Teaching Anthropology

2023, Vol. 12, No.2, pp.1-13.

The Problem of Dialogue in Online Teaching and Learning During the Coronavirus Pandemic

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Abstract

The covid-19 pandemic lockdowns of university campuses have been a catalyst for remote online teaching and learning. The lockdown forced teachers and students to transpose, adopt and adjust on-campus face-to-face classroom interaction to online interaction. In departments that did not have any previous experiences with distant learning courses, online teaching and learning was a novel field of interaction, with none or few institutionalised norms and codes of conduct. It is a culture in its making. Based on teachers' and students' experiences from an undergraduate course in ethnographic method, which consisted of lectures and debate-style seminars, we discuss the challenges we faced with dialogical teaching when the entire course went online. Online teaching and learning behaviours are relational phenomena involving social relations between students and between students and teachers, university policies and data protection regulations, digital communication technology, and an online classroom that stretches into peoples' private spaces. Anticipating a future with blended learning we recommend that teachers and students join forces to develop an online culture of academic exchange, and that departments develop institutional memory on the possibilities and limits of remote online teaching.

Keywords

Dialogical space-time, emergency remote teaching, secondary digital divide, online classroom

Introduction

> *Hanna*: At first, I was positive to [online] home instructions. All in all, it worked well for me. In hindsight, I'm in doubt. I feel that things could have been done better, and I have tried to reflect on how it would have been if I could have attended the teaching in person on campus. In general, I think that would have provided a better learning outcome.
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> *Maria:* I am not sure if I have reflected as much as you [Hanna]. But, my first year at the university has been very strange. First of all, I started … I am 23 … later than my age group. Secondly, we did not have a proper buddy scheme [due to infection control measures], so I did not get to know any of the other students, and constantly changing rules and regulations created uncertainties whether we could arrange colloquiums where we could meet physically or not.
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> But for me, that the lectures were recorded was good because I only took the Norwegian language course last year … at B2 level. I think that is a too low level for starting at the university. For me, it was difficult to follow the lectures the first two months. So, it was very good that the lectures were recorded so that I could go through them in retrospect.
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> When I think about the buddy scheme right now [upcoming next semester for new students], I feel that the past year has been somewhat "empty". When I return next semester, it is as if I do not have any network. I know almost no one. It feels wrong, but I really do not know how it should be. So, it is probably the lack of socializing that affects me most. So, I have difficulties imagining how it should have been. But … hum … I agree probably with Hanna, that that the learning outcome would have been better with lectures and seminars on campus.
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> *Hanna*: I can probably contribute with some insight here. I took the first year of Interdisciplinary cultural studies program last year, focusing on equity and diversity, in [academic year] 2019 and 2020. And that was my first year … and until March, it was the ordinary instructions at campus. Then I commenced on the studies step by step … also as a woman at the age of … let me just say that I was much older than my fellow students, but it [being

> present at campus] helped me embarking on the studies trough the seminar groups and colloquiums. Hum … let me say … It worked like this; when we got the assignments of the texts from the reading list that we were going to present in the seminars … since it was physical presence, I would never face the others on the group unprepared, not having read the papers prior to the seminars. It would have appeared rather daft showing up unprepared. It motivated me. The social dimension … the social which we approach in different ways in the program courses … worked motivating for me. If we look at it as a social fact, I met prepared precisely because we were going to have the community that we had established. This year, I have not experienced it in this way.
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> It is a requirement to participate in the seminars that you have read before to the seminar, but it seemed that the threshold to meet unprepared now, given the circumstance, was much lower … between all of us. I did not feel that I had the same responsibility, albeit I at the same time knew the importance of reading all the required texts … it felt as if I was the only one in all this.
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> *Astrid*: Could I just make a question Hanna? Truly, I appreciate the honesty. […] Don't be shy; be frank although I have been your learning assistant. Is it your impression that the student read less this year than last year now that we have online teaching compared to when we had physical attendance?
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> *Hanna*: I think I was privileged because a person in my group was very good … I shall not mention any names, but that person got straight A in all courses. I was lucky to end up in the group with a person like that because we kept in contact in between the weekly lectures and seminars. So, we discussed informally on the phone … not like the seminar groups that was more formal.
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> I can say that people tried their best [in the seminar group], but … I can't blame laziness because there are so many factors that come into play … things are not unambiguous … there's so much we have to take into account. All in all, I think people did their best and I did not end up in a group where people did not contribute.
> At the same time, it became a bit quite … at times. In my first year, when we had assignments in the seminar rooms, it was much more spirited. When we were divided into groups [on the online seminars] on break out rooms, I could end up with people who hid behind a muted microphone or would not show their face … which I understand 100%. It was a much higher threshold for active participation. It truly was …
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> *Maria*: I do not have any previous experience from this type of seminars. But I became a bit frustrated and disappointed. When I enrolled at social anthropology, I anticipated that I would meet people who were very eager to discuss "big issues". But, I experienced that people joined seminars unprepared, they had not read the compulsory reading … and it was the same problem with the microphone muted and the camera switched off. Fortunately, I stayed with my only friend on the program, and both of us were in the reference group [providing feedback from the students to teachers], and we had a meeting with Astrid, and we agreed that all of us should always have the camera on, but I suddenly felt that responsibility to help the seminar work fell on us ... that was difficult … that it felt it was also up to us to make it work when we did not have any energy left to give … so I must say, it was a bit annoying.
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> Yes, there were some seminars … I just felt that I would be better off reading on my own repeating the syllabus or just discuss it with my flatmate rather than participate in the seminars.
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> *Hanna*: Quite simply, making our time more purposeful.
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> *Maria*: Yes …

The above exchange is between two students and the learning assistant in an undergraduate course in ethnographic method that went online in the spring semester 2021 due to campus lockdown. They pinpoint the lack of a dynamic dialogue as the major problem in synchronous meetings in the online classroom. Lack of dialogue in both lectures and debate seminars is our concern in this article. We want to better understand the reasons why, and, anticipating a future with blended learning, on-campus and online, learn what we can do about it. The first author has designed the course and is the principal lecturer and course coordinator. The second author was the senior learning assistant organising and moderating debate-style seminars on the compulsory reading. In the spring semester 2021, she was a third-year undergraduate student in social anthropology at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU). An important lesson from the sudden, wholesale switch to online remote teaching was that the virtual classroom should be treated as a teaching and learning space in its own right and not be modelled on the modes and values of the face-to-face interaction in the on-campus auditoriums and seminar rooms. Rather, online remote teaching and learning should be seen as a third dialogical space-time (Wegerif, 2007) in addition to speech-based exchanges in the auditoriums and the text-based learning in the reading rooms.

In the fall semester 2020, campus had been partly open, and lectures and seminars had been held in classrooms on campus under strict infection control measures and contact tracing. Anticipating an open campus also for the spring semester 2021, we had planned for on-campus teaching and learning activities. However, as covid-19 infection cases increased after Christmas holidays, campus was locked down with the prospect of reopening later in the semester. We had to switched to emergency online teaching without having prepared for it. Prior to the lockdown, we had used the university online Learning Management System (LMS) chiefly as a message board, for enrolment in seminars, submission of assignments, and for posting reading lists and slides from lectures. Due to possible campus lockdowns, the platform had been fitted with a Video Conferencing Service (VCS) just after the covid-19 outbreak, which could be used for both lectures and seminars. Because the capacity of the VCS was limited, the students on lager undergraduate courses were advised to keep their cameras switched off during online lectures to avoid breakdowns, and to keep the microphone muted to avoid disturbing ambient sound and feedbacks. In addition, and according to university regulations, students were not obliged to switch on cameras in synchronous meetings in the online classroom.[1] The LMS was also fitted with a tube from an automatic audio-visual streaming and recording system installed in some of the larger lecture theatres. By the permission from the Department head, lecturers could access the lecture theatres with the automatic camera system for live streaming of their lectures during the lockdown. Lectures for the methods course were held in one of these lecture theatres, but with no students present. The seminars were kept on the LMS' VCS.

This was the first time the entire course went online, and being novices in online teaching, we decided to monitor and document effects. The senior learning assistant distributed on e-mail a simple questioner and encouraged student to submit narratives of their experiences. After exams, the course coordinator and learning assistant also arranged a focus group discussion online with some of the students. Moreover, in line with the general quality assurance program for courses at the university, three volunteer students had been appointed as members of a 'response group'. They kept in touch with the course coordinator throughout the semester. They also carried out a mid-term assessment together with the course coordinator and wrote a final report at the end of the course. The responses from the students conveyed in this article are drawn from all these sources. We account in detail the experiences of both students and teachers because the relations between them remains an understudied field (Karpouza & Emvalotis, 2019).

The switch to online remote teaching was a mixed blessing. On the one hand, the recorded lectures received positive feedback from many students, chiefly because they enabled them to repeat the lectures at their own pace and time. On the other hand, as the exchange between Hanna and Maria and Astrid also shows, most online debate style seminars functioned poorly. Engaging students in the debates had been a challenge in the classroom face-to-face seminars too, but the online situation made debates almost impossible because most students kept the camera and the microphone switched off. In the online situation, the learning assistants felt that they had much less control over student behaviour and less tools to facilitate debate. Moreover, dialogue between lecturer and students was impossible in the system of automatic streaming and recording from the lectures theatre. For the principal lecturer who follow the methods of dialogical teaching (Shor & Freire, 1987), this was unsatisfactory. In short, the dialogue between the students, and between the students and lecturers was the main "casualty" in the wholesale switch to online teaching and learning. In the following, we first account for the larger context of digitalisation of higher education in Norway, and the properties of different dialogical space-times of teaching and learning (Wegerif, 2013, 2019) after which we elaborate on the course and our experiences as lecturer and learning assistant on the problem of dialogue, and on the students' responses.

Patterns of Digitalisation in Higher Education

Together with the other Scandinavian countries, Norway has been in the forefront of digitalising the public sectors, including the educational sector. Digital literacy is high, and illiteracy and lack of access to digital technology follows old age and disabilities rather than gender and class (Datta et al., 2018; Gebhardt et al., 2019). Most homes are equipped with broadband internet. However, the capacity of the Wi-Fi systems in students' residents was too low when everyone went online during the emergency remote teaching, which forced some student to use Wi-Fis in cafés and shopping centres which were still open during the campus lockdown.

[1] The university guidelines states: *Streaming of online teaching:* Real-time streaming is not considered recording. Here it is voluntary for students if they want to participate with the use of image and sound, and this can be controlled by the student. [Lecturers] do not need to obtain consent from the students as this is defined as public interest. Legal basis: Act of universities and university colleges § 4-15 art. 6 (1) no. E. (NTNU Intranet: https://innsida.ntnu.no/wiki/-/wiki/English/privacy+in+online+teaching)

The driving force in the digitalisation of the universities in Norway has been the administration rather than university leaders and teaching staff (Tømte et al., 2019). The general efficiency improvement of administrative routines through digital technology have also included course programming, enrolment, exams and assessment, communication with study administration, and the use of library resources. Digital technology has improved moreover the efficiency of existing pedagogical devices such as visual illustrations, and distant learning. The digitalisation has been general and not discipline-specific, and, albeit being an expressed goal in higher educational policies,[2] the pedagogical uses of digital technology have mainly been driven by enthusiast teaching staff at a departmental level (Tømte et al., 2019) and usually, not been an integral part of study programs (Korsberg et al., 2022). Moreover, pedagogical uses of digital technology have not been a systematic part of the training of university teachers (Tømte et al., 2019).

In sum, there exists a secondary digital divide in terms development of digital programs for teaching and learning between the providers of LMS and administrative staff on the one hand and the teachers and students on the other hand. In the existing platforms, there are for example little room for students to make their own programs, co-creating knowledge. It is fair to claim that the situation in Norway corroborates the major conclusion in one of the more comprehensive surveys of students' engagement with digitalisation, carried out in Australia across science and humanities (Henderson et al. 2015), that digitalisation has had a marked effect on the logistical aspects of university life, but little effect on learning and transfer of knowledge. Moreover, it is fair to say that many of us university teachers were ill equipped for the emergency remote teaching though LMS. Ignorant of the opportunities and limitations of digital technology and pedagogics, we relied on our in internalised pedagogical modes and methods of on-campus face-to-face interaction with students.

Dialogical Space-Times of Teaching and Learning

LMS and the internet constitute a third dialogical space-time for teaching and learning in addition to the short time face-to-face dialogues with specific others in the auditoriums and seminar rooms and the studying of literature in the library reading rooms that is characterised by an enduring dialogue with the 'voice of the discipline's traditions' as a 'generalised other' (Wegerif, 2013; 2019). Whereas orality is the dominant mode of dialogue in the auditorium and the seminar rooms, and print literacy is the dominant mode in the reading room, the dialogical space-time of the internet is characterised by multi-modality and multiple types of others (Wegerif, 2019). VCSs allow for real-time face-to-face dialogue with specific others and exist in addition to dialogue with generalised others in the form of references work, tutorial videos, and chatting channels. The three types of dialogical space-times are overlapping but have their own characteristics and dominant mode of communications. Compared to the limited space and time in orally based face-to-face dialogue with specific others in the auditoriums and seminar rooms, the dialogical space-time of the internet is almost boundless and with an almost infinite number of possible 'others', of different types.

An absolute condition for dialogical teaching is that the teacher manage to open a space for dialogue and establish relations between interlocutors conducive for exchange (Wegerif, 2007, 2019). Besides the limited capacity of the VCS and the Wi-Fi systems in students' residents, the single most significant factor that caused problems of dialogue in the sudden switch to emergency online lectures and debate seminars was that we had no other model than the internalised face-to-face orally based dialogue mode to open a space for and establish good relations of exchange. The primary condition for dialogical teaching were almost impossible to meet, and most students became consumers of lectures and seminars debates rather than keen interlocutors.

Course Description

The course in ethnographic methods is held in the second semester of the bachelor's degree program in social anthropology. The study load is calculated to 15 ECTS credits (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System)[3] and comprises a compulsory reading list for about 1000 pages including a textbook and a monograph. There are four mandatory written assignments based on exercise of fieldwork methods, and a final exam essay of 6000 words on a given topic. The course consists of 14 weeks of teaching and learning activities; 2 x 45 minutes

[2] *Digitaliseringsstrategi for universitets- og høyskolesektoren 2017-2021* [Digitalisation of universities and university colleges 2017-2021], Strategy document, Ministry of Education and Research, Norway. https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/digitaliseringsstrategi-for-universitets--og-hoyskolesektoren---/id2571085/sec6

[3] https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/inclusive-and-connected-higher-education/european-credit-transfer-and-accumulation-system

of lectures, and 2 x 45 minutes debate-seminar each week. In the spring semester 2021, 113 students had enrolled on the course. Most of them were in their freshman year, whereas some had completed courses from other study programs before enrolling at the social anthropology program. Most anthropology students at NTNU are women, constituting ¾ of the student at the undergraduate level, whereas the ratio in general in higher education is 60% women and 40% men.[4]

Table 1: Enrolment and dropout rates, undergraduate course on ethnographic method, 2019-2022

Semester	Enrolment	F	M	% F/M	Exams	% Drop out
Spring 2019	97	75	22	77/23	80	17.5
Spring 2020	100	76	24	76/24	88	12
Spring 2021	113	84	29	74/26	101	10
Spring 2022	121	85	36	70/30	102	15.7

Dropout rates for programs during the first year of study at the university is in general high, up to 30%. A major evaluation of undergraduate programs in the social sciences at NTNU[5] suggests that the high dropout rate is chiefly an expression of students' intentional decisions to change program, rather than dropping out of university studies altogether, and that it is less related to the quality of programs. Having chosen the wrong program, they more easily drop out of courses and enrol for another program the second year. Having learned more about the different disciplines during the first year, they are in a better position to make a choice of program that suites their interests better. Comparatively, the number of dropouts from the ethnographic methods course has been much lower, particularly during the spring semester 2021 in which campus was closed most of the semester, and in 2020 when campus was closed the last few weeks of lectures. We do not know exactly why the dropout rate was lower during campus lockdowns, but we may conjecture that lack of interaction among students across programs boundaries – typical of life on campus – made them more ignorant about the other disciplines and programs and, thus, a poorer ground on which to make decision about switching programs.

The course was a result of a major reform of the undergraduate program in social anthropology which was implemented in 2018. Previously, we taught ethnographic methods only at the graduate level; at the first semester of a two-year master's degree program in which the students conduct six to nine months field research in the second and third semester. However, in 2016, the Faculty of Social and Educational Sciences decided that all study programs should undergo major reforms by 2021, with the aim of introducing the students to the research process already at the undergraduate level. Moreover, all programs should introduce more problem-based and student focused learning activities. Ethnographic methods are best comprehended by practicing, and we designed the course to include observation of social interaction, description of material objects, writing fieldnotes, and conducting conversations by the students interviewing each other two and two. In the semesters prior to the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown, the observations were done in smaller groups in urban public spaces, after which the different groups presented their observations. The course lecturer supervised the observations and moderated the debate following the presentations. However, due to infection control regulations, the observations were cancelled in the spring semester 2021.

The syllabus is divided into four sections[6] and 14 lecturers, and each lecture is followed by a seminar in which debates between students on the compulsory reading for each lecture were combined with some of the field method exercises. In the spring semester 2021, there were four seminars per week, with a maximum of 30 students in each seminar. Participation in the seminars is not mandatory, and the students enrol at one of the seminars at the beginning of the semester. In the seminars, the participants divided themselves into smaller discussion groups, of six to eight participants depending on the turnout. A few of the discussion groups developed into private colloquiums whose members met online much more frequent than the weekly seminars,

[4] Statistics Norway. https://www.ssb.no/en/utdanning/hoyere-utdanning.

[5] *Bachelorprogrammet i støpeskjeen. Bachelorutvalgets innstilling.* Evaluation report 2009, Faculty of Social Sciences and Technology Management, NTNU.

[6] A) An introductory part focusing on ethnographic method as a descriptive and explorative method including abduction and serendipity, everyday life and the social construction of reality as object of fieldwork, the relational nature of fieldwork and research ethics, and field work as cultural encounters destabilising preconceived ideas and pre-judgements. B) Fieldwork techniques of producing and procuring ethnographic information, including observations through the visual sense and other senses, observations of material objects and built environment, conversations, writing fieldnotes, extended case study methodology, and digital research methods. C) Interpretative methods, phenomenology, and semiology. D) Comparison and holism.

also for social functions. The principal role of the learning assistants is to facilitate and moderate the debates. Also, under the guidance of the lecturer, the learning assistants approve of assignments. Department policies put a high value the role of learning assistants because they have recently passed thresholds to academic thinking that we expect students to do at this level and are therefore in a good position to understand and assist the first-year students to pass the same thresholds.

A Theater Rigged for Online Streaming and Onsite Lecturing Under Infection Control

Lecturing in a theatre without an audience was a rather odd experience. There are 173 seats in the lecture theatre allocated for the ethnographic methods course. The pitched floor is fairly steep, and benches are rows of upholstered seats with a continuous writing table in front. A technical room for projecting films and sound and light control is located in the back of the theatre, and in which the cameras for automatic streaming and recording are mounted. There is one camera directed towards the lecturer, and one directed towards the screen on which power point slides, films, and still images are projected. Sound is drawn directly from the lecturer's lavaliere. For the student watching in front of the computer, the lecture appears in a split screen with the lecturer to the left, and slides to the right. The cameras are fixed, so that lecturer cannot move much from the lectern before he or she drops out of the videoframe. All lectures begin 15 minutes passed the hour and ends at the top of the hour. A red light, signalling the recording, is placed next to the cameras, and start blinking five minutes before the lecture begins to alert the lecturer, and stops recording on the top of the hour sharp to ensure the students a 15-minute break before the second lecturing hour of 45 minutes begins.

In preparation for sudden reopening of campus, the lecture theatres were fitted with antibacterial spray and wet wipes, QR codes to register in the university contact tracing system, and every second seat was closed with red and white striped barrier tapes to keep distance between students. In Norway, infection control combined national and local regulations, and was to a certain extent flexible according to the infection rate in the different municipalities. The city council was the regulating authorities, acting upon advice from central government health authorities, and, with respect to closedown of the campuses, university management followed advice from the city council and the local health authorities. The infections rates dropped nationally towards March 2021, in which campus was partly reopened. A few lectures were held with students present in the lecture theatres. However, campus was locked down again as infection rates rocketed towards April. The lectures with students present in the theatre in the short period campus reopened were also streamed live and recorded.

Only 10% of the enrolled students attended the on-campus lectures when it reopened. This surprised us. We had imagined that the students would flock to campus to meet their friends and become relieved from their isolation at home. However, the flexibilities of regulation had created to a certain extent a sense of uncertainty among the students about when, an if at all, the campus would be reopened for lectures and seminars during the spring semester. As a consequence, the students who attended the lectures reviled, many had not returned to the university for the spring semester and remained at home with their parents where they had spent in-between the semesters and the Christmas seasonal vacation. Others reported that they were uncertain about how safe a partly opened campus would be with respect to possible infections and would in any case choose to watch the lectures online.

Online Lectures: Speaking to the Camera

I chose to keep all my online lectures streamed from the lecture theatre, using the automatic recording system, for a particular reason. During campus lockdown in the previous spring semester, in April 2020, I had held a few lectures on the LMS's VCS devise from my kitchen table which served as a second office at home where we needed two home offices during the lockdown. It felt awkward that my home became exposed to more than 100 students. Moreover, I found the lectures undynamic. I spoke to a black screen, just showing the student's user names; and the students viewed just a "talking head". The students could raise their virtual hand and ask questions or use a chat channel for questions and comments. The dialogue between the students and me as the lecturer was, however, almost non-existent. Very few dared to unmute and raise a question; "It is so strange to listen to your own voice, which makes it more difficult to focus on the questions when so many are listening", a student related in hindsight. The chatting channel was mostly used for emoji comments, not proper questions.

For the remaining lectures on the VCS, I switched to a reading paper style of lecturing and wrote full lecturing notes that I shared on screen so that the students could read them at the same time as I spoke. I also posted the lecturing notes online after the lecture. This solution violated parts of my teaching philosophy: I believe that

students will understand and internalise knowledge better if they endeavour to formulate in their own words what the lecturers say rather than copying what the lecturer has written, e.g., that students become obsessed by copying power points word by word rather than formulating their own points. Moreover, I value that the students write down their notes by hand, as research, albeit inconclusive, suggests that longhand notetaking is superior to electronic notetaking on smartphones and laptops (Mueller, & Oppenheimer, 2014; Morehead, Dunlosky, & Rawson, 2019), and I usually tell the students so. When we switched to online teaching in January 2021, I reasoned that, since dialogue was poor and teaching philosophies were violated on the videoconference system, I could as well use the automatic streaming and recording system in the theatre; believing that I could recreate some of the dynamics of the theatre lecture speech performances despite no students being present in the theatre. From my perspective, that turned out not to be the case, however.

In the theatre, I usually fix my view on a few students at rows in front, at the middle, and at the back of the theatre, trying to read their facial expressions and bodily gestures as clues on how the students in general concentrate and follow what I am saying. In the very first online lecture recorded in the theatre, I imagined students were present, and shifted my glance at different part of the lecture theatre, thinking that it would look "natural" on the tube; due to the cameras being fixed on the lectern and screen, the empty rows would in any case not be within the videoframe. However, with no non-verbal clues from students on my lecturing, I felt that the content of the lecture so to speak kept slipping out of my mind. To keep a dynamic speech performance in the theatre, I usually repeat the compulsory readings for each lecture just before the lectures and keep rather short lecturing notes. To keep coherence in the lecture and make sure that all the important points are conveyed, implies that I focus at the same time on what I have said, what I am saying, and what I am going to say. Without the students' feedback, I lost concentration and felt that the lecture became somewhat staccato and unnecessary fragmented.

For the following lectures, I changed my strategy. I imagined that that entire course cohort was inside the camera, or rather, it was through the eye of the camera I could reach them directly and looked only into the camera unless I checked lecturing notes. I also wrote notes more fully, which I lectured from and screened at the same time; a sort of middle ground between the reading paper mode of lecturing I had done on the VCS and the speech performances in the theatre with students present.

With no students present in the lecture theatre, and no modes of communicating with them, another principle of my teaching was abolished, that of dialogical lecturing. To open up a space for dialogue, I usually begin a lecture by asking, and encouraging, the students to relate an experience, an example, or a point of view of the social and cultural phenomenon which is the topic of the lecture. I use the students' narratives and observations as a point of departure to pose problems and engage them in interpretations and debates. I pose question in a way that enable them to employ key anthropological concepts, represented in the compulsory reading for the lectures. I find that students internalise the knowledge better if they engage in collective meaning-making and discover points themselves. In addition, the dialogue provides me with feedback on what the students have comprehended and can adjust my lecturing accordingly.

In the case of lecturing ethnographic fieldwork methods, my ideal is to narrate in words and video and still images a situation from my own field works, and use that as a point of departure, asking the students to interpret what they have observed and facilitating a dialogue on multiple interpretations of the event. Provided that all observations are interpretations, that ethnographic methods are explorative based on abduction (Reichertz, 2010), and that we in interpretative sciences do not come closer to the truth by carrying out methods "correctly" (Kaplan, 1984), ethnographic field methods hinge in the final analysis on the imaginary faculty of the field worker. The interpretative skills of a student cannot be learnt in the classroom alone, but it sure helps to practice. That is *raison d'être* for engaging the students in interpretations through dialogue.

Contrary to my negative experiences with online lecturing, the response from the students was mostly positive. As noted by Hanna and Maria in the exchange above, the fact that the lectures were recorded and stored on the LMS, made it possible for them to repeat the lectures, and review them in their own pace. This was also underlined as a positive effect by the members of the response group in their assessments. On the other hand, some of those who attended the two lectures when campus was reopened for a short period, related that they were so happy to be present in the theatre again because they had problems concentrating at home, in front of the screen. They said that they were easily distracted with other things at home. Being in the lecture theatre with other students functioned as social control mechanism. "Everyone does exactly the same, focusing on the lecturer and the blackboard", one of them said. The materiality of the lecture theatre and the conformity in

action meta-communicated so strongly what the purpose of them being there was, that it helped them to focus and concentrate. This was a frame they lacked at home.

Others related that they found the home environment conducive. "It is very efficient", one said, "I use to do household chores while listening to the lectures ... I kill two birds with one stone, so to speak". Household chores had a kind of "doodling effect" (Andrade, 2009) on her ability to concentrate. Some also reported that they concentrated better in front of the screen than in the lecture hall. One of them said that by using headphones and staring at the small screen, made her "completely detached from the outside world". In the lecture hall, on the other hand, she had the habit of watching other students, assessing their performances; "did they appear focused", "did they take a lot of notes" and so on, constantly compering herself to the others, nourishing her self-inflicted performance anxiety. At times the anxiety was so importunate that she completely lost her train of thought.

We usually think about the 'online classroom' *as* the 'virtual classroom', i.e., a shared online digital space for communication and exchange. We ignore that the relations that has the most profound effect on the learning environment in online teaching and learning lays precisely beyond virtual space (see Patgiri, 2021). Where does the student actually sit and work during online classes? On the bus, a café, at home, in the present of others? Characteristics of the physical, technological, and social space of the students while online had significant effects also on the students' ability and willingness to swich on the cameras and microphones in the online debate seminars, the experience of which the senior learning assistant turn to below.

Being a Learning Assistant Before and During the Coronavirus Pandemic

During my undergraduate studies in social anthropology at NTNU, I have worked part-time as a learning assistant in first-and second-year anthropology courses. I have, in total, led seminars in four courses, of which only the ethnographic method course in the spring semester 2021 was mostly conducted online. Below, I first describe my role and general experiences and impression of the academic and social functions of the seminars, followed by a discussion about the problems that the students and I as a moderator experienced by the seminars going online.

Although attendance is not mandatory, most students enrol at the debate seminars. Gaining anthropological knowledge is an obvious motivation for attending seminars. However, I believe the social aspect of the seminars, spending time with fellow students, is of great importance, especially for the first-year students with a poorer social network. Evidence of the seminar's social functions is that the students in the smaller discussion groups usually make Facebook and Messenger groups to communicate with each other off-campus. Some of the groups seem to chat online before the seminars about whether they should attend or not. Another indication of the social functions is small talk. Although students are meant to debate questions that I have prepared in advance from the compulsory reading for the week's lecture, students often talk about other issues such as the party they went to during the weekend, what their plans are for the evening, or simply stories about themselves. As a moderator, I usually circulate between the groups, asking how they are doing, moderating the debate if the debate is in a deadlock, and answer questions about the course literature. The students are very inquisitive during the seminars. It feels easier perhaps to ask questions to me as a tutor rather than the lecturer in a theatre attended by 100 students. There is, however, a delicate line between answering the questions and guiding the students to discuss and discover important points themselves, which is my main objective as a moderator.

When I was hired as a learning assistant at NTNU, I was encouraged by the Department to do a twenty-hour pedagogical course called LAOS - Learning assistant training.[7] Although the course prepared me for some seminar scenarios through roleplays, general teaching tips, and reflection essays, I found the course to be surprisingly uninstructive; I felt overwhelmed by many "don'ts", such as to not answer too explicitly questions because I am not a fully educated anthropologist myself. I was not sure if I would commit myself to all the "don'ts" they had listed. There are always discrepancies between what the lecturers intended to convey, and what the students have comprehended. In my experience, the learning assistant is a broker between the lectures, the syllabus, and the student. The LAOS course did not prepare me for the role of being a broker. How do you, for instance, ask students that do not understand the concept of 'animism', even after reading the literature and attending lectures, to discuss the concept without trying to clarify at the best of your ability what the concept

[7] See: https://www.ntnu.no/documents/1266530207/1270423601/LAOS/c636c00b-25db-435a-bc90-a4b682fcfeb1

refers to without breaking the pedagogue's advice? I found my role ambiguous somehow, and that I had challenges in balancing the formal expectations from the LAOS pedagogues and from the students, who expected me, as their senior student and "scholarly confidant", to help them to understand anthropology. Someone had to fill the gap between the lectures, the syllabus, and the student's comprehensions, and that someone was me as the learning assistant.

In general, the seminars constitute an informal atmosphere where fellow students hang out, discuss, clarify a point, and open up to each other, and to me, about questions they did not find the courage to ask in the lecture theatre. Whereas some students thought of me as a university employee and, on the basis of the social hierarchy in the academy, kept at a distance, others spent a lot of time with me, and later became my friends. The students in the seminars were roughly of the same age as me, and we shared the same passion for anthropology. Getting to know the students, asking about their backgrounds and experiences, did not only create a safe haven for some of the first-year students, but it also served as a tool for motivating them and make them use their own lived experiences as examples when they discussed and tried to understand abstract anthropological concepts. For some of the students, I knew, so to speak, which 'strings to pull' if I wanted to move a discussion in a desired direction or towards a particular learning outcome.

On the other hand, having a friendly and very egalitarians culture had its challenges. One of the LAOS "don'ts" was not to discuss with the students about other issues concerning their educations than the course. Formally, I was supposed to refer the students to the professional student counsellor at the Department or to other services at campus. I often advised the students to talk to the professionals; however, I got the impression that the students wanted to speak with me personally rather than a counsellor simply because they wanted to learn from my opinions and experiences. I did care about the student's wellbeing and did not want them to feel rejected, and, thus, answered many of their questions. A recurrent theme they raised was how I got through my first year, and I believe that those kinds of advice perhaps are more reliable when it comes from a student you trust and spend time with every week and has recently had that experience herself. Most of the students just needed encouragement, a pat on the back, and to know that they were going to get through this, just like I did.

Debates in Crisis: Muted Microphones and Switched Off Cameras

When the seminars went online, we adopted and applied the campus classroom seminar frame, which we had planned for, to the online setting. The aim of the seminar was still to encourage and inspire the students to debate in smaller groups the compulsory reading and pre-prepared questions, which was technically done by using «break-out» rooms in the VCS. The aim was to simulate online the face-to-face interaction in the campus seminar room. As the exchange with Hanna and Maria above shows, debates were almost impossible because most students chose to have both camera and microphone switched off, as they were also entitled to according to university regulations (see footnote 1). Therefore, I could not make camera and sound-usages a criterion for attending the seminars. I encouraged the students to keep the camera and the microphone on continuously so as to enable a face-to-face discussion. However, and to my surprise, most students chose not to. I contacted the study advisor at the Department and the course coordinator. Even though this was the third 'corona-semester', neither could give me any other advice than to keep on urging the students to turn on their cameras. I also tried to search NTNUs Intranet for tips and techniques, however, to no avail. I felt left alone trying to solve the challenging situation, and other learning assistants who I asked for help were also short of advice. We exchanged frustrations rather than solutions.

Having worked as a learning assistant at four courses, I have always looked forward to the seminars. However, during the online teaching in the spring semester 2021, being a learning assistant was draining my energy. Online seminars were so much more demanding to organise and to engage the students. During the LAOS training program for learning assistants, I had learned a few techniques to motivate students and encourage self-education. Neither the pedagogues at the course nor I were prepared or equipped with tools to motivate students who sat behind screens with their cameras turned off. As learning assistants, we were pioneers trying to do so. I used different online software programs to which NTNU had common user licences, to motivate and engage the students, such a as Kahoot, Menti, and Padlet. Kahoot and Menti are anonymous quiz-like websites where students could respond to questions from me and add questions, word clouds, and reflection notes. Padlet have many of the same features, however, in this program, students can add longer texts, and pictures. After a few weeks, I felt rather exhausted and looked upon myself as suffering from "zoom-fatigue". Perhaps, I was not the only one: the response rate to these programs also dropped quite rapidly, and students stopped attending the online seminars.

During the semester, I coordinated and moderated two of the four online debate seminars, which allowed me to make comparison between the groups. What was particularly interesting was that the use of the camera and microphone differed between the two groups. In one of them, the students, at least in the beginning, turned on camera and microphone. It was almost like a domino effect; when one student turned on her camera, other students followed. In the other group, few or none turned the camera on, and I spent almost the entire seminar talking to "black boxes" on the screen, just showing their usernames. At times, the students chose only to use the chatting devise for raising questions, making points, and commenting. The same herd mentality could be observed in the breakout groups within the same seminar group. I switched between the virtual breakout rooms, just like I would circulate between the smaller discussion groups in the classroom. In some online breakout rooms, all students would participate eagerly in the discussion with both camera and microphone switched on. Some of them, albeit very rarely, combined the discussion of the syllabus with small talk, familiar in the classroom seminars. In some groups, on the other hand, none had turned on neither the camera nor the microphone, communicating only on the chatting device. Some students did not want to participate in break-out rooms at all. When I told them that I was going to divide them into smaller groups, some students would simply leave the online seminar altogether without leaving any reasons as to why. Some seminars even had to end earlier than planned because many had left the seminar, and because the remaining group had nothing more to discuss.

In general, the dropout rate during the online seminars was quite high. At the beginning of the semester, about thirty students would attend each of the online seminars, of which as much as 1/3 would leave either before or after they had been divided into groups. I have never experienced so many leaving a classroom seminar on campus. If students had to leave, they would always notify me at the beginning of the seminar that they had to leave during class. The number of students attending the seminar groups rapidly decreased during the semester. In previous semesters, when all seminars were held in the classroom, I had also experienced a midterm dip in the attendances. Of a group of thirty students, altogether five to ten would gradually drop out. Some would return as exam dates drew closer. During the semester with online seminars only, as much as 2/3 dropped out from some of the groups. As a result, we merged the groups with low attendance.

The lack of dialogue in the online seminars made my role as a moderator and inspirator rather difficult. How should I maintain the main function of my role, facilitating debate between the students? With the cameras and microphones switched off, I would not even know if the students were present in front of their screens or were busy with other tasks. When I asked for responses, very few did so, even on the chat. After some of the more unsuccessful seminars, I discussed the problems with some of the students. They said that it was awkward just being one of few having their camera switched on or being an eager discussant. This is understandable; I find that uncomfortable myself. It is difficult to stand out, and lack of response from the others on an initiative makes it even worse. Talking to no faces, just to the "black boxes" on the screen, made me uncertain about my role as learning assistant. With no feedback from facial expressions or body language, how would I know if they had understood the questions for debate? I also felt exposed: Are flatmates of the seminar participants watching me as well? Do they record or take pictures of me without my consent?

As attendance dropped later in the semester, the remaining students began switching on their cameras and microphones and engaged stronger in the debates. This was not a matter of scale only. I knew several of the students from seminars I held the previous semester, and my impression is that those who followed the online seminars for the entire semester, were also the most dedicated participants in the on-campus classroom seminars in the previous semester. How can we reach out to those who did not study so hard, and would benefit more from participating in the seminars?

Feedback from students in the previous semester suggests that an important reason for attending the seminars was to clarify issues they had not grasped in lectures or the readings. I felt at times that my task in the seminar was to help decomposing the lectures into single concepts and topics, so that it would be easier for the students to discuss the topics and concepts in the reading list step by step, and this was my prime concern with making a set of questions before each seminar. However, the students were very differently prepared for the seminars. The most hard-working students had an almost encyclopaedic knowledge of the reading list and were eager helpers to those who were ill prepared or had difficulties grasping the literature and lectures, in defining concepts, and applying them to empirical examples. This transfer of knowledge between the students almost ceased when the seminars went online, not only because the dialogue was poor, but also because almost all the weaker students dropped out from the online seminars.

Comparable to the on-campus classroom seminars before the lockdown, some of the participants wanted to discuss with me and learn my opinion on different aspects of being a student. They asked if we could discuss after the other participants had left the meeting. A recurrent topic was how to cope with just online teaching and learning, fearing that they would not be able to pass the exams. Also, hard-working students in break-out groups who did not function well wanted to discuss after the seminars had ended. They wanted to air their dissatisfaction with fellow students who were ill prepared, made no contributions to the debates, or just dropped out without any excuse. They taught it unfair that the co-students became dependant on them to understand the syllabus while gaining nothing in return. In hindsight, I think I may have added to their frustrations because, failing to persuade the participants to switch on cameras and microphones in order to make the debates more dynamic, I began dividing the groups for the break-out rooms in such a way that I placed one hard-working student among students who did not engage much in the debates, hoping that the engaged students would spur some life into the debates. They served, somehow unknowingly, as my aides in the seminars to break open a space for dialogue. I wish I would have found better ways to solve the problem without putting more stress on them. I wonder if dividing the students into more permanent discussion groups would have been more productive for the dialogue between the students, and more beneficial to the most dedicated among them. Perhaps in a more permanent breakout group they would have had a better chance and more time to learn to know each other and develop their own debating style, either online face-to-face or on the chat.

Also in hindsight, I think I would have introduced the online seminars differently. Rather than expressing my expectations and the university's recommendation to keep cameras and microphones switched on, I would have given the students time and the task to formulate the ground rules for the online seminars themselves. Perhaps, by discussing pros and cons of keeping cameras and microphones switched on, they would have reached the same conclusion as I, and complied with the recommendation from the university. In conclusion, the online seminar set aside my expectations and skills as teaching assistant, learned through on-campus classroom seminars. The way the participants responded to and behaved in the online seminar, lack of common politeness of greeting when they entered and left, keeping complete silent, and frequently dropping out, was unexpected and I felt that the teaching techniques I had acquired were not very useful. Adopting the classroom seminar to an online setting is difficult, and I strongly advice the learning assistant in online seminars to engage the students in the very first seminar how they should create an online learning space beneficial for themselves and for each other.

The Diversity of the Online Classroom and the Problem of Dialogue

The black screens and audial muting that hampered the online debate seminars were not only a result of lack of commitment and absence of social regulating norms of online teaching and learning behaviour. For the students, the online classroom is where they are at the moment lectures and seminars are conducted live online. Some of the students related that they had their cameras switched off because the only space they could study were either their bedroom, which was very private, or the common room, which was occupied with flat mates that they would not expose on the seminars. Some reported that they at home were usually dressed very casual and did not prepare their appearances as they would have going to campus. They would not look appropriate on screen in their casual home attire. Ohers related that the Wi-Fi system in their student home could not cater for all flatmates who also studied online from home, and if they switched on the camera, they would simply become offline. For the same reason, some studied online from cafés downtown, which was not locked down, and where customers could use the Wi-Fi system. However, they could not switch on camera because of the other guests could be seen. In addition, they felt awkward because they were not very popular with café owners, occupying for a long time one of the very few tables that could be served. Where they entitled to that, "buying only one cup of coffee"?

Conclusion

The sudden switch to emergency distant teaching was a mixed blessing. Tutors and students expressed dissatisfaction with co-students' lack of engagement and turned-off cameras in the debate seminars. The lecturer expressed dissatisfaction with lack of dynamic interlocution in online teaching, lecturing for an imagined audience in an empty auditorium. The single most critical factor was that the teachers could not meet the basic condition for dialogical teaching and learning, namely, to engage students in a dialogue. Students were positive to the online lectures, however; not because of live streaming but because they were recorded and made available on the course's LMS for the entire semester. The students could rewind and review the lectures and gave them freedom as to when to attend a lecture, and to watch the lecture at their own phase.

Provided that university teachers' poor experiences with emergency distant teaching during the Covid19 pandemic campus lockdown will not backlash against the development and experiments with online teaching tools and LMS, we can anticipate a future in which blended learning becomes the norm. On that basis, we suggest the following:

1) *Online teaching and learning platforms should be treated as a dialogic space-time in its own right*. We should not confuse the dialogical space-time of the virtual classroom with the dialogical space-time of the auditoriums and seminar rooms which is characterised by short time physical face-to-face interaction and specific others. As Gregory Bateson (1958) pointed out, there is no evolution in medias of communication; a new medium does not replace another but adds to it. A theatre play, say for example Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, exists on stage, as text in a book, as a radio play, as a cartoon, and as a film – all with their own aesthetics and qualities of communication with an audience. The dialogical space-time of the virtual classroom cannot be modelled on the ideas of the physical classroom but should be developed on its own terms, and albeit overlapping, be regarded as a third dialogical space complementary to the solitary, written text-based space of the library reading rooms and the collective, speech-based space of the auditorium and seminar rooms. LMS often function as reference work such as video tutorials and supervision through chatting channels. A 'generalised other' may thus be more suited for online dialogical teaching than the 'specific other' of the campus auditorium and seminar rooms. To be sure, the success of VCS-seminars is also a matter of scale, and smaller online face-to-face colloquiums with regular attendance should also be a part of the LMS.

2) *Bridge the secondary digital divide between university management, administrative staff, and teaching staff* in order to bring more financial and pedagogical resources into the development of LMS and blended learning. Teaching staff development programs should be more advanced than just tips about game programs, and university leaders must invest more systematically in the development.

3) *Social contract*. New students should be better informed at the beginning of their studies about the educational merits of academic exchange and the different dialogical space-times; about what is expected of them, and about the codes of conduct that make them work, including such minute details as switching on their cameras and microphones while debating with others, online.

Acknowledgments

The article is based on a presentation at the webinar of the Teaching Anthropology Network of European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA), entitled *Teaching and Learning Anthropology during the Pandemic. Dilemmas, Challenges and Opportunities*, 17 March 2021. We would like to thank the participants of the work group "Digital Classroom 2" and the anonymous reviewers for providing insightful and critical commentary. Thanks also to Maria Tårland for providing course statistics.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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