



## ARTICLE

### 'I miss the physical presence of the students': Swedish teachers' experiences of online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic

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**DOI Number:** <https://doi.org/10.26203/jhqw-6007>

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**To cite this article:** Alerby, E., Ekberg, N. and Johansson, M. (2021). 'I miss the physical presence of the students': Swedish teachers' experiences of online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Education in the North*, 28(3) pp. 100-120.



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## **‘I miss the physical presence of the students’: Swedish teachers’ experiences of online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic**

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### **Abstract**

The demographic and economic conditions for education in the Nordic countries—especially in remote areas of this region—has led to an increasingly intensive use of information and communication technologies. The authorities’ response to the COVID-19 pandemic has, however, entailed a radical acceleration of the already ongoing change towards digitisation. In the wake of the current pandemic regulations, the purpose of this study was to illuminate and discuss Swedish secondary school teachers’ experiences of online teaching and learning—with a particular focus on the teaching dimension—based on synchronous teaching and learning modes. A specific research question was posed: What opportunities and challenges do online teaching and learning offer when it comes to forming a sense of belonging, authenticity, and presence? Theoretically, this study was based on a phenomenological lifeworld approach. The empirical data, collected from March 2020 to March 2021, consisted of written reflections from ninety-three teachers in a remote school district. Three themes showed how online teaching and learning redefines the bodily, temporal, and spatial conditions for teachers’ experiences of belonging, authenticity, and presence in education. The study also indicates how digitisation might serve as a disruption that not only reminds us of the pedagogical assignment at hand but also lets another possible pedagogical world announce itself.

**Keywords:** lifeworld phenomenology, belonging, authenticity, presence, teachers’ experiences, online teaching and learning

## **Introduction**

Since the turn of the 21st century, there has been a massive shift in education worldwide, especially in higher education, towards online teaching and learning (e.g., Collins and Halverson, 2010; Dede, 2007). The challenging demographic and economic conditions for education in the Nordic countries, especially for education in the remote areas of the region, have specifically led to an increasingly intensive use of information and communication technologies. In many respects, the COVID-19 pandemic has become an even more radical transformative force in education, at different levels (Fischer et al., 2020).

The first phase of the pandemic occurred during the Spring Term of 2020. During this six-month period, the closure of educational institutions occurred worldwide and countries were forced to make decisions in order to keep educating students. Sweden was no exception, in fact all upper secondary schools as well as vocational and municipal adult education centres were closed at this time (Ministry of Education and Research, 2020). The use of video conferencing tools, together with other digital resources, enabled this sharp didactic turn from traditional to online teaching and learning, constituting a transformation of educational practices. This change allowed teachers and students to connect and communicate with each other synchronously, in real time, without being co-present in a joint classroom. Another alternative which was quickly developed and established during this time is asynchronous teaching, with pre-recorded video lectures and tasks which can be completed regardless of time and space.

Although some return to familiar educational practices will occur over time, it is reasonable to assume that the rapid digital transition in education will leave a lasting impression on teaching and learning. “The pandemic has forced change in educational practices—the dominant change being to make temporarily distant learning the primary way to offer learning opportunities for people of all ages” (Fischer et al., 2020, p.449). This digital transformation, in turn, means that the practices, conditions and values of education are in a continuous process of renegotiation.

Even though recent years have been characterised by the digitisation of educational contexts (Fransson, Holmberg, Lindberg and Olofsson, 2019), there remains much to learn about how the interplay between people, their bodies and the objects in digitised education occur and overlap (Enriquez-Gibson, 2016; Sheail, 2018). The increasing prevalence of online teaching and learning challenges conceptions about the conditions required for quality encounters, as well as the formation, role and meaning of contemporary education. However, the radical increase in the speed and magnitude of the digital transformation of education, as a consequence of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, has created an even more urgent need for in-depth knowledge and understanding of how online teaching and learning affects education and its actors (Clark-Wilson, Robutti and Thomas, 2020; Nouri and Selander, 2020).

The purpose of this paper is to illuminate and discuss secondary school teachers' experiences of online teaching and learning—with a particular focus on the teaching dimension—based on synchronous teaching and learning modes. The overarching research question is: What opportunities and challenges do online teaching and learning offer when it comes to forming a sense of belonging, authenticity, and

presence? Within the framework of this paper, teaching and learning as a phenomenon is viewed as intertwined and inseparable. Hence, in this study the expression 'online teaching and learning' is used even though the focus is on the teaching aspects.

### **Concepts of significance**

As the concepts of belonging, authenticity and presence are of significance for the study, a brief exploration of the meaning of these concepts follows. A sense of belonging means more than just getting to know other people. Instead, it refers to how we as individuals strive to gain acceptance, attention, and support from group members as well as how we give the same attention to other members. Westman and Alerby (2012) argue for a chiasmic be(com)ing, that comprises "a strong feeling of presence and belonging, appreciating potentialities and changes" (p.369).

Authenticity is central in all communication between teachers and students and permeates the learning process itself. It is made up of transparency, self-awareness and genuine connections forged through learning tasks with relevance for the learners. In a Heideggerian (1962) sense, authenticity stands for the human subject's grasping of his/her possibilities of "being-one's-self" (p.168) in a world that at the same time has "being-with" (p.167), in the presence of the Other, as a fundamental existential dimension.

In connection to education, Garrison, Anderson and Archer (1999) stress that learning occurs through the interaction of social presence, teaching presence and cognitive presence. Presence becomes important to establish a common learning community, which expands the learners' knowledge space and sense of belonging and empowerment (Zilka et al., 2018). The digitisation of education has also become part of an ongoing epistemological shift, from knowledge as something persistent, derived, and secured by legitimate experts to knowledge as a volatile, subjective, and socially negotiated phenomenon (Eijkman, 2008). In the framework of this article, presence is understood as relational, in accordance with the theory of the social world, developed by Schütz (1945). Thus, it demands a sense of We—and has bodily, spatial, and temporal dimensions, "only in the We-relation, in which there is a community of space and time (a common social environment in the pregnant sense), can man with the natural attitude experience the other's self in its unbroken totality" (Schütz, 1945, p.571).

### **Contemporary research in the field of online teaching and learning**

Literature suggests that the online teaching and learning environment constitutes a topic of considerable research interest. Several studies published before the global pandemic indicate that communication, teacher and student interaction, learning, and motivation are the four main aspects of significance. Of particular importance are cognitive and social strategies for online teaching and learning (Whipp and Lorentz, 2009; Hodge, Tabrizi, Farwell and Wuensch, 2007). It could be said that research about online teaching and learning has evolved with regards to the inclusion of students' perspectives. Kelly and Westerman (2016) suggest that student success requires self-discipline, flexibility, and motivation. Furthermore, interaction has been shown as a success criterion, however "we can do more to communicate both the expectations and the process of communication between

students and teachers in online blended coursework, especially at the secondary level” (Blaine, 2019, p.31).

Research has shown how digitisation of education can be seen as part of a general and increasingly tangible flexibility discourse in contemporary society. This discourse is not only characterised by expectations and opportunities for a far-reaching temporal flexibility among technology users (Naidu, 2017) but also advances the ideal of the agile body (Gillies, 2011), a body, which through technology can be stretched beyond “a physical time-space” (Sheail, 2018, p.7). Rather than experiencing release and an unrestricted life, mediated by technology, the human body is subjected to an adaptive configuration in accordance to prevailing political and economic interests (Sharma, 2011). Based on the phenomenological perspective and the notion of a ‘technological turn’, Dall’Alba and Barnacle (2005, p.720) state that the body has become peripheral in cultural, social, and educational terms. Therefore, Dall’Alba and Barnacle (2005) promote a shift towards embodied knowledge and, accordingly, an open-minded exploration of the relationship between mind/body and machine, and what this relationship means to “the ways of being, and of framing the world” (p.740).

The ongoing digital shift concerns a plethora of educational dimensions, and research has pointed out the promising possibilities of enhancing and transforming teaching and learning (Collins and Halverson, 2010; Dede, 2007; Fischer et al., 2020; Wood and Shirazi, 2020). Multiple studies have emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic from various countries around the world, showing that the rapid transition to online teaching and learning entailed challenges and difficulties for teachers (Bozkurt et al., 2020; Jones, 2020; Marinoni, van’t Land and Jensen 2020; Pelosi and Vicars, 2020).

As a result of the digital change which the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about, the traditional classroom has been transformed from a clearly defined place to a more indefinable and fluid place. The horizon of the room has been extended, and learning occurs in the place where the student (and teacher) is momentarily situated (Amir et al., 2020; Arnou et al., 2020; Barrot, Llenares and Del Rosario, 2021; Pokhrel and Chhetri 2021; Tang et al., 2021).

Bergdahl and Nouri (2020) outline how Swedish teachers creatively adapted their lessons to teach online. These findings are consistent with a study in Asia, showing that educators experienced a myriad of emotions from confidence and flexibility to extreme stress (Stasel, 2020). This stress could be seen as emotional and at times physical strain, reflecting the lack of preparation and professional development required for online teaching and learning (Collier and Burke, 2021). Despite concerns and a sense of inadequacy, many teachers also express feelings of togetherness and enthusiasm, and were able to nurture caring relationships with students in the online teaching and learning setting, which Kostenius and Alerby (2020) show requires interpersonal relationships.

### **Theoretical foundation: a phenomenological lifeworld approach**

Theoretically, this study is based on a phenomenological lifeworld approach, mainly in accordance with the philosophies of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Martin Heidegger and Alfred Schütz.

According to the ontology of the lifeworld, reality can be viewed as multifaceted and pluralistic. This means that the understanding of reality is not a limited number or type of quality, such as bodily or intellectual aspects. Western ontology traditionally views the pluralism of the lifeworld as a way to understand reality in positive terms, without minimising its complex value. Hence, reality is perceived as elaborate, with immensely different qualities which are not able to be condensed together (Merleau-Ponty, 1996; Merleau-Ponty and Lefort, 1968).

Interdependence of different qualities of reality is another aspect of the lifeworld ontology, where the lifeworld exists amidst the objective and subjective worlds. These two entities of the world and life are interconnected, through the worldly nature of life and the role of the world for living beings who belong in it (Bengtsson, 1999). Different people interpret and decipher reality in different ways.

In line with the phenomenology of the lifeworld, there is both an inseparability and a mutual interplay between human beings and the world in both directions. Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty (1996) claims that it is through the body that a person is in a living relation to things, such as a smartphone or a laptop. Consequently, it is via the body itself that worldly encounters take place. In other words, new media technologies influence human beings and vice versa.

Heidegger's phenomenological reflections on *technē*, as well as the relation between technology and the arts, support the exploration and understanding of teachers' experiences of living in an era of digitisation (Heidegger, 1977a, b). Heidegger (1977b, 2005) brings together the Greek expressions 'poiēsis' and 'technē' and thus adds a poetic dimension to the seemingly functionalist and linear technology, or as Ekberg and Schwieler (2021) put it: "technology and poetry basically share the same task, namely, to show and create meaning in the world" (p.35). Moreover, Heidegger (1977a) claimed that Being-with is a natural mode of Being-in-the-world, which shows itself in our need for "Mitdenken" (p.210) and "*Mitlernen*" (p.212, *Italic in original*), as he originally put it, that is to think and learn together with others. He also reminds us that the lifeworld is a matter of originality, finitude, and historicity, which does not concede to be fully observed, seized, or explained (Heidegger, 1977b, 2005).

Additionally, Schütz's theory of the social world supports a re-consideration of presence and the formation of time and place in education (Schütz, 1945, 2002). Schütz (1945) dismisses the detached theoretical attitude and abstract academic thinking as the starting point for communication, presence, and understanding. Instead, he emphasises the importance of starting from the shared everyday world, in which man both physically and cognitively engages with and is dependent on.

Drawing on the Schützian ideas of a world of multiple realities, consisting of various finite provinces of meaning, digitisation has brought a specific and complex accent of reality. This reality gives rise to new perspectives on the meaning of inner and outer time, the time structure of our partial selves as well as our actions, the possible expansion of attainable worlds, and our fundamental anxiety (Schütz, 1945, 2002).

The philosophical ideas presented in the phenomenological lifeworld approach emerged during the pre-digital era. In some respects, this requires a reconsideration of the current educational context, as these ideas are of relevance and can be related to the digital era of today, more precisely to online teaching

and learning. The lifeworld approach to practice-based research has a close affinity to people and their lived world experiences (Bengtsson, 1999). In addition, the methods used within this approach are based on the ontological understanding of the reality to be studied. Practice based research, as understood within the lifeworld approach, is not only research conducted in connection with the studied practice, but also an ontological, motivated, and evaluative position. Consequently, the lifeworld approach can be used in a fruitful way to theoretically conceptualise, as well as empirically investigate different pedagogical issues (Alerby, 2020). Thus, the lifeworld approach to practice-based research has been applied in this study, where the pedagogical issues relate to online teaching and learning.

## **Study design**

Education as it is known today has decisively changed because of the coronavirus, in what could be deemed an insurgent way. The objective of the study was to acquire an illumination of the teachers' experiences of online teaching and learning during this historic time frame and depict these experiences with clarity. The shared interest of teachers to voice experiences of educational change encompasses emotional responsiveness, which has occurred concurrently for individuals and groups of teachers.

The twelve-month period between March 2020 and March 2021 forms the time span for teachers' experiences of online teaching and learning. This period involved a drastic move away from face-to-face lessons where teachers and students could interact physically, to working in isolation online, and involved a "seismic shift" in educational norms, creating the capacity to provide insight from this point in time during the pandemic (Pelosi and Vicars, 2020, p.397).

Spring 2021 may or may not mark the end of the pandemic, however what is clear is that teachers at this point in time, had at least a year of experience with the online teaching and learning environment and reflections include this time span.

## **Participants of the study**

Teachers from upper secondary schools, adult education and vocational education centres participated in the study, and demographically represent a remote school district in Sweden. 'Upper secondary school' is a term used to categorically describe the schools, municipal and adult educational centres where teachers work. 'A remote school district in Sweden' also refers to a broad geographical location in general terms.

In the study, a purposive sampling—which can be described in terms of non-sequential, a priori sampling—has been applied, that aims to ensure variation and rich answers in relation to the research questions (Bryman, 2021; Hood, 2007). Teachers from the entire school district (two hundred and twenty teachers in total) were asked to participate. Ninety-three teachers chose to participate in sharing their experiences through written reflections.<sup>1</sup> The participating teachers had various levels of experience. This included teachers of both practical and theoretical Key Learning Areas (KLAs).

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<sup>1</sup> In the original study (see Johansson, 2021), the empirical data consisted, in addition to teachers' written reflections, of focus interviews and visual narratives. For the purpose of this paper, we have used selected parts of the data, the teachers' written reflections, and re-analysed the data.

Compulsory subjects include English, history, PE, mathematics, natural sciences, studies of religion, social studies and Swedish/Swedish as a second language.

#### **Data collection method: written reflections**

Van Manen (1997) argues that one way to study a phenomenon is to ask the relevant people to write down their ideas, thoughts, and visions, which are based on past experiences, because “writing distances us from the life-world, yet it also draws us more closely to the life-world” (p.127). Written reflections may therefore help writers remember and verbalise the significance of their former experiences. Dysthe (1993) also notes that writing is a slower process than speaking, and this pace creates the conditions required for reflection.

The teachers were asked to respond to various main, and rather open, questions with written reflections about their experiences of online teaching and learning, the advantages and disadvantages of this teaching form, as well as any comments they wished to make. The teachers’ written reflections were submitted anonymously using an online survey application, Google Forms.

#### **The Phenomenological Analysis**

Since the study is theoretically based on the phenomenological lifeworld approach, the analysis of the collected data reflects this method. According to Bengtsson (1999), the phenomenological lifeworld approach is consistent with qualitative analysis methods in which the depths and the variations of the data are allowed to emerge to their full potential. The analysis has focused on description and interpretation to understand the studied phenomenon and elucidate the relevant themes (van Manen, 1997).

According to van Manen (1990), the analysis is a process of discovery and invention—to let themes emerge. The themes, in turn, are “like knots in the webs of our experiences, around which certain lived experiences are spun and thus lived through as meaningful wholes” (ibid., p.90). He also stresses that “[t]hemes are the stars that make up the universes of meaning we live through”, and “[b]y the light of these themes we can navigate and explore such universes” (ibid., p.90). Important to emphasise is that the analysis process should not be regarded as governed by certain predetermined rules, instead it involves allowing the phenomenon to appear precisely as it is, “a free act of ‘seeing’” as van Manen (1990, p.79) states.

The empirical data of this study was, in accordance with the phenomenological lifeworld approach, analysed repeatedly and thoroughly, to become familiar with the material. This means that the teachers’ written reflections were read several times, and through this thorough reading, finally different patterns of relationships and similarities emerged. Organising and thematically sorting the material was then completed in order to create meaning. The following phase was to complete a flow chart with central themes and sub-themes, with an interpretation of more theoretical themes (cf. Braun and Clarke, 2006). The thematic analysis is about listening to, and “seeing” (van Manen, 1990) what emerged in the material, highlighting similarities and differences. The data was then collated into different themes based on the central and common characteristics of the patterns as the point of departure.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The Swedish Research Council (2017) outlines ethical principles for research. These include benefits for participants, confidentiality and ensuring harm is avoided. All participants in this study were asked if they wished to participate and their confidentiality was communicated through writing. In addition, names of the teachers, educational institutions and regions have been left out to ensure confidentiality. In the following result section, therefore, the teachers' names are fictional. Adherence to the ethical principles is a necessity for equitable research to take place (Swedish Research Council, 2017).

### **Opportunities and challenges of online teaching and learning: a result**

During the analysis of the teachers' experiences regarding opportunities and challenges in online teaching and learning, the following three themes crystallised: *The Importance of Interpersonal Relationships and Belonging*; *The Significance of the Body and the Sense of Presence*; and *The Black Screen: Renegotiating Participation and Exposure*. Of significance to emphasise is that there are connections and links between and within each theme, they should therefore not be regarded as autonomous and self-contained.

In the following section, the themes that emerged in the analysis are explored without any relative order of precedence. In addition to the phenomenological analysis, we have analysed and discussed the data in relation to contemporary movements in education, specifically teachers' experiences of online teaching and learning. Given this, the results of the study and the discussion in relation to the empirical data and the theoretical foundation are interwoven and often emerge in non-linear directions.

#### **The Importance of Interpersonal Relationships and Belonging**

The significance of interpersonal and social relationships in education, whether it is in face-to-face education or in online teaching and learning, is stressed in previous research (e.g., Kostenius and Alerby, 2020; Naeme, 2016). It is of utmost importance to be "connected to and confirmed by others, teachers as well as students, and also to exist in a (class)room that provides room for interpersonal relationships: in real life or online" (Kostenius and Alerby, 2020, p.8).

This notion of collaboration, involving social meetings and interpersonal relationships with students, was raised and problematised by teachers. In terms of interaction in the digital space, there is an experience of stagnation, which is captured in the following comment, "[t]he hard part has been to reach deeper, beyond the screen" (Kirsti, 2020). The lack of depth applies not only to the interpersonal interaction but to the highest degree also to the teachers' ability to didactically orchestrate their teaching, "I miss the interaction with the students, being able to improvise in the classroom, making quick adjustments if I notice that something is too difficult or if they [the students] get tired. Sure, it works, but the real appeal of the teaching profession; meeting students in learning encounters disappears" (Anna, 2020). According to another teacher, interaction itself did not pose a problem but the level of difficulty increased when working with a new group of students through online teaching. More specifically, interaction "is worse, it is not the same contact at all. It works with students you know, but I started a new course via distance, and it was really difficult" (Lars, 2020). The online teaching and learning situation in this case does not seem to allow the practice of a natural attitude or the taking of the shared

everyday world as a starting point, which in turn leads to a situation where neither a sense of a 'We' nor of sharing a vivid present can be established. Instead, the theoretical attitude seems to be given priority. Consequently, the assurance and delivery of predetermined didactic content are rewarded, while the unpredictability and creativity of pedagogy's deeply human and everyday dimensions are deprived of space. Online teaching and learning thus takes the form of a limited reality, which in Schütz's terminology could be described as a finite province of meaning. This collision between openness and finitude, diversity and direction is apparent in the following quote, "[t]echnical difficulties cause problems since some people can't be heard, or need to use the chat, so the discussions occur in many different places. This leads to the teacher controlling exorbitantly more, which tends to kill creative discussions" (Karin, 2020).

The digitised environment enables people to meet at the same time, without a bodily presence in the room. Teachers express a changed view of reality, whether students use a realistic picture, an imaginable avatar or a superficial icon, representations for each participant are visual rather than physical. "A photo is not an exact image of reality, a Skype morning tea is not the same as an ordinary [face-to-face] morning tea" (Peter, 2020). In this area, online teaching and learning poses opportunities for success, "[s]tudents who for one reason or another become passive or quiet in the classroom can now express themselves when they are not comparing themselves with others, or worried about comments" (Maria, 2020).

It would be naive to assume that all students succeed with social interaction in the traditional classroom. According to several teachers, some students who struggle with interpersonal relationships face-to-face, are provided with more opportunities for success in this area when the classroom is digitised. This viewpoint can be seen in the following teacher reflection, "I believe that it's people in the classroom who put a lot of energy and effort into dealing with social relationships. Now they can fully devote themselves to the acquisition of knowledge" and "[s]uddenly there is an arena for the group of students who have difficulty finding their place when the space is physical" (Nina and John, 2020). Thus, interpersonal and social relationships in the online teaching and learning environment are influenced by elements of the body, the mind and the room (cf. Merleau-Ponty, 1996). Digitised education could be seen as a welcome and powerful force, with the potential to highlight the possibilities for education as we wish it to be. One teacher put it this way, "[i]t has really created an awareness among the students how important the school is from many perspectives; socialisation, access to lunch, the important physical meeting with the teacher" (Robert, 2020). This concurs with another teacher who sees physical embodiment as a vital aspect of collaborative teaching and learning. "The very charm and appeal of the teaching profession; meeting students in education, has disappeared" (Margaret, 2020).

To summarise this theme—*The Importance of Interpersonal Relationships and Belonging*—the teachers in the study emphasised the importance of interpersonal relationships and belonging, and that online teaching and learning can be both an opportunity and a challenge for the teachers and the students' daily life. The teachers expressed the lack of relationships and interactions with the students in the digitised educational space. But at the same time, they stressed that online teaching and learning

provides opportunities for the students who struggle with interpersonal relationships in the traditional classroom.

### **The significance of the body and the sense of presence**

According to Merleau-Ponty (1996), it is through the body a person is in a living relation to things, such as a smartphone or a laptop, and Heidegger (1962) claimed that it is through the body a person is acting in the world. In this acting, the person's gestures are of significance, and as stated by Hall and Looney (2019) "talk, gaze, facial expressions and gesture work simultaneously and sequentially to mitigate correction, hold the floor, display cognitive states and invite participation and/or empathy from students" (p.7). In other words, gestures work as vital pedagogic assets for educational interactions.

When the space is digitised, interaction occurs at a distance and this changed dynamic challenges some teachers, as seen in the following comment, "I miss the physical presence of the students" (Alicia, 2020). This could be related to the difficulty with interpreting body language in this online space. "Reading body language, gaze, tones—there is probably nothing that can replace it in relationship building and the contact suffers [during online lessons]" (Kirsti, 2021). Whether gestures are made, seen, understood, or even interpreted in the online teaching and learning environment provides a new challenge for teachers and students alike. "I miss the eye contact and body language, gestures and facial expressions" (Marlene, 2021).

Bodily presence in the online environment, whilst being an important aspect of teaching, is, however, not always a conscious element for teachers themselves. "The movement in the dimensions of being and having a body can be characterised as stepping in and out of the online embodiment. When being the online body, the teacher is immersed in the online setting" (Bolldén, 2014, p.9).

Movement in the physical classroom, on the other hand, encompasses a range of spaces and positions, for example a teacher will often stand, walk around, sit, reach over, point, interact and move in response to students and their movements within a room. One teacher in this study has some ideas about how to improve this imbalance with movement as follows, "I have found that I think it works better for me to get up and walk around rather than sitting down [during online lessons] because then I can use my own body language in a more effective way" (Jonathan, 2021).

Another aspect of movement explored in the study relates to the subjects being taught. Differentiation at the methodological level enables aspects of movement within practical and theoretical KLA's to become visible. A teacher of Physical Education (PE) stated that "[t]he whole idea of teaching the joy of movement in sports, is drastically more difficult [in online teaching and learning situations]" (Lena, 2020). This comment suggests that enjoyment is at the forefront of this teacher's mind and the loss of this sense of fun for students is implied as being due to the lack of movement in online teaching and learning situations. This also has implications for the assessment of learning, which can be seen in the following comment, "[it is] difficult as you have many practical elements to be examined" (Anders, 2020).

To summarise this theme—*The Significance of the Body and the Sense of Presence*—the teachers express that they, most often, miss the physical presence of the students. Immanent in the lack of physical presence is also the lack of opportunities for physical movements. This leads to significantly

altered teaching and learning encounters. It could also be argued that there is less bodily movement in the online teaching and learning environment for both teachers and students, than in traditional classrooms. In fact, some teachers express a view that they sit behind a screen for lengthy lessons, whilst others are not even aware of their bodily movements in this setting.

### **The black screen: renegotiating participation and exposure**

According to the teachers in this study, visibility was seen as a highly valued necessity for communication. Invisibility—when the screen is black—was thus seen as problematic. A pattern emerged that teachers would ask students to turn on their web cameras, yet students refused to comply. One of the teachers doubted the students' skills and expressed a view that they lacked the ability to turn the camera on. Some teachers express a sense of inarticulate reluctance within their student groups, while others emphasise how “[s]ome students also consistently refuse to turn on the camera” (Sofie, 2021). In their endeavour to understand and explain the students' situation the teachers argue, “[t]hey have ‘technical problems’, and it seems as if the students become speechless when the whole class listens, which is interesting” (Carl, 2021). However, the teachers generally concluded that the webcam refusal was a rather active and conscious choice among the students in question.

Regardless of whether the students, or the teachers, have the skills to handle the new situation with teaching and learning in the online classroom, it is most likely a learning process for everyone involved. For this learning process to really be established, and the knowledge about how to use the technology, and the methodology followed by this, to be embodied, a habit needs to be formed (Merleau-Ponty, 1996). If this habit has not yet been formed, an uncertainty about the technical solution may occur—maybe the student does not know how to turn on the camera. However, a student may very well have the knowledge to, for example, turn on the camera, but for some reason choose not to announce it or use the knowledge—instead the screen is black.

In this study, all teachers articulated the desire to not only use, but also engage with the web camera during lessons in the online teaching and learning environment. This vital equipment reinforces Heidegger's concept of *zeug*, the tool or thing that is handy to us (1962). He depicts the human being as immersed in a practical world of things, things that carry a variety of social and cultural meanings and, often unreflectively, become part of who we are. Occasionally, this unreflected relationship to the tools as objects *Ready-to-hand* (integral parts of our lives and activities) changes. Suddenly, based on their broken or obstructive function, these tools appear as specific objects from the previously presumed context. In this context, disengaging the tool forms the black screen, which in turn impacts on how people react and interact in the shared digitised space. In the following example, the teacher fills the empty space with verbal language, much to their own disdain, “[s]ome students consistently refuse to turn on the camera and you feel like a radio talkback host” (Ninnie, 2021). Thus, the learning environment is altered, and a one-way stream of communication is created by the teacher, whilst the students seem rather detached and inactive.

It appears that whether the camera is on or if it is off, is something most teachers allow individual students to choose, despite their strong conviction that it is necessary for communication. “I want to see

my students for the interaction, otherwise it [teaching and learning] does not work properly. Just a simple thing such as facial expressions is very important” and “I always ask them [the students] to turn on the camera” (Peter and Suzanne, 2021). In addition, the use of a web camera is perceived by teachers as connected to the willingness to participate in online teaching and learning opportunities. “It plays a large role! Having the camera on makes them [the students] more motivated, otherwise they can lie in bed and lethargically watch [the lesson]” (Lovisa, 2021). This comment shows a range of role descriptions from active to passive, as experienced through verbal and non-verbal cues of oral interaction. However, in the teachers’ reflections, other important aspects emerge which need to be emphasised. They indicate an openness and alternative understanding among teachers that the black screen represents more than meets the eye. These teachers point to how online teaching and learning makes it possible to meet the needs of certain groups of students for peace and quiet and, in particular, how insecure and shy students have been given an opportunity to participate on their own terms. One of the teachers’ comments reads, “[s]tudents who become more passive or quiet in the classroom for one reason or another, can reach their full potential when they are not comparing themselves to others, or worried about comments being made” (William, 2020). Among these teachers, it is also noticeable how a broader view of participation, communication and expression is applied, as for example in the following, “[s]tudents who do not participate in teaching (waiting for the lesson to end) participate through the chat function in Skype, actually, students who do not wish to take space verbally are given the opportunity and possibility in the format of online teaching and learning” (Pernilla, 2020). It also appears that the significance of the time dimension for presence and commitment in certain respects is broadened or re-considered. Even though the students might not expose themselves on the screen, they are active in ways and timeframes of their own choosing, through various assignment comments and submissions. Thus, the online teaching and learning environment has dramatically enhanced opportunities for accessibility. Flexibility is created through the temporal freedom of the digital technological setting, which has the capacity to improve learner autonomy.

Among the teachers are also those who reflect on the importance of digital technology for new aspects of equality and students’ diversified needs. Here, to some extent, new groups emerge that can be seen as favoured or disadvantaged by the change in technology use:

“New perspectives are interesting. Put simply and based on my experience, I can group students into three categories. Those who embrace online teaching and learning as they would classroom teaching, those who have real difficulties developing structures and commitment to studying from home, and those who perform better via the computer. I believe that it is the people in the classroom who put a lot of energy and effort into managing social relationships, who can now put all of their energy into the acquisition of knowledge” (Marcus, 2020).

The traditional classroom is a physical space in a school building, where students from all socio-economic backgrounds come together to participate in learning. This environment is predictably similar from day to day and is predominantly made up of a teacher and a group of students in a shared space. The unique physical home environments of each individual student are invisible. Synchronous online teaching and learning, in contrast, involves participation from different physical locations, where the home environment is visible and audible to others. This may include a multitude of people or pets who

create superfluous sounds and sights, leading to expose unwanted scenes during a lesson. It seems viable and logical that students may wish to control visibility and limit web camera usage to ensure confidentiality for a range of reasons.

To summarise this theme—*The Black Screen: Renegotiating Participation and Exposure*—the teachers emphasised the importance of visibility as a necessity for communication. When the students, for different reasons, did not turn on the camera and the screen remained black, the teachers expressed this as problematic. Teachers may be aware of an absence or the existence of something beyond the invisibility of the black screen. It could be argued that new operating norms around visibility, participation and exposure in online teaching and learning are important aspects to raise, ensuring equity and understanding across a range of social situations.

### **Teachers' experiences of online teaching and learning: a discussion**

In this paper we have elaborated on secondary school teachers' experiences of online teaching and learning regarding opportunities provided and challenges undertaken, more specifically when it comes to forming a sense of belonging, authenticity, and presence (cf. Zilka et al., 2018). The study endorses how digital technology development and new digital practices create new bodily, temporal, and spatial conditions for, what Schütz (1945) described as “a common vivid present, our vivid present” (p543). Based on a phenomenological reading of what emerges in the study, it is also possible to consider the themes—and online teaching and learning in general—in terms of *zeug*, or a kind of intertwined network of things. If we are to consider Heidegger, we should not make the mistake of believing that correct understanding is obtained by being able to scientifically reduce reality, or to break down its various components into separate units of analysis. Thus, there is no point in trying to regard digital technology, governing documents, teaching groups or didactics as something ‘present-at-hand’. Instead, the challenges and opportunities of online teaching and learning need to be understood from a holistic position of being-in-the-world. In this way, online teaching and learning becomes an integral part of a larger practical context of things, with presupposed meanings and practical functionalities.

Based on the study's prominent themes, it is obvious that not only digital technology, but also online teaching and learning are undergoing a transformation—and even a disruption. Things [online teaching and learning ventures] are not going as planned and the equipment [the digital technologies] do not deliver as intended. In terms of Heidegger (1962) the digital technology setting goes from the unreflected “readiness-to-hand” to a state characterised by “un-readiness-to-hand” (p.103), where the technological equipment apparently is no longer fit for the purpose. This disruptive state contains a threat of far-reaching erosion, when it comes to teaching and learning, but also a promise of a rediscovery of authentic pedagogical values and practices. In addition, if we continue to listen to Heidegger (1962) and can value what is found missing, the disruption does not only uncover and remind us of the assignment at hand but also offers a contextual prospect where “the world announces itself” (p.105). What can be said about the pedagogical world that announces itself through the shared experiences of the teachers in this study?

On the one hand online teaching and learning may be ascribed to a certain “specific accent of reality” (Schütz, 1945, p.554) where many teachers apparently find themselves left out in an uncommon professional domain, characterised by a lack of relationships and meaning. Drawing on Schütz (1945) view of reality, the results show that these teachers express a lack of relation to their own students through online teaching. The teaching situation itself and the relationship with the student thus feels compromised and non-authentic. In this respect many teachers and students have been left out to a rather dualistic oriented online teaching and learning initiative. Hence, the cognitive dimensions of education have been predominant, while a holistic approach—especially addressing the significance of the bodily dimensions of teaching and learning, interacting, and belonging (cf. Merleau-Ponty, 1996)—have proved more difficult to pursue. The relationship between a dualistic approach and the body’s essential importance for teaching and learning is also obvious when it comes to the way in which online teaching and learning tends to turn towards transmissive modes of pedagogy. Many teachers feel transformed into talking heads on a screen, who vainly try to engage a detached—and often disembodied—student group. One explanation for the often teacher-centred approach, may be that there is not yet embodied knowledge and experience within the teaching staff that allows improvisation and renegotiation of how the technology should be used (cf. Merleau-Ponty, 1996). Another explanation, though not entirely separable from the previous one, is that online teaching and learning constitutes a finite province of meaning, where ideas about pre-planned structure, content divided into sequences, clarity in teacher instructions, and focus on subject and curriculum are prevalent. To speak in Schützian terms, it could be about a domain characterised by the theoretical attitude, which consequently does not create conditions for mutual exchange and a feeling among teachers and students of sharing the vivid present.

On the other hand, it is possible to see digitisation as a welcome and much-needed force that turns our eyes to what pedagogy and teaching are and can be; which asks questions and evokes reflections that would otherwise never occur (cf. Fischer et al., 2020; Wood and Shirazi, 2020). The results portray an admittedly challenged group of teachers, but also show different ways of dealing with these challenges (cf. Bergdahl and Nouri, 2020). Here, for example, teachers share their own experiences of introducing bodily dimensions into the digital mode of teaching, which at first glance may seem deprived of most forms of embodiment. Other teachers point to the pedagogical need for a certain openness and understanding of the students’ diverse conditions and needs when it comes to their learning and participation in an online teaching and learning context. The teachers’ reflections also allow for interpretive possibilities concerning the need to redefine and renegotiate valid forms of expression, presence, and perhaps even education in itself. Additionally, there are essential dimensions of care for the students in the teachers’ reflections, dimensions also found in the work of Collier and Burke (2021).

This study provides additional benefit due to the contemplative nature of the data collection which occurred at contrasting times, encapsulating a year during the global pandemic. This has meant that people have reflected on authentic and valid experiences of relevance at different times. Importantly, we as authors of this article have also had first-hand experiences of teaching at upper secondary school and university levels during this timeframe. Our pre-understanding of online teaching and learning

involves a form of subjectivity to the phenomena in focus. Embedded in this dilemma is the risk for bias, which has been countered through receptiveness and openness to the idea of otherness. Participants' experiences are at the heart of the study, and truthfully representing and analysing the data is a responsibility we have undertaken with rigour, to ensure that the findings are reliable. Another dilemma, or limitation of the study, concerns the characteristics of the method used. Written reflections are a one-way form of communication, which lack the possibility to clarify and interact with the participants. As researchers we have taken these matters into consideration when conducting the study, analysing the data, and reporting the findings. Written reflections, however, are a proven method of allowing people to speak on their own terms and to share their lived experiences (Alerby and Hagström, 2019; Ekberg and Ferm Almqvist, 2020).

### **To conclude**

As can be seen from the results, it is common for teachers—on several obviously good grounds—to idealise traditional classroom teaching. However, it is probably not as ideal to try to transfer and recreate these practices in the online teaching and learning context. Both contexts have their different values and limitations, where the online setting cannot compete with the physical tangibility and agency as well as the physical representation of possibilities in the traditional classroom (Collier and Burke, 2021). At the same time, online teaching and learning offers a greater range of immediate sources of information, a greater variety of simultaneous modes of interaction and representation (audio, images, text/chats, symbols), and easy-to-initiate student collaborative forms, which many teachers do not seem to have the ability to make use of during synchronous lessons online. Instead, teachers have tried to capture students' interest through what appears to have been a teacher-centered, transmissive and, primarily, voice-based pedagogy. However, it is entirely possible to challenge the notions of the pedagogical authenticity of traditional classroom practices (Dede, 2007; Sheail, 2018).

Based on the insights that emerge in the teachers' reflections, the digital presence can be said to offer students other possibilities than allowed by the teacher-orchestrated traditional classroom when it comes to impression management, that is to let the student decide which 'Self' is presented. These technologies also offer the student choices about the degree of self-exposure to the class as well as an increased influence on how learning and knowledge representation should be managed. In this way, the online teaching and learning environment can contribute to alternative ways of exploring the Schützian way of establishing a common communicative and existential starting point for teachers and students in the everyday world that concerns us all and to which we all want to contribute.

Collier and Burke (2021) express a perspective that is justified in this type of study, through which they draw attention to "the critical and growing role of teachers as heroes in the pandemic" (p.6). However, research needs to take the exploratory task further. As the human subject experiences the world in time and space, life is inevitably an embodied part of the socio-historical world, and vice versa (Merleau-Ponty, 1996). Therefore, the research elaborated on in this article is relevant and important as an expression of a very real situation experienced by teachers in the contemporary world, as an articulation

of the body “as a site of experience or practice” (Enriquez-Gibson, 2016, p.1125) and an advancement of a form of embodied knowledge (Dall’Alba and Barnacle, 2005).

Despite the imminent challenges which have impacted on teachers’ experiences of online teaching and learning, there are glimpses of the potential possibilities with this mode of teaching to be found. Or as one of the teacher’s expressed, “[t]his is a mode of teaching which has more possibilities than it has limitations”.

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