From Real to Virtual Worlds

University Pedagogy in the Time of Covid.

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Abstract

In this paper I explore pathways of pedagogical enquiry that are apparently well-trodden; however, in the time of Covid-19, there has been a general revaluation of traditional ways of doing things at all levels of society. This also applies to the context of education, which has seen widespread reflection on the adaptation of existing pedagogical solutions, as well as the invention of new ones.

The quasi-universal implementation of anti-viral lockdown measures has led to a drive towards the adoption of digital platforms for teaching: in many cases these have been introduced suddenly, without sufficient deliberation or the due preparation of staff and pupils (Teräs et al 2020).

While digital solutions are clearly fundamental in this moment of crisis, it is important not to use their apparent efficiency to smooth over existing faults in education systems, or *naturalise* (Barthes 1957) these temporary solutions as resolving issues on a long-term basis. Technology, though popular with corporations and politicians, does not

necessarily offer solutions to traditional pedagogical problems (Cuban 2004: 20-21). While some studies appear to suggest that student performance has actually risen due to the replacement of physical with virtual instruction (Gonzalez et al 2020), it is imperative at this moment to highlight traditional values and ensure that they will not be forgotten in the emerging paradigms of future learning.

The notion of education as 'flourishing' is central to what is felt to be the classical model, or ideal (Luntley 2016); in this conception, education concerns the growth of the person as a whole. This paper aims to contribute to this debate, in the specific context of language education, asking whether a kind of Aristotelian 'flourishing' is possible through Computer Mediated Communication (CMC), and problematising the adaptation of communicative language teaching methodology in an online context.

Key words: pedagogical enquiry, flourishing education, Computer Mediated Communication, communicative language teaching methodology.

Introduction

Covid-19 has stimulated discussion in many spheres, both in traditional forums of debate and in new ones dependent on web affordances, concerning the future of education, the modalities it will have to adopt, the pedagogical pros and cons of online learning when compared with what occurs face to face. Schools and universities worldwide have had to adapt to a rapidly worsening pandemic that rendered live teaching impossible and enforced a move online (Teräs et al, 2020), with dramatic consequences for many aspects of the teaching/learning process that have yet to be fully understood. It is not simply a case of seeing out the current health crisis and then resuming normal practices; it is felt that even when this emergency has passed, we will not see a resumption of traditional practices *tout court*, but instead a certain component of online learning will be included in the teaching offers of educational institutions (Murphy 2020, Teräs et al ibid). Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben

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(2020) even claims that the crisis is being used as 'a pretext for the ever more pervasive diffusion of digital technology'.

There are some within universities who interpret these possible scenarios as favouring a drift towards privatisation, as part of what is seen as an attack by neo-liberal government ideologies on the university as public institution (Fairclough, 1996; Currie, 2004). Universities post-pandemic will have to compete with organisations that have consolidated positions as market leaders in providing online learning, investing resources that, with government cutbacks to universities in many countries, are already thinly spread.

There are good reasons advanced for extending online learning in universities; for example, increased accessibility of instruction, improved learning outcomes (Means et al, 2009; Gonzalez et al, 2020), stress reduction (Roed, 2003). However, there are discrepancies between the promises made by providers of online educational services (e.g. Starr and Turoff, 2005; Wishnoebrotoe, 2010; Bailenson, 2018) and classroom realities, and significant downsides also need to be emphasised in the debate.[1] As Teräs et al (ibid) point out, the pandemic has provided an opportunity for data companies to extend their already significant worldwide influence, and deepen the impact of 'the competitive ethos of business intelligence' in this sector:

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[1] Typical of these claims is the following, from Wishnoebrotoe (2010, p. 593):

"Learner-centered education begins with an evaluation of the abilities, learning style, social context, and other important factors of the student that affect learning. It would extensively use software programs which can structure and tailor the learning experience for the child. It would be more active, with students discussing, debating, researching, and collaborating on projects."

What tends to be lacking, in such publications (as it is lacking here) are i) precise indications as to how digital technology will achieve these desirable outcomes; the suggestion appears to be that they will simply follow automatically from moving instruction online, and ii) a clear account of how traditional classroom teaching is deficient in these respects. This is especially clear in the reference to students 'discussing, debating', etc., since these are manifestly activities which are easy to arrange in a traditional classroom, and in fact do feature in a broad range of lessons across the curriculum.

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In the case of education technology vendors and their growing influence in the education sector, the two are inseparably intertwined [..] It is not unrealistic to imagine that the boom of online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic could further strengthen and accelerate current developments in platform capitalism [..], that is, harnessing online platforms as profit-generating engines functioning on the basis of collecting and using ever-increasing masses of data.

Furthermore, in a context of greater reliance on online teaching there will be implications for teacher/student relations, for pedagogical practices and teacher training, for classroom technology, and for a range of learning outcomes that concern the holistic dimensions of education, referred to in the following citation about Aristotle and his educational philosophy:

[Aristotle's] work is a testament to the belief that our thinking and practice as educators must be infused with a clear philosophy of life [..] We have continually to ask what makes for human flourishing?[2]

The notion of education as 'flourishing' is, of course, central to what is felt to be the classical model, or ideal (Luntley, 2016); in this conception, education concerns the growth of the person as a whole, which would include – at least in its ideal, Platonic form (Dewey, 2004; Nightingale, 2001, p. 135) - the acquisition of non-academic qualities such as the virtues, as well as physical strength and health.

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[2]   Infed.Org, Aristotle and Education. https://infed.org/mobi/aristotle-and-education/#:~:text=We%20only%20have%20scraps%20of,has%20been%20of%20fundamental%20importance.&text=Aristotle%20believed%20that%20education%20was,person%20was%20an%20educated%20person, retrieved 26 January 2021.

Much of the uneasiness felt by some educators in the current context arguably stems from this root. For one thing, they recognise the inadequacy of the teaching they are able to provide online, in terms of the specific features of their subjects. Natural scientists have to supply the want of laboratory time, music teachers are deprived of their instruments, while language teachers, who constitute the main focus of this paper, find it impossible to engage their students in the kind of tasks involving spoken interaction which have, up to now, been central to the learning experience. There is also a sense that by forbidding physical contact, by confining our children to their homes, by making a computer screen the fundamental window through which they are obliged to interact with the space where learning happens, we may be betraying them. For, so this argument runs, it is only through actual contact, in the rough and tumble of a playground, next to peers round desks; shouting, arguing, resisting the bullies, emulating what is seen as worthy in friends or teachers, that true growth – true flourishing – may occur.

Not everything, naturally, was working perfectly in this sense before the pandemic. So it may be that the time is ripe for a general debate on these issues, stimulated by the unprecedented disruption to current educational practices brought on by Covid-19. The world is moving towards models of social organisation that may see people spending time in their homes instead of going to work or school, and substituting virtual experiences for actual contact with others (Klein, 2020). This paper aims to contribute to this debate, in the specific context of language education, asking whether the kind of Aristotelian 'flourishing' just referred to is possible through Computer Mediated Communication (CMC), and problematising the adaptation of communicative language teaching methodology in an online context.

What does 'flourishing' mean?

We need to take several steps back, and take advantage of the enforced period of reflection to raise not just the question of the merits or otherwise of online learning, but also older questions that have been somewhat out of the pedagogical mainstream of late. They would not have been unfamiliar to A.S. Neil, founder of Summerhill School, who sums up his school's mission thus:

> My message has been this one; a child's emotions are infinitely more important than his intellectual progress. I have tried, with I fear little success, to show that schools, by ignoring emotions, leave them to outside influences, the press, the kitsch of radio and TV, commercial TV ads, a plethora of magazines geared to a mentality of ten. Teachers cannot see the wood behind the trees, the wood that means life abundant, freedom from character moulding (Neil, 1992, p. 101)

Implicit in Neil's words is a distrust of the current state of human society. Paradoxically, for a non-believer, he posits something of a Manichean division between, on the one hand, 'life abundant', and on the other 'the world', which is under the sway of mediated consumerism and the products of mass culture. Like Rousseau (1979), his educational panacea is freedom, which he believes will permit the individuals in his school to flourish, to achieve learning goals that are only partly academic. A similar perspective is found in Tapscott (2009, p. 147), where one progressive American teacher shows a similar faith in the possibilities of independent thinking and pedagogical freedom:

I am not telling students what to do. I'm helping them to discover. I'm helping them to unearth their greatness. That is what education is all about.

Summerhill stands out because, like other similar institutions, it was/is an alternative school to those found in mainstream British education, which follow rigid curricula, and where learning goals tend to be exclusively academic, producing outcomes whose most visible manifestations are exam results, statistics that 'grade' the schools themselves in annual OFSTED tables. Mainstream schools thus participate in a working environment that sees them pitted against one another, the teachers always under pressure to produce more students with better grades (Marginson, 2006).[3] Such schools have pressure from above, in the form of government funding and centralised mechanisms of control; and below, from parents who wish to maximise A-level results, Oxbridge placements, and so on. In the terms of our paper, the question would again be, what is meant by flourishing in such a context? Presumably it would not be unreasonable, given that so much effort is expended in this direction, to conclude that the schools believe that flourishing, for a student, means leaving school with the best possible academic qualifications.

To even raise the question of what is omitted in conventional education is to risk appearing naïve, marginalised or simply out of touch with the realities of today's world, where a dominant 'business intelligence' has been naturalised, in Barthes' sense. That is to say, it appears that the capitalist way of doing things, of thinking about them, is

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[3] "Currently, in order to be judged 'outstanding', schools must demonstrate that 'Pupils make substantial and sustained progress throughout year groups across many subjects" (Ofsted, 2014, p. 71, in Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2016). Ofsted's slogan is 'improvement through inspection'. Yet, as Chapman (2002) shows, it is doubtful whether a majority of schools actually do 'improve' as a result of its activities, and teachers certainly feel stressed during the process. As some of the interviews in Scanlon (1999) show, Ofsted inspections can have traumatic impacts on teaching staff, and lead to a 'failing' school's being stigmatised in its local community and even in a national context.

simply part of the structure of reality itself, rather than the result of a series of choices which could have been different, and thus given birth to different social conditions (Barthes, 1957). It is also hard to put these things into precise words. Rather, they come under headings, signalled by big words that George Orwell, in another context, characterised as signifying everything and nothing, like *creativity, sensitivity, imagination, observation, critical thinking, emotional positivity, autonomy, empathy, kindness, generosity, strength of character*, and so on (Orwell, 2013).

However idealistic mention of such attributes might appear, it should be remembered that, as Dewey (2008) put the matter: 'it is a commonplace to say that the development of character is the end of all school work'. Not, notice, 'an' end of school work, something that can be added on after all the academic goals have been met. Rather this goal, according to Dewey, is a *sine qua non*, it represents the end and object of all activity in schools – and, by extension, all universities as well. If this principle is accepted, we can ask what the current authorities in mainstream British education are doing in this regard, and the response would probably be 'not much'. These things are simply not part of the curriculum.[4]

However, as the progressive schools remind us, there is a double aspect to teachers' roles: on the one hand they are subject specialists, transmitting merely academic knowledge; on the other, they have a less overt function. Like priests, or therapists, they cure souls (Prentis et al, 2014; Salobir, 2019, p. 12); they will strive to kindle imagination, to refine their students' tastes, to encourage critical thinking, self-motivation and the rest, to create learning opportunities in areas that regard ethical

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[4] The debate, naturally, is more complex than allowed for by such a brief sketch, and no doubt schools would put forward all kinds of extra-curriculur activities, sports, outward bound projects, community work and the like, as evidence that their pedagogical drives are not wholly confined to academic subjects. However, I believe the main point is an uncontroversial one, i.e. that the greater part of a school's efforts are devoted to improving academic outcomes.

choices, in order that these aspects of the students' personalities may be engaged. Such non-academic outcomes are crucial to what human flourishing may mean.

Language teaching and human flourishing

A student who learns to speak another language, to understand it and begin to think in it, would appear to represent a *de facto* case of human flourishing, in the same way that acquired competence in piano playing would be demonstrated by a student playing Debussy. As Wilson (2013) notes, to learn another language is to acquire 'another soul'.

This discussion now moves outside the context of British secondary schools to approach the topic of English Language teaching methodology, an area in which pedagogical research has been extremely productive over the last hundred or so years, marking out the area of language teaching as something of a test case for pedagogical innovation. There are many reasons for this. Chiefly the status of English as a world language within the British Empire, and later the American sphere of influence, which has made its learning a priority in the outer and expanding circles (Kachru 1985) of English users, and fostered a host of commercial language schools, government sponsored teaching programmes, miracle methodologies and the like. There has also been intense debate within the field of Applied Linguistics over theoretical issues relating to language acquisition, classroom techniques, learning methods, all feeding into practice at the coal faces of language classrooms around the world.

From one perspective, looking back over the history of what is known by acronyms such as TESOL (Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages), TEFL

(Teaching of English as a Foreign Language) and so on (Richards & Rodgers, 1996), the issues that have been discussed so far emerge with great clarity. An observer in a language classroom in the nineteenth century would have seen students working on translating texts from one language to another, the teacher drilling grammar rules and correcting written errors, with very little, if any speaking going on in the foreign language. Today the picture is different, at least in parts of the world responsive to the influence of research in language teaching pedagogy. Here students will be encouraged to speak the language as much as possible; the teacher will reduce their own talking time to a minimum, and instead provide the class with role plays, simulations, encourage questions and discussions in the foreign language. Students will do short talks or debates, play language games that involve speaking (Scrivener, 2005); anything, in other words, to encourage them to open their mouths and produce words or sentences in the language to be learned. Meanwhile, the attitude to grammatical knowledge is more laid back. Richards and Rogers (op. cit, p. 72) speak of 'the unconscious development of the target language system as a result of using the languages for real communication'. In other words, what has occurred over a century or so is a dramatic shift, from a focus on language as an object for principally rational, cerebral learning, to something more holistic, attempting to mirror the kind of processes that occur in learning one's first language, where actual language production precedes self-conscious structural study by some years. The 1960s saw the gradual emergence of 'Communicative Language Teaching'; not a single method, but rather the application in various forms, of principles such as:

- Learners learn a language by using it to communicate

- Authentic and meaningful communication should be the goal of classroom activities

- Learning is a process of creative construction and involves trial and error (Richards & Rodgers, op. cit, p. 172)

Harmer (1991, p. 38) indicates the theoretical rationale that underlies grammar teaching in such methods:

It has been suggested that freer practise activities (communicative activities especially), may act as a switch which allows consciously learnt language to transfer to the acquired store.

In other words, the overtly cerebral part of language learning, that regards the acquisition of the underlying grammatical structure, is backgrounded. It is not that CLT does not teach grammar; rather, that the expectation is no longer that acquisition will occur through repeated practice with the structural element in question, for example by answering written grammar questions. Instead, this may occur when the students are engaged in some oral activity that involves 'authentic and meaningful conversation' – a role play, for example. This is analogous to what happens, arguably, with learning a first language, or among immigrant children picking up the language of the host culture. No explicit grammar explanations are given, yet the child inexplicably acquires not just the lexis of a language but its underlying grammar too.

To return to the initial observations of this section, then, we begin to notice that 'flourishing' does not necessarily refer to the end result of the language learning process. When they are strongly motivated to learn other languages, people have

always managed, despite reliance on outdated methodologies. However, the communicative tasks that emerged in language classrooms during the latter part of the last century appear to correspond to more holistic values.

A method such as Grammar-Translation is a teacher-centred paradigm, relying on a rigid, structure-based method; one of the explicit tenets of CLT is to increase student talking time at the expense of teacher talking time, while it leaves plenty of room for creativity, empathy, and so on (Moskowitz, 1978).

The best methodology?

Earl Stevick (1976, p. 104) raised an interesting conundrum which is still awaiting a solution:

> In the field of language teaching, Method A is the logical contradiction of Method B: if the assumptions from which A claims to be derived are correct, then B cannot work, and viceversa. Yet one colleague is getting excellent results with A and another is getting comparable results with B. How is this possible?

The inference, with which many theorists have concurred, is that the choice of method/ology is, in point of fact, less central to learning outcomes than might appear. On closer inspection, what matters are a number of intangible factors which Willis (1996; see also Harmer 2007, pp. 78-9), for example, lists as exposure to the target language, opportunities to use it, and motivation to do so.

The question, if there really is no best method (Prabhu, 1990), is what drives the process of change in approaches to language learning? My tentative response would

refer to changes in the cultural climate, and to the notion of flourishing itself, as it has been adumbrated so far in this paper. In other words, I am suggesting that the holistic values referred to above have become more prominent in western societies over the period in question, especially since the 1960s. The teacher as source of all-knowledge, the 'sage on the stage' (King, 1993), or 'jug and mug' approach to instruction (Story 1953, p. 302), are no longer psychologically in tune with the current *zeitgeist*. These days, teachers need to pay more than lip service (Wells, 2009, p. 132) to what Stevens (2003, p. 11) terms 'student-centred creative self-discovery', a phrase that would probably have sounded curious to the Victorians, but which aptly summarises a modern perspective on education as a form of 'flourishing'.

A language lesson

This section briefly presents the stages of a typical language lesson in a physical classroom, prior to exploring the plausibility of replicating such a lesson in an online setting. There is, of course, no such thing as an ideal lesson, so I have focused on stages and activities that feature in the works of current TESOL instructors (Harmer, 1991; McDonough & Shaw, 1993; Scrivener, 2005; Horwitz, 2013, etc.), all representing the prevailing communicative language approaches of our time. The structure I refer to is a consolidated one in ELT, Presentation-Practise-Production (PPP) (Harmer, 2007), in which a language rule or lexical item/s are presented, then practised in some oral/written exercises, and finally 'produced', a phase where the students use the language elements in freer sentences of their own devising. This is a methodology at the rigid end of the communicative spectrum, as Harmer (2007, p. 66) acknowledges; however, it will serve the purposes of illustration.

Most lessons begin with a *warm-up* phase, where the teacher may assess the mood of the class and introduce the topic of the lesson, perhaps with questions, brainstorming, informal chat, an anecdote or joke. In the introductory phase, they may use *elicitation* in order to check the class's current state of knowledge of the topic, since if they already know it well there is no point repeating the lesson (Harmer, 2007, p. 203). In the *presentation* stage, the language element is introduced, perhaps through an illustrated dialogue (figure one):

- **Presentation:** the teacher shows the students the following picture and asks them whether the people in it are at work or on holiday to elicit the fact that they are on holiday.
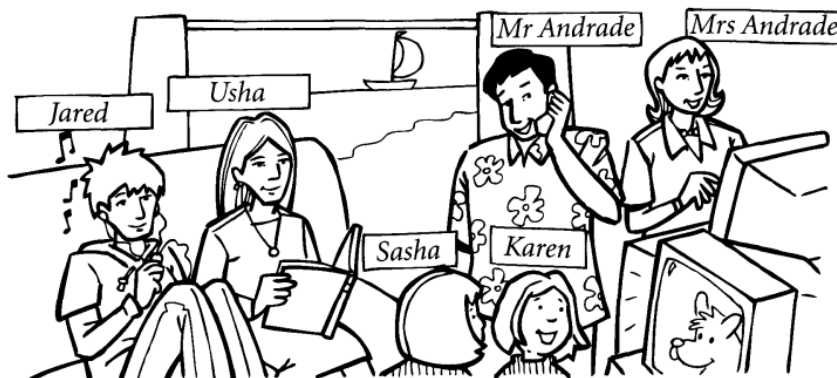
Figure One: Presentation stage (from Harmer 2007: 65)

Through this picture the teacher introduces the structure*: is + V -ing (Jared is listening to music, Mr Andrade is talking on the phone, they're going on holiday*, etc.). The next stage is *practice*, in which the teacher models sentences using these structures, then invites the students to repeat them, individually or chorally, correcting errors in grammar or pronunciation. The teacher then extends the activity to the physical classroom, pointing at one of the students and encouraging another to use the structure that has just been presented *(what's s/he doing?*, etc.). In the *production*

stage, the teacher asks each of the students to say, for example, what friends or family members are doing at this moment (ibid, p. 66).

Such is an approximation of what might occur in a language class; naturally this simple model would lend itself to multiple variations, depending on the requirements of the syllabus, the mood and disposition of the students, the teacher's own creativity, and so on. What I hope may be added to this brief outline from the reader's imagination, is the type of behaviour involved, the way the lesson proceeds as a shared activity. Since they are in the same physical space, it is natural for teacher and students to pick up each other's vibes. During the warm-up phase, for example, the teacher may notice that a particular student is missing, another seems in a good mood, another arrives late and is clearly flustered, and so on. The warm-up phase, though it seems unrelated to the real language teaching work that is programmed, is really crucial because, as every teacher knows, the class needs to be brought onside, a positive atmosphere, a rapport (Harmer 2007, p. 113) must be established at the outset if the lesson is to succeed. It is also possible to glean, from this outline, something of the teacher's likely behaviour; they will use appropriate intonation for the modelling phase, use hand gestures to pick out students for individual activity and organise the class, provide supportive back-channelling, feedback and reinforcement. In a perfect class there will be a perceptible buzz from the group, especially during the production phase, as the students' energies flow and merge in satisfying communication.

Online teaching

In this section I explore the question of how far this methodology can be replicated online. I will be using some data from an online questionnaire, conducted in late 2020, to highlight the way some other language teachers are feeling about these issues.[5] Universities, like other institutions, were thrown into chaos by the sudden onset of the Covid-19 crisis, for which nothing had prepared them. Almost overnight, teachers were asked to adapt their lessons to a new context, a significant challenge for many reasons; demographic, technical and pedagogical, for example. In terms of the first, university teachers tend not to belong to the younger generations, mainly because of the lengthy period of apprenticeship the career requires. Hence, they are not always up to date with technological evolutions (the second factor), so p2p platforms such as Zoom, Skype or Teams, which were rolled out as expedients in the crisis, may pose severe difficulties.[6] Finally, there are pedagogical implications which relate to the difficulties of adapting practices like those just outlined to an online context. Here it must be said, parenthetically, that the old 'sage on the stage' model referred to above, in which students simply listen and take notes while a professor gives a lecture, still survives in many contexts around the world and could, effectively, be transferred online without any great need of adaptation.[7] For in such lessons, there is little or none of the interactive behaviour that featured in the lesson just described. No doubt, students could well find these lessons boring, but neither more nor less than they did when attending the lectures physically.

Here are some positive responses to the question of online teaching as a whole:

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[5] This was a small-scale questionnaire, sent out to 40 colleagues, from which I received 25 replies. Therefore, the teachers' answers are not taken as representative of generalised attitudes within the profession.

[6] It is also true that these platforms were not designed explicitly to facilitate classroom teaching.

[7] As Don Tapscott (2016) pertinently points out: "Big universities are still offering what I call the broadcast model of learning, where the teacher is the broadcaster and the student is the supposedly willing recipient of the one-way message. It goes like this: "I'm a professor and I have knowledge. Get ready; here it comes. Your goal is to take this data into your short-term memory so you can recall it to me when I test you."

a) We don't need physical contact for effective practice, like for teaching future doctors or physicists and mathematicians, for example. So I don't see any problems of interaction in online form of teaching humanitarian studies.

b) I think lessons are sometimes more effective in online learning than they are in presence, because students feel themselves more free to communicate with teacher, they become less shy to ask some questions.

c) If we still want to learn something, we have to find new ways to do it.

d) I'm able to do more or less everything I'd normally do in the classroom.

As these replies show, there was a certain openness to the affordances of the new media. In this discussion, I focus more on the points raised by a) and d), or the extent to which actual physical 'contact'- by which we don't mean touching, but rather, actual presence – may be reproduced online. Though some authors claim this can be replicated (Lehman & Conceição, 2010), in practise this arguably represents the hardest challenge.

It seems fairly obvious that, if one were to go through the lesson outlined in the preceding section and ask how the various stages and activities could be reproduced online, there would be little argument – in many cases, this is quite impossible. So much of the human communication dimension to teaching depends on non-verbal cues, on the teacher's sensitivity to signals that may appear imperceptible, but are crucial in knowing when it is time to move on, to change activity, to shift the physical

arrangements of the class, and so on. Though much pedagogical orthodoxy embraces 'student-centredness', the teacher's role in a communicative class is still vital, and depends on a two-way process of dynamic communication among the parties in the physical space of a classroom. Deprived of this active role, one respondent to the questionnaire commented:

e) I feel aloft and useless

Some other negative comments:

f) Online education can't replace the effect of real live interacting with students

g) Online learning would be a disaster for this generation they'd lack empathy

Reply f) summarises one of the most important questions in this debate, often little considered in the literature (see, e.g. Brandl, 2002). Though some p2p platforms allow for small group or pairwork, such virtual interaction between students is quite different in character from the busy huddles that form in real classes. The task of 'warming-up' a virtual classroom, too, is one essentially interactive activity that would appear to be problematic; for one thing, by contrast with the real context, students may only appear to be present in the classroom. In this phase the character of interaction is essentially emotive, aiming at stimulating a positive attitude in students, much harder to guage or impact in an online context.[8] The same applies at every phase of the lesson, as

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[8] I don't think a shower of yellow thumbs up or smiley emojis would count as evidence that the class was satisfactorily 'warmed-up', though maybe this is a debatable point.

teachers rely on verbal and non-verbal cues, a stream of signals, gestures, comments, feedback from the class to assess how the lesson is going at every stage and direct its micro-movements. While students are working on a task in pairs or groups, moreover, the teacher may engage in 'overhearing', if necessary stepping in to offer feedback on pronunciation or direct the course of the interaction. S/he may spot students in difficulty and intervene with suggestions, or give extra attention to students known to be in need.

For these reasons, I feel that it is probably unproductive to take this line of reasoning much further. With appropriate platforms, and with optimum training, the most proponents of online learning can say is that it *may* be possible to reproduce something of the feel of a real classroom environment in an online context. Many teachers would probably dissent even from this hedged conclusion, and of course it relies on conditions which are not likely to be available in public education for many years.

However, to expect this of online learning is probably unfair. It has different characteristics, entirely different horizons and motivational potentialities. Therefore, it would probably be more useful to look at the best possibilities of online learning and compare these with what occurs in traditional classrooms.

Unfortunately, this is precisely the point that my own experience falls down. Like many of my colleagues, I have experience with traditional communicative methodologies of the type discussed above, but almost none with online platforms specifically designed to facilitate online learning. As many colleagues confirmed in the questionnaire, little training was offered during the pandemic by universities already badly hit by government funding cutbacks.

Among learning platforms, there would appear to be three types. The first involves the filming of lectures, to which students anywhere may have access. Clearly, there are enormous pluses involved; students worldwide may hear lessons given by distinguished scholars,[9] thus enriching the range of possibilities available in a traditional context.

The second type involves the provision of online modules, with lessons mainly presented via videos covering the subject area, with a series of exercises, quizzes, etc. These are known as 'MOOC courses' (Massive Open Online Courses), and may include interactive features such as Facebook/Youtube pages, interactive student-to-student blogs, online tutorials and the like.[10] Some Italian universities already offer a range of such courses.[11] It is beyond the scope of this paper to evaluate the possibilities of learning in such contexts; here we should only note their fundamental differences from traditional classroom setups, especially in the area of interaction.

The third type offers an immersive digital experience that purports to simulate interaction in a virtual context, with virtual classrooms, teachers, avatars for fellow students, and the like; these courses are currently futuristic, and would require considerable investment and research before they could be widely adopted.[12]

Discussion and conclusions

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[9] These are provided by many universities, such as Yale (https://oyc.yale.edu/, Retrieved 6 February.2021), Oxford (https://www.conted.ox.ac.uk/about/online-courses, retrieved 6 February 2021), etc.

[10] See, e.g. the courses offered by Future Learn. Online at: https://www.futurelearn.com/, retrieved 6 February 2021.

[11] See, e.g. Università Federico II, Naples. https://www.federica.eu/mooc/c/introduzione_alla_filosofia, retrieved 6 February 2021.

[12] See, e.g. Second Life: Educate in the Virtual World. http://go.secondlife.com/landing/education/, retrieved 6 February 2021.

In this final section I would like to consider the types of online course as alternatives to teaching in presence. The first two types, though they have undoubted advantages, are not really comparable. Learning institutions have already begun to recognise their advantages and profit from them. However, they mostly leave untouched the vital area - for students' growth, engagement, and eventual flourishing – of human contact, peer to peer interaction, interaction with a teacher. Therefore, in what follows I offer some considerations about the third kind which, though in many respects as yet under-developed, nevertheless afford glimpses of a possible techno future that may await. The technology for creating virtual schools and universities already exists, though the political will to alter existing arrangements may currently be lacking. In the comfort of their own homes, students could attend classes set in digital worlds, interacting with other student/teacher avatars. The possibilities are endless; a lesson on Physics, for example, could be accompanied by a visit to the event horizon of a Black Hole. Moreover, the interactive criterion could be satisfied in these scenarios, as students in any class could team up to collect information, discuss topics suggested by the teacher, give presentations, and so on. On this point, indeed, claims are advanced that the kind of experience on offer is in every respect analogous to what the senses provide us with in ordinary reality:

> The user becomes engulfed in a virtual environment that simultaneously engages multiple senses, in ways similar to how we are accustomed to experience things in our daily "real" lives (Bailenson, 2018)

The vision of students everywhere, sitting with headsets at home at their computers, immersed in brightly coloured contexts of intense audiovisual stimulation, engaged in

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rich learning programmes, is entrancing. From one perspective, as Bailenson convincingly illustrates, these programmes would enable children from whatever background to have access to top quality learning experiences, thus actualising their potentials in ways undreamt of today.

From another, it is profoundly depressing, for it would signal that a way of life, with an underlying philosophy that dates back milennia has disappeared, to be replaced by a new one based on ethical and aesthetic values that are at present uncertain. Even if digital 'experiences' have the capacity to provoke physical sensations – and thus, it may be argued, they are in some sense 'real', online experiences are addictive, and these digital learning environments would arguably only turn out adolescents with the same kind of social withdrawal symptoms as those witnessed in the *hikikomori* in Japan (Teo & Gaw, 2010).

I have indicated, above, the moments in a language lesson where I suspect the conditions might be right for human flourishing, for what the Greeks conceived of as *eudaimonia*, and identified this notion with a string of wonderful qualities such as empathy, imagination and so on, which I believe, despite the pressures of governments and business intelligence, most educational institutions and teachers still prize. As Teräs et al (2020) rightly note, the Covid-19 pandemic has offered an opportunity to

> actively engage people, networks, projects, research, and public discussions to promote critically and reflectively informed praxis.

We need to discuss not only the eventual role of online learning in future educational panoramas, but to reflect on our real pedagogical priorities, and ask whether we

currently focus enough on *eudaimonia* in education, or whether it has too often been sacrificed for other goals of a materialistic or instrumental nature.

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