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Behind screens: challenges and opportunities of participatory online peace education in Finland

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the challenges and opportunities of participatory online teaching and learning in higher education. It analyses an online peace education course taught during the Covid-19 pandemic in three Finnish universities between 2020–2021. The course explored fundamental mediation skills and practices of positive peace through participatory methods and applied drama. We show how the online setting affected students and teachers, by focusing on the challenges and opportunities for participatory pedagogy in an online environment. The course feedback from students (N = 23) was studied by content analysis and conjoined with the ethnographic observations of the authors. Our findings suggest that mediation skills and practices of positive peace can be effectively taught and analysed online. However, maintaining active presence and emotional sharing present both challenges and opportunities for participatory online education. The findings will be of interest to researchers in cognate fields of scholarship, as well as activists and teachers engaged in participatory teaching and how it can be effectively deployed online.

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Introduction

The rapid proliferation of the global Covid-19 pandemic saw many countries education systems take a sudden leap toward digital provision. Unable to participate in lectures and activities in person, students faced unfamiliar digital learning environments while effectively locked up in their homes. Among a number of highly digitalized countries, Finland had the necessary infrastructure in place, enabling educational institutions to make the jump to online provision very quickly. However, teachers were abruptly faced with different online platforms such as Zoom and Teams with little or no experience in online pedagogy, and meeting students behind their – sometimes black – screens. In short time, both students and teachers were overloaded with endless online lessons, recorded lectures, and increased amounts of assignments and readings.

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The sudden change and increased workload had marked effects on students' wellbeing and learning performances. For instance, Salmela-Aro's (2020a) survey of the academic year 2019–2020, found that 60% of students from the University of Helsinki felt exhausted by online teaching. Forthcoming research further indicates that periods of distance learning have witnessed burnouts double, and the sense of community among university students weakened (Salmela-Aro 2020b). Although seldom studied, it is unlikely that teachers' wellbeing has emerged from this period unscathed. The long-term consequences of this aspect of Covid-19 management will only be visible in the coming years, but as part of the process of reflection, consideration of current online teaching and learning practices, and a change of attitude towards the ways the sector uses online platforms and tools, can only be helpful.

To that end, the article analyses a specific course on peace education, taught online in three Finnish universities (Tampere, Jyväskylä and Helsinki) at the height of the pandemic between 2020–2021. The course was previously taught in person in spring 2020 at Tampere University. In order to deliver an online version, the teacher had to make several adjustments to accommodate activities and exercises that were initially designed to be held in the classroom. We explore how the transformation of the course from an in-person event to an online experience affected teaching and learning from the perspective of students and the teacher. In addition, we are attentive to what was required to deliver the online teaching of fundamental skills needed in mediation, such as active listening, professional empathy, integrated presence and nonviolent communication, by using participatory and applied drama-based methods intrinsic online. Drawing on peace theories (Galtung 1969, 1996; Boulding 1989, 2000; Wibben et al. 2019), participative pedagogy (hooks 1994) and applied drama (Taylor 2000; Nicholson 2005; Boal 2008), the article shows the limitations and criticalities of online education, whilst simultaneously reflecting on and how fundamental mediation skills can be effectively taught online, and the platforms and tools can be used to create cooperative, nonviolent and peaceful learning processes.

Theories of peace education and critical pedagogy have long suggested that participatory teaching methods can bring peace into theory and praxis (hooks 1994; Synott 2005; Jenkins 2008; Wibben et al. 2019). However, as Conley Tyler and Bretherton (2006) state, the role of praxis in peace education, especially at university level, has been somewhat neglected. Following this, we consider how participatory and applied drama-based teaching methods relate to the holistic, applied and experimental nature of peace education. This contribution makes a meaningful addition to understandings of how the challenges intrinsic to online teaching and learning can be overcome with an example of teaching and learning in the field (Brantmeier and Webb 2020). Despite the pandemic, online settings are likely to retain a pedagogical presence, not least because of the growth of multilocal education. Indeed, in order to find meaning in online

education where human interaction is limited behind screens, the article suggests that the praxis of peace education provides crucial pointers to successful implementation.

The article first sketches a pedagogical overview of the course, its objectives, contents and an example of how the course activities were tailored to the online setting. Following this, we outline the theoretical framework of the article, showing how the concepts of positive peace and mediation relate to the case course and participatory pedagogy. Concurrently, the section discusses education as a transgressive practice, where teachers act as facilitators of learning, and shows how the applied drama-based teaching methods were implemented online in the course. Thirdly, in the light of the theoretical frameworks in which our approach is embedded, we outline our mixed methods approach of content analysis, an ethnographic diary and observations as the most appropriate. Finally, the article presents the content analysis of the survey conjoined to the ethnographic observations of the authors and explores our key findings, the criticalities of the research, and suggestions of future possibilities for researching participatory methods in the field.

Case course

The case course 'Theatre for Peace' was offered in three Finnish universities to students from various disciplines *inter alia*: Cultural Studies; World Politics; International Relations; Sociology; Education Studies; Psychology and Peace Studies. In Tampere and Jyväskylä, the course was offered as a free-elective (6 students each), in Helsinki as a compulsory Masters' course (27 students), and was taught in English, a non-native language for most of the students. The course contents were mostly similar, however, the course was planned and developed in slightly different ways for each university according to local contingencies and as a response to students' interests. All meetings were implemented online using Zoom, where students were asked to keep their cameras on, but when 'inactive' to cover their cameras with a colourful sticky-note or a fabric to create an artwork of otherwise anonymous black screens.

One key learning objective of the course was to discover and explore the different ways in which theatre and drama can be applied in variable contexts such education, conflict transformation and human rights activism. We are aware that these two terms, which refer to 'interdisciplinary and hybrid practices' (Nicholson 2005, 2), are commonly interchangeably used in literature (E-debate in 2004, 2006). More specifically, applied theatre, understood as practicing theatre with the explicit intention of social change in a specific arena such as refugee camps, prisons, and health centres, was part of the course contents. Whilst students engaged with video-based material and read articles

about applied theatre, theatrical games in the classroom were intended as an educational practice and were the main methodological framework in which the course was embedded.

A further objective of the course was to present and experiment with different nonviolent communication models (Patfoort 2002; Rosenberg 2005) in dialogue with conflict analysis (Galtung 1969, 1996) and conflict management (Fisher, Ury, and Patton 1991; Thomas and Kilmann 2002) to encourage students to find models that suit them. Finally, and most importantly, the course focused on fundamental mediator skills, such as professional empathy, active listening, and integrated presence, which were practiced with drama-based exercises and accompanied by specific readings (Bercovitch 1991; Putnam 1994; Winslade, Monk, and Cotter 1998; Bowling and Hoffman 2000).

The learning objectives as presented to the students were:

(1) attaining a general understanding of applied theatre and its possible developments, especially its potential use as a means of social change in different contexts
(2) familiarization with participatory methods, nonviolent communication, and mediation skills by analysing and exploring different conflict styles and by being involved in online simulations of a facilitation
(3) increasing awareness of different conflict styles
(4) experiencing speaking, listening emotions and thoughts in an intercultural setting by working in English

Even though it was delivered online, the course retained its focus on cooperation and participation. Students were engaged in short lectures and activities, such as cooperative games and simulations. Artistic exercises were used to get to know each other and learn about communication, while videos about different theatre projects from various fields of social transformation were discussed collectively. These activities formed the core of the lessons, while lecturing and assignments were complementary to each other.

When tailoring exercises and activities to an online environment, the teacher wanted to keep the focus on the pedagogical goals of the original exercises. As an example, the teacher substituted the original exercise Right distance (presence) with Online connection as follows:

> Right distance
>
> In two lines, students stand in front of each other, and walk towards their partner until they find the "right distance" – which is the distance they feel is the right one with the person standing in front of them. The exercise is carried out without talking, and so students have to adjust their position, walk a bit, stop, and even walk backwards, until the right distance for all the pairs have been found.

The aim is to listen, accept and openly share the right distance between bodies and feel connected to each other. Consequently, students end up staring each other, looking into each other's gaze. With physical proximity not possible, the teacher developed Online connection as a substitute:

> Online connection
>
> In pairs, using pen and paper, every student has to draw their partner's facial portrait. Instead of looking at the paper, the key objective is to look at each other, keeping one's eyes on their partner. Students have two minutes (a timer is used) to draw, before they switch places. The model now becomes the sketcher. Students are asked not to make any comments during the exercise and stay as silent as possible. They are encouraged to concentrate on the exercise, avoiding anything else, like checking the phone, e-mails or the news.

The course was organized so students could continuously reflect on the activities and lectures in relation to assigned readings. During the course two individual assignments in the form of reflective essays (and for Helsinki and Tampere also artistic writing such poems, monologues and songs) were required. Furthermore, the exercises prepared students for the final group assignment of creating mediation simulations, where they developed descriptions of conflict cases and characters from scratch. Finally, students played the roles of characters and mediators that they had created, in the mediation setting they prepared, with the activities which facilitated the final mediation simulations. When student numbers were high, some students were engaged as external observers of the simulation.

Teaching peace and mediation online

One of the more problematic issues for teaching peace is that for several decades peace theories have been derived from theories of violence. Among others, Johan Galtung, one of the fathers of peace research, coined the notions of negative and positive peace in relation to his theory of violence (Galtung 1969, 1996). For Galtung, violence can be displayed in three different forms: direct violence; structural (or indirect) violence; and cultural violence. While negative peace is understood simply as the absence of direct violence, positive peace is defined as the absence of structural violence and the concomitant realisation of social justice. In her pivotal work, Elise Boulding (1989) foresaw the challenges in creating positive peace from definitions of violence. She argued that because understandings of violence(s) are usually much deeper and detailed than our knowledge of peace and nonviolence, an epistemological shift was necessary. To overcome this lack in 'peace' thinking, she proposed working on the potential of image literacy and utopias. For Boulding (1989, 77–78), these formed the strategy to create nonviolent and peaceful ways of envisioning societies and relationships among humans.

Feminist scholars have only recently begun to reflect on and apply Boulding's ideas in the context of teaching peace and mediation in the classroom (Reber-Rider 2008; Woodhouse and Santiago 2012; Wibben et al. 2019). Similarly, while analysing cases of war and conflict with her students which left limited scope for imagining alternative nonviolent and peaceful scenarios, Annick Wibben noted how this kind of pedagogy left her students unable to imagine a world without violence, bombs and guns. Inspired by the work of Boulding, she restructured her course entirely differently (Wibben et al. 2019). For Boulding (2000, 29) 'the very ability to imagine something different and better than what currently exists is critical for the possibility of social change'. The ability to imagine can be provoked by exploring a critical pedagogy that uses arts-based practices in the name of utopias.

The exploration of image literacy and utopias lies parallel with the substance of mediation. Mediation is considered as a process which requires the full consent and commitment of those who are engaged in it. In this sense, Boulding (1989, 8) identifies mediation as a process through which people can see the other in their needs, beliefs and interests, while imagining new solutions and possibilities. Utopianism, taken as constituting the imagination of a better world, is the essential groundwork for developing relationships and thus enacting successful mediation processes (Boulding 1989, 81). From this perspective, the role of the mediator (or facilitator of the mediation process) is crucial. Mediation requires conditions in which dialogue among the parties can thrive; a space for nonviolent and safe confrontation with each other, and the possibility to envisage a better future for their relationship. Skills such as active listening, professional empathy, integrated presence and nonviolent communication are required for a mediator who is willing to engage herself and the parties into an open process of dialogue towards new scenarios.

Translating the pedagogical inheritance of Elise Boulding into online teaching poses a serious challenge. Teaching online naturally increases the difficulty of building a participatory community that is able to see the other. Boulding (1989, 75–76), critically asked how it could be possible to feel present, build, and imagine peace and nonviolence, while working in front of a computer screen. At the time, Boulding could imagine the existence of contemporary online platforms and tools, but her encouragement for people to walk with each other through social despair, is very timely. But how can positive imagery be built online? How is it possible to nurture the person behind the black screen?

From the perspectives of positive peace and mediation practice, teaching online requires an augmented, shared and attentive presence. These spatial-temporal issues relating to the praxis of peace education resonate with participatory and drama-based teaching methods. Being present, emotionally and intellectually, is a crucial aspect both in theatre (actors) and in mediation (mediators). As Bowling and Hoffman (2000) pointed out, presence is a necessary part of the professional skills required to become a mediator, but

it also goes beyond reaching what they call 'integration'. 'Integrated mediators' are those mediators able to bring 'peace in the room', as their mere presence has a positive impact on the parties' relationship and on the mediation process itself (Bowling and Hoffman 2000, 21).

Peace education, participation and applied drama at university level

Universities can be a limiting environment for teaching peace. Spence and Makuwira (2005), have shown how universities are ill-suited for such an undertaking. They argue that,

> Contemporary university environments still emphasise conventional scholarly habits of detached and objective observation performed in hierarchical, elitist or remote locations. This offers little for the student interested in the applied and practical areas of and studies. We share Greenwood and Levin's (2000, p. 86) concern that critical and socially engaged research efforts are being undermined by 'autopoetic and self-referential academic activities in universities dominated by career opportunism and by students who are treated as imitators of their teachers rather than as original thinkers in the making' ... (Spence and Makuwira 2005, 2).

Universities, then, have the structural ability to contradict the aims of peace education. Johnson and Johnson (2010) echo Spence and Makuwira (2005), by suggesting that by the promotion of competition instead of cooperative relationships between individuals and groups is unlikely to foster the necessary attitudes. To achieve peace in all areas, from intrapersonal to international peace, peaceful attitudes, values and behavioural competencies need to be taught (Johnson and Johnson 2010).

Spence and Makuwira (2005), Synott (2005) and Conley Tyler and Bretherton (2006) promote praxis in peace education that rethinks and combines the how with the what, when considering what to teach. In their view, peace is largely built with practical skills and educating future peace practitioners is the main objective of peace education. According to Spence and Makuwira (2005), the goal of peace education should be long-lasting behavioural change. While focusing on developing the practical skills needed, they still urge a strong theoretical grounding for peace education. According to them, the solution to the challenge of intersecting interests may very well be found in a philosophy of teaching that promotes pluralism and participation (Spence and Makuwira 2005).

In considering this, Donahoe and Wibben (2018) underline the crucial role of critical thinking within the learning process related to peace and war. Specifically, they argue that both students and teachers bring their norms and previous knowledge to the classroom. Furthermore, acknowledging them creates the conditions for understanding peace and war issues, and students and teachers need to reflect openly about them. To achieve this, the role of the teacher as a facilitator of the learning process is the key (Donahoe and Wibben 2018).

Linking feminist insights to critical pedagogy, bell hooks (1994) advocates active participation in her philosophy of teaching, drawing on two essential elements to active participation: first, critical awareness, (see also Donahoe and Wibben 2018) and secondly, engagement. Engagement becomes manifested in self-actualization and accounts for a holistic understanding of a human being, which in turn, encourages students to see connections between life practices, ways of being, and the world in general (hooks 1994, 14). This 'engagement pedagogy' is more difficult for the teacher as it requires flexibility: participatory voices must be formed by the situation and for the people the teacher is working with (hooks 1994, 11). For hooks (1994) as well as for Johnson and Johnson (2010), the learning environment should be seen altogether as a communal place.

In hooks (1994) account, teaching is fundamentally an action to transgress. Enthusiasm for learning and serious topics can live side-by-side and within academic life, and do not need to be contradictory. Enthusiasm towards learning is sparked by interest towards the other person, and the recognition of other's voice and presence. In hooks' philosophy, acceptance and recognition of plurality form the basis of ideal teaching, which promotes everyone's active participation. (hooks 1994, 6–8.) Furthermore, as Hantzopoulos (2011) has shown, either a teacher or a student can be a transgressing agent, even within educational institutions, and therefore can become participatory actors in their environment.

In our course, applied drama was used to teach peace education and mediation skills, but also to understand people as human beings (Boal 2008, ix). Applied drama exercises and activities were used during the first part of the course, as preparation for the collective final simulations. These were formative experiences for students as they engaged in fictional mediation processes and practically reflected on the required skills of mediators. According to Augusto Boal (2008, 97), theatre is a language that anyone can possess, even those without narrowly defined artistic talent. In this way, theatre practice becomes a training for real action in the safe and protected environment of the classroom (Boal 2008, 98).

In addition to this, drama praxis in the context of higher education, reveals its significance within the co-constructed 'process of playing' (Taylor 2000, 7). As Taylor (2000, 1) states, drama is at its core and interplay between people, passions and platform. The specific features of the classroom, background, moods and abilities of students (and teachers), collectively shape the goals and the directions that applied drama activities entail. Here, applied drama intersects with mediation and conflict transformation practices, as they are both focused on the process of transformation instead of achieving a predetermined outcome. Thus, transformation is the feasible potential of applied drama and peace education, as it can ignite unforeseen events and unexpected learning outcomes, but it is not inevitable (Nicholson 2005, 12). For example, an

act of active listening can become a surprising transgression as it is a wake-up call for the mind to be truly attentive of the other and therefore, wake the consciousnesses of mind and body (Boal 2008, 103–104). This embodied perspective of drama encourages interpersonal discourse and has potential to relive and recreate conflicts through the imaginations of the participants. Furthermore, applied drama practices may create communities of identity, where participants (students) recognize each other's views and stories and develop a sense of belonging to the group (Nicholson 2005).

Research methodology

The epistemological premises apparent in the scholarship discussed, lend themselves to mixed methodological approaches that are able to distil the gradual and evolving character of the subject of this research. We employed two research methods to study our case: content analysis (Tuomi and Sarajarvi 2018) of the course survey and the ethnographic observations of the two authors in the form of notes and diaries. After the completion of each version of the course, students received an online questionnaire. The questionnaires were anonymous and optional and had no bearing on the course grade. The respondents were also informed about the good ethical guidelines and Responsible Conduct of Research (RCR) guiding the research (TENK, Finnish National Board of Research Integrity 2021). Of 39 participants, 23 responded, of which 13 were from the University of Helsinki, 5 from University of Jyväskylä and 5 from Tampere University. The survey was conducted to draw the large picture of the case course and to identify individual experiences of participatory and applied drama-based online teaching methods.

Students were asked 7 open-ended questions and given a column to send greetings and comments freely to the teacher. Of these, 4 were related to teaching, teaching methods, learning and course contents while the 3 remaining questions focused on the online features of the course. Additionally, students from Tampere University participated in a collective evaluation session during the last lesson of the course. They anonymously answered 4 questions which can be considered as a supplement to the questionnaire.

Ethnographic data was collected by the teacher (Tucci) and a student (Hietamäki, from the course delivered at the University of Jyväskylä course). Tucci kept a diary and commented on the lesson structure throughout the teaching of all three courses. Hietamäki was initially one of the respondents to the questionnaire and becoming the co-author was unknown at the time. Hietamäki attended the course as a PhD student to learn about online pedagogy and the use of participatory methods, which naturally guided her observations. These are also evident in her reflective essays of the course assignments and later, in the discussions together with Tucci.

The ethnographic data provides two insider views to teaching: teaching methods and the philosophical groundings to pedagogical practices. This data sheds more light onto the meanings that the content analysis cannot unearth. Allowing the student perspective in the process, some of the bias one might expect in analysing one's own course (Tucci) is reduced. This was further limited as Hietamäki analysed the contents of the course feedback.

Case analysis

The following case analysis is structured in three parts. First, we explore how students described their learning experiences; what challenges and opportunities they encountered and how their expectations affected their participation in the course. Along with students' insights, we discuss the challenges encountered by the teacher, especially regarding her expectations and her pedagogical goal to retain the participatory character despite the online setting. Secondly, the analysis demonstrates how sharing emotions, a sense of community and co-responsibility between students and the teacher, was pivotal to the success of the online course. Thirdly, drawing on some specific examples, the analysis tackles the criticalities and opportunities of the online platform in teaching and learning mediation techniques.

Opportunities and challenges to teaching and learning

In the questionnaire, students were asked to identify and then describe their most important learning points (minimum 5) from the course. Regardless of their home university, and the specific course, the students responded similarly and mostly named interrelated learning points. They were categorized under 1) simulations and mediations, 2) nonviolent communication, conflict management and its skills, 3) active listening, 4) acting and the use of applied drama and participatory teaching methods, 5) structural and societal violence, 6) peace research and 7) emotions, feelings and values. The typical learning experience corresponded well to the intended learning objectives of the course, which are listed in the beginning of the article.

The transformative nature of learning objectives such as nonviolent communication, conflict transformation, and active listening, was mentioned in many responses: the students reported how their behaviour as individuals has changed towards friends and family and as activists for social change. In some answers these were directly linked to understanding and opposing structural violence and seeing the world through someone else's eyes. A typically detailed answer (naming five or more learning points) was as follows:

> I familiarized myself with the NVC model (Rosenberg) and recognized the importance of active listening and non-verbal communication. In mediation simulations, I was able to practice these skills, including mediation skills. I also deepened my understanding of different mediation approaches. In this course, I learned more about the possibilities drama and theatre can create to make epistemic [sic] violence visible. Most importantly, this course reminded me to embrace creativity, question my assumptions, and practice critical self-reflection to tackle structural violence. I'll be more careful to recognize violent behaviour, such as minor and major positions in communication. (Student 4, Tampere)

Despite the guidelines, a few students responded with a single learning point. These students reported learning 'different' or 'artistic' methods to mediation. This is also evident in a number of critical comments from respondents from the University of Helsinki, which suggest that the learning goals, and especially the relationship to everyday violence, was not clearly related to their major topic (World Politics). However, in general, the mediation simulations were commented upon in all the answers, and all respondents learned about the mediation process through participatory applied drama-based methods.

There are a few students, who explicitly covered the praxis of peace education in their assessments for the course. The students used phrases such as: 'it was the first-hand, concrete realization of these things that made an impact. It is always different to read about something than to do it yourself', and 'exercises bridged the gaps between theory and practice and aided learning' and more specifically, 'the importance of more practical, "immersive" and communicative courses' and 'learning by doing'. One respondent wrote that despite their earlier scepticism, the practice in the course had made an impact on their learning regarding communication. Some students welcomed participatory methods as a distinct alternative to standard university teaching and stated that the skills practiced in the course are in themselves very important when working in teams, at school, in other institutions, at home or communicating in general with people. Additionally, students from the Tampere University described in their evaluative session how hard it was to facilitate a mediation and use those skills, even when they had learned a great deal about them. These students explained that they learned a 'theoretical take and concept of non-violent communication, and how hard it is to take it to practice'.

Students from University of Helsinki show the greatest divergence in the content analysis. This group had taken a very different route to the course because it was mandatory for World Politics Masters students, and the initial course description given by the university did not match the course content. In several responses, these students alluded to the fact that topics and theories from their major studies were lacking in the course. This was noticeable in their confusion, irritation and strong reaction to the course contents and approaches

used. Many students who responded to the survey from Helsinki found the course approach lacking, irrelevant or even unsuitable to academic teaching. A student wrote:

> Focus more on lecturing instead of interaction. The latter is rare in the academia and therefore I appreciate your approach. However, interaction is sufficient through simulations and maybe through a bit lesser number of exercises. (Student 9, Helsinki)

While another found the course overall unsuitable for higher level academic courses:

> I could recommend this course in another context (maybe secondary school or upper secondary school or perhaps as a voluntary course in bachelor' studies) but not in master's phase. (Student 11, Helsinki)

These extracts illustrate the tangible difficulties of participatory pedagogy, and how a transgression from the normative 'banking method' of higher education became a challenge for some students. Borrowing the term of bewilderment from Thompson (2003), the confusion, overwhelmed, and surprised feelings were a response to the extraordinary learning and teaching context that is seldom, if ever, encountered. However, bewilderment harbours neither negative nor positive meanings, and the transgressive practice of participatory teaching, equally assumes no pre-determined goals. These extracts evince that the students felt able to freely write their feedback, which meant they took the chance to be truly engaged and critical towards the learning experience. Despite the resistance, the analysis shows that the respondents learned a minimum of how to facilitate a mediation, while most of the respondents were able to learn all intended learning objectives online.

From the perspective of the teacher, other challenges and opportunities emerged. The data from the teacher's ethnographic diary and notes, indicate that it was a challenge to translate the goals of the exercises into an online setting. Therefore, teacher had to accept and embrace the possibility that some activities would create different learning experiences to what was expected. This act of acceptance resonated deeply with the role of the teacher as a facilitator and allowed students (and teacher) to freely experiment with what was unknown and unexpected. Consequently, taking the role of teacher as a facilitator requires flexibility and creativity in making this process possible, which was an ongoing concern. Furthermore, embracing the basic principles of facilitation, working with the means that are available in the here and now, is an embodied practice of positive peace and conflict transformation.

A further major challenge was how to give each occurrence of the course a fresh start in terms of managing both teacher and students' expectations of the course. In this respect, asking students to share their expectations, fears, wishes and doubts at the beginning of the course was singularly important to those matters being collectively acknowledged in the classroom. The teacher

similarly shared the same thoughts at the beginning of the course as a means to communicate the dialogical approach of participatory teaching, at the risk of not pleasing everyone, and/or creating potentially uncomfortable moments for the whole group.

The importance of emotional sharing, equality, and community

The content analysis revealed that the responses of students from the University of Helsinki were the most critical. The two smaller courses, delivered at Tampere University and University of Jyväskylä respectively, had a student body with greater academic heterogeneity. For both, online teaching during the restricted time of the global pandemic was mentioned with a positive note and resulted in additional learning outcomes. For the respondents, the course became a small community to learn and where emotions, trust and equality could be experienced.

The responses show a much stronger connection between the teacher and students in comparison to the experience at Helsinki. Answers to the questionnaire highlighted the teacher's role as a facilitator in the learning process. The students reported that the teacher 'treated each and every one as equals', cared about them and took into consideration their individual needs and interests. The teaching style was appreciated and closely related to learning outcomes being met:

> I appreciated her [the teacher] being straight-forward with us and treating us like adults, as equals, and conversing with us rather than simply lecturing us. Her being open and trusting towards us, with assignments and the simulations f.ex., was extremely motivating. I'm very grateful I met Ilaria [the teacher] and my fellow course mates, even though only virtually - everyone taught me something new about our world and the people in it, and also about me as a person. I grew so much in such a short amount of time, I feel like a different person now. And that's my goal with studying: I don't ever want to stop learning or changing. (Student 2, Jyväskylä)

At the University of Helsinki, while a few students mentioned the teaching as great, and likewise appreciate the participatory approach, some felt that the atmosphere was bad, or that the teacher did not change the course contents enough even though confusion over the expectations for the course were discussed during the first weeks.

In general, students described the course as 'interesting', 'valuable', 'fun', 'different', 'therapeutic', 'insightful', 'refreshing' or as a 'chance to challenge oneself'. Some students expressed its impact on their life in colourful and meaningful expressions such as 'food for the soul', 'my light in the dark during the autumn'. One student stated that:

> This spring was a bit challenging for me, and sometimes I cried before the lectures. After your lectures I felt better, so this course supported my well-being and mental health. Therefore, it played an important part in my daily life. (Student 4, Tampere)

We would strongly suggest that for those who appreciated the methods, and the style of teaching, the course had a meaningful impact.

Respondents from Tampere University and the University of Jyväskylä along with a few respondents from University of Helsinki, reported that recognising and expressing emotions, values and evaluations vs observations as their learning points. They also reported that they learned skills of patience, trust and exploration, as well as how to control and express their feelings and most significantly, empathy. Giving time and space for others was also named by one respondent as an essential mediator skill. At the evaluation exercise, students from Tampere University also claimed to have learned 'the value of silence' in the mediation process.

Despite the feeling of having created a pleasant connection with some of the students, the online setting hindered a new type of ethical responsibility connected to sharing emotions. In the smaller groups (Jyväskylä, Tampere) students shared a lot, sometimes even more than had been asked of them. In the teacher's ethnography, she describes feelings of being scared and of nervousness, as the ability to control the situation is more limited in the online setting, which was exacerbated by the emotional charge felt during the global pandemic. Having control of the facilitation activities, but not the learning process and its results is common to participatory pedagogy; but the online environment imposed an additional lack of control which can become an unsettling and uncomfortable experience for the facilitator. Even when personal spaces and emotions are shared online, the physical closeness of an in-presence setting is conspicuous by its absence. This takes us neatly to our final point of consideration: a deeper reflection into the opportunities and criticalities presented by the online platform.

Online platform

Three questions targeted online teaching directly. The first asked if the students felt and/or encountered challenges while participating in the course online and to explain the challenges with examples. The additional questions related to help given in private messages by the teacher during the fictional mediations for the facilitators or characters. This feature was unique to mediation online and for using applied drama in so far as it was possible online.

More often, students reported technical issues with participating in the course, which did not have a major effect on the overall learning experience. However, whilst specific technical features of the platform made following the instructions increasingly hard, many pointed out the importance in being clear

and precise in the explanation of exercises and instructions. In general, clarity of course objectives, contents and exercises were clearly hoped for. In some answers, the number of students participating in Helsinki were perceived to impose a limitation, with comments suggesting the exercises not long enough for an online version of the course; running out of time was an issue. However, in the mediation simulations online teaching worked particularly with no respondents reporting difficulties.

The factor of being online accounted for the challenges and positive experiences in teaching. For one respondent, the online platform created a safer and easier learning environment:

> I honestly felt that this course adapted really well to the online platform. Making the mediation simulations be in a Zoom context (as in, having the situation be Zoom mediations), using sticky notes to add atmosphere, and the other activities all felt good over Zoom. It must have felt limiting to you, but to me it was safer and easier to let go of inhibitions than an in-person class might have been. (Student 2, Tampere)

Another respondent mentioned how online teaching directly related to meeting the learning goals for peace education, stating that, 'that we can connect and create a safe environment through online platform'. However, not all students felt the same way. A student from the University of Helsinki wrote: 'I felt that the online platform gave the possibility to "hide" since people had no camera/mic on when doing exercises. This made some exercises/games a bit harder to do.' The difficulty in not seeing and being able to interpret human emotions were also mentioned as limitations to the online platform. Other respondents from Helsinki recorded also felt awkward with some online exercises, stating that some worked better than others.

Regarding the comments sent by the teacher during the mediation simulations, some students felt encouraged and reassured, while others found it bothersome or simultaneously good but slightly distracting. For time management, the comments were found useful. For a few respondents, the comments helped them to develop their characters and concentrate better on the applied drama.

In her ethnographic notes, the teacher described the added stress of technical difficulties while teaching a larger group online. For instance, collective activities were more time consuming than frontal lecturing, and only one exercise per class could be implemented with the larger group. This confirmed her initial thoughts that participatory online teaching with a large group demanded more time, extra online tools such as synchronous chats, and access to external online facilitative platforms (such as Flinga, Innoduel or Miro) to keep the group active. From the teacher's perspective, having implemented fewer activities meant that the larger group were not prepared as well as they might have been for the final simulations. Notwithstanding those reservations, the

online setting created useful opportunities for interactions with students during the final simulations. In fact, she could give secret instructions to the students-characters and the students mediators in support of their role-play, which would have been difficult in an in-presence setting.

The teacher also reported that the uncertainty caused her to hear 'a noise in the head' and thinking before a judgment coming from behind a blank screen, despite instructions to use colourful fabric or a post-it to alter the screen. However, with students who used the camera and mic actively, their personal spaces could be shared in the classroom giving a more concrete communicative experience through the online platform.

Key findings

Our findings strongly suggest that using participatory and applied drama-based methods to create a community learning environment is a significant challenge in an online environment. Nevertheless, the findings also show that students can become engaged in a participatory online teaching and learn mediation, nonviolent communication, and active listening, with the help of a suitable approach. Moreover, these specific learning outcomes were interlaced and interconnected.

All students taking the course experienced learning the skills necessary for mediation, while the majority also achieved additional learning outcomes of the course. Some students also indicated specific understanding of the meaning of praxis in peace education, building bridges between theory and practice, structural and mundane violence and stated that the practical approach, although somewhat lacking from the university, was very useful for all aspects of life. The link between learning outcomes and personal acknowledgements in students' daily lives is recurrent in other studies (see f.ex. Hiller 2018) and relates to the goal of education as a process to transgress (hooks 1994). The findings demonstrate the potential of teaching peace education in higher education, and the importance of reflecting on similar experiences.

Online settings also worked well for teaching mediation and implementing simulations. The unique possibilities open to the simulations by online teaching were seen to be mostly positive. Whilst being behind screens poses challenging limitations, it also provided useful possibilities for peace education. Sharing emotions and experiencing equality resulted in positive relationships between the teacher and the students. Joined with the insight of one student, the ethnography also suggests that by using the camera and microphone actively and sharing individual spaces (such as one's home), people became open to their emotional spaces, which can be increasingly important whilst studying in the solitude and loneliness of the global pandemic. During the lockdown,

having personal things to share becomes even more crucial in online teaching, and applied drama was a particularly good method to bring people closer despite being physically distant.

There was discernible divide in the student learning experiences from Tampere and Jyväskylä to those from Helsinki. Naturally, with smaller courses (from 6 to 12 participants) the community is easier to build while teaching online. Concurrently, while building a community, applied drama practices do not solve or answer questions, but rather provide tools to interrogate and pose questions, which can open to unknown realms. Thus, while using participatory and applied drama-based methods, the importance of building a community, sharing emotions and acknowledging others as persons, cannot be understated in the process of learning. When students (and teachers) are not available for this exploration which may create bewilderments (see Thompson 2003), the opportunity for achieving new discoveries, embracing different perspectives and community belonging can be lost.

The ethnographic observations further suggest that the challenges of the methods, such as lacking control on the process, can bring out surprising and unexpected situations as well as learning outcomes. Emotions, expectations and opinions remain hidden, if not shown on camera or expressed directly. Conversely, only those who put their camera on and want to express their feelings are heard which can adversely affect the collective atmosphere. The spatial-temporal challenges also affect the immediate tone. For example, the teacher can also miss events happening on the screens. Participatory teaching requires flexibility, but also intellectual and emotional presence, which was hard to always achieve online.

The results further hint to the prejudices of academia against peace education at university level, which may have filtered through to students' views. When teaching a participatory and applied drama-based course online, structure is crucial to the students. This was evident in the course offered at Helsinki, which differentiated from the other two in terms of what was obliged to be included. This difference gave the authors the opportunity to reflect on the understanding of teaching peace education within higher education for those who were not voluntarily opting for it.

Beyond the feelings of frustration, exhaustion and isolation caused by the global pandemic, students became expert recipients of online teaching. Therefore, they were critical analysts of how participation and engagement during classes were planned, envisaged and actually delivered by teachers. Negative comments and criticisms which were easy to elaborate, were given during the course and in the feedback, while positive comments can often be underdeveloped. It is fair to point out that no course is perfect, and certain teaching methods and styles that work for one, do not work for another. Online teaching can make this hard to unpick, with identities often hidden behind black screens and microphones muted. With 'in person' teaching, however, body language, dissatisfaction or struggling students can often be discerned, while

in an online setting teachers cannot request students to be visible and audible all the time which makes it harder to identify specific issues. This is an ethical paradox to teaching and learning online. 'Live feedback' may arrive during the course with the filter of remote presence and without face-to-face interaction, which can cause distortion and unnecessary misunderstandings within the relationships integral to learning communities and building positive peace.

Conclusions

During the global pandemic, teachers faced a major challenge to connect with students by organizing education on online platforms, whilst students have struggled with isolation and non-contact teaching. Online teaching may not be a short-term fix to the particular circumstances of the pandemic. The increasing multilocality of learning means that the lessons learned are unlikely to be forgotten, meaning a focus to how education is done is likely to prove more than pertinent. Our contribution to this ongoing evaluation places emphasis on the praxis of peace education (Spence and Makuwira 2005; Synott 2005; Conley Tyler and Bretherton 2006). The case we have analysed suggest that students' wellbeing and their learning, can be better supported by using holistic, participatory and applied drama-based teaching methods. Despite the limits imposed by the screen, these methods were able to bring meaning into education.

The findings are consistent with Conley Tyler and Bretherton's (2006) arguments about the lack of practice in peace education. With some limitations, we would argue that first, participatory and applied drama-based methods can be used to achieve the necessary praxis, and second, they can be implemented online. We also suggest that attitudes towards online platforms and education itself needs to change, and moreover, pedagogies promoting critical awareness, pluralism and participation can indeed offer one answer (hooks 1994; Boal 2008; Wibben et al. 2019). The case further suggests that in online teaching, it is the establishment of the learning community that becomes very important to its success (hooks 1994; Johnson and Johnson 2010).

Whilst online tools can be extremely useful in enabling participants to express their thoughts, feedback and evaluations anonymously, especially for larger groups, the key finding of the article, however, is that a purposeful learning community can only be developed by the revealing of identities and the absence of anonymity. Following Boulding (1989) we suggest that technology can show us the problems of our teaching and pedagogy and guide us to find more human ways to connect, teach and learn. Asking everyone (teachers and students) to participate behind a screen is antithetical to this; to recognize and hear each other's voices is what makes education engaging and transgressive.

This article constitutes an opening to discussions in online peace education. The case suggests that future research should be undertaken on the praxis of peace education, with a specific focus on students' views. More in-depth interviews might reveal more nuanced information about participatory pedagogy, but more experimentation and research into what kind of permanent changes mediation skills and active listening have on students, and how they relate to insights of positive peace.

Whilst online peace education and technology can easily be seen as a problem or an obstacle, conflict transformation practices and theories stress the maxim that every problem, contains the source of a learning experience and improvement. Leaning upon the practices and theories of conflict transformation, the article contends that technological tools should not be 'exploiting us', they should however, following Boulding (1989), help us to imagine solutions that did not exist before, in response to hardships (Boulding 2000, 30).

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