

Slava's Notes on Zoom Teaching

These notes and practical advice for teaching on Zoom (written for Laura's Resource Box) were inspired by R. Kern's excellent article, "Technology as *pharmakon*: The promise and perils of the internet for foreign language education."¹ (2014), and my years as a documentary filmmaker.

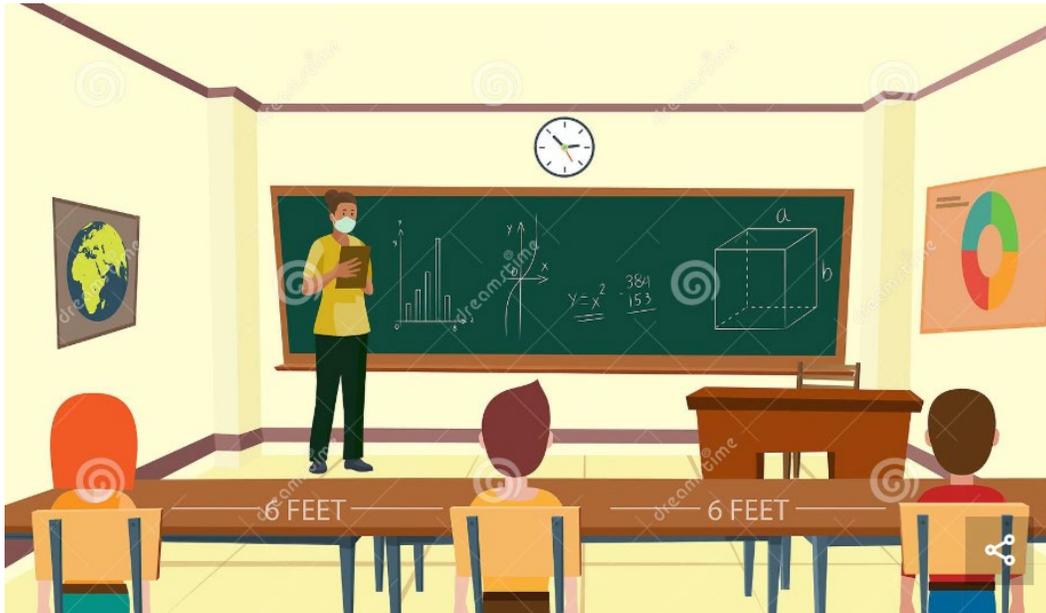
Kern starts with a reference to McLuhan's "The Medium is the Message" and gradually moves to the medium of... Zoom. (I am not repeating Kern below; I alone am responsible for infecting your mind with my suggestions.)

When the lockdown happened last spring, it presented intriguing opportunities for those of us who like teaching: an expanded messaging language.

The grammar of Zoom is powered by *framing*, *distance*, and *sound design*.

Teachers are performers. Our shows are more interesting than Chekhov's because they are interactive. Our theater is similar to cabaret: the audience is on stage, too.

In the classroom, here is how the students see you:



How expressive is a raised eyebrow at that distance? Will the message be even noticed?

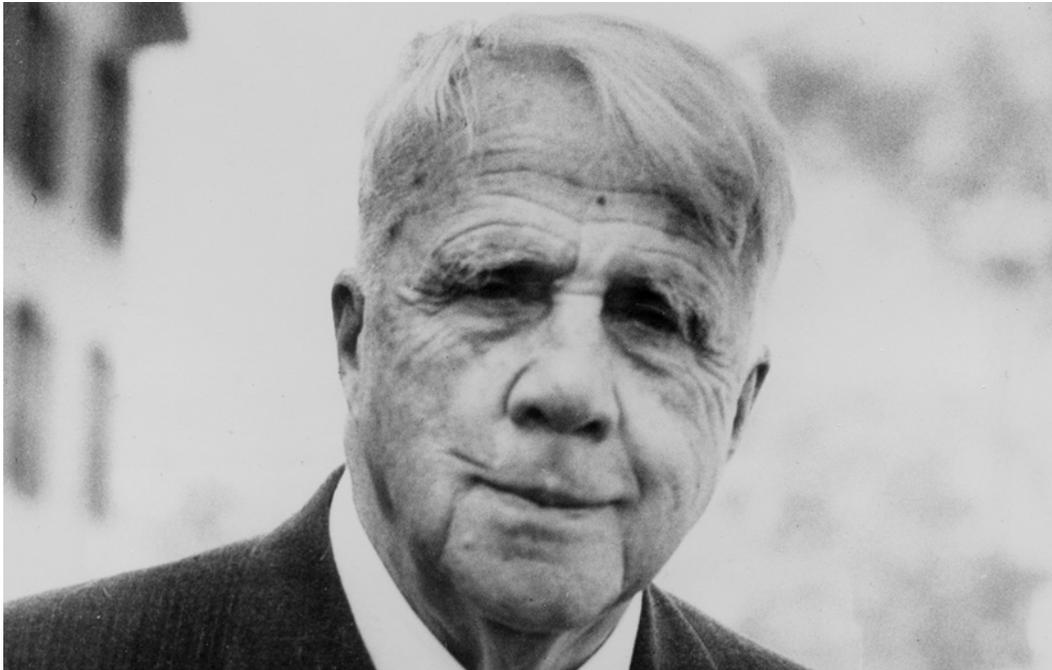
¹ *The Modern Language Journal*, 98(1), 340-357.

On Zoom, this is what the students see (a much clearer message):

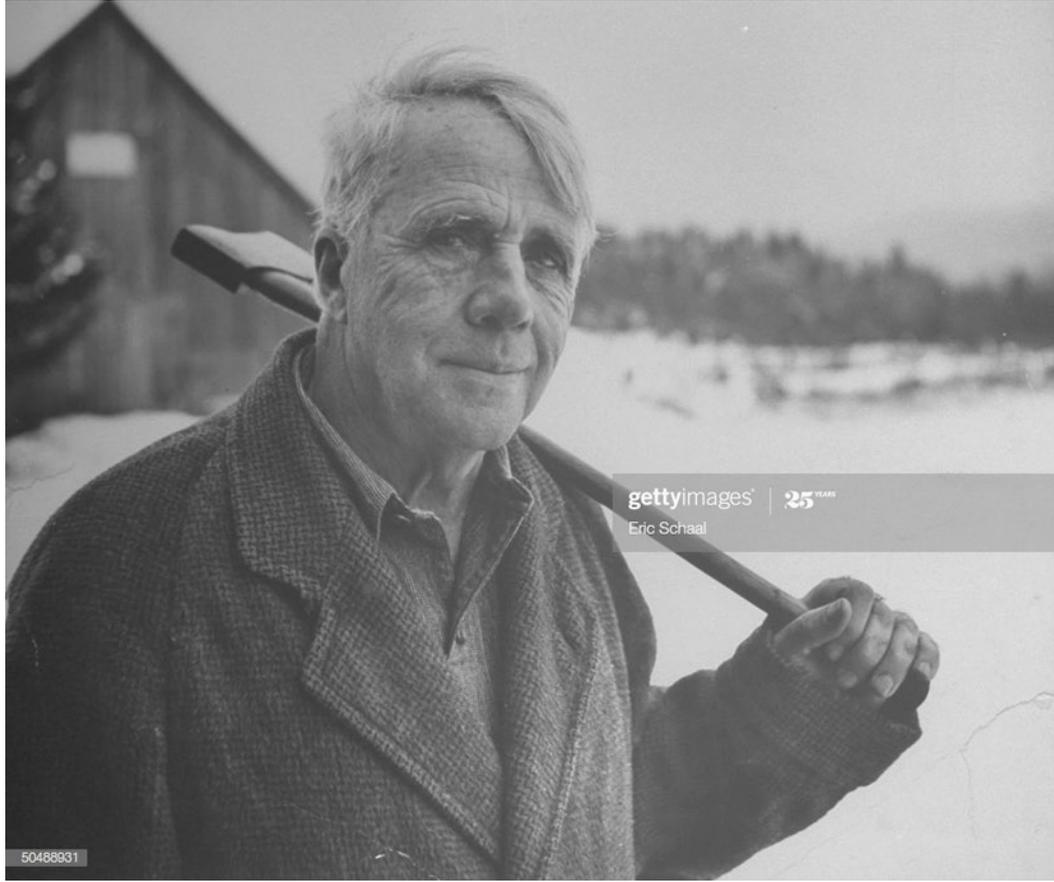


Realistically, three framing formats are practical on Zoom: face, head-and-shoulders, and torso. Each carries its own message:

“Think about what I just said.”



“But that is what I think.”



“You may disagree, of course.”



Whatever the semiotics of your framing choices may be, you should arrange your Zoom window so that your eyes are approximately two-thirds above the bottom of the frame. This is the golden rule. Eyes too close to the bottom of the frame send the message: “I don’t care what I look like.” Eyes too close to the top say: “I’m not an important part of this image.”

If you aren’t filling at least half of your window, the message is: “I don’t want to be here.”

No one wants to listen to a person whose feet are visible on screen. Feet are for action shots. This is why so many TED Talks—those that are given to a live audience and filmed from the back of the auditorium—are utterly boring. Look at how TV interviews are filmed: the brief full-body shot is used only as an introduction, if at all.

You may decide to lean back or even take a step away from the desk when reviewing the existing literature on your topic. No one will listen to that anyway. But as soon as you get to the point, lean forward. And when the time comes for the audience to join you in shared discovery, move in all the way—fill the window with your face. Then step back to let the students enjoy the moment of truth. These are some of the tricks of on-screen teaching. In the classroom, we do things differently.

There’s a problem with all that leaning back and coming forward: sound. To hold the audience, your voice must be close, *present*. It must fill the air. It must speak directly to everyone watching. As soon as you step back, your voice loses its presence. You sound distant and uninteresting. If you realize that the audience is struggling to hear you, you strain your vocal cords and inevitably sound irritated. In order to command attention, earn the students’ trust, and convey intimacy, you must keep your mouth within ten inches of the microphone and speak in a relaxed and confident tone. The acoustical power of your voice is inversely proportional to the distance squared. Double the distance, and your powers of persuasion drop to a quarter of what they were. My microphone is positioned so that I am always close to it, whether I lean forward to drive home my message or step back to invite response.

All of this means that you shouldn’t use the webcam and microphone built into your laptop. You must be able to position them independently of your computer’s position, and of each other. Most webcams come with a built-in mic; do not use it. The microphone must be positioned for the best sound. It must not blindly follow the camera.

A good webcam will cost at least \$100. The price of a good microphone is more or less the same. The webcam will need a stand. I like gooseneck stands with adjustable height. The mic must be isolated from the hard surface of the desk. To

reduce the echo, cover the desk with something soft. To win extra brownie points with my students, I use a microphone that looks like this:



The message is, “I am serious about teaching. Only the best will do.”

Your computer’s video control panel will allow you to appear in black and white, if you wish. Where color is concerned, sometimes less is more. Learn what “white balance” means, too, and find the control you can use to adjust it.

Few students feel that they get sufficient personal attention in the classroom. The teacher’s eyes are always moving, she is too busy. Zoom changes that, too. When you look into the lens, you’re looking every student in the eye. Computers have not yet learned to provide mutual eye contact, but you may want to experiment with placing the webcam between yourself and the center of the screen. This works better with a large monitor.

Enjoy your online teaching! It gives you new options.

[What the Russian Program tells students about teaching online.](#)