Out of Synch: A Schutzian Study of Space, Time, and Intersubjectivity in Seventh Grade Online Teaching

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Abstract: Rich intersubjective experiences are rooted in real-time, physical inter-actions where bodies and non-verbal cues play a crucial role in fostering shared understanding. In digital settings, such as online teaching, participants are separated in space and interact through virtual representations: images, initials, or live video. This study focuses on a Danish seventh-grade class during the 2021 pandemic lockdown to explore how the digital representation of bodies and spaces in video-based teaching shapes students' and teachers' experiences of intersubjectivity and temporal flow. The findings reveal that fragmented bodily gestures and a lack of eye contact hinder the development of we-relations. As a result, students become more engaged with their physical surroundings and fall into individual temporal rhythms, rather than aligning with the shared digital context.

Keywords: We-relation, Telecopresence, Education, Time and Space, Digital life-world

1. *Background*

1.1 Using Schutz to understand online teaching

The COVID-19 pandemic forced schools worldwide to close and shift to online teaching. Numerous studies have been published that in various

ways highlight the derived difficulties for teachers and students to socially connect (For instance: Ville 2022; Bergdahl & Jalal 2021; Guillén et al. 2020; Anderson & Hira 2020; Godowa 2020; Lemov 2020; Pastori et al. 2021; Hilli 2020; Peterson 2020). Teachers cannot "reach" their students while students find it hard to focus and feel alone during school hours. Even though it is fundamental to this form of teaching, research in the changes in time and space in a digital context and how these changes impact the social relations between actors is scarce. More studies are needed that use theory-based frameworks to understand what lies beneath the challenges teachers and students face when teaching moves into a setting where their bodies are located in separate spaces - miles away from the school and each other. Using a Schutzian framework, this study aims to deepen the understanding of the relationship between time, space, and sociality in online teaching.

Whether in online or physical contexts, educational thinkers widely agree that teaching and learning are not matters of knowledge transmission. Instead, knowledge is a social construction (Berger & Luckmann 1989). The relational bond between teacher and student, as well as the social dynamics of the class-room, are pivotal to young people's acquisition of knowledge (Vygotsky 1978; Dewey 1916; Lave & Wenger 1991). However, perspectives on educational interaction rooted in phenomenological theory, unpacking what constitutes intersubjectivity and how sociality evolves through inner and outer spatial and temporal processes, remain underexplored in studies of online teaching and educational research more broadly. Against this background, the present work proposes Alfred Schutz's framework as a starting point for exploring the fundamental social processes in teaching contexts.

To Schutz, intersubjectivity, encapsulated in his concepts of "tuning-in relationship" or "we-relation," is fundamental to the human lifeworld and, as I will unfold, to educational life:

> As long as man is born of woman, intersubjectivity and the we-relationship will be the foundation for all other categories of human existence. The possibility of reflection on the self, discovery of the ego, capacity for performing any epoché, and the possibility of all communication and of establishing a communicative surrounding world as well are founded on the primal experience of the we-relationship. (Schutz 1966: 82; Barber 2017: 220)

The we-relation forms the basis for developing a sense of self, for conceptualizing and engaging in the surrounding world; and it constitutes the very core of sociality. As the foundation for children's relationship to self and the world is shaped during their school years, I find it urgent to explore we-relationship as a key focus in educational research, in physical as well as digital environments. This inquiry represents an effort to bring Schutz's theory of the we-relation—an

experience of mutual presence and tuning-in between the *I* and the *Other*—into the context of education. Here, the teacher's role is to cultivate tuning-in relationships in various configurations: between themselves and the entire class, smaller groups of students, or individual learners. Exploring these relational processes in the context of online teaching, the temporal and spatial dimensions preconditioning the we-relation in teaching as such are brought to the fore. Online, the teachers' and students' separation in space and the challenges it causes enforces an attention on the character of the glue that holds teaching together under normal circumstances, but whose absence puts it at risk of erosion in the virtual space.

1.2 We-relation in the digital life-world

The study's foundation in the we-relation acknowledges the intricate intertwinement of time, space, and sociality - making the study of intersubjective experiences synonymous with exploring how individuals manage to share experiences of space and time in diverse settings. Time is then phenomenologically understood as *durée*, the flow of thoughts and emotions within individuals, as well as time in the outside communicative sphere where standard time rules, while space is conceived as in terms of the body and its physical surroundings. The primacy of face-to-face encounters, as highlighted earlier, underscores the role of the body in fostering experiences of togetherness.

> It appears that all possible communication presupposes a mutual tuning-in relationship between the communicator and addressee of the communication. This relationship is established by the reciprocal sharing of the Other's flux of experiences in inner time, by living through a vivid presence together, by experiencing this togetherness as a 'We.' Only within this experience does the Other's conduct become meaningful to the partner tuned in on him—that is, the Other's body and its movements can be and are interpreted as a field of expression of events within his inner life. (Schutz 1951: 96-97)

Through the later analysis, I will scrutinise this exchange of embodied gestures among teachers and students, leading to, or challenging, experiences of sharing fluxes of inner time in online teaching. Whereas this theoretical perspective of the "we-relation" is not widely applied in studies of either education or of the peculiar context of online teaching, the primacy of embodied encounters and the digital transformation of the social, are central topics in research exploring the broader implications of the "digital lifeworld." Zhao (2004; 2006; 2015), a pioneer in reinterpreting Schutz's theory in the context of the digital age and one whose reflections I will frequently revisit,

reconceptualises the "we-relation." Despite being separated in space, individuals can engage in reciprocal interactions and synchronisation:

> In a telecopresence situation, individuals share a community of time without sharing a community of physical space or place. Individuals share a community of time in telecopresence because they are able to maintain simultaneous contact with one another, allowing the streams of their consciousness to flow side by side and moment by moment. (Zhao 2004: 99)

In "telecopresence," the participators maintain simultaneous contact, as seen in instant messaging, where distant individuals engage in real-time exchanges of thoughts and emotions. While they share time, they remain physically separated in different geo-spatial environments. This notion, meaning that also teachers and students in the present study should be able to share a community of time while being located in each their physical place during school hours, will be explored across the paper. Beside the notion of telecopresence, the analysis will take several other Schutzian based reflections on digitality into account. Nell (2023) and Berger (2020), point to the relevance of Schutz's framework for analyzing digital interactions due to his insights into the different qualities of social encounters, including his notion of a "decreasing vividness" in experiences of others depending on the mode of presence, with embodied face-to-face encounters offering the richest experience. While researchers such as Zhao (2004; 2006; 2015), Nell (2023), and more recently Zhang (2023) adopt a descriptive and non-normative approach on the topic, other studies present a more optimistic perspective on the potential for rich intersubjective experiences online, challenging Schutz's emphasis on the primacy of embodied, face-to-face encounters. Notably, Hardesty and Sheredos (2019) argue that digital environments, particularly gaming worlds, enable participants to share space and experience intersubjectivity with a richness comparable to physical interactions.: "To be in a world is to be in its space, and to be there with others (…) where one's flesh is located in everyday space is of no essential consequence (…)" (Ibid.: 360). They emphasize how digital advancements blur the lines between mediated we-experiences and face-to-face encounters, and the latter cannot any longer be regarded as more "real." Osler (2024) aligns more cautiously with this optimistic view of digital intimacy, highlighting how the body—and, consequently, empathetic interaction—plays a vital role in online encounters, whether in face-to-face video interactions or audio calls. Technologically mediated experiences, such as video and text communication, can facilitate genuine empathetic engagement as our bodily expressions adapt to bridge communicative gaps. Conversely, other studies reflect on the potential consequences of living in a datafied, non-embodied environment. Friesen (2014) points out that disruptions in

spatial coherence and the loss of mutual gaze are inherent features of digital communication. This shift results in diminished perceptual openness and the rich sharing facilitated by direct eye contact. Ruh (2021, 2023) further examines how we perceive the Other through representations—such as emojis, voice, and profile pictures—instead of engaging with the real body and its myriad expressions. For the subject, this raises questions about the authenticity of these mediated encounters and contributes to feelings of ontological insecurity and alienation.

1.3 Empirical-based phenomenology

Methodologically, the above field often adopts a phenomenological approach where the researcher, employing a first-person perspective, "with a sharpened eye and ear," attends to "what crystallizes in the stream of consciousness" (Luckmann, quoted in Dreher and Göttlich 2016: 33). This approach seeks to capture and reflect on changes in "the structures of the life-world," aligning with what Luckmann refers to as "proto-sociology" (Ibid.). In contrast to this approach, the present study employs Schutz's framework as "a basic formal matrix" (Eberle 2012: 285) to analyze and discuss historically and culturally specific processes. The focus is on a particular group of individuals: A Danish seventh-grade class situated within a specific moment in history. By exploring the lived experiences of these specific subjects, this approach aims to take into account that the experience of sociality shifts according to the specific digital situation. The specific media, the relational bond between actors and the representation of body and space, age, and number of the participants influence the actor's experience. A seventh-grade class's online teaching differs significantly from video calls with old friends, texting or talking on the phone with loved ones, or gaming with peers in fantasy worlds.

Basing my study on a specific sociocultural situation and highlighting action and intersubjectivity, I moreover position myself in a current seeking to exploit the sociological potential in Schutz, whose work is often critizied for being universalistic, subjectivistic, and focusing on singularities (Belvedere & Gros 2023). Drawing on material that captures specific actors' utterances and actions to understand their unique perspectives, I align with the pragmatic and social dimensions of lifeworld analysis that Schutz emphasizes in his later works on signs and symbols (Dreher 2003; Dreher 2022; Eberle 2012). This approach is grounded in the idea that, while direct access to others' minds is impossible, actors' experiences are mediated through appresentative systems. Their bodily movements, expressed as meaningful actions, can be observed (Eberle 2012: 288), providing approximate insights into their inner

worlds. The sociological aim of this paper is further advanced by seizing the opportunity to illuminate broader societal issues (Belvedere & Gros 2023) through an exploration of individual actors' small worlds. The evolving possibilities and challenges faced by teachers and students in fostering meaningful interactions shown here are shaped by societal structures, and political decisions, along with the rapid proliferation of digital technology. The interview excerpts and observational notes presented are drawn from my empirical material, collected and analyzed to gain insight into teachers' and students' inside view on the online situation; "concerned with revealing the structure of action and experience in small life-worlds" (vom Lehn 2019: 191). This article is based on a case study of a Danish seventh-grade class consisting of 24 students aged 12 to 13 and 5 teachers who conducted their lessons via the digital platform Microsoft Teams. The data was gathered between mid-December 2020 and mid-March 2021. It consists of fieldnotes, audio and video recordings, semi-structured group interviews with students, and interviews with teachers during and between lessons. Most observations and interviews were conducted online but the material also includes visits to students' homes and the teachers' offices during online classes. With a sensitivity to the actors' utterances, facial and bodily cues, my focus has been: How do they experience the online teaching situation? How does the teaching screen appear to them, how do objects in their rooms appeal to them? How does the interplay of bodily cues unfold between them and allow for action and intersubjectivity in virtual space?

I organized the material around two themes: moments of successful communication—marked by rhythm, reciprocity, and a sense of togetherness—and moments of disconnection, such as loneliness and lack of motivation. My analytical concepts, however, evolved over time. For instance, I initially broadly thematized students' tendencies to engage in activities in their physical surrounding while, at the same time, attending online classes. When I began my analysis, I approached this tendency as expressions of engagement in two parallel realities. Yet, after encountering Zhao's (2004; 2006) distinction between the *Here-and-Now* and the *There-and-Now* zones, I returned to examine some of these episodes more closely through this conceptual lens.

My analytical approach alternates between empirical excerpts and analytical reflections grounded in Schutzian literature on time, space, and sociality in the (digital-) lifeworld. By adopting this approach, I seek a "dialogical" relationship (Gros 2021: 225) between phenomenology and my ethnographic material, allowing the two to inform and enrich each other. The analysis is structured to first explore teachers' perspectives and then examine students' perspectives on the online teaching situation.

2. *Teacher perspectives*

2.1 Experiences of emptiness

Starting the analysis with a teacher's perspective on the teaching screen and its representation of his students' spaces and bodies, the challenges of creating a shared teaching reality emerges. Zhao (2006) points to the possibilities of digital synchronization: "individuals can share a community of time without sharing a community of physical space. In telecopresence they are able to maintain simultaneous contact with one another, allowing the streams of their consciousness to flow side by side and moment by moment." (Ibid.: 96). As I will show below, although the digital teaching I observed, unlike communication such as phone calls and online texting, included both real-time video and sound and could give access to several bodily cues in real time, the truncation of body and space, made sociality in terms of "tele-copresence" difficult.

On one Thursday morning in April 2021, during the lockdown, the German language teacher, Søren, invited me to observe one of his digital teaching sessions in class 7D. In the following situation, I sit beside him in an empty canteen at the school as he encourages the students on Teams to take turns reading sentences aloud from their workbooks. At the beginning of the sequence, I am not able to see his screen, so I watch him and listen to his conversation with his class:

– "Noa, what did you answer to the first question?"
– … "Momo wünscht sich eine neue Uhr."
– "Great job, Noa!" Søren repeats the answer: "Momo wünscht sich eine neue Uhr."
– "Helene, would you like to answer the next one?"
– (No answer)
– … "Lena, will *you*, please?"
– … "No, actually, I don't want to."
– "Well, you're going to do it anyway." Søren laughs a little, and Lena reluctantly reads aloud. After finishing the review, Sune tells the class to take 10 minutes off-line and complete their next assignment, *Das Familiealbum* individually. While the students are logged off the call, I ask Søren about his experiences of teaching digitally. He tells me everything goes slower here, and it frustrates him:
– "You can't see who's ready, who wants to answer. I have no idea if I'm talking to someone who's sleeping." While speaking, he turns his head towards the laptop on the café table and rotates it so I can see his display: "Especially not when it looks like this…" I see his screen image of 7D. It shows no living faces or bodies, just rows of black circles with the students' initials. "It's this emptiness…" he sighs.

Søren's virtual classroom provides access to only minimal bodily cues that might reveal his students' inner worlds. His co-actors are presented indirectly through symbols: "There are no faces or bodies to read, just rows of black circles with student initials." In Schutzian terms, these initials act as *indications* (Schutz 1962) — objects within Søren's sensible reach that stand for something beyond it: his embodied students. Teaching in this mode requires a constant mental operation of pairing these abstract signs with the living, sensing individuals they represent (see also Nell 2023: 379 on digital representations as "signifiers"). Søren's reflections reveal his frustration with this mediated form of interaction. The lessons feel "slow," and he has "no idea who wants to answer" or whether he is "talking to someone who's sleeping." His teaching is hindered not only by the effort of mentally bridging symbol and body, but also by the lingering uncertainty of whether the students behind the initials are even mentally or physically present. The absence of bodies introduces a fundamental ambiguity into the pedagogical relationship.

In face-to-face settings, the immediate, embodied encounter provides just enough sensory access to the other—despite our different perspectives and biographies—to uphold Schutz's idealization of a shared world: the "interchangeability of world within reach and system of relevances" (Schutz 1962: 315ff). Online, however, these conditions are disrupted. When students hide behind anonymous letters, Søren cannot see what they are sensing, nor can he tell whether he himself is part of their world within reach. He cannot read their gestures or facial expressions to understand how their environment, which may or may not include his own teaching, affects them. In such conditions, his students might be inhabiting an entirely different province of meaning, immersed in dreams or other distractions, caught in the lowest possible tension of consciousness. As Søren puts it, they might quite literally be "sleeping." His idealization of a shared world breaks down, leaving him with a sense of disconnection and "emptiness." Though virtually surrounded by over twenty students, he is, in a profound sense, alone in the teaching situation.

Digital lifeworld analyses often point to new possibilities of being together opened by new media. Because of the space-time separation, you can synchronize with several friends in a texting discussion, though being separated in space:

> The emergence of a multimodal structure of human interaction has redefined the meaning of sociality. In a society of physical copresence, the distinction between "alone" and "with others" is usually unproblematic: alone means by oneself and with others means being in the presence of others. Today, this distinction becomes less obvious: one can be physically alone yet in real-time contact with multiple people. (Zhao 2006: 471)

Søren's case shows, however, a less optimistic variation of the experience of "being alone together" (Locke 1998). In his digital teaching situation, though available online for several consociates, the absence of bodies seems to leave him in a more solitary state than if he had been at the school by himself without being digitally connected to his class. With Zhao's notion in mind, though appealing for his students to run side by side with his stream of thoughts, it is doubtful, who, if anyone, does.

2.2 Student eyes

Whereas the observation of Søren explicates a doubt deriving from his blocked access to the students' bodies and spatial environments, some of Søren's colleagues described a more detailed bodily feature, whose absence disrupted their teaching: the students' eyes.

During an online English lesson, in between two sequences, I asked the teacher Isabel what she missed the most from her teachings in the physical classroom. She replied:

– "Their *eyes*, I miss seeing their eyes"
– "Why is that? …What can you see in their eyes?"
– "Well, everything! If they are ok, how they *feel*. Whether they understand me… If they are ready to move on."

Here, Isabel touches upon some of the crucial information she usually recieves when teaching in-person but now misses. By connecting to the students through eye contact, she normally reads their emotional states: "How they feel," their cognition "whether they understand me…"

To understand digital sociality, Friesen (2014) refers to Merleau-Ponty's articulation of complexity in vision: "I look at him. He sees that I look at him. I see that he sees it…" (Merleau Ponty 1964: 17, in Friesen 2014: 24) and warns that these mutual glances that create a "perceptual openness" and "shared consciousness" are at risk of diminishing online. The teacher Isabel's experiences mirror this loss of instant mutuality through eyes. Further, they seem to refer to an emotional bond between her as a teacher and caregiver to her students, as if the screen between them prevents her from taking care through the usual subtle mirroring gazes in the classroom: "I can see if they are ok." Zaner (1961), in his interpretation of intersubjectivity within Schutz's framework, emphasizes the embodied, face-to-face encounter as a site of mutual recognition and empathy: "This 'mutual tuning-in relation,' then, whose fundamental stratum is the interlocking of time dimensions, becomes an interlocking of mutually recognizing actions — that is, a mutual tuning-in of reciprocal concern" (Ibid.: 93). To foster experiences of such exchange of

concern is difficult in Isabel's Teams classes because of the missing or frag-
mented live images on her display but also because, technically, eyes cannot
meet in a video call (Frisen 2014). Isabel can simulate looking directly at her
students by directing her gaze at her camera above her display. But this would
be a trick. Her eyes can in fact only meet her camera or the glass screen, not
her students' mutual glances.

Video-based teaching differs significantly from other digital interactions,
such as video calls with relatives (Osler 2024) or student-supervisor sessions
(Bengtsen & Jensen 2015). Although mediated by screens, microphones, and
speakers, Osler illustrates how the body still manages to express itself and evoke
empathy in her digital encounter with a friend: "I can see her happiness play out
across her lips, her enthusiasm in her gesticulating hands, hear her amusement
in her chuckling. …it is not to my screen that I am perceptually directed; rather,
I am perceptually directed at Frida" (Ibid.: 313). In contrast, the teachers in 7D
found it challenging to sense and connect emotionally to their students. This
difficulty was not limited to cases where they were merely represented by still
pictures or letters. Mathias, the math teacher, linked this lack of tuning-in to the
overwhelming number of individuals he had to perceive on screen simultane-
ously: "I used to be able to *read* the classroom…! Even if they all had their cameras
on, I wouldn't stand a chance of seeing them all. It would require a projector
to blow it up, and even then…," he shakes his head slightly with stiff lips.

While students are technically "present" as names and images arranged
in a grid in front of the teacher, the ability to "read the room," that is, to
intuitively assess student engagement, understanding, and mood, is compro-
mised. Although Mathias considers enlarging the screen with a projector to
compensate, he ultimately abandons the idea, sensing that no technological
fix can recreate what is fundamentally missing. Schutz generally describes
the "tuning-in relationship" as a subject-subject exchange, between *I* and *the
Other* (Schutz 1962). The teacher's embodied orientation in the classroom, is,
however complex, involving tuning in not only to individual students, but to
a network of cues; glances, noises, and posture shifts, flowing across twenty or
more students. In line with the other teachers in this study, Mathias experiences
that even with technological adjustments, the fundamental elements of such
interaction remain absent, making it difficult to tune in on the subtle and often
simultaneous signs emerging from a collective group of students.

Besides experiences of taking care, reading the classroom and adjusting
the communicative course, several teachers expressed difficulties in creating
meaningful academic moments during their lessons, situations where they
would "get into the core of the subject." When I asked the history teacher,
Ole, to describe these situations that he sometimes experienced in the school
of bricks but not online, he said:

"Yes, well, you can see it in their eyes… I mean, if you hit on a topic that really relates to them, you can see a completely different kind of attention in their eyes. Then you know you're at a point where *you* also need to be a bit more attentive — what am I doing now, what's my next step, what's the next thing I'm going to say? (…) People say you need to have a goal for the lesson, but sometimes it takes a turn, and I try to stay open to that instead of always forcing something through."

The tuning-in relationship is constituted through a fluid temporal course of partners taking turns in appealing and responding (Zaner 1961). In this sense, Ole begins with his appeal by introducing a subject, followed by the group's response—marked, as he puts it, by a "completely different attention in their eyes." This, in turn, leaves him receptive to their signals and aware of his next communicative step. According to Ole, meaningful collective engagement with the core of the subject depends on the teacher's ability to scan and sense the room in order to adjust speech, pace, tone, and pedagogical direction on the fly. They involve an intuitive coordination that cannot arise when one is too fixed on predetermined goals and structures. When the teachers Ole, Isabel, and their colleagues were forced to shift to video-based teaching, they became acutely aware of how much they typically rely on the presence of bodies and eyes to create such valuable experiences in class.

Ruh (2021) suggests that digital encounters where images, or in this case, initials and live video increasingly replace embodied individuals, reinforce the emergence of "ontological insecurity." For the teachers in this study, the fundamental structures they normally take for granted in their professional roles as knowledge facilitators and caregivers become destabilized when the usual channels of tuning in are hampered by digital mediation

3. *Student perspectives*

3.1 Between realities

Turning now to the students' perceptions of their teachers' and peers' bodies, faces, and spaces during digital meetings, I will explore their peculiar situation of being placed between two realities and show their difficulties in synchronizing with their fellow participants on Teams, who often appeared alien. I begin with the case of Nanna, a 13-year-old student who lived a few miles from the school. Due to the extended time spent alone at home during the lockdown, she had taken up practicing the bass extensively. "You can use the time to learn something new," she had told me during interviews. Although she viewed this as a positive opportunity, her comments had been marked by a

sense of longing: *"Of course, you become more alone like this, I miss laughing together, just hearing my friends' *laughter.*"*

One Wednesday afternoon in February, I visited her at home during an English lesson:

> An alarm sounds from Nanna's Macbook. "It's my class that starts." Among five profile student-pictures from various angles and the rest presented by initials, a woman is seen in a medium close shot with a blurred background. In a slightly monotone voice, she praises the students for the pictures they uploaded during the last class and then discusses their exercises on commas.
> – Christian, would you like to read and emphasize your comma markings?
> – (No answer)
> – Christian are you there?
> – (Christian's picture appears.) Do you mean the first sentence?
> – … Yes, please go, Christian!
> – … They ran all night, comma, but when morning came, comma, they still hadn't arrived.
> Nanna turns the sound on her laptop down, mutes herself and turns off her camera, then takes the bass from a stand on the floor, puts the strap around her shoulder, and places her legs a bit apart, few steps from the desk where the boy is talking. She starts playing a riff, Queen's: Another one bites the dust.
> "Very good, Christian!," the screen says. Nanna gives it a brief glance. Now it's another student's turn to read aloud. Nanna's fingers continue wandering the strings, giving off deep beats; she follows the rhythm with her upper body and hums: "Hey, I'm gonna get you too; another one bites the dust…"

Looking closer at the co-actors' spatial presentation to Nanna, like the teacher's display, the bodies, faces and spaces offered to her are characterized by truncation. Her screen is filled with silent profile pictures, except for her teacher, who speaks. Unlike her fellow students in the Teams meeting, the teacher appears as a live video feed and attempts to initiate conversation. However, the blurred background makes it impossible to gain awareness of the world within her reach—how possible objects, sounds, or individuals in her space might influence her inner states. The medium close cropping limits access to her bodily gestures, and her monotone voice renders her presence motionless. In accordance with Schutz, in vivid experiences of speech and movements, meaning is attained through processes of retention and protention by continuously connecting present units of time with past and future units (Muzzetto 2006: 8; Zhang 2023: 18). Through communicative delays between the actors on Nanna's screen, this flow of movements and sound is however troubled: "Christian, would you like to read and emphasize your comma markings? (No answer) … Christian are you there? …" These small blockages in the dialogue where neither verbal nor nonverbal cues are available,

are a typical trait in digital encounters, but "problematic for meaning constitution" (Zhang 2023: 18). Nanna must fill in the gaps to make sense of the digital communication before her.

Since Nanna is influenced by her "system of relevances," the objects and events most important to her are those which offer meaningful experiences in her here-and-now situation (Schutz 1962: 227), she turns her attention to other objects in her room, the bass. Playing "Another one bites the dust," following the song with "fingers on the strings, rhythmic moves, and humming," she enters an activity where coupling her subjective stream to the polythetic tones enables a vivid present experience of bridging former and continuing tones, and with that, meaning can be made immediately to her.

Zhao explains how the "dislocation of space from place gives rise to a unique situation in which the flow of individual consciousness splits into two separate streams" (Zhao 2004: 99) following the events in the embodied and the virtual space accordingly. This insight highlights how Nanna engages with two distinct meaning contexts simultaneously. One is in *"space dislocated from place,"* that is truncated and she engages with only sporadically; and she "gives it a brief glance" before another student begins reading aloud. The other unfolds in her physical, geo-spatial environment, where she creates tangible, vocal experiences through embodied actions with her bass.

Like most of her classmates, Nanna's playing music, was connected to an experience that the pace of time changed when being occupied with something else during classes. Another girl, Sacha, who I interviewed in a breakout room, shared such temporal experiences with me, "time moves *so* slowly here," she said. When I asked how she then managed through the long school sessions, she held up a drawing of a colorful dragon to the camera, explaining that she had made it while her teacher spoke on screen. "It's like being in a bubble," she said, "Time passes faster when I draw." Following Zhao (2006), Nanna's and Sacha's situations illustrate how online teaching compels them to navigate between two realities taking place simultaneously: A "*Here*-and-Now," grounded in their immediate physical surroundings, and a "*There*-and-Now," mediated through their Teams screens. Much like many of their peers, their tendency to immerse themselves in activities such as drawing highlights a preference for the reality of their homes, which offers a more fluent and "faster" temporal experience in contrast to the perceived slowness of the online classroom.

To further characterize Nanna's relation to her co-actors in the reality playing out on Teams, it is helpful to draw on Schutz's notion that a "Thou-orientation," where actors are open to each other as unique individuals, is gradually replaced by a more distant "They-orientation" in modern reality (see Nell 2023: 382). In Nanna's case, the example above suggests that, since her peers and teacher are presented only in a limited way, she is unable to engage

with them through an open, intimate "Thou-orientation." The fact that she, without warning, with a few clicks can fade her fellow actors from her space by "turning the sound on her laptop down" and withdraw herself from their reach by "turning off her camera," indicates an objectification related to the kind you would have to individuals acting on the tv or radio who would have no mutual relationship with you and would not be aware of you adjusting the volume of their voices nor count on your availability.

This distantiated encounter, that can be conceptualised by They-orientation or objectification, manifested itself in various ways in 7D's Teams settings. One notable example occurred in breakout rooms where students were randomly assigned to discuss topics or collaborate on schoolwork. Several classmates reported feeling uncomfortable due to the behavior of their peers in this digital group encounter. Two months after the lockdown, I interviewed Nanna, together with her friends Lisa and Benjamin, in a classroom at the school. Three students who, unlike many of their peers, would often have their camera on and engage with the teacher during online lessons:

> Nanna: "(In the break-out room) everyone just immediately switched off and became *completely* silent."
> Lisa: "It was *totally* silent; people just didn't say *anything*."
> Nanna: " … there was this group work thing. Do you remember the horror story we had to write?"
> Lisa/ Benjamin: "Yeah, yeah."
> Nanna: "I had to work with Asger, and it was insanely awkward because he didn't say anything. It was like talking to a *door*. (…) I ended up doing every-thing. He was just like, "Okay…" It was a bit… um, it didn't work very well."
> Benjamin: "Not at all!" (laughs)
> Lisa: "And at school, it's not like that *at all*. Here, we talk about *all* kinds of things *all* the time."

The three informants experience disbelief about fellow students who "switch off" cameras and microphones and become "completely silent," "like talking to a door" when encountering them in breakout rooms, leaving them with an "insanely awkward" feeling. Schutz notes that the increasing prevalence of They-orientation means that "An element of doubt enters into every such relationship (…) I am not therefore apprehended by my partner in the They-re-lationship as a real living person" (Schutz 1962: 202; Nell 2023: 385). In this context, Nanna and her friends' experiences mirror "an element of doubt," that goes hand in hand with the increased digitality in modern life (ibid.). In the physical classroom, their peers respond to their appeals and engage in vivid conversation as consociates. However, in breakout rooms, these same individuals could leave their calls hanging in the air. The answer to the question

whether the interviewed students are conceived by their peers "as a real living person" or merely as a typification seems unclear and shift according to contexts.

Nell (2023), building on the work of Illouz (2018) and Timmermans et al. (2021), highlights how the absence of shared physical space, embodiment, and eye contact can hinder empathetic connection, fostering "negative socialities" such as ghosting (sudden, unexplained withdrawal from communication). In this view, the shifting social dynamics in 7D, evidenced by practices like ghosting each other in breakout rooms, can be understood as forms of online disengagement, leaving those ignored feeling uneasy or "awkward." Similar to Nanna's handling her co-actors as distant, impersonal voices, akin to a radio broadcast, students ghosting one another did not appear driven by personal ill-will but can be understood as a consequence of the digital medium's anonymisation of the others' bodies (Ibid.).

Though not intending to cause harm, these practices reveal how video-call anonymisation extends beyond the teacher–student relationship to the peer group itself, where it fosters uncertainty and a sense of alienation.

3.2 Freedom from the gaze

The tendency to avoid engaging in online conversations, beyond the previously mentioned conditions, was, according to several students, linked to a sense of greater freedom to do *whatever* they wanted *whenever* during class time. This freedom showed in students paying less attention to the communal activities organized by teachers, as we saw in Nanna's playing her bass and Sasha drawing dragons. Other students would build Legos, cook pasta, eat, chat on their phones, or even stream Netflix during school hours and did not feel compelled to engage in the Teams conversations. This newfound freedom, as we shall see, was made possible by the absence of a shared, embodied space and regulating gazes.

Zhang (2023) describes how the lack of a shared physical space brings a sense of freedom to digital contexts, such as online classes: "When I want to quit an unpleasant conversation, I can just click out and then I am hundreds of kilometers away. While in a face-to-face situation, I have to take my physical body to leave with me, whereas the other might stop me and force me to continue the conversation" (Ibid.: 21). Similarly, the digital school environment in variated ways encouraged the students in 7D to resist social rules and feelings of guilt that normally maintained through in-person presence. Harald articulated this tendency succinctly:

> "(…) at school, the teachers are there, and they can *watch* and *see* how much work you're doing. But they can't do that here (on Teams). They have no way of knowing how much you're actually doing. I know there are some classmates—I won't name

names—who do this: they get up, log into Teams, and then just play games on their computer all day. Then, in the last half hour, they quickly write down whatever is needed… and, I mean, the teachers can't really do anything about it. (…) They can't step in and say, 'You have to do this; you just *have* to!'"

Whereas Zhang points to the weight of the body and the other's ability to physically stop you, Harald's description shows how the force that usually guides him and his classmates to behave adequately is similarly connected to the physical encounter, but more specifically to the teacher's gaze: "they can *watch* and *see* how much work you're doing (in the physical school). But they can't do that here."

Earlier, we saw how teachers' experiences of caring for their students were connected to mutual glances. However, to Harald, being seen by the teacher influences his and his fellow students' motivation to focus on their schoolwork and keep to the schedule. Quantitative studies have long shown that the mutually confirmed gaze in teaching is correlative to increased student participation and performance (Friesen 2014). This aligns with the boy's indication that without the loop of pedagogical glances in the classroom—the teacher sees that I see that she sees me—the teacher's authority to guide and intervene appears to weaken: "They can't step in and say, 'You have to do this; you just *have* to!'"

Drawing on the distinction between *intrinsic relevances*, driven by personal interests, and *imposed relevances*, shaped by external forces such as social norms and institutional expectations (Dreher 2023), my material suggests that co-presence and the pedagogical, binding gaze it enables, play a significant role in upholding the structures of schooling. But online, without the binding experience connected to bodily presence**,** many of the young teenagers were largely guided by intrinsic relevances, shaping their days around spontaneous and subjective impulses rather than shared expectations. This newfound freedom dominating everyday life was, at times, worshipped by students—yet it proved ambivalent. Janus, a boy I interviewed two months into the lockdown, described how time seemed to slip away at home:

"One thing I *don't* like about homeschooling is that there's no clear *time limit*. For instance, if we're supposed to write a history assignment, it's not like 'it *has* to be done by Wednesday at such and such time.' I miss that because, at school, you know *exactly* when something has to be finished. Otherwise, it just keeps getting pushed off, like 'Oh, I can finish that some other time.' (…) you don't really… you don't feel *motivated* to do it. You just think, 'I'll do it another day,' because there's something distracting you on your phone or whatever."

Janus' account illustrates how external school structures related to time, seem to diminish in online learning. Without "time limits" or fixed "deadlines,"

tasks were repeatedly postponed, and "I can finish that some other time," or "do it another day." This contrasted sharply with the student's experience of attending the physical school, where "you know *exactly* when to have your work finished."

In social phenomenology social reality unfolds between two distinct modes of temporal experience: a low tension of consciousness, where the subject is immersed in her inner, subjective flow of time: fluid, unstructured, and unpredictable—and a high tension of consciousness, where she aligns with the socially shared sphere, governed by mutual face-to-face-interaction and standard time (see Muzzetto 2006). Janus' homeschooling distanced his orientation from the shared social sphere, which ordinarily structured his and his classmates' days, including tasks like handing in assignments on specific dates, to a more individualized rhythm where common agreements could easily be avoided. His daily activities became increasingly arbitrary, guided by immediate impulses shaped in part by the constant lure of his phone calling for his attention. The physical distance led him and many of his classmates into a condition of slowness and a loss of temporal grip. "I feel like a Zombie, a boy said, it's like the days blend together. It's not nice." A girl, Aya, explained that "It has to do with *willpower*. Those who don't do anything, they… its because they do not bother. It's very different up here at school, because here others can *see* what you are doing." Aligning with Dreher (2025), the students' experiences mirror how acts of gazing are connected to social structures and power relations. To the students, being seen by others meant being pulled into a shared reality. Out of their teachers' sight, they moved toward a more solitary and distracted state of mind, in which outer, collective obligations were easier to ignore.

In sum, the students' experience of freedom during online schooling, on the one hand, offered autonomy and relief from external pressures, yet, on the other hand, this freedom came at a cost of structure, motivation, and social engagement. The absence of mutual presence and regulating gazes appeared to loosen the normative bindings of school life.

4. *Concluding remarks*

Based on material from a Danish seventh-grade class, I have explored some of the relations between time, space, and sociality in online teaching. The study shows how the we-relation, which is seen as a cohesive force binding teachers and learners together, changes when teaching shifts online. Without students' bodies, in terms of eyes, gestures, and sounds, information crucial for the teachers to tune in on the class is blocked, leaving them with a sense of emptiness and longing for the physical, attunable classroom. To the students

the fragmented spatial experience and opportunity to hide lead each of them to engage in activities in their immediate spaces and drift into isolated temporal rhythms. The absence of a shared space fosters a sense of uncertainty, and of distanced, estranged They-relations, rather than responsiveness and experiences of intersubjectivity in the digital classroom.

Throughout this paper, the intricate role of the body has been a recurrent theme. As presented, Schutz, who formulated his theory before the advent of digital technologies, emphasized experiences of sharing space and direct access to one another's bodies in fostering rich experiences of intersubjectivity. Later, however, Zhao (2004: 91) appears to diminish the importance of bodily encounters, as technology now enables individuals to "share a community of time without sharing a community of space." These two perspectives create ambiguity about the role of the body and physicality in digital tuning-in relationships. In recent research, some of which is included in this study, an answer, however, seems to clear. Osler (2024) illustrates how we-relation is experienced in situations where the body is, in various ways *drawn into* the digital encounter, for instance through her friend's tone of voice and joyful laughter, and the present analysis illuminates how, in turn, the absence of bodies and mutual gazes in video-meetings prevents actors from sharing time. What comes to the fore is how the quality of temporal alignment highly depends on the remake of embodiment in virtual space. Digital spatiality must convincingly engage the participating students to foster a shared sense of co-presence, whether that would be through appealing sounds, mirroring bodily activities, or realistic online environments that they can navigate together as avatars. Without a sense of shared space and co-embodiment, students' inner streams of time cannot "run side by side."

As I conclude this paper, it is essential to stress that my aim is not to generalize the challenges observed in the online schooling experiences of young teenagers by suggesting that digitality inherently leads to alienation in education. Emerging digital innovations present exciting opportunities for students to connect with their peers and predecessors but also with contemporaries across the globe. In fictional universes, digital tools may even facilitate quasi-social experiences with imagined successors. Like current video-based teaching methods, the spatial representations and forms of intersubjectivity enabled by such media warrant further exploration and thoughtful development for educational purposes. Still, based on the experiences shared by actors within this study, as well as the acknowledgment of Schutz's notion of the significance of the we-relation in social life, I argue that the current widely used video-teaching formats cannot replace real-time, in-person exchanges of gazes and nonverbal cues that occur in physical classrooms. Digital innovations may enhance and compliment but not supersede the embodied interactions as the foundational setting in education.

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