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## ARTICLE

# Bringing Real Life into the Classroom: Learning in Nearness & Distance

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## Abstract

*This article details and reflects on how student learning was elevated to a new level through inviting real life into the classroom of a course in cultural understanding, aimed at engineering students at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology. In preceding years, the learning was organized as two group assignments where students authored a make-believe narrative, wherein a technical project was accomplished in collaboration with a foreign party. This year, the students' second project was a collaboration with social science students from the West University in Timișoara. The students not only learned facts about Romanian culture, but, more importantly, they became immersed in culture as an experience and a process, observing a turn from culture understood as a reified scientific entity, to culture as an environment or lifeworld. Rather than trying to approach culture at a distance, distance itself became the students' environment. Only as the students came to accept a state of unknowing, with associated feelings of frustration and anxiety, were they able to dwell in a nearness to Romanian culture quite unlike that in which a "native" dwells. The students' project solutions evocate this nearness. In previous projects, cultural challenges were hurdles for the technical product that needed solving much like any technical hurdle. This relationship was flipped upside down in the real collaboration, putting technical products in the service of culture rather than the other way around. We show and discuss how our open-ended pedagogical philosophy was critical in unlocking this new level of learning.*

**Keywords:** Culture; Active Learning; Remote Collaboration; Communication; Problem-Based Learning; Pedagogy

## Introduction

A classroom at Norges teknisk-naturvitenskapelige universitet (NTNU, Norwegian University of Science and Technology): Students in Norway are collaborating with remote students located in Romania on a project that is to be presented in two weeks. The NTNU students have scheduled a meeting and are sitting around a large table, waiting for the students from the Romanian university to join. But, alas, they don't hear anything. No sign of contact. "Do they know we only have two weeks left?" The desperation is escalating, as they witness the increasing jeopardizing of their assignment, and therefore also their mark. They begin hypothesizing about why their partners are not showing up, despite agreeing to the scheduled time. Some days later they will uncover why their partners did not show up. But right now, they are frustrated. And this frustration will later prove to be an essential part of their learning journey.

In order to bring university engineering students' education closer to the "real life" for which the university is meant to prepare them, the course *Cultural Understanding and International Working Relations* invites real life into the classroom. Engineering students from Norway collaborate remotely with social science students from a Romanian university, Universitatea de Vest din Timișoara (UVT, West University of Timișoara). Together, they need to propose creative solutions to a social problem faced by marginalized citizens in a major city in the western part of Romania. To accomplish this, they must organize their own collaboration.

In this article we invite you aboard our pedagogical adventure, where we discuss how our approach may offer added learning value compared to other pedagogical approaches, such as weeks of traditional lectures followed by a written exam, or having the groups only simulate – as was the case with previous iterations of this course – group projects. Our findings suggest that inviting the real world into the classroom can be a frustrating experience for the students, but that precisely this frustration, combined with aspects of real life, as opposed to simulation, offers clues on how students can reach a cultural understanding that they benefit from in practice, by letting culture emerge more freely and immediately. We furthermore discuss how open-endedness and active, problem-based learning are keys for unlocking this potential. Our story is told from NTNU, as the students at UVT were not specifically studying nor evaluated on cultural relations.

## The Course & Pedagogy

*Cultural Understanding and International Working Relations* is a master's-level elective course that provides theoretical knowledge and practical skills for cultural interfacing, communicating knowledge across interdisciplinary and international boundaries in innovation projects, taught principally to engineering students at NTNU.

The course has traditionally been organized as two group assignments where students author and present a make-believe narrative wherein they develop a technical product in collaboration with a foreign party, and often for a foreign market. Students are

to pay particular attention to cross-cultural collaboration challenges and should demonstrate cultural understanding in combination with disciplinary knowledge and skill. Lectures are kept to a minimum. Students discover what they need to learn by solving the practical assignments. The four-hour weekly blocks of the course are mostly, and sometimes –especially towards the end of the assignments – entirely, allotted to group work. The groups frequently discuss their work in plenary in order to inspire and learn from each other. For the exam, the groups present their results and work process to the whole class. Each of the other groups must formulate questions for the presenting group. Both assignments are carried out this way, and the final marks in the course average the two project marks they receive.

The first assignment would typically be conducting a sustainable project in a region of the world with a different cultural context than the Norwegian. The region and its characteristics are introduced through lectures and the curriculum, as are the characteristics of the students' own region, the Nordic, which is equally important in the cultural meeting. The second assignment has typically been the facilitation of an imaginary collaboration process with a team from East Asia, introducing new cultural challenges. Through the assignments, the students are meant to develop a sensitivity for their chosen regions and the people there, a sensitivity which will be expressed through their assignment, and which fundamentally also requires an awareness of their own culture. At their disposal, they have any available knowledge offered by the lectures, the curriculum, and their own self-directed research. They develop scenarios which are required to get the groups into muddles, caused by cultural factors, and to then overcome said muddles – thus demonstrating cultural sensitivity. The scenarios are presented by the groups as make-believe narratives. The guidance provided by the teachers consists primarily of hinting at possible problems in the cultural encounters, as well as how to “stitch” together a narrative from how certain solutions may produce new challenges. The teachers act almost as interim group members, floating between groups, joining in on the conversation. The learning is tied to this iterative process of finding and addressing challenges.

We have always questioned the make-believe aspect of these assignments: How does this affect the learning, compared to a real collaboration with foreign partners? This was difficult to evaluate until the autumn of 2020, when the student groups collaborated for the first time with bachelor-level students in the social sciences at UVT. This collaboration came about through the EEA Grants project *Classroom Laboratory*<sup>1</sup>. The teachers from Timișoara had additionally used their connections with local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to provide relevant social challenges for the student groups to undertake. The UVT students would serve as local experts – providing local know-how – and contact relevant NGOs in Romania with hands-on experience. The NTNU students would provide technical skills and organize the collaboration. The result of this student

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://classroomlab.uvt.ro/index.html>

collaboration is designed to be a detailed project plan, ready to be executed. It is beyond the scope of the course to carry out the plan, but the plan is made available for the involved NGOs. This is a real collaboration with people from a different cultural and disciplinary setting, exposing the students to actual cultural barriers.

## Theoretical Foundations & Methodology

The course emphasises the active engagement of students. Bortoft (1996) argued that the education of students of natural sciences aims at improving the intellectual faculty and its analytical capacity, developed by verbal reasoning, substituting the world with its textbook descriptions. In contrast to this, Bortoft believes that only an active engagement with the world allows phenomena to manifest freely, which is a prerequisite for understanding them. Our course encourages students to actively engage with other cultures and thus develop meta-cultural competence. Ingold (2015, 134) similarly criticizes the notion that students are to be furnished with knowledge as passive recipients, showing how our notion of education has become “to rear or to bring up, to instil a pattern of approved conduct and the knowledge that supports it,” rather than “a matter of leading novices out into the world.” This remote collaboration with UVT students is our attempt at leading the students out into the world by, in a manner of speaking, bringing the world into the classroom.

Frustration, a key word in the opening classroom scene of this article, is one of the essential components of the students’ learning journey. The students must get into what we referred to as *the muddles*, a term we borrow from Bateson (1972, 16); getting into the muddles is necessary to move past any ready-made phrases and ideas, for “in order to think new thoughts or to say new things, we have to break up all our ready-made ideas and shuffle the pieces.” One part of breaking up ready-made ideas is to acknowledge the lack of knowledge: to know that we don’t know. Dahl (2013) refers to the moments where you suddenly realize that you do not know something as *golden moments*, great opportunities for learning. We have found that such moments manifest much more frequently when we invite real life into the classroom. Conversely, there is always a danger of trying to interpret events according to ready-made ideas. We refer to Ryle (2009), who describes how we seek to substitute thin descriptions with thick descriptions, where thin to thick is the move from “their eyelid contracted and reopened” to, for example, “they winked flirtatiously at me,” or “they had something irritating in their eye.”

On a more general and theoretical level, the course presents what Heidegger (1992) calls a *clearing* (Lichtung), in the sense of a scene of activity that both provides a special overview and serves as a source of clarification. The classroom stands out as a special kind of *meeting place* at the intersection of *nearness* and *distance*, meaning that “near and far relate to each other not only in place but as place” (Casey 1993, 69). We investigate a reciprocity of nearness and distance through Heidegger’s (1992) hermeneutic circle, wherein wholeness is revealed by investigating the parts, thus

allowing us to discover more of the parts for each turn in the circle. It is this self-same method Bortoft (1996) advocates that teachers use to aid students in approaching phenomena. Heidegger and Bortoft both suggest that the ensuing relationship to the phenomena so discovered can be one of respect and harmony. We furthermore elucidate the relationship between nearness and distance through the two modes of being in the world described by Buber (2017): *I-Thou* (Ich-Du) and *I-It* (Ich-Es), where the former is the union of the two in their meeting, and the latter is how we experience instrumental objects.

Lastly, we discuss and relate our project to pedagogical literature, particularly concerning active learning (the experiential involvement of students in the learning process) and problem-based learning (PBL, centering the learning process on students solving an open-ended problem). We find that these approaches are often in keeping with the insights of Bortoft and Ingold, and they work intuitively in a hermeneutic circle.

### Methods

During the course we observed what was going on in the classroom, making weekly notes. We also conducted short informal interviews – dialogues with the students – in groups, asking about their experiences, learning, and emotions. We walked from table to table (the student groups sit at large table islands in a large classroom), chatting with the groups. These chats also gave the groups the opportunity to ask questions, get feedback on their ideas, and express any frustration. We made notes of these dialogues as well. Additionally, we frequently discussed and cross-referenced our observations and notes between ourselves.

As a research method these dialogues are affected by our standings as teachers, though not necessarily negatively. They seem to be a reliable method for “taking the temperature” and logging the development of student sentiment. Moreover, by inviting the students into an open and uncritical space of dialogue, our experience is that they actually tell us what is on their minds in earnest. They certainly do not hold back in expressing frustration and negative experiences. This can be attributed to the open-ended form in which the students’ learning journey takes place, which permits an *uncommitted potential for change*, an open-ended form in line with the main principle in most knowledge discovery in anthropology – build knowledge gradually as you go, which requires the flexibility to adjust the course along the way. Not knowing what lies ahead, it is of paramount importance to not start out with too definite an idea or follow too strict a script. The open-ended form helps us make room for experimentation whilst simultaneously offering a safe and effective learning environment. Engaging the students in dialogue is critical for this to work. The students’ earnestness is likely also due to a Norwegian tendency to lessen the emphasis on hierarchy in the workplace.

Due to the course’s time pressure, we did not want to take up more of the students’ time by asking them to fill in questionnaires or partake in formalized interviews. However,

we have used some supplementary data to triangulate our observations and dialogue. One is the course evaluation from the students, mandatory for all courses at NTNU. It is comprised of a mid-term and end-of-term meeting between three volunteer student representatives. Prior to these meetings, they discuss with their classmates – without any teachers present – what to report and discuss. At the end of the term, they also produce an evaluation report. These data corroborate our findings. It was also suggested that the students write learning diaries during the course. While these data also corroborate our findings, they are limited to only two diaries. (Several UVT students wrote similar diaries for their own course, the results of which are presented in Dinca et al. 2021 and 2023). All participants have agreed to the use of collected material for research, and the research project is approved by the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research.

## **The Joint Course, Week by Week**

In this section we present experiences from the course, as they unfolded week by week, in the five-week joint portion of the course.

This year's first assignment, again only involving the NTNU students, was to imagine a collaboration with a Chinese or Japanese company. Students developed the narrative for a project and collaboration process in which they faced and solved challenges with the collaboration. Through this assignment, the students gained some experience as to what kind of problems might arise during international collaborations and how to overcome them. The problems ranged from differences in interpreting events, communication styles, hierarchical relations, the use of collaboration technologies, etc. Having presented and received evaluations and marks from this first assignment, they were now halfway through the course. It was mid-October, and week one of the joint course.

### *Week 1: Getting in Touch*

Both teachers and students are excited as we meet up in the classroom this first day of real collaboration. During the first hour, before the team from Timișoara enters the classroom by screen, we prepare the students as much as we can for the collaboration, though much remains cloaked in uncertainty for both the students and us. Most of the teachers' attention is drawn to technology-related muddles, like setting up the conferencing software and related classroom hardware. The sense of chaos is immanent and shared by teachers and students alike.

It is an exciting moment when the UVT students and teachers come up on the big screen, commencing our joint session. Everyone is introduced – and so far, all is well. The NTNU student groups are paired with UVT student groups using a name list. The list turns out to not correspond entirely with actuality, so we agree – right then and there –

to charge the NTNU student groups with establishing contact with their respective UVT partners, thus sorting out this particular muddle themselves.

At this point, the NTNU students seem to harbor the ready-made idea that the UVT students are somehow “assembled” in the same fashion as the NTNU students were themselves – perhaps not in a classroom, due to the coronavirus, but at least in front of their computers at home, ready to meet up.

However, it proves difficult for the NTNU groups to connect with – and even find – their UVT counterparts. Much time is spent on sorting out this muddle, but by the end of the session, every group finally manages to make *some* sort of contact. This is an important early lesson in remote collaboration – the first premise of good communication is getting in touch with each other in the first place. This was never a challenge in any imagined collaboration, hiding in plain sight as too basic to pose a problem.

The challenge of getting in touch is multi-faceted. One of the groups gets in touch with one of the UVT students from their designated group, but it turns out that she is not – as per the expectation of NTNU students – in her “home office” in front of her computer. Instead, she is on the phone, on her way to work. She does not know anything about the other UVT group members, having never met with them. To make things more difficult, a recurring piece of feedback from UVT students is that they are unable to meet up at the time allotted for joint course collaboration. Some have other courses to attend, some have work, and others offer other reasons still. Much later it became clear that the UVT students belong to eleven different faculties, all of which have schedules of their own.

The NTNU students soon begin formulating assumptions about why so few UVT students are available. Some even start questioning whether the UVT students were at all motivated for the joint task at hand. “Maybe they already had decided to drop the course altogether?” An oft-repeated ready-made idea that surfaces as a coming-to-terms with the presumed lack of motivation from the UVT students, is that the meeting challenges could be due to them having fewer virtual reality (VR) headsets than did the NTNU students. The course was supposed to offer headsets to the students and to allow for experimentation with the efficacy of VR technology in remote collaboration. However, COVID-19 prevented their proper distribution to UVT students, who only had one headset per group, whereas the NTNU students had one per student, as originally intended.

By the end of the first day, the NTNU students find themselves above all *confused*. They made great efforts to come to terms with the muddle they found themselves in, using ready-made ideas at hand to control the situation, to make sense of it. Nevertheless, they also sensed that there might be something here that has escaped them, something that calls for a need to maybe break up some of that old manner of sorting things. From a learning perspective, the students are on the verge of discovering something new about intercultural collaboration.



### *Week 2: Confusion on the Verge of Frustration*

After a week, the NTNU students are still struggling to get in touch with all of their UVT group members. Establishing meeting times that suit everyone remains difficult, as does getting the UVT students to show up to the meetings. The confusion which was colored by hope and optimism in the first week is now on the verge of turning into frustration. Students know full well that they have come one week closer to their deadline. One of the NTNU groups is considering just completing the assignment by themselves, bypassing their UVT partners altogether. We advise them to contact the relevant local NGO themselves. The other student groups are all working together with at least some of their UVT collaborators.

The groups who have established contact with UVT students leave the main classroom for smaller group rooms where they can converse with their UVT partners without noise pollution, as well as without noise polluting. Although they come back after their meetings, this obviously makes it more challenging for us to observe and support the students' work, so we need to somehow plan for this in a better way next time, perhaps by securing small meeting rooms close to the classroom. This was not possible this time around, due to the effects of COVID-19 responses on classroom allocation.

The uneven distribution of VR headsets still causes some worry among the NTNU students, who feel it is unfair to use the headsets when most of the UVT students do not have their own headsets, and that it would highlight an uncomfortable socio-economical difference between Norway and Romania. (The meeting software we were planning to use for the VR experimentation does let users connect with a regular computer running Microsoft Windows, without a VR headset, but the NTNU students feel that it would still be unfair.)

### *Week 3: What's Really Going On?*

There is by now a clear difference between those joint groups who have succeeded in establishing collaboration on a regular basis – sometimes outside of the formally assigned classroom hours – and those who have not. The groups that are successfully connecting have now established some measure of rhythm and calm; those that have not are frustrated. The two groups that struggle the most have now gotten hold of one UVT student each; however, these students soon turn out to be less than reliable. This was the case with some UVT students in the more successful groups as well. The sources of this unreliability, however, turn out to have rather unexpected origins, such as, "they had to work in the factory and were called in on a short notice," or "there was an alarm going off at the student's workplace," or "there was a sudden storm causing the network to break down." UVT students with issues like these were also equally unavailable to their fellow UVT teammates.

Again, the NTNU students try to come to grips with what was “really” going on here by, again, drawing on ready-made ideas, such as, “maybe they do not know English very well and feel a bit embarrassed to partake in the joint conversations?,” or “maybe the UVT students do not know how little time the NTNU students have left in order to complete their assignment?,” or “maybe the UVT students are not so used to scheduled time at all?” It seems like the NTNU students are reacting to their unmet expectations with a general sense of desperation-tinged with suspicion. When a UVT student says, “I had to work,” this is met as if it were what Ryle (2009) calls a thin description, a surface level observation in need of thickening, or meaning. The students then try to produce thick descriptions that explain what the UVT students must “really” mean.

By now, we detect the onset of panic in some NTNU students. Their frustration reaches a threshold as they begin to realize that their assignment is in real danger since time might be running out, and, with it, the flexibility to adjust course.

The students are reassured when our UVT colleagues inform us that any UVT students who have not actively participated in the joint project are excluded immediately. The students also receive even more important information from our UVT partners: Many people have lost their jobs due to the COVID-19 pandemic in Romania, and, thus, many students have been forced to get jobs to support their families, since their parents were laid off. The COVID-19 situation affects UVT students in a radically different way from how the virus manifests in everyday life for the NTNU students.

Also due to the coronavirus, the UVT teachers have not had the chance to meet with their students in advance – nor have the students met each other – as they normally would have. All the UVT students have had to stay in their hometowns during the initial weeks of university, meaning that the main source of information about the course for the UVT students has actually been their NTNU joint-group members. The NTNU students summarily realize that most of their previous assumptions based on ready-made ideas were quite off-target. Identifying their problems as communicational problems focusing on knowledge as a thing to store and retrieve (“they probably don’t speak English very well”), or emphasising the importance of common meaning (“they probably have a different idea about what working together means”), clearly misses the mark in this case. Even paying attention more narrowly to how different interests impede knowledge sharing (“maybe they already had decided to drop the course altogether?”) will not do.

With this dramatic shift in outlook and understanding comes a shift of sentiment in the classroom: frustration turns into sympathy, curiosity, and empathy. This is also an important lesson in how important it is to pay attention to one’s own prejudices.

#### *Week 4: Realising That One is Mistaken*

Today all the NTNU group members start by presenting their joint group projects to each other and the teachers before the joint portion of the class, in the hopes of receiving that crucial last round of feedback. Excitement is back in the room, alongside a

myriad of yet unanswered questions, and some lingering expressions of doubt. The evaluation criteria for the exam are also finalised today, with the students' input—a reassuring manoeuvre.

The one question on every student's lips is this: "How do we avoid embarrassing the UVT students?" This genuinely empathetic question arises partly due to the incidents of the first few weeks, but also due to continued muddles in which the NTNU students do not quite feel comfortable. Some NTNU students still find it difficult to get all the information they need from the UVT students. They have a feeling that the UVT students are not always letting them truly know if they disagree on some of the group decisions. They question the UVT students' honesty. But perhaps there is something else, something they are failing to consider? A couple of weeks ago, the NTNU students would have been unable to even conceive of these various options and would instead probably have taken the lack of disagreement as a thin description for want of a thickening into "the UVT students are not trained to disagree or feel that they are not allowed to do so," and then either just left it at that or taken measures based on this (mis)reading. But such naïveté is no longer an option. Now, the NTNU students plainly admit that "we don't know," and they are curious to discover more. The recurrent incidents in which the UVT students agree to a meeting but often do not show up are also now considered more thoughtfully. A few weeks back this thin scenario, too, would have been thickened from ready-made interpretations. Though the NTNU students struggle, unable to get themselves out of their muddles, this is a far cry from merely believing that they got it right (not knowing that they got it wrong), and then acting on this misrepresentation born from a misguided thick description.

If one does not realize that one is mistaken, one can be said to be *not even mistaken*. The first step to correcting a mistake is letting the mistake be a mistake, viz., to be aware of one's mistakenness, embracing a state of unknowing. This state of awareness and observation in communication permits the golden moments (Dahl 2013) wherein one may attempt to arrive at an understanding, rather than resorting to ready-made "strategies" or attempted evaluation of the other party's motives. The students experience golden moments throughout the entirety of this project; however, in the project's fourth week, these moments become both more frequent and more momentous.

#### *Week 5: Presentation Day*

Today is the big day. The students are nervous but also ready and excited to present their projects. UVT teachers and students are digitally present on the big screen. The groups are going to present in a pre-determined order, following a strict time schedule: 12 minutes for presenting, 3 minutes for taking questions from the other groups. The presentations are streamed to the UVT team (and interested NGOs) and to some NTNU students stuck in COVID-19 quarantine. Some groups are better represented than others

from the UVT side. One group presents using video conferencing software, while the others mostly present face-to-face, bodies present in the classroom, though several groups have elements of telepresence in their presentations. The presentations are a mixture of slideshows, film sequences, and live shows; some groups also role-play.

The first group presents their project, "Connect." Taking on the social problem of how to better integrate disabled people in the Timișoara job market, they have constructed a website for connecting disabled people with potential employees. Another group suggest a Roma dance festival in the same city, bringing together both Romani and other people in Timișoara, hopefully increasing cultural awareness and acceptance. Another group suggests a food festival for similar purposes.

Compared to the first assignment, and assignments of previous years, we see a striking difference: while almost all previous projects offered solutions on the form of technical prototypes, this time the solutions tend to be events and campaigns. Faced with the real challenges in the Romanian context, and collaborating with their UVT partners, the engineering students have used their design skills to produce social contributions rather than technical products.

The joint course ends on a positive note. Frustration has given way to relief and gratification, even if some dizziness remains. There is an air of "something of interest has happened," even if precisely *what* this is, remains unclear.

One student, who seemed almost unwilling to leave the classroom on her own accord, even after the teachers had cleaned and removed every last possible smidgen of the coronavirus, asked us "what are we [students] going to talk about during our lunch hour now?"

## Discussion

As we have now already been privy to, the pedagogical intention is for the NTNU students to approach their projects much like the anthropologist approaches the field. "Ethnographic fieldwork, carried out according to the method of long-term participant-observation, is what defines social anthropology. The method is inductive and open-ended" (Howell 2018, 1). It is additionally exploratory and interactive in its engagement and attentive to serendipity and wonderment. It is a method that both leads to and necessitates self-examination and the uncovering of misconceptions. Although the anthropologist obviously prepares for their fieldwork, it inevitably assumes form as the anthropologist acts in an unpredictable environment. Similarly, each of the course projects are presented to the students as an initial sketch of proposed project aims. These aims are designed to be open-ended, thereby permitting, as well as indeed encouraging, the students to discover the project aims as well as results. Students are thus invited both to shape their "fieldwork" as they engage their "field," and to shape the project from their own engagement in the "field"; they are invited to make

suggestions towards the formal project description and evaluation criteria, which are then finalized in an open dialogue between the teachers and students. The examination is similarly student-active, designed not principally as a form of evaluation, but rather as a subset of learning, on par with lectures and the project work. This is in keeping with the course's pedagogical philosophy of knowledge through discovery. The course's fundamentally open-ended form thus unifies the approach to teaching and research, as the engineering students learn to think like anthropologists while doing their engineering work.

The open-endedness manifests distinctly differently in the two projects. In the first project, where the narrative is entirely imagined, we note that the students usually relate to culture as a reified object of study, e.g., "Japanese culture." However, in the second project, students eventually realize that this attitude does not cut it. Although they initially tried thickening the actions of the UVT students by reference to notions of a static "Romanian culture," as new information arose, it quickly became evident that this was not working. Conclusions reached in this manner were not accurate and had to be overturned. Consequently, we saw how the students came to understand the behavior of their student collaborators as not directed by a simple "culture" but by complex dynamics linked to economic and labor structures, resource access, and pandemic impacts. As such, we observed a turn from culture as reified scientific entity to culture as culture. This is the turn from confronting culture as a scientific study of otherness – and considering how to best "overcome" this challenge – to being situated in, and interacting with, a culture. It is the difference between a culture the students study and a culture they live (in). It is the turn from cultural understanding understood as knowledge transmitted from teachers to students who then apply it to their study object, to cultural understanding as a skill that students train and practice in their environment as it is shaped by culture. With Buber (2017 [1970]), we could say that the NTNU students realized that an I-It relation to their UVT group members is insufficient – an I-Thou relation is necessary. The I-It relationship is one in which the "I" addresses the "it" as a separate object of their existence, rather than as a "Thou," an immediate relationship. And so the students no longer merely experienced the culture as an object, but rather stood in relation to the culture. Buber's I-It could thus be said to be to distance as I-Thou to nearness; culture as culture, then, is the transformation from culture as a reified object to culture as an environment in which one is wholly immersed. In this environment, the NTNU students no longer explain their UVT collaborators by way of simplistic appeals to "Romanian culture" (I-It), but rather understand them through the wholeness and complexity of cultural dynamics (I-Thou), including economic and work-life aspects.

This does not however mean that the analytical tools and lenses provided through teaching become useless – quite the opposite! When culture becomes culture, cross-cultural sensitivity and transversal competence become fully realized as practical skills. Indeed, golden moments become plentiful as students move on from ready-made thickenings to an acceptance of unknowing.

The students' cultural understanding unfolds in the hermeneutics of distance and nearness. When the course begins, culture initially emerges to the students at a distance. This distance prevails throughout the first – make-believe – project, and at the outset of the first week of the second project. However, this attitude necessarily breaks down in the later weeks, as the NTNU students meet the UVT students, teachers, and NGOs. They initially try to interpret the UVT students and their actions through the lens of cultural difference – or cultural distance. This strategy is successful in the first project because the problems were created through the self-same lens as their solutions. (A symptom of this is that when guiding the students through the first project's first few weeks, we must frequently advise them that their imagined problems are too easily resolved, preventing them from learning and applying any transversal competence.) In the second project, this strategy fails, because the distance of the first project is not the distance of the second project. Considering the classroom as a meeting place, it opens it up for a nearness with a central element of distance, and vice versa. Absence makes the heart grow fonder because distance is an essential part of what unites. Nearness is a corresponding part of what separates, as it is in nearness that one discovers the differences that prompt distance. Thus, as distance becomes the learning and collaboration context, the NTNU students forge a relationship with the UVT students that includes the cultural context. This connection, in which the students are virtually near but geographically distant, leads to a new type of knowledge, the knowledge of not just studying distance as an object (e.g., in textbooks and journal articles), but of distance being the environment in which one studies.

Whereas the distance of the first project is that of a "scientific" object of study, distance at a distance, the distance that emerges with the second project is distance up close, distance as distance. When faced with uncommunicative UVT students, the students' initial reaction is to attempt to derive answers at a cultural distance. From this, they make hypotheses about what is going on. As these are proven wrong, and the hermeneutical circle takes another turn, a new type of learning happens: as students necessarily attune themselves to distance as distance, a nearness to culture begins taking form, culture as culture. Only by letting distance be distance can nearness appear. The reified culture of the first project does not allow the students to meet distance, to immerse themselves in it, and to study in it; the distance of the first project is merely one attribute of the theoretical problem of culture, largely considered simplistically in geographical terms (overcome by travelling or telepresence), or as equally simplistic problems of translation ("in Bulgaria. headshaking is affirmative not negative"); thus the entire dimension of distance, so integral to cultural encounters, is entirely dismissed and therefore missed.

As real life unfolded in the classroom, the difference between the first and second project becomes the difference between distance to somewhere, and difference as somewhere. Rather than learning about distance in the classroom, distance becomes the place of learning; distance becomes the clearing in which nearness emerges.

This proved a valuable learning experience for students and teachers both. The lessons learned in the preceding lectures and first project were largely inapplicable to the most time-demanding problems presented by the second project. Whereas all the imagined problems in project one revolved around identifying and solving issues of (mis)communication, the biggest problem in the second project was simply establishing communication in the first place. The lack of control in overcoming or mitigating this challenge produces a certain form of chaos and anxiety, in which distance inevitably emerges as distance, and student learning may be – or perhaps *must be* – elevated from the reified realm to the practical real world. There must then be enough flexibility in the learning structure to permit this.

The chaos and anxiety of real life is tied to the real risk of communicating with real people. The second project birthed several golden moments of communication as a direct result of inviting real-life into the classroom. The students did not arrive at their epiphanies on their own accord – otherwise they would have had similar epiphanies in the first project too. The epiphanies were not “inside jobs,” arrived at by the power of analytical analysis, and they did not come from interacting *with* their environment as a scientific entity that they could theoretically contemplate from the outside, but from acting *within* their environment, which now included UVT students, teachers, NGOs, etc. Realness brings real consequences, which is to say that real life carries real risk, necessitating real communication. This realness makes the artificiality of the first project stand out in stark contrast. In the second project, realness renders the analytico-evaluatory mood and its associated ready-made “strategies” obsolete and antithetical in certain aspects of communication. Yet, these are the self-same strategies that are paramount to the first project. The strategies become obsolete in the second project not because they are bad strategies per se, rather it is because the second project prevents their static application to exemplar problems (derived from the strategies themselves). In short, it is because the second project carries the spontaneity and openness of real communication. Thus, while the first project serves to make the students think in terms of cultural understanding, the second forces them to understand culture. It would perhaps be unwise – that is, cause too much anxiety – to try to impress both teachings simultaneously. Thus, students are not only taught strategies for cultural interfacing, but also to more accurately (and openly) judge a situation so as to understand how and when these strategies are actually applicable.

The open-endedness inherent to the project and course promotes – even demands – that the students must act, react, and interact, in their environment. The students were able to successfully react to their classroom becoming distance. Our teaching approach, with knowledge through discovery, means that what might have been a messy mismanagement in a too-rigid project design instead became a new type of learning experience that could not have taken place if the second project was also one of make-believe. The proposed project solutions are an indication of this elevated level. Whereas the results of the first project, as well as the results of make-believe projects in past years,

are typically intricately technical engineering solutions, the solutions to this new project form were principally social solutions that displayed more nuanced cultural understanding, reacting in relation to Romanian culture and society, rather than merely trying to overcome it. Where cultural challenges were previously taken to be mere impediments to the implementation of a technical product – impediments that needed to be solved like any other technical impediment – this relationship is now flipped upside down as technical products are in the service of culture, not the other way around.

We see this in connection to Buber's (2017 [1970]) suggestion that we are increasingly orientating ourselves in the world through an I-It attitude rather than an attitude of I-Thou, and that this process builds its own momentum. An I-It problem, i.e., an objective problem, is merely instrumental and demands a technical solution – whereas an I-Thou relationship is characterized by the nearness of union and recognition, not the distance of instrumentality and strangeness. I-Thou relations are inherently social, I-It technical. (See also Heidegger's 1977 essay on the instrumentality of modern technics.)

As the second project unfolded, the classroom became a clearing for culture (as culture), allowing the students to not just care *about* it, but also to care *for* it. In the make-believe project, where culture is at a distance, cultural hurdles are conquered. However, in the second project, culture comes up close and becomes an environment in which to  *dwell* (*Wohnen*), as Heidegger (1971) calls it. By dwelling, Heidegger does not merely mean to be somewhere, but to belong there, to *live* there. This is not to say that the NTNU students became native Romanians; they do not belong to Romanian culture like the Romanian UVT students do. Rather, they came to dwell – to belong – in *distance*, and only once they accepted distance and started to dwell, rather than attempting to build structures asserting control (Heidegger 1971), a clearing shone nearness on Romanian culture. Thus, a relationship between distance and nearness emerges that is reminiscent of the relationship between the front and back of August Möbius's well-known "twisted band," the Möbius band (see Starostin and van der Heijden 2007), a topological figure with the paradoxical effect that if you follow one side of the band, you always have a point on the back that corresponds. But if you then move the whole band around, you are suddenly at the back without having crossed any edge. The front and back form an unbroken continuous surface. Such is the relationship of nearness and distance.

Establishing this clearing was particularly important as the joint project in many ways takes place in a *virtual* classroom, in that it consists of a remote collaboration. Culture is itself relational, so in order to understand culture, one needs as much context as possible. This context necessarily makes itself present more easily if one is in its midst, i.e., if the students were to actually travel to Romania. Thus, the geographical distance facilitates a cultural distance that must be overcome. This is further amplified by the distance of the objective I-It attitude. As the geographical distance cannot be overcome, only transformed into the quite different distance of telepresence (something of an



oxymoron, with τηλε- literally meaning “at a distance”), it becomes even more vital that the distance of the objective attitude gives way to the nearness of the I-Thou relation.

Our course, like many newer pedagogical approaches, is an example of active, interactive, and collaborative learning based on dialogue, project work, and problem solving, with a real-world-orientated learning that places the student in the center of the learning process, as opposed to an individual learning “based on “absorption” and “restitution” of knowledge (Rouvrais et al. 2004) with teachers “owning” knowledge and “depositing” it in students (Bartlett 2005). As is typical of problem-based learning (PBL), the students in our course test their ideas, make mistakes, and learn from these mistakes (Barron et al. 1998; English and Kitsantas 2013; Kolodner et al. 2003; Mergendoller et al. 2006). The course also aligns well with the three main principles of PBL: (1) the learning is context-specific, (2) learners are involved actively in the learning process, and (3) learners achieve their goals through social interactions where they share knowledge and understanding (Kokotsaki, Menzies, and Wiggins 2016). As with PBL, our course has a particular type of inquiry and discovery basis where “the context is provided through authentic questions and problems within real-world practices” (Al-Balushi and Al-Aamri 2014) that lead to “meaningful learning experiences” (Wurdinger, Haar, Hugg & Bezon, 2007). The joint course furthermore practices an active student-centred form of instruction, characterized by “...students’ autonomy, constructive investigation, goal-setting, collaboration, communication and reflection within real world-practices” (Kokotsaki, Menzies, and Wiggins 2006, 267).

One aspect that makes this course stand out from most is that the full course is a two-phase project-based approach – an approach considered effective by pedagogical literature (see Drain 2010 and Good and Jarvenin 2007). In line with the findings of this literature, we lower our expectations in the first (non-joint) project as compared to the second (joint) project, and, in keeping with the findings of Grant and Branch (2005), ensure a balancing of didactic instructions, thereby ensuring that students develop a certain level of knowledge and skills before their engagement with more complex endeavours towards deeper levels of understanding, thereby making this prospect more comfortable for them. The effectiveness particular to our approach is the comparative dimension from the two-phase process, which enables the course to identify similarities and differences between the two phases, and consequently enables us to identify and discuss more precisely the added value of the aspects unique to the second phase.

As with other active pedagogy, the course leads to knowledge and meaning through an iterative process of questioning, active learning, sharing, and reflection (Blumenfeld et al. 1991). The main learning in the course is tied to iterative processes geared towards *finding* and *addressing* challenges more so than overcoming them or proposing their ideal solution. When the NTNU student groups finally present their projects to the teachers, peers, and even invited collaborators from Romanian NGOs, the teachers’ evaluation emphasizes the students’ effort and willingness to get themselves into the

muddles along the way more so than their ability to get themselves out of them (cf. English and Kitsantas 2013). (The UVT students were, on the other hand, evaluated on transversal competence (cf. Dinca et al. 2021 and 2023)). The course is thus not solely concerned with so-called knowledge transfer but equally with what we may call the translation and negotiation of knowledge. This means that the iteration cycle always moves back and forth between these different levels. Our approach to PBL is not necessarily exclusively concerned with *solving* problems as much as with coming to terms with the complexity of them, that is, stimulating new “[c]omplexity-based interdisciplinary research projects” (Johnson 20011, 11), as well as student learning.

The course is collaborative across disciplines – both with regards to the students at NTNU and additionally when adding in the students from UVT – but our emphasis is on the cross-cultural aspect of the collaboration. While the UVT students bring local and disciplinary knowledge to the table, they are not necessarily accustomed to active pedagogy, which means they have lesser know-how-to-do and know-how-to-be dimensions as compared to the NTNU students (cf. Thomassen 2009). The UVT students are generally more familiar with the classical pedagogy we described above, with the students as knowledge recipients and the teachers as knowledge transmitters. They are thus also more accustomed to the regurgitating we described above than to a PBL approach of adjusting to practical situations based on the problem at hand. Furthermore, it seems fair to say that the UVT students are more used to deference than sociability as the appropriate posture for interaction with what they perceive as superiors in the classroom, i.e., principally teachers, but also senior students – which would include the master’s-level NTNU students. These are some of the muddles that emerge (for both sides!) in the joint course. Another, perhaps even greater, danger, is inferring from the general to the particular, when NTNU students simply assume that the UVT students are not contributing because they must be deferring.

## Conclusion

Compared to many other students practicing active pedagogy, the students in the joint course are to some extent researchers and learners both. The students conduct research not only in close dialogue with the teachers (who are trained in social anthropology), but also close to the research methodology used in social anthropology. The pedagogy and research are both situated firmly in anthropological practice and are consequently inductive and open-ended. As with many other courses that practice active pedagogy, the joint course is discovery-based, and the students proceed by uncovering misconceptions, leading them to self-examination. Unlike many other courses, the joint course is not only orientated towards knowing-how-to-do, but also towards knowing-how-to-be, how to react in a situation when confronted with a practical problem (Rouvrais et al. 2004) – in our case, the know-how-to-be is the acceptance of the unknowing. The joint portion of the course emphasizes this accordingly when the NTNU students, rather than overcoming the distance to another culture, allow themselves to dwell in this very

distance, in which this culture truly emerges as culture, with all of its aspects at play. Importantly, this change of attitude is not simply the students becoming competent with Romanian culture, but rather their developing a cultural meta-competence. It is the change from I-It to I-Thou, whereby the students move on from the distance of culture as an object to the nearness of standing in relation to culture in the clearing of their virtual classroom. Culture has been transformed from a matter of facts to a matter of concern.

The turns of events we have described lead the course to achieve a vital change of learning context. What began as an intellectual context was, with the joint portion of the course, elevated to a context comprised of active engagement. These contexts are distinctly different, as Bortoft (1996) argues: whereas the intellectual mindset is characterized by verbal reasoning attempting to reach the phenomenon (culture, in our case) as an instance of general principles, with active engagement, the students spend time with the phenomenon. Bortoft emphasizes this latter context as integral to understanding a phenomenon, for phenomena can only reveal their wholeness as we approach them free of our general categories. It is when a phenomenon is allowed to come to us that we perceive what Bortoft calls “the wholeness of nature.” We can see this in how the students initially “solved” every cultural challenge they faced with ready-made conclusions derived from general principles, whereas in the fourth week they had come to dwell in distance, feeling comfortable enough to admit to the unknowing that inspires golden moments.

We suggest that further research is made into pursuing an anthropologist’s open-endedness in multi- and inter-cultural projects. This includes education courses (at any level), but also very different projects, such as local community projects, or even broader societal inclusion projects. We persist in insisting that culture should not be viewed as a technical hurdle, but a meeting, wherein a nearness to a culture emerges in the recognition of culture as distance. Perplexity, even anxiety, is not necessarily a herald of catastrophe; indeed, it may suggest the arrival of a golden moment, provided that the project takes place in a safe and effective environment and that its members are engaged and motivated. We also suggest further research into how exactly to ensure such a safe and effective environment – which could actually be seen as a three-fold question: (1) How do we make an environment safe?; (2) how do we make an environment effective?; and (3) how do we balance the two and make an environment *safe and effective*?

Ingold (2015, 134) asks (rather rhetorically): “Which of them is wiser, the ornithologist or the poet – the one who knows the name of every kind of bird but has them ready sorted in his head; or the other who knows no names but looks with wonder, astonishment and perplexity on everything he sees?” The joint course is our answer. Inviting real-life into the classroom goes beyond training the analytical capacity grounded in the intellectual faculty, and instills the students with a sense of wonder, astonishment, perplexity, and – not in the least – frustration and anxiety; it seems that wonder is to

frustration as nearness to distance in our Möbius band. The joint course thus elevates the learning from that of instilling the general principles of distance inwards in the students to that of inviting distance into the classroom and attuning them outwards in their environment, thereby rising to the challenge Ingold poses. While the joint project remains a simulation in that the students do not actually carry out their projects (we therefore suggest further research into precisely “how real” the problem can be and still benefit from PBL), it is real in the sense that the project management is real, and the foreign project participants are real people rather than figments of the students’ own imaginations. And in this context of active engagement – of letting the phenomenon of culture emerge as itself – students experience several golden moments that enable and motivate learning at a higher level than previously attainable. In short: real-life means real knowledge.

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