

William & Mary Law School

## William & Mary Law School Scholarship Repository

---

Popular Media

Faculty and Deans

---

12-17-2020

### Together and Apart in an Online Classroom

Laura A. Heymann

*William & Mary Law School*, laheym@wm.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarship.law.wm.edu/popular\\_media](https://scholarship.law.wm.edu/popular_media)



Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#), [Legal Education Commons](#), and the [Online and Distance Education Commons](#)

---

#### Repository Citation

Heymann, Laura A., "Together and Apart in an Online Classroom" (2020). *Popular Media*. 534.  
[https://scholarship.law.wm.edu/popular\\_media/534](https://scholarship.law.wm.edu/popular_media/534)

Copyright c 2020 by the authors. This article is brought to you by the William & Mary Law School Scholarship Repository.

[https://scholarship.law.wm.edu/popular\\_media](https://scholarship.law.wm.edu/popular_media)

# Laura A. Heymann

Follow

4 Followers

About

## Together and Apart in an Online Classroom

Collapsing the distinction between “real” and “virtual.”



Laura A. Heymann 4 days ago · 5 min read



Photo by [Compare Fibre](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Like many law professors across the country, I taught my classes remotely this semester via Zoom, after half a semester doing so in the spring. One class this fall consisted of about 70 first-year students, for whom a remote law school education was the only one they knew; the other class the same number of upper-level students, some of whom had spent, by the end of the semester, as much time learning the law remotely as they had in the classroom. I wondered whether this experience would feel like a simulation — that, in the end, we had provided something sufficiently akin to, but not quite the same as, a real law school experience.

What many of us had known as the “real” experience took place in the bounded space of a physical classroom. When students entered the room at 3:30 p.m., we saw them, for the next 75 minutes, as Torts students, the walls separating them from the students learning Criminal Law next door. Their assigned seats created a fixed mini-community of the students surrounding them — the beneficiaries of pre- and post-class chatter, the hushed whisper or scribbled note asking what page we were on. We professors stood at the front of the room, behind the podium that held our notes, and while we did our best to move around the room, every attempt to position ourselves to face some students inevitably resulted in our turning away from others. The physical space, it seemed, united us through geography in a shared, if not always optimal, experience.

On Zoom, that physically bounded space became disaggregated into 70 different digital spaces, each in its own little frame, brought together on a single computer monitor. We were at once part of the same experience and attending 70 variations of the same class. For some students, my questions sounded against the backdrop of a construction worker jackhammering outside their house or a child asking for help with a school assignment. For others, their slower Internet connections meant that they heard everything half a beat later. Some were sitting in comfortable desk chairs; others were on the floor, leaning against a bed; still others shared their learning spaces with pets, children, roommates, or family members. As Jeannie Suk Gersen has thoughtfully observed, there was no front of the room anymore to set me apart — my window was the same size as everyone else’s, all in proximity to others at any given moment only by the happenstance of Zoom’s arrangement.

The nature of a Zoom teaching space came with its own constraints. Our practice of staying muted when we weren't speaking meant that we couldn't hear shared laughter or notes of puzzlement when a comment didn't land the way the speaker thought it might. And although I tried to glean facial reactions across two screens, it was decidedly not the same as looking around a classroom in a single swoop of my head. But in some ways, the discussions were even better once we were released from the confines of the physical space. When I was talking, I was looking at my camera, directly at each student, my back turned to no one. Freed from constantly scanning the room looking for encouraging nods, worried about filling the space to reach the students in the back row, I was able to introduce difficult conversations more thoughtfully. Students who might have been fearful of speaking up in a large lecture hall could likewise look directly at the camera and forget about how many faces were staring back at them. Our individual solitude often caused us, I think, to become more reflective.

I was fortunate in several respects. While our house isn't huge, I was able to use our guest room as a dedicated teaching space with no distractions beyond the occasional motorcycle revving on the street outside. My computer is only a year old, I had all the technology I needed, and our Internet connection was consistently strong. My students were not all equally fortunate, and a few of them faced considerable struggles this semester.

Nonetheless, there were times when, even with these inequities, the technology enabled conversations that likely would not have happened in a physical classroom. Students could engage in thoughtful, candid discussions without feeling as if they were on stage. The beats of silence that accompany a student's gathering their thoughts seemed to weigh less heavily online. A student who confessed during one class session that he doubted his analytical abilities immediately saw a stream of supportive messages in the chat. Students who were feeling vulnerable could participate in class discussions with their cameras off, when, in a physical classroom, they might have chosen to miss class altogether. Students whose quieter voices might have become lost in a large physical classroom could now be heard just as well as their louder classmates. And when I saw a bunch of stressed faces at the midpoint of the semester, I asked the students to set the chat to private message me with one word that described how they were feeling at that moment. I saw an immediate string

of adjectives — everything from “hopeful” to “unsure” to “anxious” — that I was then able to convey back to the class so that they knew they weren’t alone as they felt.

One session particularly stands out: We were talking in the first-year class about the challenges of assigning a monetary value to the psychic harm of having unwittingly been made to undergo something strictly forbidden by one’s religious beliefs, such as consuming a prohibited food or receiving an unwanted blood transfusion. For many of the students who were participating in the discussion, their comments were respectful but hypothetical — these kinds of religious tenets were not something with which they (or I) had direct experience. And then, wonderfully, a student posted in the chat that they *could* speak to such beliefs from family experience if anyone had any questions. Seeing that comment during the discussion enabled me to invite the student to contribute to what immediately became a richer conversation for us all. In a physical classroom, I’m not sure that hand would ever have been raised.

I don’t know what it will feel like when we return to the physical classroom — what used to feel like the “real” classroom experience. At the very least, I had thought that when we were all in a physical classroom together, we were having something of a shared experience. But, of course, we were always having 70 variations of the same experience, brought together in a single frame.

[Zoom](#)[Law School](#)[Online Teaching](#)