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IO3
2021

Manual of best practices for a blended flexible training activity in architecture for higher education institutions

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This volume returns the results of the Intellectual Output 03 of the research project "ArchéA. Architectural European Medium-sized City Arrangement", with the aim of analyzing and restating the state of the art achieved in the field of flexible mixed training in architecture, strongly encouraged by the emergency period of the Covid-19 pandemic. The result is a collection of good practices carried out internally and externally to the ArchéA partner network, in the context of higher education institutions, made possible by new virtual tools capable of mediating teaching and mixed and flexible learning around the disciplines related to the project.

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Manual of best practices for a blended flexible training activity in architecture for higher education institutions

edited by Enrico Prandi and Paolo Strina

Architectural European Medium-sized City Arrangement

Co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union

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Esther Giani
Rarefied atmospheres

Iuav University of Venice, Italy

Fig.01 Cover of the on-line worshop curated by Esther Giani + Pretesti. An experience of blanded teaching by distance shared working

We have been using remote connections for many years, for decades; already in the past millennium it was largely in use by several industrial holding companies, in politics, in journalism, in entertainment. But only in the last two years, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the call system has undergone an unexpected development: modified and enriched platforms, simplifications in connections, expansion of accessibility. A sort of interaction pseudo-democratization. Today and in few months, video-calling has become a widespread custom regardless of social media; it's strongly inter-generational and available even from faraway places.

What are the consequences of this new pervasive competence and what the rebounds on the practice of knowledge transmission? The emerging scenarios are different and depend on many variations. The aim of this short contribution is to trace a framework, a field of possibilities, using a simple and proven analytical analysis: the SWOT.

Strengths

Spokespersons scattered around the world may participate remotely and simultaneously at the same event: this is the most obvious strength. Again, this is not a novelty but rather a rediscovery. The lockdown made it necessary: a form of remote dialogue used only on formal and exceptional occasions became more simple, reliable, and familiar. These opportunities are at disposal almost for free. Before, a roundtable with several international researchers would have required quite a complex organization (search for funds and quotes, administrative procedures, several costs' approval, permits and calendars, etc.). Now, any event can almost be improvised amongst interest parties, nearly without "structural" involvement.

A strength comes from government investments. These are direct by means of incentives and dedicated funding devoted to e-infrastructure and hardware (in both the public and the private sector). They are also indirect, as a result of an unprecedented boost given by a demand that is outlining a new market.

Another element of strength is the development/improvement of integrated digital platforms. Hardware and software infrastructures guarantee technological services and tools, programs and applications, for distribution, management and creation of digital content and services, also by the integration of multiple media. In a few months, companies reconfigured platforms systems for a more friendly virtual, blended, flexible learning. Training systems in e-learning, work environment and organization, research ambient, monitoring, have been tuned up. Storage of experiences and services have been redirected. All has been organized upon multiple access levels and on user's type based. Thus, the possibility of disseminating contents became boundless. The reference is to the "enrichable" classic recorded lesson. Modes not at all innovative, but now much simplified and of direct and easy access.

Strength: Space-time displacement. Students can follow the lessons without being bound either to the place nor to the time segment in which they take place. Strictly speaking, this is a strength, but it's also a weakness.

Still on the transmission of knowledge: a strength is the archiveability. Material and immaterial contents of different origins can be stored and be of direct and diachronic access. Seminars, workshops, roundtables, conferences, lessons but also exercises and reviews can feed and design invaluable

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

PREtesti proposed a sort of team game for an *excursion on capacities* (MVRDV 2005) through the interactive composition of a 1x1x1KM cube for an autonomous community of 15.000 inhabitants.
In three weeks we ventured into *Operative Epistemology* exercises (Munari 1981): the students challenged each other in strategies of active exploration of the knowledge-building practices to become more aware of their cognitive processes.
The natural consequence was a general reflection on the elaboration's methods and use of knowledge and culture for a renewed social awareness.
The pretext of the pandemic and the latest isolation we've been forced to, led us to imagine an island (D-2196': the denied Iuav address) where 6.000 residents and 9.000 users were trapped.
Five spontaneous teams worked out to make the new community survive starting from the basic needs: providing clean air and food (level: landscape), to move on to infrastructure strategies to feed the island (level: netscape), ending up with the definition of the builtscape as apotheosis of the achieved awareness of coexistence between man and nature (level: builtscape).
It was a role-playing game, cooperative and multiplayer. The game is a privileged place for meeting, training and collaboration, where to do mental gym and to build knowledge, sharing the processes, the aim, the goals.
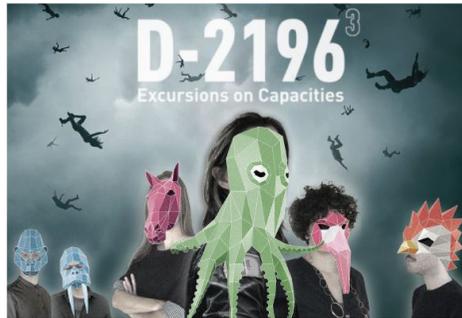
WORKSHOP PRESENTATION   01/10   ESTHER GIANI + PRETESTI

Fig.02 Presentation of the on-line workshop curated by Esther Giani + Pretesti

WORKSHOP PRESENTATION   08/10   ESTHER GIANI + PRETESTI

Fig.03 Presentation of the on-line workshop curated by Esther Giani + Pretesti

(personal) archives.

Weaknesses

The "aura" absence. Who works in the teaching world, and generally deals with communication, knows the importance of the empathic perception of the speaker during the communication. What atmosphere a speech can generate; the listeners' gaze; the body language; buzz or silence in the hall… they are all important ingredients for the success or failure of any lesson, conference, seminar. With online modes, the atmosphere becomes dry, rarefied. The impact of occasional interlocutions, interruptions, unexpected questions, in both directions, are also lost. The reference is to those small "incidents" that indirectly help in *fixing* the sense of lessons. Those that *mark* the transmission of knowledge while is taking place.
Applicative disciplines suffered most of the physicality loss during online communications. It is even more noticeable in our case, where a *manufacture* of the educational production is involved. It concerns the whole block of knowledge related to the Architecture Project. «The teacher's pencil should not be more than a meter from the student's eye», was a *boutade* that Ignazio Gardella loved to repeat, in times far from the digital advent. Digital. it could be argued that the new applications

make possible interactive reasoning on drawing, even at a distance. Therefore, and to some extent, the former dialogues on sketches drawn on the sheet are compensated thanks to sophisticated digital and interactive applications (e-pencils, MS-Notes Etc). We know that this is not: the rustle of the pencil on the paper, the suspended or accelerated breathing, the pressure of the hand, the imperious or hesitant stroke, are lost in the project-review carried out at a distance. It is the case to add that architecture students have been losing this "artisan dimension" since a decade, since the digital design appeared at the early stage of training.
Our students are all formidable self-taught in mastering powerful and seductive digital representational tools. The same students who too often forget the hand-drawing, a skill that seldom is taught.
Space-time displacement: a strength but also a weakness. The opportunity to delay the access to available and archived data, can produce an effect of "indolence" or apathy (absence of pathos). The remote and blended didactic fails to affect and to be impressed on subjects who have no or little interest, nor mature or nascent. The curiosity given by a brilliant dialectic and by a captivating communication rarely exceeds the time of consumption. Especially in those students who still
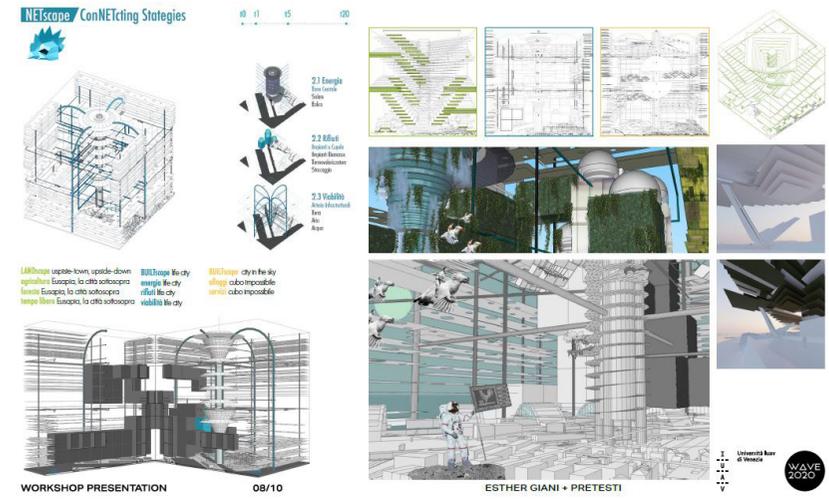
do not know if they are in the right course of study. At last: in a blended flexible training, students do not have "more time" to study and process the communications received throughout the day and the week. This is a myth to be dispelled. In many cases the opposite is true: times expand more, attention is lost faster, concentration follows armillary paths that have no sense to share. The impromptu opportunity delivered remotely is like an "active ingredient" capable of fortifying: it acts as a therapeutic effect on traditional (in presence) teaching. On the other hand, the persistency of remote teaching tires all participants out, weakening the growth (and immune) system. We all find ourselves in a rarefied realm.

Opportunities

The gradual familiarization with remote communication, with blended flexible training activities through the various platforms at disposal, suggest possible functional evolutions, both to students and professors.
Teachers learnt by doing the possibility of storing and sharing teaching materials that can be used by students at any times. At a later stage we can imagine (and design) an archive that, although "cold", can be used several times by several users without time limits. We, as teachers, should though

be aware: posting a lesson call for a different care in choosing images and in structuring the vocal or written contribution. In this pedagogical mode verba non volant.
Overcoming the time and place unit: the opportunity concerns recording lessons, seminars, conferences but above all project's reviews. This condition of dialectical iteration allows a personalization of training. This is feasible independently and autonomously by each student, according to each own individual learning rhythms. Rhythms which, as we know, are changeable, even within the same day. As stated above, such an opportunity supposes an aware and interested student.
The community formed during an-online or blended educational cycles, has innovative interaction opportunities than in the immediate past. This new generation of students can sharpen horizontal forms of learning, by using many levels of interconnection. What is lost in spontaneity and immediacy should be partly compensated by the greater ease that remote communication entails. Again, these opportunities depend on the student and on the micro-communities of students and of students-teachers gathered within the design studios. It's reported behaviours ranging from isolation, despite smaller working groups organized by the teacher, to degeneration due to the loss of inhibition. Inhibition

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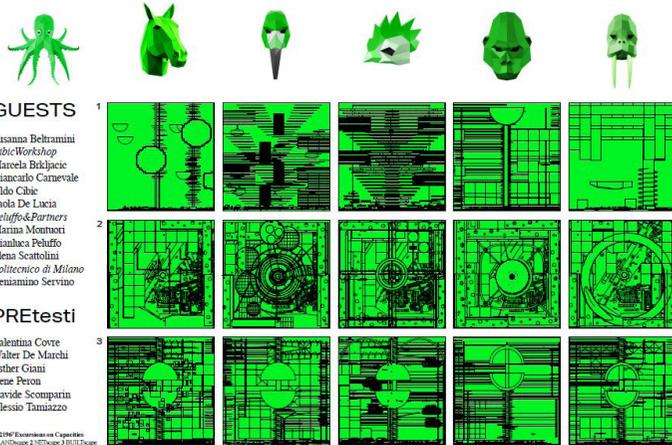Bin Xiao
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D-2196°Excursions on Capacities
1 LANDscape 2 NETscape 3 BUILTscape

WORKSHOP PRESENTATION   11/10   ESTHER GIANI + PRETESTI

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WAVE
2020

Fig.04 Partecipants and directions of the on-line workshop

that live-communication always brings with.

Threats

Risks are obvious, and partially anticipated. The loss of contact penalizes those aspects intertwined with learning by doing, with the poiesis. Aspect which are decisive for training activities in architecture.

Online and blended teaching also disadvantages those forms of self-teaching driven by emulation, and depowers the spirit of competition produced in every didactic community. The reference is to those forms of learning considered "minor", almost secondary effects; on the contrary and by the experience of each of us, they may take on a fundamental and, at times, revealing role. The greatest threat is to that atmosphere produced above all in design studios, intensive seminars, workshops. A living atmosphere, a composite condition made up of stimuli and impulses, even sensorial, that seems not to be replicable remotely. At its contrary, during the online and blended same activities, it dried, it turned into a rarefied atmosphere.

The project's process cannot be outlined, no matter how much we try to rationalize it, to sequence it. Especially the initial stages of a project have a variable "density". Confused phases are necessary and normal. Likewise, crossing successive approximations is indispensable for selecting and sorting coherent, and logical choices. In the online and blended didactic, the impossibility of following (even of being produced) this "nascent phase" of projects is a risk, difficult to avoid.

To feel this moment of pandemic even more dangerous, there is a reinvigorated boost to digital reproduction of images, diagrams, and graphics. The world of representation, in just two decades, offered powerful tools to the Project, also involving its initial phases, not only its description. One cannot but be fascinated by these formidable instruments, still in dizzying evolution. Nevertheless, the prolonged confinement gives us the opportunity to wonder whether the seductive power exerted by digital representation does also change the "way of thinking" the project. The reference is to millennials and generation Z students. Describing the Project in a more engaging, realistic, and augmented way, even before intercepting and taming the generating morpheme, can represent a risk. It can produce a removal, a loss of skills. Skills and tasks that, rather, link us to our predecessors, relating the past to the future. This risk is reported as a secondary effect of remote teaching, a possible threat, a sure damage because perhaps irreversible. Our discipline, architecture design, has a solid,

static, non-evolutionary core, which is related to the Form. The latter uses knowledge associated to those like Technology, Construction and Representation which, on the contrary, evolve over time. The risk is the hierarchies alteration: tools so effective and attractive make lose sight the main target. This is a threat. The Project uses writing, but writing is not the Project.