

Emotional Graphing and the Phenomenology of A/Liveness in Three Arts Educators in Singapore During COVID-19

Introduction

On 23 January 2020, the Singapore Ministry of Health confirmed the first case of the novel coronavirus in Singapore imported from Wuhan, China.¹ As cases continued to rise, Singapore went into the first lockdown, locally known as the Circuit Breaker, from 7 April to 4 May 2020,² which was later extended through 1 June 2020.³ The Circuit Breaker essentially suspended the rhythm of life and work. For freelance artists whose livelihood in the gig economy depends on festivals, cultural events, and performances, this meant zero income as shows and classes were cancelled. Many struggled to convert new works into the virtual space, while others turned to broadcasting old works online, sometimes for free.

¹ Ministry of Health “Confirmed Imported Case Of Novel Coronavirus”

² Ministry of Health “Circuit Breaker”

³ Abu Baker

On 14 June 2020, *The Straits Times* produced an infographic on jobs that were most crucial to keep Singapore going.⁴ On the list of the top five non-essential jobs, 71% of the 1000 respondents said that an artist was non-essential. This was contrasted with the top five essential jobs which were doctor or nurse (86%), cleaner (78%), garbage collector (77%), hawker (76%), and deliveryman (70%). These statistics did not go down well with artists who then made their voices heard, including Jeremy Monteiro, Ivan Heng, Neil Humphreys,⁵ R. Chandran Rama, and Rishi Budhrani.⁶ Even Professor Tommy Koh, ambassador-at-large of the Singapore government, questioned the value of the survey, arguing that “Singaporeans [have] kept themselves sane [during the Circuit Breaker] by reading books, listening to music, watching film and television shows and concerts online.”⁷ In addition to the transient nature of the gig economy within creative industries, the precariousness of artists’ work and the perceived loss of significance of their work demonstrated a huge divide with the public. This was evident in the public outcry voiced by artists fending for themselves.

⁴ Tan

⁵ Basbas

⁶ Tan

⁷ Koh

Precarity has been understood as the “casualization of labor in post-Fordist, immaterial production and in association with post-welfare states.”⁸ Zygmunt Bauman characterises these liquid times as a “playground for the notoriously capricious and inherently unpredictable market forces and/or are left to the private initiative and care of individuals.”⁹ However, Nancy Ettliger believes that precarity is not imposed by global events or macrostructures. Rather, it is “located in the microspaces of everyday life” and is an enduring feature of the human condition.¹⁰ Similarly, performance theorists Nicholas Ridout

⁸ Ettliger 320

⁹ Bauman 2

¹⁰ Ettliger 320

and Rebecca Schneider define precarity as “life lived in relation to a future that cannot be propped securely upon the past.”¹¹ They invite us to think about the labour of performance:

¹¹ Ridout and Schneider 5

How do we pay attention to precarity—economic precarity, neoliberal precarity—through a close reading of the performing body? At one time, claims for resistance to commodity capitalism were addressed through the idea that performance does not offer an object for sale. What of the performing body in an economy where the laboring body, and its production of affect, is the new commodity du jour?¹²

¹² Ridout and Schneider 6

During the onslaught of the coronavirus pandemic, the “performing body” did not labour as much; live performances, co-curricular activities, and enrichment programmes had been cancelled, and for most artists, work stopped momentarily. How then did “economic precarity” during the lockdown regulate aspects of life for artists and arts educators? Especially with the lack of immediacy with students in a virtual space, how is liveness being negotiated as a consequence of such uncertainties in their practice and pedagogy?

All these questions point to work (or labour) as a defining marker of one’s life, but I also want to know if being alive is a question that should even be considered during this pandemic. What does it mean to struggle to stay alive? If liveness exists in, or co-exists with, the sentient body, is that notion adequate to account for one’s life? I argue that it is not. Death (lacking liveness) and work (being alive) are extreme polarities, yet the significance of one’s labour (essentialness) is contingent on productivity. This is problematic because productivity excludes the lived experience. This paper, therefore, seeks to examine the phenomenology of liveness among three arts educators from the disciplines of dance, music and theatre in Singapore. It is also the aim of this paper to devise a visual methodology to understand more fully (both quantitatively and qualitatively) the spectrum of emotional rhythms felt by participants so that the visibility of the arts and arts education can change how public discourses are generated or maintained.

Liveness and Presence

To operationalise the key performance concepts of liveness in this study, I aligned these to the theme of the conference—“Arrhythmia”—and used the heartbeat as a conceptual metaphor and methodology. I wanted to understand what the participants’ emotional rhythms were—were they too fast, too slow, or irregular—and what effects they have had on their lives and on their practice.

Within performance studies literature, scholars have examined the phenomenon of presence quite differently. Cormac Power distinguishes “making-present,” “having presence” and “being present.” In “making-present,” he illustrates the magic of theatre to transform consciousness and structures of conscious experience. Here, presence is defined as “being the simultaneity between consciousness and an object of attention.”¹³ The second classification Power highlights is the auratic presence in theatre, which is related to Artaud and Grotowski’s transcendental quality that is beyond representation. It is also connected to an actor’s powerful

¹³ Power 3

charismatic presence. Power's third classification is the literal "being present" in the same room referring to Joseph Chaikin's "existential moment-to-moment awareness of a shared situation between actors and audience."¹⁴ It is this form of immediacy and contingency, "subject to the conditions of time and place in which the performance takes place"¹⁵ that would be relevant to this study since teachers are constantly sharing the same space with students; their moment-to-moment exchanges potentially mean a sustained and heightened state of performance. If the ratio of one teacher to forty students is the expected class size, I might argue that this form of presence is extensive and probably reaches across space and time, with possibly forty nuanced variations of "being present." Implied within this is the speculation that teachers are affectively linked to students' lives; forty worldviews would probably weigh in heavily on the teachers' mental and emotional wellbeing. If presence contributes to emotional labour, then why is emotional labour often missing from educational discourse?

¹⁴ Power 80

¹⁵ Power 87

More politically driven, Peggy Phelan interrogates the power and value of presence as, "that which is not 'really' there" and puts forward an argument for a re-evaluation of "a belief in subjectivity and identity which is not visibly representable."¹⁶ She states that many assumptions are framed within an ideology of the visible which therefore erases the power of the unspoken and unseen, which she calls "unmarked". Phelan makes a distinction between Lacan and Freud's immateriality of the unconscious and states that the immateriality of the unmarked, in contrast, shows "itself through the negative and through disappearance."¹⁷ Even though the art works examined in *Unmarked*, especially performance art, are framed within the politics of performance, Phelan states, "in the analysis of the means of production, the unmarked signals the un(re)productive"¹⁸ and it is even more urgent to "remember the undocumentable, unreproducible art they made."¹⁹ In other words, Phelan is suggesting that in the context of cultural reproduction we might be able to interfere with its labour, at least recognising the deeper body of work that is not visible. To understand this form of presence, I might argue, requires an excavation into the labour of teaching where the extraneous efforts put into teaching are neither seen nor recognised as labour but are, nonetheless, "materiality" for teaching and for "being present" with students.

¹⁶ Phelan 1

¹⁷ Phelan 19

¹⁸ Phelan 27

¹⁹ Phelan 31

In an attempt to mark and make legitimate the undocumentable, unreproducible labour that extends across, as well as below, the surface of a lesson, this study foregrounds the states of emotion felt during COVID-19 and visualises varieties of presence demonstrated by arts educators as they engage with their learners.

Emotional States

To contextualise these constructs further, I draw on Peggy A. Thoit's definition of feelings, affects and emotions. She states that *feelings* include experiences of physical drive states (e.g. hunger) as well as emotional states, whereas *affects* refer to positive or negative evaluations of an object, behaviour or idea. *Emotions*, on the other hand, are "culturally delineated *types* of feelings or affects."²⁰ Emotions must involve an appraisal of a situational stimulus or context, create physiological changes or bodily sensations, result in free or inhibited display of

²⁰ Thoit 318

expressive gestures, and a cultural label for the first three components. Until recently, emotion has had not been a topic of inquiry within education or educational psychology. Previous research on emotion was connected to values, beliefs, attitudes, and motivations of pre-service teachers,²¹ but not discussed as an independent area of investigation. For example, teacher education handbooks have also relied on James Gross's model of emotional regulation as a coping or adaptive strategy to improve students' performance tasks or reduce errant behaviours.²² One study found that teachers controlling their anger effectively kept "them focused on their goal of academic learning and helping them nurture relationships with students."²³ All these point to the need to develop self-regulation strategies in service of the student. Seeing the importance of teachers' emotions and the direct impact on what, and how, they teach, Rosemary Sutton and Karl F Wheatley ask more poignantly:

How are teachers' emotions shaped by their temperaments, family experiences, cultural origins, age, their emotional experiences as students, and the settings in which they learn to teach? [...] How are teachers' emotions related to their classroom behaviors?²⁴

Though the more recent discourses acknowledge the role of emotions in education and rightly point to teacher efficacy, the danger is that the emotions of teachers felt in their own bodies are completely suppressed for a larger academic goal. How then can teachers' emotional wellbeing be conceived if their emotions are not permitted to be present? This again points to Phelan's call to acknowledge the unmarked, disappearing acts of labour. To raise the level of significance of our "non-essential" artists in Singapore's public discourse, there is an imperative to examine the emotions felt by arts educators during COVID-19 as they not only operate within the arts, but they also operate within education. To account for their lived experiences during COVID-19 would perhaps demystify the labour of arts educators whose commitment in schools can also impact not just their art practice, but also their emotional wellbeing.

Methodology in Visualising Presence

To visualise presence, I draw inspiration from psychology and behavioural sciences. Though their methods are more empirical, James Gross and Hooria Jazaieri's article provided a more hermeneutic example which I could easily adapt, where they graphically represented emotional problems on a graph, with the x-axis representing *time* and y-axis *intensity*.²⁵ In their article, emotional problems could be examined through four kinds of graphs, namely intensity (hyperactivity-hypoactivity range), duration (short-long), frequency (infrequent-frequent), and type (anger-sadness). For me, I have used similar constructs and dimensions to quantitatively account for the emotional valences of the three participants. Yet, my methodology is also qualitative because the data is collected from interviews, and numbers on the graphs are coded as self-reported values rather than empirically obtained using skin conductors and neuroimaging techniques, both of which are not readily accessible.

Sampling was done from three of the performing arts; Durga, a classical Indian dancer; Boni, a Jazz musician; and Simon²⁶, a theatre teacher. Both Durga and Boni are freelancers who run co-curricular activities or

²¹ Richardson

²² See Cassady and Thomas 52-74; Thomas et al 40-48, Pekrun et al 13-36

²³ Sutton 267

²⁴ Sutton and Wheatley 346

²⁵ Gross and Jazaieri

²⁶ Name changed at the request of the participant.

assembly programmes respectively, while Simon is a full-time teacher in an independent school.

A series of interviews were conducted in May 2021, where I had invited the participants to reflect on their life's rhythms from March 2020 to April 2021. This meant highlighting the significant moments from the last year, and giving themselves a numerical value for their emotions each month. The numerical values were then plotted on a graph paper as a comparative way to symbolically represent the electrocardiogram (ECG) that records electric signals from the heart, except that I record signals for their emotions, hence my coinage *Emotional Graph* (EG). On the graph, the y-axis reflects emotional valence in positive or negative values and the values reflect intensity of emotions, ranging from 0 to +5 or from 0-5 respectively. The x-axis reflects the timeline from March 2020 to April 2021.

The values on the EG formed the quantitative data whilst the interview responses formed the qualitative data. To provide direct access to the participants' feelings and experiences during COVID-19, I have left their words verbatim within quotation marks. Varela and Shear argue that:

to accept experience as a domain to be explored is to accept the evidence that life and mind includes that first-person dimension which is a trademark of our ongoing existence. To deprive our scientific examination of this phenomenal realm amounts to either amputating human life of its most intimate domains, or else denying science explanatory access to it.²⁶

²⁶ Varela and Shear 4

This means the first-person dimension—stated in their own words or felt in their bodies—is an important methodology within qualitative research, which empirical methods fail to account for. Roy, Petitot, Pachoud and Varela have also used the phrase *phenomenological data* to validate first-person narratives.²⁷

²⁷ Roy et al. 4

Both sets of lived experience data were then analysed thematically for trends before abstracting them into the meaning of being-in-the-world, in alignment with Simon Heidegger's existential phenomenology. Briefly, Heidegger explains that one's experience of the world is dependent on one's lived experience as well as the structure of that experience, what he calls *Dasein* or being-in-the-world.²⁸ There is a relational ontology between the subject "I", the act, and the object of perception. In this study, it is the arts educators' relationship with the arts (or the 'absence' of performances during the pandemic), their students, their audiences, as well as their private family lives which are, unavoidably, brought into their being-in-the-world when boundaries of home and work collapse.

²⁸ Heidegger Being And Time

At the outset, one of the limitations of this study is that memory is often fragmented, so asking participants to think about the last twelve months could be difficult. Another limitation is that because the self-reported values were retrospectively ascribed, these numbers may not reveal an accurate representation of emotional intensity felt and experienced at that point in time. Nonetheless, I have used the Emotional Graph as a pictorial representation to visualise embodied phenomena, so as to, in Manuel Lima's words, "[give] life to many structures hidden from human perception, [hence] providing us with an original 'map' of the territory."²⁹ The following sections are also arranged as case studies,

²⁹ Lima 79

another textual technique to bring significance to each of the three participants' stories.

Case 1: Durga

For the last 20 years, Durga has been teaching Indian dance and contemporary dance in Ministry of Education (MOE) schools as well as in Special Education schools (SPED) as a freelance dance instructor. Her work in schools comes under the Artist-in-School Scheme (AISS) for SPED schools. She has been dancing professionally for 20 years, and in the last 15 years has operated privately, founding her own dance company. Durga holds a Master's Degree in Arts Pedagogy and Practice from Goldsmiths University of London, a Bachelor's Degree in Contemporary Arts with a Dance major from Deakin University, Australia, and a Specialist Diploma in Arts Education from the National Institute of Education, Singapore. She also holds a Certificate in Working and Facilitating the Learning of Children with Special Needs in the Arts.

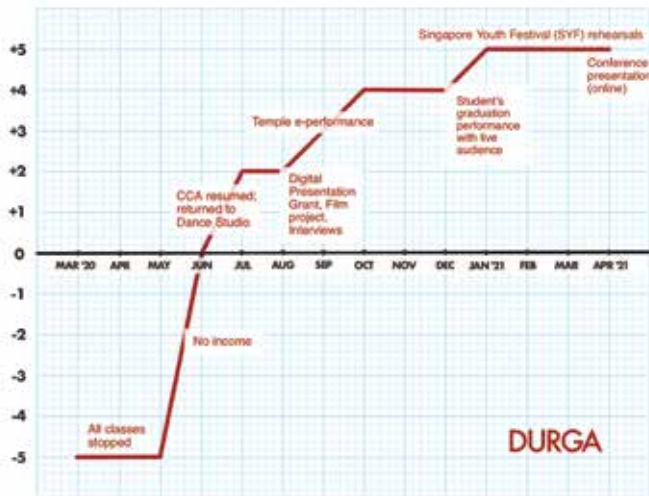


Fig. 1 Durga's Emotional Graph Values from March 2020 to April 2021.

The EG for Durga showed an upward trend from -5 to +5 over a one-year period. In March and April 2020, all face-to-face classes stopped and so did her income. From August to December, she worked on a film after having been awarded the Singapore National Arts Council's (NAC) Digital Presentation Grant³⁰ of \$10,000. Interviews came in continuously from various media channels for a few months. Meanwhile, in October, there was an e-performance for a Temple. In January 2021, she produced a performance for her only graduating student at the Singapore Repertory Theatre with a live audience and a live orchestra. Her emotional intensities peaked in January and February 2021 as she was preparing two of her schools for the *Singapore Youth Festival* competitions. In April 2021, she delivered a paper at a conference organised by the Norwegian University of Science and Technology.

³⁰ The Digital Presentation Grant (DPG) was launched by the National Arts Council (NAC) to support artists and arts organisations to present their work in digital form or via digital mediums during the COVID-19 period. They may include digital presentation of new or existing works, livestreaming of performances, virtual exhibitions and digital adaptations of texts. Successful applicants received up to \$20,000 per project.

Those were the major events on her EG. But to have an understanding of her emotional valences, some of Durga's interview responses are transcribed below. For example during the circuit breaker period³¹ when she was doing all her classes online, she said she needed to move things around in her home because she needed more space to dance. She had to borrow her husband's computer, use another phone to play the music, and then hook up the phone to the home speaker. It was such a hassle. She said, "it was so ridiculous. For eight hours, my family members could not do anything. It was quite an inconvenience." In terms of her pedagogy, she quips:

We had to compromise the movements [...] It's very, very hard for embodied practices like that, for us to be able to [...] But if I'm trying to teach something brand new, it's very hard to see whether the rhythm is in sync. Because a lot of the times, it's lagging.

There is a certain exasperation in Durga's recount.

To ensure her students got the choreography correct, Durga pre-recorded exercises for them for weekly practices, labelled them, wrote annotations on the video itself, and uploaded them to the cloud. Students would record themselves and send her the videos for correction. Then the cycle would repeat every week. Though videorecording was not a new practice to her she said, "this whole process was just time-consuming for no reason. It was very draining—mentally and emotionally draining for most of us—because we all wanted to dance in a nice big space as what we always did. [...] I felt very stifled because my apartment is small."

Even after they had returned to the studio, Durga could not feel the same sort of enthusiasm from her students. "I think it's a sort of mundaneness—I think that's exactly what the word is." She realised that this was because there was no big production to look forward to:

So no music, no dance, no live performances. I also feel they come to class, [and] they train, train, train, and aiyah, there's nowhere to perform. I do feel them. And I think that anxiety is sort of, you know, even before they feel it, maybe I'm the one giving it to them. [...] So hopeless. None of us liked this online thing.

In October 2020, there would usually have been a nine-day festival called Navratri dedicated to nine forms of the goddess Maa Durga. Usually, students would dance in different temples. Due to COVID-19, it was done online. Durga lamented: "we did the e-performance for the temple last year. It was so ridiculous. We're imagining the goddess sitting on the internet looking like this and watching all of us and blessing us. It's so silly. We made such a big joke out of it."

Durga also shared her sentiments on the irregularity of a freelancer's work and life. For her, there was no CPF (Central Provident Fund),³² no bonuses, no medical benefits, no sick leave benefits for co-curricular instructors under MOE. So the loss of income was a recurring theme. She said:

We've been doing that for many years. But this [COVID-19 and payouts] sort of... messed up the system for us quite a bit. And now I'm feeling a bit lost because this month, I managed to get 2 schools

³¹ The "circuit breaker" was the official term given to the COVID-19 lockdown in Singapore.

³² The Central Provident Fund (CPF) is a compulsory retirement savings plan for residents living and working in Singapore. Persons with a salary will need to contribute 37% of their income to their CPF, where 20% comes from the individual and 17% from the company. Freelancers like most artists are self-employed and do not have a company to contribute to their CPF, so the contributions have to be fully borne by themselves.

to give me proper salaries. So I can come back into my regular mode again, in terms of paying my bills. I also think it's sort of a mental space, especially for people like us with families and children and all that. [...] I can't believe it's taken a year.

Durga also mentioned that she was worried for her husband, as he had to be in India to do a film for two months. With the escalating cases of COVID-19 deaths in India, it would be a risk for everyone. Moreover, the fact that she could not travel with him added to her anxieties.

Case 2: Boni

Boni de Souza has been a professional musician playing the piano in hotels since the 1980s. In the 1990s, he operated his own recording studio. Since 2004, he has been teaching privately and training the music scholarship band at a reputable private music school. As a freelance music instructor in MOE schools, he also runs NAC-AEP workshops from primary schools to junior colleges. He has 17 programme offerings, such as music composition, songwriting, classical music, pop music, and jazz. He is currently pursuing his Master's Degree in Arts Pedagogy and Practice from LASALLE College of the Arts/Goldsmiths University of London.

Boni's EG dipped sharply in April 2020 and then it rose quickly to the peak in August 2020. There are some fluctuations, but the most noticeable drop came in February 2021. It then rose to a mid-level from March 2021, closer to the zero baseline.

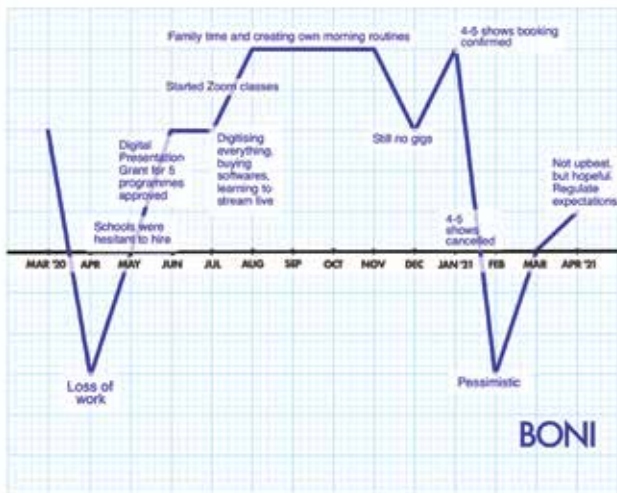


Fig. 2 Boni's Emotional Graph Values from March 2020 to April 2021.

More specifically, from March to June 2020, Boni lost all his classes. But in late May, he received the NAC Digital Presentation Grant for five of his assembly programmes. He stayed at home to digitise everything and he felt "very good, very productive." He was not familiar with Zoom and YouTube streaming then, so he learned it and even bought a new software, Wirecast, which cost about \$1000. He explained that when he was not occupied with anything, he would get "antsy." He said:

I need to do something productive. I need to finish something and be proud of it. That, I'm happy. It's my sense of accomplishment. That is why I also enrolled into the [MA Arts Pedagogy and Practice] programme. At my age—I'm 60 plus—I don't think, after this, I'm able to work somewhere full-time even with the degree. But I'm happy because I want to accomplish something. That is my character.

In late June 2020, schools “were hesitant” to hire external vendors into their premises to teach face-to-face. Nonetheless, as can be seen in the EG, Boni reached +5 from August to November 2020. He claimed that it was because he had found a new routine while working from home. He would wake up at 6.30 am and play his guitar or piano every morning. Within a month, he said, “I was able to create new arrangements [...] or compositions. By lunchtime, I feel like I have achieved something.” He also explained that after developing these new routines, he felt “more balanced, more satisfied as compared to before.” Boni also attributed his positive emotional valence to having more quality time with his daughter during those months of working from home.

In January 2021, there were about five bookings for his assembly shows, but by February, all of the schools cancelled their bookings. This sent Boni into a -5 state of pessimism. He was not “really upbeat” but remained mildly hopeful. He said he had to regulate his own expectations.

Throughout the entire COVID-19 period, Boni applied for government payouts once. He recounts, “actually you don't even have to apply. As long as you just declare you are a freelancer or sole proprietor or whatever they will fund you.” He said that every month for a few months, “they give you \$1000 or something like that, which is great. I never realised that this government would do things like that. I find that in times when push comes to shove, I think they did the right thing.”

Boni elaborates, “financially, work-wise, there was none, but I had to rely on savings and the little that trickled in. Thankfully, it did not last long. We are not rich but we can survive a few months.”

Case 3: Simon

Simon has been teaching in an independent secondary school as Head of Drama since 2007. Unlike freelance drama teachers who are engaged as vendors, he is fully employed by the school. As part of his job scope, he teaches drama as a core curriculum for the entire secondary two cohort, and runs his Theatre Club as a co-curricular activity. Each year, the secondary two students put up a DramaFest where each class stages an original play to a ticketed audience, showcasing their year of drama learning. He also directs all the Theatre Club's performances, preparing them for Singapore Youth Festival (SYF) and their bi-annual public performance. Prior to this, he was a professional theatre director, running his own theatre company for ten years. He holds a Master's Degree in Arts Pedagogy and Practice from Goldsmiths University of London, and a Diploma in Education from National Institute of Education (Singapore) with a specialisation in Art (Visual) Education.

Simon's EG dipped early during COVID-19 and it slowly rose peaking in October 2020. It slowly saw an emotional decline before reaching a level near the baseline.

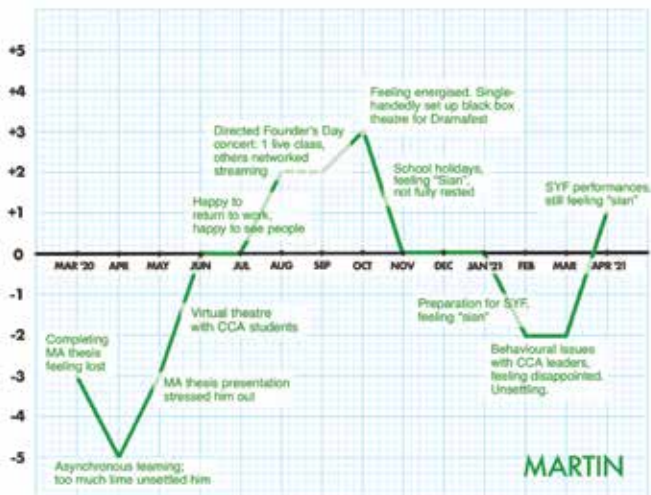


Fig 3. Simon's Emotional Graph Values from March 2020 to April 2021.

Simon explained that he was feeling very lost and stressed when he was completing his Master's thesis, so his emotions dipped to -5 in April 2020. It was his final semester of postgraduate studies. As his teaching workload in school for home-based learning was asynchronous, it did not affect him as much, but he felt unsettled and anxious. He recounted, "I'll feel guilty because my colleagues are working like hell, and then I'm like [...] can go NTUC³³ every day. Because I'm writing my thesis, I can't be bothered with school, I mean work... It's a different kind of emotional stress." Because students were doing asynchronous learning in his subject area which was non-examinable, he explained:

³³ NTUC is a local supermarket in Singapore.

I lost track of what's happening in school, for example. Because you're not following a timetable, you're not following anything. So basically, you're a bit like lost. It's a different kind of stress, whereby you're like, 'OK, what's going on, what's going on?'

That feeling of loss morphed into another emotion: guilt. He pondered: "How do I account for my work? You get what I mean? There's this guilty conscience."

Before June, he experimented with virtual theatre with his CCA Theatre Club students. By June, he was happy to be back in school getting to see people. In August, his emotional intensity rose to +2 as he directed a Founder's Day concert, and then to +3 when he single-handedly set up his Blackbox Theatre for the upcoming secondary two DramaFest. That was the peak. After that it dipped to a neutral zero because school holidays came and went—but his feelings of being *sian* (which can be translated to a sense of boredom or lethargy) continued through 2021, even though performances for SYF were going on full steam.

In February 2021, student management issues caused him extreme distress. Two of his Theatre Club student leaders started disagreeing with a member of staff, ending up in outbursts. Simon said:

We are beginning to see the effects of... Hard to quantify or qualify... The kids are behaving strangely. And I don't understand. It's a kind of behaviour I've not seen in my CCA. Kids were breaking down, start crying in the toilet. Only two kids. Very draining.

Later in March 2021, he found out that one of his students was suicidal and had been sexually assaulted. He sighed as he elaborated:

Kinda disturbing to me coz she's very happy. No sign of any problem. A very happy child. Having suicidal thoughts and has plans. That disturbed me. I had to watch her very closely.

Simon felt unsettled from these issues, but also because he took on the SYF team that was not doing too well. He reflected: "What if my team didn't do well? When one team does not do well, people will compare. [...] I'm still the teacher in charge. So worried that kids will think lesser of me and the team."

Discussion

The three Emotional Graphs are superimposed to identify arrhythmia in emotions (see figure 4). In the earlier months of COVID-19, the trends dipped and then increased rather proportionately. By around November or December 2020, the three lines diverged in slightly different ways. In fact, a comparison with a working paper by Tan et al. from the Singapore Management University shows a similar trend. The authors wrote that, "overall life satisfaction [...] dropped significantly when the 'circuit breaker' began in April 2020. [...] Yet life satisfaction has not returned to pre-COVID-19 levels and appears to have plateaued"³⁴

³⁴Tan et al. 3

It might be comforting to know that all of us in Singapore felt the same. But how meaningful would it be to know that one person's wellbeing followed identical trends of other Singapore residents? When emotions rising, dipping, and plateauing are universalised, this potentially negates individual differences and undermines the nuances of each emotional journey, especially evidenced through the three arts educators' stories.

Fluctuations, Affective Homeostasis and Liveness

Methodologically, some of the steepest lines are exhibited by Boni, from +5 in January 2021 to -3 in February 2021 (a drop of 8 points), from +3 in March 2020 to -3 in April 2020 (a drop of 6 points), and from -3 in April 2020 to +3 in June 2020 (a rise in 6 points); as well as by Durga from -5 in May 2020 to 0 in June 2020 (a rise in 5 points). Intensive hyper fluctuations within one or two months, especially for both Boni and Durga, would indicate erratic and unpredictable emotions. In a typical medical context, fluctuations in an electrocardiogram (ECG) – called ventricular fibrillation (VF) – would show that a patient is slipping into cardiac arrest, the fatal outcome of arrhythmia. But how can these fluctuations be interpreted?

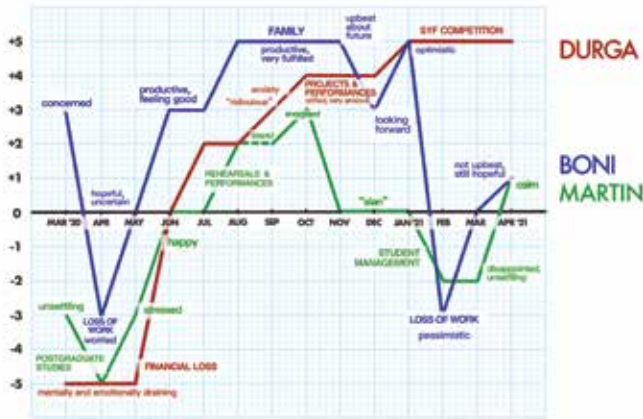


Fig. 4 Combined Emotional Graphs.

In addition to these fluctuations in figure 4, straight horizontal lines in the Emotional Graph would signal a different “heartbeat.” Unlike the straight lines on an ECG machine indicating an absence of electrical impulses—hence death—straight lines on an EG would indicate some form of stability, what I call *affective homeostasis*. I make a distinction here from “emotional stability” because this construct is defined as a “personality trait that has to do with being even tempered, particularly in the face of challenges and threats,”³⁵ which is usually conceived as the opposite of neuroticism. Emotional stability scores are often administered in questionnaires to evaluate a person’s eligibility for a job, hence *affective homeostasis* would be a better coinage to show emotional regulation over time.

³⁵ Ellis et al. 77

From the graph, Boni exhibited extremely positive emotions in one month and an extremely negative change the next month. More specifically from January to February 2021, there is a sharp drop from +5 optimism to -3 pessimism. If Boni’s emotions had continued to fluctuate, it might indicate an emotional arrhythmia. But because his EG values from March to April 2021 remained at 0 and +1 respectively, it could be interpreted as a sign of internal emotional regulation; what James Gross would call “altering the emotion trajectory.”³⁶ Boni admitted that he tried to be “hopeful” even though he was “not feeling upbeat.” The attempt to remain hopeful in difficult times is perhaps a form of balance near the baseline of fluctuating emotions.

³⁶ Gross 5

By contrast, Durga’s waves are slowly increasing due to the number of performances and projects from August 2020 to January 2021, her upward trend representing more positive emotions. Yet her words show she is feeling “anxiety” over the “ridiculousness” of performing to a goddess on Zoom, for example. She also feels “stifled” at not being able to travel to India with her family, but presumably because her finances are slowly returning to some form of regularity, her EG did not dip. It could indicate that family priorities might be less important than her work and finances during that period. But this also shows that despite the quantitative representation on the EG showing a more positive outlook, there are less positive undertones that she needed to battle against. Even if a feeling is negative—for example -5 for Durga from March to June 2020—I would argue that emotional regulation is still taking place.

More specifically, Simon and Durga showed four periods of *affective homeostasis*. These four periods actualise themselves into nine months of *affective homeostasis* each in the last year, regardless of emotional intensities. For example, Simon showed homeostasis from June-July 2020, August-September 2020, November 2020-January 2021, and February-March 2021. Likewise, Durga's stable months were from March-May 2020, July-August 2020, October-December 2020, and January-April 2021. By contrast, Boni's stable months were only from June-July 2020 and August-November 2020—only 6 months out of the entire year. If these participants' wellbeing were to be analysed in terms of *affective homeostasis*, both Durga and Simon probably showed that they were better at regulating their emotions, whereas Boni might not have had the same inner resources. As seen in the EG, all of Boni's graphs showed intense fluctuations which could potentially raise alarm bells for early psychosocial interventions if needed. But if zero on the EG is a baseline between extreme emotional valences, it could be argued that Boni and Simon eventually regulated their emotional trajectory closer to a mid-level, whereas Durga's EG values remained at +5, which may show that she is riding on a consistent high. It might also mean Durga may not have regulated herself as well. Both interpretations are plausible.

In *The Neural Basis of Emotion Dysregulation*, Tom Johnstone and Henrik Walter state that, "we cannot afford to be constantly interrupted; emotions exist in a balance with other ongoing cognitive, attentional, and behavioural processes."³⁷ It has been posited that bodily stability is a requirement for survival. In explaining why some people are able to regulate their emotions while some are not, James Gross explains:

People differ substantially in their ability to track subtle emotion dynamics and represent these in a differentiated fashion; some do this very well, but others (e.g., those who have alexithymia or low levels of emotion awareness) have little or no awareness of ongoing emotional responses.³⁸

³⁷ Johnstone and Walter 58

³⁸ Gross 13

Based on the phenomenological data, I would contest that survivability—being alive—is more than a mere maintenance and control of emotional triggers. Life performs liveness. The paradox of the Emotional Graph is in visualising emotions over an intensity-time continuum is that it reveals more than the emotions themselves. The relational nature of phenomenal data points to entities beyond the perceiver to what is also being perceived. In other words, the liveness of the perceiver, as would be explained later, is also in the being of the perceived.

Attunement

This study does not seek psycho-pathological explanations behind emotions, but to narrativise, enliven, and make visible 'how' the three arts educators' liveness had been performed with their 'what.' This can be understood by examining the entities that have affected them, namely family, students, money, and the management of work. None of them had identical priorities—Durga has more financial priorities than Boni or Simon; Boni places more importance on finding a routine at home; and Simon's attention was completely fixated on students' wellbeing, as well as on his postgraduate studies. As evidenced by the annotations on the EG (figure 4), the three participants were affected

in their relationships with both humans and nonhumans. This is important from a phenomenological perspective because the three arts educators defined what their *being* meant for them. Heidegger calls this being-in-the-world, or *Dasein*. He explains that the essence of being does not lie in existence in the world but in the inner worlds that we inhabit. In other words, Heidegger's *Dasein* is a relational world describing the human *being* with their entities. These entities are known as attunements.

Gerhard Thonhauser, a scholar in Heideggerian's existentialism, explains that *Befindlichkeit* is a general condition of an entity existing in the mode of being-in-the-world; we experience *Befindlichkeit* by being attuned to one another. He writes:

Attunements are not simply modes of colouring our experience, but rather serve a fundamental disclosive function. [...] At the same time, attunements disclose one's own situation; they are modes of finding oneself: 'Attunement makes manifest 'how one is and is coming along.'³⁹

³⁹ Thonhauser 104

The disclosive function highlights the fact that the inability to perform in a physical space and to a live audience matters very much to these artists. Even though there were performances and competitions for Durga and Simon from September 2020 through April 2021, they were heavily compromised with the wearing of masks, or with safe-distancing measures required of performers, and very limited audiences. They lamented that loss. Durga found e-performing to her goddess ridiculous; Boni was deeply affected by the cancellation of five shows, and if he had not regulated his expectations, he might have entered a more depressive state and; Simon seemed to be 'floating' across time and space in a state of boredom and purposelessness. Perhaps for these artists, art without an audience is akin to an existence without an identity. Underlying those small acts are big affective valences—worry, stress, being unsettled, pessimism, stifle, uncertainties, hope, productivity—all of which presuppose *being* with attunements. Heidegger argues:

These existential determinations are not pieces belonging to something composite, one of which might sometimes be missing, but a primordial content is woven in them which constitutes the totality of the structural whole that we are seeking.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Heidegger 178

In other words, these attunements help to elucidate what their worlds constitute.

Engrossment and Emotional Labour

In *Being and Time* Heidegger states, "because being-in-the-world belongs essentially to *Dasein*, its being toward the world is essentially taking care."⁴¹ In this section, I explore the concept of care beyond their arts practice by arguing that because they are arts educators they are taking care of specific entities in their world—their curriculum, students, proficiency levels, group dynamics, performances and competitions. In fact, the amount of emotional work associated with being a teacher goes beyond checking that dance students have learnt the rhythms and choreography correctly in Durga's example, or ensuring that music

⁴¹ Heidegger 53

students have digital access to Boni's resources, or checking that drama students have submitted their online homework in Simon's case. For Simon, his inability to understand his students, especially in the two cases of students having suicidal tendencies, led him to feel unsettled, with emotions swinging somewhere between anguish and worry. It is stress connected to the wellbeing of his students, a form of caring that contributes to a teacher's *emotional labour*.

In the original conception of *emotional labour*, Arlie R. Hochschild defines this as labour that "requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others."⁴² For example, a judge maintains the semblance of impartiality when being presented with horrific evidence such as maiming, murder, dismemberment, and child rape.⁴³ Nurses encouraging patients to eat, listening to a patient's story, making a joke, or patting an arm are now invisible acts of emotional labour.⁴⁴ For some other occupations—police officers, teachers, and prison officers for instance—there may be a need to display antipathetic emotions to incite fear and intimidation to accomplish organisational tasks and goals.⁴⁵ Perhaps these are what performance scholars Nicholas Ridout and Rebecca Schneider refer to as the neoliberal condition where, "the production of feelings and the various practices or structures through which affect circulates."⁴⁶ But the emotional labour demonstrated by at least two of the participants in this study take on very different valences. They are not suppressing emotions to show a professional front, or regulating them for the sake of the organisation; they are sincerely concerned for their students' welfare and needs.

⁴² Hochschild 7

⁴³ Hochschild x

⁴⁴ Hochschild xii

⁴⁵ Ward and McMurray 17

⁴⁶ Ridout and Schneider 8

Nel Noddings, a philosopher of education describes caring as "the relation between the one-caring and the cared-for."⁴⁷ She explains:

⁴⁷ Noddings 9

The one-caring, in caring, is *present* in her acts of caring. Even in physical absence, acts at a distance bear the signs of presence: engrossment in the other, regard, [sic] desire for the other's well-being. Caring is largely reactive and responsive. Perhaps it is even better characterized as receptive. The one-caring is sufficiently engrossed in the other to listen to him and to take pleasure or pain in what he recounts. Whatever she does for the cared-for is embedded in a relationship that reveals itself as engrossment and in an attitude that warms and comforts the cared-for.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Noddings 19

Noddings adds a conceptual metaphor to describe the attitude of caring: disposability. Drawing on Gabriel Marcel, she argues that disposability (or *disponibilité*) is the "readiness to bestow and spend oneself and make oneself available, and its contrary, indisposability. One who is disposable recognizes that she has a self to invest, to give. [...] She is present for the cared-for."⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Noddings 19

From the Emotional Graph, the engrossment shown by Durga and Simon is towards their students, whereas Boni's is towards his daughter. It is possible that Durga and Simon have a lot more emotional investment in the act of care (as more students are involved) than Boni. As a result of such caring, I agree with Noddings that arts educators are more present in times of precarity—as they know there are younger lives in their charge who may be in need.

Conclusion

This study seeks to understand the phenomenology of liveness in three arts educators during COVID-19 in Singapore. What does it mean to *be* during COVID-19? Is it the feeling of being alive in a time of precarity that determines one's liveness? Through Heidegger's lens of existential phenomenology, I highlight the "attunements" that cause fluctuations in emotional valences, some of which were not directly related to their arts practice, such as completing a postgraduate degree, spending time with family, and worrying about students' suicidal thoughts. Those related to their arts practice would include the need to create or use digital performances, experiment with new technologies, adjust their pedagogies, and wait helplessly for classes to resume.

Heidegger asks, "how can the temporal constitution of attunement become visible? How can we gain insight into the existential connection between attunement and understanding in terms of the ecstatic unity of actual temporality?"⁵⁰ By methodologically plotting the emotional values of a dance teacher, a music teacher, and a drama teacher from March 2020 to April 2021, the Emotional Graph has not only attempted to answer Heidegger's call to make attunement visible, but this analytical tool has also revealed when these valences are out of control, and if homeostasis was ever attained. The EG is a powerful methodology to visually measure emotional arrhythmia. Phenomenologically, these markings are complex performances of liveness, articulations of being-in-the-world.

⁵⁰ Heidegger 312

Especially in a time of precarity, arts educators have had to exert and project their presence in acts of caring. and because of the uncertainties brought about by COVID-19, they were further endowed with the quality of disposability, one which confers the meaning of insignificance (and therefore, being non-essential), and another on making oneself emotionally available. Paradoxically, when artists are perceived to be non-essential in the eyes of the public, that non-essential "disposability" is a quality that foregrounds affectivity. Underpinning these affective valences is their emotional labour. Their invisible acts of care—from caring about the curriculum to caring about students' mental wellbeing—have become emotional weights that diversely affected these teachers' a/liveness.

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