

Anna Somfai

iPros and iCons: Minds Meeting Online

The hitherto mostly empty concept of digital humanities has attained real dimensions and become lived reality when in early 2020 the surfacing of a virus resulted in global reactions. With moving online, teaching and learning have encountered new challenges and new rewards.

While we lose proximity in one sense, we gain it in another. Sitting in the comfort of a home, a safe environment, can bring for some a kind of freedom they can never experience while in the physical closeness of others in a nondescript classroom. The absence of a physical dimension resulting from the use of two-dimensional computer screens need not be matched by an absence of dimensions in virtual space. In our adjustment to virtual classrooms, we can allow ourselves to inhabit them through our full intellectual and emotional presence.

Switching university teaching online overnight was a moment of confusion, well-prepared for in some places, less so in others. My personal experience was of a positive kind, sensing in the situation not limitations but on the contrary, possibilities.

My thoughts concerning the nature of online teaching are based on two types of teaching setup, both of them real-time and fully interactive. Firstly, I have taught two, small-group, seminar-type courses which carried over from physical classrooms after universities had switched to online teaching. Secondly, I organised and taught at a one-week international summer school which I had

designed specifically for online environment after having seen the worldwide cancellation of real space summer schools.

The skill-based seminar I teach regularly carried on online being a frame of teaching with students practicing techniques and asking questions and with Zoom technology, such as screen share and whiteboard, serving their purpose efficiently. The text reading seminar, with a more personal nature and more shared inner space in the first place, assumed extra dimensions in virtual space. It has unexpectedly turned into a months-long virtual space of discussion, thought, and self-examination, going well beyond the end of semester and with weekly meetings with the small group of students. With all of us sitting in our respective rooms, real and virtual space merged into an extra dimension. On a fundamental, non-spatial level, we all felt at home and ready through analysing texts to explore, and share with one another, an extra dimension of a deeper and more personal kind.

The summer school, fundamentally skill-based and designed directly for online teaching, proved that faculty and students, mostly completely unknown to each other and meeting in virtual space for the first time, could interact, create an atmosphere of sharing, and make the course a coherent and fruitful academic experience. A consultation session I set up for a small group within the school on medieval philosophical manuscripts brought in addition the kind of intellectual experience, the meeting of minds, that one cherishes in the capacity of a professor as much as in that of a student. The summer school turned out to be a success and for me an important experience.

All three online teaching scenes briefly touched upon above share two essential characteristics. Firstly, they all carried on being the kind of experiences they are when they happen in real space. Secondly, the real-time, fully interactive nature ensured proper teaching and learning environment and exchange of ideas, an element that would have been completely missing with the traditional, pre-recorded lectures practiced in the past in distant learning. The summer school showed no sign of disadvantage for teaching or learning resulting from meeting for the first time in virtual and not in real space.

The text-based seminar and the philosophical consultation group of the summer school had all the depth, inspiration and meeting of minds one can hope for in a real space situation.

The crux of the issue to my mind is whether or not presence of an intellectual and emotional nature can be felt in virtual space. The sheer usefulness of being able to teach specialised courses to students who cannot access instruction locally nor travel for them pertains to the very essence of the spirit of teaching. But for me the potential in bringing likeminded people from all over the world together in a virtual room, and do so with the added advantage of them being in the space they call their own, is immense. For any subject in the least special and worth exploring, one never has more than a few students present at any university. To enable the meeting of minds from around the world in a space where those minds can rely on their most intimate depth is of the greatest value.