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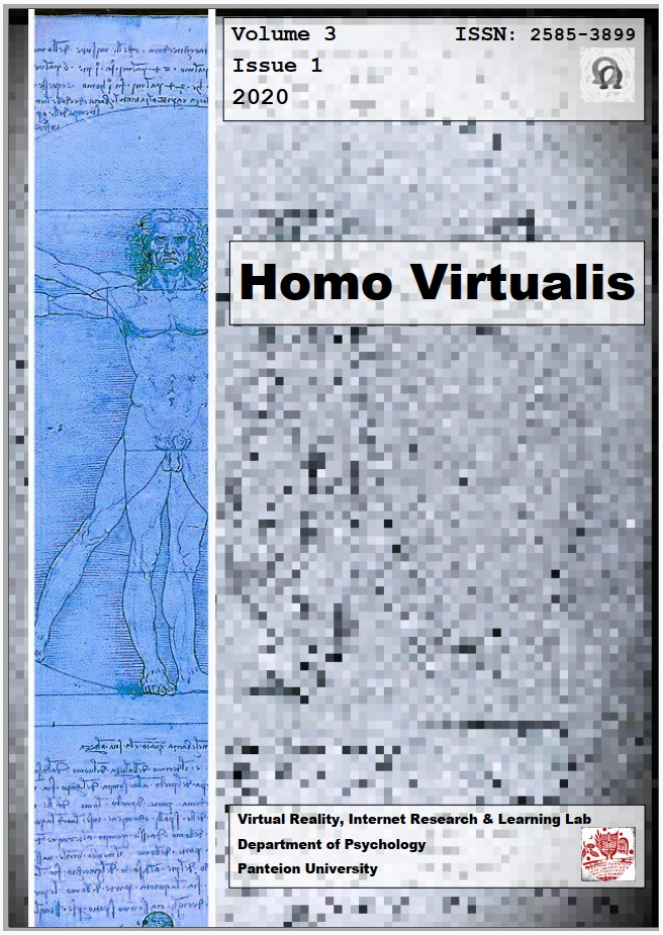
Human systems in time of COVID-19



Digital pedagogies and biotechnical realities: Education and life after the COVID-19 pandemic

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Commentaries

Digital pedagogies and biotechnical realities: Education and life after the COVID-19 pandemic

Alexios Brailas[1]

What would have taken years to change in the world we knew, took just a few months during a global pandemic.

Millions of teachers, therapists, and other practitioners around the world whose work requires direct contact with people, dived into every synchronous and asynchronous platform they could find.

They had to in order to continue their work with students or clients, to maintain connections, to empower people during the crisis, to ensure that nobody felt alone, to protect and strengthen life, and to resist a vicious invisible threat. All these practitioners struggled to ensure physical distancing did not result in social or emotional distancing, and managed to do so through web technologies and digital media. The social pattern of life, the very pattern that allowed coronavirus to threaten humanity, is the same pattern helped maintain life during lockdown by taking advantage of digital media.

Can technology-mediated sessions be as effective, efficient, and emotionally rich as face to face encounters? For me, it is difficult to answer this critical question. As an academic teacher and group psychotherapist, I became exhausted trying to maintain a normal daily routine and to connect and work through teleconference platforms and e-learning systems during the lockdown period. Definitely, I think it is far easier to build rapport, connect emotionally, and communicate effectively and efficiently with your students or clients in face-to-face meetings. But I have to admit that emotional connectivity can also be attained through technology-mediated practices. It can be effective and efficient, and, during quarantine times, this can help people survive a harsh reality.

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One thing we know for sure, meaningful and life-promoting human interactions can take place in any medium. People can share ideas and emotions, connect, laugh, and cry over any media. Nevertheless, teaching face-to-face will never be the same as before.

> We now live in a postdigital world, 'where digital technology and media is [no longer] separate, virtual, 'other' to a 'natural' human and social life' (Jandrić, 2020).

Is it the same?

No, it is qualitatively different. Online you do not have the full array of human sensations; nonverbal communication is not as rich as it is in physical proximity. But this is not a matter of comparison, physical vs. digital pedagogy. Now, it is crystal clear to every educator or practitioner working with people that those digital tools can be utilized to support and enhance their face-to-face work in wonderful ways unrealized before. And this is not something they have read about; this is an embodied knowledge for all teachers, something they have experienced themselves. In the months to come, this realisation will inevitably inform face to face education in catalytic ways.

Processes will be accelerated. Teleconference technologies were already available for many years before the appearance of COVID-19, but their use has sky-rocketed during the pandemic. Like social networking sites before Facebook, their time was yet to come. New technologies cannot be disruptive without the appropriate human reception. Humans need time to digest anything, but Covid-19 seems to have accelerated time's passing; people are adapting to technology much quicker than in the past. In this context, we should consider the long-term implications of our actions.

> Today we are faced with an unprecedented set of challenges that cannot be addressed by any of us individually. Climate change, the overexploitation of environmental resources, financial crises, war, violence, poverty, and affronts to basic human rights and needs raise calls to action… These challenges not only defy individual action; they defy even actions attempted by linearly summing our forces. They demand complex collective action within an organized whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. (Brailas et al., 2017)

In human lives, crises always present opportunities, and always in a painful way. This crisis is a challenge; it can be our unique opportunity to inform and enrich our

educational systems. Or it can be used as a mere alibi to drift to more economic forms of educational services. When deciding between alternative routes, we should not only ask questions about financial efficiency but also about ecological sustainability and long-term consequences.

> Imagine a future in which the human has attained its fullest potential. Imagine a world in which the good of each human and each species is considered in every decision made. (Armstrong, 2005, p. 17)

Modern social technologies form a complex mediated ecosystem in which a plethora of intelligent biotechnical entities interact and co-evolve. In such a system, unpredictability is inherent. In the years to come, education will be totally transformed in ways we cannot imagine but we *should* dream of. In the present situation, a critical guiding question to ask is what kind of world we want to deliver to the children of our children? What kind of techno-social territory do we want to inhabit ourselves?

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Notes on Contributor

Alexios Brailas (Ph.D.) works at the Department of Psychology, Panteion University, Athens, Greece, where he teaches courses on Qualitative Research Methods, Systems Science, and Psychology of Social Media. Research interests include, among others: complexity theory; reflective practice and peer learning networks; building resilience in complex techno-social systems; participatory research methods; group work and community interventions. Alexios is a certified group psychotherapist, systemic practitioner and adult educator.