

Narratives of being ‘Doubly Distant’ – Student Experiences of Distance and Learning

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Abhirami Suresh is a final-year Exhibition Design student at the National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad. Through her work, she explores narratives of human activities and emotions to create projects that hold emotional value for her audience, as well as prompt them to consciously think about current society. She aims to bridge the gap between the self, art, and design thinking to empower users to actively participate in the projects. Over the past year, she has developed the White Lines Collective, an inquiry into narratives of mental health in higher education institutions and among young adults, and the various ways to provoke conversation through creative practices.

INTRODUCTION

The *White Lines Collective* enquires about ways to provoke conversation about mental health in higher education institutions and among young adults through creative practices. A participatory project, it engages students in activities as a means to confront and converse about their mental health. The *Collective* bridges the gap between UN SDG 3.4 (Good Health & Wellbeing) [1] and UN SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities & Communities) [2]. It uses frameworks of participatory design to create projects that allow students and young adults to collaborate and express their mental health narratives through creative exercises, share them, and collectively cope.

BACKGROUND

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 caused disruption to the daily lives of students worldwide. The consequences of the pandemic are unprecedented, and its emotional toll on students and young individuals has triggered conversation about the impact on mental health. Now more than ever, young individuals are subjected to feelings of anxiety, depression, grief, and loss due to the abrupt changes to their lives, and uncertainty of the global situation. Since April 2020, the *Collective* has shifted its efforts to documenting student narratives and experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. It now asks;

- 1) What are the mental health and self-challenges the pandemic poses for these individuals?
- 2) What are the various types of responses that have emerged?
- 3) What are individualistic and collective experiences? How are our experiences different from and similar to one another?
- 4) How can online interactions and digital experiences be used to establish social connectedness with students around the world to help them collectively cope?

CONTEXT

As a student whose place of work is a different country from my home, the digital shift posed unique challenges. Various troubles arose from working remotely – changed project briefs, different time-zones, logistic and technological issues, and difficulties working across digital platforms. Drawing from my reflections, these experiences prompted thoughts about exchange-semester and international students who were ‘stranded’ in the country of temporary study.

An exchange semester or study program abroad is a period of cultural and educational exploration, a time of ‘adulthood’ and growth for a young individual. However, since March 2020, a different type of growing up has arisen. The consequences of the pandemic have put an unwavering wrench in many plans; a milestone and lifetime experience for affected students. Whilst most students were quarantined in their homes or with family, these students are *doubly-distant* – away from their home countries and family, and their universities. They feel a sense of loss and struggle with loneliness, isolation, and feelings of anxiety brought on by the uncertainty.

TEMPORARY HOMES

To document the nuances and emotions of these students during this time, the ‘*temporary homes*’ project was designed. Presenting myself as a researcher to facilitate the documentation of this *doubly-distant* time, my aim is two-fold – to capture exchange/international student life, and to help students connect with others through stories of similar experiences.

The project is hypothesizing the *I-sharing theory* [3]. It theorizes that two people can have the same in-the-moment experience. Sharing experiences of similar situations merges one person with another, creating a close feeling of existential connectedness. The theory states that by sharing these stories, feelings of isolation can be counterbalanced. This inquiry is also based on understanding collective experiences; the differences, and similarities regardless of location.

METHOD

Involving students studying and living all over the world, the project was conducted in two phases – video calls, and a visual documentation journal. These two methods holistically captured the experiences of the students, and helped establish a connection between both parties.

VIDEO CALLS

The video calls initiated the conversation with the students about their lives right now, and how they have been adapting to a new culture and lifestyle. Utilizing the video feature in online conversations built a connection founded on mutual trust and empathy. The calls prompted discussions about changes to their education, different formats of learning and academic content.

VISUAL DOCUMENTATION JOURNAL

Journaling is defined as a vehicle of emotional exploration, a way to channel difficult feelings into healthy and creative outcomes [4]. A form of writing therapy, it allows the individual to explore their lives through self-expression. It is of a similar sentiment as ‘Dear Diary’ from our childhood and allows individuals to assess their lives, current emotions, and feelings.

Understanding Coping

Defined by Lazarus and Folkman (1987), coping is a phenomenon that involves both cognitive and behavioral responses that individuals use in an attempt to manage internal and/or external stressors perceived to exceed their personal resources [5]. These situations, which are deemed stressful, activate the need to perform an activity that yields a positive outcome. They categorized possible coping mechanisms into four groups;

- Problem-focused
- Emotion-focused
- Support seeking
- Meaning-making

The journal exercise is an extension of ‘emotion-focused’ and ‘meaning-making’ coping mechanisms. Emotion-focused mechanisms allow the individual to confront the emotions associated with the stressful situation. Meaning-making mechanisms involve understanding and making sense of the relationship between life events and the self.

Designing tools to help individuals cope with stressful and unexpected situations requires the researcher/facilitator to empathize with and relate to the project’s users. An important personal introspection was that by expressing my thoughts and feelings of a similar situation, I was able to better understand and manage my emotions on the same. This exercises thus allows students to better cope by providing a safe space to confront their experience of the past few months and express it constructively. It therefore yields positive and uplifting mental mindset.

Purpose

The ‘*temporary homes*’ journal visually documents the exchange/international students’ lifestyle, educational experiences, changing emotions, and mental health. As avid users of social media like Instagram, Snapchat and Facebook, most students have already been sharing their experiences in some form – writing, drawing, or photographing them. The journal harnesses this ability and allows students to gather their personal narratives in one space.

Process

The journal document provides the framework of the exercise. It contains a series of questions that act as prompts for the students. These seedlings of thought help students think about themselves and the impact of the pandemic on their lives. The questions are presented in a first-person point of view to help students align their thoughts. They are divided into four categories – home, lifestyle, growth, and mind – to build a holistic understanding of student experiences. The questions are as follows;

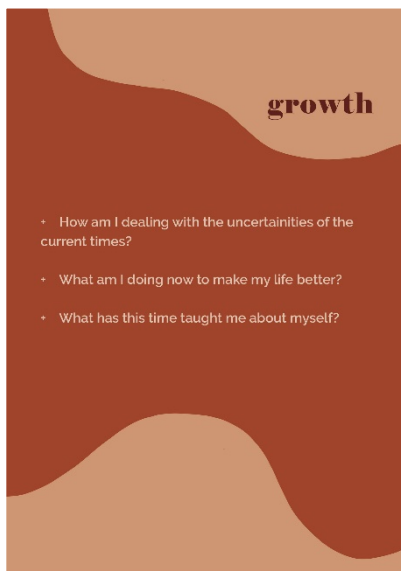


Figure 1 - Visual language of journal.
Colors are signifiers of comfort and home

Home

- What is my home now?
- How is the world in this country different from the one in my home country?
- What do I do now that makes me feel most home?
- What is my safe space now?

Lifestyle

- What is my life like now?
- How is my life here different from the one when I am in my home country?
- How has the culture, people and environment here made me feel better/more at home?

Growth

How am I dealing with the uncertainties of current times?
What am I doing now to make my life better?
What has this time taught me about myself?

Mind

How is my mental health doing?
How has my mental health changed over the time I have been here?
How am I dealing with feelings of homesickness?
How am I dealing with loneliness or isolation?

To use the journal, the student reads through the prompts and finds 7-9 that they identify with. They take a photograph that represents or visualizes the answer, and annotate it with a short paragraph; writing about the photo, its contents, and symbolism. Answering at least one question a day, the exercise is completed over one week. The guidelines provide the framework and ‘rules’ for students to keep in mind when responding. It is designed and worded in a manner that allows freedom of expression for the student, and for each journal to be unique.

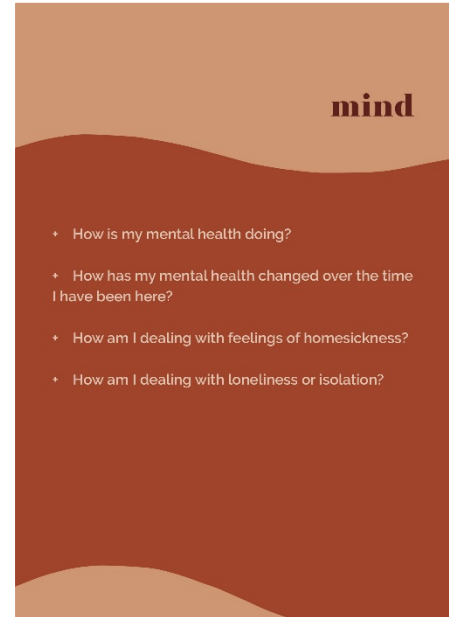


Figure 2 – Page from journal with questions from the ‘mind’ section



Figure 3 – Journal entry by student whose home is in India but was temporarily stranded in Germany. They narrate how their life during exchange and quarantine was different

INFERENCES

Through the conversations during the video calls, it was inferred that classes were not only redesigned for the digital realm, but assignment briefs were modified to adapt to the changes. They were revised in a manner that would allow students to complete them from the confines of their home, or require minimal outdoor movement.

The assignments allowed students to learn new tools and adapt their skills to work remotely and digitally. The process of working also shifted to understanding what can be achieved from home. This created a different kind of learning curve for students. They are now more competent to adapting their process, and projects to work online, and have acquired an ease to using digital tools and platforms. Attending these classes presented the opportunity to work on projects that might not have been possible in their home country, creating a more worldly educational experience.

The visual journals became a space for students to assess and express their experiences of the past few months through visual media and written material. Upon analysis, it is interesting to note the number of similar things students have spoken about in their responses, sometimes even using similar language and phrases, irrespective of location. Even with the creative freedom provided by the guidelines, the visual expressions showed alike emotions and thoughts. This gives rise to a universality in the experiences, strengthening the belief that they are collective in nature.

Most students have discovered that this time abroad and away has given them the freedom to break free of their regular routines. They have the opportunity to slow down, use this time for critical introspection and self-reflection. They speak of their ‘pre-Corona’ lifestyle with a sense of nostalgia, and draw comparison between the busyness they experienced before as opposed to the quietness and slowness of the present.

Another significant inference notes how students have adapted to the lifestyle in their country of temporary stay, and the values and lessons imparted by the local culture and people. Adopting the way of life of that country has allowed them to create a new sense of routine that they find healthier and hope to continue upon returning to their home country.

The questions give students an opportunity to reminisce about their homes and family. This comparison and the resulting expression has enabled them to reflect on the changes they have made to their lives, sometimes subconsciously, that allow them to feel the most at home and combat feelings of isolation or homesickness. Furthermore, surrounded by people from that country or other students like themselves had prompted a two-way cultural exchange, often helping both parties relate better to one another, building a stronger connection.

Sharing the journals with the community of participating students allows them to experience the life of their peers in similar situations. This forges the belief that they were not alone in their struggles, and are now existentially connected with the other students through these narratives. Therefore, the project is a successful experiment in testing the I-sharing theory.

CONCLUSION

The ‘*temporary homes*’ project aimed to capture the narratives of life as a student ‘stranded’ in another country as authentically as possible. The project framework and guidelines prompted them to think about themselves, their lives right now, the impact of the pandemic on them. As noted

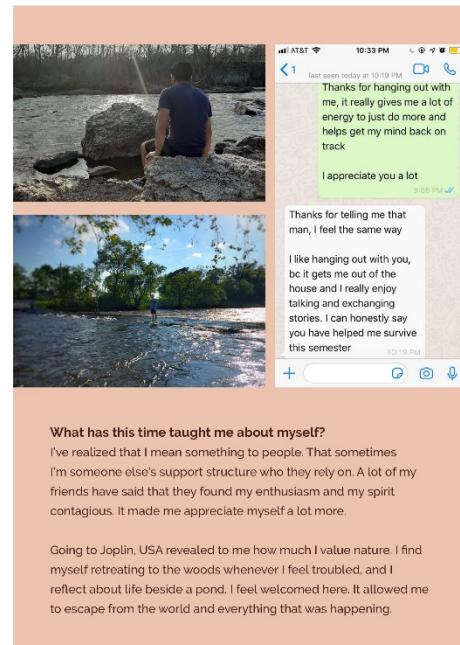


Figure 4 – Journal entry by student whose home is in Dubai, UAE, but was temporarily stranded in Missouri, USA. They narrate their experience through the lenses of lessons learnt

from the video calls, changes to their mode of education had allowed the students to learn new skills and tools to adapt their process and professional practice. They are now not only better-equipped students, but also more competent individuals. The analyses of the journals have shown that most students have discovered this time as critical for self-growth and reflection of their lives and personal wellbeing. It also presented the various ways they had adapted their lifestyles to combat negative emotions of the current times. The project helped these students connect with others like themselves through these stories of similar experiences, to forge the 'I am not alone in my struggles' mentality.

The *Collective* continues its work in documenting student narratives of the COVID-19 pandemic through various practices. It is also using digital tools and online platforms to conduct experimental workshops to help students from all over the world to come together, create expressive works, converse about their experiences, and collectively cope.

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