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Digitizing Academia

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Seismo

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Introduction

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It has become obvious nowadays that digital technologies penetrate every aspect of social life in Switzerland, from work, leisure and consumption, to communication, social relations, governance and political participation (Fussey and Roth 2020). Digitalization has also impacted on the academic world regarding teaching, research and conferences, which is a central theme of this issue of the Bulletin of the Swiss Sociological Association. The aim is to discuss the digital turn in how it affects "doing sociology" continuing the self-reflexivity of the discipline started in former issues of the Bulletin[1]. After introducing what is meant by "digital" and its topical relevance as an object of study in sociology, we will question how sociologists themselves are using social and other digital media as part of their work, in teaching and research practices, as well as in conference organization and participation. What new (if any) theories, methodologies, and pedagogies have been brought about by digitalization?

As highlighted by a recent special issue on the topic by the *British Journal Sociology*, the rapidity of technological innovation makes it difficult to grasp an exhaustive definition of the digital. Components of the digital are more easily identifiable, including hardware, software and practices such as "Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), computer mediated communication (CMC), the internet and the web, social media, Big Data, artificial intelligence (AI), computational decision-making and, increasingly, nanotechnologies" (Fussey and Roth 2020: 660).

These technologies have given rise to hopes on the democratization of knowledge and political mobilization, but just as many fears regarding the perpetuation of inequalities and oppressive consequences such as the digital divide, class, racial and gender discrimination through biased algorithms, cyber harassment and surveillance related to datafication, or fake news (Halford and Savage 2010; Roth and Luczak-Roesch 2020; Scheerder et al. 2017).

The "digital" became an area of research in sociology around 30 years ago, as the emergence of the World Wide Web (1989), invented by Tim Berners-Lee and towards transforming the small network of computers used primarily for military and research purposes into the global network it is today – used for all forms of communication (Bloomfield 1989). Since then, digital sociology has focused on the constraining and enabling effects of technologies (named "affordances" by Gibson 1977; Hutchby 2001) in various social spheres and how they shape and are shaped by social relations and structures. The resulting power relations and inequalities – how they are developed, reproduced or exacerbated in this context – is also a central theme (DiMaggio et al., 2001). Digital society is characterized by Castells by the notion of superconnectivity *(network society)*, the amount of information *(information age)*, speed and technologies, whereby everyday lives become more and more enmeshed with technologies. The role of technologies is ambivalent: whilst on the one hand these technologies ease daily life and can save time, they can also put pressure on efficiency and hyper-connectivity. In other words, these digital

1 See Bulletin 150 on Methods training and formation in sociology (https://www.sgs-sss.ch/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/bu-150-web.pdf) and Bulletin 155 on Professional career paths and the labor market for sociologists (https://www.sgs-sss.ch/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/SGS-Bulletin-155.pdf).

technologies "are becoming a constitutive part of what makes us human" (Miller and Horst 2012: 4). They have also become a constitutive part of academia.

In most Swiss Higher Education institutions, theories and methods related to digitalization are part of the curricula in sociology (at Bachelor's, Master's and Doctoral levels), covering such diverse questions as, for instance, "How can being networked be grasped analytically? What opportunities and challenges are offered, for example, by the traces of our digital presence that are generated in large quantities every day?"[2]; "How can we apply and reflect upon computer-assisted and experimental processes in the humanities and social sciences?"[3]; "What are the cultural, social and political issues raised by the characteristics of digital tools?"[4]; "What are the best digital practices needed for publication and data management plans?"[5]. Offers of training range from critical analysis of the changes brought by digitalization to skills in dealing with these changes or needs in teaching and research.

Digitalization has also become an important topic in sociological research in Switzerland, as illustrated by the development of research laboratories on the issue in different higher education institutions, as well as the recent Swiss National Fund's research 77 entitled "Digital Transformation"[6] which aims to trigger research on the changes, risks and opportunities brought about by digitalization in the fields of education, economy and governance, ethics and trustworthiness. Some of the results of the projects on education will certainly be published in the next special issue on Digital Academia in the Swiss Journal of Sociology (expected in 2023)[7].

Finally, our community also experienced digitalization through the last annual Conference of the Swiss Sociological Association (Social Injustice in Times of Uncertainty, Geneva, June 2021), including the opportunities and challenges that organizing and attending an online conference entails. The attendance broke all records with 480 registered participants, based in 28 different countries; with 92 sessions organized in parallel. Whilst we were able to participate in many sessions, "jumping" more easily from one to the other, we also experienced the limited possibilities offered for informal discussions. For more junior scholars, the aim of conferences as an opportunity for networking was attenuated.

To conclude, the teaching and research agenda in Swiss sociology demonstrates the growing importance of sociological analysis on the changes produced by digitalization, the potential sparked by technologies in various social spheres, and how these technologies shape and are shaped by our social relations and structures. The different contributions of this bulletin provide some answers to these questions, focusing on digital teaching and digital research.

The Contributions

In her contribution, Sophie Mützel (University of Lucerne) discusses the many changes provoked by digital research in sociology, which have become even more salient during the pandemic. She highlights the possibilities generated by digitalization

2 https://portal.unilu.ch/details?code=HS211309

3 https://dhlab.philhist.unibas.ch/en/; see also https://digitalskills.unibas.ch/en/

4 https://www.unil.ch/formations/en/home/menuinst/masters/humanites-numeriques.html

5 https://www.unige.ch/lettres/humanites-numeriques/fr/cours-et-seminaires/certificat-de-specialisation/

6 https://www.nfp77.ch/en/the-nrp/portrait/

7 http://szs.sgs-sss.ch/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Call_SJS_49-3_E.pdf

for both qualitative and quantitative research. She mentions first how digitalization allows us to communicate more easily across different geographical regions or, in other words, to "zoom around the globe". Second, digitalization provides more and different types of data: offline activities" such as surveillance camera footage allow "remote ethnography", whilst large scale data sets also become opportunities for empirical data analysis. Third, according to her, digitalization pushes us to reflect on old ethical issues in doing research, such as the effects that research(ers) has(have) on their participants, but also new ones related to the use of digital computing and platforms. She discusses the development of new methodological toolkits in order to frame ethical slippages. This confirms the importance to continue to develop such reflection into curricula.

The contribution by Fabienne Malbois (University of Lausanne and HETSL/School of Social Work Lausanne) also discusses digital research, but with a focus on ethnographic research. Her paper shows the plurality of digital ethnography: the plurality of modes of data collection (by being remotely present, physically present, virtually present), the plurality of fieldwork and writing styles, as well as the singularity of different modes of doing digital ethnography. Finally, she argues that studying digital society requires embracing digital methods: "If the ethnographer seeks to say something about how the organization of everyday life is (un)done by the Internet, s/he must consider digital communication as an expression of a life-world".

The third contribution, by Tobias Röhl, Franziska Zellweger, Gabriel Flepp and Santina Battaglia (Pädagogische Hochschule Zürich) examines the experiences of digital teaching of students at the Zurich University of Teacher Education. The authors explore the teaching in the context of an emergency during the pandemic[8], which involved remote teaching due to distancing measures. They question how the participants assess their learning experience and what preferences they express regarding the value of on-site or online formats for the future. The results of their survey indicate that the traditional mode of continuing education needs to be fundamentally rethought as a consequence of the emergency remote-learning experience. A mix of online and on-site learning is widely preferred by the participants in the survey. The results also show that the successful use of digital media in continuing education depends as much on the availability of tools as on the skills in using them, which pleads for support to be offered to both teachers and students in order to receive materials and improve their digital skills.

Finally, the contribution by Jimmy Clerc, Mathilde Bourrier, Leah Kimber and Cornelia Hummel (University of Geneva) reflects on the experiences of teaching during the pandemic at the Department of Sociology of the University of Geneva and the pedagogical innovations which sociology teachers were pushed to develop during this period. These range from using chat in e-sessions and involving students to moderate exchanges; organizing more virtual sessions with fewer students to allow discussion; putting in place flipped classes which focus on discussing what students have prepared at home; and setting up virtual sessions for informal exchanges on the lecture. According to them, the forced shift to distance learning has pushed teachers to develop even more interactive and reflective forms of teaching.

8 See also Bulletin 157 on the COVID-19 and inequalities in student lifestyles. https://www.sgs-sss.ch/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/SGS-Bulletin-157.pdf

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Doing Digital Research

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The current pandemic has catapulted us into working via digital tools. Even those of us sociologists, who try to stay away from computer and smartphone screens as much as possible, could not avoid the digital. Via a variety of platforms (zoom, webex, etc.) we learned how to be connected to our research teams, to our students, and to our colleagues, while keeping physical distances. We experienced how collaborative tools can facilitate communication across computer systems. We literally zoomed around the globe more so than ever before and could join meetings with researchers from e. g. Sydney, Tokyo, New York, Johannesburg, and Lucerne while staying put at our work-from-home set-up. We redesigned our courses to entice students to participate from their homes and to learn as best as possible.

Furthermore, for us sociologists, the time of the pandemic, in which face-to-face interactions were limited, when traveling was restricted, when fieldwork sites and archives were closed and the observation of interactions and interviews were impossible, also brought into sharp focus how to do sociological research. The pandemic has served as an accelerator to (re)consider ethical questions, methods for direct observations, the role of the digital in everyday social life, the construction, analysis, and interpretation of digital and digitized data for sociological analyses. The digital is certainly here to stay and where much of current sociality, however supportive, friendly, hostile, or polarized, is taking place. Doing research on and/or with the digital thus sits at the current core of the discipline of sociology.

The pandemic starkly reminded us to consider ethical questions when conducting research. For example, the unequal distribution of vaccines across the globe means a de facto moratorium on in-person field observation – long the iconic method of ethnography, which relies on on-the-ground, in-person encounters. This serves as a strong reminder for us that the work we do as sociologists affects the groups we aim to understand: in a very literal sense, we may infect those who we are studying and thus cause harm (Fine and Abramson, 2020).

Second, the time of the pandemic made us consider alternative methods for direct observations, such as phone or online in-depth interviews, using online documents or groups on networking platforms. Lupton (2021) has gathered a crowdsourced list of a wide variety of possible methods and tools. What some have called remote ethnography (Postill, 2017; Silverman, 2020) uses digital tools to gather data on people's offline activities: smartphone apps, digital diaries, short surveys, photos, chat messages, messaging groups, or surveillance camera footage. Indeed, we can expect an even further increase in the use of multiple methods when collecting and analyzing data (Lamont and Swidler, 2014). This not only holds for qualitative research, but also for large scale digitized or digital data corpora, which require both qualitative knowledge and quantitative modeling for further insights (e. g. Mützel, forthcoming; Nelson, 2020, 2021).

Third, the time of the pandemic brought into focus the role of the digital in everyday activities for many of our research participants. No longer can online and offline be separately delineated. Rather online and offline are different fluid spaces people move through on a daily basis; indeed, most of us are in both spaces for most of our waking hours. Organizational research is particularly attuned to the challenges of taking both digital and offline

interactions into account, when digital work is so much less visible to the observant eyes of researchers (e. g. Akemu and Abdelnour, 2020). Moreover, work-from-home arrangements continue to limit observable face-to-face interactions in particular in office spaces. In turn, scholars will need to consider these new work configurations in future research (e. g. Aroles et al., 2019).

Fourth, during the time of the pandemic, many of us kept most of our social relationships alive using digital media. Of course, for the past decades researchers have studied the digital world, conducting, for example, digital ethnographies of online/virtual/cyber communities (e. g. Boellstorff, 2015; Garcia et al., 2009; Glatt, 2021; Hallett and Barber, 2014; Hine, 2015; Paccagnella, 1997; Pink et al., 2016). Others have studied those who work on building those communities (e. g. Knox and Nafus, 2018; Massa, 2017). If indeed we shift our focus to digital interactions as a primary source of data, we need to consider *how* these digital data are construed. Online activities take place on algorithmically mediated platforms, think about Facebook, Instagram, or Tiktok, which shape what people see, do, and say in crucial ways. This, in turn, means that we need to gain an understanding of how online interactions are computationally shaped. Algorithmic ethnography (Christin, 2020) entails considering data tracking and algorithmic sorting. When studying interaction on platforms (e. g. Gillespie, 2010), researchers need to take into account each platform's tracking strategies, monetization system and business models of the platform. Digital platforms are not neutral meeting spaces. Platforms optimize for users online engagement and in a give-to-get-relationship deliver targeted advertising (e. g. Fourcade and Kluttz, 2020). Researchers should also pay attention to the details of algorithmic sorting – how do platform users understand what they see? People have "algorithmic imaginaries" (e. g. Bucher, 2018), which together with metrics, such as platforms' rankings, hearts, and likes, have performative effects. User act accordingly.

Of course, taking the entangled construction of data, algorithms, and modeling decisions in constant reiteration and adjustment into account holds for working with digital trace data at small up to very large scale. While advantages of digital trace data collected from social networking platform are their large size, the fact that they can always be collected, and that they are observed and, in this sense, non-reactive, they also have several problematic properties. They are typically "incomplete, inaccessible, non-representative, drifting, algorithmically confounded, dirty, and sensitive" (Salganik, 2017: 24). Particularly sociologists have chosen different avenues to overcome these challenges imbued in data production. Some have started to work with the richness and broadness of digitized archival sources, which arguably are less interactive than platform data. Others have begun to develop apps or use experiments to obtain data, yet again others work with particular datasets that are less algorithmically confounded, e. g. Slack data of remotely working organizational teams (e. g. Lix et al., 2020).

Certainly, the combination of available large-scale digitized corpora with novel natural language processing and machine learning tools have elevated computational text analysis as well as large scale network analyses in empirical studies of the social world (e. g. Edelmann et al., 2020). Due to computational analyses of vast amounts of digitized textual data, sociologists have gained insights into numerous social phenomena, events, situations, and relations (e. g. DiMaggio et al., 2013; Fligstein et al., 2017; Mützel, 2015; Rule et al., 2015). User-friendly handbooks (e. g. Ignatow and Mihalcea, 2016, 2017) and a range of international summer

schools (e.g. The Summer Institutes in Computational Social Science with global satellites) help interested sociologists to navigate this new field of methods. In Switzerland, the University of Lucerne offers an interdisciplinary MA in Computational Social Science, a focus on Media and Networks in its MA in Social and Communication Sciences, and in its BA programs modules on digital skills. It is apparent that the ability to collect, curate, process, analyze, visualize, and interpret: work – with small or large, old or new types of digital data, including texts, sounds, and images, is an invaluable asset for successful applicants in academic and professional job markets. This holds in particular for non-technical, social science subjects, whose graduates may serve as translators between those with the technical expertise and those with the domain knowledge. In sum, this means that as a discipline we need to enlarge our methodological toolkits to include methods of digital and digitized data collection, curation, analysis, visualization, and analysis for pertinent sociological work.

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Doing Digital Ethnography. Some Reflections on What it Means to Study Society Through the Internet

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Given that the Covid-19 pandemic made it difficult, if not impossible, for sociology researchers to be present on their field sites, many of them rapidly pivoted to practising some form of digital ethnography.[1] This approach, which today includes a rich and varied body of contributions, has developed as a way of understanding the increasing pervasiveness of the Internet within the everyday and the ways in which digital media technologies relate to each other and are changing how we live, work, study and so on. If the methodological and analytical value of this approach is well established – Christine Hine's *Virtual Ethnography*, first published in 2000, has for many paved the way for it, and Boellstorff's landmark work on Second Life dates from 2008 –, digital ethnography nevertheless questions fundamental aspects of ethnographic practice.

On the basis of several studies carried out before or during the pandemic, I will attempt to shed light on three of the most challenging aspects, which relate to the questions of (i) the conduct of fieldwork and data collection, (ii) the delimitation of the field site, and (iii) ethnographic writing. By anchoring these reflections in the analysis of concrete and emblematic examples, the aim of this paper is to emphasize the singularity of each experience of digital ethnography, its orientation being indebted not only to the social phenomenon under study, but also to the various ways in which the constraining and enabling material features of digital media technologies (i. e. their affordances) shape the semiotic, interactional, spatio-temporal and moral orders of social relations. It is also important to highlight that different ways of being in the field are possible (Pink et al. 2016), yet without relinquishing the core principles at the heart of ethnography. Note that ethnography is approached here in a classic way. As a research perspective that pays attention to the various forms of the intrinsic organization of social relations and to the regularities and patterns of social action (Atkinson 2015), it is recognized to be a distinctive way of understanding society *in situ*.[2]

The Conduct of Fieldwork and Data Collection

In ordinary fieldwork, the ability of researchers to interact with respondents, to participate in major or minor mode in their life-worlds for observation and description purposes, and experience them through bodily immersion, are key elements of data collection. However, it would scarcely be appropriate to reduce the ethnographer's engagement with the field to a physical presence within a geographically bounded space, as if "being there" necessarily implies face-to-face communication (Atkinson 2015; Hine 2015). The rationale is not

1 This work was supported by the SNF [grant n°196185].

2 According to P. Atkinson, this view of ethnography implies endorsing a set of key ideas – everyday life is skilful, physical, symbolic, enacted locally and performed in specific locations over time – that are shared by a series of analytic traditions, ranging from symbolic interactionism, dramaturgy, social phenomenology, ethnomethodology, structuralist anthropology and interpretative anthropology, through discourse and conversation analysis, narrative analysis and analysis of material culture. With this in mind, it becomes clear why digital ethnography cannot be equated with the analysis, whether sociological or anthropological, of digital media uses.

that digital environments, that are inescapable components of contemporary society, would otherwise be unknowable by ethnographic methods. In fact, there are various embodied ways of being in the world and being present to one another – talking at a distance without seeing one another is, for instance, the type of relation historically instantiated by the telephone –, and mediated interactions are forms of interaction amongst others (Hutchby 2001). This is why E. Goffman was able to conclude his canonical study on radio talk (in *Forms of Talk*) by stressing that the differences between ordinary talk (or in-person communication, in which all participants can assume both the speaking and the hearing roles) and radio talk (or audio-only communication, in which the audience cannot assume the speaking role), are "a consequence of the presence in radio talk of absent addressees" (Goffman 1981: 321).

Goffman's ethnography of communication, which is not insensitive to bodily gestures, signs, vocalizations and movements produced by individuals, is conditioned by the fact of considering both spoken and written words as activities through which participants in a social situation establish exchanges. The sociological perspective on language involved in favouring naturalistic observation is particularly heuristic when it comes to conducting digital ethnography, insofar as interactions mediated by a screen are truly semiotic materials. That being said, further exploring the path opened up by E. Goffman does not mean adopting a single research strategy. Indeed, at least three different modes of engagement with the field can be distinguished.[3]

First, the ethnographer can be *present remotely,* as I was in autumn 2020 when I conducted several observations of university classes delivered via online platforms. This position on the research field is often encountered with digital technologies for which the places where the observed participants are currently (and physically) located matter in the moment-to-moment constitution, through communication activities, of a shared "interactional territory" (de Fornel 1994). In the case of video conferencing technology, this feature is noticeable by the fact that the interactional territory configured by the connection of several screens is vulnerable to external disturbance (noise from the street, the flat or the university corridor, cats wanting to play with their owners, etc.), and implies or allows the delimitation and preservation of a private territory within the publicly available one. Second, it is possible to be *physically present* within a setting such as a Client Contact Centre for instance (Malbois, 2019a), and interact side-by-side with research participants who are themselves working on a screen. Third, the researcher can be said to be *virtually present,* to the extent that s/he is located within a virtual world, as in Boellstorff's study, or within the digital public sphere, as I was when I followed the circulation and constitution of a public transgender figure, namely that of Chelsea (Bradley) Manning (Malbois, 2019b). In this case, it should be noted, the interactional territory is altogether located in a virtual place that is to be understood as a "third place" (Pink et al. 2016) that is neither the present location of the ethnographer nor that of the observed participants.

Let's take a closer look at the last two modes of engagement that I have just identified; due to lack of space, I will not be able to deal with the first.[4] Contrary to what one might think at first sight, the

3 My typology is loosely based on the one proposed by Pink et al. (2016).

4 However, this case study is the subject of an article in preparation for the journal Questions de communication.

difference between them is not immeasurable and they both entail a strong notion of ethnographic participation, which relies on the human capacity "to perceive the world […] from the perspectives of others" (Atkinson 2015: 39).

Being Physically Present

A Customer Contact Centre, such as the one in which I conducted fieldwork, is a workplace whose activities are organized according to a service relationship. Nowadays, the service relationship that agents establish with the company's clients, the inhabitants of a Swiss town, is wholly supported by computers. Thus, agents handle incoming and outgoing customer calls through Customer Relationship Management (CRM) tools. Incoming calls are automatically distributed, agents being likely to receive another call as soon as they become available. A conversation should not last more than 5 minutes and agents have 3 additional minutes after the call to complete the client record. In addition, the daily and monthly performance of agents, as measured by various statistics, is displayed on a screen, as well as the number of clients waiting to be dealt with.

Of course, the study of such forms of work organization requires the physical presence of the ethnographer in the setting. More precisely, sitting next to agents in an open plan office, in order to listen to their calls directly, as do the managers who supervise them, makes it possible to gain "thickness". In this case, listening to a series of incoming calls[5] allowed me to identify, probably because of my good command of conversation analysis, the pattern that structures this type of conversation, as well as the skills that agents must master in order to meet both time targets and client needs. It also allowed me to observe the ways agents interact with their screen while working, in order to navigate databases or apps, as well as the ordinary exchanges during and after calls (agents asking colleagues for advice, for example).

5 For a number of reasons, I was not provided with the recordings of the calls.

Being Virtually Present

Manning was a gay male US Army soldier when he disclosed confidential state data to WikiLeaks. Subsequently arrested by the Pentagon at the end of May 2010 and then incarcerated, he quickly started to turn into a figure being performed in public statements in leading newspapers. On 22 August 2013, after being sentenced to 35 years' imprisonment, he carried out a gender transition on a TV programme (via a press release read by a journalist who was interviewing his lawyer), asking everyone to identify him as a woman called Chelsea. From that time, her appearances within the digital public sphere (on Wikipedia, Twitter, websites, blogs, etc.) multiplied, making it even more difficult to track them in order to collect and gather the performances contributing to the constitution of her public identity. The research strategy I adopted was to follow his/her proper name, inasmuch as the proper name, according to V. Descombes (2016), makes it possible to re-identify an individual who has been named. This led me to deploy a twofold approach. To begin with, I constructed the trajectory of Manning's significant public appearances from 7 June 2010 to 17 May 2017. This first step, of a methodological nature, operated a substantial reduction. Indeed, a trajectory is equivalent to a succession of instants and only represents the chronological order of events over a period of time. As such, the trajectory loses the process of temporalization within lived time that organizes the becoming of a person. Yet, the aim of my ethnography was to analyse a transition, within the digital

public sphere, from manhood (Bradley Manning) to womanhood (Chelsea Manning). What I did then was to focus on the selected appearances, in order to grasp how Manning's gender transition occurs in a set of interactive situations (an interview on a TV programme, discussion pages on Wikipedia, Facebook posts, etc.), all characterized by specific communication activities between speakers (or writers) and viewers (or hearers/readers). The objective of this second step was to embrace, on the one hand, the small-scale timing structure that organizes each of Manning's appearances as a singular identity performance, and, on the other, the large-scale timing structure that, by piecing together these located performances, produces a narrative identity – that of Chelsea (Bradley) Manning – for which the TV gender transition on the 22 August 2013 was the turning point.

The researcher, in this type of analysis of communication, holds the position of an analytical spectator. The inquiry is no less ethnographic, in that it describes and interprets, on the basis of the sharing of a common world, the perspective of participants that, within the digital public sphere, have the status of those who read, listen to, watch and write for (as do Wikipedia contributors) the media.

The Delimitation of the Field Site

Manning's circulation within the digital public sphere required the implementation of a multi-sited ethnography, each performance taking place in one discrete online setting. But in addition to being a mobile, that is a non-spatially located figure, Manning was mutable, as her gender transition indicates. This is why this case study was highly challenging when it came to the delimitation of the field site. However, this matter is always problematic. If a field can have a single-site location (an elderly care home, for example), the field site is never, except in romanticized representations, either a "self-contained" or a "bounded entity" (Atkinson 2015). It is always an "artful construction" (Hine 2015) depending on the ethnographer's engagement with the field. This construction is likely to be less perilous when field sites are physically grounded, inasmuch as the ethnographer can count on the pre-organized dimension of the social world. In contrast, online settings require sustained attention, due to the polycentric nature of digital environments and the properties of online semiotic material.[6] Indeed, online semiotic material circulating in the digital public sphere is characterized by its remanence (it is, in most cases, automatically recorded and archived) and scalability (it is bloated and spread on a massive scale). Hence, it is "quickly and easily mobilised, recontextualised and resemiotised", giving rise to "complex and unpredictable […] uptake" (Varis 2016). In this regard, well-founded concepts are essential to defining the boundaries of digital field sites. In my case, it was the concept of identity that played this role. I tackled Manning's identity in both the identical sense (the idea that *"there is only a single self-same thing* where one might have thought there to be two") and the identitarian sense (the idea that "there is a thing that has the virtue of being itself even though it might well have no longer been or not yet become itself"), as coined by Descombes (2016: 5). Furthermore, I considered the performances that were expressed in the first person (or self-categorisations, as when Bradley Manning claimed: "I am a woman and my name is Chelsea) and in the third person (or hetero-categorisations,

6 The digital databases that are fed and used by the agents of the Customer Contact Centre raise other questions, which it would be interesting to address at greater length. Anyone interested in exploring them further can consult Denis (2018).

as when the contributors to the Wikipedia French-language platform wrote: "Despite his recent public statements, Manning still has a male body, so we will continue to refer to him as a man").

Ethnographic Writing

If blogs provide data and spaces for observation, they are also media in which the inquiry can be shaped and made public. This way of doing digital ethnography was undertaken by a collective of social sciences scholars who investigated the social consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic through a participatory research blog (https://covies20.com/). In addition to enabling the study of the event as it was happening, the blog was particularly suited to conducting research at a distance, at a time when we were all asked to stay at home to prevent the spread of the virus. But the blog was not only intended to gather data, including contributions from students or any other stakeholders; it was also meant to offer preliminary analyses. From April 2020 to June 2021, this project, for which I was a co-editor, generated the production and publication of 137 blog posts. On the basis of this experience, I will now outline some of the shifts in ethnographic writing that blogging is likely to bring.

Unsurprisingly, a blog is very convenient for the use of ethnographic materials other than traditional field notes, such as digital pictures and videos. For my part, I took photographs of the socio-sanitary devices *(dispositifs)* that had been set up in front of or inside supermarkets in order to regulate behaviours. Published as a series, these photos were an excellent way of proposing a dense and detailed account of the rapid and ongoing transformation of a usually remarkably stable part of our material environment. Afterwards, I turned to this material as a visual memory when writing up field notes on the meanderings of shoppers in supermarkets,[7] and one of these photos was reused to illustrate an analytical post written by a student. This shows that blogs promote data-sharing between researchers, as well as forging connections between academics and stakeholders. Thus, having seen on social media that an elderly care home where I had previously done fieldwork had made a short humorous video to enable its residents to express themselves and encourage people to stay at home, I suggested they republish it on the blog. The video gained another audience and the standpoint that it represented – that of elderly people particularly affected by the pandemic and for whom life "outside society" is everyday life – entered the polyvocal narrative that the blog was in the process of writing. At the current time, this video has a hybrid status on the blog. It is also treated as data, inasmuch as I gave a sociological interpretation to it in an analytical post, by drawing on the concept of interpellation.[8] All these transformations and reuses reveal the open-ended nature of blog writing – within the limits of the subscription contracted with the software. In this regard, it is worth noting that most of the 54 published sets of field notes have been carefully edited and sometimes extensively rewritten. This aspect is inherent to the release of data to a wider public, which also has another consequence. If communicating "emerging findings and interpretations during the research itself […] involves relinquishing the privacy of at least some of the field notes" (Hine 2015), the tricky question arises as to how far, knowing furthermore that the publication of field notes on a blog makes

7 https://covies20.com/2020/07/06/le-virus-aux-trousses-les-meandres-de-la-circulation-publique-dans-un-supermarche-1/

8 https://covies20.com/2020/05/11/restez-a-la-maison-un-double-appel/

it possible to keep track of nascent ideas and test new textual forms.

Conclusion

Obviously, digital ethnography takes a myriad of forms. This is why practising it may require "creative adaptations" (Hine 2015). There is, however, one certainty. If the ethnographer seeks to say something about how the organization of everyday life is (un)done by the Internet, s/he must consider digital communication as an expression of a lifeworld (Dicks et al. 2005). For this purpose, focusing on the distinctive semiotic properties of digital media technologies is one of the most promising research avenues.

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Beyond Emergency Remote Teaching. Experience and Format Preferences Between Online and On-Site Learning in Continuing Education

Tobias Röhl, Franziska Zellweger, Gabriel Flepp, Santina Battaglia, PH Zürich

Introduction

The Corona pandemic led to a sudden uptake of remote teaching and distance learning in educational institutions worldwide. Teachers and students could not meet in person and had to rely on different modes of online learning and teaching. In higher education, such modes of emergency remote teaching (ERT) resulted not only in a disruptive experience and wide-ranging transformations in Bachelor and Master Education (Hodges et al., 2020) but also in continuing education. At the authors' institution, the Zurich University of Teacher Education (PH Zürich), over 6000 participants enrolled in the period of March 2020 to March 2021 in various courses, ranging in length from 2–4 hours and daylong modules to year-long programmes (CAS, DAS, MAS). Most of these courses were held completely online due to the pandemic and had to be adapted accordingly.

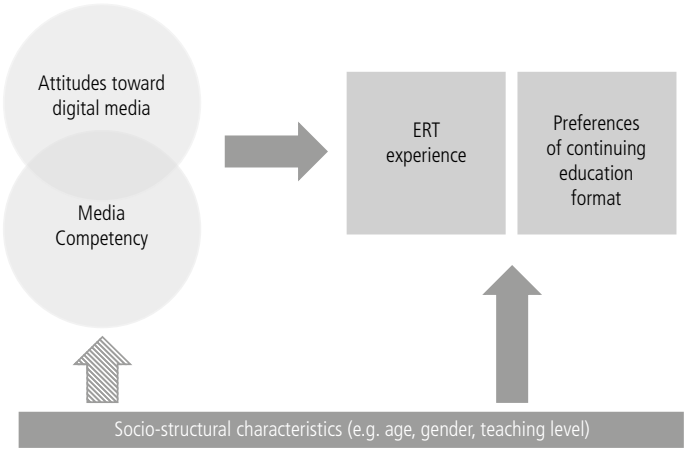
Digital media in continuing education is, of course, not a new phenomenon. Rohs & Weber (2020) illustrate a longstanding development embracing digital media also in continuing education. As they note, however, still less than half of the continuing education programmes in Germany make use of digital media. In contrast, Zawacki-Richter & Stöter (2020) refer to the longstanding experience and modes known from distance learning institutions – flexibility in terms of time and place are of critical importance here. And while social presence can be achieved online, it requires elaborated strategies suited to digital settings (Whiteside et al. 2017). Consequently, it remains unclear how ERT as a disruptive event affected continuing education. In particular, the experience of participants and their acceptance of digital modes of teaching and learning is underexplored. What can institutions of higher education learn from the ERT experience? What elements of digital learning and teaching can and should they rely on in the future? In this paper we discuss results from a survey conducted at Zurich University of Teacher Education in May 2021 that tries to answer this question. The survey investigated how the participants assess their learning experience and what preferences they express regarding the value of on-site or online formats for the future. It also scrutinizes factors explaining these preferences.

Theoretical Model and Research Design

In explaining varying preferences for distance learning, we draw on Knezek et al.'s (2000) will-skill-tool model. The model was developed to explain the integration of ICT in primary and secondary education. According to the model three factors are responsible: an open attitude of teachers towards technology use (will), sufficient competencies of teachers (skill) and the availability of ICT (tool). Since its inception the model has been widely used to account for differences in technology use in primary and secondary education (for Switzerland see, for example, Petko 2012).

While the model by Knezek et al. (2000) was initially developed for the field of primary and secondary education and focuses on the role of teachers, we believe that it can be adapted for continuing education. However, we decided, to exclude the "tool" factor (the availability of technologies) since it can be assumed that participants in continuing education at PH Zürich are confronted with a rather

Figure 1 Framework



homogenous set of technologies. The framework as illustrated in 1 guided this research. Our survey was devised to integrate the model and to control for other variables (for example, demographic features such as gender, age, professional role). The model's dependent variable are comprised of participants' experiences and their future preferences for different modes of further education.

In consequence, the following research questions are guiding this project:

- How did participants experience emergency remote teaching and what differences are visible regarding age, gender, duration, media competency, attitudes, teaching level or continuing education format.
- What preferences do participants express for their future learning regarding the extent of on-site and online elements and regarding specific aspects of their learning process.

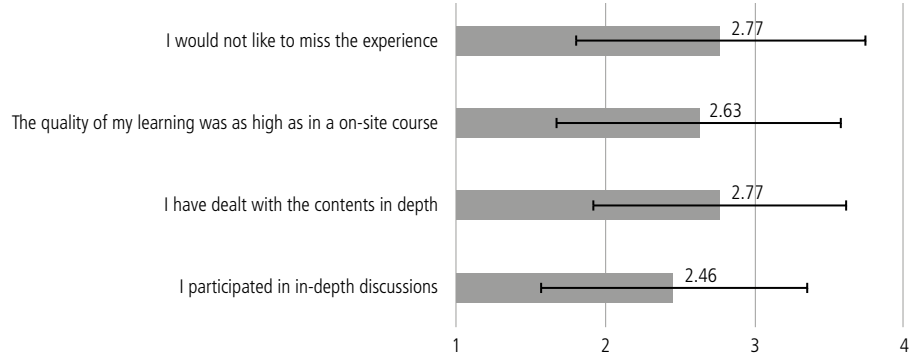
In April / May 2021 the survey was sent to a total of 6088 participants of continuing education formats in the period of March 2020 through March 2021. The survey included 45 close-ended questions as well as two open-ended questions. 1957 individuals resp. 32.2 % participated in the survey. Approximately 35 % of the respondents attended courses (short formats of multiple hours), 41 % modules of 1–3 days length and 24 % longer programmes. Half of the participants are teachers in primary education, followed by teachers on the level of secondary 1 (19 %), secondary 2 (8.8 %), higher education (12 %), and pre-primary education (10 %).

Results

Experiences

The participants were asked how they experienced ERT in the past year (see figure 2). Our data shows that experiences were heterogeneous, but overall positive. On average the respondents were more likely to agree that they would not want to miss the distance learning experience (scale: 1 = "don't agree at all", 4 = "fully agree"). However, the variance of responses is remarkably high (M = 2.77, SD = .97). Equally divided is the view regarding the quality of the learning experience in ERT compared to the traditional on-site presence: Only just under half

Figure 2 Emergency Remote Experience (1 = "don't agree at all", 4 = "fully agree")



of the respondents rated their own learning gain as equivalent in terms of quality (M = 2.63, SD = .95). On average participants were slightly more positive regarding their engagement with the contents ("I have dealt with the contents in depth"; M = 2.77, SD = .85) in comparison to their participation in in-depth discussion (M = 2.46, SD = .89).

The data show a medium size correlation between experience in ERT and preference for digital continuing education formats (Pearson's r = 0.601**). The following two quotes from the open answers illustrate that the direction of the relation is not clear.

In the first quote the participant rated his or her ERT experiences high and emphasizes a change in attitude in the course of the experience:

> *To realize that continuing education can also be conducted digitally and without any loss of quality or gaps in knowledge amazed me. I am sure that this way will be very important in the future and that even more people will participate in training from home.*

Figure 3 Format preferences

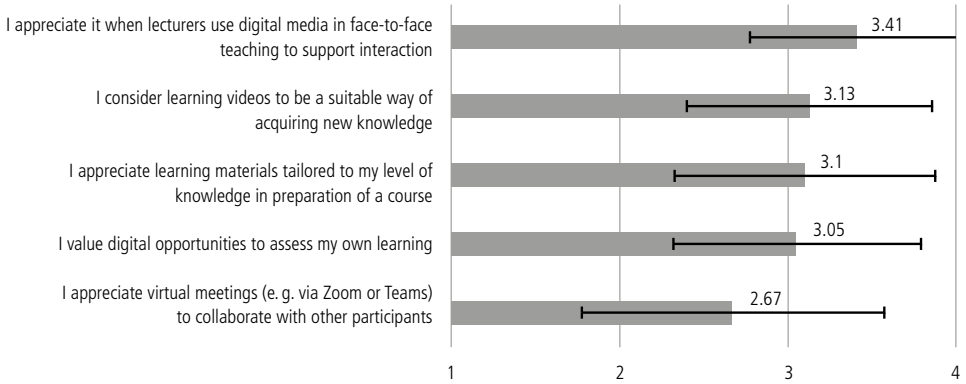
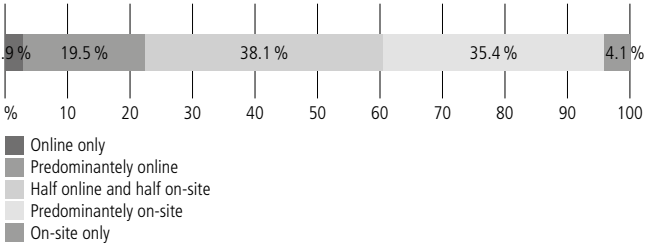


Figure 4 What Ratio of Online Formats to On-Site Formats Would You Prefer for Your Continuing Education in the Future? (n=1896)



In contrast another participant rating his ERT experience low was not necessarily dissatisfied with the course quality but he or she emphasizes the uncontested importance of in-presence teaching:

> *I thought the courses were good, but personally, I appreciate face-to-face training. The only advantage of distance learning is that you don't have to travel to Zurich.*

Format Preferences

Asked about their future format preference participants rated different options on a scale of 1 = "totally disagree" to 4 = "totally agree" (see figure 3). Using digital media to enrich face-to-face teaching is uncontested (M = 3.41, SD = .63). Overall, asynchronous formats are slightly more preferred (e. g., learning videos (M = 3.13, SD = .73), followed by courses that involve individually tailored learning material before the course starts (M = 3.10, SD = .77), digital opportunities to assess level of learning (M = 3.04, SD = .74) and finally synchronous formats for digital collaboration (M = 2.67).

When asked about their preferred ratio of online and on-site formats, only a minority favors exclusively online (2.9 %) or exclusively on-site formats (4.1 %) (figure 4). Most participants prefer a mix of online and on-site teaching (93 %) wherefrom 35.4 % prefer a mix with predominantly on-site teaching, 38.1 % a mix half online and half on-site and 19.5 % a mix with predominantly online teaching.

When asked about the ideal scenario of continuing education in an open question, the participants overwhelmingly state that online formats are suited to listen to talks and acquire knowledge at an individual pace whereas they prefer on-site formats for discussion, groupwork and networking. Many emphasize pedagogical aspects:

> *The digital form is ideal for presentations of theoretical content. Short exchange rounds can also be easily organised in this way. As soon as it comes to doing/trying/viewing or more intensive group work, the analogue form makes more sense.*

Several responses highlight the efficiency and convenience of digital possibilities:

> *Depending on the content of the training, there's nothing to be said against distance learning. For me, it saves time, is up-to-date and focused. Face-to-face events have the advantage of personal meetings in between. Content comes first: Is the digital preparation equivalent to the face-to-face event? If so, distance learning can be used.*

Relevance of Socio-Structural Aspects, Attitudes and Competencies

How can we account for variation in our data concerning participants' experiences and preferences? As illustrated in table 1 attitudes toward digital media in general correlate with preferences with a medium effect size ($r = .451$, $p < .01$) as does media competency ($r = .368$, $p < .01$). As expected, people who have more positive attitudes toward digital media and assess their own media competency higher are more positive regarding online learning formats. However, attitudes and competency also correlate significantly with the ERT experience but with a low effect size ($r = .266$, $p < .01$ for attitudes and $r = .195$, $p < .01$).

Socio-structural aspects hardly explain any differences in experience or preference: although age, gender or educational level also have significant correlations with all the other constructs, their effect size is very low. This means that overall ERT experience or format preferences do not differ between men or women, between older and younger participants or participants teaching at primary schools or higher education institutions.

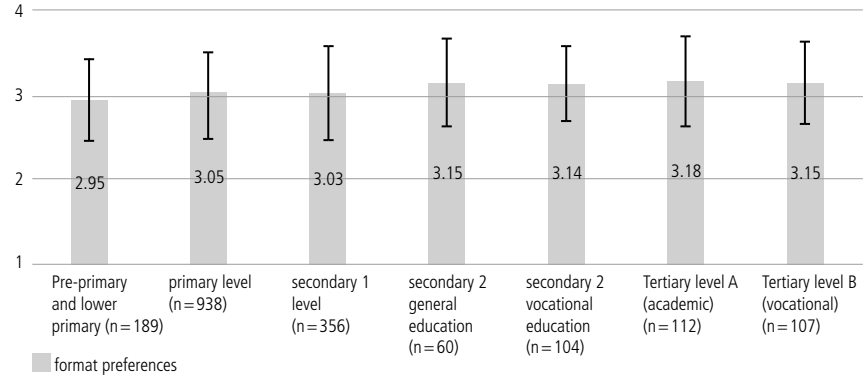
Similarly, a closer look at the level of education reveals only limited differences in format preferences between the lowest (pre-primary and lower primary: M = 2.95, SD = 0.77) and the highest (tertiary level A: M = 3.18, SD = 0.78).

Table 1 Correlations

	Preferences for digital format	ERT experience	Attitudes toward digital media	Media competency	Education level	Age
Preferences for digital formats	1	.601**	.451**	.368**	.096**	–.132**
ERT experience	.601**	1	.266**	.195**	.049*	–.100**
Attitudes toward digital media	.451**	.266**	1	.342**	0.045**	–.072**
Media competency	.368**	.195**	.342**	1	.180**	–.164**
Education level	.096**	.049**	0.045**	.180**	1	.150**
Age	–.132**	–.100**	–.072**	–.164**	.150**	1

Note: * P < .05, ** P < .01.

Figure 5 ERT Experiences and Format Preferences by Educational Level



Discussion and Implications

The results of this survey indicate that the traditional mode of continuing education needs to be fundamentally rethought as a consequence of the emergency remote learning experience. A mix of online and on-site learning is widely accepted. However, participants rate their experience very differently and their imaginations of an ideal learning experience are very diverse. This survey also impressively illustrate that these differences cannot be explained by socio-structural aspects. At the same time the exact effect of attitude and skills is not clear. Yet, the results confirm that the successful use of digital media in continuing education is not solely a question of the availability of tools and infrastructures. Attitudes and skills matter. Lecturers and other actors in further education can use this insight to improve the experience of participants. Attitudes can be changed and skills can be improved.

For participants blended learning as a concept seldom exceeds the idea of combining elements. The majority of the participants simply envision knowledge acquisition to be organized more self-paced online whereas face-to-face formats are still valued for exchange and discussion. Practical considerations regarding efficiency and convenience are in their view of critical importance.

In our perspective it takes more to translate the experiences of learners and teachers in continuing education during the pandemic into sustainable further development. To face the heterogeneous prerequisites, goals and needs of our participants we need a change in perspective and more consequently develop settings to support individual learning paths in a climate of co-construction.

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Digital Teaching

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Introduction

The speed and scale of the Covid-19 pandemic has profoundly disrupted our lifestyles and impacted large sectors of activity. Many organisations have had to redefine both their essential tasks and reshape their operating methods according to the various restrictions imposed by the authorities in order to guarantee the continuity of their activities. The higher education sector was not spared from such major adjustments.

More specifically, new teaching formats were urgently implemented to ensure the continuity of courses while respecting the new health standards. From one day to the next teachers were forced to move from a traditional face-to-face teaching model to a model based exclusively on distance learning. Henceforth teaching practices immediately relied on digital technologies (ICT). Yet the transition to distance – online – teaching had teachers face a number of constraints and challenges.

Towards a New Teaching Model

In spite of the successive reforms in academia[1] in recent decades (Tralongo, Court, et al., 2019), the Covid-19 crisis has profoundly disrupted the dynamics in higher education. As the new sanitary measures imposed by the Federal Council were *stricto sensu* applied by the University of Geneva's rectorate in March 2020 (i.e. confinement, suspension of face-to-face activities and compulsory teleworking), the traditional model of teaching that prevailed before the crisis became no longer viable.

Prior to the crisis, teaching at the Department of Sociology at the University of Geneva first entailed – almost exclusively – face-to-face exchanges between teachers and students. Online teaching was only provided in exceptional cases. While the pedagogical potential existed, the digital tools provided by the University were still underused[2]. Second the traditional model of teaching was not conducive to collaborative dynamic among professors. In other words, input and feedback related to pedagogical practices remained rare even if the intermediary body tends to work toward collaboration among its teaching assistants.

Although the traditional pedagogical model had been embedded in the academic system for many years, decades and centuries (Coulon and Paivandi, 2008), the new health measures and the imperative to ensure teaching – as the University's *essential* task redefined during the crisis – have forced sociology teachers to fully shift to online teaching. The radical teaching transformation in an emergency context in the early spring semester of 2020 led to stupefaction, incredulity and a form of shock for both teachers and students. No one had neither envisaged nor had prepared for such a major transformation. Teachers have had to reorganise their curriculum. They juggled with the resources they had at hand at the beginning of the pandemic. *Remote teaching* suddenly became an online transposition of the traditional teaching model, rather than *online education* a curriculum

1 The main reforms of the academic system include the Sorbonne Declaration (1998), the implementation of the Bologna Process (1999) with a three-level system (bachelor, master, doctorate), the introduction of a European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), as well as Europe-wide cooperation on quality assessment.

2 The digital tools provided by the University (including Moodle, which is the official UNIGE platform) were mainly used to deposit documents/readings for students and to make announcements about courses.

designed to be delivered online (Burbules, Rizvi, et al., 2020; Gillis and Krull, 2020; Kozimor, 2020). Remote teaching as it was delivered during the pandemic is thus more akin to a temporary and extraordinary adaptation due to the emergency. Pedagogical continuity was prioritised over a thoughtful and intentional redesign of the courses, an essential component in the academic system for recognized and valued distance learning known as online education.

By pushing educational actors to rethink pedagogical continuity in light of distance learning, the Covid-19 crisis has given rise to various dynamics around the use of digital pedagogical tools. First, the pandemic accelerated the "digital transition" which had been promoted by UNIGE for more than a decade[3] consisting as much as possible of the use of digital tools (Rectorat UNIGE, 2015). Second in line with UNIGE's strategy, sociology teachers adopted new teaching practices by exploiting pedagogical possibilities offered by institutional digital tools[4] to ensure fulfilling students' curriculum. Third had it not been for tools allowing to broadcast live stream courses or record content on *Mediaserver* platform, sociology teachers would not have been able to make a smooth transition to online teaching (Asio and Shallimar, 2021). Finally, at the time of the first wave (March 2020), the transition to distance learning had redistributed roles within the Department of Sociology around digital skills. *In fine* it became each teacher's responsibility to acquire sufficient mastery of digital teaching tools in order to deliver online courses. This said, during the first distance teaching phase, the members of the intermediary body played an important role in accompanying senior teachers, at a distance, in learning the tricks and the trade of new digital tools. By creating a virtual space of trust and solidarity (thanks to *Zoom*), the entire sociology teaching body – junior and senior – managed to share advice, good practices and moral support. Though online teaching remained a teacher's individual task, the collective spirit, the digital means made available by the UNIGE, and especially the intermediary body's dedication all contributed to the *up-skilling* of the Department as a whole.

While this online dynamic of the Department was conducive to a smooth transition to the digital realm, sociology teachers nevertheless faced several challenges and constraints. From a technical point of view, online teaching requires adequate equipment (i. e. a computer with a camera, good internet connection) while from a logistical perspective, it necessitates a suitable environment to work from home. Furthermore, in order to take into account the context of the health crisis and to avoid overloading students with the increased use of digital tools, several sociology teachers decided to adapt the students' workload in terms of teaching methods (less theoretical lectures and more moments of reflection and group discussions). Even if academic teaching had been evolving towards teaching methods that focus more on interaction with students, the forced shift to distance learning has pushed teachers to ever more develop interactive and reflective teaching. This is mainly because interactions between teachers and students have

3 The position taken by the UNIGE in favour of the digital transition has resulted in the creation of MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) courses in 2013. A MOOC unit was subsequently also integrated into the rectorate, as well as the creation of the Bureau de la Stratégie Numérique (BSN) in 2016.

4 The pedagogical functionalities of the digital tools made available by the UNIGE have been used to a greater extent with distance learning, such as chats, quizzes, forums, video capsules, surveys and exams on the Moodle platform. In addition, other digital tools have also been used by teachers such as Zoom, Padlet, Skype, SpeakUp or Google drive.

been strongly impacted and degraded by distance learning (Gillis and Krull, 2020). For example, the majority of teachers have already been at least once confronted with a "wall of black and silent squares" during courses on *Zoom,* giving the impression that the teacher is speaking to themselves in front of the camera. Moreover, fearing a high drop-out rate, sociology teachers were led to give their students more support, for example by answering their many questions by e-mail, or by organising Zoom offices outside of class hours to replace the face-to-face meetings. Thus, many have had to adapt their teaching practices to compensate for the lack of interaction caused by the virtual mediation of distance learning.

Rethinking the Educational Model in the Era of Pandemics

By producing a real shock in the field of higher education, the Covid-19 crisis has shown the need to adapt the academic teaching model in times of crisis. Moreover, according to a WHO (World Health Organization) expert group, we have entered a "new era of high-impact, potentially fast-spreading outbreaks that are more frequently detected and increasingly difficult to manage" (Global Preparedness Monitoring Board (GPMB), 2019, p. 12). It is therefore essential to rethink the educational model in the era of pandemics in order to best prepare education for the crises that lie ahead.

Although some pedagogical practices have been left behind with distance education, others have continued in order to provide the most appropriate teaching in times of crisis. Several categories of *good practice* in distance education can be mentioned. A first category aims to encourage the interactivity and the spontaneity of exchanges between the teacher and the students. This may entail i) using the *chat* and involving intermediary actors (i. e. a teaching assistant, a master's student) who participates in the course to moderate exchanges, ii) creating virtual classrooms with fewer students, iii) favouring flipped classes[5], or iv) proposing moments of informal exchanges before or after online course sessions in order to instil and cultivate a group dynamic. However, the implementation of these pedagogical practices requires a lot of energy and time that most teachers do not have because of their already busy schedules (Achard, 2020).

A second category of pedagogical practices aims at favouring hybrid teaching in order to allow students who could not attend face-to-face courses for various reasons to follow them at a distance. Another category of good practice is also based on solidarity, collective spirit and experience sharing among peers. Constructive and collaborative exchanges on teaching practices promotes teachers' pedagogical training thanks to the digital tools. Similarly, this spirit of mutual support allowed students to be trained quickly in the new digital tools at the beginning of the pandemic. And last but not least, one tactic used by some teachers was to preserve fixed hours for distance learning to allow students to keep a regular work rhythm. Indeed the teachers at the Department of Sociology at the University of Geneva and their students lost their reference points due to the shock of the crisis and hence saw their work pace overturned. In preserving a form of rituality, teachers maintained a "framework" by teaching and keeping regular contact with students in spite of the distance.

Finally, the categories of good teaching practice mentioned above are intended to improve

5 The concept of flipped classroom refers to a type of teaching, where students prepare their lessons at home (readings, assignments) and then discuss in class with the teacher the readings/homework that have been prepared at home.

the quality of university teaching in the event of another crisis. In order to overcome the improvisation with which teachers set up distance learning under pressure at the beginning of the pandemic, it will be essential in the future to exploit the many possibilities offered by digital tools and to integrate them in a more systematic way into higher education training. However, expecting digital technology to entirely compensate for the lack of face-to-face interaction seems illusory. It is undeniable that the indispensable socialization with peers and mentors in the learning process has been undermined. Further reflection is necessary to rethink teaching practices in an all encompassing and sustainable way.

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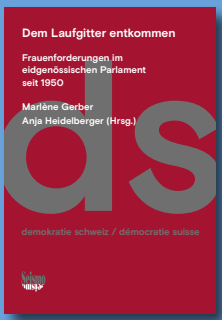

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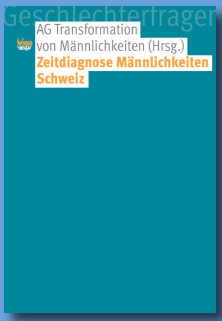

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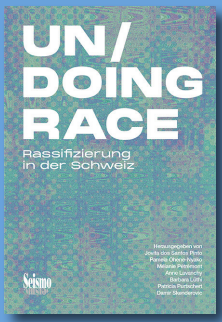

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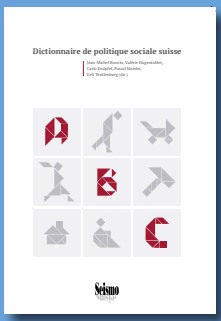

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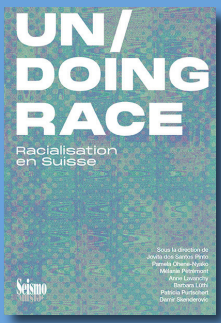

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