"Sorry about the mess" – vulnerability and authenticity in an online world

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The past twelve months have seen a wide variety of new words enter the lexicon of educational speak. The verb 'to Zoom' has become as commonplace as 'to email', every single one of us has heard the word's 'you're on mute' after delivering a well-argued point and a cornucopia of terms such as 'breakout rooms', 'asynchronous teaching' and 'onboarding of digital learners' have replaced more traditional pedagogical phrases in staff meetings. From an educational leadership point of view, things have changed rapidly in a very short space of time and as we pass the first anniversary of the rush towards online learning, it seems apt to reflect on how this has impacted on educational leadership.

We are humans too: In hindsight, traditional leadership meetings seem remarkably sterile. Participants wear smart attire, agendas are formal and any insights into life away from the organisation are limited to small talk at the start and end of the meeting. Whilst at the start of the pandemic, many leaders sought to replicate this online, it is now the norm for far greater glimpses to be available into peoples' lives outside work. Partners bringing cups of tea, children interrupting leadership meetings, Amazon deliveries and dogs barking have created a patchwork of events that show more about our lives than we would normally reveal. At first, many people fought against this, but as we became more comfortable being beamed into the homes of people we lead, a more authentic form of leadership has begun to emerge which fosters the hope that barriers can be broken down between leaders and those being led. Mike Robbins in his Ted Talk explored 'bringing your whole self to work' and the additional authenticity that vulnerability brings. Glimpsing into the lives of others, albeit through a screen, has enabled leaders to share more of themselves and to develop greater empathy and compassion for those we lead.

Online does not mean isolation. Schramm's (1955) model of communication stresses that the major cause of a breakdown of any message between source and recipient is 'noise', something which covers a multitude of barriers. Whilst physical noise might still be a problem in the online world, other barriers have been lifted and the result has been record attendance at staff meetings, a proliferation of social events and often far greater cooperation amongst people who might not meet each other in 'normal' circumstances.

What is professionalism? A year ago this argument would be a footnote in any educational leadership discussion but changing times means changing approaches. The increased authenticity seen means that the boundaries of professionalism are becoming blurred. Something that creates a degree of liminality amongst participants. Discussions are now being held about appropriate attire when teaching, whether online backgrounds should be visible and to what extent participant's day-to-day life can intrude into their online work.

Increased intrusion into home life. Being online has changed the way we communicate and that impacts on life beyond work. If we accept that the standard email response time tends to be 48 hours, then the last year has brought about a seismic change in expectations from both staff and students. The Teams and Zoom chat functions recreate the immediacy of social media, something that blurs the boundaries between 'work' and 'home' as instant responses become the norm. There

are benefits in faster communications, MS Teams groups have sprung up for groups and the more formal email messages have diminished. It is more common place to drop a quick question in the chat now and a group member can respond quickly, perhaps mimicking the equivalence of popping your head in the office next door. However, the dangers for leaders lie in creating a blurring of boundaries as to what is 'work'.

New colleagues, new problems. Given the timeline of the academic year and the pandemic, a final issue emerges. It is entirely possible that new members of staff have never physically met their colleagues, or indeed set foot in the building. Now it could be argued that with teaching being online, this should not be seen as a major issue, but collegiality is often built in the staff room or coffee shop. When we return to campus, we need to look out for the staff wandering around, they maybe new and they're probably lost!

So, as we tentatively start to anticipate a semester featuring a return to something more akin to traditional approaches, there are some key questions that educational leaders need to address. Notable amongst these are whether the increased authenticity the online world has led to will transfer back to the face-to-face world, and secondly, how, as Robbins suggests, can we embrace the vulnerability that is inherent in revealing more about ourselves and use it to create greater authenticity in our leadership?

Robbins, T. (2015) *Bringing Your Whole Self to Work,* TED Talk, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bd2WKQWG_Dg

Schramm, W. (1955) Information theory and mass communication. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 32(2): 131-146.