A case study: The digital course homelessness and homemaking as a step towards the future of the university education and as a public home space

Accepted 15th May 2020

ABSTRACT

Digital education practiced since 1990s but has become more popular in 2000s provides a new medium in addition to the physical spaces. Usually considered as a substitute to traditional learning media, it carries its own possibilities and challenges. It can become a 'life saver' particularly in war zones, authoritarian regimes where the students and academics are threatened. This article analyzes the possibilities and challenges revealed in the course Homelessness and Homemaking: On Different Meanings of the Home Place (H&H). Based on an on-line educational experiment and interviews with the anonymized participants, the article argues for reconceptualization of university as a digital public home space for students living in authoritarian regimes and face risk as academics. This experimental case study has allowed its participants to experience new relationalities and pedagogical tools such as Research Based Learning, international class environment, small group teaching, increased engagement, flexibility in teaching, interactive learning environment, time for reflexivity, collective and decentralized learning and some challenges detailed in the article along with suggestions on how to overcome them. The authors argued that the space of the H&H can be conceptualized as a digital egalitarian public home space of solidarity emerging from and open to differences, and has a potential to transform the existing university system in neoliberal and authoritarian regimes.

Key words: Digital education, research based learning, home space, solidarity.

INTRODUCTION

Digital education practiced since 1990s but has become more popular in 2000s provides a new medium in addition to the physical spaces. Usually considered as a substitute to traditional learning media, it carries its own possibilities and challenges. It can become a 'life saver' particularly in war zones, authoritarian regimes where the students and academics are threatened. This article analyzes the possibilities and challenges revealed in the course Homelessness and Homemaking: On Different Meanings of the Home Place (H&H). Based on an on-line educational experiment and interviews with the anonymized participants, the article argues for reconceptualization of university as a digital public home space for students living in authoritarian regimes and face risk as academics. To do this, after a short literature review, the political contexts of Hungary and Turkey are presented which have brought about the conditions of the experimental teaching journey. Thereafter, the course design is explained. Following the course design, the relational and pedagogical possibilities that have appeared via the course are elaborated. After the section on the possibilities, the challenges and how they can be overcome are discussed. In the Conclusions part, it is argued that the space of the H&H can be conceptualized as a digital egalitarian public home space of solidarity open to and emerging from differences and which has a potential to transform the existing university system in neoliberal and authoritarian regimes.
authoritarian regimes.

The introduction of the digital space (of any new space) naturally opens up discussions on the transformation of pedagogical relations. For instance, the literature on digital education\(^1\) suggests that there is no significant difference between digital education and traditional education in regards to overall achievement (Bell and Federman, 2013: 172; Hijazi, Bernard et al., 2003: 38). Moreover, some studies claim that digital education is as effective as traditional education (Bell and Federman, 2013: 174; Jung and Rha, 2000: 57). Most significantly digital education may be a useful method to continue education in war-zones where students have difficulties in attending classes in physical spaces (Khairan, 2018: 6784). However, "If e-learning is to increase access to college among low income students and specific racial and ethnic groups, institutions will have to address digital divides in terms of not only of students' access to technology but also of their technology skills and literacy" (Bell and Federman, 2013: 179).

Another major issue is whether the digital education reduces the cost of education: some claim that the digital education is more advantageous in reaching underrepresented, low-income and underprepared students (Khairan, 2018: 6785, Bell and Federman, 2013: 178). However, others claim that if the start-up costs are taken into consideration, it is not a cost-effective education system but will be in the future (Bell and Federman, 2013: 179). However, as also mentioned above this piece of writing is not going to focus on a comparison between traditional educations and digital educations but it will rather analyze the possibilities and challenges revealed in this particular course on H&H. However, the context that have paved the way for the course need to be explained shortly particularly but not exclusively in Hungary and Turkey as the instructors who have gone through this educational experiment of the H&H are from these two countries.

**Why new on-line higher educational institutional practices are needed?**

The impact of the armed conflicts that have occurred in Turkey in 2015-16 on the peoples in the conflict region was and still is devastating. Thousands of academics from Turkey have also significantly been influenced by their stance against armed conflicts though the impact on the academics' lives cannot be compared with the people who were directly influenced by the armed conflict. One of the prominent expressions of this stance was signing the Peace Petition dated on January 11th, 2016 which had been signed initially by 1128 academics and the number gradually increased up to 2212. Hundreds of academics, many public employees were dismissed, persecuted, and banned not only working at universities but also at any public and educational institutions in addition to the radical restriction on their right to travel by restricting their passports and preventing them from leaving the country, thus faced with *civiltar mortuus*. In these circumstances some academics preferred to stay in Turkey and have formed solidarity relations among each other and others have escaped from the country to form relations of solidarity and resistance in different countries.

In Hungary recently, three disturbing and interrelated events happened. First, the Hungarian state nationalized and centralized the research institutes of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences following the Russian model of institutional reform. Second, it forced Central European University into political exile from one European Union country to another. Third, 2 year masters’ program in gender studies was deleted from the accredited study list by the government without any explanation (Pető, 2018). These developments fit into the new tendency of polypolarization of academia: emptying the existing infrastructure (Pető, 2019). The question is what is to be done when pretending the business as usual strategy does not work anymore.

**A new course design**

It has all started with an e-mail from the Off-University expressing their willingness to apply for the Q-Kolleg program of the Humboldt University (HU): a program that brings students and teachers from two different countries on a digital platform to conduct a Research Based Learning course with students from different geographies on a common theme from different perspectives. We were to design a course titled as *Homelessness and Homemaking: On Different Meanings of the Home Place* along with substantial and technical support of the Off-University -an initiative that was established in 2017 to provide a safe digital space (can be called a public home space in this particular instance) for the politically executed academics particularly from Turkey but in general from anywhere in the globe. The mediator, from the Off-University team, was the primary facilitator of the Off-University for this course was to join from Berlin. One academic instructor in exile has joined the classes from CEU Vienna. The other one as a persecuted academic has participated from Istanbul and the students were expected to join from anywhere in the world. The course we had designed in May 2019 was accepted by Q-Kolleg programme, HU. The main question of the course was: "How do the meanings of the home space change in different geographical and historical contexts by taking different axes of conflicts into consideration (such as

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\(^1\) Digital education, e-learning and online learning are used interchangeably in this article. Digital education is used in this article unless some else's ideas are quoted with a different terminological choice because it is thought that education is more comprehensive concept containing both learning and teaching.
gender, race, class, generational differences, sexual orientation, religion, culture)?” It was structured in such a way that the participants can conduct their own research on their own research questions as long as their research questions are related to the main question of the class.

This course was designed as 10 weeks of gathering of the students, the teachers and facilitators\(^2\) (as three subject positions of the course) in addition to four additional weeks of individual consultations between the teachers and the students to discuss the final drafts of the researches. The participants were from Hungary, Austria, Sweden, Germany, and Turkey. All of whom were women. 3 of them were immigrants in the country they reside. After spending the first weeks of the semester on a discussion of methodology and foundational texts on the home place, the participants have started with their own research. Throughout the semester, the teachers have supported, mediated and advised on the ongoing researches of the participants rather than lecturing. At the end of the semester, one student has made a short movie based on her research instead of writing a paper. As students have joined the class either via HU or Off-University, they were subject to different institutional responsibilities. While the HU students were assigned a grade to be recorded in their transcripts based on their papers, the students who have joined through Off-University were only expected to finish their research in this class.\(^3\)

Each student was responsible for sending a progress report before each session to the group (composed of facilitators, students) and to the teachers. They were also responsible for presenting their progress report in each session and they have received feedback from the whole class. The facilitators were responsible to give feedback to their group of students and they have presented their research in one of the sessions and engaged discussion in class that particular week. The teachers have facilitated certain groups and organized the course flow during the semester and in the sessions along with leading and mediating the sessions and mediating class relations and producing the course content. The Off-University has provided the digital platform which has enabled us to meet online collectively, to conduct group work exercises, to contact each other through messages and chat functions and the whole technical organization, institutional, financial connections were realized by them. In fact, they are the primary actresses who made this novel experience possible.

In our first class we have had a class composed of researchers of post-doctoral, doctoral and MA level. Taken the diversity of distinct disciplinary backgrounds and the level-differences of the researchers, we have developed two strategies: 1. We have decided to form research groups with people who will pursue similar research subjects to engage group learning in addition to small group learning. 2. The post-doctoral researchers have been assigned as the facilitators of each research group that are composed of MA and doctoral researchers. Thus, each individual research was part of a research group where they can talk about each other’s individual research. Thus, the different subject positions (facilitators, teachers and students) in the course have appeared in the relations through collective decision-making processes but they were not determined before the course and implemented from a top-down way.

What is relationally/pedagogically new?

The organization of the digital space by the Off-University team as a safe, democratic, non-hierarchical and free research/education space along with the experimental design of the course has allowed us to experience various creative/productive relationships during the semester. Safety became major concern, therefore the registration is a complex process to get access to the safe on-line platform.

Off-University has been formed by these academics who had fled from Turkey in these circumstances and by the academics in Germany who are willing to form solidarity relations along with a “new” academy as a digital research/education/solidarity platform that “creates new strategies to uphold and sustain academic life and knowledge threatened by anti-democratic and authoritarian regimes. It was established for and by academics from Turkey yet addresses itself to academics all over the world: academics who have been purged from their institutions, forced to resign, who are legally and politically persecuted and even imprisoned because of their opinions and research”.\(^4\) The prominent aspect of this space created by Off-University is the provision of safety which is a primary socio-biological need for all beings. Spaces such as Off-University proliferate more and more every day in Middle-East, particularly in war-zones (Khairan, 2018: 6783). One student originally from Turkey, working on queer refugees in Turkey, pursuing her PhD in Europe and working at several NGOs both in Turkey and Europe states that “[Off-University] gives a freedom to express yourself freely and anonymously. It offers an ability to negotiate the immobility” (Gül, personal communication, January 17, 2020).\(^5\) Moreover, Khairan (2018) in his article on the

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\(^2\) Within the limits of this paper the different subject positions are called student, facilitator and teacher. The participant is used as an umbrella term for everyone participating the course. They are chosen due to their functional usage.

\(^3\) Actually one of the impressive and promising aspects of the Off-University is that it gives the students the chance to take the classes with credits in the Erasmus University system. Thus, these credits can be counted at any university part of the Erasmus system. But they can also participate at a course with no credits. All students except one who have joined via Off-University have chosen to take this class as non-credit which was one of the challenges of this particular course that is going to be elaborated shortly.

\(^4\) https://off-university.com/en-US/page/vision

\(^5\) All names of the interviewees are anonymized.
effectiveness of e-learning and teaching in war-zones claims that “E-learning does not require students to travel to a brick and mortar structure where the lives of students are jeopardized due to air bombardments, rocket shelling, earthquakes or flooding. Students can access course materials remotely from a safe haven” (p. 6784).

Along with providing people under bombardments a safe space to pursue education, Off-University "seeks to develop emancipatory education-research activities that are less hierarchical and more democratic" both in its own work environment and within the class environment6. A student from H&H expresses herself as follows: “Academic production can be emancipated from the four walls of the university buildings. It is possible everywhere and at this stage of technological development, we can do better. My general impression has often been that academics put some distance to online media but it might be used to negotiate the authoritarianism and limitations on freedom of thought and free academia as well as organizing social and political movements” (Gülê, personal communication, January 17, 2020) and another one claims that “It was a much more free, and democratic atmosphere” (Müzgün, personal communication, January 10, 2020). Thus, in this sense, Off-University is not only a space of escape from the political oppression but it simultaneously provides a space of creativity through egalitarian relations respectful of differences. By creating this space they also blur the hierarchical boundaries between the research and educational activities that are created by the elitist mainstream academy.

It was not only the democratic, anti-hierarchical and safe medium that has created this course as an inspiring space of solidarity, but also the research and educational experience intervening the canonical walls of the academia. Jung and Rha (2000) in their article on the effectiveness of online education state that “the way the medium is used to determine the effectiveness, not the medium itself” (p. 57).

For this reason, it is significant to discuss shortly the relational and pedagogical aspects experimented in class. Contrary to Jung and Rha (2000), one of the students stated that "In real life, I might feel a bit reserved towards some professors probably because of the epistemological authority. I never felt this in online communication. It really helped to lower the power dynamics in favor of the student. But I think it is not only about the medium of technology but more of the instructors’ approach to teaching” (Gülê, personal communication, January 17, 2020).

New elements: Research based learning

Research Based Learning (RBL) is an approach that is related with Enquiry Based Learning that is composed of different aspects such as project work, field work or problem based learning7. Research classes are categorized in four parts: Research-Tutored courses, Research-Led courses, Research-Oriented courses and Research-Based courses (Yakovchuk, 2011). RBL differs from all others in allowing the students to conduct research during the semester. It is an approach that functions well with Small Group Learning which is going to be discussed shortly.

In H&H, we have aimed that the students gain research skills through research practice during the semester. In that regard, the course was designed neither as a course on methodology (Research Tutored Course) where they can learn on different methodological approaches nor as a course with reading materials on a certain subject where they could review a literature on a certain subject (Research Led Course). It was not a Research–Oriented course either where the students work on research skills and techniques. We have rather aimed that students conduct research on the home space and elaborate this research area from distinct perspectives and that they pursue their research in a group of people around a certain subject through related but different research questions (Research Based Learning). Even though in the beginning of the class we have aimed that the students research in groups from two different countries, we could not manage to engage the student-pairs to work on commonly agreed-upon research questions but they rather have preferred to continue with their individual research.

Internationalization of digital education

One of the most inspiring aspects of digital education may be its power to gather people ‘around a table’ in a comparatively (im)mediate way as a digital version of Hannah Arendt’s metaphor for public space. The H&H course was an international/intercultural medium composed of participants from five countries (Sweden, Turkey, Germany, Hungary and Austria) that actively have taken part in the weekly sessions. Three of the students were migrants in the country they live and two of them have stated more than once throughout the semester how their precarious conditions as migrant scholars have affected their relation with the course in a negative way and one of them could not complete the course for this reason. Furthermore, "internationalization efforts at home have also shown that students may develop intercultural competencies without the burden of traveling to a foreign country” (Howard et al., 2017: 116-117). Echoing Howard, Perrotte, Lee and Frisone, Müzgün as one of the active participants of H&H expresses her excitement on the

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7http://www.thinkingwriting.qmul.ac.uk/ideas/researchbasedapproach/learning
international and diverse composition of the class and states that "Having chance to discuss with people from different locations, geographies, and fields helped me to see my own research in different perspectives. I was accustomed to classical learning techniques, but this course developed the way I learn, the way I research" (Personal communication, January 10, 2020). People have come together to talk about the homelessness and home space as an academic subject that is also subjectively related to each participants' lives in an era when movement of people experienced mostly as global forced mobility and has caused more dispersion of lives than freedom.

Lilley, Barker and Harris (2015) state that "learning to become a global citizen is a process that occurs in response to particular facilitating situations that could be simulated through mobility comparable learning experiences 'at home'" (p. 242). Asmîn, another active participant of H&H, expresses her feelings on the intercultural atmosphere of the course parallel to the above quote and says that "I strongly believe that it is a perfect opportunity to get together in a diverse and inclusive environment like this" (Personal communication, January 9, 2020). Thus, H&H has given each participant the chance to contribute to the class from the perspective of her own geographical, historical and political conditions and listen to those of others at times with their similarities and sometimes with their differences. In addition to building intercultural connections to foster our skills in being global citizens, and to foster our transformative relations of solidarity, Jones (2017) states that the internationalization of digital education helps the students also to be more successful in the job market; “all students, not just those with international mobility, should enjoy an internationalized curriculum in order to develop transferable skills that will allow them to compete in the current job market” (qtd in Howard, Perrotte, Lee and Frisone, p. 242). Thus, one can claim that the course H&H was a fertile space to build intercultural academic relations, to develop intercultural competencies and to be part of the global job market an aspect that is mostly underestimated by the humanities/social scientists and which many times results in the exclusion of the social science and humanities graduates from the decision-making processes particularly at the universities but also in general at the institutional and political levels.

Small group teaching

H&H was a course composed of a small group of people comprising 5 students, 2 teachers and 2 facilitators. Even though the class was a small group, "small group teaching is not defined by numbers. We define it as any teaching situation in which dialogue and collaboration within the group are integral to learning. The teacher is still key to this learning. But now their role is to facilitate rather than to direct, to coordinate as much as to communicate, to inspire rather than to inform" (Mills and Alexander, 2013: 4). H&H was a fortunate class in the sense that it did not have one teacher but two participating from Vienna and Istanbul, and it had two facilitators participating from Budapest and Berlin, respectively. For this reason, the rights and responsibilities were not only shared between different subject positions but also within the subject positions which has contributed to the democratization of the classroom and equal sharing of the power within the class.

Teaching effectiveness

"Effective small group teaching is characterized by four main strengths: flexibility, interaction, reflexivity and engagement" (Hameed et al., 2018: 3). However, in H&H we have additionally experienced aspects regarding collective learning, group learning and decentralized learning. These characteristics are practically intertwined with the four mostly-seen aspects of small group learning.

Engagement

In small group learning environments, there are not much time restraints. For this reason, participants in class (particularly teachers) can spend time with each other's research problems and needs. Thus, the engagement of the participants in course activities seems to be higher than traditional learning environments. A student explains her engagement as follows: "Every week I had the chance to present my findings, and the course of my work for five to ten minutes, and afterwards I had review from teachers and students. Before the lessons I sent my progress report, and I had really high quality feedback. In that group, I was advised wisely on literature, and also the ways I could do my research. My papers and progress reports are read and commented weekly with detail. It was really amazing to develop my studies with different perspectives" (Mızgîn, personal communication, January 10, 2020). Hameed (2018) claims that "Teachers are better able to continually engage in self-reflection and listen sensitively to students in a small group and observe the dynamics between the members of the group” (p. 3). It was not only in the weekly sessions where each participant has had plenty of time to discuss each other’s work but weekly progress reports were also significant both to keep everyone engaged in the course outside of the session time and to improve the ongoing researches.

Flexibility

Hameed (2018) defines flexibility as “when the teacher’s
Responds to the needs and learning of the students dynamically and helps them to explore wider pedagogic spaces” (p. 3). During the semester, the teachers and the facilitators have had the chance to change the pace of the course, they could assign new readings or homework when they feel the students need it, or spend more time for some group of students if needed, change the groups of the students, give the students chance to change their subjects on justifiable grounds and the like. Throughout the semester we have tried almost all of the above-mentioned strategies. We have advised on reading inspiring and thought-provoking readings when the students seem to have fallen in a vicious cycle in their research. After reading Joan Scott’s text titled as “On Experience” every participant in class has started to express how their perspectives regarding their own research have changed. It definitely was one of the transformative moments of the semester that can be counted as a productive outcome of flexibility along with the wisdom of the senior instructor. One student states “I am really well advised. I felt really free to choose my topic, and afterwards I was put in the most appropriate group” (Mızgın, personal communication, January 10, 2020). Mills and Alexander (2013) maintain that “The flexible and reflexive nature of small group teaching means that teachers can tailor their approach to instruction in order to meet the individual needs of students. Differentiation (that is, varying one’s approach to teaching in order to meet the academic and social needs of individual students) allows teachers to hone in on the specific knowledge and skills that students need to develop” (p. 14). One student states that she has sharper research skills after the class “I greatly benefited from the feedback regularly given by the professor and the other advanced researcher. I regained my ability to think outside of the box and honed my research design skills thanks to the comprehensive feedbacks and encouragement. I gained self-confidence to assert my opinions regarding my own research” (Asmın, personal communication, January 9, 2020).

**Reflexivity**

Reflexivity can be considered as a characteristic that cannot be limited particularly for small group learning environments. However, small group learning gives one more time and space to reflect on the course during the semester. Even though there is not a definite number of people to form a small group learning environment, the number of people usually varies between 5-8, “a commitment to critically evaluate our own teaching practices (an approach that sometimes gets called reflexivity) is the best way to keep improving and developing” (Mills and Alexander, 2013: 4). In that regard, H&H was a fertile class for reflecting upon one’s own and others’ needs and conditions along with one’s own learning and teaching methodologies.

**Group learning**

Group learning was another asset we have experimented and have become partially productive. Some of the groups have just dispersed but some of them have functioned effectively. Mills and Alexander (2013) state that “Emphasizing the learning that takes place independently outside of contact hours can encourage students to recognize the active part that they play in the educative processes of small group teaching” (p. 14). As most of the participants have not even shared the same city, it was impossible to organize physical gatherings and help the class to build a feeling of community through blended learning techniques. However, one of the students expresses her relationship with her peers as follows: “Yes, in my second group, I was contacted with them. They helped me a lot of resources. Also, Kris helped me a lot...
while I was building my research structure. Also during the lessons, while we were talking about our projects, everyone tried to help each other as much as they could” (Mızgîn, personal communication, January 10, 2020). Asmîn emphasizes the significance of a small online library they made for themselves “We created a Google Drive folder to share some materials relevant to our research, as well. But in cases of group discussion, the instructors perfectly managed to keep the participants focused and actively engaged” (Personal communication, January 9, 2020).

Decentralized learning

As the course was not revolving around the discussion of certain texts but rather the research of each student, and because all students were presenting their work after their progress reports, the center of learning and teaching was not the teachers but everyone. This kind of decentralized learning seems to increase the participation of the students as there was not a male gaze in the class judging their ideas. Mızgîn has stated that “It was important to help me freely discuss without monitoring, and judgment. It was more comfortable to focus on the subjects” (Personal communication, January 10, 2020). In addition to feeling more comfortable and free in expressing ideas, such environments naturally proliferate the ideas and opens up new paths to follow in the researches. “For me, this course gives the participants more autonomy as regards their research projects, which is really important for creative thinking to flourish. And the intense focus on research design enables participants to take more tangible steps along the way, which makes this online course a good place to learn and practice” (Asmîn, personal communication, January 9, 2020). Instead of centralizing the power of knowledge on one subject position, we have tried to distribute it to different subjects as much as possible. This does not mean that all structural power relations can be overridden and changed in one class but it means that practice creates the possibility of changing the power relations and has the potential to flourish freedom of expression and productivity.

Collective learning

Lastly, this experience of small group learning has resulted in collective learning. Mills and Alexander (2013) similarly states that “the small group teacher may also learn directly from students, and improve his or her teaching practice as a result” (p. 14). We have learned from the students in a couple of ways: 1. The students have used readings that are new to the teachers, 2. The students have come up with good questions that have opened up new paths to think through. One of the most common anxieties of the teachers is not to be able to answer a question posed by the students. It seems like the small group learning environments are effective spaces to get over this anxiety of the teachers because it is much easier to build trust relationships with people in small group environments. After a period, feelings such as mutual respect, sympathy and empathy are formed in small gatherings. And from that point onward, the classroom becomes an environment of sharing and learning for each participant, including the teachers. Thus, the relations rather than the subject positions are prioritized. But the relations are always composed of solidarities and conflicts. It is transcending the conflicts through critical encounters rather than ignoring that enables one to form firmer relations of solidarity. There were some restrictions of the course as well.

Challenges

There were 2 main challenges in the course:

High withdrawal rate: We have started with 17 students and finished the course with 5 students. Possible reasons are:

Lack of experience of the teachers in teaching a digital RBL course: As was the case for the students, the teachers were not familiar to teaching and communicating in digital spaces, too, and for this reason they could not keep the students in class.

The course was opened by two partner institutions: Humboldt University and Off-University. The former has opened the course as an MA/BA course. The latter one leaves the decision to students. Anyone can take the Off-University courses either for credits or for no credits. Moreover, Off-University opens its classes to anyone in the world regardless of the educational/research background and for free. As mentioned above, in the first session of the course the class was composed of post-doctoral researchers, doctoral researchers and MA students. We have tried to keep all of them in class. However, we did not have sufficient strategies. The two strategies we have used was (1) to assign the post-doctoral researchers as facilitators for some doctoral and MA student groups and (2) to form research groups. After this assignment all post-doctoral researchers except one have dropped the class. But the remaining post-doctoral researcher has become the facilitator and she has shown excellent performance in her communication with the students. She was giving high-quality feedback besides being supportive and interactive in the sessions. Meanwhile, many MA students have dropped the class as well because the remaining majority of the class was composed of PhD students who had taken the course via Off-University. Almost all MA students have
taken the course through Humboldt University for credits. Thus they seem to have felt undermined by the majority of the class and left. However, they all have expressed their appreciation to the teachers and facilitators for the support and encouragement. One student has written an e-mail before she has dropped the class: “Dear Ayse, I’m very sad to say that I won’t continue to participate in the course Homelessness and Homemaking anymore. Even though I love the topics and the supportive character of the course, it is too labor-intensive for me to handle at the moment. I wish you the best and thank you for this amazing opportunity. Best wishes” (Tran, personal communication, November 3, 2019). One of the reasons for the high withdrawal rate was also the lack of the means of production, i.e. the insufficiency of the number of teachers. Similar RBL courses conducted at the HU have hired up to two teachers per research group composed of 3-4 students and these courses were not conducted online but in physical space. This course has started with two teachers for 17 students which can be seen as one of the reasons of the high withdrawal rate.

It is difficult to keep students motivated without any instrumental outcomes such as grades or certificates: Many students were pursuing their doctoral degrees in different parts of the world, some of them were also activists or working at NGOs. In this sense, the students were academically engaged, hard-working and creative professionals. However, the neoliberal conditions, global forced mobility, global political oppression and the precarity of (im)migrant conditions were alienating reasons that have decreased the motivation of some students to continue without any end-result.

For instance, there was one student who has lost her home due to losing her PhD funding. After feeling detached from the course for two weeks, in one of the sessions she has expressed her feelings about the course: on the one hand, she was feeling inspired by it and on the other hand, she was feeling that this course is a luxury in her life as she does not have any home anymore and had to move back to Turkey in order to pursue her research. Still, she has completed her research and managed not to drop the class. But it was difficult for her like for many students. She has stated that “I think my respect to the instructors and how I value their persona was one of my main motivations to keep going” (Gulê, personal communication, January 17, 2020). But another immigrant student could not pursue but has dropped. Thus, in neoliberal, politically conservative periods where most people have been trained in a traditional education system, it is difficult to keep the students engaged for a long time with no external motivation like grades.

How to overcome the challenges?

We would suggest making the following modifications in the course if the resources remain unchanged. By virtue of its being a RBL course, this course has asked for more responsibilities from the students as compared with a traditional course. For this reason:

1. The level of the course could be determined more strictly. It is difficult to conduct an RBL course with both MA and PhD students simultaneously. The two groups' backgrounds are too far away from each other.
2. External motivations such as grades or publications are necessary in a course like this with heavy responsibilities on students so that the students can prioritize the class when faced with a difficulty in life.
3. This course cannot be open to anyone but only to a group of people with a research background who have not only taken a research methodology course but had preferably conducted a research by her own.

Conclusions: A space of solidarity and transformation

The use of solidarity as a concept in the feminist literature and politics dates back to the 1970s, particularly in the U.S. and the West, and to the 1980s in Turkey. Feminists consider solidarity as a concept that allows for the creation of non-hierarchical spaces through coming together and telling each other what they share and how they share certain experiences. Reflective solidarity theorized by Jodi Dean and other feminists as a means of communicating whereby participants try to understand each other rationally and through mutual respect, is one of the helpful usages of the concept. This kind of communicative rationality, in the Habermassian sense, enables women to “take a responsible orientation to [their] relationship,” (Dean, 1997: 8) and Dean asserts that such solidarity is only possible via our differences (Dean, 1997: 8). Thus, according to her, solidarity does not ignore differences but emerges from them, which makes rational communication possible and desirable. Moreover, Kennedy and Tadesse calls back Marx' concept of proletarian class consciousness as a form transformative solidarity of relations, spaces, institutions and tools (Kennedy and Tadesse, 2019: 255).

First, the relations in H&H during the semester can be considered as transformative solidarity relations for the following reasons: One instructor, a world-known historian, has accepted to work pro bono with another junior researcher to prove that it is possible to form a different academy. Hers was an interventionist act towards the mainstream academy that is under the influence of neoliberal authoritarianism. But it was at the same time a transformative act of solidarity in the Marxist sense that carries the potential of creating a new academy formed transculturally. Moreover, all the students have claimed that this course has contributed to their way of research and all of them have expressed that they have experienced the feeling of solidarity while taking this class. One student
states that “In the current competitive state of neoliberal academia where researchers tend more to hide and individualize the knowledge rather than share and collectivize what they know, such interactions between the participants of this course would perfectly be defined as a form of solidarity” (Asmín, personal communication, January 9, 2020).

Secondly, in addition to being a space of solidarity, H&H was open to differences of any kind be it racial, gender/sexual or cultural. Mizgín states that “we were always free to choose our topic, as well as our paths to go there. It was an open space, open to difference, which makes me feel much more comfortable. We were there with our differences, we were accepted but also guided with respect to those differences” (Personal communication, January 10, 2020). Respect for differences is not only significant to form solidarity relations because solidarity as concept based on equality requires simultaneous existence of difference and vice versa. But it is also significant to flourish the learning potential of the students in John Stuart Mill’s sense. Asmín states that:

The instructor provides examples from their own research experience and offers various approaches to overcome a difficulty without singularizing the way. It is, in short, all about sharing, not about dictating. Therefore, the relationship between the instructor and the participant is not a traditional professor/student relationship, but one that gives the participant the autonomy to navigate across the map of possibilities in the light of the experiences of another person who navigated similar maps before (Personal communication, January 9, 2020).

Lastly, the most significant aspect of the home spaces are belonging and forming habits. Even though it is difficult to distinguish the public homes from the private homes, public homes can be seen as spaces which offer one the possibility to meet with the “others in a free and equal way”. Off-University can be considered as a transformative public home. Because on the one hand, it is in relation with the globally leading research universities, thus takes a place within the existing academy and carries the potential of transforming it or at least intervening it, that is, creating cracks in the wall. These cracks in turn carry the potential of transforming the university/education system globally or at least provide people safe homes of production and solidarity. As one student claims that “Attending classes in digital space reiterated my belief that the digital space can be utilized to form long-term or short-term communities based on mutual social and intellectual curiosities” (Asmín, personal communication, January 9, 2020). This Off-University course proved in a small scale that university education can flourish as a safe public home space in authoritarian regimes who want to control and eliminate alternative critical thinking. Against the emptying of existing higher education’s structures alternatives can and should be produced. One just needs supporting institutions with safe servers.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors express their sincere appreciation to Professor Nadja-Christina Schneider in the Gender and Media Studies for the South Asian Region at the Institute of Asian and African Studies at HU, for being supportive, mind- and path-opening throughout the whole process. Special thanks to Helga Dorner from CEU Center for advising us about literature on Teaching and Learning.

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