

Research Space

Other

Pandemic panic: COVID and the claustropolitan university?

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Expert opinion

Pandemic panic: Covid and the Claustropolitan university?

The recent growth of online learning, accelerated by Covid 19, has been welcomed by many. It has connected families, facilitated communication and reduced traveling. New opportunities to experiment and envision new models of education have arisen.

But do these developments really represent a technologically enhanced future for learning and teaching? Until now discussion on the topic has often been stronger on exhortations than on evidence: in 2015 a [Scottish government report](#) highlighted the lack of a conclusive demonstration of digital technology's longer-term positive impact on educational outcomes. Five years on, critics still argue that "pandemic pedagogies" are under-theorised, under-developed and under-resourced. With "a significant risk of offering more of the same" ([Selwyn et al. 2020, p.2](#)), this is "the online learning revolution that never happened" ([Brabazon et al 2020, p. 37](#)).

This non-event is particularly tragic because its impact has long been predictable. The work of Paul Virilio (1932-2018), thinker of the toxic innovations of speed and technology, is particularly prescient. He was suspicious of visual technologies, especially the tiny surfaces we call screens. Jealously detracting from experience, they gerrymander sensory stimuli and demands we become passive participants in the all-consuming narcissism of the image:

Ours is not yet a completely on-line society, but one where entering the virtual community is compulsory, or very nearly, and this means living in a surrogate reality that deprives us of the tactility, the physical contact and the empathy essential to communal intersubjectivity

[\(Virilio, 2010, p. 78\).](#)

Like many such proclamations, this may seem overblown. But I think many teachers, learners and researchers recognise exactly what Virilio means. Virilio's work has certainly helped decode some of my own experiences ([Beighton, 2017](#)) and those of students learning online: setting aside the obvious facility with which sessions can be "delivered" and, as Virilio suggests, the mechanised replication of "learning" *in absentio* by various online

mediators of experience, I was struck of the different types of claustrophobia they evoked. Locked within four walls and, increasingly, the four sides of their screens, online learning is the new panic: we shut down of our sense(s) and co-create the “claustropolitan university” (Brabazon et al, op.cit). The screen, like the windscreen, projects us ever onwards ([Virilio, 2012, p.37](#)).

Doubtless, as humans, we have evolved to make nonbiological tools and the ability to build and rebuild “an endless succession of designer environments [and] extended thinking systems” ([Clark 2003, p. 197](#)). The test for HE, then, is whether our current pan(dem)ic actually produces these environments and the capacity to think, or whether it destroys them. If observation and destruction do indeed develop at the same pace, as Virilio claims ([1989, p.85](#)), higher education needs to observe and recognise its own destructive impulses. We need to make sure that the cosy but counterproductive academic claustropolis doesn't foreclose creative, expansive and above all open minds ([Beighton, 2018](#)).