International Online Teaching Experiences

Good Practices Webinar

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TEACHING, RESEARCHING AND COMMUNITY BUILDING ACROSS VIRTUAL PLATFORMS: NARRATIVES FROM THE FIELD

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Introduction

As of March 2020, 80% of the world's learners were unable to attend school or university (UNESCO, 2020), with 138 governments closing their educational institutions (World Economic Forum, 2020). Globally, instructors and researchers continue to learn how to use online tools, such as *LifeSize* and *Microsoft Teams* and become more proficient in adopting virtual course management systems. The need for mastering online synchronous and asynchronous competencies was urgent, but the timeline was short, jeopardizing teachers', scholars', and students' mental health and wellness (Fleming, 2020).

Coronavirus-related disruption inspired educators to re-frame education by "educating citizens in an interconnected world, redefining the role of the educator, teaching life skills needed for the future" (e.g., resilience, flexibility, adaptability, empathy, emotional intelligence, continuous learning, communication, collaboration, effective teamwork, entrepreneurial skills, creativity, and critical thinking), unlocking technology to deliver education while recognizing the importance of face-to-face social interaction (Luthra & MacKenzie, 2020), and fostering a strong community in the virtual classroom, "based on trust, respect, and responsibility" (Henry, 2020).

We are five scholars from the Faculty of Education at Brock University, a medium-sized university located in Southern Ontario, Canada.

In this paper, we share our selected narratives from the field of higher education, specifically the community building initiatives and instructional practices that were implemented during the pandemic.

Responding to Crisis (Catherine)

While I am a faculty member with teaching and research responsibilities, I was also the director of our university's Masters of Education (MEd) program, half-way through a 3-year appointment, when COVID-19 arrived in Canada during March 2020. In the section that follows, I speak about the experiences of not only myself and some other program directors, but those of the students, instructors, and staff who were a part of the program during the first 18 months of the COVID crisis.

Moving online

Our program is primarily an in-person program, with most courses delivered face-to-face on campus. The instructors were comfortable lecturing in person, but the majority of them did not know what technologies were available to them, nor how to use these tools for online teaching. COVID cases started flourishing in March of 2020, and governmental and university precautions were put into place, making it necessary to move all courses online with three weeks left in the academic term. Most days were spent assessing the program based on the university's new COVID-related procedures and linking students and instructors experiencing technology and instructional challenges, as well as financial and health issues, to the appropriate resources. The faculty and staff showed courage and resourcefulness as they adapted to online teaching, set up procedures for administrative tasks to be conducted remotely, and maintained their support for the students with videoconferencing as needed, professionally, and without complaint.

Challenges and successes

By June 2020, it was clear there were ongoing challenges as a result of COVID. While restrictions were lifted and Ontarians were out of lockdown and able to engage in some social activities, students were taking leaves of absence from the Master of Education program for a variety of reasons including their mental health, financial instability, or a need to stay home to

look after their children and homeschool them. Program administrators also realized they would need to prepare for at least one academic year of online teaching, learning, and administrating.

Resources and support were put into place for the academic year, which commenced in September 2020. I set up two online teaching training sessions that the university's master adult educators taught, and had frequent virtual meetings with the administrative assistant who worked closely with students to ensure they were supported. The program staff developed online resources for students, such as a website with descriptions and links to all of the university facilities, including tutoring services and psychological counselling. I met with faculty members who had technology challenges and collaborated with another program director, Dr. Vera Woloshyn to organize ongoing technological support for faculty who needed assistance to put their courses online and for international students who were unfamiliar with the platforms our university uses, the Canadian education system and culture, and academic and social exchanges in a language that was not their first. These valuable resources enabled the program to run exclusively online for the academic year.

In essence, we are building online communities of practice among the instructors and among the students. The two sections that follow will focus on the practical strategies for building a community of learners among students, who were studying from their homes around the world, and for building scholarly communities among faculty and instructors.

Community Building for International Students (Vera and Jacqueline)

Like my colleague, Dr. Catherine Hands, I am a faculty member who served as an instructor and director for an international program throughout much of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this section, Professor Jacqueline Beres, who is also a doctoral candidate and instructor in our international programs and I provide a brief description of an online community-building initiative developed for students enrolled in our international programs. We first provide an overview of our international programs and outline some of the challenges that we faced in delivering these programs during the pandemic. We then

describe our efforts to develop an online community and reflect on perceived challenges and successes associated with program delivery.

International programs

For approximately two decades, the Faculty of Education at Brock University has delivered a post-graduate certificate program with the intention to prepare international students for the rigors of advanced post-secondary *studies in the* broad *field of Education* and related disciplines. The Faculty has also supported a designated pathway for international students within its MEd program, with many graduates from the post-certificate program advancing to the MEd program. The majority of students within each program are from mainland China or India, with increasing enrolments from the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa over the last decade. International students who enroll in these programs are provided with linguistic support and are invited to participate in several cultural activities and events.

Both of these international programs faced substantive challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic as faculty and staff were required to transform their programming and instruction to online platforms. At the macro level, challenges included navigating uncertainties associated with accelerating global infection rates, international travel restrictions, VISA office closures, and rapidly changing government legislation related to the status of online study. At the micro level, significant time zone differences (e.g., 5-14 hours) required faculty to teach outside the traditional work day and limited student access to on-campus learning supports and services. Some students were challenged to access reliable Internet services and/or instructional texts, videos, and other online course materials. Online instruction required faculty members and students to work within unfamiliar technologies and learning platforms, often heightening linguistic challenges. For students who were able to travel to campus or Canada during the pandemic, classes remained online and in-person social activities were either severely limited or nonexistent due to rotating lockdowns and COVID restrictions. Collectively, these factors isolated students enrolled in these programs from their instructors and their peers.

Community-building program

As community-building was long perceived as a foundational component of these international student programs, an administrative decision was made to offer community-building activities and events online. These activities and events were launched before program start (January 2021) and ran throughout the duration of the program. The objectives of the community-building initiative were multilayered and included:

1) promoting familiarity with designated online learning platforms and functions,

2) introducing student-centered learning approaches and learning expectations, and

3) introducing Canadian cultural practices while facilitating English language learning.

Throughout the community-building sessions, students were invited to engage in informal "check-ins". Students were encouraged to identify stressors in their professional and personal lives, discuss stress management and coping strategies, and when appropriate, directed to utilize university supports and services. Students were encouraged to engage in goal setting and were guided in the development of SMART goals (Fig. 1) in order to support their personal and professional objectives. In order to promote students' competencies with online platforms and technologies such as MS TEAMs, students were invited to participate in a "mock classroom" where they could engage in forum discussions, upload assignments, complete a quiz, and participate in chat rooms.

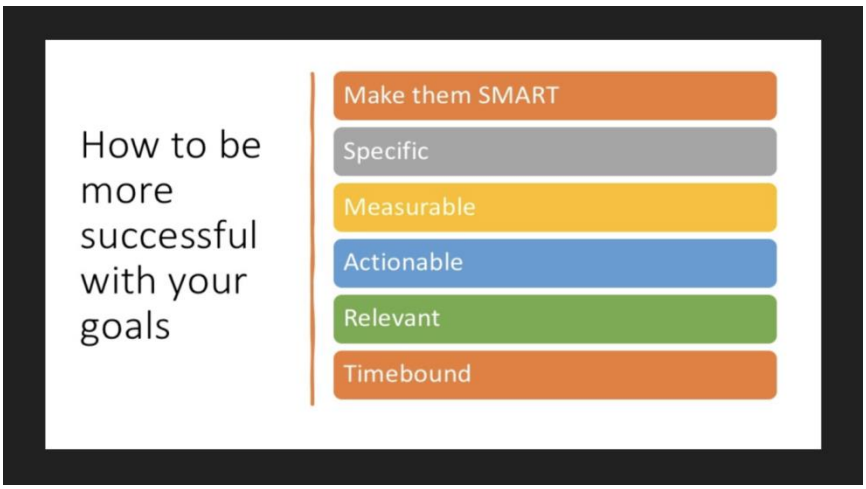

Fig.1. SMART Goals

Community-building activities and sessions were also designed to promote a sense of Canadian culture and familiarize students with the local region. For instance, students were invited to answer a series of challenge questions (via Kahoot!) about the university and region (e.g., local time zones, currency, local attractions).

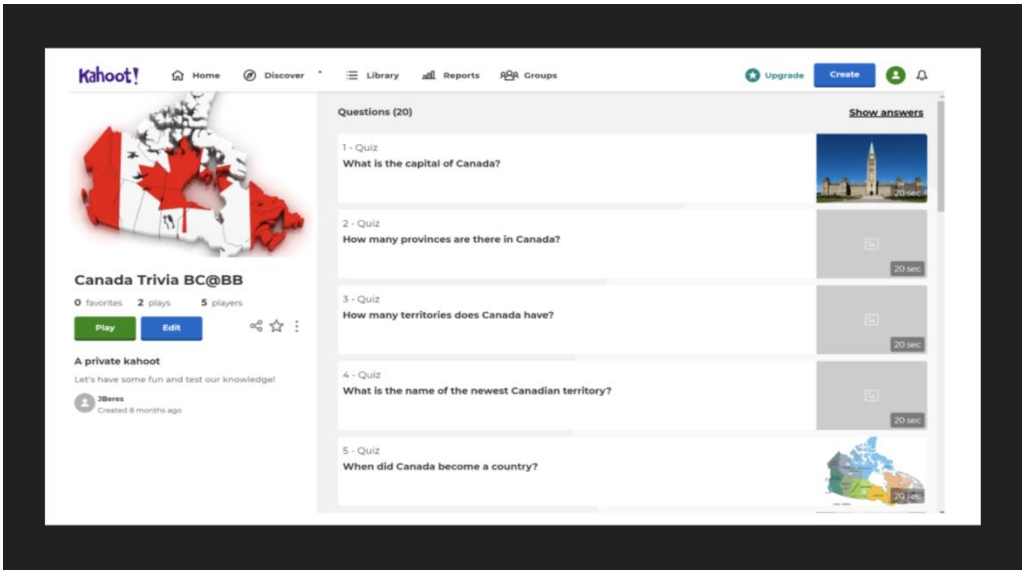

Fig.2. Community Building Through *Kahoot!*

Students were introduced to popular celebrations and activities and were provided with opportunities to share their traditions and festivities, such as New Year festivities and celebrations (e.g., red envelopes & lunar festivals). Students engaged in gameplay and other activities such as virtual tours intended to familiarize them with the region in which the university was located (e.g., local attractions, economy, geography). Students who travelled to campus during the pandemic were provided with critical information and support related to securing accommodation, navigating COVID-related restrictions, and fulfilling quarantine requirements.

Community-building activities were intended "to provide students with informal opportunities" to engage in English-language practice through authentic discussions that would typically occur outside of the classroom. For instance, students and the group facilitator engaged in discussion about daily

life on campus, favorite foods, international travel, and recreational and leisure activities including a gardening show and share session.

Challenges and successes

Several challenges emerged throughout the academic term and within the community-building initiative. In order to accommodate time zone differences, community-building activities and events were often delivered twice, either in the early morning or evening. As formal instruction began, community-building activities were frequently scheduled over weekends or holidays to accommodate students' professional and personal lives. Collectively, these decisions increased faculty workload associated with program delivery and required students to intentionally allocate time apart from their academic studies and home lives to participate in program activities. We also came to realize that students differed in their needs for program-based community. While the need for program-based community appeared less for some students who remained settled in their home countries during the pandemic, it appeared greater for those who were studying in Canada and for those who were intending to apply for immigration status following graduation.

Despite these limitations, we believe that the community-building initiative described here was largely successful. Students provided positive feedback about session activities and actively participated in events throughout the program. Students indicated that "community-building sessions provided them with opportunities to ask questions and seek clarification" about potentially sensitive topics related to their academic program, scholarly performance, and/or experiences as international students outside of the traditional classroom - inquiries that they were unlikely to have directed to their instructors. Students indicated that participation in community-building activities and events helped them develop and sustain friendships. Students reported that they valued opportunities to practice English outside of their classes and engage in a broad range of conversational topics. Finally, students reported that participation in the community-building initiative, especially the pre-program activities and events, reduced their anxieties related to navigating online learning platforms and technologies and increased their understanding of academic norms and expectations. We believe that without the intentional efforts to support community-building

described here, these experiences would have not existed, or would have been severely limited, during the transfer to online instruction.

Community Building for Writers (Snežana)

I am a *research officer and instructor* in the Faculty of Education. In January 2020, we established *Writing Studio: A Space for Academic and Professional Writing Development*. The Writing Studio embodies a community of writers, including undergraduate and graduate students, staff, retired and active faculty, and community writers who have a particular interest or expertise in writing and publishing. In May 2020, we moved online to support student academic writing development, to provide a space for mindfulness and mindful writing practices, and to build "a sense of belonging to our Brock community" during the COVID-19 pandemic and physical distancing. Since then, we have developed and facilitated 97 sessions. The sessions were attended by 292 participants, presenting 85 individuals, including Brock University undergraduate and graduate students, faculty and staff members, alumni, and community members.

Writing Studio programs

Writerly Wednesdays sessions are held online every Wednesday (12:00-1:00 pm) through October and November, as well through February and March, each year. They are free and open to our Brock community and the public. We also partner with the Brock University Graduate Student Association and the Joint Ph.D. in Educational Studies program to offer academic writing workshops, based on students' needs and requests. We have also delivered revenue-generating programs, including "Graduate Academic Writing Program," "Academic Communication Program," and "The Four-Week Publishing Program." We organize fall, winter, and spring writing institutes. The titles of the upcoming institutes are "Writing Exemplary Thesis or Major Research Paper Part I: Proposal," "Writing Exemplary Thesis or Major Research Paper Part 2: Completing Your Writing Project," and "Turning Fact into Fiction: Writing Short Stories."

All Writing Studio sessions are proposed and developed by writing experts at Brock University, and beyond, based on their expertise and students' needs. During each event, we discuss what participants' goals are

and what other events they are interested in. Last year we conducted a survey about Writerly Wednesdays and Mindful Writing sessions to find out what works, what doesn't work, and what new events and directions should be developed. We continue assessing the Writing Studio programs and student needs.

By attending the Writing Studio sessions, students, faculty, and staff can enhance their understanding of the writing process; develop their preferences, goals, skills, and identities as writers; and build a sense of belonging and wellbeing within our Brock community. As Writing Studio leader, I have supported and mentored five doctoral students, one master's student, and one undergraduate student in developing, facilitating, or evaluating writing events and activities of their choice, including writing workshops, mindful writing sessions, writing together online retreats, and individual writing consultations. These events are hands-on events and they always include reciprocal information sharing, a writing exercise, constructive feedback, discussion, a questions and answers period, and follow-up activities, such as providing a second round of feedback or reconnecting as needed. By attending Writerly Wednesdays sessions, students also receive credit in the Campus-Wide Co-Curriculum, with graduating students receiving credit prior to Convocation.

Challenges and successes

To move online, due to COVID-19, we had to give up face-to-face sessions where we would connect in a physical space, work in pairs or groups, and enjoy light refreshments, such as coffee, juice, cookies, fruit, and yogurt. Moving online brought up lower participation. For some students, attending Writerly Wednesdays workshops from 12:00-1:00 p.m. did not work because they studied from home and they chose to have lunch with their family over attending the sessions. Many international students were unable to join our events because of the time difference between Ontario, Canada and their home countries, such as China, India, and Pakistan. Virtual screen fatigue also forced students to be more selective in attending our sessions. Additionally,

the new fluidity of the studying-from-home-schedule resulted in some students forgetting the date and the time of a session or switching their priorities due to more pressing issues at home. Some students and session facilitators struggled to join sessions due to a slow Internet connection. At times, we experienced a lower engagement in discussions, with some students keeping their cameras and microphones off for different reasons, such as avoiding session interruption by family members, pets, or unexpected events taking place at home.

In October 2021, we launched a Visiting Scholar Program. Our Writing Studio Visiting Scholar this year is Dr. Jelena Arnautović. Dr. Arnautović is an *Assistant Professor* in the Faculty of Arts, Music Department, and University of Priština, Serbia. As a Visiting Scholar, she will work in the Writing Studio for a year, facilitating monthly Writerly Wednesdays sessions, writing institutes, and individual academic and creative writing consultations. Dr. Arnautovis will also work on her own academic manuscript entitled "Music and Diaspora: Serbian Women Musicians in the Americas."

To support the Faculty of Education undergraduate and graduate student academic writing skills development, we engaged two doctoral students as writing mentors from November 2021 to March 2022. Each Writing Mentor will offer 34 hours of individual academic writing consultations to undergraduate and graduate students, per request. Writing mentors will receive support, mentoring, and an honorarium for their engagement in the Writing Studio.

We learned to work virtually with flexibility, empathy, encouragement, and inspiration. We learned to be there, in cyberspace, for each of our students, caring about the quality, safety, support, and inspirational power of each session. We are flexible in scheduling our sessions by discussing best dates and times with students and faculty and by offering sessions, tutorials, and individual consultations per request. We are committed to building and sustaining a strong and supportive writing community to enhance participants' and facilitator's sense of belonging and well-being.

Teaching and Researching Online With Community Building in Mind (Kari-Lynn)

In the spring of 2020, courses at Brock University went online. Lucky for me, my drama and dance education courses had finished just two weeks earlier. Thus, I had time to prepare by learning about the online platforms, understanding new software and applications, practicing and dialoguing with mentors, and preparing step-by-step teaching videos. By fall, I felt prepared to use the online systems; however, learning this technology was no longer my primary concern. Discussions with other instructors informed me that teacher candidates and graduate students were struggling with mental health and were feeling isolated. I wondered about how to create an artful, collaborative community. I suspected it could be done because not only had I witnessed online plays and dance performances, I had also recently begun an online playbuilding project (along with Drs. Catherine Hands and Snežana Obradović-Ratković).

Working with the arts

When working with the arts—whether in the areas of teaching and learning or within scholarly research—an important consideration is that students feel safe and that they have their own agency. For this reason, I provided numerous opportunities for conversations that meandered, small group work online rooms, office hours as well as team-building games and improvisations.

Challenges and successes

Online work had its own challenges, both regarding to the platforms being used, but also because of the tactile and visceral nature of the arts. Dance and drama are both embodied in nature, requiring real-time presentation. Thus, a film/video (two-dimensional representation) often does not do it justice. How, for example, do you show bodies moving around each other or positive/negative space relationships when you are engaging in solitaire through the use of a screen? Other struggles arose with choral speaking, especially given that two students or research participants cannot speak at the same time without cancelling the other out. Screen displays were also confusing as mirroring sometimes occurred; a student would move their body

to the left and it would appear as though they had moved to the right. Everything felt forced and unintuitive - the exact opposite of how an educator or scholar wants an arts space to feel.

Eventually, with persistence and openness, I slowly saw students and research participants opening up, especially when technology was integrated. Google Slides presentations which were accessible online and interactive, replaced PowerPoint presentations. Here, I could draw on animation features. (Fig.3). Students could see the orange expand and shrink, or roll off the screen before they were asked to copy the movement. The smaller fraction of the orange slid side to side and up and down. Soon, students were using their bodies to represent shapes, levels, and specific types of movements, while relating to others in distant and separate spaces. This technical application allowed for community building and hands-on collaboration.

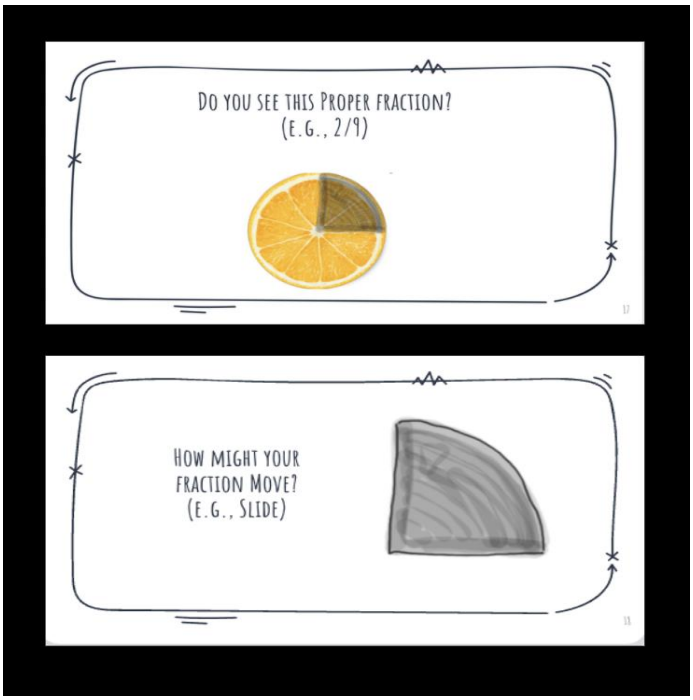

Fig.3. Google Slide Animation

Similarly, mentor videos, combined with at-home movements and Jamboards, enabled students and research participants to build collaborative and engaged confidence in the arts. There was a layeredness in the courses and play-building sessions that was now more obvious. Multi-modally became a

key aspect of active, artistic, and cooperative learning. Here a video was shown, layered with Jamboard drawings, a poem from a book that I co-wrote, *Hungry for Math: Poems to Chomp On* (Winters, Sherritt-Fleming, & Collins, 2015), and of course, embodied movement (Fig.4).

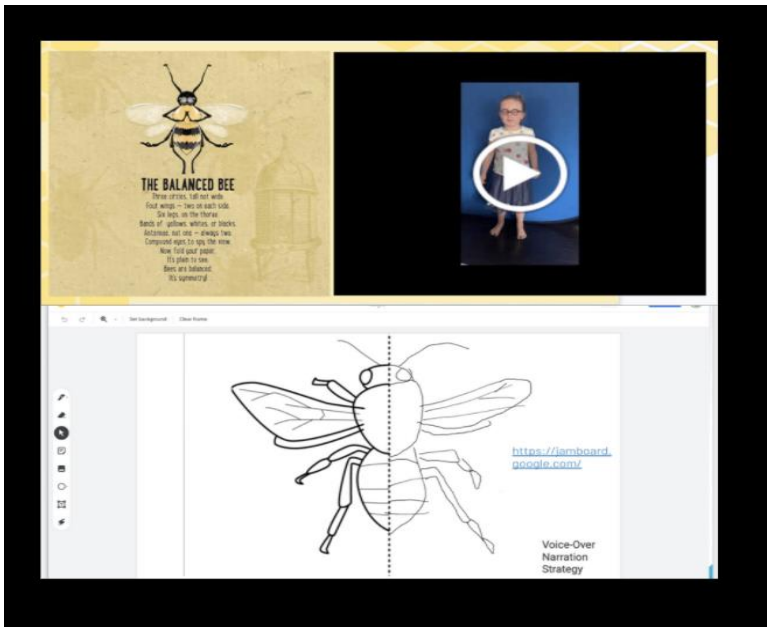

Fig.4. Layering Modes

Other interactive teaching applications (Fig.5) demonstrate alternative ways of thinking within online settings.

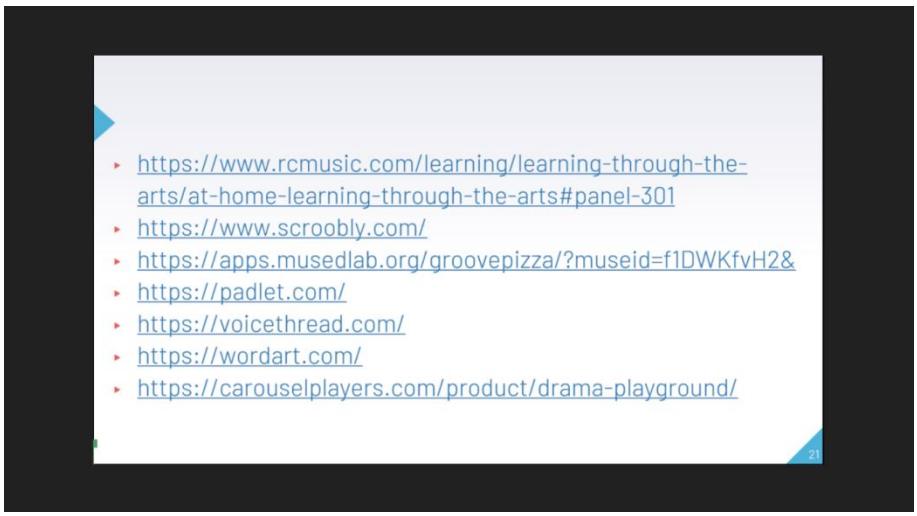

Fig.5. Interactive Teaching Applications

Layering modes offered students and research participants multiple entries for collaborative understanding and community building.

Online Scholarship (Vera and Snežana)

While much of the attention in higher education has focused on supporting and enhancing undergraduate students' learning successes, less attention has been directed to supporting faculty and graduate student research and scholarship during the pandemic. In this final section, we describe the development of an online mindfulness-based writing community intended to support graduate student and faculty wellbeing as well as their academic scholarship.

Mindful academic writing project

We are two scholars who have regularly sought out and benefited from engaging in writing retreats before the COVID-19 pandemic. We also have adopted mindfulness practices into our scholarly and personal lives. In response to "a growing sense of isolation and disconnection" from peers, we invited several colleagues to participate "in the development of an online mindfulness-based writing community" in August 2020. In this final section, we describe this initiative and resulting outcomes as documented through a collaborative auto-ethnographic study (Woloshyn et al., submitted for publication).

Mindfulness-based writing sessions

Our mindfulness project consisted of multiple consecutive and overlapping phases that continue to this day. In the first phase, we focused on developing a collective mindfulness practice that supported our individual scholarship. Specifically, we met bi-weekly for 3-hour sessions that included 60 minutes of guided meditation and reflection, with the remaining time allocated to focused writing. As part of our mindfulness processes, we adapted open monitoring, focused attention, and loving-kindness meditations to support our academic writing processes. For instance, we used open monitoring meditations to observe our thoughts and emotions as writers.

Focused meditations assisted us in developing main themes, discussion points, and paper structure. We visualized our preferred writing spaces and habits to inspire our writing. Finally, loving-kindness meditations were practiced to moderate negative self-critique and accept ourselves and each other as writers. We then extended our sessions to reflect on our practice, systematically analyze these experiences, and document them through collaborative writing.

Challenges and successes

While we recognized the benefits of collaborative scholarship and writing, we also experienced vulnerabilities resulting from sharing our writing and opening ourselves to peer review and critique. Related challenges included achieving a uniform voice, incorporating feedback, and assuming responsibility for manuscript development. Despite these challenges, we benefited from prioritizing our scholarship and sustaining time for writing. Additional benefits included a safe and welcoming writing community, peer learning, enhanced writing skills, and increased motivation to write. Most relevant to this paper, participation in the online mindfulness-based writing community strengthened our sense of wellbeing and connectivity during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Beyond Crisis

As we move from crisis to a post-crisis reality, we reflect on our current online practices with an eye toward maintaining some of them, establishing new practices, and acquainting ourselves with old ones from the pre-COVID era. The following are some of the questions we have been asking ourselves as we reflect on our experiences.

What have we learned?

We learned a great deal about technology, such as different platforms and tools as well as their strengths and limitations as teaching resources. We have familiarized ourselves with teaching, learning, and researching in an online world. Taking an inventory of the practices is a start to assessing them and deciding which ones to keep and which ones to discard.

What should we stop doing?

Some of our practices have been ineffective. Tools were being developed as we were using them. For example, Microsoft solicited input from users regarding their needs, and they were modifying their platform and tools accordingly, such as adding break-out rooms in Teams for small group work. In other situations, the tools may not have been effective or they may have been complicated to use, but we continued to use them because we did not have a choice. We may be unable to develop an online teaching strategy that is as good as face-to-face teaching, especially for experiential learning. With a move to more face-to-face interaction, it may be possible to identify and eliminate the teaching tools and strategies that are ineffective in either face-to-face or online environments.

What should we start doing?

In our new reality, there may be further necessary modifications to our teaching practices. We should stay open to alternative and innovative ways of teaching, learning, and researching.

What should we continue to do?

Our experiences in an online world have allowed us the opportunity to adapt. COVID precautions forced us to look beyond the status quo and seek out alternative teaching strategies and learning opportunities. There may be many strategies and online teaching practices we would like to maintain post-crisis, seeking only online or blended course formats. We must continue searching for tools that facilitate future-ready learning opportunities for students, faculty, and staff.

Final Reflections

COVID-19 made it necessary to administrate research, teach, and learn remotely. As a consequence, important learning arose from our experiences. It was invaluable to have technical support available to assist with immediate Information Technology (IT) challenges, either through the program or at the university level. It was critical to have a staff member in place to build community among students before beginning their program online. It was also essential to have a staff member assisting students with academic issues and someone directing students to the non-academic resources they needed, such as the counseling or finance department, co-curricular activities, community

resources, or someone to be sympathetic and willing to listen. These staff members needed to be available to respond to the students in a timely manner, as students were unable to come onto campus in person during COVID outbreaks, or unable to see university consultants without an appointment.

In retrospect, we recognize we have gained confidence in our capacity to provide meaningful and engaging online instruction as well as participate in relevant scholarship across multiple platforms and technologies. We also acknowledge the importance of community-building as foundational for these instructional and scholarly activities. We advocate for the provision of dedicated personnel and resources to support faculty and student engagement with online platforms and associated technologies. As we cautiously move toward fewer restrictions on face-to-face teaching and learning in universities, we will take many of these lessons with us.

In sum, while the urgency to transfer our instruction and scholarship to online platforms due to Covid-19 restrictions and protocols will lessen over time, choices and opportunities to engage in online teaching and scholarship are likely to continue or increase. While we initially resisted and were fearful of these realities, we now acknowledge and embrace these spaces of growth and innovation.

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DIGITAL SCHOLARSHIP AND FACULTY DEVELOPMENT: FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE UNIVERSITY CONTEXT

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Introduction

The technological tools and the logic of the networking have brought important changes in the classical formats of communication and for several years they have also innovated the university system through digitization processes that concern the services offered, academic research, and teaching and learning processes (Raffaghelli, 2021). The enhancement offered by technologies has particularly affected the management aspects of the University organization, improving and simplifying processes and activities. The technological tools also allow to expand and extend the work of teachers by overcoming space-time barriers and offering the possibility of accessing shared resources and creating networks and communities of practice by improving teaching and learning actions (Dipace, Scarinci, 2021).

These transformations, especially considered *from the point of view of educational practice,* have often *encountered resistance*. Indeed, when referring to the digitization of teaching and learning, "despite the availability of funds, infrastructures and government strategies that manage and promote the presence of technology in educational institutions" (external process), *their pedagogical use is entrusted to the few academics within their disciplinary fields* (internal process); this generates a "strong contrast between what digitization entails at an organizational and administrative level and what is required at an educational level for the improvement of teaching and learning" (Tømte et al., 2019; Perla, Scarinci, Amati, 2021).

In the Italian context, despite the great impetus received by research (Limone, 2013; Gaebel et al., 2014) and by institutions (Paleari et al., 2015), the digitization of university teaching has so far continued from scratch, thanks to the spread of mostly non-institutionalized good practices (Ferri, 2017). This trend remained constant until spring 2020. The pandemic crisis caused, in fact, an acceleration of this internal and external digitization process and represented a strong break with traditional university teaching. The imposition of the mandatory suspension of the attendance of degree courses due to the Covid-19 emergency, which occurred with the Decree of the President of the Council of Ministers (D.P.C.M.) of 9 March 2020, had a strong impact on the digitization of teaching (Perla, Scarinci, Amati, 2021).

The health emergency, as highlighted by the European University Association (EUA) (Estermann et al., 2020), has put higher education institutions to the test in many new and unexpected ways, especially from the point of view of "digitally augmented teaching and learning processes" (Vinci, 2021).

The speed with which it was necessary to move from *face-to-face* training to *distance learning* forced teachers to adapt their teaching action and enabled students to use tools for which they were not adequately prepared (Lederman, 2020). Unlike classic distance learning in which students and teachers "choose to undertake a learning / teaching path while remaining physically separate" for some periods, in this emergency period the intentionality and planning of distance learning have failed, highlighting the lack of pedagogical innovation (Perla, Scarinci, Amati, 2021; Trinchero, 2020).

Furthermore, teachers and students "found themselves cohabitants in an educational space" to be re-imagined in a short time: the digital one. *Technologies*, as Williamson et alia (2020) point out, *break through and alter* "the space and time of the class" bringing it into the domestic environment. “We could call it the Bring Your Own School Home (BYOSH) movement. In this environment, the time of the personal screen is occupied at the same time as the physical spaces of the house are colonized and co-opted” (Williamson, Eynon, Potter, 2020, pg. 111).

The network, in this phase, *not only offered a new learning context* without traditional spatial and temporal limits, but it was also a "network" in an educational metaphorical sense as it offered a "constructivist learning environment for sharing and building. of knowledge, safeguarding students' right to study" (Calvani, Rotta, 2000). Each student lived a "personal" didactic experience: "mediation was forcibly reinvented and rewritten through the web within a common space" (Cope, Kalantzis, 2008) in which experiences and emotions related to induced imprisonment were also included from health prescriptions.

If on the one hand, therefore, this state of emergency has introduced "a new and destabilizing element in the academic world, making the planning and intentionality of distance learning disappear", on the other it has been a push "that has accelerated a process of change of the training offer in place for several years but which has often found resistance" (Speck, 1996; Mishra, Gupta, Shree, 2020). A change that involves different figures (teachers, students, administrators, technicians ...) and a series of adaptations and "rethinking from the point of view of teaching and the training environment that becomes a digital space". The emergency situation has also proved to be a precious opportunity to "rethink the forms of mediation in distance learning through technology, in an adaptive and flexible learning perspective" (Huang et al., 2020), that is, able to offer *wider choices* and with a *higher level of customization for students*.

These changes push us to reflect on the need for "high-quality professional development, advancement in digital scholarship, support for teachers' professionalism" and the development of teaching skills aimed at improving student learning (Perla et al., 2021).

Digital education in the pandemic period: from presence to distance. Search Results.

The Covid-19 emergency represented *a challenge for education* and training institutions and for the parties involved (teachers, students, and staff) who had to *manage a change in teaching / learning methods*: from face-to-

face education to an environment of online learning which required "a process of adaptation and acceptance of technologies" (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020).

Through two researches, the first carried out at a *national level* and the second at a *local level*, it was possible to deepen the experience conducted by Italian university professors in the reconversion phase that took place following the Covid-19 health emergency and the perception and attitudes that students developed concerning the online teaching-learning experience (Perla et al., 2021; Perla, Scarinci, Amati, 2021).

National research

The first research carried out at the national level was born within the ASDUNI association and was conducted by *an inter-university working group* (including the working group of the University of Bari). Through the administration of an online questionnaire to which 721 teachers from Italian universities responded, it was possible to understand the changes implemented in the period of health emergency in teaching practice with attention to forms of educational mediation and remote educational evaluation.

Specifically, the part of the questionnaire relating to didactic mediation had as its objective the analysis of the teacher's practices in the distance learning (DL) experience, with particular reference to the procedures used, tools, and multimedia contents. The representations of teachers concerning distance learning, the positive and negative aspects, the role in modifying *the relationship with knowledge*, *the perceived quality of communication* with students, the possibilities of the "future redesign of teaching activities" were also investigated in the DL (Perla et al., 2021).

What emerged at the level of the practices adopted by teachers is a tendency to use *critical and participatory activities*, such as the "presentation of content in the form of demonstrations or explanations" (57%) and "the presentation of content in the form of demonstrations or explanations that involve a response or product from students" (24%); the percentages are very low compared to the use of lectures accompanied by slides or recorded lectures (Perla et al., 2021). In terms of content, the results highlight the use of readapted pre-existing materials (60%) and only 37% said they had *used ad hoc materials*. Compared to the *tools of didactic mediation*, the data that

emerged concerning the difference between the use of technological tools in the past (pre-Covid), in the present and in the future is interesting. Specifically, among the tools most used in the present we have "audio-video recordings" (49%, n = 350); "web conference lessons with Skype, Zoom, webinar" (76%, n = 544); "discussion and collaboration environments such as web forums, blogs and wikis", which allow "short interventions by students" (32%, n = 232); "information processing software such as PowerPoint, Excel, Word", etc. (60%, n = 433) (Perla et al., 2021). For the future it is important to highlight that over 60% of the interviewees declared that they want to use distance learning, and the willingness to use "Social Networks" (17%, n = 124), "Demonstrations or additional explanations present in the faq" (19%, n = 134); "Structured and individual activities, such as reports, exercises, case studies, problem-solving, web quests, projects, production of artifacts, simulations" (29%, n = 208); activity in web forums with demonstrations or "operational suggestions on how to solve a problem" (20%, n = 141) (Perla et al., 2021). At the pedagogical-didactic level, the student's commitment was directed above all to the use and analysis of the teaching material (47%) while little space was dedicated to the development of products by the students at home (24%), to problem-solving activities (21%) and self-assessment (8%).

The perceived effectiveness of the DL is oriented towards design and communication aspects related to the digital environment. Concerning the use of DL in relation to the knowledge taught 51% declared that "their relationship with the knowledge they teach has been modified by the use of DDA" while 24% did not see a change.

The declared change concerns the *communication modality* with a *tendency to greater clarity of presentation*, a *care in the preparation of the didactic material*, and a *simplification of the contents*. This shows how teachers have a sort of aspiration to dominate educational intervention didactically and pedagogically, but the practice they develop in the classroom as reported is focused solely on the transmission of content.

The results reported with respect to the distance learning experience that the Italian teachers conducted in the emergency period show that "it was not a question of making a transition from presence to an online teaching / learning mode" since this, in order to be effective and have a positive impact on quality education and learning, provides for a "good planning of

experiences and a capacity for planning of learning and education on the part of the teacher" (Hodges et al., 2020; Aguilera-Hermida, 2020; Barberà, Badia, 2005). Instead, we speak of *emergency remote teaching*, as suggested by Hodges et al. (2020), in which "planning and all the possibility of choice are lacking and whose goal is to offer and guarantee all students temporary access to education and teaching aids" (Hodges et al., 2020).

Online learning cannot be seen as a "mere, extemporaneous transposition of teaching in the presence" (EDEN, 2019), as they change not only the space-time organization, favoring greater flexibility, but also the "relational dynamics and the social interaction, often requiring different teaching approaches and skills" (Hodges et al, 2020). The teachers found themselves having to "redefine, redesign their teaching action, considering technologies no longer simple tools for the transmission of knowledge" and having to live with students in a space to be reinvented in a short time that is the digital space. A space that, together with time, *governs practices* (Foucault 1996) and *allows the construction of training devices that mediate knowledge*. Fundamental in this framework are the teacher's pedagogical mediation and his ability to create a "network" between the different elements and means for the construction of a digital space that takes on meaning (Damiano, 2013). Tasks of the teacher in online didactic mediation are research, retrieval, critical selection, and meaning of the "information available through digital technologies" (Perla, Agrati, Vinci, 2019). Specifically, as explained by Perla, Agrati, Vinci (2019, pg. 5), "it refers to 'integrated' but diversified tasks: from making information available (access), to mediating it on the basis of the meanings of the contents (evaluating and managing), knowledge structure (integrating and creating) and characteristics of students (communication) ".

The adoption of technologies in teaching, therefore, requires individual and institutional changes and investments in infrastructure and technological equipment, as well as the skills of teachers for the use of technologies for the promotion of innovative and student-centered teaching.

The teacher must therefore be able to combine "professional, pedagogical, relational, and technological skills and be able to evaluate the most suitable technological tools to be used in the various fields and in the construction of a virtual space" for the delivery of contents and management of interaction with students (Barberà, Badia, 2005).

Local research

The pandemic crisis has confronted teachers with the need to remodel their *specialized contents* through the *opportunities of the learning environment* and to *adapt them to the characteristics and learning needs of students* through mediation and mediation of the contents themselves. The change implemented has brought out the need to observe how the strengths and opportunities offered by online teaching methods, in terms of flexibility of times, places, and above all of the didactic mediation (Dhawan, 2020) can be considered as factors to be adopted in a process of rethinking and renewal of university teaching, capable of responding and adapting to the needs of students and being student-centered.

The case study, carried out with 418 students of the degree courses in Primary Education and Education and Training Sciences of the University of Bari attending two courses in the second semester of the academic year 2019-2020, allowed reflection on new hypotheses for the redesign of the didactic space starting from the needs of the interviewed students and highlight certain "flexibility in didactic mediation, a hybrid mediation, emerging in the academic context" (Perla, Scarinci, Amati, 2021).

The data, collected through four actions (questionnaire, analysis of practices, in-depth interview, and *quantitative monitoring* of *formal and informal student interventions*), highlighted some interesting data concerning the students' *perception of learning in an emergency*.

The first figure to highlight is the number of on-site and off-site students: only 23% of the students interviewed are residents in Bari, therefore more than 70% of them travel by train or bus to reach the university. Post-emergency, however, generates a strong discomfort and fear. Almost all of the students (91.4%) declared that "they followed in synchronous mode, respecting the lesson times". The students were also asked whether, "compared to face-to-face teaching, lessons were attended more" during the Covid-19 emergency, and to what reasons it is possible to attribute the choice: 47.6% replied that "they were able to manage the times better without having

to travel to and from the university", 24% due to the "greater ease in accessing virtual and physical classrooms" (Perla, Scarinci, Amati, 2021).

From the analysis of the data collected through the interviews, 4 main issues emerged that characterize distance learning: *flexibility of time, flexibility of space, organization, perspectives.*

As regards the first node, *flexibility of time*, 88.3% of the students interviewed stated that "with distance lessons they considered the saving of time used to move to and from the University very useful", 74.6 % of the students declared that they "had attended 100% of the lessons during the last semester" and that compared to traditional teaching only 3.1% of the students declared that they "had not attended". Furthermore, 51.2% of the interviewees stated that "in the case of face-to-face teaching they would not have been able to attend more than 50% of the lessons" (Perla, Scarinci, Amati, 2021).

As regards the flexibility of the space, the students were asked how they perceived the virtual classroom. 54.8% said they perceived it "as an open space but with borders", while 3.8% perceived it as "closed with no air". Furthermore, from the interviews with the students, it emerges a greater ease of intervention through *chat* (87%) compared to the intervention in presence, that intervening during the lesson "with the use of the microphone is easier than the intervention in the classroom" (92%), expressing doubts through "the chat was less embarrassing" (89%), expressing doubts during the lesson with the use of the microphone "was less embarrassing" (67%), "contact with teachers via email was more frequent "(49%), contact with the teacher *via chat* was more frequent (78%) (Perla, Scarinci, Amati, 2021).

For the organizational node it emerges that the students have shown a high appreciation compared to the restructuring of the didactic space. In particular, the tripartite flexibility between reception, active learning activities, and debriefing (80.2% of students) with which the two courses were organized taken into consideration concerning organizational flexibility, the availability of teachers and the level of preparation achieved were positively assessed. The learning developed during the course and the workshops were defined for 75.6% as "deep learning", for the 15.8% as "profound learning" (intense learning) and for 10% "shallow learning" (superficial learning) 98.3%) and the labs (97.8%) (Perla, Scarinci, Amati, 2021).

From the perspective node, the students show that the DAD has a lot of potential and few limits (88.3%) and 70.3% that the university should consider the use of DAD even after the state of emergency Covid-19 in mixed mode (Perla, Scarinci, Amati, 2021).

A final aspect that emerges from the research is linked to the possibility of hybrid mediation which sees in the use of traditional and technological mediators the possibility of a redesign of one's own didactic action that can integrate educational technologies and be able to talk about educational innovation (Eradze, Dipace, Lemon, 2020; Mishra, Gupta and Shree, 2020).

In particular, in Table 1 we can see the different mediation format which can be adopted during a lesson (Perla, Scarinci, Amati, 2021).

Lesson organization	
Orientation mediators included: • *Newspaper articles* • *Scientific articles* • *Hearing aids* • *Literary pieces* • *Visual aids*	15%
Lesson was organized through: • *Stimulus* • *Exhibition* • *Systematis*	50%
For Active learning the most used mediators were: • *Occasional conversations* • *Purposeful conversations* • *Systematic conversations* • *Testimonials* • *Interviews* • *Exercises (role-playing activities)* • *Design and simulation games* • *Consolidation exercises* • *Individual work planned with structured material*	30%
The closing proceeded with:	5%

• *Systematic conversation* • *Control exercises* • *Debriefing*	

Table . Lesson Organization (Perla, Scarinci, Amati, 2021)

The high appreciation received from "the restructuring" of the didactic space should be underlined: the choice of "tripartite flexibility between hospitality, exhibition, activity learning, and debriefing" was particularly appreciated (80.2%). It, therefore, emerges that didactic structuring and organization as well as mediatization, are important aspects that can influence how knowledge is transmitted and acquired (Siemens, 2005). The "effectiveness of this choice" is probably linked to the use of technologies that have allowed many students to break down space-time barriers, facilitating relationships "through an authentic arsenal of tools and procedures" incorporated in them.

Faculty development actions

The results of the investigations reported are *not limited to a simple photograph of the existing*, but aim further, to *understand the possible implications of development* and *the implications for the future*. Technological achievements must no longer be"demonized". They must *become part* of a teaching action by the teacher through "faculty development processes" that enhance community approaches, experiential dimensions, active involvement, and reflective learning, to support a constant review of representations and professional practices. This leads to a "necessary rethinking of the university teacher who must start from his didactic training". This training must "lead to the integration of professional, pedagogical, relational and technological skills (according to the framework of TPCK) and make teachers able to evaluate the most suitable technological tools" to be used in the "various fields and able to adapt the disciplinary contents to the different needs of students in terms of customization (according to the framework of the sophisticated knowledge)" (Perla, Agrati, Vinci, 2019). The results of the research also make it possible to "critically problematize didactic mediation in the context of higher university education in a direction of

revision of the ways how the teacher chooses, uses and transforms disciplinary contents into digitized disciplinary contents" (Perla, Agrati, Vinci, 2019).

For this reason, training should be understood as "a reflective practicum", as Diana Laurillard (2020) argues. Professionals must be able to "recursively analyze and reflect on their practices, to reflect in action". This can be made possible through the activation of faculty development programs.

The emergency period constituted a further push towards an organizational and professional rethinking, emphasizing on improving training processes and teaching innovation and pushing universities and their governing bodies to question themselves about the actions and possible lines of action to be adopted "aimed at strengthening the teaching-learning skills of teachers" (ANVUR QuarkDocente, 2018).

The didactic qualification of university teachers is now a fundamental aspect for the quality assurance of the training offer and the subject of a reflection on the relationship between research and teaching and therefore also on the professional figure of the teacher who becomes central in the innovation of practices (Felisatti, 2020). The initial and in-service training of teachers becomes essential as these, as Ettore Felisatti (2020) points out, must be adequately prepared to face the continuous transformations of the context, of the student body, and of the teaching-learning activity.

In response to these challenges, the University Centers for Excellence in Teaching and Learning - Teaching Learning Centers (TLC) are spreading in university institutions "characterized by considering the professional development of university teaching as a strategic lever for improving the results of student learning and contributing to social progress "(Perla, Vinci, 2020). In this context, our research group is working on the development of a training course for faculty developers to get to the establishment of the TLC. Our model involves the use of a bottom-up logic as interest must grow from below to hybrid mediation issues, co-construction at the planning and evaluation level of one's teaching-learning and experimentation with active learning methodologies.

Training faculty developers allows for the creation of a network for the professional and organizational development of each department, favoring the

construction of interdisciplinary connections and communities of practice (Sorcinelli, 2007). According to the developer skills model proposed by Baker et al. (2018), the faculty developers are engaged in three fundamental processes, negotiation, construction, and tuning, and at the same time in the integration of their knowledge, skills, and identity with the context in which they operate. Methodological, evaluative, and technological skills will be provided through basic training for developers, capable of encouraging analysis and reflection on and on their practices in action (Laurillard, 2015).

As Lueddeke already stated in 1997, developers can "help convert future possibilities into practical realities", influencing the motivation of each department to innovative teaching practices by assuming a bottom-up logic to achieve an improvement in the quality of the training offer of the entire university and achieve real organizational change.

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CREATING ENGAGING DISCUSSIONS ONLINE

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Introduction

Early into the Covid-19 pandemic, in April 2020, Joshua Kim, Director of Online Programs and Strategy at the Dartmouth Center for the Advancement of Learning (DCAL), speculated as to the extent to which the Covid-19 pandemic would permanently affect physical and virtual learning spaces across academia (2020). His predictions hinged on the expansion or hybridization of remote teaching and institutions of higher learning making use of synchronous and asynchronous platforms to meet the challenge of maintaining pedagogical standards (Kim, 2020). A variety of instructional modalities, including online and hybrid ones, will endure past the pandemic. Making use of technologically-mediated distance learning to facilitate student interaction and foster academic communities has been studied in the past (Bates, 1990; Burge & Roberts, 1993; Jonassen, Davidson, Collins, Campbell, & Haag, 1995; Nalley, 1995; Seaton, 1993; Selfe & Eilola, 1989). The present foray into making affordances for online collaboration and engaging discussions comes as a synthesis of various established theories present in the field of *applied linguistics* (or *second language acquisition and teaching*) and TESOL pedagogy. In the spirit of providing pedagogical applications, this article provides research- and practice-based suggestions for how to design productive prompts for online interaction *between teachers and students* as well as *among students*.

Theoretical Frameworks

Engagement: Cognitive > Affective > Behavioral

Learning depends on learners' cognitive, affective, and behavioral engagement, as has been noted in both educational psychology (Fredricks et al., 2004; Fredricks, 2013; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012) and applied linguistics (Ellis, 2010; Han & Hyland, 2015). From a Vygotskyan and Socio-cultural Theory perspective, interaction is crucial as a mediator of learning through engagement, and occurs between teachers and students, student to student, and between learners and content – both in person and in online environments.

Engagement, Vygotsky teaches, must move from the cognitive sphere to the affective but does so more efficiently through the mediation of specific tasks under the guidance of a facilitator (Lantolf, 1994, p. 419). These tasks are of distinct functional importance as psychological aids that elicit the students' interpersonal, problem-solving, and communication skills to reflect, recount, and recall socially-relevant topics of conversation, as Vygotsky wrote in 1929 (1994, pp. 69-70). The aim of tasks is multifaceted and, to some degree, dialectical, navigating the constant interplay in the student-teacher relationship and its non-antagonistic contradictions.

"Warm-ups," as Robertson and Acklam (2000) describe activities at the beginning of class, help with rapport building and affective engagement, activating the students' pre-existing knowledge, backgrounds, and what Vygotsky referred to as "inner speech" (Vygotsky, 1994), which is considered "one of the most important functions we have at our disposal" (p. 353). When combined with the effects of validation and rapport-building brought on by emphasizing interpersonal investment and the human connection present in the student-professor relationship, one can overcome what Glazier (2020) describes as the "inherent distance to the medium that makes it difficult to connect and establish meaningful human relationships." Embracing an engaged approach runs contrary to the individualistic values articulated in Western ideology (Pacansky-Brock, Smedshammer, & Vincent-Layton, 2020), and aligns concretely with the present needs of students whose levels of alienation, anxiety, and depression have steadily increased since the pandemic began (Johnson, 2021; Son, Hegde, Smith, Wang, & Sadangohar, 2020).The work of Thornberg and Elvstrand (2012), Portelli and Konecny (2013), and Thorne, Hellermann, & Jakonen (2021) on the importance of democratizing the learning environment becomes an important corollary to

rapport-building techniques when attempting to stimulate dynamic, cognitively engaging discussions. Synchronous environments such as Zoom, and asynchronous ones such as Blackboard or Canvas, while not new, still create cultural sub-domains that many students find challenging due to their impersonal nature, delay mechanisms, sometimes real-time such as lag, or displaced by several days as in the case of discussion posts, and require reiteration of the learner's conscious agency and active participation (Thornberg & Elvstrand, 2012). Though impossible to recreate the authentic ecology of the physical classroom, it is possible to promote a culture of pluralism and camaraderie through content discussions that acknowledge the learner's struggles as people, and not just students (Portelli & Konecny, 2013, p. 89). Centering conversations on the validity of interpersonal challenges and daily struggles, whether victories, defeats, or stalemates, requires that the instructor be aware of the power dynamic present in their position and the everyday interaction patterns they might take for granted (Thornberg & Elvstrand, 2012). In consideration to the rising needs of learners, Pacansky-Brock et al., (2020) state that "to grow into empathetic online educators, faculty must be immersed in online learning environments themselves to experience them the way students do", and recognize that as human beings themselves, it is both normal and understandable to feel vulnerable, nervous, and even fear ridicule when engaging with technology (Herckis, Scheines, & Smith, 2017; Pacansky-Brock et al., 2020, p. 15). Creating a "safe, judgment-free environment to experiment, make mistakes, and grow" is to recognize the shared humanity, vulnerability, and imperfections that a truly horizontal and democratic environment comprise, and is a fundamental component for free association and dynamic discussions (ibid.,p. 15). Therefore, we propose and have successfully used online discussion prompts such as the ones in Table 1 to gain a path towards cognitive and behavioral engagement by first engaging affectively as well as by activating prior background knowledge (Kumaravadivelu, 2008).

Warm-ups	
Rapport Building, Affective Engagement	**Cognitive Warm-up – Free association, activating pre-existing knowledge, activating background**

What is your “win” for the day/week (synchronous)	When you hear the word/concept x, what comes to mind? (synchronous or asynchronous)
How do you relax and recharge before class/during this time of the semester? (synchronous)	Define x before reading the assigned text. (synchronous or asynchronous)

Table 1. Warm-ups

Within online interactions there are dialogic negotiations of meaning that follow Long’s interaction hypothesis (1981, 1996). Negotiations of meaning are valid in engaging online discussion as they connect comprehensible input, the learners’ conscious ability to focus, and the production of "output in meaningful ways" (Long, 1996, pp. 451-452). In our application of interactive online forum discussions, we have experienced that assigning clear roles to all participants promotes further conversation and cross-talk, creating additional opportunities for speakers to produce evaluative output, create input for others, and do so with a degree of control of the topic as either starter, responder, or wrapper.

Online discussion roles:

- Starter: begins the discussion with a well-developed paragraph and a question to the group.
- Responder: after a few posts by other students, the responder interviews to react and post new questions. Students are required to reply. Note: All students should participate in the discussion, but the responder should be expected to intervene several times in a strategic manner in order to move the discussion forward in interesting and productive directions.
- Wrapper: highlights the most important ideas, summarizes the discussion, draws a conclusion
- Require that every student in class be a starter, responder, and wrapper at least once each.

Participation in conversation, Krashen (1982) and Long (1996) agree, provides a contribution to communicative competence, sometimes referred to linguistic or rhetorical competence. A multiplicity of perspectives, what

discussions are meant to promote, is fundamental to the negotiating process of these interactions (Long, 1986). During these, learners also gain opportunities to produce pushed output (Swain, 1985), and active noticing may enable the acquisition of new knowledge and information (Schmidt, 2010). Evaluation and feedback for these discussions, where once managed entirely orally in the physical classroom, have shifted to allow for synchronous and asynchronous means (Elola & Oskoz, 2016; Ene & Upton, 2014, 2018; Tuzi, 2004). Despite still requiring further research in the ways that these multimodal elements might function in remote teaching, a plenitude of options allow instructors to personalize their feedback methods in a way that complements discussions and keeps learners' affective filter low (Elola & Oskoz, 2016, p. 71-72).

Moving forward, given the high likelihood that we will continue co-existing – and teaching – both in person and online, sometimes in hybrid modalities, we should also keep in mind tips for how to bridge the synchronous and asynchronous modes:

- Have students post a question you have about something you would like the class discussion to clarify. This can be something you don't understand well or something intriguing that is worth debating.
- Allow students to post various types of files.
- Create video discussions.
- Invite students to join groups for the discussion boards so that the discussion board will be less overwhelming.
- *Incorporate discussion boards with breakout rooms in Zoom*.
- *Offer multiple questions from which students can pick the one they prefer.*
- *Provide sets of readings and let students choose what to read and respond to so that they're teaching each other by sharing what they found most significant in the reading*.
- *Create self-enrolled groups based on topic interest*.
- *Students can choose to respond to another type of course content like a mini-lecture video or a shared online document, or a project they're working on* (reflecting on their process and what they've learned). (https://owi.ucdavis.edu/news/making-most-discussion-boards).

Conclusion

What our system of higher education has inherited in the wake of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic is nothing short of what Vygotsky would have described as the emergence of a new transition point, forcing changes to our present educational conditions and requiring us to reassess and re-imagine a classroom to "meet the needs of our learners". It is unrealistic and un-dialectical to assume that the principles we held true for our physical spaces would apply to the psychological forms uncovered and disaffected by quarantine, social distancing, and the atomization of the learning environment.

“At certain points in the emergence of a psychological process new forms of development and new explanatory principles enter the picture. At these points…there is a ‘change in the very type of development’ and so the principles which alone had previously been capable of explaining development can no longer do so. Rather, a new set of principles must be incorporated into the overall explanatory framework, resulting in its reorganization.” (Vygotsky, as cited in Wertsch, 1985, pp. 19-20)

Reorganization need not upend the instructional design of curriculum goals, but rather the framework for how we engage with remote teaching, how we treat learners and instructors at a time of unprecedented stress, and make concerted efforts towards a more democratic, and humanizing approach to discussions and classroom activities.

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THINKING INTERFACE: AN AESTHETIC-ARTISTIC PERSPECTIVE TOWARDS ONLINE TEACHING

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic does mean a special challenge for teaching the arts in various fields. How can we create an interface between Aesthetic Education/ corporal actions/ the body and Online Teaching/ digital tools/ the virtual space? The idea of being already interfaces, ourselves, is based on the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theory, who assumes that, as human beings, we are always standing on the threshold. Between nature and culture, our living body (German *Leib*) is connecting us with the surrounding living space: the phenomenon of "*Ambiguité*" (Merleau-Ponty, 1965, p. 106).

As well as the idea of the body as an interface, an *étrange système d'échange,* is supposed at the beginning of this essay, the fact that actions and perception (*aisthesis*) – the body, its movement and its senses – are fundamental for learning in the child's development does mean a main approach. Aesthetic experiences are crucial in a way for adults, too. Artists add to these aspects: their material arises from the senses and sensations: *perception – impression – expression*. They create *something* in free (inter-) spaces full of ambiguity and they want to teach how to create. They are transferring and transgressing in many ways.

Hence, artists especially had to re-think methods and develop new approaches of teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic instead of adapting former ones on the one hand. But on the other hand, they offer their potential for other fields in online teaching through the appropriate examination of their approaches for education in off- and online formats.

Transfer – A Basic Idea of Teaching

An artistic perspective includes the idea of *transfer*, characterizing the Arts: concerning the elementary "movement" between materials (Latin: *modi*) and different ways of expression; the "movement" from the idea to the product, the resonance between art work, artist and spectator, the transgression of borders and the transfer in inter- and trans-disciplinary thinking.

Regarding inter- and trans-disciplinary thinking, a key for teaching in general can be found. A *discipline* as a coherent setting of tools, methods, procedures, exemples and theories (Thompson Klein, 1990) has been established quite late, in the 19th century. Looking for interspaces is not just the reaction of 20th century's research and work approaches confronted with the increasing specialization and the loss and the need of a holistic perspective. „A knowledge view and curriculum approach that consciously applies methodology and language from more than one discipline to examine a central theme, issue, problem, topic or experience" (Jacobs, 1989, p. 8) can be found already in the ancient world. Transfers between disciplines create new, collaborative spaces through a lively dialogue, through appreciation of the „other world" and the view on the essence in complexity. Whereas *interspaces* are generated in inter-disciplinary ways of working, *trans-disciplinarity*, in this essay, mainly is defined as the *movement* between different *worlds* – the movement from practice to theory and vice versa, between Science and Arts, from the so-called "grass roots" to the experts. Transferring is a key concept for teaching online, not merely referring to uploading content, but as an idea on a meta-level, which starts already in classroom learning.

Aesthetic Education – Vital human Beings in Virtual Space?

The Greek term *aisthesis* defines perception and the senses. The German philosopher Erwin Straus calls the senses something volatile, something in movement, creating a lively dialogue (Waldenfels, 1999, p.69). A perception is manifested in the present and happens in the body (*closeness*). It is individual, a form of attention and dedication. Aesthetic Education does not mean exclusively an education in the Arts, but it is fundamental for

becoming an artist. The adjective *aesthetic* refers to perception, impression, creation and expression as elements of every human being. Aesthetic impressions are the impulse for amazement, which is, continuatively, the fundament of learning (Waldenfels, 1999). So, an artistic approach has to ask whether we can or how we can connect this aesthetic fundament and virtual space to enable confrontations with the *other* from which understanding arises, as well as knowledge and satisfaction.

Teaching in the virtual space means transgressing the borders of physical reality (*distance*) into another world of unlimited possibilities, without geographic distances, and thus offering new experiences. Its *potentiality* – at the same time a synonym for *virtuality* – has been experienced by human beings already before modern digital technology: Books and theatre, dreams and thoughts create virtual spaces as well. Is it not every virtual space based on aesthetic perception and our collection of sensuous experiences? A thesis might be that every form of online teaching has an aesthetic origin, but we can mind the concrete use of our senses to facilitate learning.

Needs for Visual Creations from an artistic Perspective

In the Performing Arts *staging* is fundamental. The German philosopher Martin Seel (2004, p.48) describes the *Mis-en-Scène* as a phenomenon, which helps to make something "appearing in a new way"; for Scheer (2004, p.91) *Staging* is a form of "translation and appropriation".

In teaching contexts, the question of how to stage aesthetic spaces of learning and – especially in the Arts – how to create spaces of learning, in which aesthetic experiences can be provoked, may be still underestimated. Regarding visual creations like video tutorials or interactive learning posters (for instance *ThingLink*) staging is crucial since such a space can offer impulses to start an individual learning „expedition", supposing an attractive presentation of the content.

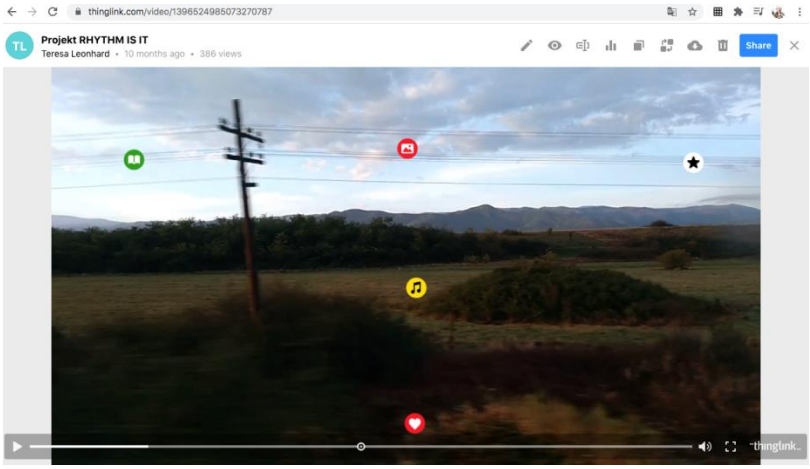

Fig.1. Thing Link Posters

Staging means thinking about creating an environment, including also thinking about clothes, objects, seating-accommodation, arranging furniture and instruments, attention on the lighting assembly and for sure, a dramaturgy. Artists show the potential of thinking queer and risking experiments. Staging always includes trial and error, courage and failure. And it is a real challenge to put the world in a nutshell, to keep it simple, but stimulating. Everyday tools like the smartphone, the tablet or laptop and free apps are sufficient to create combinations of the "face to face"- a world in the virtual space. For interactive, synchronous teaching USB cameras with a built-in microphone and full 360° rotation can be recommended as really helpful (Fig.2).

Fig.2. Staging Video Tutorials

On the subject *dramaturgy* again: Acting, moving, and performing could be a link between the mentioned two "worlds". Making a case, corporal, physical acting of the teacher in a video activates mirror neurons of students – a resonance arises, that perhaps enables learning in a different way. As every sensuous experience in time and space implies irritations they will arise in the student's individual work following a tutorial as well. But this fact stimulates examination with the subject (Fig.3).

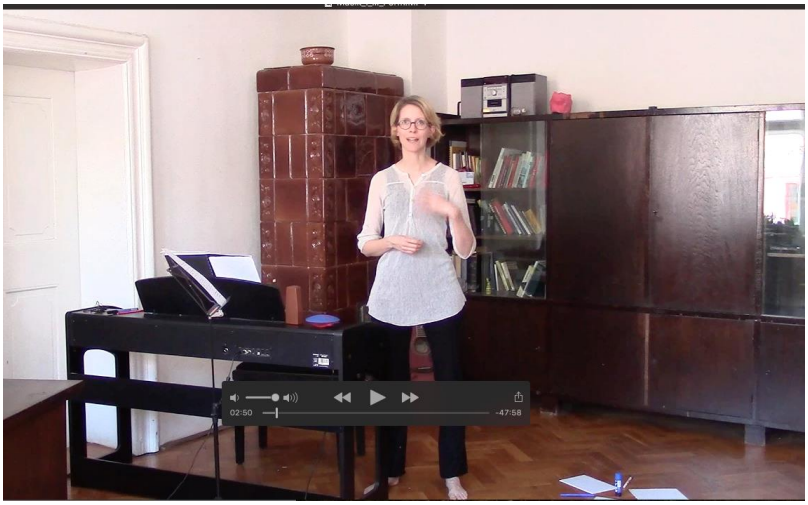

Fig.3. Acting in Video Tutorials

Chances and Benefits

Art Work very often is done alone – the artist and its *Œuvre*, requests many facilities of organizing the own workload. Everyday rehearsals support many needs, such as intrinsic motivation. Hence, starting and managing creative projects means engaging student's curiosity. An individual way of working on a task develops autonomous thinking and acting, related to the experience of self-efficacy. Creative tasks and tutorials can encourage the development of new abilities. Furthermore, it is possible to discover new talents and interests because of another setting, providing new spaces and

approaches out of the traditional classroom learning. For teachers, a great possibility exists to get to know the student much closer, in an intimate way and to follow the individual process – the student's commitment assumed.

Fig.4. Videos as a chance to discover talents and as a space for experimental work

Videos as a tool for presenting artistic, aesthetic productions, just as results in other disciplines, are a special chance to reflect the Own through video images (*visual sense*) and audios (*sense of hearing*). The *sense of self* is focused intensively. This might be a challenge for many students, especially for those out of the context of professional performing art education (Fig.4, 5). But the step outside the comfort zone provides a large potential, which should be transferred in classroom teaching, too.

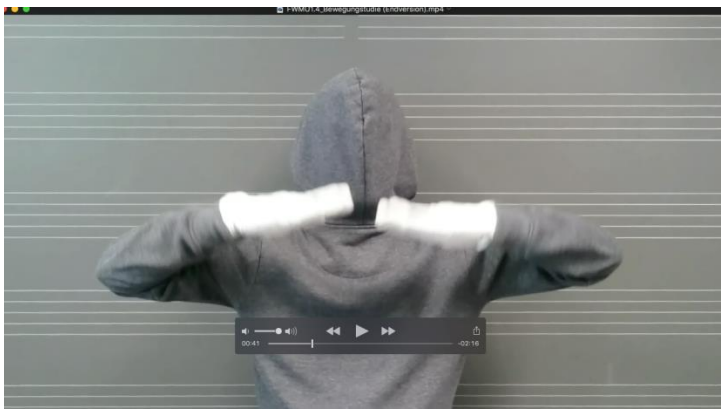

Fig.5. Videos as a chance to reflect to the own body movement

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DEMOCRATIC TEACHING AND COLLABORATIVE LEARNING. ADVANTAGES AND LIMITATIONS OF THE ONLINE APPLICATION GATHER.TOWN

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Introduction

In the last decades teaching cultures were widely changed from teacher-centered instruction towards a more democratic teaching style and collaborative, co-constructive learning methods. That was not only connected to emancipator tendencies in education, but also to the neoliberal agenda followed by education policies and educators (Brosio, 2007). Here is not the place to discuss this issue, but one has to keep in mind that co-constructive learning and a participatory teaching style is not in itself progressive, it also could be a new type of conventional conditioning.

However one will evaluate this development, it seems obvious that the corona pandemic forced teachers *at all levels of the educational system* to switch (at least temporarily) to digital teaching – and because they lack appropriate knowledge and skills they came back to more instruction-like teaching methods, which reduced students involvement and even co-determination of the learning process.

The online tool gather.town provides possibilities to avoid this danger. In this short article I will provide an insight into the possibilities gather.town gives for adult education in general and university teaching in special. Using a course I thought in summer 2021 I will illustrate didactic conceptions and practical exercises that may be helpful for other formats. Like all digital teaching tools, also gather.town limits the education process somehow. These limits I will discuss later, at the article's end.

Democratic Teaching and Collaborative Learning

Although democratic education has a long tradition going back to the 19 century and includes the theory and practice of people like Leo Tolstoi and others (Schroedter, 2007), it start to expand in the 20ies of the 20th Century by the implementation of so-called 'new' or 'progressive education' like Alexander S. Neill's Summerhill School (Neill, 1969) or John Dewey's Laboratory School (Fehrmann, 2019).

After the conservative backlash of the 50ies and with the beginning of the anti-colonial movement in the 1950ies and 1960ies the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire developed and implemented his concept of education of the suppressed, where he coined the phrase form ‘education as a practice of freedom’, which meant that education not only may lead to liberation, but also has to be liberating in its process. He was adopted not only in the global south (formerly called 'third world’) but also in the western countries and his pedagogical ideas shaped progressive education until now.

At the beginning of the 21st century, the black American intellectual Bell Hooks developed his approach further and adopted it for college and university teaching (Hooks, 1994, 2003, 2010). Both Freire and Hooks shaped my theoretical background.

In the context of the pandemic, nearly all pedagogical activities were forced to switch from physical meetings to cyberspace. But in the beginning, only a few teachers were able to deal with this new situation in a proper way. I was none of them. Indeed, the situation changed in the last one and a half year, and we have learned a lot about the various possibilities of digital teaching. But, also if there are possibilities of more individualized, more student-centered pedagogy, online teaching is often practiced in a form that is teacher-centered and not very interactive. Clearly, these forms are not able to encourage collaborative learning processes and are mostly the opposite of democratic teaching culture.

One alternative to enable collaborative and democratic educational processes in a virtual space is the online tool gather.town. Its potential I will illustrate using a course on democratic schooling I gave in summer 2021. But at first I will give a short introduction in this tool.

Gather.Town – A short introduction

Gather.town was developed by Gather Presence, Inc. It is a browser-based platform that provides a game-like environment, which reminds of computer games of the 1990ies, in which people can move via avatars in a two-dimensional space. Hosts can easily design their own spaces fitting to the interests and needs of the event via a graphic interface, the so-called Map Maker (Figure 1), so that there is fortunately no need for any programming

skills. Gather.town runs on Windows, Mac OS, and Linux. The steps I suggest to prepare a lesson with gather.town are the following:

- *Create your own room.* You may start with a template provided by gather.town and modify it in accordance with the needs and purposes of the course. Gather.town provides templates suitable for groups between five and 25 people; between 25 and 50, between 50 and 100, and for more than 100. I suggest choosing the size that fits your group size, otherwise, the learning environment will be either too small or too

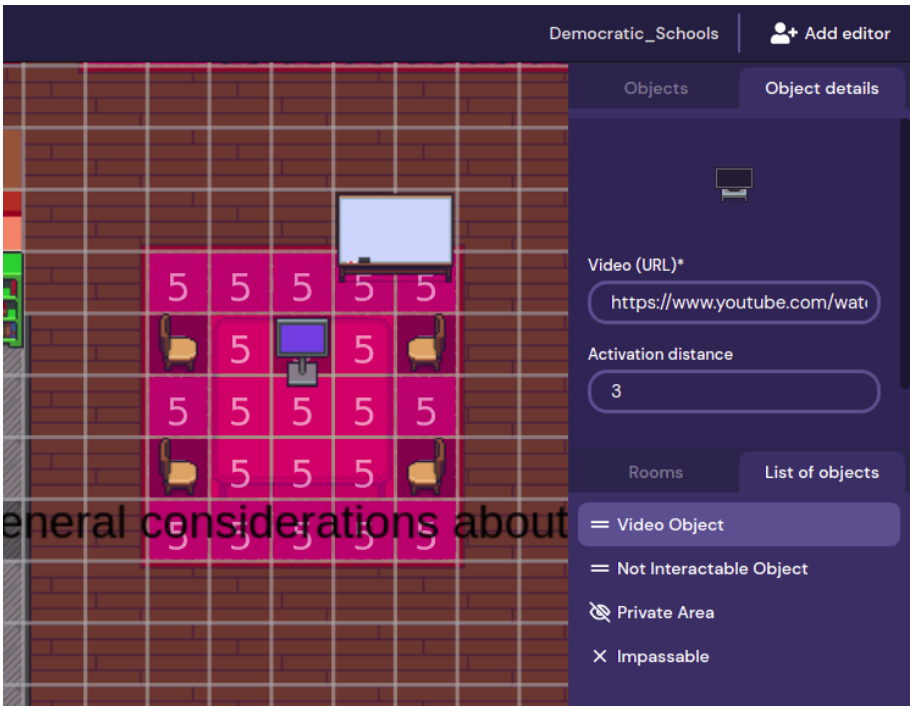

Fig. 1: Screenprint of the gather.town MapMaker

spacious for a supporting atmosphere.

- *Prepare your room(s) with learning material.* Using the graphical interface it is easily possible to insert interactive objects in your room. Before doing this, you have to choose which material you will need for your students. I've made the experience that between 9 and 12 information sources are appropriate for a course with 20 - 25 students. So there is enough material that some can study it alone – but also to build study groups. Gather.town is compatible with different types of

media: you may link YouTube videos, diverse audio files, web pages, PDF files, pictures, whiteboards, or even interactive applications like Padlet.

- *Test all the materials.* Sometimes web pages do not work properly if they are opened in gather.town, also videos from other platforms like YouTube are blocked. To avoid complications during the course or seminar with the students, check before the lesson if all materials are working correctly.

- *Invite participants.* There are two possibilities to invite your students to the learning environment offered by you. You may add their mail addresses directly in a mask provided by gather.town or create a link, which you can copy and send separately to your learning group. There is also the possibility to lock your room with a password so that only persons who know the password have access.

- *Start your course!* If you want to use gather.town for the first time, you should consider some hours of preparation. You need time to make yourself familiar with the tool and the possibilities it offers. Also, you may change your didactic concept to fit better to this tool. After you have designed and used your first space and collected some experiences you should not need more time for preparation than *for a normal face-to-face lesson or online lecture.*

Using gather.town for Collaborative Learning

In the summer of 2021, I provided an *online course* on Democratic Education for teachers for a Romanian private school. To bring content and form in a suitable concept, that enables participatory and co-determinant teaching, I decided to use gather.town. The course was designed for a group of educators and teachers, who wanted to be qualified to work in a more participatory and democratic way with pupils in a democratic school yet to be

established. They had work experience of between some months and nearly twenty years. So I had to consider a wide range of prior knowledge and skills, some of them had English, Romanian, and German language skills, others could speak and understand only Romanian.

Taking these two circumstances into consideration I had to work with materials in different languages and different degrees of difficulty. I scheduled three lessons and one session in advance to make an introduction to the learning platform. This was important to make sure, that we can start the first lessons without losing time with technical problems.

At the beginning of each session we met in a classical video conference (I used the cost-free and open source platform jitsi; https://meet.jit.si/). Here I gave short lectures on the day's topic and created space for short common discussions. Mostly we met in the video conference also at the end of a session for a final discussion.

Using gather.town gave me the advantage of using nearly the same methods I would have used if we had met in a real classroom. Because each participant was not only present by his or her video and his or her voice but also via the own avatar he or she was able to move around like in a real room and thus choosing spaces, topics, and partners for work and discussions by his or her own. This possibility is not given in any video conference tool, as far as I know. The methods I used in the course are summarized in figure 2. I will not explain these methods separately because they should be known by experienced educators or could be easily found by short research.

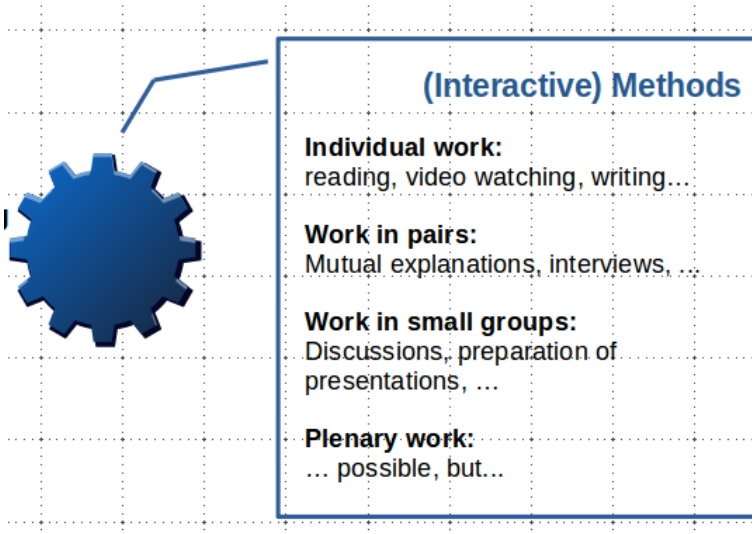

Fig 2: Some realizable methods in gather.town

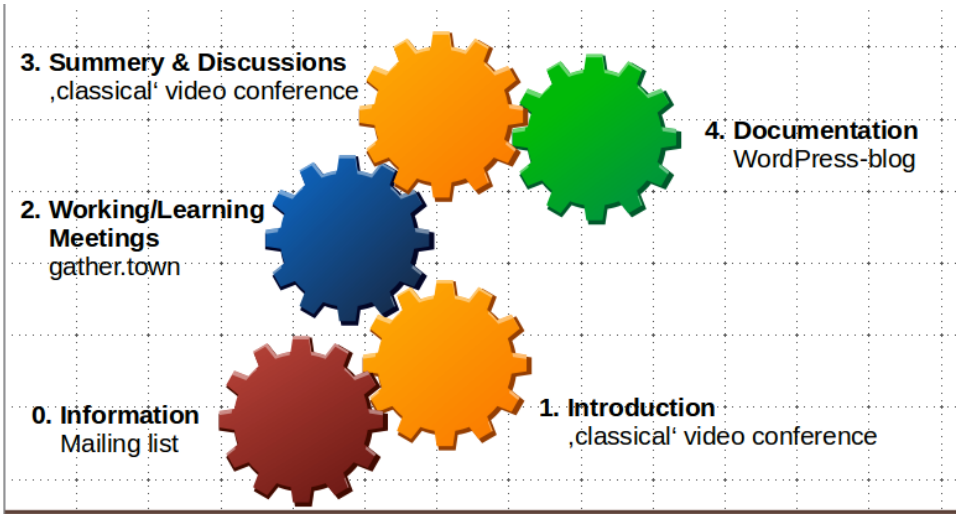

Fig 3: Technical and didactic support for the use of gather.town

At all, methods build not the core of the lessons. Even more important was the possibility of the environment of gather.town enabled, to meet between the working phases to talk and change out ideas and experiences. I used the practice described by Hooks: "I asked them [the students, R.P.] to share with us how ideas that they have learned or worked on in the classroom

impacted on their experience outside. This gives them both the opportunity to know that difficult experiences may be common and practice at integrating theory and practice: a way of knowing as well as habits of being. We practiced interrogating habits of being as well as ideas. Through this process we build community." (Hooks 1994, 43). Gather.town made it possible for me to discuss such issues in various situations, with single students, in a small group, or with all of them.

To uncomplicatedly vary the discussion settings, it was important to create safe spaces for the discussion of partly private and difficult topics. Moreover, the virtual classrooms allowed building tandems or groups of participants for reciprocal teaching; even I, as the formal course leader was involved in these groups and thus changed my position from teacher to pupil in the sense Freire pointed out when he wrote about the relation between teacher and student in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire 2007).

Resuming my experiences with the use of gather.town I think that this tool is not suitable for all educational purposes. So I decided to use other tools to embed the seminars I gave in gather.town in a holistic learning architecture. Figure 3 summarizes all the elements I used.

Limits of gather.town

The producers are working on the improvement of gather.town, but there are still some technical limitations. Gather.town is designed to work at best on a PC or laptop with Windows, Mac OS, or Linux. If participants are using mobile devices like mobile phones or tablets they may not be able to interact with objects in gather.town (for example with whiteboards or embedded videos), they are not able to share their mobile phone or tablet screens and other limitations. And even if all participants are using a desktop computer they have to use one of the following browsers: Google Chrome (the browser recommended by the programmers), Microsoft Edge, Firefox, or Safari.

To be sure that your course on gather.town may start without technical problems I suggest you inform the participants early enough about the technical requirements. In my course I organized a technical introduction

meeting three days before the start of the course, to make sure that everything was working for everybody. For this meeting I used a 'classical' video conference, to avoid any access problems on the side of the participants.

Didactically gather.town provides an innovative virtual environment for simultaneous meetings and teaching. And as teacher, you can arrange specific objects where you may present further information and documentation of the learning process. But to guarantee fast and uncomplicated access to the information, for example after the course's end, or if you are using the gather.town space with another group again, gather.town provides no integrated solution. To deal with this problem, I used a separate website for my course. On this page, I collected all learning products and supplementary information in a systematic way, so that it could be easily found by the participants for later use.

The third limit of gather.town is in its nature economically: gather.town is free to use only for up to 25 participants (including host or teacher). For my course, the pricing was not a problem, because I had only a small group, but if you have bigger groups, you have to choose between different price models ranging between two US dollars per user for two hours and seven US dollars per user for one month.

Conclusion

To conclude, gather.town is a tool that provides a wide range of possibilities for democratic and collaborative teaching scenarios for online teaching. If you have a group smaller than 25 students it could be used for free, otherwise it gets expensive rather fast. But for small seminar settings or adult education gather.town satisfies many needs that other online tools fail to meet. Especially the possibilities of including diverse materials in diverse formats in the learning space, and the possibility for students and teachers to use private rooms to talk with each other, but easily be found on the map by others enable a lot of methodical and didactic variations.

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