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Editorial: New Distances and Proximities in Teaching Geography of and in Latin America

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Editorial: New Distances and Proximities in Teaching Geography of and in Latin America

In our previous editorial we considered the impacts of Covid-19 on research in Latin American geography, focusing especially on the implications of moving from in-person to remote scholarly activities. In this editorial, we reflect on what the pandemic has meant for our practice of teaching, drawing on our own experiences from within North America, Europe, and Latin America. Still focused on using remote technologies to replace face-to-face activities, here we address the pandemic's implications for learning about, from, and in Latin America, and the ways in which it has made some experiences more distant, brought others closer, and opened up new ways of seeing geographical processes in Latin America.

Similar to colleagues in universities around the world, we have been forced to quickly pivot to remote learning, refashioning our homes as impromptu classrooms along the way. While our physical interactions with students have become more distant, we have also supported them in coping with uncertainty, anxiety, and in some instances grief. Added to this often-increased workload are our roles and responsibilities in caring for those who depend on us, and managing our own lives, health, and fears during the pandemic.

Yet, these challenges have also sparked creativity and resourcefulness. Like so many of our peers, we have fostered exciting international collaborations, developed novel

virtual activities, harnessed a proliferation of online teaching materials, and reevaluated and improved our communication and pedagogical skills. In the following pages we use a selection of vignettes drawn from our own adapted teaching practices to reflect on challenges and opportunities around issues of pedagogy, learning, and structural inequities in higher education.

Our first vignette—from a North American perspective—shows how Latin American actors can be brought closer to students, and how students can be brought closer to one another, through online embodied learning.

The pandemic taught me that even though we are engaged in remote teaching and learning, I have to think outside of the Zoom room. In fall 2020, I reached out to Pachaysana, a collective of Ecuadorian and international educators, artists, and community organizers whose work bridges community development and global education. Pachaysana works regularly with study abroad programs and was experiencing a similar reinvention of its own pedagogical strategies under the pandemic. Together, we experimented with how to bring embodied learning into the classroom—at a distance. I integrated their teaching philosophy on movement into my syllabus and paired their visits with the course content. Through regular visits to our Zoom class, Pachaysana

offered my students the opportunity to look at the online screen as a malleable and imaginative space of embodied learning. This meant that being together, synchronously, we could use the space to juxtapose and play with ideas, props, time, and movement. Through a series of workshops, students gained tools to create group plays that used storytelling and the visual arts to feature environmental justice issues. As part of the learning experience, we also worked with the real issue of their isolation and disconnection to create an integrative narrative of existing together, even if not in the same physical space.

This experience encouraged me to incorporate other external partners in teaching activities. In early 2021, I partnered with Digital Democracy (Dd) for my course on Environmental Justice in Latin America. Throughout the semester, students research the establishment of one of Dd's Latin American partners: the Ejecutor de Contrato de Administración (ECA) de la Reserva Comunal Amarakaeri in Madre de Dios, Peru. The course focuses on the ethics and practices of digital advocacy, and students engage in a pilot project of "research consultancy" to support the ECA. Together with Dd and the ECA, students create narratives about biodiversity, ancestral territories, and comanagement programs that respond to a script produced by the ECA, which also supports the community's vision of Reserve life. Students learn about cultural translation and gaps in our knowledge of places unfamiliar to us, and they put to use their skills

and creativity to connect across language and cultural barriers, even if at a distance. The final product is a series of Story Maps that will be included on the ECA's website. None of this would be possible without the resources the university offers, including but not limited to software and digital storage access, digital librarians, and the people of Pachaysana, the ECA, and Digital Democracy.

Similarly, throughout the past year many of us have had to substantially revise any and all teaching that involves field-based activities. Our second vignette—from a European perspective—reflects on an experience of designing a virtual field course in human geography, which endeavored to bring the field to the students, rather than take the students to the field, while also building on existing collaborations.

The pandemic has forced me to convert my human geography field course, which normally includes a field trip to Chile, to a fully virtual format. Many of the online resources I've found are oriented toward material resources from the field, such as geological maps, and thus give scant attention to the social interactions that animate landscapes, which are so central to human geography. Before the pandemic, this course was comprised of preparatory seminars on the themes that we would examine in the field, followed by guided site visits with local academics in Chile. For the virtual course, I asked colleagues on the ground in Chile to film walking tours and produce short videos

for my students (I was able to compensate them with an honorarium for their labor). These videos, along with live online seminars with the Chilean academics who filmed them, have enabled my students to better understand a sense of the socio-spatial dynamics of the place with real-time geographical explanation and interpretation that would have been unlikely in existing footage.

While these virtual encounters have enabled us to bring some limited field experiences to the students, we have been less able to reproduce true field experiences of the places and their people. That is, even by reproducing this element of the field course—the walking tours—we still miss a real sense of the place: the way in which the urban fabric in Santiago can transition from exclusive to run-down in the span of just a few blocks; the steep paths that low-income residents in Valparaíso's cerros climb to reach their homes; and so many other place-based experiences. The cultural exchanges that we normally organize with Chilean geography students, so important for exposing our students to a different culture and experience of higher education, will also unfortunately be missed this year.

The reality of our uneven world is that not all universities, especially in Latin America, have the resources to implement teaching activities in the ways described above. Our final vignette—from a Latin American perspective—outlines the design of an indoor urban ethnography where urban

processes are observed from windows in homes, rather than the streets of the city.

In the early months of the pandemic, during Lima's strict lockdown, we struggled to adapt to Zoom teaching and confinement in our homes. At the same time, we were astonished by the rapid and profound changes to our city. In my urban geography course, we were compelled to adapt field trips and individual urban ethnography projects to our new conditions. We learned to observe urban processes from our windows, and through sharing our observations, to better understand and conceptualize changes happening across the city.

We reported our experiences with the vital services of water provisioning, garbage collection, electricity reliability, and Internet access, and we considered how they were unevenly distributed among our class members. We discussed changing transportation systems and mobility patterns, focusing on how our families obtained food and other necessities. We noticed a boom in the use of food delivery apps, yet an uneven distribution that provided access in wealthier neighborhoods while neglecting less-well-off zones, allowing us to consider urban inequalities. We observed that the couriers were mainly Venezuelan men, allowing us to discuss processes of neoliberalism, refugee migration, and labor markets.

Finally, we kept our eyes out for non-human urban actors, paying attention (some-

times for the first time) to the birds, insects, fungi, and more that share our home spaces. Changing human activities called our attention to changing habitats and urban soundscapes, and it was always pleasant to hear birds chirping through the computer microphones of our classmates. With no budget and no tools beyond our smartphones, and without leaving our homes, we recorded urban transformations across a megacity, analyzed and evaluated these profound changes, and linked our observations to global processes. Class discussions and interactions also allowed isolated students to connect with one another as we learned about the realities of each other's urban experiences. With some flexibility and adaptation, the basic observational and analytical skills of the geographer can be ably transferred to very restricted conditions.

In teaching, the shift to remote methods has made some experiences more distant, but has brought others closer. Yet, as ever, the implications are uneven. While we can identify many similarities in our experiences, we acknowledge that conditions in Latin America are generally more challenging.

This is partly related to infrastructure—less reliable Internet and electricity, and more limited access to digital content libraries and other resources—but also partly due to labor conditions that tend to entail higher workloads with less institutional support. These conditions place an unequal burden on both women and more junior and/or precarious faculty members. Thus, in the emergent online teaching environment it is vital to ensure that colleagues at higher-resourced institutions do not (inadvertently) over-burden colleagues at lower-resourced ones in online collaborations without providing compensation for their time and effort and/or thinking about how these endeavors will benefit them too.

Finally, we also have to be mindful that some communities in Latin America have been directly and disproportionately impacted by Covid-19. The pandemic thus does not merely comprise a transition from face-to-face activity to remote learning, but is interwoven with materialized fear and loss, especially among colleagues who are far from home. The emotional burden of the pandemic is significant, and we should not overlook its impacts on our core educational mission.

The Editors