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#ZOOMFAIL: HYPER-MEDIATION AND THE DOCUMENTING OF PEDAGOGICAL FAILURE ON TIKTOK DURING COVID-19

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Abstract: The realities of COVID-19 demanded of instructors, students, and classrooms a particularly onerous task. What had once been a spatialized exchange between instructors and students turned into a virtual encounter where time was exhausted, assuring that technologies worked. Microphones went unmuted while one directed their attention to the disembodied images of others. While adjustments were made, one major shift remained, individuals could more easily record and distribute (often unknowingly) their virtual classroom experiences for others to see. Amongst the sharing of these experiences includes the TikTok trend of the #zoomfail wherein users shared both personal failures on their part to adhere to the unique rules of online meetings. Participants also observed the failures of their instructors to adapt pedagogically to the exclusively online world (proctoring tests with easily searchable answers). In response, this paper explores the sharing and remediation of these failures via TikTok to better understand the hyper-mediation of education in an increasingly online world. In particular, the paper argues that while many of these failures point out significant disconnects between students and their instructors, the failures also illuminate generative new ways of doing education wholly aware of the fragility of classroom dynamics. By highlighting critical examples of the #zoomfail hashtag on TikTok from March of 2020 through the Spring of 2021, this paper shows how the participants many of whom were unknowingly having their failures shared globally, affirms a need for a pedagogy embracing failures as a site of learning.

The realities of COVID-19 demanded of instructors, students, and classrooms a particularly onerous task. What had once been a spatialized exchange between instructors and students turned

into a virtual encounter where time was exhausted, assuring that technologies worked. While adjustments were made, one major shift remained, individuals could more easily record and distribute (often unknowingly) their virtual classroom experiences for others to see. Amongst the sharing of these experiences includes the TikTok trend of the #zoomfail wherein users shared sociotechnical failures. Some failures included confusion around adhering to the unique rules of online meetings, such as not turning off a camera when entering a private space. Other failures reflected the inability of instructors to adapt pedagogically to the exclusively online world (proctoring texts with easily searchable answers or recording lectures without having assured that those lectures were edited). In other instances, professors merely failed to imagine how their instructional delivery might be recorded and shared with others. A blatant example of this comes in a TikTok by @derrickyang titled "Poor professor doesn't even know." The video involves reading names for a group project by a professor, including the raunchy pun "TEAM MIKEHAWK." The moment in the video passes, and the professor makes no acknowledgment of the pun or that they have said it. The sharing of this video evokes a particular way students who now found themselves taking courses online confronted their professors' inability to retain a sense of order and demeanor within classes. Such hypermediation of the college classroom shows how students use TikTok to document the challenges of online learning through splintering professorial authority, even if humorous.

In response, this paper explores the sharing and remediation of these failures on the social media app TikTok to better understand the hypermediation of education in an increasingly online world. The paper argues that these mediated failures indicate a significant disconnect between students and their instructors when facilitating pedagogy within an increasingly capitalistic educational landscape. As a new challenge to the order of power within teaching spaces, these TikTok videos navigate and acknowledge the fragility of classroom dynamics, both virtual and in person. By highlighting critical examples of #zoomfail TikToks, this paper illuminates how the participants, many of whom were unknowingly having their failures shared globally, affirm a need to embrace failure as a site of pedagogy (Halberstam 14).

Further, by utilizing the personal, the paper argues that this shared sense of collective failure proved inspiring and affirming rather than stigmatizing and alienating. Ultimately, through a discursive exploration of "#zoomfail" and its mediation on TikTok, the paper argues for a more knowing embrace of the mediation of the classroom. Such mediations decenter power

relations and offer a frame for a more careful and caring pedagogy in education going forward. The paper first turns to what COVID-19 did to education in terms of technological mediation and what it illuminated about the expectations of education in an increasingly digital and capitalistically fueled educational ecosystem.

COVID-19, Education, and University's Online Expectations/Pedagogical Affordances

While the realities of the COVID-19 virus and its global spread lingered early within 2020, American universities began to shift their gaze to the impending spread of the pandemic by the middle of March. With many universities holding out hope for the virus to dissipate, students scrambled back from Spring Break, and professors contemplated what it meant for them to prepare to go entirely virtual. Emergent scholarship on the reactions to this dramatic shift offered cautionary reminders that the abrupt online educational demands would severely impact individuals already facing diverse learning challenges and those whose non-university living spaces lacked the necessary infrastructure to meaningfully engage in online learning (Smalley, 2021). Between taxing at-home internet requirements and the normative structuring of many classroom assignments and exercises, initial hiccups existed as administrators attempted to envision a "new normal" for collegiate life post-pandemic.

As various fields of thought pointed out, the discourse of returning to a "New Normal" suggested a presumption that the aforementioned immediate failures were due exclusively to COVID-19's encroachment into educational spaces. The immediate embrace of normalcy illuminated universities' investment, like other capitalist-driven organizations, in order and dominance. Such demands responded to a moment where their utility and value were rightly questioned (Timotijevic, 3). The rolling out of university technology, in particular, reflects this shift as many prioritized the technologies necessary for virtual pedagogy and only after this considered what it would mean to engage in pedagogical practices in a highly mediated world. Such adaptability on the part of American universities, while impressive and, to some degree, inspiring, rendered explicit an ongoing and incessant shift by an increasingly profit-driven world of academia. COVID-19 laid bare a desire to commodify education for quantifiable purposes at the expense of quality. The general lack of student, faculty, and staff communication and transparency provided during the shift online matches a practice of "neoliberal sleight of hand"

wherein an assurance of continued production of capital outweighed the well-being, safety, and support of those making such labor possible (Kouritzin et al., 237).

Simply put, the expectation to make virtual education work necessitated two things. First, students accept the economic loss of other college experiences outside of the classroom with little to no attempt to recoup those losses back to students. Second, it asked that faculty and instructors (many who were overworked graduate students or underpaid adjuncts) replicate the classroom experience while also implicitly making up for the extracurricular losses the university failed to provide. Going to college suddenly became only about going to class, and going to those classes occurred far from university premises.

Such an immediate, albeit less than transparent shift online, made clear that the university could support a pandemic learning space in the ways it had always supported education by assuring that their accreditations remained in place and that learning outcome retained their traditional approaches. Anecdotally, this looked like me attempting to aid students in online classes while making use of my spotty internet connection only to cancel classes due to not getting online connections to work. When raising this concern to my administrators and what it might mean for my teaching evaluations, I was reminded that such evaluations were a necessity of accreditation and that I should do my best to make the educational experience worthwhile. I was told this simultaneously to being offered minimal promise of teaching or work beyond that semester. Again, the university ensured that it made good on its expectation to teach without clarifying how that support manifested itself. On a national level, this systemic misdirection of technologically driven support, without a matching pedagogical system, reflected the onboarding instructors' strain, many of whom had never taught a course online. This onboarding further occurred with technology that though relevant to standards of online pedagogy, failed to reflect the uses of and engagement with technologies popular and familiar to youth, many of which were college-aged. Crucially, the approach prioritized the implementation of “technological” needs with little concern for the “social” implementation of such changes (Squire, 6). Again, the questions became how to facilitate technological recreations of classrooms in mediated ways, but no focus on how to adjust pedagogy occurred with this mediation. For example, media studies instructors faced the daunting task of screening media in spaces like Zoom, where reliant streaming sources such as Netflix became useless as copyright blocking software initially made it difficult for instructors to share their screen. This particular failure became a site of

technological frustration and not one reflective of an over-reliance on instructional ease via Netflix at the expense of library resources for streaming media, or the utilization of open-source, perhaps less canonical media. Failure here suggests something about not the challenges emergent within instruction during a forced virtual semester. Instead, it illuminates how intertwined pre-pandemic pedagogy was in maintaining order, engaging in canonical lecture-style instruction, and assuming access to technology to be a shared, universal experience. The inability to stream media or to proctor examinations highlight the realities of Zoom-based learning, but the counter discursive role of mediating Zoom-based pedagogical failures (i.e., #zoomfails) highlight the way a social practice of non-radical pedagogy had become normalized to the point that many instructors felt it acceptable to change nothing about their instructional style outside of doing so across the span of computer screens. As such, it raises questions about more significant presumptions related to pedagogy as a practice and the role of failure as an ideological stance.

Failure as Pedagogical

A long thread of queer theory attends to the role of failure as a generative site of exploration. Jack Halberstam identifies failure as something uniquely queer. In his social analysis of failure, he argues that failure exists as an oft-marked negative space within imagined meritocracies. By reframing failure as a site of interrogation and deliberate occupation, Halberstam imagines how meritocracy fails to address systemic societal failures, often at the intersections of historically marginalized identities such as race, gender, sex, and sexuality (Halberstam, 4). Halberstam asks how we might reimagine acts of failure as agentic and further counters a deficit framework of thinking within societal spaces such as schools wherein failure is assumed the individual's fault and not a signal of the failure of a system. In a wholly unsurprising turn, Halberstam evokes pedagogy as a site in which failure is often attributed to students and not instructors, schools, and educational ideologies. Leaning deliberately on Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Halberstam examines how pedagogy as existing within late-capitalist, neoliberal forms of American education "demands the presence of a master and proposes a mode of learning by which the students are enlightened by the superior knowledge, training, and intellect" of their instructor (Halberstam, 13). In this success-driven model, the only way for education to function is to assume that knowledge distribution occurs through an established authority graciously sharing their time and labor with the ignorant. Proof of that

sharing occurs through quantifiable and ideally universalized outcomes of knowledge acquisition (i.e., standardized testing). Through literary analysis, Halberstam asserts that these models upheld by the idea of success at any cost (think No Child Left Behind mantra) perpetuate failure in students without ever examining how and why students might choose to fail.

Before COVID-19, such a sense of failure within education, especially at the collegiate level, proved quite rampant. Models of failure, of course, ignored the hostility and outright inaccessibility of education to minoritized populations. As but one example of this exclusion is Z. Nicollazo's exploration of transgender students and their navigation of a cisnormative college landscape riddled with deadnaming, misgendering, and biological essentialism within and outside of their classrooms (Nicollazo, 91). The reality that transgender students face inequity suggests a problem easily addressable. However, as Nicollazo and others have made clear, the onus for changing systems within universities to be inclusive of these populations almost always falls upon minoritized students (Weiser et al. 329). A pre-pandemic example of this would be the navigating of one's pronouns within a classroom setting. Choices to make respectful use of preferred names and pronouns while legitimized via inclusive training such as SafeZone training rarely reflects actual policy at a university level marking the concern for inclusion as rhetorical. Online-only education exacerbated challenges; it did not produce challenges anew.

I found myself having to be extra diligent to ensure the use of correct names and pronouns when students were often logging in from their computers at home and using family Zoom accounts to avoid having to out themselves to their parents or guardians. In turn, I avoided requiring any displays of pronoun signage or consistency in Zoom account names, but this meant that I had to constantly rely on memory and diligence that offered little mitigation from the technologies provided me. Here the failure to have a consistent way to signal one's name or pronouns was not a failure on the part of students, nor was it a failure of the technologies used to engage in online pedagogy. Instead, it was part of the over-reliance of institutions to address immediate technological demands with little or no preparation for the social impact of such a shift. The pronoun anecdote was a failure I navigated by myself as an instructor. I chose to engage with this and at no point was given guidance on how to assure that I was making safe my students' needs and respecting their identities.

Additionally, while students were asked to work from their homes, I had multiple students admit to attending class, keenly aware of the irony, in the closets of their homes so they

could be out as queer and engage in class. This reality illuminated for me, a queer person myself, the complex ways that I had built safety and intimacy on a face-to-face basis, and while it was challenging to have students not verbally or visually participate, their refusal to do so in some instances was not a failure on my part nor theirs. Instead, their engagement at a distance was agentic and arguably even a protective practice on their parts. As will be discussed, this navigation of classroom participation informs how #zoomfails function so much as it clarifies the role instructors took in controlling or attempting to assert power within the classroom, often failing to realize that such dynamics had been destabilized. As a result of this destabilization significant opportunities for counter discursive participation emerged during this moment of hypermediated education.

Social Media as Counter Discourse

Discursive power perpetuates solely to benefit institutions and their perseverance as authorities (Foucault, 1966/2005; Habermas, 1985/1990). Universities, through discursive power, reify exclusionary actions while their public personas communicate an acceptance of inclusivity and diversity (Ahmed, 57). Scholars challenge this, noting that for individuals experiencing marginalization, their presence in doing work to change diversity is routinely tokenized. Individuals existing within these spaces produce dialogue and support one another via counter-discursive practices such as storytelling and affirmational support (Harney & Moten, 38). Storytelling exists as an action, which prepares another for what they might experience (here systemic oppression), while the practice of affirmational support provides assurance that individuals are not imagining their disconcerting experiences. Though these two actions do not cover the breadth of counter-discursive tools made available to this community, it does show that actions are in response to events, spaces, and ideologies left unaccounted for when reported to those holding institutional power. Essential to this always existing counter-discourse has been the rise of social media as a site to challenge institutions in both direct and subversive ways. Press releases, administrative decrees, and policy statements that could once circulate rather ubiquitously without external transparency became subject to larger social discussion. Many faculty and students who once felt silenced in airing their frustrations to university administrators now had methods to engage in more transparent dialogue with parties outside of university echo chambers. Given the role of increased mediation, social media has become a unique version of

participatory culture within US academia, wherein structural failures become subject to a more public scrutiny. Additionally, this increased use of social media as a site of counter discourse builds upon questions of hypermediation in so much as those recording and sharing suggest a keen awareness of their impact. Posts, images, and content distribution across social media results in multiple moments circulation and redistribution which more rapidly than any methods of deterrence a university might dream up. Take as a parallel example of similar concern emerging within test distributions during the height of COVID-19. Many instructors found that their course materials were being distributed online via multiple types of file sharing websites, meaning that a student interested in cheating could easily find the exam questions to a given course. Moreover, since the distribution often happened across multiple sites and through multiple accounts, locating the original perpetrator proves incredibly difficult (Lancaster & Cotarlan, 2021). Like the production of counterdiscursive media about classroom experiences, the sharing of assignment answers preceded COVID-19. Therefore, new instantiations of hypermediation are quite simply advances in social media rendering more visible moments that destabilize power and control. The problem in both instances was not simply that individuals without discursive power found a method to produce mediated responses, but that these responses once distributed could continue to expand into perpetuity and adapt to new media landscapes, thus producing moments of hypermediation. Social media, in particular, became a site for destabilizing the “unquestioning acceptance of hierarchical knowledge” (Jenkins, 285). An evocative example came by way of the global “I, Am, Too” social media campaign wherein students of color at universities challenged evocations of diversity values on the part of their universities by pointing out the gross inequities in diverse populations, lack of faculty of color, or even the experiences of racism they faced by the same institutions purporting to be devoid of such racism (George Mwangi et al., 154). Equally, such use of social media operates to challenge the normative image of what a college or university experience looks like, especially critical of its whitewashing of college spaces (Williams et al., 2019) or in helping to illuminate the realities of student suicides within the college (Saha et al., 2018). Such disparate examples provide insight into how social media can challenge repeated attempts by institutions to normalize things that ought to cause frustration or concern and require, at times, systemic change. Social media, of course, is not a cure-all and can prove equally detrimental to challenging discursive power. Take a social media application such as YikYak, which prided itself as possessing anonymity to those

posting on its site. While seen initially as producing multiple counter-discursive potentials, especially given its link to universities (Bayne et al., 2019). In multiple cases, students utilizing the application understood the anonymity to be a means with which to prop up and distribute offensive sentiments, one's directed at students of color, female students, and LGBTQIA+ student populations amongst others students (Armstrong et al., 2017). Further, anonymity is not always necessary for a social media account for perpetuating normative ideologies at the intersections of homophobic, sexist, and racist sentiment often exist within university spaces and deploy university iconography in doing so (Wagner and Weiser, 2020). The question becomes how such technologies offer evolving and generative ways to reframe discourse towards a method of collective accountability. It is within this understanding of technology and mediated counter-discourse that this paper turns towards its analysis methods.

Utilizing TikTok for Critical Discourse Analysis

This paper explores the counter-discursive power of #zoomfail within the short-video sharing platform TikTok. TikTok emerged within China in 2016 before becoming a popular medium within 2018 as the application broke US markets. (Schwedel, 2018). TikTok saw a meteoric rise in use during the onset of the pandemic. The application witnessed an increase in use of roughly seventy-five percent and had thirty-three times more users than some of its nearest application-based competitors (Koetsier, 2020). TikTok is an example of emergent technology in that its implementation produces “a significant break in the way individuals, groups, and society as a whole conduct their everyday activities” and “add[s] new dimensions to our understanding of the social world” (Hesse-Biber, 4). TikTok further operates within the paradigm of information and communication technologies (ICTs), given its paradigm shifting role as a tool for information sharing including its unique language and communicative expectations. For example, while multiple video-based sharing applications to date have had features wherein one could quote, respond to, or edit together narrative onto one's video, the application's “stitch” and “duet” features produce a particularly rich site of hypermediation. Each refers to the ability to take a preexisting piece of content and adapt the media new. In some cases, this means merely providing a side-by-side video of a content creator reacting to the video, whereas other instances include a person adding text to denote their opinion about a video. Additionally, many individuals merely take preexisting content with a high degree of virality and simply repots it,

hoping to leverage the video's success to boost viewership (Anderson, 2021). While certainly not dissimilar to something like a YouTube reaction video or Twitter's quote retweet feature, the expansiveness, and seemingly untraceable ways this type of sharing expands outward makes mediation all the more important. TikTok allows one to already stitched video meaning that a video can often have multiple layers and collaborators, resulting in multiple instances of potential viral success, as well as visible examples of additive responses (MaKinnon et al., 2021; Kaye, 2022). It is the additive nature of TikTok that makes it a particular unique venue for hypermediation, once again due to a new level of participatory interaction, especially given its ability to circumvent formal channels of institutional dialogue, while growing at a rate with which locating the origins means engaging in exhaustive, potentially costly, digital forensics. Simply, the plethora of media, even in response to one single video, means the visibility of a narrative always grows rather than decreases in mediated potentialities.

TikTok offers new methods for counter-discursive communication, given both its abundance of content and intensified focus on user-driven content sharing. While the algorithmic functionality of the application remains somewhat unclear to those outside of the company, the emergent analysis of the trends and practices of the application's users offers insight into the application's unique features. TikTok affords new ways of social engagement within and against authority. Early uses of the application included predominantly younger users creating imagined spaces to speak against the frustrations faced by authority figures such as school teachers and parents, often at the intersection of marginalized queer identities (Avdeef, 12). Further, content analysis of political discussions suggests that the platform often affords younger Democratic-leaning users a means to challenge what they see as oppressive and often offensive discourse produced by their offline Republican-leaning family and community. (Medina Serrano et al., 2020). Linking this study to Avdeef's work, one can build theoretical connections between how young users of TikTok produce methods of challenging normative ideologies within cross-application communication that affirm identities while also collectively challenging discourses aimed at delegitimizing their own identities and values. Of course, the opposite actions exist on the application, with incredibly vitriolic and hurtful communication iterations occurring (Weiman and Masri, 2020).

While several corporations and brands utilize the application for advertising, university TikTok accounts remain primarily non-existent. Such a lack of presence is more than likely

explained by universities' generally slow adoption rate of new social media applications, which often only invest in social media-driven communication years after an application has gained popularity (Coleman et al., 422). Despite TikTok producing record-breaking trends of use, it exists as a uniquely unsurveilled site by institutions. The counter-discursive narratives of #zoomfails become particularly interesting as they signal the failure of institutions, often with direct reference to the university or college in question. To be clear, this is not to suggest that professors themselves were not combatting such failures or offering guidance on how to navigate such failures. Indeed, many instructors took to TikTok to provide guidelines and methods to adapt to an all-online landscape and how to avoid their own potential moments of failing on Zoom (McAleavy et al., 2021). It also is not to ignore that many instructors leaned into the hypermediation of TikTok in imaginative ways, including creating pedagogical approaches to teaching through TikTok (Putri, 2021). Instead, this critical discourse analysis centers the way structural failures emergent within #zoomfail spaces illuminate a methods of destabilizing not only presumptions of normativity between students and instructors, but how the larger framing of universities ignoring such failures as always already present. Again, TikTok was a tool ripe for pedagogical potential, as shown by its myriad utilizations, however, TikTok exists equally as a means to produce mediated counter discourses against egregious pedagogical missteps. Further, videos distributed via TikTok operated to illuminate the far too human challenges faced by teachers and students who were collectively asked to replicate in-person college life, while the world around them caved to the strains and stressors of an ongoing pandemic.

Further, while the university can respond or attempt to control the narrative, the virality of a TikTok (proves quite unwieldy upon emergence. The #zoomfail TikTok's discussed exist within the window of March 2020 through August of 2021, a relatively small timeframe, but one that made clear the attempts by instructors and students alike to orient themselves to the impossible task of adapting to what their university leaders were calling the "new normal." In particular, this set of TikToks disrupts how rhetorics of return to normal (despite no clear sense of a pandemic end date) failed to address precisely how abnormal online pedagogy became. The examples counter the entire notion that university pedagogical spaces were ever normal, by elucidating two key realities. First, it called attention to the ways that non-mediation of classrooms afforded instructors the ability to retain control over their classrooms through containing failures to the confines of one's physical classroom. Second, it laid bare the daily

struggles of professors and students alike who could hide traces of those realities by relying on avoiding using their own personal space and technology in classroom spaces. This approach to destabilizing normativity within the engagements of forced online teaching engages in analyzing how the videos' visual, audio, and text-based rhetorics establish notions of normative power and work to either deconstruct or challenge them.

Given that this analysis focuses on the students' interpretation yet is written by a person who actively had to teach during the shift to online-only pedagogy, I will include my own correlating experiences with the #zoomfail videos discussed. While I, thankfully, did not experience the failures rendered below to such an extreme degree, I did face hiccups, challenges, and a few very human slip-ups while attempting to make sense of the demands for which I was wholly unprepared, even as my university assured me that I had their unwavering support. As such, the analysis also includes a series of autoethnographic reflections on my part, primarily examining the way my own experiences with Zoom classrooms equally challenged my notions of instructor and student relationships and the role of pedagogy as a liberatory practice. Following similar scholarship, this project hopes to be "critical, vulnerable, situational, personal, eye-opening and relevant" to the ways that "cultural identities intersect in our everyday lives" (Boylorn and Orbe,13). It equally attends to my visibility as an openly identifying genderqueer person, informing how I engaged in pedagogical practices before and during Zoom-based teaching. In particular, it engages in critical autoethnography to prioritize my experiences and those of my students as well, as we equally felt frustrated with the limits thrust on us by a slow-to-change academic reality beyond the mere assertion that we use online meeting spaces. Further, it is a critical digital autoethnography as it attends to how even before COVID-19, my identity as a millennial graduate student was one whose existence was "highly mediated or digitalized, causing [me] to be surrounded by a media and digital ecology" (Atay, 269). In light of such details, Zoom pedagogy is a microcosm of a more prominent way in which my pedagogical practices always possess the potential to be hypermediated, whether through the persistence of something like RateMyProfessor or the recording of class lectures via Snapchat both which preceded the unique experiences of teaching entirely online during COVID-19.

The following sections will consist of three examples of #zoomfail TikTok's, with each highlighting three components. First, a discussion of the structure of TikTok, including visual components and relevant textual comments and hashtags. Second, an exploration of questions the

video raises about pedagogy and the relationship between students and their instructor. Third, each will include my reflection on similar experiences navigating Zoom-based learning and consider how, if at all, I addressed these issues in my own pedagogical spaces.

#zoomfail TikTok 1: Technology and Failures of Inclusivity

The analysis of #zoomfail TikTok begins with a markedly disconcerting example. While participation, or lack thereof, became a common site of frustration for professors, the choice to demand that students engage in tangible ways became an individualized practice. Some instructors shifted to entirely lecture-driven formats, while others bemoaned having to talk to gray avatars (Blum, 2020). During this moment, students took to media to record their own frustrations with these shifts in pedagogical delivery, by utilizing TikTok to call attention to the inability of their own instructors to adapt to, let alone support, the instability of the new instructional landscape. An expectation for power dynamics to exist within the hypermediated classroom during an all online COVID-19 moment was almost universally undone given the ability for participants to discretely record and distribute footage from their classrooms. No undoing was quite as unsettling, however, as the video shared by @zizi_underwater. According to the video description, it involves a community college professor within California attempting to demand that one of his students participate in class, suggesting that her lack of participation is somehow rooted in antagonism. As the professor attempts to get the student to participate, she repeatedly notes that she has difficulty hearing and is trying her best within the situation. Further frustrated, the professor suggests that the student and himself have a "private Zoom meeting" to discuss the issue. Another student attempts to intervene and explain that the student has a hearing impairment which makes it difficult for her to respond as she relies on a translator. Refusing to accept this claim, the professor then attacks the other student asking if they serve as the translator for the student. When they reply negatively, the professor shifts back to the student, he was earlier berating and humiliating her. As multiple comments observe relational to the video, the frustration comes not from his ignorance of her situation but the professor's refusal to understand that a student's lack of participation might not be anything ill-willed. Tellingly, one commentator goes so far as to note, "this is sadly how this is for deaf and hard of hearing students," and that such issues are not unique to the Zoom-based world of learning. The professor in question was put on paid leave due to his inability to accommodate the student

(Steinbuch, 2021). Almost any viewer of the alarming video can reflect on how it runs counterintuitive to the requirements by universities to be accommodating to students with differing abilities.

This failure is perhaps an extreme case within the larger canon of #zoomfail videos. However, it demonstrates how much of the failure, though mediated via technology, had little to do with technology. The professor insists that a student's failure to respond to him is antagonistic. Inquiries about the student's ability to use the Zoom features for discussion are never explored, and even after classmates raise concerns around their colleagues' diverse needs, the instructor shifts blame to them rather than acknowledging his misgivings. While viewers are not afforded a broader context to this interaction, it suggests a gross oversight by the instructor and perhaps even his university to provide guidelines for adjusting online pedagogy for diverse learning styles. The video shows quite clearly a considerable degree of understanding not only of the use of Zoom for turn-based dialogue, but it further suggests a collective understanding of how advocacy ought to work in such spaces. Additionally, while it is impossible to know, there is the potential that the professor in question possesses a record of confrontation with students with disabilities, however, prior engagements lacked a mediated component wherein students could document and distribute the failure, forcing both the instructor and the university to be held accountable for an action that would otherwise have been silenced or dismissed as hearsay. Commenters on the video note that if they were in the class, they would be "yelling through their microphone" to stop the professor's ignorant tirades. A #zoomfail TikTok such as this one illuminates a latent priority of universities to make classroom spaces normal in so much as a pre-pandemic normal upheld ableist exchanges such as this one to perpetuate. While consent to mediate this footage is undoubtedly a legal gray area, the students visibly and publicly calling out a professor remains worth celebrating. Anecdotes proliferate on college campuses of similar incidents occurring by professors with tenure ridiculing students for their diverse educational needs and use their position as an instructor to deny differently-abled students and those advocating for them a means to redress such ableism. This TikTok highlights the reality of what this newest hypermediation means for pedagogical spaces. The video displays how affirmational advocacy occurs between students, but more specifically it provides a venue for students to air grievances beyond an audience (university administrators) who might work to protect the external perception of the university as inclusive, rather than reprimand an instructor for ableist

behaviors. Additionally, through It also suggests that if professors are unwilling to shift towards pedagogical inclusivity, and in this case, legally mandated practices, then students might seek out extralegal means for reporting inequities. Specifically, this type of mediated approach to social injustices mirrors a more extensive practice of disclosure within social media spaces that challenge institutional power and the subsequent attempts by those institutions to stifle acknowledgment of such continued inequities. The counter-discursive maneuvering occurring here on behalf of marginalized positionalities relational to institutions produces a space for visible accountability, particularly evocative, due to the possession of an archive of evidence (Meijer, 2003).

The instructor within the video presumes a student's ability to succeed to be reflective only of direct verbal affirmation. Calling back to Halberstam here, the failure of the student to participate *correctly* assumed certain truths about participation informed by ableist pedagogical privileges. I found the shift to an entirely online format also challenged my radical and inclusive pedagogical presumptions as they tied my own instruction of a course titled Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality. While I noted that I needed to include transcriptions and multiple forms of access to lectures, I attempted pretty idyllically to transfer all of my assignments and in-class activities into online distribution. One such assignment included having students listen to the Against Me! album *Transgender Dysphoria Blues* and engage with how the lead singer uses the semi-biographical album to explore her own coming out as a transgender woman. Before the abrupt shift online, this particular assignment was met with generally positive feedback to students who found the inclusion of textual analysis of music decidedly refreshing. However, when transferring the listening assignment online, several students pointed out that the album, whose punk rock influences were loud and often abrasive, produced within them an inability to focus. I had multiple students point out their challenges with focusing on this particular assignment due to things like being autistic or having ADHD, which provided for me a reminder of my own presumptions around medium accessibility, here in the case of recorded audio. Instead of challenging the students' assertions of this issue or insisting that they push through and produce work on the album, I worked with them to find alternative assignments that they could focus on relational to the unique demands of having to do such an assignment. It became clear to me that even innovative and student-oriented pedagogy within extenuating circumstances could produce ableism. However, in the weeks leading up to the reality that I would be teaching online, while I

was given multiple guides on how to transfer lectures online or to shift assignments due to differing degrees of internet access, at no point was there an institutional discussion of alterations one might need to make for inclusive access. My experience was one of co-facilitation with students who were experiencing new stressors to already challenging teaching. Unlike the instructor in the first #zoomfail TikTok, I saw this as a chance to adapt from my failure from a pedagogical standpoint rather than as a moment in which students were failing to participate. Other #zoomfails, however, reflect a more complex layer of intimacy between instructors as figures of authority and knowledge and the realities tied to their humanity external to professional roles.

#zoomfail TikTok 2: Exposing One's Personal Life On Screen

The forced reliance on Zoom and other conference-based communication platforms intersected with the reality that many professors became reliant on their personal devices for instruction. While such reliance was not foreign to higher education spaces by any means, the utilization of university-provided hardware became less common, especially for graduate students and adjunct faculty. Many instructors found themselves sharing the same screens they used for non-academic tasks, or at the very least used in unison with their daily lives. On the unsettling side of things, it led to instructors revealing some of their more intimate daily actions, such as at least one documented instance of a professor being fired for sharing a screen displaying a tab to search for a pornographic website (Lieberman, 2020). In this instance, the university removed the instructor from teaching and canceled the class avoiding any formal addressing of the issue's implications. The underlying implications here are that the nature of this particular tab, one focused on collegiate women as fetishized, was, to them, not worth acknowledging.

Further, it served to elide realities that universities possess disconcerting inaction when regulating ongoing sexual harassment by faculty (Cantalupo & Williams, 2018). Nevertheless, this example illuminates a more tangible reality made apparent through #zoomfail TikTok's. The necessitation of sharing one's screen for pedagogical purposes forced people to become keenly aware of what was showing on all layers of their computer. Anything open in proximity to one's Zoom window became subject to documentation by students. In one rather humbling TikTok, as shared by @presliercink, a professor appears to be displaying a syllabus for a course while sharing their entire screen. Displayed below the syllabus are the results of a Google search with a

site titled "THIS IS Why You Can't FIND LOVE." The post appears to be a remediation of a Snapchat story with the text covered over by emojis laughing with their arms up as an audio snippet from Daniel Powder's "Bad Day" plays in the background (Figure 1).

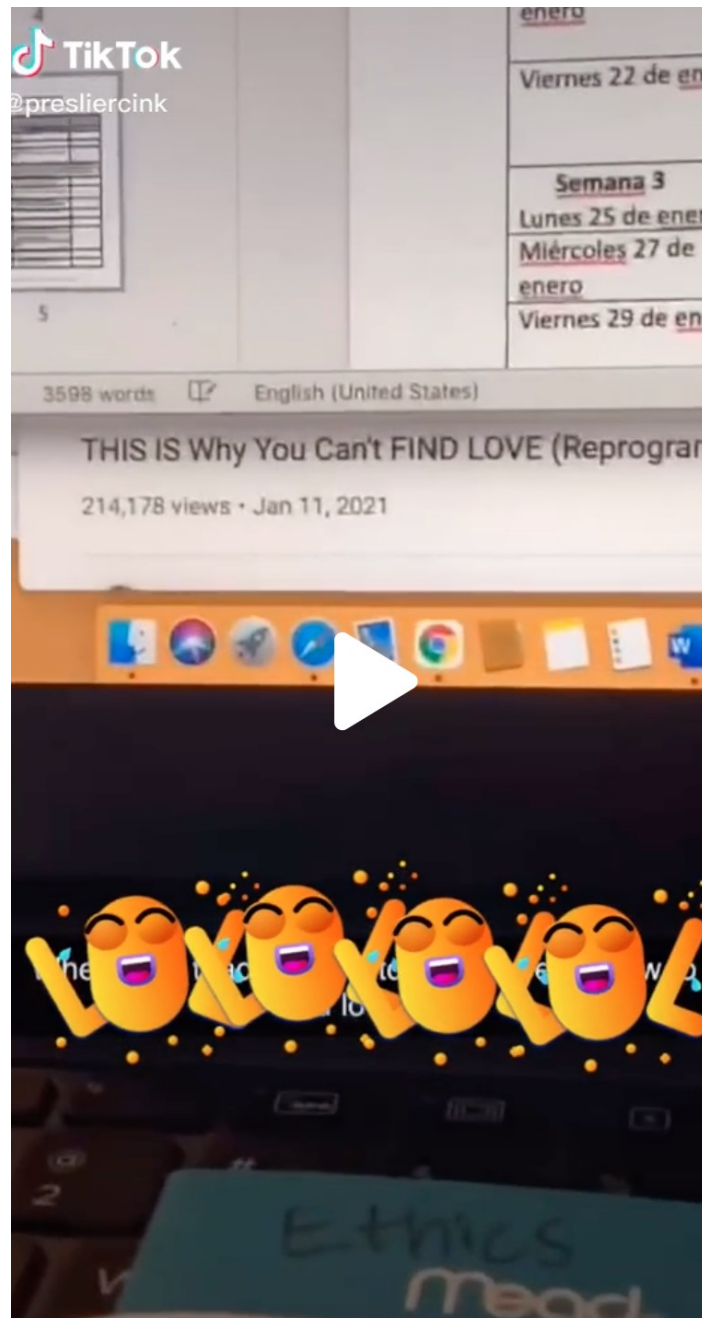


Fig 1. [A professor's personal life seeps into their instructional delivery in a potentially undesired way, @presliercink's TikTok]

While it is easy to read this particular exchange as wholly embarrassing for the instructor, such a reading is antithetical to the value of these TikToks. Such slippages of the personal and professional as emergent within #zoomfail TikToks offer a means to humanize instructors who remain abstract figures to their students. Though the desire to find love is a particularly affective moment to show vulnerability, the desire to connect with other human beings amidst a completely digital moment is not uncommon. Indeed, emergent scholarship around the psychological impact of what is colloquially known as "zoom fatigue" suggests that all parties suffer in video conferencing spaces. Video-based interactions cannot call upon meaningful engagement with others, including direct eye gaze and more individualized tasks such as nodding and note-taking, producing physiological distress (Bailenson, 2021). While pedagogical innovations have arisen to attempt, in some capacity, to deal with these mediational limitations, it remains challenging to show one's emotional investment via a web camera.

From personal experience, I found myself overemphasizing my emotional state with students, often telling them how proud I was of their work or how truly emotionally draining it was for me to be making sense of the ever-expanding demands of pandemic teaching. Of course, it proved quite challenging to measure whether or not any sentiments came through. I also appreciate the unique position of instruction that allowed me to be open with my students about anxieties afforded to me as a white, genderqueer, AMAB person. The realities of the demands of Zoom-driven pedagogy impacted and continue to intensely impact queer femmes/women of color in intensified ways, and the emotional vulnerability becomes a site of regulation for them rather than liberation (Lorde, 1997; McCormick-Huhn & Shields, 2021). Further, the newly hypermediated tensions of teaching dismantled longstanding beliefs that the pedagogical role of an instructor is to be as objective and to avoid displaying affective experience whenever possible (Fendler & Tuckey, 2006). Again, this valuing of objectivity had everything to do with power dynamics within the classroom space and, in particular, the ability to hid one's lived experiences from the physical space of the classroom. While most instructors with experience will note the reality of subjectivity's role within pedagogy, to adopt such a truth proves far more complex. The ability to be open about one's feelings was not a universally available practice for those engaging in video-driven pedagogy for the first time, and many, out of necessity, tried their best to retain a veneer of professionalism and classroom order. As a result, such a minor revelation of being loveless holds significant weight, not only for the professor's subconscious revelation of personal

struggles but for the attentiveness of the students observing this. It is easy to read the posts about this particular TikTok and agree that "zoom university" has indeed "[done] the professor dirty." However, the fact that a student felt it necessary to observe and share such a moment suggests radical empathy and an attempt to humanize the struggle to find love. While this is by no means an argument for a professor dumping their personal life onto the classroom space, a candid discussion around what it means to exist within academia and try to engage in relationships could be telling. In turn, such sharing opens up a chance for students to explore how their academic pursuits produce challenges in their relationships with partners, friends, and family. This process of open, empathetic connection allows for "recognizing the emotional challenges that emerge" and to "acknowledge both students' humanity" and the humanity of instructors (Schwartz and Snyder-Duch, 10).

One way I attempted to do this personally was to be incredibly transparent about my struggles with expressing and exploring my non-binary identity in the wake of the shift to Zoom-based learning. While I had been open about my genderqueer identity with students, it was much harder for me to feel as though I was embodying this identity from the shoulders up. In discussing this through more extensive class discussion on readings around transgender identity and gender performance, I was able to open up about my struggles and find some truly remarkable support from students who were both within and outside of the non-binary spectrum. Further, it allowed for me to create a space for sharing and inquiry with students who were themselves struggling to come out as non-binary now that they were returning to spaces that were not their college dorm rooms or their close-knit set of queer campus allies. I had long been familiar with serving as a sounding board for students navigating queer identities. However, I found the general shift to accepting such identities, leading to these questions tapering off over each semester. The resurgence of this sort of communication reminded me that I was not alone in the struggles to make sense of myself during a moment of intensified mediation and being open about this and potentially even accidentally revealing my own saved Google Searches on "how do I know I am genderqueer?" likely had something to do with that. In turn, this example shows how much destabilization can occur via one's screen-based engagement within pedagogy. Finally, a third iteration of the #zoomfail TikToks makes the student a central participant in mediated instruction's pedagogical limitations of control. This example serves as a reminder that

one's classroom space was now their home, and the intimate realities of home life were equally subject to emerge online as well.

#zoomfail TikTok 3: One's Home Life Becomes Hypermediated

One of the most persistent trends of the #zoomfail mediated landscape beyond even pedagogical spaces of classrooms involved individuals simply forgetting that they were in front of their cameras during otherwise routine behaviors. Multiple videos went viral of individuals forgetting to turn their cameras off while using the restroom, having children and pets blocking screens, or day drinking while at work. The practices here illuminate something telling about how people perceive their personal space relational to being interminably on the other end of a colleague's computer or phones. As T.N. Cesare Schotzko rightly observes, such breaks from presumed normalcy ought to be seen "less as disruptions and more as opportunities to acknowledge the changes in professional and domestic labour the pandemic has wrought" (2020, 282). Cesare Schotzko's work primarily speaks to how hypermediation of work laid bare inequities in domestic labor, predominantly for women who were now expected to serve the role of domestic caregiver, educational intermediary, and employee in simultaneous ways. However, her work contextualizes how the intimate as a rendered backdrop for class forced instructors to think about how their students had personal lives. Much like the professor whose accidental sharing of their inability to find love produces an affective response in students, so too did the emergence of one's home life remind us what students might be bringing with them to class every day, even if unspoken. @Aymrld's video provides a window into what this might look like for students who share their learning space with families. Though unclear as to whether fictionality, what it depicts is an all too real occurrence. An unnamed instructor turns the class discussion over to a student who begins presenting on the geography of Nebraska. Moments into the talk, off screen, an argument is heard, including the phrases "I want a divorce" and "I've given you twenty-five years." As this argument escalates the student does their best to continue presenting while apologizing intermittently for the disruption. Various students' eyes widen as they respond to what they are hearing. In a manner reminiscent of an intensely edited cinematic conversation, each student responds with inaudible gasps before it returns to the image of the professor in stunned disbelief (Figure 2).



Fig 2. [Professor's reaction to audio of student's parents arguing about divorce during a presentation, @aymrld's Tiktok]

The disconcerted look given by the professor invites viewers into their mindset. The professor is startled, and a bit befuddled as to how such a dramatic event could be unfolding over the Zoom call. Unlike other videos of this genre wherein the person whose intimate spatial life is being displayed without their awareness, the student here constantly calls back to the disturbance and apologizes for the inconvenience. The fabricated nature of the video becomes all the more

suspect, given that the individual playing the part of the professor seems insistent that the student continues despite the argument swelling in the background. Further, for any instructor who taught during the pandemic, the reality that all participants would have their cameras on proves equally unusual. The video, satire or otherwise, provides a telling site for the additional layers of #zoomfail videos by examining the inability to control one's spatial, to use Cesare Schotzko's term "messiness." Videos such as this become a damning indictment against expecting that students deliver course materials in a standard or traditional manner. A professor could quickly have asked the student to pre-record videos or provide a written assignment in place of the verbal presentation. However, like the belligerent professor from the first TikTok discussed, the willingness to adapt to the technologies of Zoom did not come with an equitable commitment to pedagogical alteration.

Tellingly, even if the video might be fictional, responses to its narrative include commenters asking why the professor did not allow her to stop or judged the professor for prying into the student's personal life. Such comments provide a site of counter-discursive criticism of normative pedagogical practices, which professors tend to perpetuate without being held accountable for changing. Unlike the often and justly criticized *RateMyProfessor.com*, the utilization of such #zoomfail TikTok's affords a space to name a problem and potentially avoid accountability of punishment by a vindictive instructor. The utilization of these videos is thus a form of student action that calls attention to inequities within a classroom or the danger of mismanagement within a classroom (Bessant, 255). More importantly, however, it offers a scathing indictment of pedagogy that demands students produce rigid content regardless of external constraints by literalizing the constraints as disruptions that one cannot easily ignore. Much like the professor in the second TikTok who reveals their humanity, the professor in this video is asked to act humanely and fails to do so.

While I had the good fortune of not navigating such a lousy example during the stages of forced remote learning, I became keenly aware of how students were trying their best to make sense of space and academic engagement. I was also trying my best to perform the version of a graduate student who was expected to participate in virtual conferences despite having spotty internet and an overstrained personal laptop. When I began to lose a sense of daily time schedules, as no doubt many did during the pandemic, I would find myself waking up almost at noon only to realize that I had to teach a class or given a presentation in moments. Taking

advantage of the reality that I would only be seen from my chest up at best, I would wear a nice floral shirt and perhaps some earrings while still wearing pajama pants. I did my best to ignore that my hair was growing increasingly disheveled due to not getting it cut. In these moments, I framed my camera in such a way as only to cover my bookshelf hiding from students that I was in a tiny, messy apartment without a dedicated workspace. I provide this example not as a point of pity but to return to the notion of spatial messiness becoming quite evident in my own life while trying to present myself as a put-together queer-identifying instructor for students navigating their lives in new intensified ways. As noted, I had students admit that they were recording their lectures or engaging in classroom discussions in closets, broom closets, and basements. Sometimes this was due to them not wanting their parents to hear our discussions about colonialism and its role in the persistence of police brutality. In other instances, it was because they had to share space with their younger siblings, who were also working from home. Just as I was keenly aware of how much my space would be on display, I watched my students do their best to navigate a hypermediation of their own space. We were each doing our best to not come across as failures while never once exploring why we might have felt shame or the sense of failure.

Embracing Connectivity Issues: #Zoomfail TikTok's as a Metaphor for Embracing Failure

Zoom classrooms exist as nothing more than a backdrop to a perpetuation of issues latent within pedagogy at the university level. The particularity of #zoomfail TikTok provides hypermediated exposure to the ever-increasing fragility of teaching in a time when resources for doing so decrease. At the same time, the labor demanded of those responsible increases. This intensification is felt both by students and their instructors, and what many of the videos illuminate is a system at its breaking point. Nothing should have forced a student to be berated by a professor no matter what the source of frustration, just as no student should feel obligated to report on a project while their parents are arguing in the background. However, both of these instances emerged out of a sense of normalcy wherein neither act was deemed ill-advised enough to happen. While it is easy to see the technology as the problem in many of these instances, the #zoomfail TikToks expose the fragile connections of humanness, informing a social relationship that had until then relied on a unique division of the privacy of a classroom. TikTok is merely the newest hypermediation of self-documentation of one's daily life. However, Tiktok thrives virality

and sharing in particularly new ways meaning that the exposure of failure discussed in each of the videos above could have remained wholly unaccounted for was the video not uploaded or redistributed through the application. Alongside videos such as the ones discussed above exist @jacindaneptune's post about San Diego State University having a student forum in which they informed students about a scheduling change that would ostensibly take away their Spring Break in 2021. The video shows a Zoom call in which the administration fails to create a mute function for all 700+ students in attendance leading to the students protesting quite vocally their frustrations. Further, @jacindaneptune provides text explaining what is occurring (Figure 3).

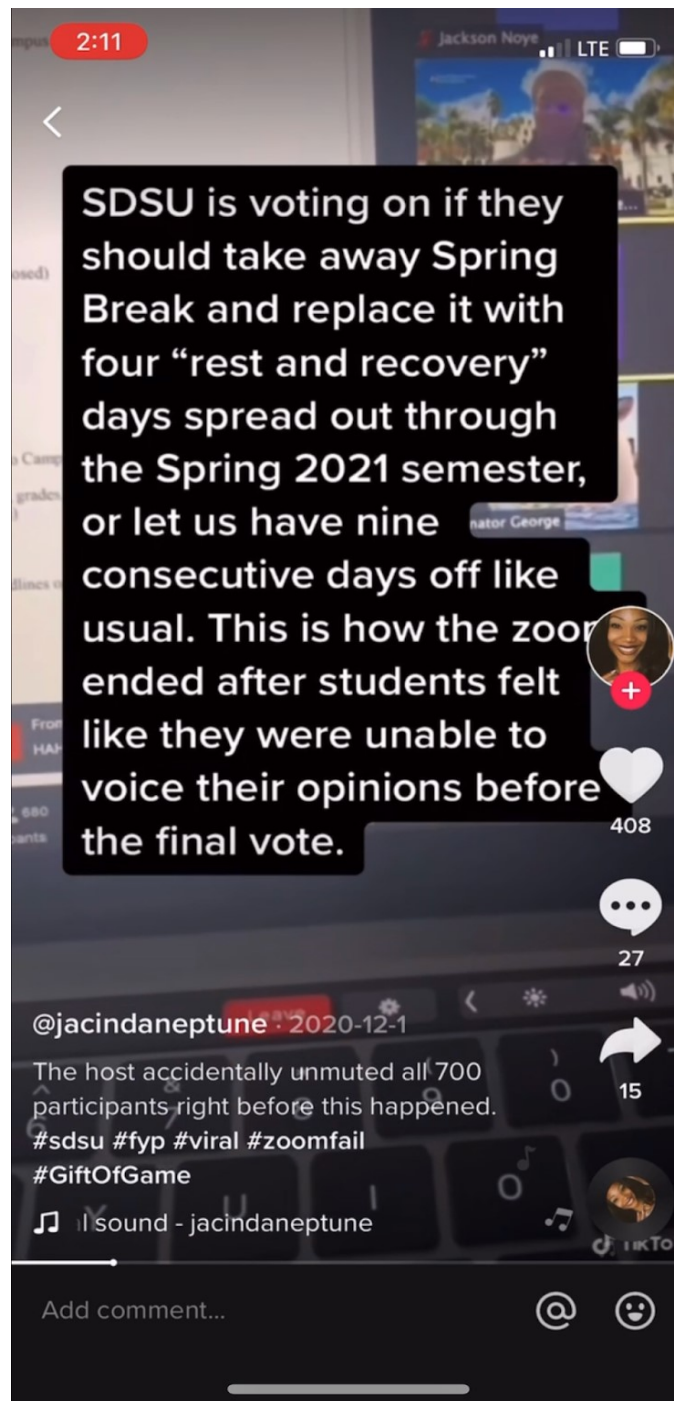


Fig 3. [Students use the function of #zoomfail to combat administrative indifference, @jacindaneptune's TikTok]

The post notes that the university is attempting to shift the dates to provide students with “rest and recovery” days. While it is hard to make sense of the audio, the students express their desire to retain the previous schedule. Comments to the TikTok note that there seemed to be an

ongoing practice of administrators telling students what they need and failing to inquire as to what they might want. This #zoomfail TikTok is not the same as the others as it is not in a pedagogical space. However, it illuminates the position of frustration faced by students who, like the professors of the earlier videos, are being told to adopt changes and practices that benefit the university but prove somewhat disorienting for instructors and students. The use of this video makes clear an attempt to call attention to the indifference of San Diego State University and serves as an archival record for students quite literally speaking out against a change.

Such a video exposes the role of administrators in not preparing for a change in a systematic way. In turn, the notion by the university administration that any professor or student was expected to succeed or fail within the "new normal" of online pedagogy grossly misdirected responsibility onto those with very little power to make structural change. Directing the burden of change and adaptation onto instructors exposed the way administrators sought not to change and actively avoided helping faculty, students, and staff. Failures like these exposed a desire for administrations to maintain, as much as possible, normal circumstances for purposes of student success as defined within the quantitative components of neoliberal, late-capitalist higher education. So long as students still passed classes and showed proof of graduating with appropriate rigor, nothing was all that different. The videos discussed here show that rigor was absolutely part of the Zoom-based educational world; however, it was of the sort that demanded students make space for professors to humble themselves both directly or inadvertently. Zoom-based pedagogy also asked professors to give students a caring space to fail, but without the quantitative implications of the word. Even as examples perpetuated of professors exposing intimate parts of their lives, just as many of the videos of professors not realizing that their microphones were muted or not editing out potentially embarrassing sounds or slip-ups in their recorded lectures, I faced these issues live in the classroom and were it not for tech-savvy students I would have been faced with completely inoperable teaching spaces. While Paulo Freire (2018) reminds us that students come to educational spaces with their unique knowledge, the willingness of students to assure that their hypermediated classroom spaces were generative ones through technological aid offers us a tangible example of students coming to class with literal knowledge. Beyond even this technical know-how, what remains is a shift in discursive perception around the relationship between an instructor as an agent of knowledge distribution and a student as a passive receiver of that information. While administrators may not be aware of

the way this discursive challenge manifests within TikTok and equally many professors may be ignorant to its presence, the reality is that these videos exist on an application heavily used by individuals who are attending college. Presuming college campuses return to predominantly in-person education, students will understand that their instructors are humans and that treating them as objective authorities would be absurd. This absurdity, in turn, becomes a site to explore how pedagogy in the wake of #zoomfails might look.

What is More Human Than A Potato? Embracing the Absurd as Pedagogical Potential

One of the more endearing examples of TikTok classroom documentation is a video of one professor taking advantage of Zoom filters in instructional endeavors. Most prominently shared by @amoneyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy0 though initially posted by the defunct account @ameilamaraeh, the video is captioned with the phrase "My Mom: How's your Masters program going? Accounting Professor: "In the video, a student looks on as their professor shows up like a potato with a face. Upon doing so, the professor realizes that the joke is going to stick, stating, "to be honest once you are the potato you can't turn off the potato without leaving Zoom." The professor then asks if the students would like to meet their family, changing the background to a handful of baked potatoes before yelling, "my family!" (Figure 4).

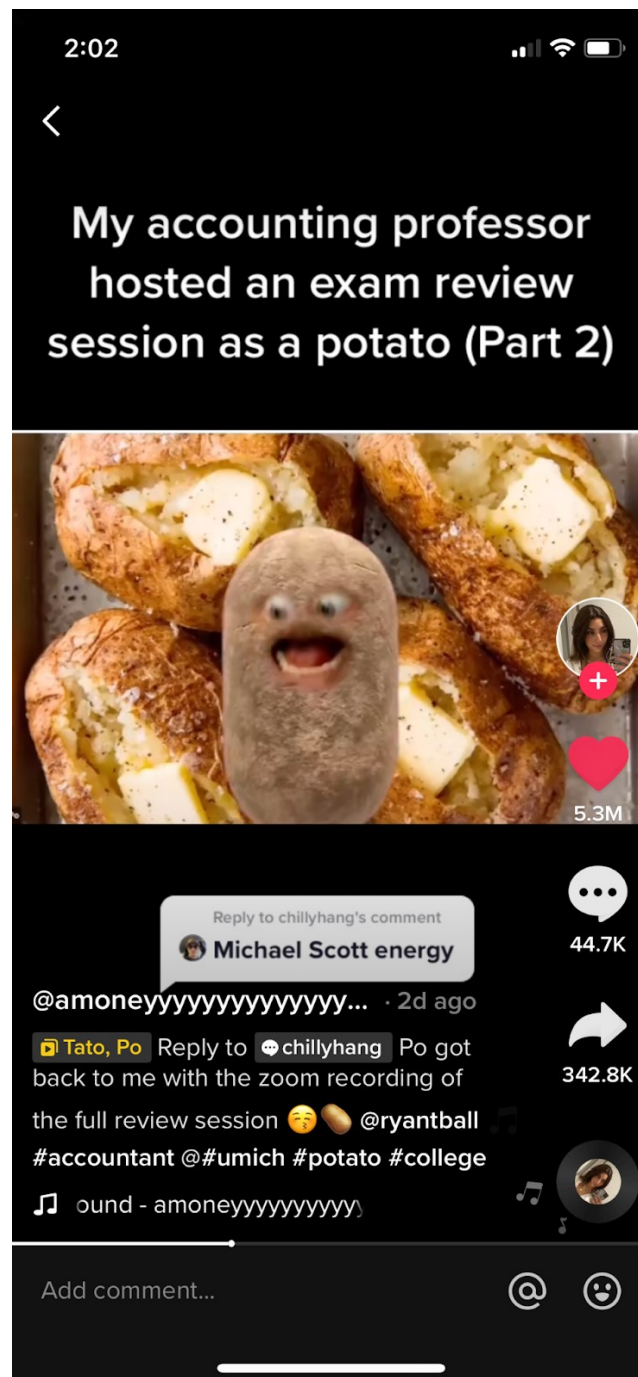


Fig 4. [Professor leans into the dehumanizing nature of Zoom pedagogy to become a potato, @amoneyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy0 's TikTok]

Framed with a comment by another TikTok user observing that the professor gives of "Michael Scott energy," it suggests a certain cringiness to the video associated with the affirmation-seeking boss from *The Office*. However, the students in the TikTok are laughing and

sharing in the glee of the professor trying their best to make an accounting course fun while also trying to make a Zoom session even remotely engaging. Zoom pedagogy's biggest challenge and the reason it became such a generative space for observing failure was partly due to how much it exposed the all too human nature of individuals within educational spaces. By leaning into augmented disembodiment here, the professor as potato provides students with a chance to laugh off the absurdity of being always expected to act human without ever acknowledging the impact being a human has on the classroom space. While time will tell as to what good Zoom pedagogy looks like, it is perhaps unsurprising that all the things that made for good pedagogy before the pandemic held true for the mediated classroom as well. Instead of assuming order and control, those most willing to embrace the chaotic and the absurd found not only meaning in the bleakness of grey Zoom avatars but a new way to make teaching a wholly human act, even if that human is accidentally a potato.

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