Longing as learning, learning as longing: Insights and improvisations in a year of disrupted studies

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Abstract

Whether a harbinger of a new era or an anomaly, the year 2020 confronted students and teachers alike with the necessity of reassessing and reformulating teaching and learning possibilities and practicalities. In this very subjective text, we examine some of our own experiences of higher education under lockdown and physical distancing conditions. In an apparent paradox, the changed conditions simultaneously added more stress and uncertainty to the students' learning process while also providing the learners with more confidence to question the established norms.

Against the background of ongoing systemic collapse, we explore our own and our students' stories and poems chronicling learning in a time of crisis and constraint. Drawing on critiques of modern consumer capitalism underpinning management education, we use the experience of a ruptured semester to propose a reinterpretation of management learning as rooted in the paradoxes of desire and longing: for success, career, but also for enlightenment, revelation, social change, and togetherness. We ask the reader to embrace the poetic and libidinal aspects of desire and longing as central to the transformative potential of the learning encounter, and propose to reconstitute the basis for education as rooted in desire and longing: for contact, for learning, for revelation.

Keywords

Desire, learning, narrative collage, poetics, teaching

Introduction

In her celebrated introduction to organization studies, Barbara Czarniawska-Joerges (1992) pondered the question: What would a firm come to if its employees did not turn up for work? Only the infrastructure would remain: an old factory or an office building, lifeless and inert. If people stopped performing their routine duties, the firm would lose meaning. If, instead, they decided to do something completely different, this meaning would change. Only through continued and concerted action do material objects acquire meaning; on their own, objects always allow for multiple interpretations and affordances, that is seemingly obvious ideas about their use (Gibson, 1966). Thus, mused Czarniawska-Joerges, an archaeologist of the far future stumbling across the remains of a factory might well misread it as something completely different, such as a typical example of a temple.

In the early spring of 2020, many European countries, including the ones where we live and work, instituted lockdown on their citizens, responding to the rapid spread of COVID-19 infections among the populace. Travel was all but suppressed, only shops deemed essential were allowed to open. The previously facetious and paradoxical scenario took sudden shape: in many workplaces, employees really stopped turning up for work. Institutions of education, including universities, closed for all physical activities. The response to the crisis was far from uniform, and largely uncoordinated. While some universities strived to pursue clearly mandated and centrally organized teaching agendas, others trusted their lecturers to find ways of providing teaching under these highly unusual circumstances. One of us found himself teaching a hastily put-together course entitled "Imagination after apocalypse." The other, then employed at the University of Melancholia[1], enjoyed a semester of profound professional experimentation, allowing her to try out new ideas and learn novel insights into pedagogy. The ideas were tested together with the students who, at several occasions, expressed their strong appreciation for the possibility of shared experimentation. Both of us, and the students, shared a common goal: to learn (to learn) under unusual circumstances. This is a story of where it led us.

The structure of stable or stabilized settings is based on the myth of order (Law, 1986). Ordering is taken to be the natural and we rarely, if ever, pause between obsessive the attempts to sort out resources, plans, experiences, personas, identities, and stories. Yet, as Zygmunt Bauman (1994: 46) noted, all these efforts can create, at best, a "thin film of order, forcibly stretched over Chaos, but incessantly torn, ruffled, pierced, and shredded by it." Proponents of paradox theory (Fairhurst et al., 2016: 174) see

> paradox as the phenomena [sic!] for complex times and as persistent contradictory elements locked in relationship to each another and impervious to resolution. Collectively, paradox and related terms move beyond dilemmas, tradeoffs, and conflicts, which can be solved by splitting and choosing.

In other words, no organizational order can be final and transparent, no complex solution devoid of contradiction. Similarly, Klaus Harju (1997) wrote of organizing as the struggle between affirmation and negation, producing and being produced, monism and dissemination... In his understanding there are nomadic moments when organizations inhabit areas of insecurity and ambiguity; social actors, turned nomads, move at the boundaries: spatial, temporal those of identity — and cross them with ease. The time when this happens deserves special attention as it is located not in the past or the present, but in becoming.

The lockdown, for those of us confined to their own homes as well as for the many, deemed essential workers, who were caught in the frantic and dangerous activity and movement, provided glimpses of a nomadic, chaotic world beyond the ordered certainties. This paper focuses on just one: the changed learning experience of students. , left for some time without the structure of predefined syllabuses and learning outcomes. Based on conversations and seminars with students at the University of Melancholia, and on a narrative collage to which a few of them were invited to contribute, we present a distinctly paradoxical experience of concurrent confinement and liberation, and muse on the following: How does the poetics of organizing (Höpfl, 1995) manifest in reflections on learning amidst the emptiness of the lockdown?

Pierre Guillet de Monthoux (1993; 1998) has shown how the deeply, possibly innately human desire for aesthetics is redirected, defined, and ordered through

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[1] This, unsurprisingly if wistfully, is a pseudonym

the dynamics of fetishization, channelled as consumerist cravings (Stiegler, 2008). And yet, as Hartmut Rosa (2019) argued, the untamed remnants of this desire resurface as longing, now brought into sharp focus by the pandemics-enforced rupture in daily routines. In this text, we tentatively explore how longing for aesthetics (and the aesthetics of longing) can become a guide to organizational learning, without ever losing the all-permeating ambiguity and multivalence.

The learning experiences we describe are far removed from the usual interpretation of the imperative for practical learning as hands-on solving of actual business problems. They took, by necessity, a form of inaction learning. They embraced paradox, starting from the very aim of studying organizations just as so many of them were grinding to a standstill. But, as proponents of paradox theory (Smith and Lewis, 2011), argue, tensions and contradictions not only abound in organizations (and any complex social settings), but they are also provide crucial opportunities for reflection and for welcoming of complexity which goes beyond linear consequences and clean models taken as accurate representations of the muddled organizational world. In other words, they enable meaningful learning (Vince et al., 2018).Consequently, our text and our experiences do not lend themselves to a glib conclusion and, indeed, the contribution of our text remains somewhat elusive, even to ourselves. We do not present a critique of established models of learning, nor do we provide schemata for poetic classes in management studies. Instead, we share a multifaceted story and experience, consciously open to multiple reinterpretations (Kociatkiewicz, 2020) but also, we believe, providing a possible source of inspiration for further explorations.

Our base methods are textual and narrative (Bruner, 1991; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1995; Czarniawska, 1999), in that we rely on examination of student writings, and that our text represents a retelling of the feelings and experiences associated with forced distance learning. In this, we strive to answer the call of Hugo Letiche and Michael Lissack for methods which take into consideration text-based consciousness, including narratives and art, to explore and express a complexity involving "a multi-dimensional ecology of world and consciousness, objects and perception, opportunities and language" (Letiche and Lissack, 2009: 61). But, as no text is meaningful without its context, we need to

sketch out some of the background of our experiences before we present our approach in more detail.

Enough

Our text is an exploration of a rupture (in organizing, in learning, in experience), and we wish our writing to reflect this overriding theme. Consequently, we do not attempt to follow the standard template of an academic text (Kociatkiewicz and Kostera, 1999), but to write differently (Gilmore et al., 2019), purposely working to create resonances between ideas rarely juxtaposed in academic reflection: in this case, the process of studying and the state of the global society. And so, this section does not aspire to forming a literature review, nor is it an examination of the issue explored in detail in the rest of the article. It is, instead, a very broad overview which informs and frames our experiences reported in the later sections.

Robert and Edward Skidelsky (2013), in their widely read book How much is enough? remind the reader that, for a long time, one of the primary topics of education was a reflection on the good life. This also used to be one of the most significant ideas both in philosophy and literature, at least since the times of Aristotle. The good life can even be said to be a historically central value, or framework, uniting most reflection on the human condition. This does not appear to be the case any longer. Two very human needs and desires, of friendship and sociality on the one hand, and of creation, the making of things, on the other, have virtually become replaced in mainstream reflection by the insatiable desire to own and to consume more, argue Skidelsky and Skidelsky.

The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman framed this change as the global rise of the consumer society. In the modern era, the development of industry, ever growing production capacities and increasingly sophisticated agricultural methods posed before us, for the first time in human history, a vision of the world where it is possible to fulfil the basic needs of the entire humankind; a world where no one is hungry and everyone has a roof over her or his head. Considerable progress continues to be made in this regard: according to World Bank (2021) data, absolute poverty (defined globally as surviving on less than 1.9 dollars a day) is

still the reality for almost 10% of human beings, but this constitutes a vast improvement over the past. Only a few decades ago, in the 1990s, over a quarter of the human population lived in absolute poverty. While there are serious methodological issues concerning the usefulness of a flat poverty threshold (Lang and Lingnau, 2015), the overall optimism is hard to avoid. But it masks an important shift in the dominant forms of identity construction, or, to put it more grandly, in the commonly held notions of what it is to be human. During the 20th century (possibly somewhat earlier in the USA and West of Europe and somewhat later in the former Eastern Bloc and East Asia), human communities changed the primary anchoring of identity from production towards consumption. This metamorphosis entailed a redirection of human desires towards goods, readily available on the market, as well as a redefinition of these desires. The change is profound for both the society and the individuals:

> The consumer of a consumer society, however, is a sharply different creature from the consumer of any other society thus far. The difference is one of emphasis and priorities—a shift of emphasis that makes an enormous difference to virtually every aspect of society, culture, and individual life (Bauman, 1999: 36).

It soon became exceedingly obvious that neither human needs nor human desires for consumption are absolute: it is not possible, as the common global development models seemed to presuppose, to satisfy the needs and wants of one group before moving to another. We are social beings and our happiness (and, consequently, our health and its indicators such as life expectancy) depends on more than the satisfaction of predefined and individual needs, be they basic or sublime. We also care about how our ability to fulfil our longings compares to that of other people, and relative deprivation brings about actual suffering (while relative advantage brings little, if any satisfaction — cf. Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009).

Desires disconnected from needs fulfil a key role in consumer society: the ideal consumerist world is one where all possible whims vie for the attention of impatient consumers (and their wallets, topped up with credit as required). It is only under such conditions that marketing, the eminent contemporary endeavour, can truly spread its wings. But the garden of temptation is

as full of horror as it is of wonder. To quote Bauman once again:

> The prospect of the desire fading off, dissipating, and having nothing in sight to resurrect it, or the prospect of a world with nothing left in it to be desired, must be the most sinister of the ideal consumer's horrors (and, of course, of the consumer-goods merchandiser's horrors) (Bauman, 1999: 38).

And the horror continues: just consider a world where there is no possibility to fulfil the tempestuous desires gripping the consumer, where the existing solutions do not convince as remedies for the fired up longings. The less the products, offered to contemporary consumers, manage to help them in overcoming their sufferings and deficiencies (and most products fail, either totally or to a large extent), the more productive and forceful the marketing machinery needs to become. It needs, after all, to bring assurance that what is really on offer is not any product but, indeed, happiness, security, or good health. Bernard Stiegler (2008) argues that capitalism can work only through producing motivation, but that nowadays it is destroying the very desire which has been instrumental to keeping it going. Desire is rooted in singularity which contemporary capitalism is devouring and abusing, by transforming all aspects of life into mass production and consumption. It has become dominated by drives and impulses. Drives and desire are opposed like the finite and the infinite: the desire is infinite and singular, whereas the drives are momentary and consumable.

This leads us to the dream of fulfilment. Socialism promises to each according to her needs. Capitalism tempts us by offering to each according to his desire, but commoditized fulfilment invariably leaves a sour taste and fails to sate the lingering hunger. Everything that is immaterial is translated into the material and, more importantly, provided with a price tag signifying ready equivalence with other offerings. The world of people who, in Oscar Wilde's celebrated quip, know the price of everything and the value of nothing.

Sigmund Freud once proposed a reduction of all impulses to two fundamental and antithetical urges: the striving for life (named libido or Eros), and the movement towards death (later named Thanatos by Wilhelm Stekel). Humans wish to live for ever and to celebrate their existence but, at the same time, find themselves and their surroundings unbearable. The insistence on

immortality is, as Cornelius Castoriadis (2007) points out, pure hubris, an unsustainable elevation of oneself above the human condition. It is also a sterile drift towards stasis. In one of his many memorable flights of imagination, Jorge Luis Borges (1998) imagined true immortals: beings who experience the entirety of eternity: all possibilities and all permutations repeated endlessly. Such beings, argues Borges, would have no will to act, and no ability to create, having witnessed all conceivable outcomes already. So, paradoxically, humans need to stay mortal in order to create.

If, as Freud would have it, these two fundamental impulses form the basis of all human behaviour, and if social life can be interpreted as their taming and sublimation, the human tendency to locate their longings in material goods becomes more understandable. Such goods remain both gratifyingly solid in their presence (promising fulfilment) and exquisitely ephemeral in their function (allowing for sublimation). They are close at hand (available to buy) but never within reach (no one can ever "catch 'em all," as the Pokémon slogan would have it): they literally embody the paradoxes of desire. Marketing persuades us that only goods money can buy can satisfactorily fulfil this role. Indeed, it proposes that nothing else can function as a true object of desire.

And yet consumption, dominant as it is in our society, is complemented by the imperative of work, preferably as a full-time endeavour. Poverty is morally acceptable only when accompanied by employment or, at the very least, vigorous job seeking. Indeed, as Peter Fleming (2017) astutely noted, job hunting has been turned into a facsimile of work, with all the accoutrements of an office job except for a salary. The wish for work should not come as a surprise: humans are productive beings, perhaps precisely because of the conflicting and paradoxical drives of Eros and Thanatos. Bernard Stiegler (2018) points out that it is often the paradoxical character of social dynamics that makes apparent their complexity and gives rise to productive responses. He stresses the creative power of paradox yet asserts that some paradoxes are tragic. Contemporary work is commonly a nightmare and a perversion, and workplaces resemble labour camps where alienation is seen as a norm and an expected condition rather than a failure of management (Fleming, 2017). David Graeber (2013) notes the rise of what he terms bullshit jobs: work positions comprised of meaningless tasks that do

no good to anyone and depriving the people engaging in it of agency as well as of dignity. We would extend the term to the notion of bullshit work: meaningless chores that might, or might not, be accompanied by snippets of meaningful activity.

Small wonder that time spent at work is rarely associated with satisfying desires. Being a producer is not connected with happiness nor, indeed, with any kind of fulfilment (and recent attempts to rescue the joy to be found in material creation turn to words such as crafting or making rather than work or production). Despite work being uniquely positioned to play a central role in the processes of identity formation (Dejours and Deranty, 2010), contemporary organizations, in Nancy Harding's (2013) words, make us less than human, reducing workers to zombie-machines who "murder the selves that might have been" (p. 175). In a double blow, the logic of marketing disconnects desire from need, while the logic of alienation denies the possibility of its fulfilment.

Such a mournful description, however, assumes the possibility (however remote) of resolving all contradictions. However, as Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1969) and his followers powerfully attested, and as paradox theory restates in the idiom of contemporary management studies (Raisch, Hargrave & Van de Ven, 2018), paradoxes, tensions, desire and lack are fundamental aspects of human existence. And we cannot encompass the breadth of human longings and desires, describing them, as we did so far, in purely individual terms. So much of our craving is directed towards other beings, human or otherwise. This includes the erotic drive, but also all the other ways in which we are drawn to building relationships: love, friendship, sociality, cooperation. The question of how much the ideal of romantic, eternal love has lost relevance remains a matter of contention, with evidence pointing towards increasing preponderance of short-lived and contingent relationships (Bauman, 2003). Anthony Giddens (1993) noted the growing disconnection between romance and perseverance, and fragmentation of love itself. New technological means, including smartphone apps for arranging trysts with strangers, casually sexual or otherwise, help strengthen the momentary modes of relationships. The complexity of meeting the Other reduced to a single swipe.

Which brings us to another paradox: the consumer society's obsession with perfection (accompanied, we might add, by advances in accepting disability, as long as it remains declared and confined within appropriate checkboxes) clashes with daily experience of inadequacy and failure. Coined in 1978 by Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes, the term imposter phenomenon describes the mix of feelings associated with the perceived failure to live up to the lofty demands of one's assumed social role. Simultaneously, as Woolgar et al. (2021) convincingly demonstrate, the fear that others around us might be imposters pervades numerous areas of our culture. Perhaps inevitably: in the climate of grandiosity (Alvesson, 2013) where overblown job descriptions match overpolished CVs, such experiences are inevitable. Humans now have an unachievable duty to be perfect, anything less is anathema and proof of an unworthiness that justifies social abandonment and ultimately marginalization.

The poor deserve to be poor because they are inferior; the losers have lost and are thus proven to have been unworthy all along. The worthy, meanwhile, are granted their status only until further notice or, more precisely, until the next periodic review. There, they need to show, or at least claim, to have produced significant innovations, discovered America, or invented the wheel anew. One who does not is revealed to have been a loser (one of the favourite words of the outgoing President of the United States of America) all along. This is narcissism, but not the hedonistic, self-obsessed narcissism of the 1970s (Lasch, 1979). This is a stark, self-punishing loneliness of hubris.

Yet at the same time the promise of reciprocated love has remained a powerful draw present in high literature, popular culture, secular and religious mythology. It remains a powerful marketing tool, explicit or implicit in most marketing messages. Yet, as Bauman repeatedly noted, this craving must always confront the reality of human imperfection, and the gnawing suspicion that a better experience, a more perfect encounter awaits just beyond the corner. Can we imagine that there is no marketing, to paraphrase John Lennon's well known song? And then, what?

All this forms just a backdrop, a prelude, the roaring ocean before the silence, the raging storm before the ebb

of a tsunami. This is what was swirling around us when March 2020 swept us all up.

Longing

The list of longing

> When they let us out
> I will walk straight ahead
> And then I will scrape the skin on my heels,
> so I will sit down, and then,
> I will get up and go farther,
> because, in time, all will heal,
> and then I will go smell the trees,
> because something will be flowering,
> perhaps the lime trees, perhaps elderflowers,
> and then I will board a train crossing the fields
> perhaps I will meet the same storks
> perhaps I will see a deer,
> because nature does not abhor a train.
> And then I will eat ice cream on Starowiślna
> even if there is a queue, all the way to Kazimierz,
> and then I will sit in De Revolutionibus
> with a book and a coffee
> and then I will talk with students
> they are so great this year
> from the same stuff as dreams
> and then I will touch my hand
> to a stone bench hot from the sun,
> and then I will breathe in the afternoon,
> and then I will catch,
> and then.

Everything stood still. The lockdown was proclaimed and traffic all but stopped. People disappeared from the streets. The schools stood empty and the buildings revealed their angularity. Colours appeared stark against an immobile background. We realized just how many rooks there are in the city: it was them, and not the pigeons, who took over: so visible and so audible all around. Traffic noise vanished. People appeared in the windows of neighbouring blocks: they were not looking at us; they seemed to be searching for the free scraps of sky reflecting in our windows, just as we were. We felt that something very powerful had protruded from the cityscape we knew so well, something which had been present all the time yet never pronounced with such a force as now, never made explicit on such a scale: the blanks up till now overwritten by the city's teeming materiality and life.

The rupture created by the sudden emptiness, the poetic liminality revealed in our everyday context, brought about yet another powerful transformation. Desires and cravings are future orientated, whereas life is going on now (Petrucelli, 2006). Desire is the elusive promise whose fulfilment is always pushed further back into the future, and this gap is a source of suffering. Longing is the feeling that waiting produces, longing which can be made known and voiced in interaction with others. When the noise of desire subsided, there emerged a new longing, whose attraction towards the Other could now be revealed. Tim Butcher (2013) wrote of the "longing to belong," an overwhelming attraction accompanying the liminality of ethnographic research. Now this same feeling manifested itself in situations which, up till then, were regarded as normal, as part of a well-defined social institution, such as that of higher education.

Heather Höpfl (1994) believed that the dominant discourse of our world is the rhetorical one, striving to order and persuade. However, much of the really important knowledge, about things that underpin our problems but which we do not want to know are to be found only outside of the ordered rhetorical system, in the cracks and the blanks, the silences and the stops. This kind of knowledge can be found in poetics: a non-symbolic language, born from the struggle between the human and his environment. Poetics accepts and affirms the paradoxes and contradictions of our reality and our perceptions, but allows us to step even further: to allow, imagine and hold dear the empty space, the indefiniteness of life: knowledge constituted from rhythms, words, cacophonies and silences. The silences are important: in them we are able to see what comes before words and all other propositions. This is a moment when management learning can become attentive "to the poetics of experience" (p. 471) where professional behaviour can, for a moment, let the mask of the acquired professional persona drop: a mask leading "to the construction of managed roles and managed performances" (p. 471). This is when an encounter with the Other becomes possible and another kind of learning occurs: one that seeks to "transform working relationships, meanings and values" (p. 472) beyond the rhetorical order.

The philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1999) imagined the encounter with the Other as gazing into her face. This is the primal social encounter, the source of all human ethics and prosocial behaviour. Such gazing encompasses not only our shared humanity, but also our common frailty: we are mortal, we are imperfect, we are frail. It also encompasses difference and irreducibility: the Other appears in a liminal and indefinite space, but she staunchly refuses to disappear, or to be consumed. The face of the Other is always imperfect but it continues to be the surest way for us, humans, to get a glimpse of infinity (Levinas, 1999). Lockdown and isolation drastically reduced this possibility.

The longing to belong is an important aspect of inhabiting a liminal situation. It might be self-sought, as in the case of an ethnographer, or thrust upon an otherwise "normal" member of society during lockdown. It is the impulse that makes her

> look beyond mastering a certain discursive repertoire to construct my identity. There is also an aesthetic repertoire to be aware of. Speaking the same language [...] alone is not enough to gain a shared sense of belonging (Butcher, 2013, p. 246).

What is needed is also a new form of inhabiting the world, a (self-)presence which needs to be learned, a kind of a "second nature embodiment" (p. 246) that forms and sustains relationships with the environment. Ann Cunliffe (2002) makes a case for social poetics to make sense and actively learn from this embodied presence encompassing rhythms and embeddedness.

Peter Berger's (2000) quest for the sublime, sociology of art, social psychology, and so on, all have contributed to our piecemeal understanding of our desires and longings. But the wholemeal sociology of longing eludes us. Psychology did better than that. There is the Freudian vision, of course. Freud's vision of society as a mechanism of suppression and sublimation of desire still provides a good starting point for thinking about the contemporary world, but no longer provides adequate explanations. Jean Petrucelli's (2006) psychoanalytic rethinking of longing and desire moves beyond Freud, but still focuses more on individual rather than organizational or group experience. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu uses Freudian language to note that

> the work of socialization of the libido is precisely what transforms impulses into specific interests, socially constructed interests which only exist in relation to a social space (1998: 78-79).

But all this brings us no closer to understanding the complexity of this transformation. Gilles Deleuze

and Felix Guattari's (1983) idea of desiring machines can be helpful, but is ultimately let down by its own mechanistic metaphor, offering little aid for exploring the relational aspects of desire, its enmeshing in poetical knowledge. Yet this social aspect is at the heart of the learning experience.

The method of narrative collage

The narrative collage is an established (Pfohl, 1992) qualitative, projective research method best suited to the study of social imagination (Kostera, 2020). It is aimed at exploring the subjective but not the individual. It is a method rooted in the narrative tradition in social sciences (Bruner, 1991; Czarniawska, 1997), which regards narratives as the most common form of social interaction (MacIntyre, 1997). This approach is well suited to the study of organizing and organizations, because, as Yiannis Gabriel (2000) points out, stories are a regular part of organizational life which is full of "narratives with simple but resonant plots and characters, involving narrative skill, entailing risk, and aiming to entertain, persuade, and win over" (p. 22). They are important mechanisms of the sensemaking apparatus of human collectives.

The narrative collage is composed of stories and narratives collected in the studied field. The point is to create an inter-subjective story based on the collected narratives, in order to show not what is typical, normal or representative of the population, but, rather, what is possible, imaginable, potential in the sensemaking of groups or processes under examination. Just like other narrative methods, the narrative collage is an experiential method of gaining insight into social phenomena, where the experience is considered at several levels and facets. The resulting experiential learning occurs between the researcher and the interviewees, as well as between the readers and the text. It concerns the straightforward plots and meanings, but it can also pertain to deeper layers of culture and imagination, providing inspiration (Kostera, 2020).

Assembling and collective stories does not result in any "objective representation" of how people make sense and imagine things but it should be a compelling representation. This means that the researcher should try to follow the flow of stories and not to dominate with

her own; to find the unravelling narrative. It is, rather, a process like following a river, than like the digging of a canal. The stories are located within the domain of the possible, the potential and not yet realized the mapping of which may be essential in times that demand new ideas and change: to imagine and understand currents of thought and creation.

The process of assembling a narrative collage can be roughly ordered into three stages. In the first stage, the researcher comes up with the theme for the collection, which may be an element of the cultural context, the potential of a developing process, or an ambiguous notion or situation. The collector then asks participants to write or to tell a short narrative concerning the theme, either by asking a question or by providing a theme or a starting line. The authors may be told what form the story may take, what genre is and how long the narrative is to be, as well as the deadline. During the next stage, narratives are collected and interpreted with the aim of finding themes, synergies or associations. Finally, the researcher composes an own story based on the collected narratives in the form of a meta-story, anthology of stories with an editorial commentary, or a textual dérive, a narrative outlining an "alternative line of movement and thought" (Kociatkiewicz, Kostera and Zawadzki, 2019, p. 63).

Improvisation

As research methods go, narrative collage is a relatively unstructured, or at least uncodified endeavour, and thus suited mostly for studying unknown, novel, or vaguely defined topics. Researchers are invited to shift and vary the form of their research rather than strive for cross-study homogeneity. Each narrative collage study can be framed and created differently, using different prompts, asking different questions, synthesizing the collected works in a different collage form. Each study of this kind is unique, and this is part of the point with it: to find something that is unique yet possible to express in the domain of social imagination. It can, and often does, rely on improvisation as much as on established procedures. It is not "hard evidence" but potential building material for alternative and new ideas and modes of organizing. It is a reflexive method, in the sense that Hugo Letiche (2017) proposes as a learning intervention strategy: it focuses on the symbolic and combines the real and the

imaginary, thus capturing some of the complexity of the social dynamics of reflexive learning.

The collage we are about to present was, accordingly, not conceived as a predefined study, but rather a late-stage attempt to capture and examine the wonder and novelty of shared learning under unexpectedly liminal conditions. It consists of two main narratives. The first part of the empirical material is our own story about the conversations we had with the students. The second part is made up of stories and poems collected from some of these students. We selected eight persons who have been particularly active during the conversations with whom we still had ongoing contact and asked them to write a short narrative about what good they learned about learning during the lockdown, what bad or sad they learned and, if they felt like it, to write a haiku about the experienced. Five responded and promised to write stories which they also did, more or less promptly.

In terms of presentation, our findings consist of our own narrative framing as well as a series of sparsely edited or commented, but carefully chosen by us, excerpts from student writings offered throughout the project as a commentary on their learning experience. These quotes do not constitute a cohesive narrative or thorough description of the studied issue usually associated with a case study (Yin, 2014), but form longer and more self-contained excerpts than commonly found in what Reay et al. (2019) term the vignette approach to qualitative study presentation. This inclusion of what might appear as superfluous remarks by research participants offers more scope for the reader to reinterpret our material, challenge our readings, and juxtapose the quotes with other work. Thus, here too, our text forms a collage, circling around a theme in an improvisatory and possibly occasionally self-contradictory fashion.

The conversations

The decision for face-to-face classes to be stopped was announced suddenly at the University of Melancholia, by the public address system interrupting an ongoing teaching session. Students collected their things and went home, as did the teachers. On the next day the staff received an email from the pro-dean for teaching asking all the senior staff to use the best of their professional knowledge in order to teach the students to the best of

their abilities under these extreme circumstances. No forms were imposed or recommended, provided that it did not demand face to face contact: the intention was to provide space for improvisation, to develop new forms, best adapted to the situation and to the particular groups of students, through the application of judgement and experience. The senior academics were also asked to provide advice and guidance to the junior staff, if needed, and to report in to their superiors ever week and very briefly, in a few sentences, account for their teaching during that week. The staff also received a list of resources and technologies available at the university, as well as contacts such as IT personnel and librarians. And so began a highly unusual year for the staff as for the students.

The administrators worked limited hours and were asked not to share office space during the lockdown. The situation was helped by the extant setup which featured individual offices also for administrators, and no open plan spaces. The cleaning personnel also worked limited hours and in sparse shifts, and were asked not to mingle. Students were all but barred from entering the (non-dormitory) university buildings for several months. Teaching staff could enter with special permission (at first) and later on a basis of limited access. The library stayed closed for most of the period.

One of us, Monika, engaged in the professional experiment personally. The other was at several occasions participating in conversations and discussions about it and once got to meet the students. Monika used video conferencing (Zoom) mainly for seminars, discussions and workshops. Instead of lectures, she proposed a multi-media programme, including basic text, extended readings, films, music, and art for each of the topics covered. Each session was accompanied with a puzzle that could be solved if the student had familiarized himself with at least the basic material but which demanded some serious personal reflection, such as the following:

> In the movie Modern Times, the worker character played by Charlie Chaplin is charismatic, resourceful and lovable. However, he is unhappy and ineffective in the workplace, and even fails spectacularly. Based on today's lecture, in what workplace would this character be happy and his work useful? Please suggest a dream job for the character played by Chaplin in Modern Times and justify very briefly.

Each response was read and responded to by the teacher. There were some 250 students participating in four different classes so this programme had to be carefully organized but more so for the teacher than for the students who reported that they did not have many technical problems with participation from their side. Initially a bare majority were active, after a few weeks well over 200 students were more or less intensely participating in the classes. Over 20 persons from each class proved particularly dedicated and regularly came up with profoundly reflective answers. At the end of the semester two of these courses ended with discussions and seminars dedicated to the issue of learning during the lockdown. Students also presented their short films, music that they composed and poetry they had written. All the courses were deeply appreciated by the students, as expressed both anonymously and in personal conversation. Anna put it in the following words, but the variations one the same theme were repeated by several other students:

> I never thought I would actually be sorry that a class is ending. I was looking forward to it ever week!

As we revise our text in November 2021, Monika remains regularly in touch with several of her ex-students which is highly unusual in her experience.

One recurrent theme appearing during the seminars was the interconnectedness of feelings and experiences: profound sadness and loneliness, longing for contact, and a kind of growing awareness of one's own presence and of the deeply felt absence of the face of the Other. A group of students made a short film about how each of us suddenly became a Robinson on the desert island of one's flat, looking out from the widow at the endless ocean outside. Another group presented different ways of staying creative in isolation. When one cannot be together, creativity remains: it is sad and lonely but offers more consolation than anything else. Yet another group made photos about things they learned: the difference made by focusing on the everyday rituals such as making coffee, where the ritual both creates time that had been unmade by the lockdown and in its own way symbolizes (and invokes?) other presences. They spoke of learning to learn together at a distance, the insurmountable physical and psychological problems and the solace and support that being able to share the problems actually gives. They created a long and beautiful old fashioned soundtrack, shaped as an old time radio play: a fairy tale about a café in the town where they studied, full of magic and longing. Some students came up with songs: ballads, folk songs and hip-hop, approaching creativity and learning from different sides, but sharing one message: how humour, which is a potent human quality, can transcend isolation. There was also an ethnographic tale of animals in an animal shelter, whose "normality" is about isolation, and how people suddenly became more emphatic and more of them approached the shelter to take home a cat or a dog. One student said that she stopped looking at her mobile phone while riding the tram. Instead, she started looking at other people – and how she noticed that many of them also did the same. She recalled how she suddenly stopped in front of a puddle of water and realized it was beautiful.

In their accounts, students enjoyed pondering beauty. They said rain was beautiful: rain evokes peace, it makes sounds on the windowsill, its rhythm makes lets us feel its slow absorption by tired, dry plants, and appreciate nature approaching balance. Rain connects us with life outside. They recounted learning to see the small and the fleeting, perceptible and appreciable through everything: nature, people, relationships and everyday moments. How we became indifferent and apathetic, because we stopped seeing beauty in small things, gestures, and people. How fleeting nature combines the sunset with the smile of a loved one and a hill full of dandelions: ordinary vignettes of everyday life, but made beautiful and special through their simplicity and elusiveness.

Other students spoke about the products of their own hands. Not of pride or authorship or success, but of the beauty of being satisfied with a job well done. The product as such needs not be remarkable, its final form might even be accidental. But it was created by their hands, their effort their time. Made from start to finish and thus beautiful. They spoke about dumplings: hand-made and cooked, made beautiful by the work put into them.

Yet others noticed and recognized difference, and in particular people being different. Not in the sense of standing out, strutting down the streets of the city as on a catwalk during an expensive fashion show, but humans unaware of their beauty, haphazardly glimpsed: an older man just ahead in the checkout line, or a woman sitting down, tired, on an empty seat on the

bus. Ordinary moments of revelation, showing most truly and fully that these other people are there, that they have experienced something. Levinasian moments of gazing into the face (or the back, or the elbow) of the Other.

Some spoke about human gestures, about the everyday "good morning", the common courtesy as a sign of human presence. They spoke about the amazing beauty of the loved one's freckles, the ones that make her unique and the only one in the world, even though, when she was small, she was berated for this supposed defect. An idea of "beauty" with no room for freckles is ugly. It anesthetized, it does not attract tenderness. Beauty, students insisted again, is in the everyday and the trivial: family at the table, arranging Lego together with a sibling. Beauty liberated from the omnipresent billboards and TV adverts.

They talked about art and films they had seen, of the photographs of working hands immortalized by Henryk and Janina Mierzecki, of Zofia Rydet's beautiful ethnographic presentations of different people at home, of Mekas' film "As I Was Moving Ahead Occasionally I Saw Brief Glimpses of Beauty." Of Jim Jarmusch, recurrently. They confessed that it is beauty that helps them see that they are all part of something much, much greater. This is why love is so close by.

They spoke of plants. Of how dandelions are the most beautiful flowers because they have a message to deliver: it's early spring! It is a simple message, impermanent and ephemeral. But it is good to be able to say hello and then goodbye to the seasons and their phases. Other students championed the cautious elderberry and the boldly blooming forget-me-nots. Or they spoke about trees. In fact, they spoke a lot about trees. Trees comfort us, trees can be trusted, trees are the very essence of life, they are a relief, an antidepressant. According to one story, it is the trees which take us for a walk: we are like dogs on a leash, and it is the trees that lead us out into their world, allowing us to glimpse a fox in the park or squirrels in the parking place, behind cars, making the hitherto dull and boring estate a suddenly beautiful place, alive with all the sudden animal presences.

Still others spoke of how beautiful it is in the morning, to sit with a cup of tea or coffee in the window and to watch, celebrating mornings. The morning sun's rays falling on the streets are beautiful, as are the people (few during the lockdown) rushing to work. Of the realization that the city is a great organism, and of the awareness of living inside it while watching it wake up and unfold in the morning. Of the smell of asphalt after the rain, the movement of clouds in the sky, the sudden impression that all these colours clash with each other. Of conversations despite everything, despite the facemasks and Zoom, those moments of understanding reached despite all the physical and technological barriers. Of technology which does not divide, but which does not itself connect either. Of closeness stronger than distance.

They spoke of the eyes, of how beauty resides in the eyes. How looking into the eyes is the most intense form of contact, of how eyes do not lie, of how beauty attests that life is truth. How eyes reflect the rays of the sun and how this is not a metaphor at all. Eyes connect facts and feelings, mixing up the good and the bad. Because eyes express humanity, mixed up and confused. And of how the everpresent face masks made this realization possible, but also of the longing for a world without the masks.

The stories

During the second stage, which took place 9-10 months after the conversations narrated above were held, we asked some of the students that we were still in touch with, most of whom had finished their studies, to write short narratives and poems about their learning experience. The material does not, in our reading, differ in any substantive way from the ideas and reactions we described earlier, but offers a qualitative and more individually extensive reflection on the experience. We decided to cite the stories almost in their entirety (rather than selecting short snippets) because we found them not only beautiful but also rather concise and quite reflective. Instead of a running commentary by the editors of the narrative collage, the voice of the narratives themselves will be the dominant throughout this section. We translated the stories into English from the original Polish, and the quoted text is our attempt to preserve the quirkiness and cadence of the stories while preserving their readability.

Karolina, a kind and cheerful introvert, recognized some good things in what she learned during the

lockdown. In her case it all began suddenly, when she was commuting to class.

> I remember standing in a crowded bus on my way to university and getting a notification that my classes were cancelled. As a final year student, I did not suspect that I would not return to full-time classes... Initially, the cancelled lectures turned into remote classes. I am always stressed by new situations, I don't like talking to strangers on the phone for fear of misunderstanding something. Therefore, the sudden transition to online classes was both a stressful and interesting experience that gave me some newfound confidence. [...] I noticed that the form alters the message: what worked well in the classroom does not necessarily make sense in the privacy of your home. But thanks to [the freedom we had to experiment and improvise] I learned many new techniques and learning methods that suit me. [...] I learned the most during classes that required commitment, solving a task or answering questions. One of the activities involved performing short summary tasks during or immediately after the classes. It was interesting and allowed to check the knowledge on an ongoing basis. Then I noticed how much easier it is for me to learn specific topics right away than to cover all the material at the end of the semester.
>
> I am a homebody, I like to spend time at home with a cup of tea and a TV series. For me, home has always been a place of relaxation, seclusion and tranquillity. Maybe this is why it was so hard for me to switch to remote work; I was quickly distracted, I found other stuff to do. Learning during a pandemic has certainly taught me to be more self-organized and to deal with things more regularly. Of course, I haven't perfected it, but I can see a lot of progress (Karolina).

Yuliia, a sensitive and artistic person, learned to be patient with people.

> During the pandemic, I learned not to rush to become offended that people do not laugh at my jokes during Zoom meetings. It may turn out that my joke did not reach my interlocutors yet, or that their reaction (laughter) failed to reach me via the Internet.
>
> Lockdown also teaches patience, the ability to wait, and perhaps, in a sense, independence from other people's opinions.
>
> I have learned to appreciate movement. The movement that used to be necessary to get up in the morning, to get ready and to go to the university, to meet people along the way. Living people, smiling or sad, with emotions I could read and understand, because they were not wearing facemasks.

> Riding a bus or a tram (even standing up) began to look like a luxury in lockdown.
>
> I got to know my colleagues from the group and students from other specialties better. In a few months, the kind of distance learning we experienced brought us closer than normal teaching did during previous years. [...] Some of these people opened themselves up in a completely different way than I had imagined possible before. Why had I never spoken to them before? After all, their view of the world is so interesting? So I learned to watch people more closely (Yuliia).

Agnieszka learned of the importance of conversation: a yearning so powerful that it is able to bend even inadequate means and technologies to its purposes:

> I think the greatest value I gained from learning during the pandemic was to become aware that what is most effective for me, as well as closest to the way I learn, is learning based on dialogue, interaction and empirical evidence. A minor advantage of remote learning was its convenience: breakfast in bed, changing the body position when my back aches, no commuting in winter and more sleep. During live lectures, I could not lie down and put my headphones on to be able to listen more attentively, or drink tea when I felt like it. I appreciate these aspects, though they are not able to outweigh the necessity of separation. Another benefit I noticed [...] was the cooperation that ensued in a group of female students that I was part of. No access to libraries, limited electronic resources, incomplete information about the literature we sought were all in no way conducive to writing a Master's thesis. But we helped each other through cordial exchange, sending pdfs to one another, scanning chapters and thinking about others when securing an elusive book. I also found out that regular Zoom conversations, although a poor substitute, can cheer one up. And for me it was nice when lecturers shared their feelings about working online and took into account students' well-being, caring about them (Agnieszka)

Aleska, another introvert, realized just how much she loved to read and to study. She is now planning to go to Finland for further studies.

> I have always considered myself to be at least a rather unsocial person. I have had the impression that I can live successfully without maintaining any particular social ties. My belief did not change much at the time of the pandemic. I was quite content to keep social distance and to limit my contacts with others. But after a time the experience transformed into a constant lack. I started to feel lonely, I am lonely still. But this realization taught me much about

the meaning of life in society. It was connected to a growing appreciation of every moment of my life, even the most mundane activities. When there are restrictions were lifted in the summer [temporarily], I saw how much I missed. I know that when the pandemic is over, I will try to appreciate things more: each meeting in the café, each museum visit to the museum, library, festival, or a swimming pool.

Spending almost all of my time at home, I also had the opportunity to read many books and to study more intensively. It made me realize that, after graduating with the Master's degree, I would like to study more. I feel that there is still a lot of knowledge to gain before me... (Aleska).

Pola, energetic and sociable, tried hard to tell a positive story and was convinced that she could not. However, while pondering this, she realized that there, in fact, was something good she had learned.

At one point, I checked [University Platform] more often than Facebook, and I did not enjoy the discovery. I never liked spending too much time on the internet, and now I had to. And the compulsion to check messages frequently. Previously, I used to reply with questionable frequency, and now I have become more punctual and disciplined. I did not necessarily do everything at the last minute. I was on time, I wrote back on time. I paid more attention to my statements, not because I had more time to think about them. It is as if the written word had more power than the spoken. After all, it is more durable (Pola).

Katsiaryna, a very friendly and courageous person, did not split her answer into two narratives: for her, the good and the bad were too interlinked and entwined to make sense, if separated.

I think once again about how unpredictable everything can be and the plans you base your quiet life on can be ruined in the blink of an eye. The 2020 pandemic showed the poverty and futility of planning and helped me understand the importance of being able to go along with unforeseen situations, and how important it is to build and maintain inner strength that will help withstand and extinguish a fire – when everything is on fire.[...] Reflecting on the positive and negative skills I have acquired during this time, my thoughts constantly revolve around abstract things that can be felt and that are difficult to explain 100%. Let me start with what I think is right. First of all, the awareness that modern technology allows not only to search for information quickly and efficiently, but also to maintain contacts

with lecturers and students without leaving home, without endangering them and one's own health. It brings people together when everything is closed and inaccessible. It creates a parallel life that breaks down the boundaries of physical distance to gain knowledge, helps you find yourself and understand that there is a wonderful world beyond the walls of your room. I also learned to pay attention to details in the place where I spent most of my working day: flowers, postcards, pictures on the walls when the sun is shining through the window, colours outside the window - all these factors contribute to productivity and well-being. On the other hand[...] being at home all the time made life less efficient for me than it was before the pandemic. The day schedule had become more flexible and free, so it felt like I would still have time for everything: I'm not in a hurry, I'm at home. But this is a deception. Time normally spent getting to university now got wasted on unnecessary things. It was therefore necessary for me to re-learn day planning, which can perhaps also be counted among the positive things I learned from the lockdown (Katsiaryna).

For Karolina, distance learning was a lonely experience, and one that made her realize how much of the ordinary learning is facilitated through spontaneous embodied contact.

There is no denying that going to classes is often an opportunity to meet friends, drink coffee together during the breaks. Although I didn't have many close friends during my studies, I enjoyed talking to group members about a variety of topics, not necessarily related to my studies, such as exchanging views on a TV show or a book. As a result of online teaching, the discussions held during the lectures dimmed a bit, and the classes were similar to watching a recorded broadcast. All interaction dispersed, many lecturers had the impression that they were talking to the screen because they could not see us (during large classes, for over 100 people, we were even forced to turn off the cameras in order to avoid overloading the connection).

What irritated and saddened me the most was the lack of communication when it was necessary to complete a task in a group. Working at a shared table in the library looks completely different when you can exchange ideas face to face than when everyone has their own classes at home and does not care about long, joint consultations. Studying during the pandemic made me realize that learning is not only about acquiring knowledge, but a whole set of elements that only create the study experience: the

university building, meeting friends (and strangers) in the corridor, various rituals, and even going out of the class schedule together. And, as I have already mentioned, although I like being at home and even during "normal" classes I stayed mostly apart, when I was now forced to stay at home I was able to look at the situation from a different perspective.

In addition, I have the impression that remote classes are treated a bit more – remotely –than stationary ones, and studying at home makes it easy to get distracted and focus on something else. I admit that I happened to be solving puzzles or reading a book on several occasions during lectures and it took several weeks for me to get into the learning process (Karolina).

Yuliia remarked on the loss of energy that normal learning acquires from embodied interaction with people.

Without real meetings with people, I missed the exchange of energy that always inspires me... Being still, locked within four walls, I missed the point of doing things, I missed the beauty of it, and that's probably why I started to actively look for it. The tasks we received for [one of the classes] helped me in this. I was encouraged to look for answers to very important questions which I either did not dare to ask myself beforehand, or simply did not have time to think about "such things." I am now reading a book where the protagonist, in his old age, notices that his socks have a seam along their entire length. He is very surprised by this because he had not noticed this seam in his socks before. After checking all the other socks, and even questioning his friends, the saleswoman in the store and buying another pair of new socks, the man finds that all socks had such seams - without them, they would fall apart. But why hadn't he noticed it before, since he is wearing them every day? For me, this story triggered a line of thought: how I learned to look at things during the pandemic. All the important things I see now are my personal seams on the socks. I can see them. This helps to understand how this world is arranged. These are the important little things. After all, they say [in Slavic languages] that God is in the detail.

This is sad learning [...] but, on the other hand, these sad things (I am sure) [made these missing things] visible and helped me understand what is important and take a new path in life (Yuliia).

Agnieszka also speaks of weariness, of tiredness.

Remote learning was troublesome for me. It deprived me of what I liked the most about studying: live discussions, contact, things happening in a space,

closeness to others. I have experienced that working solely via a computer blurs the lines between a space for learning, meetings with friends, choir rehearsals, meetings of the science club and free time. The attachment to the computer was very tiring for me. It became difficult or even impossible to shift between the modes of learning, classes or even conversations with the family [...].[M]onths of stillness put me in some kind of lazy and sluggish state. The worst of all was the inability to share my everyday life with loved ones. It was prohibited to celebrate after the Master's thesis defence, there was always distance, no personal contact during lectures, inability to approach and discuss matters with your favourite professor who had just given a fascinating lecture. [Before the pandemic], every six months, we used to sit in groups of students, studying for the exams, asking each other about the most difficult topics, eating, drinking, and laughing together. Graduation without this aspect was painful not only for me.

(Agnieszka).

Aleska, who initially enjoyed being able to spend more time alone, learned about the sociality of habits – how not even an introvert is an island.

Spending days at home alone and doing the same things routinely I also acquired some bad habits. I realize that when I get back to normal, it may be hard for me to get rid of them. Things such as staying up most of the night, bad eating habits (irregular meals are a paradoxical daily routine) and sitting at the computer [...] all day long. [...] I take some comfort in the fact that, to be honest, I learned to hate the "internet-existence" and I am, actually, looking forward to the day when I can get up from my computer and really start living (Aleska).

To Pola distance learning is alienating. It is important to remark that currently the space for professional experimentation at her university has been closed and online teaching has become a scheduled and normalized practice.

Online discussions are different. You wait longer and feel less. Checking e-mail and such more often. Awaiting written feedback for written assignments takes longer than during live studies. There is a lot one can read from facial expressions or the look in live class. Usually having a lot to do I used to say, "we'll talk when we see each other." So I wasn't surprised by my aversion to life online. The group work over the internet was also quite arduous. Unable to meet, everyone preferred to do their part separately (Pola).

The poems

Four of the student also wrote short poems about learning during the lockdown. Agnieszka's haikus speak of proximity and distance

> proximity to screen
> distance of experience
> I miss learning (Agnieszka Czyczyło)
>
>   *
>
> lonely slides
> talking to computer
> this is not the same (Agnieszka Czyczyło)

Pola ponders presence, while her cat runs through the keyboard of her computer.

> catpaws on keyboard
> I don't need to dress fully
> I only need to be there halfway (Pola)

Karolina decides to take the plunge.

> In a crowd of virtual characters
> I drink tea alone
> I dive into myself. (Karolina)

Yuliia considers the paradox of having her wish fulfilled.

> For years I longed for silence
> She came at last, but why
> does she scream so furiously? (Yuliia)

Aleska got in touch with something in her which, she now feels, she can only find outside and not indoors.

> sun keeps shining
> computer keeps overheating
> youth keeps elapsing (Aleska)

Coda

As should probably be apparent by now, we do not envisage to follow the stories and the poems with a structured analysis. We do acknowledge and appreciate their narrative power, viewing them as facets of experience that do not, and cannot add up to an objective, or even necessarily intersubjective, appraisal of the witnessed reality (Brumer, 1991; Czarniawska, 1997). We agree with Czarniawska that "theoreticians take upon themselves to represent other people and even nature" (1995: 27), and that one of the key categories for this representation is beauty and use. Neither the stories nor the poems are, in the large, self-confident results of the work of accomplished or self-confident artists. But they are, at least to our reading, beautiful. They carry, largely, a bittersweet quality of learning to cope with adversity: pride of one's accomplishments coupled with serendipities and regrets. And with longing: for others, for shared spaces, for the liveliness of communal learning. They are useful at least insomuch as they provide a counterbalance to the narrow vision of student needs and desires as rooted entirely in the practical needs of the market and future careers as managers.

Martin Parker (2018) presents a chilling vision of business schools as seminaries of capitalism, inculcating narrow-minded ideology of personal profit and calculability. The stunning growth and globalization of business education led to what Miguel Pina e Cunha and Linda Putnam (2019) call the Icarus paradox or the paradox of success: productive solutions of the past have become institutionalized as rules for tomorrow, severely restricting, in management education, the possibility of critical reappraisal of the curriculum, reflection on values and, in a broader sense, learning. We fully agree with the dire assessment of the structural makeup of business education worldwide.

And yet, the testimonies listed above show cracks in the monolithic structure: there are limits to the efficacy of any propaganda machine. Alexei Yurchak (2006), describing the waning years of the Soviet Union, highlighted the paradoxes of simultaneously co-existing trust, distrust, grandeur and evidence of systemic failure. The title of his book, *Everything Was Forever until It Was No More,* exquisitely captures how the seeming imperviousness of ideology can coexist with lack of affective engagement: the belief in the system's permanence can readily coexist with the lack of surprise at its sudden demise. This, is perhaps the most prominent of the paradoxes of disrupted learning: that it was through the collapse of classroom-based teaching that the students (and we, the teachers) discovered the most important, or at least most captivating, pathways to learning available only in lived organizations (as well as the surprising, if often painful, effectiveness of the reflection to be had in moments of stillness). Both the potential, and the fragility of the system revealed in its momentary (we all hoped) stoppage.

Longing as desire, desire as longing

And yet, it is not the lack of affect which lies at the heart of our text. The students' stories and poems evoke sadness and longing coupled with intense engagement across spatial and technological barriers. The abrupt change of context allowed us, and the students, to not only reflect, but to improvise: to let in more art, more beauty, more improvisation into the learning experience. And we do not read the longing as directed towards the mundanity of previous terms: it was invariably the desire for a meeting in a utopian communal learning experience.

Frederic Jameson (2005) wrote beautifully of the universally human "desire called utopia," and "the very Utopian impulse itself, a universal philanthropy, the purest longing for the good of mankind" (p. 75). The longing of the students, though less grandiose, partakes in the same hope of coming together which lies at the root of organizing (while taking stock of all the obstacles and paradoxes frustrating the fulfilment of this desire). They do not, of course, lay claim to represent any wider population, be it generation, nationality, or even university-wide student cohort. But they do represent a possibility — both the realized possibility of meaningful learning, and the unrealized possibility of contact, togetherness, and systemic change. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1996) wrote beautifully about lines of flight, the energizing possibilities of escaping the confinement of rigid systems of signification, relying on trajectories and desire rather than on conceptualization and planning. Pierre Guillet de Monthoux (1993) calls for the artistic leadership of the sublime, encompassing both beauty and use. We, in turn, call for learning differently: a mode of engagement that takes desire, longing, and lack just as seriously as it does the transmission of knowledge and learning outcomes. All learning is contingent on the possibility of becoming, and both desire and longing are central to this possibility. Neither technology nor social context can satisfy or nullify such desire, but they can, as in these stories, help make it apparent and utterable...

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