



Student Preparation for Online Modules

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The Online Experience

Teaching a phenomenological approach in a virtual format may seem incongruent. While not ideal, the online context has been surprisingly effective at fostering the very principles and experiential learning that EQUUSOMA® and Somatic Experiencing® embody. Teaching online can either be a one-directional process of an instructor conveying information in a disconnected way to a bunch of invisible attendees, or it can provide opportunities for attuned connection and shared felt sense moments via an international web that spans geographical and time zones. We aim for the latter, of course.

Screen Time Difficulties:

- It is easy to tune out and become distracted by other things when interacting through a screen; this is, in fact, entirely normal. There is a disconnect in the social engagement process when we are having to interact through screens, which can involve a time lag in video or audio, eye contact that is slightly askew or entirely indirect, and inability to see the whole body.
- The more people are present during a webinar, the smaller the thumbnails are when looking at everyone in gallery view. As a result, it is harder to get a clear sense of individual people's states and levels of engagement. As participants, you also usually have the option to hide your video, and either have a static photograph or simply a blank screen (with or without your name in text). This provides privacy and anonymity, and we fully support student choice; however, it also creates a relational question mark without an answer. Both the size of the thumbnails and the option to only have a photograph or name visible requires the nervous system to work harder to make sense of the social cues (or lack thereof).
- From a strictly mechanical standpoint, the human body is not built to remain in a static position for hours on end. Sitting for long periods, especially if your set-up is not ergonomically sound, can result in headaches, neck, back and pelvic pain or soreness. Muscle tension from repetitive strain or stagnation can also affect the limbs and extremities.
- Screens require the eyes to be looking at the same focal distance for long periods of time, which can reduce the rate of blinking and increase eye dryness. The blue light of screens can also impact vision. Eye strain, headaches, blurry vision, astigmatism, and other vision issues can occur as a result of prolonged screen use, a cluster of complex symptoms sometimes called Computer Vision Syndrome. If you already have vision issues or have an out of date prescription, you may find yourself more easily impacted by screen time.

- Adding to this are the extra demands of having children, seniors, pets or other dependents in one's home who need attending to, not to mention other responsibilities such as work. Preferably, we request that students carve out the time to fully attend to the online training as if they were attending in person (where these other duties and obligations are not in their immediate attention). However, we recognize that this is not always feasible and that some students are taking the program online because they would not be able to do so otherwise due to these competing priorities.
- For many reasons, it requires much more effort to pay attention and remain engaged in an online format. Webinars place much more demand on social engagement and the rest of the body, and you may find yourself working harder than usual. You may also find that you are more tired after a shorter amount of time in the online training than you are used to when attending live.

Cultivating Comfort and Online Presence

- Evaluate the ergonomics of your set-up and make whatever adjustments help you find even more comfort. For additional details about specifics related to screen height, distance, and body position, check out:
 - <https://www.ergotron.com/en-ca/ergonomics/ergonomic-equation> (scroll down to Comfortable Computing to see a point-by-point outline of key issues and an illustrated game to learn more about common traps).
- Test your video, audio, and internet connection and speed ahead of time. Remember to mute yourself during the lecture portions of the webinar.
- Set a clear intention for yourself during the online module, both in terms of your learning and also in regards to your experience as a student in a virtual context. What happens in your body as you bring your attention to this intention? Allow yourself to settle into that.
- If it helps, remind yourself from time to time that the instructors, assistants, and other training participants are real people, with a live felt sense experience that is playing out in real time on the other side of their screen.
- If you find yourself distracted by seeing yourself mirrored back to you on the screen, simply minimize this view so you can focus on learning.
- Experiment with changing your posture, position, and your distance from the screen.
- Have different options sorted out in advance to vary how and where you sit, including the option of standing (whether at a standing desk, or propping up your laptop or tablet at or just below eye height on a shelf). What will best support your comfort and your attention? Does this include pillows, bolsters, blankets, being indoors or outside?
- Be gentle with yourself if you find your attention wandering, feel tired, or are zoning out. Explore some of the practices outlined on the next page to gently wake up your social engagement system and loosen your body from its contracted state.

- Check in with yourself regularly to notice what is happening in your own body in relation to the material, the instructor, the other participants, and the conversations.
- It can be helpful to engage in self-touch that feels nurturing or enlivening, and noticing what happens when you say to yourself “I am alive, and I am here.”

Social Engagement Practices

The following practices are courtesy of Somatic Experiencing® faculty member, Glyndie Nickerson, offered to support ventral vagal attunement in an online context. These are included here in her own words.

- *“Limber up one’s own **facial expressions**, and trust your own face and expression – open and close the jaw, scrunch up your face, sing while you do it if you like! For being online, it is helpful to engage a bit more with the face, as is comfortable and authentic. This happens more easily when we do some movements to loosen up our faces and give them permission to express the heart (Porges’ face-heart connection), rather than be a blank slate. As this is tuned up in us, we read others’ facial and vocal cues better.”*
- *“Introduce some prosody into your own **voice** to increase the capacity to tune in to another person’s system. Can sing a fun song or do some do-re-mi’s. Being silly with one’s voice relaxes it.”*
- *“Stretch your **ears** gently with your fingers, and massage them. Listen with your ears, feel them as perked up, see if can move them with your facial muscles (making ventral connections between face and ears).”*
- *“Practice **peripheral seeing**, which creates a softer parasympathetic gaze from which to receive the totality of the others or specific individuals, and sense into the resonance with them.”*
- *“**Posture**: Stay upright without slumping back too much, but be comfortable. Engaged, relaxed yet alert, and yes, comfortable.”*
- *“Give your **body** a message that it can move if it needs to.”*
- *“Let yourself **orient** to your surroundings, to the others, and to their spaces too. Let curiosity be here. There is physical separation, and yet there is also connection, warmth, and people seeing each other and responding to each other.”*
- *“When people you are seeing online are very still all the time, it can bring up fear that the internet connection is faulty. I tend to **move a little**, subtly, from time to time so they know their computer hasn’t frozen. This helps lessen Zoom fatigue.”*

Breakout Discussions and Practice Rounds

- 1-2 assistants will be assigned to your breakout room. These assistants will also be checking in and monitoring over the course of the module to see if you have any needs or questions. Alternatively, you can also connect with your assigned assistant for support via the private chat option or by email, or you can approach any assistant if need be.

- On day 1 of each online module, we will be meeting as a large group first. On subsequent days, assistants will typically meet with their assigned group of participants for a check-in discussion before returning to the large group.
- Each day will also have additional time in the breakout groups for reflection and discussions about the material, or to practice the skills taught in the training.
- Assistants will support the members of their assigned group during practice rounds and discussions throughout the week.
- If I am not leading a breakout group for discussion or practice rounds, I may join different groups as an observer from time to time.
- At times, we may rotate assistants among the groups or change the groups to provide opportunities to get to know others in the program.
- If for whatever reason you are not comfortable with your particular group or assigned assistant, please let me know and we will switch you.

Practice Rounds

- The assistants will allow some time for orienting and settling within your group so you can begin to get to know one another and experience some social engagement.
- Their role will be to review instructions, help you orient to roles and set up the practice rounds, monitor the discussion or practice time, and slide into your practice to check in, see how things are going, invite curiosity about different things that may be happening for the person you are practicing with or for yourself, to support your own resourcing as you practice, or to make suggestions if necessary.
- The assistants "sliding in" is crucial to support learning. This helps support containment, safety, and also to dispel the idea that you are offering a "session" as a "therapist" to a "client" to reduce any performance anxiety or self-imposed pressure to work outside of your window of tolerance or scope of practice. It is an experiment, an opportunity to try out some of the concepts and skills, and meant to be an opportunity to muck around and have fun. Expect to have the flow of your practice be paused from time to time to bring awareness to the process that is unfolding.
- To further support the idea that these are practical experiments (as opposed to "sessions"), we prefer using the language of "practitioner" and "lender" (as in, the person you are practicing with is lending you their nervous system for the purposes of the experiment).
- The assistants will slide in for different reasons to support the person in the practitioner role:
 - To invite curiosity about what might be happening in the lender's nervous system at a particular moment.
 - To inquire about what is grabbing the practitioner's attention and what their intention is.

- To bring attention to different choice points.
 - To point out examples of what we are discussing in the material (concepts, frameworks, principles, techniques).
 - To invite the practitioner to be curious about what is happening in their own nervous system and to support them to track and allow time to deactivate before proceeding with their lender, if necessary.
 - To offer support if the practitioner is uncertain about how to proceed or if the practitioner is unable to continue with the practice for whatever reason.
- The group debrief following each practice will focus on what the practitioner liked about their practice, what caught their attention, if there were any surprises or new insights, and what they would like to explore next time (different choice points and things they are curious about). While assistants may on occasion provide some instruction and direction on an as-needed basis, the goal of the debriefs is intentionally about exploration as opposed to polarized and limiting perspectives about “right and wrong”.
 - Assistants will monitor the time to ensure that the group’s debrief conversation ends before Zoom closes the breakout room and everyone winds up back in the main gallery at the same time. There will be an automated notification near the end of your breakout time to allow time to taper off the conversation before returning to the large group again.

Make Up Time

- **Please ensure that you can attend live the whole week**, since the breakout portions are private spaces that are not recorded by Zoom. The breakout portions are an essential part of the training experience, in that they offer:
 - Mutual support within the group field.
 - Somatic exploration related to the group’s process and the material.
 - Learning from the questions, insights and experiences of other students who often have different scopes of practice and are from different walks of life.
 - Practicing skills taught in the training in pairs or triads.
 - The opportunity to make connections with others to potentially support one another’s progress outside of the modules, collaborate for the group consultations, and partner to offer professional services, if relevant.
 - A growing sense of community.
- We understand that sometimes there are emergencies or scheduling conflicts that may result in having to make up time. If you have to miss a breakout portion, please advise your assigned assistant(s) so we can keep track of attendance. You can make up this time by locating other students who have time to make up and hiring a training assistant.
- However, we make no assurances or guarantees that it will be easy to make up this time, that it will be possible to make it up within a particular time frame, and that the make-up will offer the same experience as when done during the training itself with a larger group of students. This is primarily because we cannot predict how many other students will be absent and, if there are, if those students will have an equivalent amount of time to make up, and if everyone’s availability

will line up, which results in logistical difficulties:

- E.g., Student A, student B, and student C missed portions of a module. Student A has 3 hours of practice rounds to make up, student B has 45 minutes of practice rounds to make up, and student C missed 1 hour of discussions but attended all the practices. In this scenario, student B will be able to make up all of their practice time with student A if their availability lines up, but then student A will be left with 2 hours and 15 minutes of practice time to make up without someone to practice with, unless another student is willing to volunteer to complete additional make up time. Student C would have to make up the discussion time with a training assistant without other students present to learn from, unless they also identified other students willing to volunteer to complete additional make up time.
- Students who wish to proceed in light of these factors are welcome to do so.

Tracking

SE™ faculty member Glyndie Nickerson, PhD, SEP has provided the following suggestions for tracking specific experiences in an online format during SE™ trainings. They are included here in her own words.

TRACK FOR COHERENCE

- *“For tracking virtually, keep oneself grounded and anchored in one’s own self. Then tracking comes to you – to receive the perception from the other rather than straining out of oneself for a clue. When we settle inside, the more we can see in another – the resting back inside of oneself, into one’s eyes rather than leaning forward to apprehend something.”*
- *“What tells you a person’s body systems are in relation to each other?”*

BREATH

- *“Notice the breath as it moves through shoulders, as it moves through the upper arms. Does it move fluidly or is there lack of movement in the arms or chest?”*
- *“Does the breath catch somewhere? Maybe you see it move and then gets choppy. Do you feel that in your own body?”*
- *“As you observe their breath, what does it feel like in your body? Does it move the front ribs or the side ribs? Through the front or the back lobes of the lungs? Is the belly moving with the breath?”*

MOVEMENTS

- *“While you are looking at the video frame, there are some movements, voluntary or involuntary, in the upper body that infer the movement continues down through the spine, or to the pelvis and perhaps legs, which you probably cannot see in the frame.”*
- *“You may feel the beginning of the movement, in one’s own body, almost imperceptibly tuning into the movement with one’s own body. This can help to feel into where a movement might*

originate or other areas of body it might include, as well as to deepen the attunement. We are not mimicking here, but just getting with the spirit of someone's experience."

- "You can see easily online the bracing patterns in the shoulders, neck and head. Notice the movement of the neck and the shoulders. Do the muscles appear to move as a stiff block, without flow? Or do they move flowingly and with ease? Is there movement up to a point and then movement is constrained? In our own body when you notice their neck, what do you feel inside?"
- "Overall bracing pattern: observe their whole body with soft seeing/peripherally. With the video frame, it can help us tune out surrounding visual noise so can see just what is in the frame. Is there a subtle whole-body bracing pattern? If you imagine what that would feel like, what does that feel like in your own body? Can get a clue that way too."
- "Are the person's eyes locked on to the center of the screen or are their eyes freer to move around their space and easily meet your eyes and look away? Do their eyes dart or smoothly scan the room? Do they appear to be making real contact with you, or do they feel as if they are peering through a veil or glass partition? Check it out."
- "Neck movements: Does the neck move only in one direction or at all? Is the neck jutting forward, retracted, crooked to one side, stacked on top of spine or is it braced back? Feel how it feels in your body to do that."
- "Jaw movements: Are they tight or loose, retracting or jutting out? Notice trembles around mouth when emotion comes. Is there a sense of habitual clamping that makes it hard to speak? Is the jaw flaccid and slack, as if there is no charge there at all? Often goes with far away eyes."
- "Is the belly soft? Is it tight? Is there breath there? Even if you don't see the belly, you can ask, and can also place your attention there and see what it feels like in your own body."
- "Arms: notice gestures, self-protective pre-movements, twitching, retraction, inhibition of self-protection, how muscles of arms seem to get bigger in the frame when feeling power of self-protection (also up through shoulders, neck)."
- "Ask person to share what they sense in bottom half of body, as cannot see in the frame. How do the legs want to move? Invite them to feel into the impulse, self-protection through the leg. They can push back their chair or move their device forward to show the whole body."

SKIN FLUCTUATIONS/TONE

- "If the skin is flushed, dewy, with a healthy color, it may indicate ventral dominant system."
- "If the skin is lackluster, sallow, taut, dusty, pasty, pale, or papery skin, it can indicate a high tone dorsal dominant system."
- "If there is a more intensely red hue, excess perspiration or blotchy, irritated skin, it can be signs of hyperarousal. However, keep in mind that what appears on skin's surface from blood circulating depends on person's underlying skin pigmentation."

- *"Notice pattern to skin quality changes when in activation and settling cycles."*

EYES

- *"What happens in your system when you see the eye movements of the person?"*
- *"Are their eyes guarded, merging, open, darting, wide as saucers, tense, fixed or softly relaxed? How are your eyes feeling?"*
- *"What happens when you soften your own eyes in their sockets? Then allow your eyes to receive the person. How does that affect their eye contact with you?"*

VOICE TONE/RHYTHM

- *"Listen for presence of up and down tonal fluctuations. Tonal prosodic variation indicates ventral dominance. A monotone voice can mean person is right now more dorsal dominant. Rapid speech, distressed tone, and loud volume can mean hyperarousal."*
- *"Use your own prosody and engagement with voice to enliven the others. Setting a tone that expresses curiosity and a sense of play helps folks relax their own systems when working online."*

This document was inspired by material developed by Glyndie Nickerson for assistants in the Somatic Experiencing® training program, with consultation support for EQUUSOMA® from SE™ faculty member Berns Galloway and adapted for the EQUUSOMA® training.