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What does it mean to be present in distance learning? Reflections on pedagogy and the discipline of International Relations in the context of the pandemic[1]

O que é estar presente no processo de ensino à distância? Refletindo sobre pedagogia e a disciplina de Relações Internacionais no contexto de pandemia

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Abstract: What distance learning brought to the classroom was some rupture in many cases, but it also provoked us into invest even more in formats and processes. In the case of International Relations, a discipline in which formation does not presuppose pedagogical training, the pandemic may represent an important turning point. We propose to think of three "interstices" insofar as they ask what it means to be "present" in the classroom. We deal with the way in which the digital architecture in which we operate divides us into pieces of information and what the role is of pedagogical practice in challenging this form of digital existence, even in times of remote education. We also talk about the role of narratives as ways to promote contiguity, calling for a qualified presence in the conversation. Finally, we look at how teaching can be permeated by constructions of alternative imaginaries in such ways as to guarantee presence in this construction. For all these reflections, we offer cases of "in-class" activities to extend this contiguity in terms of a decompression of narrative arcs, that is, in defiance of the sometimes divisive and superficial engagement of digital times.

Keywords: Presence; Distance Learning; Digital Architecture; Narrative; Futures.

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Resumo: O que o ensino à distância trouxe para a sala de aula foi uma ruptura, em muitos casos, mas ele também nos provocou a investir ainda mais em formatos e processos. No caso das Relações Internacionais, uma disciplina cuja formação não pressupõe treinamento pedagógico, a pandemia talvez represente um ponto de inflexão importante. Propomos pensar três "interstícios" na medida em que indagam o que significa estar presente na sala de aula. Tratamos da maneira como a arquitetura digital em que nos inserimos nos divide em parcelas de informação e sobre qual é o papel da prática pedagógica em desafiar essa forma de existência digital, mesmo em tempos de ensino remoto. Falamos também do papel das narrativas como formas de promover contiguidade, clamando por uma presença qualificada na conversa. Por último, olhamos para como o ensino pode ser atravessado por construções de imaginários alternativos de tais modos a garantir presença nessa construção. Para todas essas reflexões, oferecemos casos de atividades "em sala" para o prolongamento dessa contiguidade em termos de uma descompressão de arcos narrativos, ou seja, em desafio ao engajamento por vezes decisivo e superficial dos tempos digitais.

Palavras-chave: Presença; Ensino à Distância; Arquitetura Digital; Narrativa; Futuros.

1. Introduction

In Brazil, in order to teach in higher education, a person is usually required to have at least a *lato sensu* graduate certificate in the case of private universities, and a *stricto sensu* graduate degree (e.g. Masters or PhD) for public universities. These positions, therefore, do not necessarily require training in the field of Education. This is a common fact in many countries. However, especially in face of recent movements for the decolonization of knowledge and of universities (Grosfoguel, 2013; Joseph Mbembe, 2016) and in view of debates on the relationship between science and politics in the classroom (Jong, Icaza, & Rutazibwa, 2018), discussions about pedagogical training for the teaching profession are increasingly important. After all, the challenges of this work have multiplied, especially in the current COVID-19 pandemic context: there are still numerous cases of anxiety, depression, and panic among students and faculty, associated with difficulties and doubts posed by the pandemic, isolation measures, and current economic and political crises (Levecque *et al.*, 2017). Even those least affected by these factors find themselves struggling to maintain levels of concentration and dedication when, in some cases (see articles in this special issue), we are already heading towards the end of the second year of distance learning (DL)[4]. Since students and faculty members

[4] Emergency remote learning refers to the set of online responses to the educational challenges generated by the impossibility of face-to-face classroom interaction in the pandemic context. Remote learning differs from distance learning, which comprises the more planned systematization of forms of study that do not require the presence of teachers and students in the same place (Veiga, et al. 1998). On the other hand, in 2021, after almost two years of isolation measures, one can perhaps no longer talk about *emergency* remote

are together as an academic community in this scenario, it is important for us to engage in these reflections together as well, as seen in the teacher/student co-authorship of this article.

In this sense, if the pandemic has caused countless disruptions, it has also been a time to reinvent and experiment. Surrounded by care, as a material, affective, and ethical practice (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017), these movements can foster important reflections, which should take root in the way we practice pedagogy.

We propose three paths of reflection, drawing from a broader contemporary context of the pedagogy/market relationship: (i) the digital architecture of DL and its interstices with digital existence in a global political economy of knowledge; (ii) the role of narratives and its interstices with the temporal experience of distance pedagogy, and (iii) the imagination of possible futures and its interstices with the guarantee of presence.

Thus, we firstly aim to practice a critical gaze at the digital architecture in which we are living the DL experience. In the words of Hassan and Sutherland (2017, p. 10), digital logic "moves us towards a virtual world that has no analogue in the complex ecologies of organisms that comprise life on Earth – and of which humans are a component part." A "virtual world," on the other hand, can be understood as "a simulated environment" that is distinguished from the material or physical world by the "types of experience available for the user afforded by the combination of different technical features, most notably the avatar" (Girvan, 2018, p. 1903). It is important to note that the analog and the digital are not separated by a clear boundary. As stated by several authors, there are no linearities; we are talking about complex sociotechnical mediations that are unpredictable in their crossings and their resonances (Cesarino *et al*, 2021; Segata and Rifiotis, 2021).

Any digital architecture is an inextricable part of a global political economy (Zuboff, 2019), which means that economic interests are absolutely enmeshed in our digital social relations as well. Inspired by the work of Gilles Deleuze, Tiziana Terranova (2004, p. 34) suggests that in the digital world we become "*dividuals*", that is, the result of "the decomposition of individuals into data clouds subject to automated integration and disintegration." Automated integration is driven by a whole market of information targeting for individuals, or consumers – of products, ideas, and ideologies. This

learning. Thus, throughout the article we have chosen to use both terms interchangeably, without the addition of "emergency".

phenomenon leads us to the first reflection: what does it mean to be present today in this digital architecture, facing so many fragments of us? And what is the impact of these reconfigurations of presence for the construction of collectives, the formation of shared dreams, and the pedagogical practice in which we usually attempt to nurture and make sense of these constructions (Freire, 2013)? Here we evoke the way Isabelle Stengers mobilizes the term "presence" in her cosmopolitical proposal, referring to that which produces an interstice, that is, slows down the assertions of what we know and invites us to hesitate about the way we consider ourselves authorized to make these assertions (2005, p. 995). We share some inquiries about the digital classroom as a space that forces us to engage in self-reflection on the quality of conversations we have in class.

As we become digital beings, decomposed into infinitely recombinable particles, some authors argue that we are losing important components of the analog rhythm of life: in the acceleration and quantity of everything we consume in this digital medium, we often lose the "flow" (Hassan & Sutherland, 2017, p. 141). This means there is little room, in this presentist existence, either for the past or for the construction of futures: the future takes on, tacitly, a somewhat inevitable character; it follows the natural path of technological advancement, something we inhabit and trust enough to refrain from taking part in its construction. With this, the analog duration of experiences and narratives has been set aside, with crucial impact on how we relate and, therefore, how we engage in dialogue in the democratic space (Rocha de Siqueira, forthcoming). It is in this sense that we build the second path of reflection of this article, presenting some attempts to reenact this analogical experience even in DL. To this end, we will address the use of fictional literature in the classroom.

The third path of reflection consists in dreaming together, through "hope" ("esperançar") as a pedagogical practice that is even more crucial today. To this end, we draw inspiration from the works of Paulo Freire (2013), bell hooks (1994), and Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (2018) regarding the role of theorizing and education as practices of freedom and solidarity. In this respect, DL has in a way opened up possibilities for exchanges that were normally prevented by geographical distance and financial costs. DL, in this case, helps us look for inspiration wherever it seems possible to find them. Faced with the impossibility of lamenting some a priori "impossibles" (the distant and unattainable), what lessons does remote learning offer us for introducing creativity and radical openness into pedagogical practice?

Methodologically, therefore, the article mobilizes narratives, presence, and dreams as interstices (Stengers, 2005). The aim is to explore case studies of pedagogical practice in the context of a digital architecture whose processes of acceleration, compartmentalization, and commodification did not arise with the pandemic, but are intensified and expanded by it. To this end, we as teacher and student have collaborated by gathering autobiographical elements of classroom experiences for this exercise of theorizing as a practice of freedom (Freire, 2011, 2013, 2019; hooks, 1994). Rather than sharing experiences lived by both authors in their completeness, the main goal is to promote, among ourselves, the "theoretical talk" proposed by hooks (1994, p. 70), contributing to analyses on DL in IR at the current context. Several iterations of these talks, between us, have led to the present text.

2. Challenges of digital architecture

In this section, we start by contextualizing the pedagogical practices that will be analyzed and proposed in the following sections, in terms of global economic, political, and social dynamics. As expressed above, digital existence did not start with the pandemic and, in education, it did not start with DL. However, the digitality that was already gaining strength has now taken on more dramatic contours. The use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) by educational institutions already raised important concerns before the pandemic, such as the lack of transparency in partnerships between companies and universities regarding the management of data, messaging, and the creation of virtual rooms (Cruz *et al.* 2019). In an attempt to gather more information about these agreements and analyze their effects, *Observatório Educação Vigiada* [Surveilled Education Observatory][5] was created. The Observatory is a scientific dissemination initiative that aims to promote literacy and spread information on "the platformization of public education in Brazil and South America". The Observatory's research uses open-source software to map the data centers in which educational institutions' e-mail servers are hosted[6]. Their goal is to demonstrate the reach of tech companies within the organizational dynamics of public institutions in the education sector. In 2016, their research showed that about 45% of public universities in Brazil used Google or Microsoft servers instead of their own servers or other ways to host their email

[5] See Observatório Educação Vigiada. Available at: https://educacaovigiada.org.br/pt/sobre.html. Access: October 6, 2021.
[6] The program can be found at: https://gitlab.com/ccsl-ufpa/get-mx-universities/. Access: October 6, 2021.

service (Cruz et al., 2019, pp. 12-13). By 2021, of the 144 institutions analyzed, 79% used private solutions[7]. These agreements grew significantly during the pandemic: from 63% in March to 74% in October 2020 (Cruz and Venturini, 2020, p. 1069).

One of the main theoretical foundations of the Observatory's work is the concept of surveillance capitalism, developed by Zuboff (2019, p. 11). It suggests that the extraction of marketable digital data for advertising purposes has inaugurated a type of capitalism in which the appropriation of work, land, and wealth, a hallmark of industrial capitalism, has been supplanted by the appropriation of "private experience for translation into fungible commodities that are rapidly swept up into the exhilarating life of the market." At first, this data was mainly a by-product of users' activity. Under increasing pressure from investors, it started to be "hunted aggressively, procured, and accumulated – largely through unilateral operations designed to evade individual awareness and thus bypass individual decision rights" (Ibid., p. 13). In this capitalism, the dimension of surveillance is composed through the reduction of interactions, emotions, and complexities that constitute human experience to "measurable observable behavior," a "free raw material" for the sale of targeted products (Zuboff, 2019, pp. 20 and 13). Interacting with each other, digital technologies form a "global architecture that renders, monitors, computes, and modifies, replacing the engineering of souls with the engineering of behavior" (Ibid., p. 20).

The most worrisome contours of this architecture are expressed in the way they interfere with forms of social participation and collective action. Zuboff (2019, p. 21) understands that, in this manifestation of capitalism, tech companies establish an intense relationship of dependency with populations that, in industrial capitalism, had been framed as consumers – and who are now (re)conceptualized "as undifferentiated 'users.'" We, as users, mobilize ICTs as tools for the most varied daily tasks, and it becomes a great challenge to perform basic activities without any connection to Big Data networks, for example. Interaction between economic interests and everyday social relations is thus intensely deepened, "as the same channels that we rely on for daily logistics, social interaction, work, education, health care, access to products and services, and much more" also serve to ensure the flows of surveillance capitalism (Ibid., p. 25).

[7] Available at: https://educacaovigiada.org.br/pt/mapeamento/brasil/. Access: October 6, 2021.

This is not to say, however, that ICTs are only a destructive force. Cruz and Venturini (2020, pp. 1072 and 1076) suggest that the educational platforms offered by tech companies make it possible to handle the complex tasks required by remote learning, such as real-time interaction between a large number of teachers and students, and the flexibility of this interaction across different types of devices.

In this sense, rather than deciding whether to vilify or celebrate the increasing integration of ICTs into pedagogical practice, it is important to highlight the moral and political challenges and dilemmas that arise in this integration, which have been exacerbated by the isolation measures against COVID-19. Considering the problematic integration of ICTs into our daily lives, one of the challenges lies in coping with the commodification of experience in a pedagogical context in which the use of digital technologies has become not only useful, but a requirement for collective health. This is a question that is central to pedagogical practice, not only because education is one of the aspects of our daily life that is imbricated with technologies, but because it centrally affects the conditions of presence in the classroom. As hooks (1994, p. 8) puts it, the interest in "hearing one another's voices, in recognizing one another's presence" is associated with "[s]eeing the classroom always as a communal place", which in turn increases the likelihood of "creating and sustaining a learning community."

The global architecture of surveillance capitalism intervenes in this communal presence and its values, by turning us into "dividuals" in a continuous process of integration and disintegration. The flow of this process challenges what we can know and experience in terms of the social interactions that enable the construction of communities. It establishes what Hassan and Sutherland (2017, p. 138) call "efficiency-oriented acceleration in social relations." In digital life, social relations matter to the extent that they are able to generate, as quickly as possible, the next combination of data. However, as Estévez (2009, p. 402) puts it, in a digital time, "we cannot see the continuity of movements crossing space and time to produce an effect", since computers "do not operate physically like something we could recognize in nature [...]." This erasing of continuity is a pedagogical challenge mainly because of the aspects of our sociability that we no longer experience in the dynamics of digital time.

In other words, there is a complexity in the space-time of our encounters that is hardly captured by digitality. In the exercise of participating in the life of the other (hooks, 1994), that relation constitutes its own effects and dynamics; it is thus not reducible to the

previously existing behavior of either one of the subjects who relate, nor to any "common denominator of sameness" (Zuboff, 2019, p. 21). Paying attention to this unpredictability is essential in building learning communities, as the emergence of reflections and needs that had not been previously planned reveals the importance of adapting class plans so that everyone feels like a participant whose voice is heard (hooks, 1994, p. 8).

In digital logic, however, even the ability to start and end a class with a few clicks on Google Meets or Zoom interfaces can be taken as an indication of how quickly interactions can be done and undone in virtual space. Moreover, the collectivities formed in these interactions are sometimes simultaneous: "students" of a university course, for example, enter online classes already as "users" of a videoconferencing platform and as "potential buyers" of a premium package of this platform, or of related products.

In this architecture, the fractions that make us "dividuals" are also recomposed in a process of datafication (Segata and Rifiotis, 2021) that imposes enormous challenges on our agency: "we are temporary members of different emergent categories" (Cheney-Lippold, 2017, p. 4), since "there is no single, static sense of us but rather an untold number of competing, modulating interpretations of data that make up who we are" (Ibid., p. 27). In this way, not only are particularities disintegrated, but "collectives" are formed without each person being present – the famous "profiles," taking shortcuts and thus collapsing recognition dynamics (Campanella, 2021).

According to Cesarino, Walz, and Balistieri (forthcoming), this kind of platformization generates "a highly fragmented landscape [...]. These worlds are only integrated in and by each individual user's cognitive process, which Van Zoonen (2012) has called 'I-pistemology'", in which the measure of truth is individual experience and opinion. Van Zoonen's (2012) research has shown that all these phenomena go together: surveillance or platform capitalism; the datafication and digitalization of life (see also Segata and Rifiotis, 2021); and a general distrust in institutions, replaced with an epistemology of the self. We can say that between the reliance on innovation and on the self, therefore, the analog duration and performance of experiences and narratives, with their interruptions, surprises, unpredictability, and their investment in certain flows, are left aside. More importantly, this loss has a crucial impact on how we relate to each other and, thus, how we engage in dialogue in the democratic space (Rocha de Siqueira, forthcoming). A crucial question, therefore, is: how can we recognize something of us and among us in this fragmented presence?

3. First interstice: how to be present in remote learning?

Perhaps one of the most common complaints from teachers in this period of remote learning has been about this fragmentation: the fact that they are often communicating with names written on little black screens or, at most, with small pictures, because several students would not turn on their cameras in the digital classroom. This can happen for any number of reasons, and empathy invites us to keep some possibilities in mind, such as circumstances in the students' home and the need to take care of other duties simultaneously. The aesthetics of a big screen full of small black screens with only names or pictures is in itself a powerful message, capable of inhibiting or discouraging both students and teachers. The emotions in facial expressions, the small reactions to what was said, the eye contact that allows one to ascertain interest are lost; and that becomes a snowball, as each decrease in interaction raises the cost to the student who would like to interact, but ends up believing that the effort of interruption may not be worth it. Some students compensate in the chat box by commenting in real time, but there is difficulty in monitoring the few connected screens in addition to the slides and the chat, and the written language has its own time and functioning.

What does it mean to actually be present in a virtual classroom? How many presences are there when half the group has their cameras off? Or does it not necessarily make a difference? What is the difference between in person and virtual presence for pedagogical practice?

We want to stimulate reflection along two important lines to think about IR in particular: an area in which it is common, especially in more traditional views of the discipline, to take as classical research objects that which is geographically distant. If in the Social Sciences, for example, the family is likely a frequent research topic, in IR themes such as the war in Iraq or the crossing of refugees in the Mediterranean Sea tend to be as frequently researched as they are distant from the everyday realities of their researchers. As a result, there is much debate about the ethical and political implications of doing science when the researcher does not live near the people she is writing about, nor does she have many elements with which to connect her reality and her research object.[8] We can state that "taking distance geographically", in the IR discipline, has clear

[8] Here the knowledge of feminist theorists is of utmost importance for the entire field and other areas of the Social Sciences. See, for example, Hill Collins, 2002; Enloe, 2014; Ballestrin, 2017. We have chosen, here,

"epistemological consequences" (Freire, 2013, p. 58) for an entire form of scientific practice that has become hegemonic or common sense, and that has only recently started to be disputed.

If we add to this the absence of pedagogical training (which is not particular to IR), we are left with an important question: to what extent does the non-presence of research objects in the discipline, with which we have gotten used, find some resonance with a certain non-presence in pedagogical practice? And here we do not restrict this non-presence to DL, precisely because we may take advantage of this moment to reflect on the changes DL has brought to this qualified classroom presence, in the case of pedagogical practice in IR.

We now briefly dwell on this concept of presence, which we borrow from Stengers (2005). In her concern with favoring "democratic habits" and "slowing down" thinking, we find parallels with the attempt to place "interstices" in the presentism of digital life into which DL has inevitably dragged us with even greater force. By recovering the abstract figure of the "idiot" from Deleuze, who borrowed it from Dostoïevski, Stengers wants to highlight the character "who resists the consensual way in which the situation is presented and in which emergencies mobilize thought or action" (p. 994). The insistence on dismantling emergency is associated with the desire to question the conditions under which authority is attributed to it, rather than to the asserted content. That is, rather than disputing the truth of what is asserted, one disputes the authority for saying it without the presence of those who might be "victims of their decision" (p. 997). Thus, the cosmos is the insistence itself, for its potential to generate the opportunity for this presence. Here, Stengers' discussion prompts us to think about the relationship, central for democracy, between *ethos*, the way of behaving peculiar to a being, and the *oikos*, its habitat, in what she calls an "etho-ecological" perspective (Ibid., p. 997). What would be decided if the space were different, with other presences and other possible interstices? The "idiotic" proposal calls into question the "etho-ecological" stability of this world (Ibid., p. 451). It is thus a "'cosmic' event" (Ibid.), in the sense of Stengers' cosmos.

While we propose interstices to it, we invite the reader to think of the COVID-19 pandemic itself as an interstice, a cosmic event that poses the need to think about the

to use nouns in the feminine, welcoming demands from feminist studies to break with cisheteronormative patterns in the construction of "neutral" and "impersonal subjects" during academic writing (Rio Grande do Sul, 2014).

stability of our etho-ecological perspective in the context of pedagogical practice. The way we exercise this practice is, after all, related to the space in which it takes place, and this space has been radically changed in DL.

In a public dialogue, as she called the conversation with her colleague philosopher Ron Scapp, hooks (1994) deals with the presence of the teacher in the classroom:

> Liberatory pedagogy really demands that one work in the classroom, and that one work with the limits of the body, work both with and through and against those limits: teachers may insist that it doesn't matter whether you stand behind the podium or the desk, but it does. [...] Acknowledging that we are bodies in the classroom has been important for me, especially in my efforts to disrupt the notion of professor as omnipotent, all-knowing mind (Ibid, p. 138).

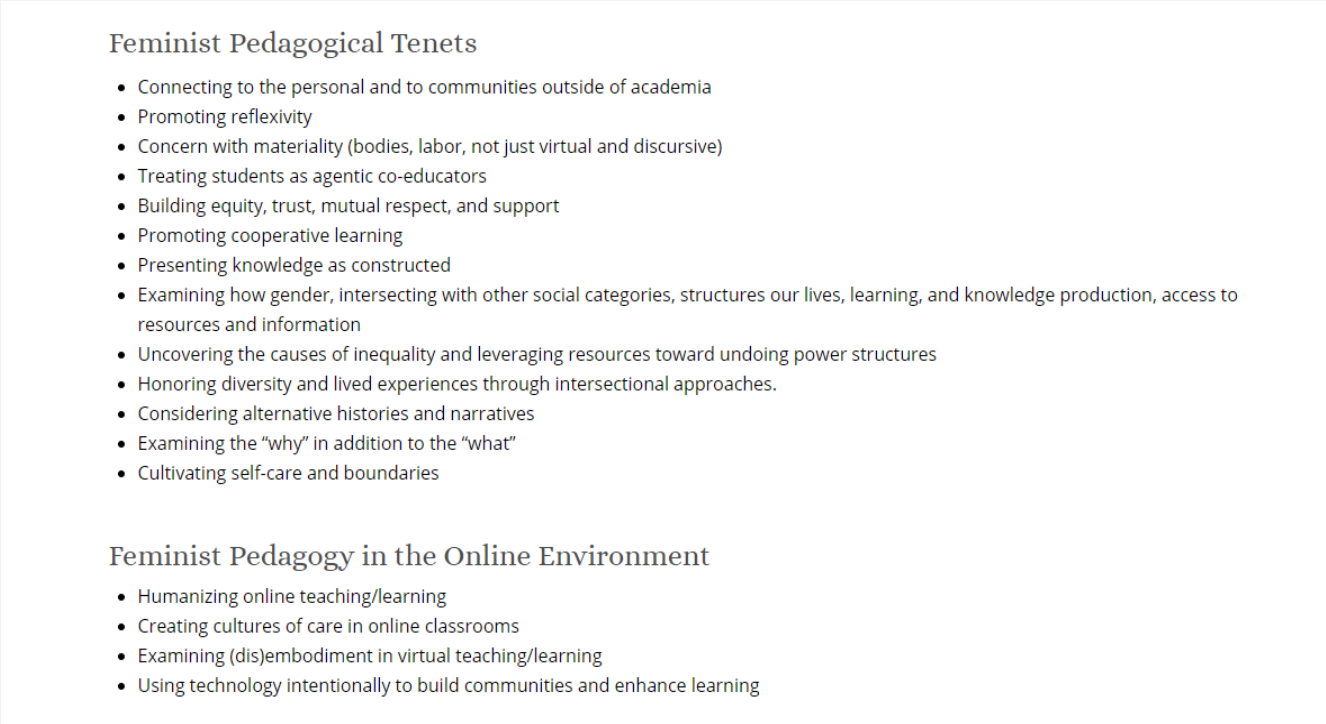
Since the presence of the body in the classroom space is so central to a critical pedagogical proposal – in this case a feminist one – how can we think about the consequences of moving to a virtual classroom through this path? This disembodiment is an important research agenda: what does the fact that we are all in an equal position with screens laid out side by side represent, vis-à-vis the idea of the classroom and the conventional expectations that hooks and Scapp describe?

For now, we want to emphasize that in hooks' proposal, inspired by Freire, pedagogy is a constant practice of freedom, so that a community could never have fixed boundaries or modes of functioning. The construction will always be collective and changing. It is impossible not to be affected in the learning community. hooks and Scapp suggest that the presence of the teacher, including her emotions, is fundamental to the overall enthusiasm, which is in turn an essential ingredient of this community. For if the construction of the learning experience is collective and if emotions have a prominent place, it is almost inconceivable that under the current health, economic, and political crisis, emotions would not displace previously set programs. Conversations about the direction of learning need to happen not only at the beginning of the semester (when hooks and Scapp diagnose a natural moment of excitement), but frequently and honestly (Ibid., pp. 155-156).

One interesting experience in this regard has taken place at a semester-long course of PUC-Rio's undergraduate degree in International Relations, as part of its International Cooperation and Development axis, in which students developed their final undergraduate papers (*Trabalhos de Conclusão de Curso*, or TCCs). The discipline aims to support the development of students' TCCs, so there is no expectation of content

lectures or of formally structured classes. However, the teacher author of this paper deemed it important to add content on critical approaches to supplement what students had normally seen up to this stage in the axis. She also considered it essential to offer more practical workshops on how to develop various writing formats, since students have the autonomy to produce texts in forms that are not strictly academic. The course includes the production of policy briefs and the elaboration of projects, both of which are relevant materials in the field of international development. Thus, the program was composed of a first part with critical readings, combining academic and policy-oriented texts, in more conventional classes; a second part with workshops on the production of policy briefs and projects; and a third part focused on the supervision of TCC writing and submission. In addition, the teacher distributed partial submissions throughout much of the program, in the form of suggested paths to ensure TCCs would be finished on time; and these paths included the personalized participation in synchronous meetings. This was done in the following way: a form was distributed to students before classes started to ascertain the best time and day for synchronous meetings, considering that at the end of the undergraduate course, many students are doing an internship or taking many credits in order to graduate. In the form, I also asked how they would like to work, whether individually or in pairs, designing a project or a brief. The general proposal is that each student can decide what content she needs to know, when and how, considering the path already taken in the undergraduate course, their current internships or end of course credits, and any family and social issues, especially at this time of DL and pandemic. At each meeting, the paths were adjusted, as I checked if everyone who would like to be engaged was succeeding to so. The synchronous meetings were always recorded for reference. Several of these initiatives are inspired by contributions from critical pedagogy and feminism (Figure 1).

Figure 01: Proposal from the Feminist Pedagogy for Teaching Online project[9]



Results been very positive, with most students turning in high-quality TCCs. But what is noteworthy is that even among students who do not often participate in synchronous meetings, several of them seem to be present in a way that is at times even surprising, considering their context, life stage, and academic moment. The teacher received several e-mails from those who could not participate, but wanted to explain their absence in consideration of her effort to personalize the program and her commitment to making the course work. Many of them reported extremely painful cases in their families and ended up, from the first contacts, seeking advice and guidance even without participating in all meetings, and managing to turn in their TCCs at the end.

This personalization and, through it, the reassertion of presence has been revisited every semester, with the aim of affirming the co-construction of the learning community and ensuring an equal, receptive, and welcoming environment, which is considered crucial in critical pedagogical proposals.

4. Second interstice: reading and telling stories

Fundamental to being present in a learning community is recognition, that is, not only knowing about people and content, but recognizing the experiences of those who

[9] See Feminist Pedagogy for Teaching Online. Available at https://feminists-teach-online.tulane.edu/. Access: July 26, 2021.

make it up and recognizing ourselves. Of course, in large classes, short courses, or more bureaucratic courses, this may sound utopian, and perhaps it is. Here, then, a relevant provocation is found in how Freire addressed our ability to connect learnings and thereby practice recognition as well: "Sometimes, it is we who do not perceive the 'kinship' between lived times and thus lose the possibility of 'welding' disconnected knowledge and, in doing so, illuminating with the latter the precarious clarity of the former". With these "welds" and "ligatures," Freire says, one creates "a kind of 'anchorage' that makes it possible to reconnect memories, to recognize facts, deeds, gestures, to unite knowledge, to weld moments, to recognize in order to know better" (2013, pp. 24-26).

Moreover, we point here to the compression of the narrative arc that seems to occur in our way of increasingly relating through digital media. Central to this is the idea that learning and the flow of narratives are powerful allies, not only in terms of pedagogical achievements, but of building "politically active" knowledges and cultivating democratic habits (Stengers, 2005).

> [...] relations with difference in the digital space often happen by means of shortcuts: the context is given, that is, by means of profiles, micro-segmentation and so on, the narrative arc is compressed, dismissing moments of discovery and, with this, restricting moments of small agreements[...]. Consensus based on discrete and accelerated differentiations jumps over everything in between, closing off possibilities for dialogue and unity (Rocha de Siqueira, forthcoming).

If every pedagogical process is about knowing and recognizing others and ourselves, the feeling of being "dividuals" and of belonging, even if temporarily, to categories that we often have not helped build politically, raises important barriers for learning. It becomes difficult to make the "welds" that Freire talks about, because the flow of narratives of ourselves and of us in community is lost. And it is in this flow that discoveries and small agreements take place – and where, therefore, democratic practice is also learned.

In the context of the IR Methodology course at IRI/PUC-Rio's graduate program, the teacher author of this article decided, a few years ago, to include fictional literature as an essential part of the learning dynamics, largely because she believes in the "slowing down" proposed by Stengers (2005) and in the importance of practicing the analogical time of narrative as a way of knowing and recognizing oneself. The student author of this article attended a term of this course. Commonly regarded as a boring and bureaucratic course, Methodology had all the ingredients to be difficult for teachers and students.

Moreover, it is offered in the first semester already with a view to supporting the writing of research projects; but this often causes enormous anxiety, because it is very common for students to still have no idea what they really want to research and/or to be constantly changing topics.

In our opinion, this definition of a dissertation topic goes through a) a self-recognition; b) the recognition that one is capable of knowing different themes, believing in the continuous learning process – which, at this point of the course, is just beginning – and c) the knowledge of how to tell a story and how much there is of this "storytelling" in the making of any academic work. By textually building interest in a theme and presenting arguments on the importance of thinking about it, what we do, after all, is telling a story, which needs to have a flow, a rhythm, certain elements of identification in the plot, and the construction of a climax that justifies the reader's investment. Thus, learning to appreciate the art of storytelling and to recognize in it the fluid construction of a worldview – or of an entire world – are, for us, crucial elements in the definition of research topics and the design of projects (see Candido da Silva Lau, 2020; Inayatullah; Opondo, 2019; and Naves, 2019). The student author (2020) subsequently wrote about this self-recognition from her experience with this discipline.

The dynamics of using fictional literature in the second part of the course, with oral presentations by students, continued in DL and took on other proportions. The selected fiction books – one per class – are aligned with the epistemological proposal of the academic literature discussed in the same week: for example, for the class on postcolonial approaches, we read Itamar Júnior's *Torto Arado*. A group of two or three students is responsible for reading and presenting the book with the help of slides. The idea is to put aside a bit of the tension around the project and the broader challenges posed by the beginning of the graduate degree, as well as to read a book that shifts the gaze from other readings being done but that also naturally leads students, through its theme and language, to think of the questions posed by academic texts.

During the pandemic this exercise, which had already received excellent feedback, became even more important to students. Signs of this are the fact that presentations last longer and longer, up to 1h20, surpassing the stipulated 40 minutes; and the surprise to see students going beyond the proposed activity and creating, for example, *surveys*, which they send to the class beforehand to connect their presentation to their classmates' experiences. Regarding the duration, we have stayed in the classroom beyond the set time,

but the teacher tries to make it clear that those who need to leave can do so. While that is not ideal, it cares for the pedagogical element by making sure that the excitement, so difficult to achieve in this pandemic and DL context, is not restrained. In the case of *surveys*, the answers have been used by students to compare experiences, laugh, tell anecdotes, and relate all of this to fiction and back to academic texts, in a very rich dynamic. In this scenario, DL made improvisation easier: it allowed us to stay longer in the classroom, not depending on a disputed physical space, and it enabled consultations that are, in themselves, methodological practices. The main thing is that narratives – the space and time of/for them – have become even more important for building the learning community, promoting knowledge and recognition, slowing down exchanges, and thereby creating conditions for "welding" together events, concepts, and people.

5. Third interstice: the space of the dream in the pedagogical process

As we are faced with so many crises – ecological, health, political, economic –, it is no coincidence that we experience a multiplication of initiatives aimed not only at modeling future scenarios in the statistical and computational sense, but also at articulating pedagogical processes with "dreams" about possible futures. UNESCO, for example, mentions "futures literacy"; the OECD has invested in "prospective foresight"[10] or simply "foresight" (OECD, 2020); and from critical perspectives, there are initiatives such as *Ecoversities*[11], dedicated to the exercise of crafting futures, often in conjunction with reflections on education. In an interview for the Foresight for Development initiative, "futures thinker" Kwamou Eva Feukeu explains the importance of investing in "futures knowledge": "[...] thinking about futures is urgent (1), and more importantly, thinking creatively about the future(s) is dire (2). This is not only about adding new patterns to our skillset, but rethinking why our skillset, why seeking such an accumulation of knowledge. (2) It is about finding ourselves, locating ourselves in both time and space."[12]

In *Ideias para Adiar o Fim do Mundo* [Ideas to Postpone the End of the World], Ailton Krenak calls on us to create colorful parachutes in the face of uncertainty as an invitation to explore the cosmos: "Let's use all our critical and creative capacity to build

[10] See https://ideas4development.org/en/possible-options-africa/; http://www.foresightfordevelopment.org/. Access: October 6, 2021.
[11] See: https://ecoversities.org/. Access: October 6, 2021.
[12] See: https://www.foresightfordevelopment.org/profile/kwamou-eva-feukeu. Access: March 14, 2022.

colorful parachutes. Let's think of space not as a confined place, but as the cosmos where we can plummet in colorful parachutes." And how are these colorful plummeting shapes created? "From where are these parachutes projected? From the place where visions and dream are possible. Another place we can inhabit beyond this hard earth: the place of the dream." Faced with the current dystopian context, however, one inevitably wonders: could it be that what we lack is the capacity to imagine alternatives?

Freire (2013, p. 12) speaks of hope, which we deem inseparable from dreaming, as an ontological necessity, but he states that "hope needs practice to become historical concreteness" and this practice needs to be learned. Much of this learning involves paying attention to our surroundings, looking at the many small initiatives that emerge even in the midst of this dystopian context and that can offer motivation and practical lessons. They show that everything starts somewhere, within certain limits: "The crisis helps us overcome these blockages [of thinking only about big issues] and pay attention to the small, the multiplicity and diversity of thinking practices that spring up everywhere" (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2018, p. 117). As if pulling a string, these stories can provide the small but constant impetus to practice hope.

Back in the context of graduate school, a very rich experience in this sense started with the pandemic. The teacher author, together with Matt Davies, offered for the third time the course Everyday Political Economy in the Global South, attended by the student author of this article. In 2020, the program featured even more themes from our daily life in Brazil. As part of the course activities, each student coordinated a debate in one of the classes, inviting a person whose work inspired them. In the class on racism, for example, guided by the question of which bodies "count"/ "are counted", one of the guests was Luciana Viegas, creator of a collective in São Paulo that advocates against ableism. As a Black, peripheral, autistic woman, a mother of an autistic child, and an educator, the conversation with her was shuddering, provocative, and inspiring. As with any stimulating conversation, we all came away invigorated, full of the will to dream and put it into practice, learning from those who gave concreteness to hope how they engaged in their struggle. By giving students the responsibility of more specifically framing the debate and defining the name to be invited, there was a shared ownership that was in itself full of potential. It is less about each student going out to build projects right away and more about making it common practice to promote the "welding" that Freire talks about,

leaving among the elements to be welded each one of these dialogues – whose content and form will certainly not be lost, just as what each person felt in these encounters.

These activities were opportunities that arose with DL. Otherwise, they might not have happened, both because we would not, perhaps, search so intensively for alternatives to compensate for what remote learning does not allow, and because we would not even be able to invite people from outside Rio de Janeiro, for example, let alone during "business hours". Moreover, since they are also facing numerous challenges in this dystopian context, guests seemed even happier to share how they dream, what they dream about, and what they have achieved with their dreams. It seems clear that the impulse to resist hopelessness in the pedagogical process lies in finding possibilities to re-signify ourselves as agents of change.

6. Final considerations

As a cosmic event, the COVID-19 pandemic invites presence in DL as a questioning of pedagogical conditions that seemed stable. It makes the effort to be in class, amidst all the challenges of digital architecture, a constant pondering of spaces, times, flows, and sociabilities in which these presences may or may not be possible. Therefore, we should take note of the questions raised by pedagogical practice in DL regarding the increasing digitalization of our experiences.

In this sense, if the health crisis and the other crises we experience have created or exacerbated significant challenges for teaching in all areas, it has also been a time when some necessary experimentation has yielded important lessons. Here we try to grasp these learnings through reflections about three interstices that we consider crucial to the pedagogical process: the presence of all in the learning community – a fundamental factor of its co-construction, as the boundaries of this community are constantly renegotiated; the centrality of narratives for a way of being together that teaches and cultivates democratic habits, promoting a slowing down that allows us to recognize others and ourselves, an essential element of learning; and the practice of dreaming and hoping as a primordial element of teaching, not only in the sense of preparing for the future, but of preparing the futures, re-signifying participants as agents of change. Believing oneself capable of knowing and recognizing is, after all, at the heart of pedagogical practice, and now it is even more important for us to find ways to make this belief bear fruit.

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