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WHAT HAPPENED TO US? THE EFFECTS OF ONLINE LEARNING ON EMBODIED ENCOUNTERS DURING COVID-19

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Abstract

The coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) shifted the paradigm of higher education in Finland and throughout the whole world. This paper is a phenomenological study that explores students' and teachers' experiences of studying and teaching during COVID-19 lockdowns in the lived space. The point of departure lies in the question: "What happened to us?". The focus of this study is on learning as an embodied and collaborative experience, where meaning-making takes place in a creative and interactive process. The corporeality of classroom learning is manifested in gestures, facial expressions, and embodied encounters in space. However, when learning is confined into the two-dimensional sphere of a computer screen, the embodied and sensuous aspect of communication is impaired.

Qualitative data collection was conducted on students' and teachers' focus group and individual interviews at the level of university of applied sciences. Apart from being observers, the authors are also positioned in the study as teachers who lived through COVID-19 online teaching and learning and thus carry a subjective memory of disembodiment and existential loneliness in front of a muted screen.

Finally, on a cognitive level, online teaching was efficiently organized in Finnish tertiary level education. Yet, the pandemic has left embodied memories that need to be addressed for understanding the collective experience and emotions surfacing from online learning during crisis.

Keywords: embodiment, education, COVID-19, well-being, lived-space, students, teachers, university.

1 INTRODUCTION

At the end of August 2021, we are allowed to start the semester on campus after having been in lockdown for the entire spring. The room is filled with more than forty freshmen hiding behind face masks. They are seated at a safe distance from one another. I have been invited to introduce myself and the curriculum for the subject I am teaching. By regulation, I am wearing a face mask as well. This should be routine after more than two decades of teaching at a university of applied sciences. Yet, I cannot utter one single word. My heart starts beating faster and my brain tells me to flee the "unfriendly" faceless crowd. Danger! "How interesting", I tell myself, my reaction being in accordance with the flight-or-fight behavior as presented in Polyvagal theory ([1], pp.50-69)

What happened to us? The scene described by Kiviaho-Kallio illustrates the current predicament of tertiary level education in post-pandemic Finland; after two years of on-off lockdowns the university campuses have not returned to normal, even if the management of most universities is advocating on-site, face-to-face classroom encounters.

The focus of this study is particularly on a holistic and embodied perception of the lived body. What kind of marks did the absence of real-world human encounters leave on us as teachers and learners? How does it feel to return? What happened to the learning community? To answer these questions, we have interviewed five senior lecturers and six students from Haaga-Helia Porvoo Campus, a 1000-student unit located in the historical city of Porvoo, 50km East from the capital Helsinki.

1.1 Finnish tertiary level education during COVID-19

Since its outbreak, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted higher education globally and Finnish tertiary level education has also been affected by lockdowns and hybrid models of teaching. On 16 March 2020, Arene – The Rectors' Conference of Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences, announced that all 145.000 students of Finland's 24 universities of applied sciences would move online. This transition of learning environment happened over one weekend. In the initial statement by Arene, it was declared that cameras should be kept shut during online teaching in order not to overload ICT systems [2].

From the initial stage, there was a tendency for cameras to be turned off during lectures. Furthermore, university lawyers referred to legislation – a demand for cameras to be kept open could be considered as trespassing a student's right to privacy at home. In February 2021, Panu Kalmi, Professor of Economics at University of Vaasa, started a Twitter tread on camera use in universities. His opening evoked a vivid discussion among faculty from higher education and the importance of live video image was widely recognized ([3]). Subsequently, Kalmi was interviewed on the matter by The Finnish Broadcasting Company, concluding that it was challenging for communication to lecture to people who materialize as black boxes ([4]).

Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences followed the national guidelines for restrictions. In the first wave of COVID-19 pandemic, distance learning started on 16 March 2020 and continued until the end of the spring semester. Haaga-Helia Porvoo Campus, the unit examined for this study, introduced in autumn 2020 a hybrid model allowing first semester students to meet on campus for their lessons. Students from higher semesters were only occasionally invited to Campus for face-to-face classes and were thus mainly taught online. At the end of November 2020, all learning activities were transferred online to remain there for the entire spring semester 2021. The rapid spread of the Delta variant over summer affected the start of autumn semester 2021; Haaga-Helia Porvoo Campus introduced a hybrid model, where the different semesters were in a four-week rotation, implying one week on campus and three weeks online. From the end of October, there was a possibility to return to classroom teaching, however, since many Porvoo Campus students had given up their student apartments, it was more practical to continue with the hybrid rotation model until the end of the autumn semester. With the arrival of the Omicron variant to Finland, spring semester 2022 started with a two-month government-imposed lockdown before face-to-face classroom teaching was resumed.

1.1.1 Wellbeing

The long periods of lockdowns and unpredictable changes in regulations described in the previous chapter had an impact on the wellbeing of university students. The Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (THL) reported at the end of autumn semester 2021 a decline in mental health among tertiary level students in both traditional universities and universities of applied sciences. According to The Finnish Student Health and Wellbeing Survey (KOTT), forty percent of female students reported symptoms of anxiety and depression ([5]).

Research Professor Jaana Suvisaari at THL was quoted as follows: "The teaching staff need to have contact with the students. Face-to-face encounters are particularly important for those students whose psychological distress is caused by study difficulties resulting from distance learning." [5] The restrictive measures in 2021 also had an impact on the student community in terms of loss of sense of community: "One in four female students and one in three male students reported that they did not feel they belonged to any group related to studying." (ibid.). For young higher education students, the lack of support provided by the study group would make studying more challenging, thus it is important to receive support from the university as well as to engage in activities organized by the student organization.

Finally, THL stated that a healthy lifestyle should be maintained, since even a small amount of physical exercise would have an impact on recovery, as suggested by the results of the survey: "One in three students engaging in physical activity experienced symptoms of anxiety and depression. One half of the students who did not engage in regular physical activity reported the same symptoms" (ibid.).

1.1.2 Porvoo Campus curricula and learning space

Haaga-Helia Porvoo Campus was chosen for this study due to its international reputation as an active learning community located in a contemporary learning environment. The university building was designed for collaborative learning with a focus on student empowerment and cooperation with the industry in real-life projects. The pedagogical approach is inquiry-based learning where problem-solving by students is promoted. In the Porvoo Campus pedagogical model, students work independently in teams and teachers serve as coaches during the learning process. Based on OECD [6] reports, collaborative learning has been recognized as an educational trend in teaching and as a transversal competence. During the process of teaching/collaborative learning students should develop general and relevant skills included in the curriculum [7].

Haaga-Helia Porvoo Campus opened its doors in January 2011, providing a contemporary learning environment with spaces for serendipitous encounters as well as meeting rooms for teamwork. In the new Porvoo Campus Curricula, the instructors gained the role of facilitator rather than traditional lecturer with given answers. "Work in this framework includes talking, work-sharing, and using different tools to create knowledge." ([8]p. 139). Ritalahti emphasizes the importance of motivation in inquiry-based

learning, where the student is the subject of his/her individual learning process. Students' learning stories and feedback included the following factors that influenced motivation in a positive manner: "support by other team members, group meetings, feeling of working efficiently together, taking responsibility, positive attitude, good communication, and problem solving." ([8]p. 146-47) Finally, Ritalahti also mentions the supportive impact of the contemporary learning facilities as an important factor in inquiry learning, since the campus enhances "freedom in learning" ([8]p. 148).

With the start of COVID-19, the content of Porvoo Campus curricula was transferred online. Yet, the inspiring and transparent physical learning environment could not as easily be moved into the confined space of a computer screen. Many teachers reported an increase in traditional lecturing at the expense of teamwork, as observed by Kiviaho-Kallio, senior lecturer at Porvoo Campus.

1.2 Embodiment

On a cognitive level, Finnish higher education seems to have organized ERT efficiently during the global pandemic. Yet, on an individual level there appears to be echoes of a sense of loss and disorientation. As described by Kiviaho-Kallio, teaching on zoom lacks multi-sensory stimuli – there is an absence of touch (2021). The phenomenological notion of the lived body is closely involved in the world and is building relationships with other people, environment, and things [9]. Snowber ([10], pp. 2-3) describes the body in terms of perception and understanding: "It is the lived body, which becomes the place of knowing, and the place that allows the skin, belly, fingers, feet, and shoulders to become the place of deep listening and expression". According to Snowber, "embodied places of inquiry open up a phenomenological understanding of who one is..." ([10], p.2) Merleau-Ponty regards the body as three-dimensionally embedded in space: "The body is the general medium for having a world." ([11], p.169)

A dichotomy of mind over body appears to be prevailing in western academic tradition, where the body is "relegated to a secondary or oppositional role, while an incorporeal reason is valorized" in accordance with the Cartesian tradition ([12] p. 3). Often, the body seems absent in the quotidian university setting, where minds are interacting on a cognitive level. We might lose focus of the body: "the surface body tends to disappear from thematic awareness precisely because it is that *from* which I exist in the world." ([12], p. 53). Additionally, Forgasz in her exploration of embodied pedagogies in teacher education concluded that "hierarchical privileging of mind/intellect over body/emotion are deeply entrenched in the academy" ([13], p.118).

While COVID-19 lockdowns continued over a longer period, the body resurfaced as the result of the strain imposed by the sedentary existence in front of a computer screen. This state may be reflected against *dys*-appearing body; as stated by Leder, in pain the body surfaces in its *dys*-appearing form: "*Dys-appearance* is a mode, though by no means the only one, through which the body *appears* to explicit awareness." ([12], p.86) Thus, in the static setting of online teaching we became aware of the discomfort felt in our bodies when being confined into the limited space in front of a computer. In addition, one consideration should be taken is that "experience of interacting with others in meaning - making processes supports learning" ([14] p.1466)

1.3 Black box - the lived body- and the self-window

The digital environment does not exclude the intercorporeal processes and even offers new opportunities [15]. For instance, video calling, or Zooming offers opportunities to see, hear, and touch someone's lives. However, online technology can also separate us socially [16]. It has been noted that technology support the already existing relationships among friends and relatives. Whereas during the lockdowns having meetings and lessons and other social interaction showed development of anxiety and frustration [17]

Given the circumstances in the midst of COVID-19, governments all round the world quickly adopted educational technology, commercial digital solutions, free learning platforms as solutions to teaching and learning[18]. However, many professionals have alerted that with digitalization the discourse and concepts of learning and teaching could be narrowed, and the participants reduced to objects [18]. Moreover, digital education has been characterized as unauthentic and thus depriving experience for both students and teachers[19], since communication and building relationships are scarce [20]. Important segment of building a relationship and communicating is truthfulness. Land [19] has described the visual notion as "anchor of truthfulness". Therefore, from the learners' and teachers' perspective,

the visual deprivation caused by the black box does not lay a strong foundation towards building a relationship nor a community.

Researchers in the field of education and phenomenology ([21], [22]) have stated that the body and the embodiment have a crucial role in learning. Therefore, when we “go online” changes are expected to happen in terms of boundary between the online space and the physical space [23]. In accordance with Merleau-Ponty [11], the perception of the night could be applied to our shift to online mode.

“When, for example, the world of clear and articulated objects is abolished, our perceptual being, now cut off from its world, sketches out a spatiality without things.”

The night can be taken as the unfamiliar space or, in our contemporary context, the online space. Merleau-Ponty [11] illuminated how the night penetrates one and influences the senses and even affects the memories, however, it does not change one’s personal identity. Yet, in terms of personal identity, communicating online and building a pedagogical relationship is regarded as changeable or adjustable [23] to the point of formation of online identity.

Finally, in addition to black boxes with names, during COVID-19 lecturers had to get adjusted to seeing a large- or small-scale mirror image of themselves during ERT. Bailenson [24] referred to this notion as “all day mirror” and specified that previous research dating from the 1970s’ till today was based on short intervals of looking in a mirror. This self- window staring notion has been reported to have a negative effect [25], because when people look at themselves, they tend to self-evaluate which can be stressful [24]. Furthermore, Bailenson [24] referred to a study by Ingram et al [26] showcasing the disastrous effect primarily on women and reported a high probability for women to experience depression. Bailenson [24] did not exclude the possibility of the longer self-focus to have a negative effect.

2 METHODOLOGY

The idea for this study emerged from a subjective and vague feeling of discomfort in the authors. The purpose of our study is to give voice to an experience that has not yet been fully understood and that we carry within us while the outcome of the global COVID-19 pandemic is still uncertain.

The approach to the question “What happened to us?” is qualitative phenomenological research conducted with the use of individual and Focus Group semi-structured interviews with students and teachers. The sampling of the interviewees was based on the campus where they studied or taught and the shared experience of living through the phenomenon we are researching.

The *Focus Group* (FG) is an effective method in gaining information about people’s feelings, experiences regarding a specific topic. It is an in-dept group interview, where everyone is free to express their thoughts and experiences [27]. The moderator of this interview stimulates discussion with questions and comments.

The individual semi-structured interview contained the same theory-based questions as the Focus Group. The analyses of the data gathered was done by Interpretive Phenomenological Analyses where topics were identified and organized in the emerging themes [28].

The justification for this approach is the need to explore the subjective experiences teachers and students had during the pandemic still in fresh memory. Particularly important for this study is the intimate relationship of the interviewer and the interviewees which led to open, detailed, and honest answers in describing their experiences.

3 RESULTS

To gain an insight into how students and teaching staff perceived the two-year period of uncertainty defined by lockdowns and hybrid models, the following themes emerged from the interviews: visceral knowledge, (dys-)embodied encounters online, physical learning space during lockdown, the effect of ERT on the learning community as well as lessons learnt for potential future disruptions in society.

3.1 Visceral knowledge

Our discussion may be initiated by the opening question in our interviews: “Where in your body would you place the memory of lockdown?” With this approach we strived to bring into focus visceral memories formed during the pandemic. Depending on the respondent, memories were placed in the feet and legs; in the core; as stiffness in the neck, in the heart as well as in the head and stomach. “Like I sometimes

I feel that I have this pressure in my head and I'm exploding..." The stagnation and alienation experienced in lockdown was summarized by a teacher in following words: "And then I just realized that I'm so stiff that I don't experience the outside world because I'm stuck in this hole where everything actually in me is stiff."

Finally, if we look at our question from a somatic therapy perspective, the body can express a memory inaccessible to the mind.

Narrative memory – the kind of memory that is stored with words or stories happens (mostly) in the hippocampus of the brain. The hippocampus is very small and has much less storage capacity than the nervous system so we end up having many more visceral memories than we do narrative ones [29].

3.2 Black box - Are you there? Embodied interaction and communication

Both students and teachers reported difficulties in communication. Considering embodied interaction, it seems that there was a lack of mutual visual and auditive contact.

"Stimulating and sustaining productive student interaction is difficult to achieve, requiring skillful planning, coordination and implementation of curriculum, pedagogy and technology" [30].

However, during ERT, teachers were not given time nor knowledge or skills to re-create their lectures and projects for the purposes of online learning. Teachers expressed their worries and admitted to not being skillful in using technology and even creating online lessons. Additionally, students expressed frustration when using technology, in terms of not knowing the proper usage, which influenced their learning process.

Teacher: "... so, I really tried to sort of make them to turn on their cameras, but they didn't, and they were really silent..."

Student: "There was a lot of cameras off, microphones off and not a lot of correspondence between. And I'm sure the teachers felt the same way because they're the ones trying to guide the course along. So yeah. Frustration."

Another teacher experienced the lack of interaction in the way her role as teacher changed: "But I think I'm more now of a kind of a visiting lecturer in my own classes. I'm more of a keynote speaker, I'm more of this person they look up to and they love to listen to, but we don't engage."

As described by the experiences above, the notion of *disembodiment* materialized – the absent body. Bodies were not present, no eye contact, no voice to be heard, no emotion to be felt. No empathy. At this instance, the notion of embodiment as "the body naturally stands outside itself through its ability to perceive across distance and move towards its goals" [31], takes another form, where the capacities are limited and prevented.

The Zoom/Teams classroom has not yet been specifically defined as a learning space. Therefore, in contrast to the traditional classroom, it is an unknown and uncertain place which raises a sense of concern regarding the students' learning experiences [19]. Wegerif [32] has identified a sense of loneliness and isolation due to a lack of instant response versus face-to-face communication when we are out there in the online world. Additionally, the invisibility of the students compromised the connection, and relationship. Furthermore, the "anchor of truthfulness" [19] could not dig deep into the process of building a relationship or a community.

In sum, we are not yet certain of the wide-ranging consequences COVID-19 has had on our lives, on the ways we work and connect with people. We still need to live with the ramification from the school closures, financial difficulties, cultural deprivation, loneliness, separation and disconnection from society [33].

3.3 When home becomes the office

During the interviews there were several remarks on the physical space. The lived-space where we live, work, socialize has now become a *constricted space* and suddenly we were displaced from our everyday life and dwelling [31]. We were forced to dwell, work, socialize with the medium technology in this disoriented space where meaning [31], and opportunities were reversed.

Teacher: "...kind of found that my home was just these four walls that were coming and getting closer at me. It just that my home didn't become my sanctuary anymore. I was just sitting on my couch or sitting

at my table day in, day out. And no, not for me. I prefer to go somewhere, physically, work-and then come back.”

Student: “... your home became the school and the workplace.”

Ng [34] has stated that the physical and social environment can hinder or support learning, through cognitive, physiological, and affective means. During ERT the spaces where students and teachers were working, have not been created as learning environments. Therefore, it can be claimed that the environmental stimuli (noise, family members present, comfort) affected motivation, attention, and learner engagement.

The students and the teachers indicated that the environment influenced their concentration, motivation, and attention.

Student A: “...I often got distracted and I started to like, do the dishes, vacuum or do something else. It was still better than studying in the bedroom that I would get sleepy and not focus at all...”

Student B: “...there were plenty of distractions”

It is evident that the transition between home and learning environment is of utmost importance to both students and teachers.

Student: “My kitchen table was where I was having lunch and everything and then I had like a couch where I would do like some of these studies. And then like a worktable where I was doing part of this study. So, I was like moving around and playing that, okay, now I will go for lunch to that lunch area. But I think that really helped at least me to separate places even though I have a studio.”

One teacher told that during the first spring she worked from home to save time, since the planning of lectures took so long. Moreover, initially working from home felt new and to some extent fun. However, when the lockdown continued, the teacher started feeling depressed at home and decided to work from campus: “Then I created my office here. So, I had the same office every single day, basically because there were no people. And, then I kind of created kind of a new maybe not an identity, but a new character for myself called The Lonely, Lonely Teacher, sitting in 0001 on campus. And it kind of made me laugh.”

3.4 Online learning Community – ERT community

The online learning community (OLC) is created online round the common interest of the members, linkage, or interaction with focus on learning [35]. Building a safe and healthy environment is a foundation to building the OLC. During the ERT we faced challenges that interfered with the process of OLC creation. Apart from the physical space we have already mentioned, time could be a constraint. One academic year, or semester, or even a period could be too short to create or grow an online learning community. Additionally, for various reasons students could face barriers when doing their assignments, discussions and idea sharing [35].

Student: “...” structuring my ideas and my time has always been a little bit difficult for me.”

Before the ERT, higher education in Finland was based on contact teaching and suddenly we all needed to become proficient online users.

Student: “I guess it's the lecturers' job to really reassure them that it's a safe space and that even though you're supposed to be here obligatory, it's still should feel like an open environment for them to be able to really open their cameras and share the setting that they're, in their opinion, and really make that personalization. Or by having small tasks like a song before the lesson or sharing your favorite coffee mug when it's like a stressful morning.”

As Chen [35] stated creating a community is the most important stage, and students should “feel comfortable, have willingness to share their ideas and experiences”

Student: “The part the online portal or dimension is missing is the small interaction, because online doesn't allow you to have those little moments in between. Once you come to a meeting it is 10 am sharp and then you finish and then you leave. So, there is not that three minutes before when you have a chat with your friends, or afterwards. That's the biggest change. And having this decrease of these interactions and everything, then you lose that connection and trust.”

As explored and presented in this study, during the pandemic students and teachers reported feelings of loneliness, depression, anxiety due to seclusion. Moreover, important element of ERT is the

abruptness or emergency in which we had to adopt to the online environment, making us vulnerable. Naturally, novice students and teachers need to devote more time in creating an online learning community [36].

Student 1: "...these times were very, very alone, very strange times, kind of alien times, in my opinion."

Student 2: "I hear very much mentioning of the community when you study and in terms of technology, somehow maybe technology isn't developed enough, having being close to what it is like-being in a room with people."

Fundamentally, we all need to belong as we need love based on psychologists ranking [37]. Therefore, creating a community whether it is online or offline is essential.

3.5 Lessons to be learned for the future

When examining government-imposed COVID-19 regulations in Finland, these appear to have been rather inconsistent and at times even complex or contradictory. Future outbreaks are likely to occur, and we need to re-examine the data and experiences [38]. The policy makers thus need to take into consideration many elements that were previously overlooked. In this chapter we will list a few ideas that emerged from the interviews.

Teacher 1: The leaders have to identify this people (visionary, luminary people) in the organization (country) and empower them because they will show the way. And unfortunately, in this type of pandemic that hasn't been done. We are victims of bureaucracy, basically. You have been saying better to do nothing, you know? No. I think we need to be braver, and we need to find these people who can.

Teacher 2: "I have to have a good talk with myself. I tried to have this talk with my superior and I tried to have this talk with a lot of people. But like I said, there's no echo there except for my own voice. So I would need to sit down and really discuss."

Student: "... Would maybe give an advice to put that extra effort and go the extra mile to talk to people. Because just by sharing stories, you see their struggle and maybe you can relate. And that's the place where you can build trust and again, not feel alone."

"...when it comes to maybe university. I believe that empathizing and personalization is something that could go a long way. ..."

"... I wish we could find the kind of more human way..."

In sum, in future disruptions we would need to take more informed decisions rather than rush ahead with seeming efficiency. Education is much more than transferring information. In modern learning communities, communication needs to work in both directions and there should be a dialogue between students and facilitators. This principle does not materialize if we get reduced to black boxes with a name.

Personalized online education might be a solution for the future. In a webinar for Haaga-Helia in January 2022, titled "Innovating the online experience and increasing interaction", Professor Jill Hellman of Cornell University gave an intriguing example of how to welcome the individual student to an online course: for an online course she had contracted a street artist to write all the course participants' names on a wall in New York. This event was filmed and shown as a video at the beginning of the online course. At the end, as learners we have a need to be recognized as our unique selves with a voice of our own.

4 CONCLUSION

This study stemmed from our personal concern for our students' as well as our own wellbeing during COVID-19 pandemic. As practitioners, we noticed in ourselves frustration, fatigue and heightened embodied awareness due to a sedentary existence in front of the computer. During the interviews, we micro-tracked the facial expressions of the interviewees and for many the memories of lockdown seemed to evoke both mental and physical pain. Student respondents reported the feeling of loss, since normal student life outside classes was cancelled, except for some online events.

Between COVID-19 lockdowns, when allowed back to Campus, the teacher collegium used to say that "we are guineapigs in a global experiment." Accordingly, later there will certainly be in-depth studies on the impact of the pandemic on learning communities. With this paper we strived to make meaning of our experiences from the practitioner perspective. As author, Kiviaho-Kallio felt sadness and loss – rarely would the writing of a conference paper manifest itself as numbness in the legs, a visceral memory from hours of online teaching. "How could they do this to us?" There were even some tears shed when recalling

the existential loneliness when staring at black boxes with just a name. The second writer, Ana Dimkar, distinctly remembers losing the authentic self and creating an online persona who is lacking courage and willingness to interact. Ultimately, writing this paper could be seen as a step towards the “new normal”.

To return to our research question: What happened to us? We approached this issue from a phenomenological perception and summed up the experiences of our students and colleagues. In conclusion, we have faced many difficulties and challenges as societies and as individuals. Thus, the rehabilitation of our societies should be of primary concern, since the younger generations seem to have taken a disproportionately harsh blow from government-imposed regulations.

To end, we give the voice to a student who started semester 2021 with an interesting commission for celebrating Porvoo 675th anniversary. However, later this semester project was cancelled due to COVID19 restrictions. Thus, summing up the sentiments shared by university student throughout Finland:

“I was really angry. Like really, really angry. Why did they put us in this situation? And then there was... I don't remember if it was the nightclubs open, but there was a lot of like inequality - that some people could live their own lives normally. But then that we who actually want to study and go ahead in our career we cannot, but people can go to bars drinking. So, it didn't feel very fair.

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