

Date: 17 August 2020

This text presents an excerpted interpretation of interviews conducted in the Mercator project “Social Innovations in the Context of the Coronavirus Crisis: Is There Potential for Social-Ecological Transformations?” The interview data are the property of the project and may not be used for other purposes. The data were prepared for the [Higher Education Summit](#) (#HES2020) to provide a basis for discussion in the “COVID-19 Round Table” on 1 September 2020. If you are interested in learning more about the interview questions, please contact: sustainability@cde.unibe.ch

What has the coronavirus crisis done to teaching?

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In between the new digital “clouds” there is room for innovative forms of teaching and learning; this can bring new light into conventional teaching. Based on 19 qualitative interviews with 4 students and 15 lecturers in the spring 2020 semester, we documented those transformative moments in teaching that we believe could particularly contribute to a transformation towards sustainable development.

At the beginning of the spring 2020 semester, lecturers and students had to switch to “distance” teaching and learning from one day to the next. As a consequence, a stronger appreciation for face-to-face instruction emerged and new opportunities opened up for self-reflection in the teaching profession. In situations where students are given more personal responsibility, there is a risk of magnifying social differences. Students differ in their ability to take their learning process into their own hands. This is partly determined by their social environment and background. Students from less-educated backgrounds typically have more difficulty planning and implementing their learning process independently. This has become particularly apparent during the coronavirus crisis, as greater importance has been attached to personal responsibility. In terms of suitable measures in response, most interviewees agreed on the need for the following: promotion of self-reflection and establishment of new spaces in which students, their needs, and their resources can be placed at the centre. However, this in turn requires a transformation at the institutional level.

Sensory experience of virtual spaces

Universities offer a physical space of sensory experience and perception. If this space is dissolved and moved to the digital realm, sensory experience must first be restored in the new virtual space. People’s private spaces suddenly become visible, and this demands an appropriate way of being handled.

Further, the role of an individual in a child’s bedroom differs from their role in the “neutral” seminar room. Trust was repeatedly mentioned as an important keyword, not only because of the visibility of private spaces, but also due to the lack of other ways of perceiving that can foster sensitivity. One lecturer illustrated it this way: “The unspoken remains unsaid – that’s a limitation” (lecturer, interviewee 4). This quotation captures the increased difficulty of conjuring a sense of togetherness when the nonverbal dimension is lost. The range of (sensory) perception, opportunities to get involved, and lastly individual subjectivity are much wider in physical space. “What otherwise occurs between the lines – between the

students themselves, and with the lecturer – is lost [in the virtual space]” (lecturer, interviewee 18). As a consequence, it is essential to repeatedly ask for feedback from students. Often the realization that something is not working arrives too late, and the online course has already been ended with the push of a button. The experience of packing things up and going out together, and associated personal interactions, were also missing in the virtual space.

In retrospect, it became clear that many students felt very frustrated and did not find the right vehicles to express their criticisms or needs that would otherwise probably have been sensed in person.

A new space is established

Creation of a virtual “safe space” proved very challenging. But the extraordinary situation also led to a shared feeling between students and lecturers of being similarly impacted; personal experiences were exchanged, and informal interactions became possible. The teachers and students became a team, as the circumstances were new for everyone and they had to rely on one another. In this way, the “open and yet protected” space could also have an encouraging effect (lecturer, interviewee 4). Careful interaction with the virtual space of the students led to a new kind of search for mutual, deeper exchange going beyond the surface topical level. Lecturers were also able to view their loss of control in a positive light, as it sometimes led to a change in perspective, accompanied by a deeper sense of empathy. “But I also need more experience in this area. Listening and being listened to – it’s important” (lecturer, interviewee 4). The questions that the lecturers asked themselves in this new situation of virtual space were very different. But they all pointed in the direction of stronger orientation on the needs of students. “How do we meet the students where they are?”, “How much work is too much?” (lecturer, interviewee 8); “What’s the minimum knowledge that students ‘must’ learn?” (lecturer, interviewee 7). Some also asked themselves: What competencies do we really want to promote? According to some interviewees, the debate over competencies should be newly conducted, and could be given new impetus, based on people’s experiences with the COVID-19 situation.

Competencies and new perspectives in the virtual space

Without taking into account students’ social background, resources, and needs, it scarcely seemed possible to manage the new situation in a beneficial way. Intensified consideration of students’ perspectives motivated many lecturers to adopt a new form of competency-oriented teaching. When lecturers create videos to guide students for concrete exercises for the first time, they imagine themselves in the shoes of students. One lecturer described it as follows: “I was no longer on the screen, but rather in the screen” (lecturer, interviewee 4).

New media can also prove useful beyond the seminar room. Intelligent use of such tools can, for example, lead to new ways of employing time-appropriate digital media (videos, video conferences, podcasts, etc.) and making science accessible to society. In this way, inclusion of new media can act as a bridge between science and society, as well as promoting fact-oriented, critical engagement with data in the digital age.

One lecturer spoke of a transfer of learning that took place in the virtual space. Longer self-organized tasks and concepts of “flipped classrooms” were also utilized for teaching virtually. “This meant freedom for good students, but presented an added burden for less-advanced students” (lecturer, interviewee 1), said one lecturer, and explained that such methods put less socially active learners at a disadvantage, adding: “There’s a real risk of intensifying social differences” (lecturer, interviewee 1). According to the interviews, students who did not adapt well to virtual instruction tended to prefer frontal instruction and pure knowledge transfer, rather than taking advantage of the independence and creativity afforded them by new pedagogical or didactic approaches. The new approaches quickly became overwhelming and led to stagnation in the learning process of these students.

Maintaining control?

One question frequently raised by lecturers was how to control what contents had been learned and what form of examination was appropriate. It became apparent that changing the form of teaching alone was not beneficial and could simply become an additional burden to students unless the form of assessment was also adapted. It was necessary for lecturers to give up their demand for control and instead adopt a competency-oriented approach. “Control question? How can it be fulfilled?” (lecturer, interviewee 7). What form must a learning assessment take in order to evaluate acquisition or development of competencies, rather than just rote transfer of knowledge? One student explained that a more open teaching and assessment style is needed to promote individual learning, particularly during the coronavirus situation, and that this can enable everyone to recognize and fulfil their personal needs.

We are not alone in (virtual) space

Learning is not only an individual activity – learning together is also critical. Much is lost without social contact and social creativity. We have known for a long time that learning together is better, as one lecturer observed. The increased complexity of student collaboration when solely using virtual tools led students to desire more frontal instruction. This did not point towards fostering ESD, but rather, quite the opposite, towards possible self-isolation of students. Reasons for wanting frontal instruction included more challenging group dynamics in the virtual space, non-binding team building, and added disadvantages for learners who already had difficulties with group processes in face-to-face instruction. Lecturers reported of student teams who were unable to grow together; this resulted in hardened conflicts. “Arguing isn’t possible online,” one student reported to his lecturer. The latter agreed that emotions were more difficult to express and conflicts more difficult to resolve (lecturer, interviewee 16). At the same time, lecturers also reported of students who had an easier time joining in online. The clear structure of the virtual space could be used to enable a more egalitarian distribution of speaking opportunities during seminar sessions. This was evident in increased participation using the online chat function, but avoidance of picture and sound was also noted. Issues of data protection and anonymity also come up here, but are beyond the scope of the present discussion.

In addition to the individual seminar space, the broader environment is also changing in the course of the coronavirus crisis. Integration of international partners has given rise to stronger cooperation between the global South and North. “The ease of bringing in people from outside the university and also people from the South, that will remain, plus communicating more globally, not always only with old white men, but instead including people from other cultures as well as practitioners” (lecturer, interviewee 1). An open-minded “classroom” is emerging that not only enables new networks and potentials, but can also inspire a feeling of positive globalization. Against this background of a growing “we feeling”, it becomes easier to address global issues and to facilitate collaboration between different countries: “We’re all sitting in the same boat, this creates hope for an open world of potentials” (lecturer, interviewee 7).

An “aha” experience enables profound changes

“Crisis and change was used as an example of the proof of quick change” (lecturer, interviewee 7). The COVID-19 crisis shows that transformation is possible – even quickly: It is an “aha” experience of change that now requires reflection and systemization of insights. Many instructors wish to have a good summary of people’s individual experiences as well as sustainable teaching-related outputs. The time has come for reflection on best practices and a strengthened focus on teacher development. The need for exchange between lecturers received more attention in the spring 2020 semester and was repeatedly cited by several interviewees. Such engagement on the part of lecturers could lead to pedagogical momentum in the direction of transformative learning. However, teaching cannot be transformed without institutional and

structural changes. Multiple lecturers agreed on this point. Transformative learning requires a larger context than that provided by an individual seminar, and this context must be enabled by educational institutions. Resources are needed to ensure quality and to integrate new vehicles of instruction as well as new forms of teaching and learning. Exclusively female teachers reported of lack of time for adequate preparation due to childcare. They also mentioned shortage of human resources for implementation of transformative learning approaches in their classes. Digital teaching and transformative learning require more time than conventional teaching/learning formats, and demand thorough preparations. These should be directly budgeted, for example, similar to the physical preparation of rooms by technical staff in the case of in-person instruction. Some hinted at the lack of appreciation for teaching in the academy, which is concretely reflected in the resources given to lecturers for teaching. Others, by contrast, see the university as a top-down lever that can realize structural changes via new requirements. A stronger commitment towards transformative learning on the part of universities would increase the pressure for new teaching forms oriented on the needs of students, according to the hope of some lecturers.

How far can we get on a voluntary basis?

The coronavirus crisis shows us how a forced transformation can occur. The question now arises as to whether the pressure from the current crisis is enough to fundamentally change (higher) education and whether the teaching profession is willing and able to (further) question its norms and continue transforming itself. Potential exists on a variety of levels, ranging from the reorientation of roles and self-conceptions among students and lecturers to the question of promoting competencies, improving teaching/learning assessment and control, integrating interdisciplinary actors in teaching, up to and including institutional change and possible top-down restructuring of educational institutions. There are a number of points of entry that should be explored and taken advantage of.

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