

Missing the Breath of Another: Work-from-Home Arrangements in Singapore Through the COVID-19 Years

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Using interviews from the recent National Archives of Singapore's COVID-19 collection, this article seeks to explore how workers in Singapore, particularly educators, adapted to the remote working arrangements imposed on them during the pandemic years of 2020 and 2021. It concludes that online activity in those years somewhat limited the type and degree of intimacy that is usually formed in person, crucial to certain occupations. However, this need not mean the dismissal of online work altogether, but rather opens creative possibilities of how work-relevant intimacies could be imagined and cultivated.

INTRODUCTION

We have decided that instead of tightening incrementally over the next few weeks, we should make a decisive move now, to pre-empt escalating infections. We will therefore impose significantly stricter measures. This is like a circuit breaker.¹

So announced the then-Prime Minister of Singapore Lee Hsien Loong, outlining the government's response to COVID-19 in a televised address to the nation on 3 April

1 Government of Singapore, PM Lee, 'The COVID-19 Situation in Singapore' (3 April 2020). Available at <https://www.gov.sg/article/pm-lee-hsien-loong-on-the-covid-19-situation-in-singapore-3-apr>. Accessed 12 November 2023.

2020. These so-called Circuit Breaker measures were in many ways a variation of the lockdown policies enacted elsewhere in the world, consisting of safe distancing methods that included the mandatory closure of most physical workspaces, except for those that were deemed to be providing essential services.² Most work was thus required to be done remotely and online. Drawing from the National Archives of Singapore (NAS) COVID-19 oral history collection, this article considers the stories of how workers in Singapore, predominantly those in the education sector, tried to adapt to the new working arrangements imposed on them in 2020 and 2021. Situating itself within the deep well of existing literature on the effect of technological change on labour as well as emergent studies on pandemic-era working lives, this article specifically posits that the novel technology-assisted situation brought about a shift in the meanings of intimacies in work and home, as these previously separate spheres of life collided and reconfigured in different constellations. Still, there were limits to the reconstitution of intimacies in the online space, as some aspects went beyond the conscious and creative agency of individual workers. This article concludes with a brief consideration of how such limits were also apparent to oral history interviewees themselves in their capacity as workers, highlighting affinities that should enrich our present and future methodological reflections.

TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE AND LABOUR

Since the mid-twentieth century, the question of how technology has transformed relationships between human beings has been the subject of intense academic interest. Assessing the implications of electric technology in its numerous forms in 1964, Marshall McLuhan described it as being ‘extensions of man’, the stretching of human senses and consciousness across the dimensions of space and time.³ Two decades later, Donna Haraway, inspired by what she saw as the re-creation of our bodies through communication technologies, biotechnologies, and others, even

2 The measures were implemented primarily between 7 April 2020 and 1 June 2020. They were subsequently reintroduced between 16 May 2021 and 13 June 2021, as well as between 22 July 2021 and 9 August 2021.

3 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995 [1964]).

called for the disruptive, fluid concept of the cyborg to be the basis of liberative organisation.⁴

The emergence and rapid infiltration of internet technologies in all aspects of life has correspondingly caused scholars to attempt greater precision in identifying the contours of this transformation. Sherry Turkle has been one of the more pessimistic voices on this topic, claiming that with the internet, we have collectively moved from ‘a culture of calculation’ to ‘a culture of simulation’, with virtual experiences seemingly becoming more compelling and real than physical ones.⁵ She argued that the relationships that we form online have in many cases been redefined as intimacy, which is ultimately illusionary, as they fail to help us feel less alone.⁶ Other scholars, through empirical studies of individuals’ use of social media and mobile apps, describe a more self-conscious use of such technologies, with people actively negotiating between the affordances of the specific technologies on offer and their own relational expectations.⁷ Susanna Paasonen described internet connectivity as an ‘infrastructure of intimacy’, a resource that people purposefully tap to facilitate close connections that they would not have otherwise.⁸ Interviewing young Italians, Cosimo Marco Scarcelli further discovered a level of discernment in their online activities, with many of them sketching out what he termed ‘an intimacy hierarchy’, where ‘face-to-face interaction, held to be the most intimate of all, is followed by messaging apps involving exchanging telephone numbers, and then [interactions] based on social networking site profiles and lastly online dating apps’.⁹ The degree to

4 Donna Haraway, ‘A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s’, *Australian Feminist Studies* 2, no. 4 (1987): 2, 18–19.

5 Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 20–22, 235–238.

6 Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 16–19.

7 See, for example, Cristina Miguel, *Personal Relationships and Intimacy in the Age of Social Media* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Michela Drusian, Paolo Magaudda and Cosimo Marco Scarcelli, *Young People and the Smartphone: Everyday Life on the Small Screen* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

8 Susanna Paasonen, ‘Infrastructures of Intimacy’, in Rikke Andreassen, Michael Nebeling Petersen, Katherine Harrison and Tobias Raun (eds), *Mediated Intimacies: Connectivities, Relationalities and Proximities* (London: Routledge, 2018), 103–116.

9 Cosimo Marco Scarcelli, ‘Intimately Connected Devices’, in Drusian, Magaudda and Scarcelli, *Young People and the Smartphone*, 43–44.

which human agency is able to shape sentiments of attachment within technology thus continues to be debated.

Away from media studies, narratives and histories of how workers have managed technological change have tended to focus on an earlier stage of transition, primarily the late-twentieth-century computer revolution. Some of these concerns appear to have continuing relevance, despite differences in the specific technology under discussion. Predating online communication, for instance, Sharon Atkins, a receptionist narrator in Studs Terkel's 1974 book, *Working*, reflected on how the telephone had disrupted her interactions with other people in the everyday:

I want to *see* people to talk to them. But now, when I see them, I talk to them like I was talking on the telephone. It isn't a conscious process. I don't know what's happened. When I'm talking to someone at work, the telephone rings, and the conversation is interrupted. So I never bother finishing sentences or finishing thoughts. I always have this feeling of interruption.¹⁰

The advent of the telephone created a perception of distance between Atkins and others where none might have existed before. However, as business consultant Larry Ross, another one of Terkel's narrators, articulated when reflecting on the effect of the computer, this notion of intimacy may have been but nostalgia in the workplace:

Today the computer is taking over the world. The computer exposes all. There's no more chance for shenanigans and phoniness [...] Business is becoming more scientific with regard to marketing, finance, investments. And much more impersonal. But the warm personal touch *never* existed in corporations. That was just a sham. In the last analysis, you've got to make a profit.¹¹

10 Studs Terkel, *Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1985 [1974]), 58.

11 Terkel, *Working*, 537.

In Ross' account, then, technology merely revealed the coldness of enterprise that had already and always been there. Work is simply work, and to think otherwise is self-deception.

In contrast, telling the tales of compositors or typographers who had to shift from hot metal typesetting to increasingly computerised methods in the 1970s and 1980s, albeit in different countries, Cynthia Cockburn and Jess Adams Stein observed how changes in technology surrounding work had broader social impact. Older hierarchies were reshuffled. As the skills of these compositors became less relevant, their roles grew more precarious, dislodging their identities as mostly male breadwinners.¹² In addition, their sense of togetherness was replaced by a new emphasis on individual self-improvement, exacerbated by the rapidly increasing pace of change. By the end of the period under scrutiny, the 'culture of neo-liberalism...had permeated all aspects of workers' lives'.¹³

TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE IN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

A fertile vein of analyses relating to the more recent COVID-19 pandemic's acceleration of technological adaptation has proven to be the increased incidence of telecommuting or work-from-home arrangements amongst parents. The survey-based studies of Lyn Craig and Brendan Churchill,¹⁴ Thomas Lyttelton, Emma Zang and Kelly Musick,¹⁵ as well as Linda Engelhardt et al.,¹⁶ all found a slightly more gender egalitarian division of parental labour as a result of these changes, with fathers spending more time on childcare duties than before, whether in the Australian, American or German contexts respectively. More nuanced and narrational

12 Cynthia Cockburn, *Brothers: Male Dominance and Technological Change* (London: Pluto Press, 1983), 3; Jesse Adams Stein, 'Precarious Printers: Labour, Technology & Material Culture at the NSW Government Printing Office 1959–1989' (PhD thesis, University of Technology Sydney, 2014), 201.

13 Stein, 'Precarious Printers', 204.

14 Lyn Craig and Brendan Churchill, 'Dual-Earner Parent Couples' Work and Care during COVID-19', *Gender, Work & Organisation* 28, no. S1 (2021): 66–79.

15 Thomas Lyttelton, Emma Zang and Kelly Musick, 'Parents' Work Arrangements and Gendered Time Use during the COVID-19 Pandemic', *Journal of Marriage and Family* 85, no. 2 (2023): 657–673.

16 Linda Engelhardt, Judith Mack, Victoria Weise, Marie Kopp, Karla Romero Starke and Susan Garthus-Niegel, 'The COVID-19 Pandemic: Implications for Work-Privacy-Conflict and Parent-Child-Bonding in Mothers and Fathers', *Children and Youth Services Review* 155 (2023): 1–10.

understandings of these experiences, such as one might find within oral history, are still in relatively shorter supply.

After all, academic reflections of the COVID-19 crisis have broadly been methodological in nature, focusing on changes to scholarly practice, rather than other workers' experiences. The reports found in issue number 42, 2020 of *Studies in Oral History* were typical of these. Some of the reflections that were produced in pandemic conditions built on the theme of intimacy, which, as mentioned above, has a long history within existing literature. Marnie Howlett, for example, in her musings on the interviews and focus groups she conducted from the United Kingdom with participants situated in Ukraine, wrote that her online conversations were more relaxed and noticeably longer than her prior in-person interactions. People were less guarded and more willing to reveal private details about themselves, leaving Howlett with the impression that she was 'speaking with a friend rather than a research participant'.¹⁷ Adam Roth et al. remarked on a similar dynamic within the online classroom in a first-year anthropology course. They felt that Zoom, the virtual meeting platform, unavoidably revealed aspects of their personal lives to each other. Even the choice to turn one's video feed off could reflect one's insecurity about one's class status, a belief – rightly or wrongly – that 'the conditions of life were insufficiently tasteful to display'.¹⁸ Nevertheless, they were also conscious of a 'sensory paucity' in the online space, the inability for educators to see and hear 'the "noddors," the "snorters" and the "mm-mmmers"' or students who could provide consistent and constant feedback to demonstrate learning.¹⁹ The barrier posed by the computer screen was still evident, despite how transparent it seemed.

To explore the concerns mapped out by the literature within the Singapore context, this article draws from material gathered by the Oral History Centre (OHC) of the National Archives of Singapore (NAS) from 2020 to 2022. Its 'Significant Events:

17 Marnie Howlett, 'Looking at the "Field" through a Zoom Lens: Methodological Reflections on Conducting Online Research during a Global Pandemic', *Qualitative Research* 22, no. 3 (2022): 394.

18 Adam Roth, Niroshnee Ranjan, Grace King, Shamim Hodayun, Rebecca Hendershott and Simone Dennis, 'Zooming in on COVID: The Intimacies of Screens, Homes and Learning Hierarchies', *Anthropology in Action* 28, no. 1 (2021): 68.

19 Roth et al., 'Zooming in on COVID', 69.

Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Pandemic' collection was initiated as the first crisis oral history project in Singapore, with interviews structured thematically and conducted in the middle of the event being documented rather than organised on a life story basis, as has historically been the preferred approach since the institution's birth in 1979. On top of the usual staff interviewers, the OHC mobilised volunteers trained online via Zoom, who eventually interviewed around 130 individuals spanning different walks of life. Most of the interviews were initially conducted with video conferencing platforms, such as Zoom and TheirStory, before a gradual transition to in-person recordings when the situation improved. For the purposes of this article, only remote interview material is used, as these conversations happened to present more extensive musings on the effect of technology in interviewees' lives, perhaps due to them having been recorded closer to the moment of traumatic disruption.

WORK-FROM-HOME IN SINGAPORE

A brief elaboration of the Singaporean context is in order. In facilitating swift progress 'from Third World to First', as Singapore's founding Prime Minister put it, following the country's independence in 1965, the state has been a prime champion of pushing both public and private sector workers into the cycles of technological transformations that were initiated elsewhere in the global economy.²⁰ To take one example, the 1986 Economic Committee Report, a governmental response to the country's first recession in 1985, had strongly recommended the possibility of telecommuting as a means to boost female labour participation.²¹ Public attitudes towards remote working arrangements took the lead of the government, as the studies of Chee Sing Yap and Helen Tng and Lai Lai Tung et al. showed. Yap and Tng's survey of female computer professionals found that married respondents were more in favour of working from home than singles, with the most stated reason being an ability to

20 Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story: 1965–2000* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000).

21 Ministry of Trade & Industry, *The Singapore Economy: New Directions: Report of the Economic Committee* (Singapore: Ministry of Trade & Industry, 1986), 107–108.

combine work life and family care.²² In a comparable survey conducted by Tung et al., the two main motivators for people who supported the proposed scheme were flexibility in balancing work and family commitments, as well as a perceived reduction in childcare costs.²³

Public schools experienced a more targeted intervention by the state, as it was the Singapore Ministry of Education that had actively introduced information and communications technology (ICT) into day-to-day activities with the First ICT Masterplan for Education in 1997. Three additional masterplans laid out digital education policy plans until 2019. Among the goals stated for these plans were almost universal home broadband coverage and 100% computer ownership in homes with school-going children, as well as the expansion and development of so-called e-Learning programmes, that is, educational modules that teachers could conduct remotely.²⁴

In Singapore, then, technological transformation in the workplace has largely been a top-down initiative, with workers thinking and acting within the bounds of objectives and visions set out by the government. It was this mindset, and the policies that underlay it, that served as a foundation for the structural changes that were introduced because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

SPATIAL INTEGRATION OF WORK WITH HOME

When the Circuit Breaker measures were first announced, workplaces and individual workers in Singapore moved their activities online, which meant that workers' homes had to have the right hardware and software to sustain online work, and that space

22 Chee Sing Yap and Helen Tng, 'Factors Associated with Attitudes towards Telecommuting', *Information & Management* 19 (1990): 231.

23 Lai Lai Tung, Shailendra Palvia, Lee Chia Huei, Loy Ye-Meng and Teng Min Yee, 'A Study of Telecommuting in Singapore: Current Status and Future Prospects', *PACIS 1995 Proceedings* (1995): 327–328.

24 Siu Cheung Kong, Tak-Wai Chan, Ronghuai Huang and Horn Mun Cheah, 'A Review of e-Learning Policy in School Education in Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Beijing: Implications to Future Policy Planning', *Journal of Computers in Education* 1, no. 2–3 (2014): 189–193. A more extensive look at Singapore's educational technology policies over time may be found at: Government of Singapore, 'Our Educational Technology Journey'. Available at <https://www.moe.gov.sg/education-in-sg/educational-technology-journey>. Accessed 12 November 2023.

had to be re-allocated to make work possible. Sarabjeet Singh, a Character and Citizenship Education Officer with the Ministry of Education, recalled the movement that happened in his household:

We had to find our own space around the home, so there was some gradual shifting around of furniture. Because you know, in the initial instance when the lockdown happened, I think it was very organic. We just found a place that we wanted to work. But then we realised that, hey, maybe each of us should have a fixed area, so that we don't get into one another's space. So yeah, there were these gradual adjustments that happened. It was kinda fluid.²⁵

Home jewellery maker Zhou Peixuan had a similar account:

My husband would work on the dining table. The dining table's quite big, and it's only two of us. So, one section is for his office stuff, where he does his laptop setup. Then the other side of the table would be where we have our meals. As for me, there's actually a pretty nice bay window along my apartment, and that's where I put all my accessory-making stuff over there. So, it's like a little small workstation at the other side of the dining room.²⁶

The new spatial arrangements were assumed to be temporary at first, which was why many workers did not fret early on about spaces having double functions. Dining and living rooms became makeshift workrooms. How well workers could reorganise their spaces, though, largely depended on the volume of space they truly had at home. Those with smaller homes and larger families experienced more difficulties in adjusting to online work. Social worker Zulayqha binte Zulkifli explained:

25 Sarabjeet Singh, interviewed by John Choo, *TheirStory*, 1 December 2021, National Archives of Singapore [hereafter NAS] Accession No. 004766, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/interview/004766.

26 Zhou Peixuan, interviewed by Sheerin Mustapa, *TheirStory*, 29 June 2021, NAS Accession No. 004728, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/interview/004728.

It was quite challenging because I had to do my case sessions, my counselling sessions all via Zoom or via phone calls. And then here I have, like, my younger brother talking to cancel deals with suppliers, because he works as a pastry chef, and also arguing with his chef, like, 'Why must [I] come back?' and then they must clean kitchen, and all sorts [of conversation]. And then I have my older brother, who is also having his Zoom class – because of the time difference, right? So, when we all sleep right, he's actually studying; when we all doing work right, he's sleeping. Then we, like, *wah*, when I do Zoom, when I do phone call, damn stressful. I have to whisper, and then like, no choice *lah*. There are times when I actually get scolded. Then I have to walk out of my unit just to talk. 'Cause that was the limited space that we had.²⁷

Ironically, this meant that despite the preference for online work expressed by married workers, seen in the Yap and Tng and Tung et al. surveys, single workers adjusted better to the new situation caused by the pandemic. University administrator Chua Nan Sze elaborated on this dynamic:

I was working, thankfully, on my balcony, where I had some fresh air and sunlight. My colleagues, some of them were confined in their small homes with kids, pets. Whereas for me, I think I had the luxury of being alone, having a nice place to work in.²⁸

As did public servant Joelyn Koh:

Some of [my subordinates] were still young, single, so working from home was quite all right for them. Not much difference. But I also had staff who had kids at home, who started studying from home, you know, home-based learning. Very difficult for them. Because they could have two or three children. I mean, they had to supervise their kids. At the same time, they

27 Zulayqha binte Zulkifli, interviewed by Sheerin Mustapa, TheirStory, 7 June 2022, NAS Accession No. 004824, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/interview/004824.

28 Chua Nan Sze, interviewed by Rosie Wee, Zoom, 12 October 2020, NAS Accession No. 004569, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/interview/004569.

had to work. So, the key thing is I had to understand them. I had to trust that they are responsible people. And I knew, *lah*. Even before COVID, we had built up enough trust amongst each other, so it was okay. I just gave my support. Sometimes, they would be telling me, 'Eh, Joelyn, I can only log into my work computer later', or 'I have to be away for a short while because of this'. Then I tell them, 'Don't worry. It's okay. I know you will do your job. Just go and do whatever you need to do'.²⁹

Layers of privilege could therefore be found in the simple ability to find a private workspace for oneself. And organisationally, these divergences were by and large left up to the discretion of individual bosses and managers to handle.

PSYCHOLOGICAL INTEGRATION OF WORK WITH HOME

The readjustment of work and home boundaries also meant that the amount of work employees felt they had to do substantially increased. Workers reflected on how external parties added to their workloads by encroaching on space that might have previously been marked off as private. Given the assumed ease of meeting online, schedules were packed far more than before. Schoolteacher Hema Kripalani complained:

[My husband] and me were there in front of [the] screen all the time. There was no time to start. Today, we start at seven, finish at seven. There was no start time, there was no end time. Meetings are there, classes are there, trainings are there. Whatever it is, it is on the screen, on the screen. So, everything was haphazard. I mean, it took some time to get on to things, to get to this new life, or the new adjustments. Because no time for anything. No time. We were there in front of the screen. All the time, he's doing his work, I'm doing on my screen.³⁰

29 Joelyn Siang Ting Koh, interviewed by Cubie Lai Lai Lau, Zoom, 8 October 2020, NAS Accession No. 004575, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/interview/004575.

30 Hema Chandrashekar Kripalani, interviewed by Dhanashri Jagtap, Zoom, 28 November 2020, NAS Accession No. 004618, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/interview/004618.

Granted, some of the encroachments may also have been due to the unique circumstances of the pandemic, which generated an atmosphere of anxiety and worry that pushed people to reach out. For workers with customer-facing duties, like Joelyn, this was a common occurrence:

Yeah, so I was glad when [my husband and I] both started working from home. But one thing that was not great was our amount of work increased. For him, I think it remained similar. But for myself, right? The amount of work I had to do really increased, because I was working in customer service, replying [to] emails and all those, then wow! Our volume [of customer requests] shot up like at least two times. Yeah, so our volume almost doubled. At the start, it was 1.5 times; then slowly, it kept growing and growing until it was two times our normal volume. Because people were anxious. [...] But it means we have to work a lot harder. And working from home blurred the lines between work and home; then, I ended up OT-ing [working overtime] a lot.³¹

As a social worker, Zulayqha had a similar experience:

Like for the job part right, I realise there isn't an office hour, *lah*. Ever since the – there isn't office hour, it's round the clock. My phone is ringing round the clock. I'm literally working 11, 12 midnight. And then, even my family, like, 'Eh, I thought finish work already?' I say, 'Ya, finish work [but so] what?' Because the thing is, while it is good that it is made very accessible for everybody, but it eats into our private time. At that point of time, companies all haven't streamline process to get extra phone or [any other] sort [of alternatives]. So, it was just like your mobile devices, and your call will just keep directing to you. So, my desk line is directed to my mobile line, right? So, I no longer know – 'cause the number will reflect as private, then you don't know if it's your family members or sort. Then you pick up right, then *alamak* [a local exclamation of surprise], your client. Then you cannot

31 Joelyn Koh interview, 8 October 2020.

reject them *mah*. You cannot say, ‘Sorry, after hours.’ I mean, we did say that *lah*, but they will like, ‘Oh, I’m struggling. How? I’m worried about this pandemic.’ Blah, blah, blah. So, there goes one hour *lah*. And every day, it’s just an hour built up, an hour built up, ya.³²

Workers whose job it was to listen to others were as a matter of course made to create room for intimate sharing, at times extending far more than what these workers had originally signed up for. They had to re-navigate the roles that they played with their clients.

Nonetheless, some of the blurring of boundaries between work and home spaces was internally generated, with workers at the time unable to fully extricate themselves from their work, even outside usual hours. On the one hand, this allowed some workers, such as Nan Sze, to casualise work as the pandemic went on, making work conditions more comfortable for themselves.

I know a lot of [my colleagues] did a lot of online shopping for necessities. Even I myself bought a lot of work-from-home clothes, that were thin and helped to facilitate my working from home. Some of them set up home offices. I myself just bought an office chair, because the thing is, I don’t even know how long this thing is gonna last. And we are also concerned with our own health.

[...]

I would say I personally prefer working from home. It gives you the flexibility to get up a little bit later. It gives you the opportunity to multi-task, to do your work while you’re handling laundry or cooking. It gives you some time to rest during lunchtime. So instead of the one hour, one and a half hour lunch, you can pop in for a nap and then be online.³³

32 Zulayqha binte Zulkifli interview, 7 June 2022.

33 Chua Nan Sze interview, 12 October 2020.

On the other hand, some workers found the work-from-home experience increasingly stressful, with detrimental consequences to their own health. Adding colour to what Engelhardt et al. termed ‘work-privacy-conflict’,³⁴ these workers related that they found themselves unable to reorganise their lives in a way that entirely suited them, without the structures imposed by an external work environment. This is Joelyn again:

The thing is, in office, whenever you need to go and get some water, or you need to go to the toilet, you’ll walk quite a bit. You know, it’s not so near. And sometimes when you pass by your colleagues, you might stop for a small chat – maybe you chat for two to three minutes. And that’s when you get your exercise and your mental break. So, by the time you stand up, and by the time you come back to your seat, you might have spent maybe 10 minutes or 15 minutes in total, like including going to the toilet or taking water. Whereas at home, you will spend like, maybe two, three minutes, that’s it. Because your toilet is so near, and it’s easy to get water. You just go, get it done, come back. There’s nobody to talk to, there’s no ‘break’. You just go back and just keep doing the work.³⁵

Information technology analyst Richard Linn, who migrated from Myanmar to Singapore for work reasons, had a more extended reflection on the subject:

I also got this option [to work from home]. But just because of that – this one also has pros and cons; I think everything also has pros and cons – so just because of work-from-home, yes, [it’s] very convenient for my working. I don’t need to travel. I got enough sleep in the morning; I don’t need to wake up early for travelling to my office, like last time. So, this one very convenient. And after work, also, you don’t need to go back to your home; you are at home. So, you got very flexible timings and you got very convenience of working.

34 Engelhardt et al., ‘The COVID-19 Pandemic’.

35 Joelyn Koh interview, 8 October 2020.

But on the other side, just because of that, you know, to me, I feel like I'm living in the office. Because I can see my laptop, I can see my work-related items. So, just because of that, although my conscious mind, I know my room is, daytime I'm working, nighttime I'm sleeping, but my unconscious mind is not used to it. So, just because of that, at the nighttime, my body stays active. My mind, I know I'm not in office, but my body doesn't know about this. The reaction is like, 'You are still in office. Why you want to sleep?' Something like that. 'Why you want to sleep? You are still in office.' Because everything is here.

That's why I got a lot of problems coming, like sleeping disorder. Because I have sleeping disorder, I have eating also disorder. Not right timing, you know? Because when you go to office – office have a lot of timing. Lunch-time means lunchtime, you have to go. You cannot postpone, you cannot delay without having any reason, for this time. So, I just go lunch, come back, I work, something like that. This are the schedule that we have to follow. But at home, we got a lot of flexible timing, you know? So, our eating habits also – maybe I eat early, maybe I eat late. Or sometimes, I work then I eat; I do two things together. So just because of that, sleeping disorder, eating disorder, a lot of things are coming.³⁶

During the pandemic, many workers thus had a newfound agency to negotiate the scope and nature of intimacies available to them. They had more control over their time and how they did their work. But this placed more pressure on individual workers than they were used to, which meant that some struggled with their freedom. This was especially the case for migrant workers like Richard with limited social networks locally from which to receive support or guidance. Their aloneness was palpable.

TECHNICAL ADJUSTMENTS FOR EDUCATORS

36 Richard Htin Kyaw Linn, interviewed by Kiang-Koh Lai Lin, Zoom, 12 April 2021, NAS Accession No. 004703, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/interview/004703.

Despite education being one of the sectors in Singapore where the state intervened most extensively in technological matters prior to the pandemic, such as with the aforementioned e-Learning exercises, some educators still found it challenging to get used to the pandemic-induced change. Polytechnic lecturer Lee Thian Pau explained why:

We were quite apprehensive [about the shift to home-based learning], but we knew that there was no choice. We knew there was no choice because of these circumstances. Everyone took it quite positively. Unlike the pre-COVID period. Pre-COVID period, we were asked to do pilot run, you know? It's called 'business contingency exercise'. Because ever since SARS [Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome] outbreak [in 2003], we were all told, 'Things may happen. Due to whatever reason, unknown reason. You may not be able to come back to campus.' So, during those time[s] when we were asked to do all this contingency practice exercise, to try to do things online, we were not doing it so wholeheartedly, because we know that it was just meant to be a pilot run, that kind of thing. But this time, it was real.³⁷

University professor of practice Lim Soo Ping echoed Lee's reasoning:

Firstly, in SMU [the Singapore Management University], we were already using online teaching on a trial basis for many years, in case there's a need to do so in the SARS situation. Of course, what turned out later on is not the SARS situation, but something worse. Therefore, SMU was prepared, and we can go into teaching online. But that itself is not easy. It's easy to do it on a trial basis over one hour in a regular lecture, but to do so for an entire course is completely new. That's because we also have to conduct quizzes and exams online. And also have to mark quizzes and exam answer scripts in an online system, which is not easy. I have to get – I have a printer at home, so that at home I could print out quiz answers. Even then, it is not easy. How do you mark? How do you put annotations on a quiz answer question paper,

37 Lee Thian Pau, interviewed by Mary Swi Neo Yap, Zoom, 27 November 2020, NAS Accession No. 004560, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/interview/004560.

and then send it back to the student? Is it by email? You'll need a scanner. So, there are a lot of logistical issues involved.³⁸

However, with at least some prior experience with online teaching, many educators were soon habituated with the new arrangements.

THE TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP

What was more dissatisfying about their online work was what educators perceived as a lack of non-verbal feedback from their students, or an inability to perceive in real time whether their students were learning or not, akin to the reflections of Roth et al.³⁹ Soo Ping expressed his personal frustrations with the new pedagogical format:

But the greatest issue is that it limits one's ability to engage a student, because how much can you engage on a screen versus being able to engage a student in a classroom where you can even walk around the whole class and engage a student face-to-face, and then walk down to the front of the class and engage the whole class at the same time, and so on. So, these are the challenges. So, I must say that, while technology is good and enables teaching using Zoom or other means, it is not an ideal way to teach. You need to have physical contact, be able to move around the class and the students, who then feel that you are all around them. It is quite a challenge.⁴⁰

Likewise, as she considered her experience of online teaching, Hema anxiously rolled off a list of questions that rattled around in her head:

For me, when it started, it's like, whether my students are able to get it, they're able to understand? How are they able to come? Am I doing the right thing? Am I doing the right thing? Because you're away from your colleagues. We're not used to this kind of HBL [home-based learning] kind

38 Lim Soo Ping, interviewed by Kiang-Koh Lai Lin, Zoom, 10 May 2021, NAS Accession No. 004668, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/interview/004668.

39 Roth et al., 'Zooming in on COVID'.

40 Lim Soo Ping interview, 10 May 2021.

of a thing. My students able to understand, able to hear me, what I'm doing? Am I talking only to the screen? Is it really reaching out there? Because in classroom, we have this feedback. We have 25 [sets of] eyes looking at us, and we are looking at 25 [sets of] eyes, their expression.⁴¹

Educators talked about their work as if it was more than just a straightforward impartation of skills. With those who taught the arts in particular, education was about engaging a certain type of curiosity and sensibility that was better done in person than online. Dance tutor Zhu Minying spoke about her frustrations:

Let's say dance is a body language thing. How can you replicate that through technology? It's really just for show, lor. I can teach you, like, one, two, three, four – it's just like that, but I think it's more about imparting skills, finding that connection, and really like being there for them, you know, that kind of thing, I think it means a lot.

And it's very hard also, because for me, my main group of students, they are primary school, and – youth or like students with special needs. Because my student profile is extremely niche, so it's very hard for them to be online also.

I did teach a few private students online. Very, very hard. Because the energy – it's more like, you have to plan. And there's a lot of things like technology. You know, what if my internet is down, and then the waiting period, it's very hard also. And then, dance, you have to dance with music, right? I mean, you don't have to, but like class, with music right? Then there's the problem of laggy-ness. And if I were to dance to music at this time, it doesn't reflect the same in the other students' point of view. And it's especially difficult because they are kids and they are – what's that word – attention span is very, very short. Yeah, so sometimes I lose them quite easily, and it's very hard to connect [with] them through technology also.⁴²

41 Hema Kripalani interview, 28 November 2020.

42 Zhu Minying, interviewed by Joshua Ee, Zoom, 4 October 2020, NAS Accession No. 004572, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/interview/004572.

It was not just performance-based arts education that faced problems translating through the screen, but also visual arts, as Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts lecturer Patrick Yee attested to in Mandarin:

而且我们上课的时候都用Zoom来教课。我觉得对一个插画家来讲呢，是一个非常辛苦的一件事。因为我们要对着电脑跟他们讲解，然后手要画给他们看，而且要注意他们要发问的问题。要注意到很多很多的事情。所以对我来说是非常辛苦的一件事。我比较喜欢在学校面对面跟学生来讨论、来教导他们。

And during class, we used Zoom to teach. I felt that for an illustrator, it was a very difficult thing to do. Because while we had to face the computer to explain things, we also had to draw for students to see, and at the same time notice when they asked questions. Had to keep track of a lot of things. So, for me, it was very difficult. I preferred being in school discussing with students face-to-face, teaching them.

[...]

学生反应还可以。可是，有些学生，你根本看不到那个学生的样子。而且他们有些学生根本没有给你看他样子，他只放个照片给你看。你只要问他问题，才露出几秒钟出来跟你看东西后，他就把它关掉就放回一张照片给你看。所以我觉得非常辛苦。

Student reactions were mostly all right. But some students, you simply could not see them. Some students simply did not allow you to see them, only displaying a photo of themselves. Only when you asked questions, would they switch their cameras on for a few seconds to present their items, before switching them off to return to the photo display. So, I felt it was hard.⁴³

For others, education also had a dimension of providing emotional support for students, which required the reading of physical cues that the latter might try to

43 Patrick Kong Tat Yee, interviewed by Kiang-Koh Lai Lin, Zoom, 7 September 2021, NAS Accession No. 004752, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/interview/004752.

hide. This tendency for students to mask their feelings from persons of authority may be a result of a general culture of deference in Singapore, but whatever the case may be, some educators clearly saw the remote working arrangements as being detrimental to their duties of crafting safe spaces. Private tutor Chua Su Siah made it clear in her account:

So, via online lessons no way I can find out how they are feeling, how they are coping. [Even if] I ask them [directly] via Zoom. Usually when I ask them, ‘How are you? How is your day?’, they will say, ‘Okay.’ [laughter] Normal answer. They won’t tell me because I think their parents are behind them.⁴⁴

CONCLUSION: THE BREATH OF ANOTHER

In essence, workers – and educators among them – recounted that the element of human connection that is our pre-conscious reaction to each other’s presence is somewhat diminished online. As to be expected, this element is more important in fields where person-to-person services are provided. In his interview, corporate mentor John Bittleston sought to convey what this meant to his work with a relatively rich metaphor:

You need to meet them face to face from time to time, because you learn things that – I call it ‘inhaling the breath of the other person’. If you can’t do that, there are things you miss. It’s very difficult. And I tell you, the most difficult thing of all, if you’re not seeing them, the most difficult thing of all is to know when they’re getting near crying. I don’t mind my clients crying – it’s quite cathartic for them – but I’d like to know when they’re going to cry, and I’d like to know when I can ease up a bit on my rather pushy way of dealing with them.⁴⁵

44 Chua Su Siah, interviewed by Rosie Wee, Zoom, 12 October 2020, NAS Accession No. 004594, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/interview/004594.

45 John Bittleston, interviewed by John Choo, TheirStory, 11 March 2022, NAS Accession No. 004764, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/interview/004764.

In a time when respiratory disease was in the air, it was definitely the case that the online medium was the only way to breathe safely. No masks were needed for communication through screens. But we could not feel the breath of another on our face, as before. Something was missing when we were not physically present with each other. This did not mean a total lack of intimacy, given how bits and pieces of our private lives flowed into each other as narrated above, but there was a reduced ability to produce the type of intimacy that induced and strengthened interpersonal trust, that enabled us to share intangible moments of both inspiration and vulnerability.

Certainly, there are resonances here with oral history work, as we in the field similarly had to come to terms with the incorporation of the virtual into the physical world. The chats that we used to build rapport before and after the actual period of recording were, especially in the initial months, more condensed and deliberate in the online space. There was less opportunity for small talk, which would arise as we shook hands with our interviewees, walked with them to the location of our interview, detoured with them, and set up our recording equipment. When we stopped recording, we would be less likely to spend time with them to process their narrative experience, as they sought water, went to the washroom, and waited for their transport or next appointment. It was easier for interviewer and interviewee to simply exit the digital chatroom. And doing so happened abruptly. With a click of a button, all at once, we stopped being with each other.

It could be that moving forward from the COVID-19 pandemic, workers will find new and presently inconceivable ways of building connections and constituting intimacies. And we will do likewise. And so, as the landscape shifts around us, we will invariably have to ask some of the following questions, and more: What type or degree of intimacy is most essential or productive for our work? What is the specific process by which this intimacy is facilitated, and under what conditions is it replicable? How are people's expectations of intimacy in their lives changing, and how should we respond to them? Perhaps, as we continue to observe the adaptations workers in other fields make to their own lives, we will find more concrete answers.