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Reconsidering Spatial Interaction in the Virtual Literature Classroom after the Pandemic Lockdown

ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the qualitative notes of a self-reflective researcher and examines his literature classroom experience. The researcher develops an auto-ethnographical research design to understand how spatial interaction can be experienced after the critical shift from actual settings to virtual settings. The paper elucidates the results in efficiency regarding involvement and creativity. The researcher's recorded auto-ethnographical entries cover four weeks while teaching at a state-run department in Trabzon. He tries to transform the virtual setting into a spatial learning medium to achieve responsive interaction and creativity to enhance the participants' critical thinking and imagination. S/he referred to the theory of postromantic education to examine the results. S/he decided to keep a diary about the classroom experience. The reflective account revealed that the use of whiteboards and particularly the integration of chatbox into virtual classrooms helped overcome social and spatial interaction drawbacks. The study concluded that the internally motivated participants oscillate between imagination and cognition thanks to the experiential apparatus of spatial interaction created by the postromantic framework.

KEYWORDS

autoethnography, pandemic era, virtual literature classroom, spatial interaction, postures of human learners

1. Introduction

Traditional notions of teaching literature are shattered, and close-ended steps to achieve "success" in the conventional poetry classroom proved vain after the pandemic (Werner & Küplüce, 2021). A real classroom setting offers considerable interaction with the 'place' and 'bodies' belonging to the learning setting, which transforms into a 'learning space' through experience. On the other hand, an online virtual setting lacks such 'spatial interaction' and arouses relatively more anxiety, which is always an adverse factor in educational mediums. As Russell and Murphy-Judy suggested, the teachers act as a guide, yet the teachers should also consider the learners' individual and private learning spaces (Russell & Murphy-Judy, 2020). Penetrating these spaces with responsive interaction requires theoretical insights, experiential reflection and utilisation of virtual tools.

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An efficient poetry class is also a desirable language classroom. So far, several articles have been on how to incorporate literature into language teaching curricula (Carter, 2007; pp. 3–12). Open-ended frames and the figurative power of literary texts have been remarkably considered in language-teaching settings (Bobkina & Domingues, 2014; Hall, 2015). However, such an instrumentalisation of literature (or literature courses) has a significant potential to undermine the authenticity of social, intercultural and spatial interaction as the essential features of a literature classroom. For instance, a poetry classroom may significantly contribute to the improvement of imaginative skills, thereby improving language skills, and the participants' experiences in a poetry course need further examination. While affluence of ideas has been raised about teaching poetry thus far, research to date hardly debunks the mystery of an efficient poetry class regarding the setting. Poetry classroom, however, should go beyond, and this article shares my exploration on the way to a spirited poetry class (and, therefore, language class) in actual and virtual settings.

2. Autoethnography in literature classroom

An autoethnography has less to do with science than art or storytelling and unearths the tellable in what innately has narrativity, doomed to the confinement of the untold. Autoethnography uses “storytelling” (Delamont & Jones, 2012; p. 523) as a critical lens that aims to explain the personal experience to understand cultural experience (ethnographic) better. Similarly, Bochner and Ellis (1996) draw attention to the performativity of the act of “writing” and “storytelling.” An autoethnography sheds light on “learning experience, struggles, solutions, failures and successes” (Arıkan, 2018, p. 24) to represent how they “feel, learn, discover, co-create” (Ricci, 2003, p. 594). Therefore, autoethnography is an artistic activity with construction, deconstruction and reconstruction strategies. It helps understand particular individual subjectivities and social phenomena. Ethnographers record cultural experience patterns and provide insights into life experiences. They continuously stay in a state of reflection, asking questions and gathering information about their experience. This reflective observer, a storyteller from within and without, carefully conceives the phenomenal individual or social characteristics, avoiding prejudices or hypotheses.

3. The role of spatial interaction in the motivation type

3.1. Chatbox and whiteboard as spatial realms

Regarding the spatial experience of the participants, pandemic-era virtual classes are prone to failure, hardly offering such a shared physical spatial environment. After the pandemic turn, space is reduced to screen Werner and Küplüce (2021). Hence, I employed chatbox, polling and whiteboard as make-up tools. The content of the virtual classroom is devoid of space and can hardly be stored in memory,

processed only in the working memory (short memory). The content creates another media/medium; thus, the whiteboard and chatbox became crucial features of the Adobe Connect meeting room.

I designed my Adobe Connect virtual classroom regarding internally motivated participants. A minority of these participants have relatively higher cognitive skills, and some other minorities in the classroom resist virtual online sessions, keeping extremely reserved. Some others are accustomed to traditional classroom strategies and assessment techniques, prioritising transfer, repetition, habit formation and memorisation. I integrated the notions of reflection (*wise passiveness*), spontaneity and voluntary involvement into the learning space so that I could make the participants more involved in the sessions. This approach requires contemplation over spatiality vs. temporality and experientiality vs. imitation (Çıraklı, 2018). This approach, developed in the pre-pandemic era, emphasises “human learner” and their hidden potential and assumes an inherent link between response/creativity and learning” (p. 134). With the critical distinction between skill reinforcement and learning, this approach stresses individual learners’ bodily, psychological and intellectual responses. The individual learner is encouraged to act, reflect or respond to all the other participants and objects in a conventional classroom setting. The lecturer changes the whole classroom into a coherent stage, and every item, person or object becomes a gadget in the performance. It is mainly based on the idea that the more the setting is experienced, the better it is transformed into a learning space. It is closely related to spatiality, working memory and cognition.

3.2. Creative Drama Replaced by Creative Writing

We can stress three main categories regarding the human learner’s motivational status against the learning experience. First, externally motivated students in the ‘traditional’ settings. These students are primarily concerned about assessment. They are accustomed to methodologies using habitual skill formation or automatisisation by repetition or memorisation. Second, internally motivated students can be more involved in humanised spatial contexts. Lastly, the students use their cognitive capabilities better than the other students. I associate their attitude with Kantian *categorical imperative*, which requires an individual “self-conscious learner” (Çıraklı, 2022, p. 189), whose involvement, interaction and learning are unconditional. Hence, presumably, my ethnographic experience of the settings showed that Kant’s *categorical imperative* could be used to explain the motivational and involvement stages of the participants:

The principles of “interaction, spontaneity, and involvement” played a significant role in my virtual classroom (with a genuine experience of acting and producing). The participants were supposed to be ‘attentive’. Considering the above taxonomy, I replaced creative drama with creative writing and involved the chatbox efficiently.

Table.1. Çıraklı's Postures of Human Learners (Çıraklı, 2022; p. 189)

<i>Phases</i>	<i>Postures</i>	<i>Interaction Type</i>	<i>Distinctive Features</i>
-Task-Based -Planned Action -Receiver (Aristotle)	Externally Motivated	-Limited Interaction -Temporality -Collectivity -Transfer	-Repetition -Imitation <u>-Memorisation</u>
-Spontaneity -Involvement -Actor / Poetic (Wordsworth)	Internally Motivated	-Social and Spatial Interaction -Reflection -Creativity -Response	- Experience -Imagination -Memory (Long Term Episodic)
-Categorical Imperative -Producer (Kant)	Internally Motivated	Virtual Interaction	-Cognition -Knowledge

It provided a somewhat spatial realm, and the distorted texts the students sent were visible and readable by any participant at a time. As previously suggested: “[Quit standard ppt presentations and avoid boring, bothering mode of preaching! We should] envisage the individual learners, in Wordsworth’s terms, with the quality of “wise passiveness,” inherently associated with imagination, inspiration and creativity” (Çıraklı, 2018; p. 134). Rather, I tried to adopt a strategy of distortion, re-writing and interaction. I always keep the whiteboard activated.

4. Research context

I kept an ethnographic journal, social media posts, notebook entries, notes, and autoethnographic narrative as a poetry coach and a reflective participant. As Custer (2014) states that “Autoethnography by its very nature is engagement” (p. 4). Custer argues that “emotion”, “spiritual bond”, “embodiment” and “self-consciousness” (pp. 3–4) are essential elements in the autoethnographic account.

Pre-pandemic and pandemic strategies are incorporated, and Adobe Connect is integrated into my literature classes. It was a dramatic switch to virtual educational space due to the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown and questioning our conventional classroom setting.

4.1. Participants

My observation covers the Fall term, 2021–2022 academic year when I hosted online sessions for 14 weeks during the pandemic. The participants speak English as a foreign language. Most of them speak Turkish as their native tongue. During

the pandemic, I collaborated with 44 students (70 officially registered ones with 26 non-attendants). More than 35 students were regular participants, mainly following the sessions online. Others are connected to the classes by watching the recorded sessions. I hosted online sessions for 14 weeks, and the participants attended these sessions from different locations scattered around the country.

4.2. Data collection and procedure

My reflective journal allows me to think critically about my educational experience in the virtual literature classroom. As the ethnographer should keep a research diary, which “is a comprehensive record of the research process and contains a reflection on that process” (Fox et al., 2007; p. 148). So, I kept my observational notes and reflections on my classroom experience in a research diary. I took notes of emotional responses, critical responses, expectations, amazements, and feelings about the session experience. I paid utmost attention to the authenticity of my notes and narratives as reliability, in qualitative research, refers to the essential consistency of a narrator. Thus, I provided factual evidence from the context. It is organised around the following questions: 1) SITUATION: What actually happened? What did we do? What did you create or experience? 2) AFFECT: What was its impact/effect on you personally? What are your emotions/feelings? Why did you feel as you did? 3) INTERPRETATION: What did you learn from the experience? Explain in what ways the new learning either confirms or contradicts your prior knowledge or understanding.

Following Bochner’s (2002) suggestion, I thoroughly considered “what actually happened to me?” (p. 86). I also considered “what responses are given by the participants” and tried to interpret their habitual, emotional and cognitive changes. The researcher feels as if he were in the shoes of a learner, which is not an explicit or implicit analogy between the instructor and the student; instead, it is a sort of identification regarding the role and status of human learners. What makes the difference between these participants is, therefore, the degree of experience. The distinctive feature of the reflective teacher is that he is more experienced than others. I tried to represent this kind of emphatic stance and experiential attitude towards the topic under consideration. The fact that my account provides the readers with generalisable outputs and projections about the future experiences of the readers makes the researcher’s diary promising.

5. Findings and discussion: experiential, observational account

5.1. Meeting 1

The situational remarks and description of my pandemic experience are as follows:

I started with a warming activity on Sonnet 17 and raised some questions. I asked them about the types/kinds of poetry from Turkish culture. It was a strategy I had used previously, and I easily

transferred it to my virtual class. I have given the example of “Rubai”, which is named according to the number of lines in the poem. A Rubai (meaning four-lined in Arabic) contains four lines. I also give another example from Twitter. As a social media platform, Twitter seems to refer to the sonnet tradition as the tweets are restricted to “140 characters”, which equals to 14 times 10. That is an indirect reference to the form of a sonnet, including 14 lines, a conventionalised number of lines in a sonnet. This implies that “a tweet is a postmodern sonnet.” After giving these examples, I invited the students to talk about “love stories” and “love story patterns” since sonnets are mostly rotating around the “theme of love.” Then I asked them to “re-write/translate” the poem into Turkish by integrating/adding/incorporating certain cultural elements and Turkish idioms. Some of the students generated good idioms such as “gaza gelmek” [to grow stimulated], “yaşını başını almak”, [to grow older enough] “tenesir”, [figurative altar, to screw up], “kostaklanmak” [unbound arrogance].

After warming up, the teacher’s explanations about Sonnet Tradition, Shakespearean Sonnets, and the Renaissance sounded more interesting. The researcher particularly stressed the significance of three pillars of the age: Humanism (Ethics), Secular Love (Motive), and Greek Ideals and Forms (the Arts). Then I related the topic to the Sonnets: a) A sonnet is a love poem praising human qualities as such; b) A sonnet explores secular love rather than divine love; c) a sonnet is a reproduction of a resonant Greek form.

After the theoretical background, we returned to the original text: We found figures of speech, revised some pronunciation mistakes, and the role of the rhymes and metaphors. We highlighted the poem’s sound quality, meter and sound repetitions, making the verse rhythm produce musicality. Then, the researcher moved to another experimental activity:

The idea is that if something has a good rhythm, regular repetition of particular stresses and a specific arrangement of rising and falling intonation, it gives musical pleasure to the audience. A volunteer student is invited to the stage. The chorus rehearsed/read aloud the poem according to the rhythm, paying utmost attention to the meter, stress and intonation to make the volunteer student on the stage, who has already turned his back to the performers, turn to them and start listening to the music/rhythm/poem leaning against the desk. We all observed his facial gestures growing better and having pleasure in the exposition. All the members were involved in the activity. Then, we changed the mode of rehearsal/performance and read the poem in a fashion of “kaka-phony” [ill composition, noise] so that the volunteer would stop us. Thus, the function of “beat” and “rhythm” in a sonnet and the role of sound in the production of aesthetic pleasure have become observable. I saw that these strategies are efficiently transferred to the virtual setting, and interested students responded considerably.

Then the reflective teacher returned to the poem and investigated the possessive pronouns: “my”. They saw that the poet starts with “my verse” (referring to the very poem and it is a reference to his art) and finishes the poem with “my rhyme”, which also refers to the poem itself and a perusal of the art of the poet. This raises the question of whether it is a love poem or a poem about the art and craftsmanship of the poet. Whether the question praises the “object of love” (the lady) or “his powerful art”.

We discussed the issue and inspected imagery and images in the texts. Our examination revealed that there appear few images illustrating virtue and beauty. The participants were told they had a genuine performative touch and a genuine bond with the historical poet. The participants are amazed and baffled by how they are/were addressed by the real (historical) poet and how they grew to be accurate historical readers. The participants learned that they have a solid, actual bond of reading with the real historical author through a virtual classroom.

5.2. Meeting 2

The following meeting starts with a warming-up activity again. The researcher wrote/projected the themes on the whiteboard: a) Imaginary Object of Love and Imagined Object of Love; b) Turkish Yeşilçam stereotype KEZBAN (the poor ugly country girl transforms into a beautiful lady); c) Aşık Veysel. (The students wondered how these keywords would relate to the main topic). Then, the researcher invited two volunteer students (one boy and one girl) to open their cameras:

I used the direct text message and asked the students to sketch up/draw up the pictures of the beloveds in Sonnets 18 and 130. I allowed them to use a dictionary and an internet connection. After that, I turned to the volunteer students, switching to Turkish (in the pre-covid era, I had let them get behind the separator, using the portable whiteboard as a separator and told them to wait for me before). In the virtual classroom, they joined the activity in their privacy. I explained the situation to and asked the girl to “make up” the boy’s picture so that it reflects/represents the object described in Sonnet 130. We used everyday stuff to “paint” the face to stir creativity. So two tandem workshops were held separately, and I created a medium of suspense. After ten-15 minutes, I initiate the students to find images in Sonnet 130n and stock metaphors and clichés in Sonnet 18. I also asked them to number each image in the poem and its representation in their product to see if they could achieve a one-to-one correspondence between the poem and the picture. They also underlined the stock metaphors. After that textual study, I increased the tension to open up the separator: They were all curious to see what would happen. Upon seeing the boy made up/acting out the “ugly” woman in Sonnet 130, they all burst into tears. Then I asked them to rehearse/read aloud the poem and asked the model to act according to the lines performed. All the students were having fun, were involved in the activity, and were cheered up. Then we read Sonnet 18 aloud altogether. I asked one of the students (a girl) to choose a girl to represent/dramatise the beautiful lady in Sonnet 18. Then appear on stage two persons, one referring to 130, the other to 18. And then, I united them back to back, as if one person had two sights, and let the class listen to Aşık Veysel’s “Güzelliğin on par’etmez, Bu bendeki aşk olmasa” [It is only my love that makes you beautiful]. The students were all lost within the tunes of Veysel and moved. I asked about the implication: Some students, raising their hands, said, “These ladies are, maybe, the same person, and beauty is not in the physical appearance but in the mind and perception of the lover. [wording is mine].” I underlined the motto: “It depends how the perceiver perceives the object of love.

5.3. Meeting 3

I wrote/projected to the whiteboard the following themes:

- 1) Shakespeare's playfulness.
- 2) Politeness and Turkish Indirectness.
- 3) Reading through Creative Re-Writing.

Chatbox, as suggested above, provided us with a carnivalesque and non-hierarchical creative space in which the learners can produce and exert their critical thinking and reading comprehension skills. Of course, it does not devoid of their distorting pleasure, which is only possible if you have realised the distinctive features of the genres, conventions and themes. The following sonnet (see 5.4), a genuinely creative piece of the re-writing of a sonnet by Shakespeare, is addressed to the participant's mobile phone.

5.4. Sample production in the virtual classroom

My mistress' screen is nothing like the skies (Sonnet to my precious handy)

I would not believe it if it was said,
 You will be seen and heard by your mate,
 On the screen of a little machine in every climate,
 Only the investors live like a prophet.
 Human being has been addicted to it in a short time,
 Forgotten to communicate with each other with rhyme,
 If it is asked their mobile phones to hide,
 They would immediately turn into Mr. Hyde.
 For some people, it is hard to give up on it,
 For others, even a room is impossible to fit.
 Today's obsessed belonging get on well with,
 And without it the world is a deepless pit.

Even if I am a bookworm and nature lover,
 Sorry to be tied with my beloved cell forever.

6. Discussion: Reflective Account

6.1. Affect

As for the impact/effect on the participants and the researcher? What about emotions/feelings? learners' productions? It is observed that the students, even the ones in the imaginary back seats, were all involved in the lesson throughout the topic. Integrating cultural elements, spontaneity, responsiveness/creativity and invention made the students active, interactive and responsive. They still keep the videos/cameras off, but I hardly followed the messages in the chatbox. They sent many responses. They produced rewritings and parodies of the sonnet tradition.

I was impressed that my friends got the gist of the idea, and I was so happy to see that they were involved and would remember the spatial experience through the chatbox. Chatbox proved to serve as an imaginary yet powerful learning space.

As part of my emotional response to what I have experienced, I can quote the following statements from my journal, which indicate the gist of my emotional response.

I liked it and thought the group was among the best ones. It is also interesting that those sitting at the back or some boys having a relatively uninterested image raised their hands to share their products. To my surprise, I have observed that boys are more active than expected.

6.2. Interpretation

Regarding what the reflective teacher learned from the experience and how the new learning confirmed or contradicted their prior knowledge or understanding, it can be said that the students are very interested in activities. The “duration” matters because their “critical attention time interval” is too short. It is observed that they did not like keeping a notebook:

[...] and even though I encouraged them to keep a mobile notebook devoted to the lesson, many students could not understand the instructions. Sometimes, it can be challenging to make the point even when I switched to Turkish. (During the pre-pandemic period, some students were so interested, always approaching the lecturer’s desk to continue the discussions before he left the classroom). In the virtual classroom, critical-minded and brilliant students contacted the researcher about the course content.

The lecturer realised that there are quite a few reflective audiences and followers of these discussions. The participants reported that they learned much from these discussions. Hence, the chatbox allowed the lecturer to initiate discussions with the students. There were authentic discussions, but sometimes, the long answers occurred as a *copy-paste* response. Nevertheless, it was a form of interaction, particularly when the lecturer asked the participants to give an example in a few words; they were very responsive. In the discussion, some participants felt more confident and active in English.

Regarding spatial interaction, I questioned the virtual/distant Adobe Connect platform as a reflective and self-conscious author of the presented experiential account. Hence, my teaching-learning experience evaluates the previously set theory of postromantic framework (Çıraklı, 2018) and related strategies (Çıraklı, 2022). Qualitative examination and experiential account of how we can adapt our previous experience to the virtual setting would provide precious findings and suggestions regarding the techniques and the participants’ attitudes and motivational types.

My experience with the virtual classroom exhibited the possibility of transforming virtual settings into actual and spatial learning mediums. I knew that if they could “accumulate long-term memory, which would be a launching pad for further learning processes” (Çıraklı, 2022, p. 189). As spatial and social

interactions were no longer possible in the virtual environments and the individual learners were isolated in their privacy even when they were connected with an online session, I needed to develop new strategies according to the postures of human learners (Çıraklı, 2022). It was a genuine challenge to activate them to write in the chatbox, draw their attention, and keep them involved since they were exposed to many distractors. Their interaction with their friends was limited and changed, and the notion of spatiality would be almost lost. Moreover, these classes would lack 'space', vitally essential to long-term memory.

7. Conclusions and future implications

A poetry classroom is a creative medium with a variety of discoveries and inventions. Teaching poetry requires an active moderation open to spontaneous responses, improvisations and creative ideas. Teaching poetry through creative drama or creative writing with cultural elements requires considerable *spatial interaction* (Çıraklı, 2018, 2022) – however, particular challenges posed by the online virtual classroom during the pandemic call for reconsidering the case.

Therefore, the *postromantic framework* transforms itself into a more ethical and cognitive categorical imperative upon the spatial shift in the learning environments. Spontaneity, involvement and creativity should be integrated with categorical imperative and the activation of cognitive processes. Both Wordsworthian and Kantian categories should collaborate, but the reflective teacher should remember that in the virtual context, spatial interaction, therefore, imagination and long-term memory, is remarkably – and relatively – limited. The students should be instigated in a way that they assume themselves in a spatial medium of learning through experientiality to induce episodic memory. Any degree of spatial interaction makes them internally motivated, oscillating between imagination and cognition. When these strategies remain limited, students' cognitive skills come to the fore, in which case the wise passive learners facilitate their cognition.

8. Limitations of the study

The study is limited to a particular period and the narrative account of the ethnographer. Other research initiatives regarding reliability and generalisability should test the reflective teacher's observations, experiences and reflections. Nevertheless, it contains significant theoretical and practical insight into learning mediums.

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