments. The Affective Digital Presence CAL events are seen as practice research workshops, made in intersectional 'a/r/tographic' spaces between artmaking, researching and teaching.' (Springgay and La Jevic 2008: 67).

Miranda Matthews began with two drawing exercises: 1) Releasing affect through drawing: marking an event, and 2) Sensory drawing – creating spaces between the senses. Participants made their drawings and then raised points and questions for discussion. In the first activity participants were asked to express an event that had happened in the day through mark making. Miranda wanted to see how our participating audience could release affect through recalling an event that may have had activating forces beyond their expectation or control. It was thought that this creative act of drawing could 'open a road' (Massumi 2014: xv) of sensory consciousness and connection between participants in hybrid online/embodied learning. Creative 'warm up' exercises are used in many fields: singers and athletes do warm up exercises, to keep a supple flow in practice. In the visual arts we set ourselves tasks such as drawing with the non-dominant hand and freely moving away from preconceived ideas (Matthews 2021). Therefore, it did not matter if the audience had done the same exercise before – and this time it would be with a different form of attention, and different collective questioning processes.

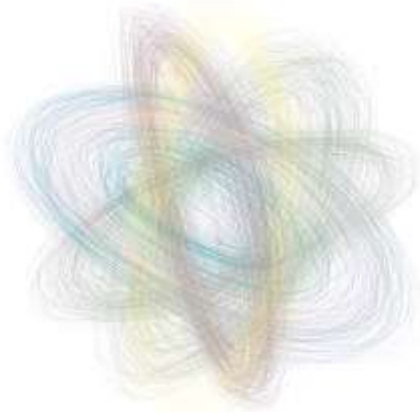


Figure 1 Miranda Matthews, Releasing Affect Through Drawing, 2021. Digital drawing.

Participants then had a space to freely draw an affective relation to an event that had happened for them that day, without words. They were encouraged to make a space where they felt comfortable to draw, and to let the subconscious of the event 'bubble up' to expressive mark-making. To express a vocabulary of visual language, they were asked to think about what kinds of lines, textures, tones, hues and energy of mark making would relate to this vent for experience, with the safety of not having to tell anyone what that event actually was. This focus on mark-making as a visual language was not about skill in drawing, more an invitation to express the self.

In the following drawing to explore how we might create a liberating distance between the senses, that enables new feelings and thoughts to emerge, Miranda then introduced a task for releasing creativity, asking participants to place an object on the table and to fix paper underneath the table. Participants had been asked to bring an object that had meaning for them to the event. Miranda had affective exemplar objects, a plaster cast of a dog sent in the post by her Canadian grandfather, reflecting on its weight and textured form in relation to the weightlessness of images and texts sent electronically, and a tetrahedron dice that had belonged to her stepfather, the many facets of which signify multiple possibilities, outside the sum of these facets. These objects could be seen as making textural 'striated' interventions in what would be expected to be a 'smooth' online space (Deleuze and Guattari 2013: 552). Participants brought their meaningful

and everyday objects into expressive textures of the affective zone (Manning and Massumi 2014: 4).

The drawings were liberated from perfection, and sensory connections that are usually unused or disregarded in the dominant discourses of hand-eye on-screen coordination, were brought into the learning space. Participants were then asked what they had discovered in the process of drawing, firstly how has their mark-making had expressed the focus event, and how it had created a meditative space, connecting with the body. Then they reflected on how the sensory displacement of the second drawing, that distanced hand-eye coordination, the element of surprise and how compensatory responses may have been formed.



Figure 2 Anonymous PGCE student, Creating Spaces between the Senses, 2020. Digitally adjusted pencil drawing.

We could not explain away and rationalise responses (Bennett 2001: 58), however the difference in experiences were significant. Participants found that the first drawing was more instructive, Jo said 'diagrammatic' of an event and that they found themselves still 'struggling with the line and quality of the mark-making.' Ay said that in the first drawing she found she 'had to focus on the drawing's constituent parts' – that make up what could be seen as an assemblage. Looking at the whole drawing as a discovery. This feeling of control was found by Jay who said that the first drawing recalled that 'a symbol of my life is looking at a computer screen and being sucked into a computer screen.' We found that the focus on the visual elements of the drawing, for an expression of an event, and the need to recall an event brought out tensions, prevailing expectations of particular forms of skill in the drawn assemblage, and reminders of what Caro called 'the frustration' of being online while

trying to draw freely. Caro enjoyed both drawings but expressed their differences as follows.

I was way more energetic because I was getting in contact with my frustration about the event. I found the first drawing therapeutic with me reflecting on my marks throughout the event. The second one looks so lively even though it looks like a child attempted to draw something. I have taken more space on the paper and I love that I have tried to use my fingers to have a tactile relationship, with my act of drawing - such as the space of the paper itself and my pencil. It was how I made the marks that was way different in the second instance than the first one.

Although the first drawing was 'therapeutic' in getting to tensions and frustrations, the second drawing had a more empathic, 'tactile' relationship with the body. Cee was also very observant of the differences in her sensory and affective experiences.

I was very busy in understanding different aspects of my connection to the event, different kinds of affections that I had towards this event. So it was more of a system, what I was drawing. But still I felt really connected to that, both of them were very satisfying and interesting. This is the first one which has more relation to the world and to different things in the world, and the second one is more like this, which is also a scribble, and I also had the experience that I used more of my other senses to engage in doing it. I realised that my affection was so focused on this object so I could really kind of connect, I drew the plant that my friend gave me.

The second drawing was found to be altogether more interesting, enjoyable and liberating as an experience. It contained within it, 'something that flows or flees, that escapes the binary organisations, the resonance apparatus, and the overcoding machine' (Deleuze and Guattari, 2013: 252) Participants felt that they were released from perfection, and that they owned the element of surprise upon revealing their

drawing. They enjoyed being able to let go control and to feel affective forces speak through them. Drawing without seeing the marks being made was experienced as ‘a discovery’, and the assembled properties had the ‘moments of enchantment’ that Bennett considers to co-exist with the disenchantment of contemporary life (Bennett 2001: 3). These moments have an ‘affective force’ that Bennett proposes could bring a togetherness of ‘ethical generosity’ (3). Bennett connects to the Deleuzian ‘becomings’ that ‘happen among humans, animals and machines.’

Some in our ‘ADP’ workshop found that their focused connection with the materiality of their chosen object increased their enjoyment of the online workshop. Jay who had drawn her hair grip said ‘it was a much nicer experience to feel for a material object in the world instead of an experience.’ Jay’s experience correlated with Miranda’s finding in a face-to-face session with postgraduate students who explored the sensory displacement warm-up drawing. It was discovered that students’ unseen drawings of their objects somehow represented the use of the objects in the day. There was a kind of unconscious relation to the use of the object that emerged through the processes of drawing, for example that scissors looked like they were cutting. The sensory displacement drawing, that released the senses from control patterns, and brought out embodied *was an event in itself*.

The ‘diagrammatic’ (Deleuze and Guattari 2013: 166) relation to an event through mark-making in the Affective Digital Presence workshop could be seen to relate to a drawing and writing practice that Francis has developed, that will now be explored as it connects to our focus on creative practice for hybrid ‘deterritorialised flows’ (11) in digital and embodied, affective learning zones.

Section 5: Francis’s part of the workshop: what, why and how

This all brings important context when exploring the exercises Francis set and the responses he received in the Affective Digital Presence workshop with Miranda. Having briefly lectured about Peter Elbow’s conception of freewriting helping people improve their writing (1998), he asked the workshop participants to freewrite for 6 minutes about the mark-making event they did with Miranda (see Section 4) and/or a different event, getting them to articulate in words all their ‘emotions about the event’. They were told to let themselves go and that their work would not have to be shared.

This was followed by asking workshop attendees to freewrite for 6 minutes about the object they chose from Miranda's workshop (see previous section). After this, everyone went into breakout rooms and asked to discuss their thoughts about the exercises. The report back from these breakout rooms arrived at some important findings that included these themes:- the blurring of boundaries between the personal and the professional in online spaces, and the ability to control and reframe some of these boundaries; the possibilities for increased access for those with physical disabilities and neurodiversity; challenging and cathartic processes in freewriting and the becoming awareness of solitude in online learning – leading to an urge to bring online learning communities together. We can expand on these thematic findings as follows.

Working online, people can move quickly from their living spaces to their place of work, making it much more convenient for them. A new assemblage of work and home has been created, which for some people has been a line of flight; a new path generating pleasurable affects. This said the affective flows in this new work/home assemblage are constantly changing, with some people feeling oppressed by the lack of boundaries between earning a wage and enjoying the freedom of their homes.

Some people enjoy the 'control' of the online space: they are usually at home and are not in a classroom where people are 'looking over your shoulder'. While the online space is very carefully organised, it appears its surveillance mechanisms are not as oppressive at times as the prying eyes of humans. Many students feel 'compelled to share stuff' in face to face classes which they actually feel uncomfortable sharing, whereas in the online space it was noted: 'you can switch off your camera, your mic and you can walk away easily'. This, it was acknowledged, could be an issue because there's also a problem with alienation, of not feeling connected to people in embodied, social way. The power of switching off your camera and microphone though is 'a line of flight', making people feel more in control of their affective flows. So if, for example, someone wants to lie down and listen to a lecture, they can easily do this in the safety of their room, whereas this would be considered bizarre and disruptive in a face to face classroom.

A teacher of young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) noted that these children often like online learning because it means that they can be in spaces at home they feel comfortable in, and that they can learn at

their own pace, as well as more easily receive one-to-one tuition. Here we can importantly see a new assemblage of SEND learning has been formed, where the components of effective teaching of SEND students – such as close attention and aspects of relative autonomy – such as navigation of the screen have been facilitated by technology (Ojeda-Castelo 2018: 24017).

There were mixed views about the writing exercises. While freewriting offers a chance to ‘vent’ feelings, it can be a challenging process because writers begin to see more clearly some of their upset, the emotional pain, and this can overwhelm them. It was noted: ‘it can be a terrifying process watching what comes out of your pencil or pen, and that the ink almost runs away with you’. It appears in this case, the assemblage of freewriting during an online class creates a disturbing affective flow which can spill over into despair, especially if the online learner does not have any supportive embodied presence near them. Thus, we can see the freewriting can bring the loneliness of online learning sharply into focus. There is no one to pat you on the back, to be there as your throat tightens with emotion, to give you a hug maybe if you are very upset.

However, it was observed that freewriting in the online context can be healing and cathartic if you ‘surrender yourself to this process, even if you might not like what you have written very much. There is a sort of truth tracking or hunting element to this process which is quite healthy. It was noted that these sorts of tracking processes can be supportive and helpful, making people aware of what is going on with them. Thus, we can see that the freewriting enables a form of territorialisation of thought and affect; it pins unique affective flows down on the page, since everyone’s handwriting is unique in a way their typing is not. If we add to this the deterritorialisation of interdisciplinary drawing and then writing, there are successive layers of a sensory approach to self-expression that can be comforting in the plurality of pinpoints that are possible, as we map expression and experience.

It was perceived that there is at least an ambivalence and often a love-hate relationship between the analogue and the digital, the digital and the human. Participants were aware of the need for technology, but also were aware of its unhealthy aspects. There was a desire to subvert digital technologies in the group, but a puzzlement about how and why this might be done. There was a sense that handwriting and drawing within the context of online learning was a form of resistance in that it enables the writers to challenge the clean lines of the digital and

step outside its surveillance systems, meaning there was less contact with the commercialism of the online world, and more contact with the disruptive.

While there was considerable criticism of the ways in which online learning can encourage hegemonic thinking and artistry, building normative patterns to be registered by a small group of on-screen emoticons, there was also an awareness that the online sphere brings disparate communities together: from different countries and from remote communities. In this sense, the online world offers a line of flight out of the territorialisation of physical communities, creating a new learning assemblage which involves global learning.

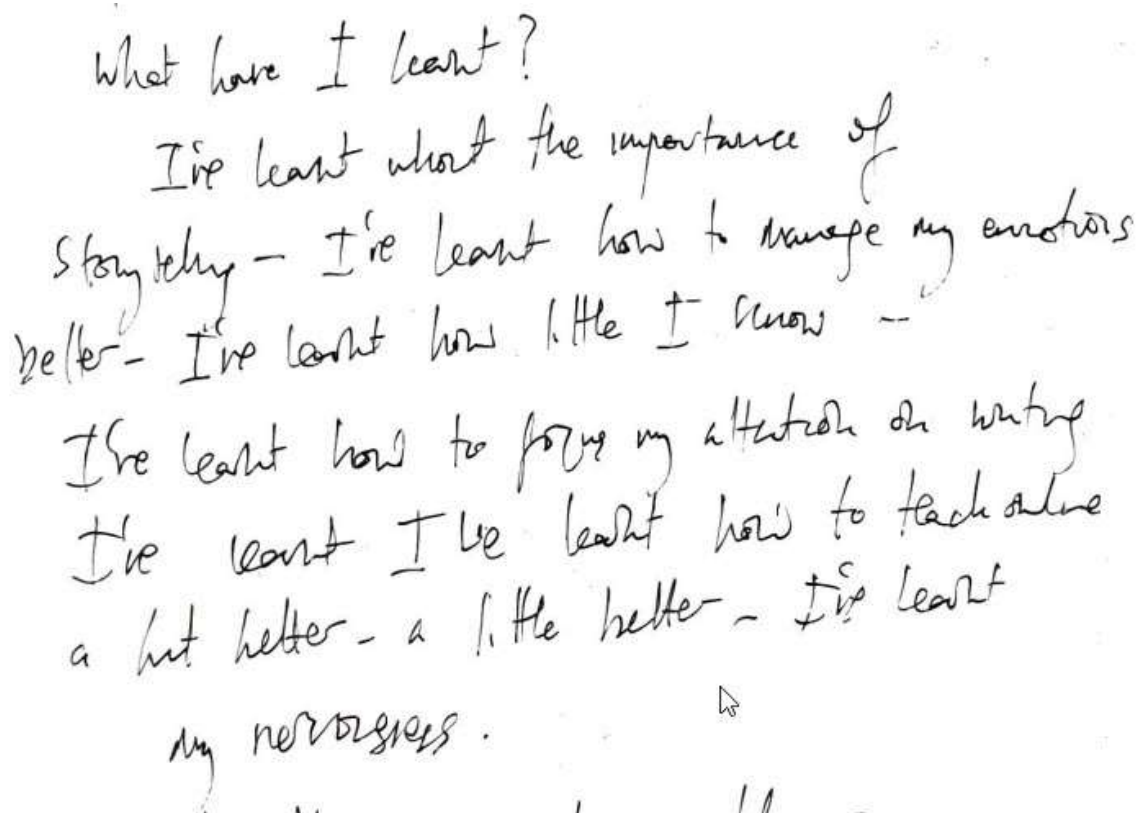
Section 6: Resistance personal pedagogy spills out into the professional sphere

Before leading the Affective Digital Presence workshop Francis free wrote from between 10-30 mins every day of the pandemic. He integrated it into his morning routine so that before he did any work, he free-wrote on a pad (Rocketbook 2021) which is designed so that handwritten notes can easily be turned into Portable Document Formats (PDFs). He wrote in washable ink on this specially designed notebook which had pages that contained Quick Response (QR) codes, and then photographed his writing using an app on his phone, which automatically turned his pages into PDFs. It should be noted having been born in 1968, Francis grew up handwriting in notebooks, unlike many of his younger colleagues and students. As a result, he discovered a nostalgia and meaning in handwriting a diary. When he was a student, he was economically disadvantaged, the child of a single mother who had no job, but could, even with his limited resources, pay for notebooks and pens. However now as a senior lecturer in education he is comparatively well-off and lives in significant 'digital wealth', being able to afford computers, tablets, phones and items such as this notebook, which is not cheap to buy. Many of his more economically disadvantaged students would not be able to afford such an item.

With the digital notebook, we can see how the older technology of handwriting merges with digital technologies to create a new assemblage (Deleuze & Guattari

2013: 36) which Francis found helpful and therapeutic. The initial reason why he bought the pad was that there was an issue with lack of space in his home, and he did not want to clutter up his room with lots of notebooks, which he would have done if he had used 'hard copy' books because his words/drawings were relatively large. Sometimes just a few sentences, a diagram or a drawing occupied an A4 sized piece of paper.

The assemblage of his digitally recorded handwritten notebook meant also that he could review his creations on his phone: take his freewriting in his pocket, and reflect upon it virtually anywhere. Thus, the software made his freewriting portable. It also enabled him to organise it, giving each day a particular name and date, which was filed in a folder for the year. Much of what Francis wrote was personal and also often work related. The free writing and drawings offered a liminal space where he could explore the 'affect' in his life, and how he was affected by the multiplicity of affective flows that shaped his life during the pandemic. Here is an example of some of this free writing from January 2021.



What have I learnt?
I've learnt what the importance of
storytelling - I've learnt how to manage my emotions
better - I've learnt how little I know -
I've learnt how to focus my attention on writing
I've learnt I've learnt how to teach online
a bit better - a little better - I've learnt
my nervousness.

Figure 3 Francis Gilbert, Free writing during Pandemic, January 2021. Photograph of handwritten page.

The freewriting here directed him to reflect upon what he was learning in his job; that he was learning 'manage' emotions better, and that he was becoming aware of 'how little' he knows. He reflects that he has improved his online teaching, and that he has become more aware of his 'nervousness'. The handwriting is expressive and full of affect; here Francis expresses his anxieties about his emotions and his job, but also can see some positives. Such freewriting affords the chance for him to be authentic and truthful, but not falsely positive. It is reflective in that he sees what he has improved upon, but also reflexive in that he is beginning to see himself in the bigger picture (Bolton 2018: 9-10); how little he knows.

Francis frequently sets free writing (Elbow 1998) as an introductory 'loosening up' exercise with his students at the beginning of his sessions and lessons. The instruction is simple: students are asked to write without stopping for a set amount of time, usually five minutes, and told that they can write anything, even 'blah blah blah', but that they must write. They are informed that their writing can be entirely private but that they can share how they found the process or their writing if they wish too when reporting back in small groups or as a whole class. Francis takes some time to explore the underlying pedagogy and purpose of this to his trainee English teachers. He frequently cites one of the leading figures who has championed free writing, Peter Elbow. Elbow writes:

The most effective way I know to improve your writing is to do freewriting exercises regularly. At least three times a week. They are sometimes called 'automatic writing', 'babbling', or 'jabbering' exercises. The idea is to write for 10 minutes (later on, perhaps fifteen-twenty). Don't stop for anything. Go quickly without rushing. Never stop to look back, to cross something out, to wonder how to spell something, to wonder what word or thought to use, or to think about what you're doing. If you can't think of a word or a spelling, just a squiggle or else write 'I can't think of it'. Just put something down. The easiest thing to do is put down whatever is in your mind. (1998: 3)

Much research (Cremin & Oliver 2017) into the teaching of writing shows that when teachers learn to write in this way and practice freewriting regularly, this considerably improves their teaching of writing for multiple reasons: they learn to become more confident, fluent writers, they learn and feel for themselves the power of allowing

autonomy in writing processes (write anything) and also the usefulness of constraints (such as time constraints).

Here is an example, a month later in February 2021, of some free writing he completed with the students he educates to be English teachers: Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) students.

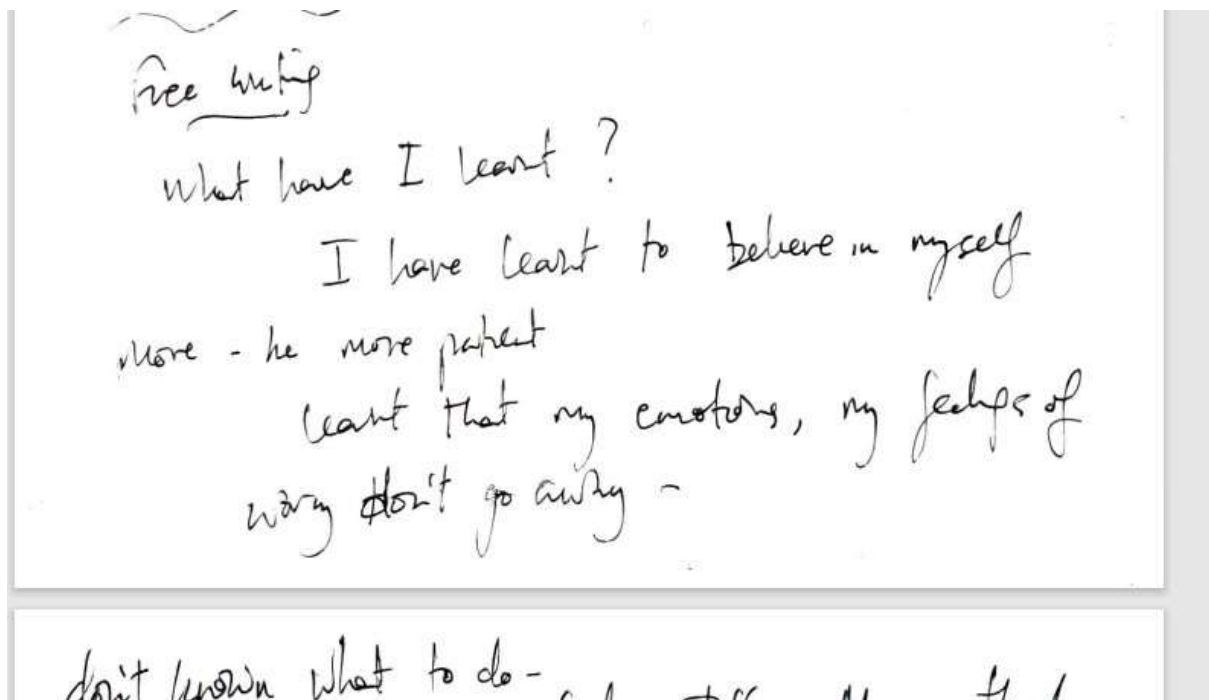


Figure 4 Francis Gilbert, Francis's freewriting alongside his PGCE students, February 2021. Photograph of handwritten page.

He wrote this alongside his students, but did not share it with them. As with Figure 3, note the focus upon both learning and the emotions here. The question that Francis returns to is about his learning; his responses indicate that he sees learning something deep, richly nuanced, always changing and affective: a way of territorialising thoughts and feelings, and then 'deterritorialising' them, setting them free from hegemonic patterns of thinking and creating 'a line of flight' (Deleuze & Guattari 2013).

A month on from Figure 3, we can see how he is more confident and patient, and more accepting of his emotions, aware that his feelings of nervousness will not go away in Figure 4. In the same free writing session (of 5 minutes) he began also to shape a plan about how to teach his PGCE students. He wrote:

Turn on let's see
Let's see - let's see - Surfer to post stuff
Zoom link (d) (1pm) - OCLL need to send
that would -
- 5.30pm - 7.30pm - send (at
Teams
The Cast of Edge - Stephen Zweig

Figure 5 Francis Gilbert, Francis's freewriting with PGCE English students, February 2021. Photograph of handwritten page.

Figure 5 illustrates how the freewriting process enables him to settle his thoughts, soothe himself, if you like, with phrases like 'let's see', 'let's see', which are circled,

followed by some speculation about the functional organisation of the online space. He wrote the phrase twice to give himself time to think about the Zoom meetings he was planning, scheduling a Teams meeting, and then considering his reading for the evening 'The Last of Europe'. Francis's misnaming of Stefan Zweig's memoir *The World of Yesterday* (1943). The page becomes both a place of comfort and parenting (giving kindly advice to oneself) but also useful planning. There is an overlapping with the personal -- reading the Zweig book (1943) and the professional (Zoom/Teams meetings), which creates a new assemblage (Deleuze & Guattari). The effect on the page is rhizomatic; we see a series of interconnecting tubers (the circled words) which reveal how these concepts are not hierarchical, not arboreal, but part of an eco-system of concepts, technologies, timings, organisations, people and affect. The rhizome is linked by its 'affective flows': the energy to think ('let's see, let's see') and the desire to enfold organisations, people and concepts into a meaningful, coherent learning machine. For example, the phrase 'scribes to post stuff' is about Francis realising that he wishes to put his students into small groups and give one person in the group the role of the 'scribe', who will write the findings of the group on the virtual learning platform's forum thread for this particular lesson. There is also the affective flow of Francis desiring to link the outside organisation of OCR (an examination board) with his students.

Having educated his trainee teachers and postgraduates to use free writing as a reflective, affective tool like this, Francis frequently talks to them about their freewriting as they go on school placements. He does not ask to read any of this private work, but sometimes they share it with him voluntarily and they often tell him that they free write very regularly, particularly after encountering stress at their work. One student, A., told him that she always sets aside 5 minutes to free write after teaching stressful lessons, and finds that it really helps her wellbeing because: 'It gives me the space to think, to say what I really think, and to listen to myself, and to value my own feelings, to tell myself that it's OK to feel this way.'

Section 7: Writing Meeting Drawings - On the Back of Books

Like Francis, Miranda works with the interstitial spaces between writing and drawing in practice research. Miranda's practice finds organic rhythms in what could be seen as an assemblage of interrelated themes and practices that take turns to surface and

continue their dialogical presence. Before the pandemic, in 2018 Miranda got a digital notepad primarily for drawing. The notepad has many functions, however for Miranda – as for Francis, its initial function was to enable a multitude of drawing possibilities without a concern for how they might be housed in sketchbooks. The notepad has also had a subversive function, in that it has enabled a creative overflow in the overlooked spaces of meetings. Before the pandemic, Miranda used to take her digital notebook into meetings and make 'Meeting Drawings', creating an expansion of imaginative space in what was intended to be closely watched, timed and organised space. Sometimes the drawings observed objects and views in the surroundings, sometimes they were entirely imaginary. Miranda noticed that the digital free drawings did not distract her attention from the spoken and verbal content of the meetings, actually the drawings released affective tensions and helped her concentration, every item on the agenda became more expressive, and when others in the meeting saw this no one seemed to mind that Miranda was drawing as well as taking notes.

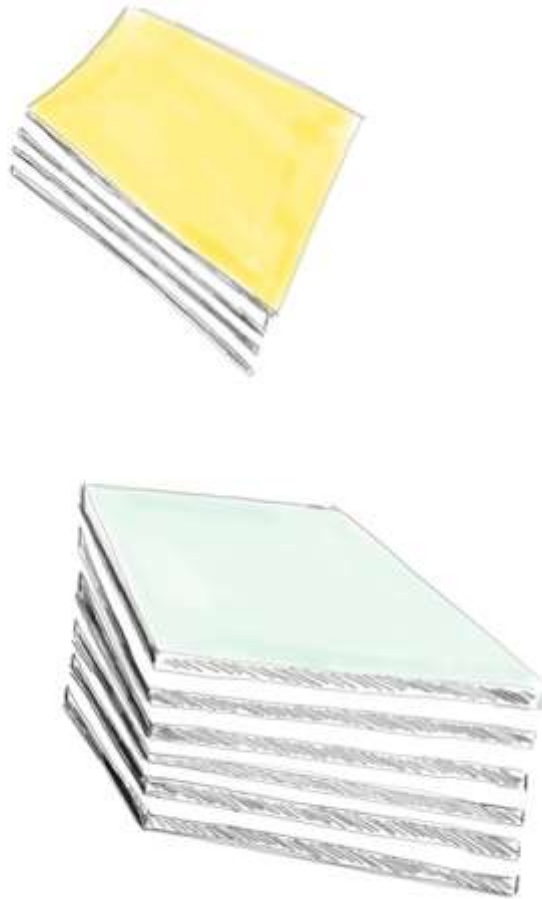


Figure 6 Miranda Matthews, Meeting drawing: The Minutes, 2018. Digital drawing.

In the pandemic from March 2020, when the digital and technological were becoming all pervasive. Miranda began to prefer starting with analogue processes of drawing and writing, that could then be communicated with others in digital formats with others. This experience compares with the handwritten sketching of notes and diagrams that Francis worked with in the pandemic. Academics are called upon to relate intensively to books, and their performative processes are assessed 'on the back of books', that is on the basis of their writing. Miranda began to make drawn interpretations on the blank back pages of the books she read in lockdown. Of course they were her own books. It had become increasingly difficult and sometimes impossible to borrow from the library in lockdown, and in lockdown Miranda wanted the papery physicality of books, and the relation of them to her hands and to other sensory experiences of reading.

The drawings are always in pencil, as one makes marginal notes in pencil, existing in the liminal spaces outside the authority of the printed word, but still

accompanying and respecting the authors and publishers who so thoughtfully provided these additional spaces for reflection. Then, to add additional layers of possibility, Miranda photographs the drawings and transfers them to an application on her digital notepad, so that she can add colour, and explore the additional dimension of a range of colourways.

Since Miranda was reading on affect and methods of equality in relation to arts practice, the 'Drawings on the Back of Books' connected also with these thematics. On the back of *The Method of Equality* (Rancière 2016), Miranda drew a moped, and this vehicle seemed to add to the 'intra-actions' (Barad, Dolphin and van der Tuin 2012: 55) machinic assemblages of text and sensory interpretation and to the travelling being-for-itself of learning (Matthews 2018) and 'lines of flight' (Deleuze & Guattari 2013: 3) as departures of thought. The moped Miranda drew has a gender relation to machinic equality, as a singular means of travel. Miranda's Instagram accompanying text states. 'Where to now? Drawings on the back of books. There is a 'herstory' to this.. and to the book it is drawn on.' (19.9.20) The herstory of the moped was significant in 2020-2021, as Miranda's stepfather of four decades passed away after a short illness in August 2020. Like her father he was a trained engineer, and always understood technology and machines. After his passing the women in the family had to learn how to work more of the machines, more technology – online and material. Perhaps we could think more about the intersectional relation between gender and technology, as between gender and the mode of transport that enables the line of flight, as a means for extending the emancipatory potential of digital, technological, machinic online spaces.

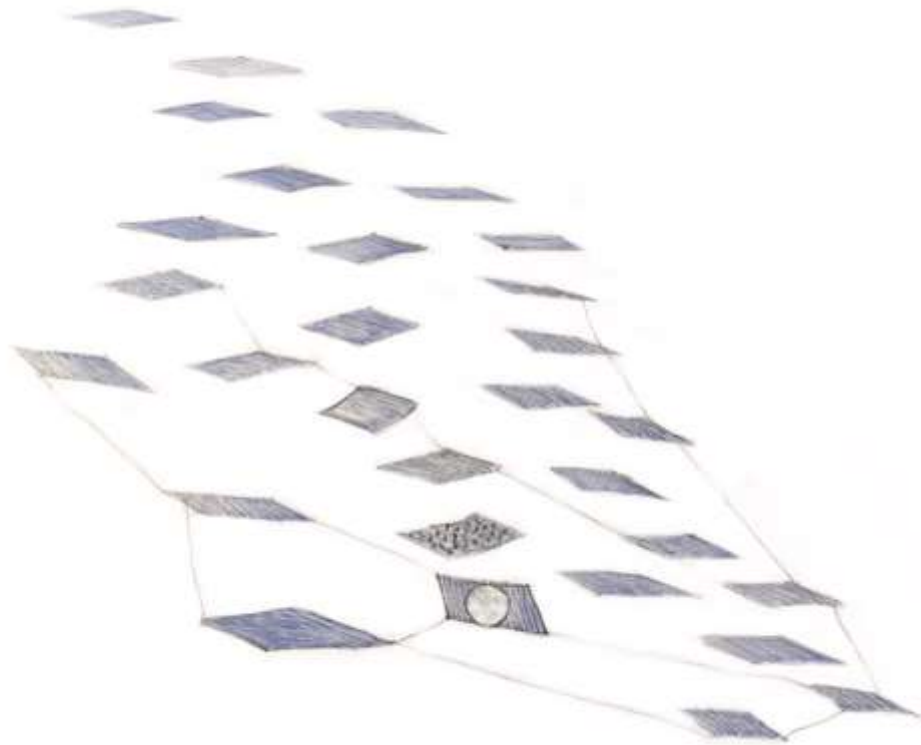


Figure 7 Miranda Matthews, *Drawing on the Back of The Method of Equality, Matthews on Rancière*, 2020. Digitally adjusted pencil drawing.

Reading Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* (2013) Miranda visualised the relation of a rhizome of multiple record covers in a drift away from something that was, towards something that is becoming. Massumi introduces the text saying that each chapter is non-linear, and can be experienced like a record, perhaps an album, that one can dip in and out of as required. Miranda's online text accompanying the drawing opened its relation to the theory.

Au milieu des plateaux. I'm reading Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* for a relation to the CAL theme this year of Affective Digital Presence. Massumi says the chapters are like tunes on a record, and if they don't open 'new thoughts...emotions...new sensations and perceptions '(date, p.) it might be better to actually get a record. Why not also have some records? (20.2.2021)

The drawing aims to capture some of this sonorous non-linear, questioning inclination, it is intentionally more abstract and diagrammatic than illustrative. The presence of visibility in relation to theoretical texts appears to offer increased possibilities for interpretation, and the release of becoming understandings that could also enhance a 'method of equality' for others whose sensory literacy builds in connection with the visual. As with the Meeting Drawings, and the free drawings created in our online workshop, these interstitial visualisations on the Backs of Books, and their dialogical online presence could enable another form of release from the confines of expected relations to cultural texts.



*Figure 8 Miranda Matthews, Drawing on the Back of A Thousand Plateaus, Matthews on Deleuze and Guattari, 2021.
Digitally adjusted pencil drawing.*

Section 8: Findings

So, to return to our research questions: Could we perhaps create 'safe breakout spaces' online that nurture affective and spontaneous creativity? And what kind of online tools and processes could help this happen?

Our research into our own practice, our teaching and the responses from the workshop participants indicate that there were some 'safe' elements to our activities. The initial experience of free drawing, with a task to represent an event in visual language, felt directional to workshop participants and it was clear that our approach had created the safety for them to vocalise this. The next drawing exercise, in which they were asked to feel for an object while making a drawing of it out of sight released participants from performative expectations of skill in representation, and therefore created the safety to bring emotive and empathic expressive relations into drawing.

It appears that some people feel much safer venting in their drawing and freewriting during online learning because they believe they are less obliged to share their work, and they are not being watched so closely. Those participants who chose to share their drawings and their feelings about these and their writing had space to do that. We found that creating more spaces for possibility and fewer of exigency enabled more affective, discursive and creative release from hegemonic constructions of representation.

It could be said that the act of handwriting in a non-digitised notebook, and the act of drawing in the margins of verbal meetings and on books, are particularly liberating because these actions have not been surveilled digitally in the way Francis's uploaded handwritten PDFs, or Miranda's shared online drawings might be. Yet it is also important for safe spaces to share and enable creative risk-taking with the possibility of vocal learning exchange to take place. Over time those who choose to hide their affective creative expressions may become more confident in selecting which aspects of their free practice to share with others. The sense of equal and shared participation, of tutors participating in the same exercises as students in our workshop setting built a lateral pedagogical space for these choices to be made.

With a view to exploring the ethical implications of enabling creative, affective online expression, we would observe that the freewriting and drawing presented some elements of potential risk. Some participants were more prepared for either drawing or writing, and found one form or the other more akin to their comfort zones of self-expression. Our Affective Digital Presence workshop took place at a time when many people were solitary in their households. The spilling over of affective flows can be particularly problematic for people who are lonely and distressed in the

spaces where they are conducting online learning. With no physical, caring presence to turn to with their upset, this clearly is an issue.

However, the online shared practice of a workshop creates what can become a community of practice (Wenger 1999), with a higher priority for the supportive and empathic processes of learning, and less emphasis on the critical observation of areas for development in a group setting.

There is no doubt that the freewriting and drawing did nurture affective and spontaneous creativity. Again and again, both in their own writing, teaching and in the workshop participants' responses, there was a sense of wonder at just how liberating the freewriting and drawing was. This was particularly the case with the drawing under the table, which appeared to unlock not only new forms of creative expression, but new forms of thinking about creative expression – as the habitual patterns, expectations for performance and muscle memories of drawing were distanced from one another and reconnected with new sensory and neural patterns of activity.

To sum up, the assemblage of freewriting/drawing and online learning appears to offer new pathways for thinking and talking about creativity. These processes enable lines of flight that generate powerful affective flows, which in turn lead to the deterritorialisation of habituated patterns of practice for more inclusive, heterogeneous interdisciplinary acts of making and authorship. We have intended to show how boundaries of professional and personal practice can be socially explored and reconstructed in the form of this written article. This approach continues in the present and future pedagogical, and creative practices of the authors, their students and the workshop participants. We argue that free writing and drawing in online and hybrid online/onsite learning spaces afford a new conception of agency; they tap and stream unconscious desires and creations, giving individuals a space to be unique, or singular (Bennett 2001: 5) within the often uniform spaces of online classes. Creative educators who utilise such strategies are being resistant in their pedagogies, challenging the hegemonic order of unconscious and unquestioning compliance with the form of digital domains that too often dominates online learning.

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