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Reflection Pieces

Rietvelt, L.J.; Guido, S.; Engelenhoven, G. van; Rörsch, M.; Wijk, R. van der; Kurowska, D.; ... ; Hoekstra, M.

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Reflection Pieces

Students and teachers reflect on how they experienced the forced online environment during lockdown.

A Day in the Life of an at-Risk Student

By Lesley Joy Rietvelt

It is Thursday—that means I have the house to myself. I clean, study and read and thank him when he comes back. He did the groceries again, all the shopping and filling the tank. He has not seen his friends or family, gave up parties and dinners. I thank him again, for everything he has done.

The isolation has been difficult, but it is getting easier after a year. The guilt has not changed—it is always there. I ask him if it would have been better had I moved out. It would give him the freedom to be the same as others—to sneak out, pay the fines, complain about festivals being cancelled. But he just smiles and shakes his head: “I would rather be with you instead”.

That night we watch the news, and I softly cry. *Young people are suffering from the lack of social contact. Businesses are drowning in debt. We need to go back to normal, even if it means we risk a few lives.* I realise I will be stuck in the house for even longer, which means he will too. I look over to him and feel the guilt creeping in again.

The freer the world is, the more imprisoned we feel.

Playing Video Games to Socialize

By Sofia Guido

I am in the very privileged position of not having been too affected by the pandemic, academically speaking. Thus far I have had very available and supportive professors, supervisors, and classmates, who have made the whole journey very pleasant. Unfortunately, since the start of the pandemic, I have almost entirely stopped reading for personal interest. After spending so much time indoors in front of screens reading to prepare for classes and assignments, I am not too motivated to read for personal interest. Because of COVID-19-related restrictions, in-person interactions are limited, so my friends and I have resorted to meeting up online and playing video games to socialize. I have therefore worked on my digital literacy: I re-discovered video games and the myriad of worlds they open. Specifically, I experienced their utility as platforms for socializing, as well as storytelling, depending on the type of video game. I am really interested in Ancient Greece, so I decided to play *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*. The game does an amazing job at storytelling, so even though during this pandemic I haven't read many books, I have read through video games.

Perpetual lockdown as experienced from within temporary contract prison

By Gerlov van Engelenhoven

On 23 December 2020, ING posted their End of the Year Video on Facebook, with the caption: “This year tested all of us in many ways. It demanded so much from everyone, stretching our limits like never before. But through it all you also showed your resilience. Here's to 2021!” The video shows lots of quirky moments with even quirkier captions: a man is lying on the floor, lifting his toddler up and down like a barbell, with the caption: “Finding new gym partners”; someone is filming their baby in a chair next to their

computer, with the caption “Meeting new colleagues”; and then there’s a whole series of selfies taken from people’s highly creative remote work places at home, with the caption “Showing off your new corner office.”

The advertisement is possibly intended to make everyone feel better and offer some emotional support, reminding us that we’re all in this together: “It was a challenging year, but that didn’t stop you from doing your thing”, the captions tell us, before launching into ING’s slogan, “Do your thing.” I think it’s a quite sympathetic message, for a bank, and yet these quirky examples fill me with a sense of dread: the final veil that separated private from public life has been torn away. We are now always at home, therefore we are now always at work. Who needs parental leave if you can take your meetings from your laptop next to your newborn baby? This is scary to me.

To be fair, this breach of the boundary between private and public life did indeed enable me to “do my thing” in 2020. After finishing my PhD in Giessen, Germany, I moved back to Den Haag in the summer of 2020 and started working on temporary contracts as a teacher for three different institutes: the BA programme Politics, Psychology, Law and Economics (PPLE) at the University of Amsterdam, the BA Film and Literary studies at Leiden University, and the BA and MA programs Photography and Society at the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague. For all three of these jobs I had my job interviews either via Zoom or phone call. I did not have to travel to the Netherlands in my best suit, leaving my wife in Giessen with our twins: two one-year-olds, climbing up the walls, breaking things, and endangering themselves in myriad other creative ways. Instead, I discussed didactic and pedagogical questions with my future employers from the relative comfort of my apartment, wearing sweatpants and slippers while my wife and kids visited the park around the corner. After the interviews were finished, I would close my laptop and start cooking dinner for them.

To be very clear, the fact that I have three jobs in three different cities is not a testament to workaholic tendencies or a fear of coherent commitment from my side; rather, it’s a symptom of the sad fate of early career researchers. We’re forced to spread ourselves too thin, and we are granted no stability or future perspective. We jump from temporary contract to temporary contract, structurally forced to be disloyal to our current employer: we have no choice but to always look out for better options that could provide us with more certainty, knowing that we’ll be forced out of our current employment after a maximum of three years. Since the second half of 2020, my colleagues from the Casual Leiden initiative have been working hard to raise awareness about this illogical status quo in order to engender lasting change.

In the meantime, however, I must continue to balance three jobs not only to arrive at full-time employment, which none of my separate employers are offering me, but also to make sure that I don’t end up without work at any point. As such, my Leiden contract starts in January, while my Amsterdam and The Hague contracts start in August and September, respectively: by organizing my employment like this, I ensure that whenever one of my three-year temporary contract cycles runs out I’ll still have others running. It’s pretty crazy, but that’s life for a large majority of young academic teachers today. Forced to work under these unstable circumstances, I often find myself feeling grateful (but to whom?) for the fact that at least I currently don’t have to travel between Amsterdam, Leiden and The Hague five days a week. Instead, I am capable of taking meetings for two of my jobs in a row by simply switching Zoom space. I’ve been able to take my online office hours for students of one university in between teaching my online classes for a different university, all from the comfort of my home. I can walk my kids to daycare and stroll back via the supermarket, sit down at the office next to my bed, open my laptop and start teaching.

However, the gratitude I feel for this situation must be taken with a hard-to-swallow grain of salt. After all, I’m describing a situation in which the seemingly perpetual full-

society lockdown feels like a step forward as compared to “usual life,” in which I would be forced to be all over the country all week long just to make a living. I’m pursuing the elusive carrot of permanent employment and running from the endless stick of my final temporary contract running out, which would stain my CV with at least a half year of unemployment before I’m even allowed to apply for the same job again. But hey, at least I’m running on this treadmill from the comforts of my entirely too small, rented apartment, right? If lockdown is more comfortable to deal with than regular life under academic employment, something is not right.

Works Cited

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Groundhog Day

By Mirjam Rörsch

Studying during corona is hard. All days look the same and you hardly get off the screen. It feels like you’re stuck in *Groundhog Day*. During the first lockdown I was quite happy. Life slowed down a bit, I realized what was important to me and which things I could let go of. I enjoyed not having to go to university; this meant more time at home to do fun stuff. But at a certain point I felt caged. I had to force myself to get off that screen and was extremely bored. Furthermore, the relationships with teachers and other students, which are so crucial, seemed less serious. Sometimes we all just forgot to check in with one another all together, living in our own bubble, minding our own business, which made me feel like I was on an island by myself.

I struggled a lot between September 2020 and January 2021. We had one in-person class but the other eleven hours of weekly classes were completely online, and I was so done with it. I couldn’t focus anymore, did not enjoy any of my classes and just wanted to lay under my blanket until this was all over. Fortunately, after a study break, I could finally breathe again. It was in these weeks that I realized something: this is just a degree I am working on, and it is still valid even if I finish it in two years instead of one. I need to give myself a break sometimes and enjoy life because we are never getting this time back again. This corona time is precious, even if it is not always enjoyable. It is still a part of our lives. We shouldn’t be too hard on ourselves, even if that sometimes means missing a deadline or not being prepared for a lecture. We must stay sane. That should currently be our main focus.

I was Taught to Teach in Turmoil. Here’s How

By Robert van der Wijk

There are those of us, and they are few and far between, that desire to aid our next generation in obtaining an education. People who suffer from this self-flagellatory disorder are often referred to as educators or teachers. The following are thoughts and opinions held by one who aspires to be a teacher. Specifically, they are a recollection of my own personal experiences (and this point warrants stressing) trying to become a teacher through ICLON, Leiden University’s Graduate School of Teaching while schools were closing nationwide.

Too often have I heard fellow students joke that “if all else fails, I’ll just become a teacher!” Little do they realise, I fear, that anyone foolish enough to think of teaching as a backup, is bound to be swallowed up, ground up, and annihilated by the amalgamous monster of parties with a vested interest. Unsurprisingly, teaching requires a rather

significant amount of patience, pedagogical skill, and character that causes an equally significant number of students to quit the track prematurely. So what could being a teaching intern in 2020, in our darkest, corona-filled timeline, possibly have looked like?

In short, it was challenging. As I speak merely for myself, I'll limit myself to the experiences of a language teacher. Those, like myself, who come from a literature-focused track, will find that less than 10% of the skills and knowledge they have attained in their MAs and BAs is even remotely relevant. This means that second to the substantial workload of pedagogical and didactic skill you are expected to attain, you are also re-learning the language you wholeheartedly believed you spoke. This challenge however is absolutely thrilling, and those with enough passion for teaching and a good supervisor and subject coach can and will persevere. Essentially, you're made to go back to the simplest, in a way superficial, version of language. On the more practical side of things, ICLON offers a very hands-on track. You spend most of your time observing or teaching your own classes in schools that are associated with ICLON. This means that before long you will be thrown to the wolves; 11-17 year old wolves with "Instas" and "stickbugs" (don't worry, I don't know what that second one means either). Your ICLON supervisor will offer you as much support as they humanly can, but your day-to-day interaction will primarily be with actual secondary school students and your subject coach.

So what did COVID-19 change regarding this internship? The online classes were well organised from the get-go, and are by far the least intrusive or significant of all the changes. Where matters get frustrating and difficult, however, is in the schools themselves; not only are you often expected to project your voice loudly from within the confines of your muffled mask, it is also impossible to interact with the students in a very meaningful and personal way. Most schools simply aren't large enough to have students so far apart that you, as a teacher, can actually safely manoeuvre into the back of the class. Instead, you might find yourself confined to a desk, marked with high-visibility tape, as though you had accidentally stumbled into a crime scene. You may also find half your class to be missing; confined instead to small little boxes on your not-always-state-of-the-art laptop screen. Hybrid teaching and social distancing certainly take their toll on a job that is inherently close and personal. Things turned even more grim as schools started closing and all but those in their final years were sent home. This made teaching and studying at ICLON incredibly difficult.

It was during this period that the flexibility, empathy and humanity of ICLON shone through most. The supervisors, professors, and supporting staff were all more than understanding as us students collectively panicked and wailed as our prospects of actually teaching dwindled by the day. Assignments were altered to ensure that we could show our progress within the limiting confines of online teaching and social distancing. For most, this was a success, but for others, the additional stress of COVID-19 on top of an already challenging degree proved to be too much. Additionally, schools, drowning in their own problems, regulations, and creative solutions, tended to forget about their interns unless they made themselves known.

To sum up, trying to become a teacher in the time of corona is undeniably challenging. My experience, and I doubt I am alone in this, was extremely educational and worthwhile, but in hindsight, would I recommend this to anyone else? Frankly, I don't know. On one hand, COVID-19 has added significantly more stress and difficulty to this degree, yet on the other hand, stress and chaos are the cornerstones of education; between schedule changes, meetings, and policy changes, no teacher ever enjoys a long period of stability. If my very poor sales pitch has somehow warmed you to the idea of becoming a teacher, let me leave you with these thoughts to help you conquer this trial by fire: be prepared to re-learn everything you thought you knew; be humble, and understand that sometimes there is a reason they're telling you that the thing you want to do won't work. Enjoy every second you get to spend with your students, they are little beings of infinite potential, and their

approval is heart-warming. Be passionate, no matter how often your passion falls on deaf ears. Finally, if you ever plan on doing this, make sure you don't do it for money, fame, or gratitude - you'll be given little to none. Do it because you love it, and do it because it's a bloody good thing to do.

Corona Anxieties

By Dominika Kurowska

I spoke with my sister recently. Concerned, she asked how I am holding up, having not seen the inside of a classroom in over a year and with my social interactions limited to visiting my girlfriend every two weeks. To her surprise, as well as my own, I am holding up rather fine. I told her I am very busy and hardly get bored. She was surprised, and said it is a rare thing these days, but it was no surprise to me: I can keep myself busy fairly easily. In a way, being home all the time and not having to present properly during classes is good for me. I have attention issues; I can't just sit for two hours, taking notes, I won't learn anything that way. Needing more stimulation, I will start scrolling on Instagram or play with the idea of ordering the contents of my cart. When I am home, however, and my camera is off, I can take on a crochet or embroidery project. This way, I can actually handle classes, and multitasking means I save time, which I can spend on commission work: the only potential income I can count on now. When I was seventeen I spent a month home with a leg in my cast, during which I learnt sculpting, jewelry making, and the basics of painting. It was the most creative I've ever been up until now. From one project I go onto the next one, barely managing to tackle piles of fabric, yarn, paint.

My sister was concerned about my anxiety and depression, worried that I might sink deeper into despair. Thing is, I am in a much better place now than I was before 2020. I live constantly in a state of emergency with a dark cloud of fear over my head. That did not change when the pandemic came, but it did gain shape: it was a more tangible economic and health crisis. Now, it also became a collective experience. I no longer feel like the only mad one, like Cassandra seeing the catastrophe before everyone else. If everyone lives in fear, suddenly, it is normal. I may see fewer people now than ever, but I am connected to many more people than I used to be, because now everyone knows how I feel. I am no longer an alien.

The economic crisis will bite me in the ass, I know it. The world is changing around me and I am helpless in face of those changes. I should be terrified, paralysed. I have lived with the thought that a doomsday scenario would be the end of me for as long as I can remember. Yet, I am not only surviving, but in a way I am thriving more than ever. Perhaps this is the magical combo: fear the worst, and when it comes and you're still standing, you'll suddenly be free.

Perhaps. Mastering crochet also helps.

Staring into the Void

By Aafje Baarslag

The day the first lockdown in the Netherlands started was the same day I was supposed to meet my bachelor thesis supervisor to evaluate the mess that I was working with: a topic so specific and hard to research, I didn't know what I was doing. His words from a week prior, whether I should be writing a thesis at all if I could not even properly word my topic, still haunt me to this day. However, I never got to face him as everything, including the smaller University Libraries, closed down. My supervisor, who was not the most keen on digital mediums or any communication at all, never contacted me to schedule another appointment. At least this way, my writing wouldn't be judged as I continued working on my thesis by myself.

It was in this week that the duality of a country in lockdown became most apparent to me. While I was unable to enter my course's special library to borrow a couple of books that I needed for research, the furniture company I work at made the highest profit in ages. After all, working at home caused a surge of interest in desks, chairs, and garden lounge sets; things we had plenty of until the first resupply date was five months away. No one in the world cared that these stores were the prime location for a virus to spread. One customer kept coming back up to four times a week because his chair broke. Another one kept inching closer and closer to take a look at the parasol in my hands while holding one themselves. Week after week I wondered when the stores would finally close and I'd be able to go home and cuddle my dog. That moment never came. Our store only closed for two weeks so we could help the others in the area. It almost felt like the virus did not exist.

In those times I learned it was easier to neglect my university assignments and take on the extra hours that were needed at work instead. After all, no one would miss me in an online class where connection issues were more and more present (a fair excuse too when your entire neighborhood of a couple thousand students is suddenly relying on one poor internet point). Working forty hours a week, skipping classes and writing papers in whatever spare time there was seemed like a much better idea than trying to follow the final classes of my degree. Unsurprisingly, my hobbies suffered significantly from the extra stress I threw upon myself.

I didn't talk to my thesis supervisor again until late May, two months after that planned pre-lockdown meeting. Even then, it was no more than short emails and feedback, most of which referred to the old sources mentioned while all newer material was kept behind the locked doors of the university. I will always wonder if the grade he gave me was a sign of pity given the circumstances.

A year later, the situation remains almost exactly the same. The libraries continue to stay closed while stores open up again. The main difference this time being that I do talk to the supervisor of my current thesis and my hours at work mostly sit at a simple seven a week. I do not wish for a repeat of last year. As much as I love my job I prefer to sit in a library with my thesis materials in hand. But I must bitterly conclude that it seems more important to flood the stores than to open up the usually empty study halls. It seems I have thrown away my tuition fee to stare into the void of my laptop at home to end my final year at the University. This should have been one of the best times of one's life, and I can only hope the students after me can truly experience that.

Pets & Pyjamas

By Michèle Hoekstra

Studying during COVID-19 has been nothing short of a challenge. Facing the same four walls every single day while staring at the same computer screen is not exactly stimulating to the senses. Not being able to visit the University Library or study together with friends while discussing what classes we liked. Trying to stay focused in online lectures while your housemates decide to vacuum-clean the entire house, your neighbours are in a never-ending renovation and the doorbell rings non-stop for package deliveries. No, studying at home has not been easy. It has been lonely, boring, demanding, distracting, and most of all: stressful. The study load has seemed heavier than ever and motivation has been down the drain. When my computer decided to stop functioning I thought I was ready to throw in the towel. But with literal blood, sweat, tears, and litres of coffee I've survived another year of being a student. And I can say with pride that I have spent most of those student days in my pyjamas looking at all the pets that came to visit my classes through fellow students' screens.