

THESPACEBETWEENWORDS

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Distance makes one realize just how present space is. It tricks the brain to become conscious of the things around it. During the pandemic, space was noticeable for the first time for many. First there's the space between you and the rest of the world. Then, there's the space between you and the other side of the continent. The space between you and other people began to cross our minds as a 6-foot social distancing precaution was put in place. The chaos of noticing how much space had been present this entire time started to become overwhelming, until a detail so minuscule – the space between words – sent a rush of perspective and insight through the body.

Words are everywhere. We hear them, we feel them, we see them, and we understand them. But words are not words without the spaces between them, the spaces that make them, spaces that often go unnoticed. When reading an article, we understand what the letters mean because they are separated into chunks to form words. When listening to something or someone, we understand the sounds that are coming out of their mouth because they take little pauses to group the sounds into words. Space is not just present, it is needed. The concept of valuing space emerged in force during the pandemic, especially in schools.

Switching from in-person learning to online learning was a profound shift. The interaction between people had switched to virtual communication. As classes moved on to Zoom, words had to travel much farther, and the space between them became that much more noticeable. The ability to mute sounds and communicate by a written “chat” made the space between words not only stand out but at times become problematic. Connections, friendships, and contact with people that are key for adolescent development started to wither and become stressed. As the space between words grew, so did the comfort of no in-person contact, and no contact with people at that. To be candid, it was becoming easy to stay in the routine of not participating in class, or not putting the video on to talk on Zoom. This made the space between words augment to a greater distance. Now, there would be minutes that would go by where words would not leave someone's mouth to answer or ask a question. A class would consist of blank screens until asked otherwise. It would be dramatic to say that life started to lose meaning, but the necessary experiences and connections for development and childhood were becoming lost.

Technological malfunctions and inexperience did not help this matter. No one was used to or really knew how to learn or teach online. There were incidents when a class would go 25 minutes without a teacher because their computer died, or their Wi-Fi shut down. There were missed classes and added stressors because of internet issues. For families with multiple children who were learning online, the internet started to become so overused and stressed that it would cause technological issues that got in the way of learning. The space between words would disappear because of glitches on Zoom. During a heated debate in history class, the internet connection became unstable, and in a fraught argument, meaning was lost in communication. Because too much time was spent trying to reconnect to the internet, the debate needed to move on, and the point of the argument was never conveyed, causing misunderstanding. This is just one example, but incidents like this happened all the time and have social and learning consequences.

When the idea of going back to regular school was proposed, the mixed feelings of change, fear, excitement, and a little uncertainty took over the minds of students. Because COVID-19 is transmitted through respiratory droplets, the need for speaking required new protection: masks. As much as online learning was a change, in-person learning with masks was a change too, and it brought its own set of challenges. Although the space between words had been reduced, the strength of words had to increase. The level of volume that words now had to be at caused the space between those words to become defined. Normally, the speaking level when people are close to each other is not that high. However, add a mask and that level of sound needs to increase. This made people even more aware of space. Microphones were now used in class so that students in the back row could hear, the level of sound at which one spoke was now escalated, and the distance between people during a conversation now beckoned for consideration. Masks were in place to obviate the spread of the coronavirus, and they did. Whilst doing so, however, they also increased the awareness and consciousness of space. Especially the space between words.

The pandemic has immeasurably affected the world and each one of us. While many are quick to say the effect is wholly negative, and there are indeed many negative dimensions of this pandemic, the strength in us leads us to consider looking at a new perspective that's emerged from the crisis. The pandemic, with its massive influence on school and life in general, has brought awareness to the reality of space. Before COVID-19, space was viewed by many as irrelevant in our everyday lives. However, this new pandemic reality and its manifestations in our lifestyle has brought the realization of how present space actually is. This pandemic has taken the presence, and more importantly the value of the presence of space, and brought it to public attention and consideration. Space is one detail, yet this one detail opens up a whole new way of thinking, analyzing, and understanding ourselves and the world; understanding space anew unveils layers of complexity in the universe and in human nature itself.