

23. Homestretch: A Scottish Graduate School of Social Sciences co-produced approach to supporting PhD students through COVID-19 Lockdown

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*I gave myself permission to feel and experience all of my emotions.
In order to do that, I had to stop being afraid to feel.
In order to do that, I taught myself to believe
that no matter what I felt or what happened when I felt it,
I would be okay.
Iyanla Vanzant*

How Homestretch was born

I remember meeting my yoga teacher on the street after the first hard lockdown. Being out on the street, meeting someone I knew came as a subtle shock, particularly as I was just coming out of a month-long battle with COVID-19 myself. We talked about how strange the time had been, about missing the shared space of the yoga studio and the small social acts the surround a class. I've thought again and again about one of the things she said, that when we come through COVID-19 we will be a long time realising what its effects are and recovering what we can from the many kinds of loss. We are still in that process both of distancing and trying to reconnect. What follows is the account of the development of a series of support sessions held every Wednesday through the second hard lock down through winter of 2020. We called the series Homestretch, hoping that it would indeed get isolated students through the homestretch of this difficult time, as well as invite them to both stretch and be at home in shared space for a few minutes on a Wednesday over lunch time. The voice is primarily Beth's but the knowledge was gained alongside Patricia, Jingyang, Diane and Geoffrey. What follows traces the back story to the project, it's development as COVID-19 gained its grip on the country and a sketch of what we've experienced and learned as we've "built the plane whilst flying it"—something, in so many ways, all of us have had to do this past year.

Back story

*The purpose of a storyteller is not to tell you how to think,
but to give you questions to think upon.- Brandon Sanderson*

This work was a long time in gestation. Its tap root grew from work that sunk deep into the myriad ways forum theatre can help us reconnect to what our bodies know. Much of our knowing is embodied. I had witnessed how powerful the embodied knowledge of service users can be when given a gateway to decision makers. Evaluation of the impact of policy making on people's lives becomes much more meaningful. This knowledge had been nudging away inside, pushing me to apply ways to explore and translate embodied knowing to more of my work and teaching. Curious to know more I've participated in the Collective Leadership for Scotland programme that has helped professionals across public sectors engage with U-Theory and its development of Social Presencing Theatre. From family networks I had also become engaged in a set of practices with different origins but that explore and tap into similar sensibilities: Interplay. I've written more about this braiding of learning from forum theatre, u-theory and interplay [here](#). Learning from these separate but resonant practices for me, felt like an opportunity to participate in a larger rhizomatic process of shift in zeitgeist. In 2018 I shared this learning with a small group of Algerian PhD students in a phenomenological study of their experience of university space as international students (Abdessalam et al., 2019). We enlarged our journaling practices to include various forms of visual engagement both dwelling with works of art at the nearby Paisley Art Gallery and making our own visual images through collage, photography and drawing. This culminated in moving into embodied activities that spoke powerfully of the mix of restrictions, decisions and pressures they experienced. In the early months of 2020, I was working to develop a week-long intensive methods workshop on [Widening the Impact of Codesign Research for the Scottish Graduate School of Social Sciences](#), as news began to indicate the severity of what we were in for.

Working with a pro-active team we persevered with workshop plans as we scaled back and reconfigured what had been a very experiential design to something still participatory held in on-line space. In Sept 2020, after three months of strict lockdown, three months of social distancing restrictions and another lockdown looming in the near future, we ran our session.

Our week included sequenced small group work. Over the series of sessions we worked with participants as they worked through a co-designed research brief, encountering challenges and opportunities. In getting to know the group I worked with, I quickly gained a sense of the toll lockdown had taken, emotionally as well as academically. Some recuperative space was needed to get participants to a place where their creativity and collaboration could flow. I knew how to do this working with groups in person, but across screens at that point I did not know if activities could precipitate the shift in energy and trust. I took a deep breath and guided participants through activities I'd facilitated in coproduced research to help everyone get on the same level, feel what they brought was welcome and create the confidence to be creative. As we worked through them, I could see the same sense of leaning in as when I facilitated these in shared physical space. I could see the tensions ease from faces, shoulders lift, and the bubble of contributions flow; I could see the transformation of our gathered wellbeing. It was enough to convince me more was possible on zoom than how it was conventionally used and that I could bring my skills as an embodied facilitator to on-line space. Geoffrey, chaplain at University of Edinburgh was on a similar path of

discovering how to adapt his facilitation to Zoom. Diane Gill at Scottish School of Graduate Social Sciences brought us together and Homestretch found its feet.

Homestretch sessions creative workshops for social, recuperative space during lockdown

*There's nothing like drawing a thing to make you really see it.
Margaret Atwood*

A good way to bring you into what the sessions were like, is the same way PhD students were invited. Here is the invite we sent out across SGSSS social site for PhD students:

This winter with increased lockdown measures research and studies can begin to feel like a marathon. The natural breaks we could often take that re-energised the focussed work we do occur less frequently in our current circumstances and this can take a toll. These sessions are designed to help get you through the homestretch. They are an opportunity for some creative playful time off task that can bring us back better in mind and body and even inspired. The sessions are not meant to have direct bearing on your research but are designed to encourage the conditions that may lead to “eureka” moments by giving you an opportunity to talk about your work in a non-judgemental space, explore ways to take different perspectives on what may seem over-familiar, and take stock of your work in your wider life interests and aspirations. That said, we will be using a range of creative methods that are increasingly being incorporated into research, so you may find it a space to explore and develop the creative side of your developing research portfolio.

We played with the visuality of zoom space, embodied inquiry activities, visual journaling, and time for small group discussion. We started by disrupting normal zoom conventions, de-privileging the face and inviting thumbs, fingers and elbows to take centre stage to play pac man, follow the leader and a game that literally involved zooming in and out from webcams. We followed this moment of fun that dispelled inhibitions with an invitation to have some stillness, with slow stretches that gave participants a moment to connect to their bodies, their strength, their breadth and where they were holding tension. Each session we focussed kind attention to a part of the body that may be overworked in these times with gentle circular motions paying attention to wrists, fingers, foreheads, and jaw lines ([here's an example](#)).

We then explored ways to flesh out and unfurl what we were experiencing using the principle of incrementality of Interplay. Simply, this means asking people to take only small leaps of faith. Rather than ask for a complete story we broke into pairs to just share a minute about a favourite pair of shoes, or a tree one remembered with fondness. In sharing these small moments details, surprising connections that are the stuff of life surfaced and made it easier to share more. We created structures that helped widen the gaze and distil meaning. We experimented with using mobile phones to go on local walks whilst still connected via phone to a person from the session, using the phone to share photos that spoke to the theme of the conversation.

Geoffrey Baines who helped give the sessions visual journaling activities. At one session we were invited to draw an object that sat on our desk, not needing to get it perfect, but through drawing to pay attention to a particular thing that made up our everyday life, exploring its qualities and connotations.

In another session we made little credit card sized sketch books and quickly sketched on each page a contour portrait, that is, without ever looking down in one continuous line drawing that face we could see in our web cams. That image has become too familiar over lockdown, a constant companion doppelganger, even. Leaning into giving it attention was an opportunity to expel the critical, surveillance of ourselves. The activity gave us a chance to laugh, confide if we cheated and looked and ponder: How is what we see, connected to what we write, how are they both us? Sessions closed with Patricia, one of the PhD students who helped us design and facilitate sessions, sharing a quote that had particularly meaning for her, providing encouragement through these times. We include a selection of them as introduction to each section of this paper.

One of the things that had surfaced in discussion with students during the Co-Production Methodology workshops was that in lockdown it's been incredibly meaningful to get something tangible delivered to one's door. It can powerfully overcome the sense of isolation. With this in mind, we created a session companion pack with a journal to write in, collage materials, a loom to take on a walk as [Tim Ingold](#) suggests, and a few quotes, folded up like the sayings in Chinese fortune cookies. We also posted an [online guide](#) for its use. When students might most need a lift or just something to give them a change of pace could not be predicted and was unlikely to always occur when we were offering sessions, and so the companions offered a way to meet needs as they arose.

We also offered sessions during SGSSS and SGSAH summer schools. These were longer sessions and we built into them breaks where participants could do an activity off screen and then share them on jamboard along with comments. One such activity invited participants to gather items from their surroundings in a still life arrangement that could be a portrait of their "Stilled Life". This gave an opportunity for a different kind of creativity, sharing and connecting. In our thinking through sessions afterwards this observation surfaced: I think the still life exercise was a good offering, just going off screen to do something, time to do it as they wanted and it meant new voices came in. What people said about each thing was so heartwarming. It did provide a different way to show up.

What we found along the way

It is ironic that you must go to the edge to find the centre.
Richard Rohr

The sessions were experienced as qualitatively different than normal zoom meetings and provided a welcomed place to share and process experiences. Participants indicated the activities within and the sessions themselves should be mainstreamed. The regularity of the sessions helped inculcate habits that supported wellbeing both for

facilitators and participants. The activities often did successfully create a space where incidental musings on life could be shared. It was not just the background inadvertently disclosing our home lives, in Homestretch there was the opportunity to choose to share more than our academic business, and thus connect our social worlds. People shared what they'd had time to retrieve that they had long set aside, they shared that in doing so they became reacquainted with past selves --knowing them differently, valuing them differently. People spoke of repurposing, repairing, getting around to what they'd always meant to have time for. Even finding in washing the windows a new kind of off-screen pleasure. Sharing these kinds of details led to deeper conversations about self-compassion, its importance, the difficulty in developing and maintaining it, the importance of celebrating small goals. Also, the odd kinds of grief and guilt experienced at a distance found a place to be heard. Being able to name these, hearing others name what one did not yet have words for, this kind of sharing emerged. There was a real sense that hearing others' difficulties was reassuring and provided a way to regain perspective-taking that our stilled lives were missing. Even people that seemed to be quite shy and quiet, really opened up during the breakout rooms. I also saw gratitude. People were grateful to have a space to share all these things without shame and getting understanding and kindness in return.

Thinking through what we learned

*Never forget that writing is as close as we get to keeping a hold
on the thousand and one things —
childhood, certainties, cities, doubts, dreams, instants, phrases, parents, loves —
that go on slipping, like sand, through our fingers.
Salman Rushdie*

As survey respondents commented:

“Opening the session with physical movement and some 'unexpected' ways to interact with the other cameras on screen was a great way to 'flesh out' those interactions. I really appreciated the invitation to be in my own body and I would appreciate if other types of online meetings/workshops began with this.”

“I was surprised by how engaged I was throughout the entire session. They really felt like a break to me instead of another thing on my calendar.”

In developing this project we had a set of goals that focussed our immediate design and facilitation work but also anchor a longer inquiry:

- to discern together the features and aspects of the activities, and the degree to which they facilitated enabling conditions of mental health for participants
- to examine the digital constraints and enablers in the context of other physical and affective conditions with sensitivity to more than human agency to share findings with the wider academic community
- to contribute to the emerging lessons of COVID-19 particularly as may inform continued forms of hybrid working and learning.

Restrictions that COVID-19 pandemic has placed on postgraduate researchers have meant this community faces particular challenges to their work, their mental health and social connectedness (Ghogari et al. 2020; Hamza et al. 2021). Whilst data is still emerging about the mental health impacts of social distancing, evidence makes clear that issues are likely to be heightened and that preventative work is needed (Galea et al., 2020; Hughes, 2020). Digital spaces lacks many of the para-linguistical affordances which we normally rely upon. Over-reliance on screen is correlated with increased fatigue, a sense of heightened self-scrutiny and isolation. We wanted to find out if innovative ways of working with these spaces that disrupt the two-dimensional grid can mitigate some of the impact. In doing so, we've taken a co-inquiry approach (Brookes et al., 2013; Voorberg et al., 2015) that draws upon post-humanist sensibilities (Taylor, 2016) to explore the benefits, dynamics and challenges of a preventative on-line support project, simply put, because Posthumanist sense-making opens up a reconsideration of embodied and embedded knowledge of lived experience.

The co-inquiry process was guided by the principles of UWS Code of Ethics. Taking inspiration from the collective biography work of Davies and Gannon, we worked to make visible and therefore revisable the discourses through which we make meaning and selves in order to deconstruct the idea of the individuals as independent of collectives, discourses, histories and places (Davis & Gannon, 2013). Monaghan's (2020) call for concurrent sociological inquiry as we grapple with COVID-19 and their question: 'what sort of society are we heading towards and what sort of world do we want to share?' oriented our inquiry process. Our analysis searched workshop, survey and facilitation notes and compared our coding of themes, revisiting the data and testing alternative meanings and interpretations (Davis & Gannon, 2013).

The sessions were fleeting and though feedback in the moment was positive, the evaluations we've sent out have not had many respondents. Those that did were very appreciative and we did not garner much constructive criticism. There could be many reasons for this. The sessions were offered through SGSSS which for the most part offers training events with clear learning outcomes and structured learning activities. What we offered was less amenable to being evaluated than these sessions. Also, if participants felt the sessions added to their quality of life, returning to standard form filling afterwards may have been experienced as subtracting from it, and therefore counterproductive and disjunctive. What we do know is that some of the standard lessons others are learning about online facilitation apply to our sessions. It's important to allow time to rehearse technical aspects and to have more than one person keeping an eye on the different channels and functions. Particular to our sessions, we also learned that although supportive space was developed within the sessions, the departure from that space was still experienced as abrupt. Zoom just doesn't allow folks to linger or drift over and join informal clusters of people departing. We always announced we would hang around after the session finished and this did result in a few good conversations, but this still didn't have that quality of off-mike, off-record informality.

We also discussed in discernment sessions the very real possibility that the people that most need this kind of support aren't here. It is challenging and some folks don't have

the bandwidth or confidence to jump into an on-line space. Nevertheless, we concluded that it is important to do what we can. Even if it is not perfect, it's an instance of what can be supportive, a tendril in the larger rhizome, that makes other instances more possible. Also, we can enlist those who do come to work with us to better understand and evolve more approachable sessions. Inviting participants at the close to 'pay it forward' by asking "What has meant something for you today and how could you take that knowledge and help someone else?" will be part of our next evolution of sessions, as it may serve to better gauge what we are doing than surveys and ratings.

Continued mental health stigma means further culture change work is needed. Mainstreaming activities within Homestretch, as participants recommended, can contribute to this. Lessons can feed into continuing mental health support in the recovery from COVID-19 and within the increased hybrid learning conditions likely at universities going forward. The role of the sessions in preventative support requires further theorisation and research as does culture change to support mental health. This work has brought us to a fuller engagement with our senses and the means to share the reassurance that we were not in "it" alone.

My yoga teacher's words resonate more strongly the farther I navigate through this time as teacher, parent and partner in embodied research. I would like to leave one last image with you who have read and perhaps followed links and listened in to what we've shared. As we signed off one session, we returned to the finger play we had started the session with. This time, each of us in our own unique way curled pointer fingers and thumbs into heart shapes and again we let these shapes Zoom in and out so that the screen became a kaleidoscope of hearts. And then, what one person started doing quickly caught on and was repeated by us all: we started releasing the hearts out beyond the zoom frame, starting with a small, closed heart shape, then, letting our fingers open out, expanding like ripples moving in diffractive waves across all of our windows into the world. I loved that moment of hearts welling up and out into the world. I experienced them coming to me as well, as a gift I didn't expect! That is the signature of creativity: repurposing and inventing variations on themes that make life and connection more than the sum of their parts.

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