Students in the spotlight: Using collaborative autoethnography to build a community of learning in the Corona crisis

Dr. Isabel Steinhardt   **University of Kassel, Germany**

ABSTRACT

Due to the Corona crisis, German Higher Education Institutions had to close their campuses in March and lecturers had to teach online. To understand how the Corona crisis affected students, first this article explains the structural and social inequalities in the German higher education system, using Tinto's (1975; 1997) student engagement theory. Second, the concept of Bergman-Rosamond et al. (2020) is used to analyze the challenges that Corona has raised for students, including current surveys. We found that the closure of the social space campus (and the Corona crisis as a whole) particularly hit hard those students who had previously been affected by (intersectional) inequality. Therefore, to lessen the specific challenges associated with the ad hoc transition to digital studying, the creation of a digital community of learning can help. We demonstrate how such a community can be created by the example seminar, "Digital practices: an autoethnographic observation". During the seminar, students recorded their digital technology use in a journal, and we analyzed the diary entries using the collaborate autoethnography method. The seminar example shows that this method is well suited for the development of a community of learning as it not only places students in the spotlight but as students work together on a topic they get to know each other, and a basis of trust is created through peer-feedback. Therefore, it was important to have a digital space (in this case Mahara) where the exchange could take place. The continuous insight into the students' "learning status" enabled the lecturer to promote the learning and provide individual assistance for the students.

KEYWORDS

The Corona-Crisis in Germany

On March 22, 2020, the sharp increase in Corona cases resulted in comprehensive restrictions involving social contacts in Germany. From this point on, German higher education institutions (HEI) were forced to develop scenarios for digital teaching for the summer semester. It was obvious that over the coming months, face-to-face courses would be impossible and we would have to switch to online teaching on an *ad hoc* basis.

However, as a sociologist studying higher education for years, I was able to draw on knowledge generated by higher education research in general as well as digitization, habitus, inequality, and qualitative methods. This knowledge enabled me to reflexively deal with the demands that the students were exposed to when switching from synchronous teaching and learning to online teaching and learning. From the beginning of what became known as the 'Corona'semester, it seemed important for me to understand the challenges students are facing due to the situation caused by Corona, commonly referred to as the Corona crisis (Brinks & Ibert, 2020). These considerations helped me to develop a seminar in which a digital community of learning has arisen that has responded to the students' challenges. The developed seminar entitled "Digital practices: an autoethnographic observation", serves as an example of how the intersectional challenges of students can be addressed in a seminar if the students themselves are the focus. I will show why and how the focus on student-centered-learning via collaborative autoethnography is

particularly well-suited to collectively learn and reflect on students' needs during such a time of crisis on and to react to them in a digital classroom-setting, thereby counteracting intersectional inequalities.

In order to understand the example in its complexity, I first explain the (structural) inequalities in the German Higher Education System, using Tinto's (1975; 1997) student engagement theory. Then using the concept of Bergman-Rosamond et al. (2020) I analyze the challenges that Corona has raised for students. I then reflect on the seminar by using the results of both analyses before discussing the overall value of the seminar.

Social inequalities of German's Higher Education System

The education system in Germany is a public, cost-free system with private schools and universities playing only a minor role in the higher education system (Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung, 2020). Nevertheless, the education system is highly selective, particularly the school system, which segregates students after elementary school. As a result, first-year students from academic families are highly overrepresented. Students with a low social and/or migration background have significantly lower chances of acquiring a university entrance qualification (Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung, 2020). Moreover, students with a low social background drop out more often from their studies and are less likely to pursue a master's degree (Lörz, 2019). Students from non-academic families struggle with the

demands of an academic environment such as an understanding of self-structure, academic language and self-motivation, which they have not learned from their families of origin (Schmitt, 2010). The situation is similar for students with a migration background, who are often the first in their families to study and therefore cannot draw on experience from within the families.

In order to reduce the inequality for entrance to HEIs, policymakers offered the opportunity to credit professional skills as a higher education entrance qualification. This step was intended to attract non-traditional students into higher education (Lörz, 2019).

The proportion of women among first-year students is balanced at 51.7%, although fewer women begin a course of study, they are more likely than men to have acquired a university entrance qualification. (Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung, 2020). In addition, there is a strong gender disparity with regard to the choice of field of study. For example, women in Germany tend to choose so-called soft subjects rather than hard sciences and choose less prestigious subjects. Men more often choose subjects that are highly prestigious and lead to high income (Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung, 2020).

In Germany 11% of students have a physical or mental illness (Middendorff et al., 2017). Furthermore, in over a third of cases, the disability or illness leads to an extension of the study period. Students with disabilities are more than twice as likely to interrupt their studies as those without disabilities (32% vs. 13%) (Middendorff et al., 2017).

Currently, about 10% of international students are studying at German HEIs. Despite the dropout rates falling in the last ten years, the dropout rates for international students remain significantly higher than for German students. (Kercher, 2018). The reasons for the high dropout rates include "poor linguistic proficiency, financial problems, a lack of social and academic integration, and misconceptions regarding the teaching and learning culture at German higher education institutions" (Kercher, 2018, p. 2)

Social inequalities also emerge in relation to digital technologies (Scheerder et al., 2017; van Deursen & van Dijk, 2019). "Overall, these findings suggest that even when controlling for basic Internet access, among a group of young adults, socioeconomic status is an important predictor of how people are incorporating the Web into their everyday lives with those from more privileged backgrounds using it in more informed ways for a larger number of activities." (Hargittai, 2010, p. 92) In a study, Steinhardt (2020) showed that students' practices in dealing with digital technologies differ. For example, students from less educated families of origin only adopt digital technologies if they are required to do so and, when doing so, need clear guidance (Steinhardt, 2020).

Typically however, these conflicts are somewhat reduced by peer groups and campus life (Tinto, 1975). As Tinto (1975, 1997) states, central to the success of the study is the involvement and commitment in and with HEIs. „Generally speaking, the greater students' involvement in the life of the college, especially its academic life, the greater their acquisition of knowledge and

development of skills" (Tinto, 1997, p. 600). Tinto (1997) further emphasizes that "Classrooms of Community" have a decisive influence. This is especially the case for students who lack opportunities for academic exchange outside the university as the classroom is the place "where education in the formal sense is experienced". (Tinto, 1997, p. 599). Success factors in the classroom are: "Building Supportive Peer Groups, Shared Learning-Bridging the Academic-Social Divide, and Gaining a Voice in the Construction of Knowledge" (Tinto, 1997, p. 609). We have known for 20 years, that "student learning is enhanced when students are actively involved in learning and when they are placed in situations in which they have to share learning in some positive, connected manner." (Tinto, 1997, p. 601). Even though widely discussed in HEI contexts in Germany, the "shift from teaching to learning" has not fully reached teaching practice.

In the Corona crisis, however, the social space campus was not accessible. This makes the question of how the "Classroom of Community" can be adapted for a digital community of learning even more crucial. Before I answer this question, I will discuss the other challenges of the Corona crisis.

Teaching and Learning during Corona crisis

In the following, I use the aspects of crises from Bergman-Rosamond et al. (2020) to describe the challenges of teaching and learning in the Corona crisis in Germany. Bergman-Rosamond et al. (2020) propose an interdisciplinary approach that includes the aspects of scale, time, spatiality, processuality, multi-layeredness, gender, intersectionality and inequality to analysis crises.

Scale
Ehlers (2020) identifies three positions: Firstly, the optimistic-affirmative position, which sees the Corona crisis as a unique opportunity to fundamentally transform HEIs in the direction of digital institutions and to abolish the presence university in its current form. Second, the critical-progressive position, which sees the digital transition in the Corona pandemic as an opportunity to gain experience and to carry out the necessary digital change without abolishing the presence HEIs. Third, the conservative-preservative position, which wants to return to the pre-Corona era and does not want change. Which scaling position will prevail in the end remains open. Nevertheless, the most widespread position seems to be the critical-progressive position. However, the different scaling of the Corona crises meant students had to handle diverse teaching approaches.

The different ways in which lecturers transferred their teaching to the virtual setting can be attributed to the lack of experience with online teaching. Half of the lecturers taught online for the first time (Kreulich et al., 2020). Online teaching has been a much discussed topic in Germany for years, but has not yet been implemented (Kerres, 2020). Kerres (2020) identifies the freedom of research and teaching, which is protected by the German constitution, as the main reason. In addition, teaching is considered less important than research for an academic's career. (Müller & Schneijderberg, 2020). As a result, lecturers have less institutional/structural motivation

to acquire online teaching skills and the university management cannot force them. Therefore, only a few lecturers have comprehensive experience with online teaching and only a few students have had the opportunity to gain comprehensive experience with online teaching (Bond et al., 2018). In a recent study conducted just before the outbreak of the Corona pandemic, Händel et al (2020) found that students had very different experiences with online courses. For example 6% had experience with live streams, 35% with other online-supported learning opportunities, 43% with e-tests, 49% with live media in courses, 52% with online learning modules, and 63% with online communication and collaboration (Händel et al., 2020).

Time

The Corona crisis was an unprecedented blow for all HEIs in Germany. Most HEIs did not have a digital strategy and accordingly, they had to find short term solutions to deal with the digital semester (Kerres, 2020). For example, there was a lack of technical infrastructure for online teaching, such as licenses for video conferencing software such as Zoom, and WebEx etc. As well as the HEIs, lecturers also had to develop quick solutions that would allow for "emergency remote teaching" (Hodges et al., 2020). "Emergency remote teaching" refers to the rapid implementation of online teaching that cannot rely on well thought-out concepts. The fast transition to online teaching was necessary to allow students to continue their studies. This meant that 74% of students did not have any course cancelations with 26% of students reporting that courses were cancelled (Lörz et al., 2020). Besides course cancelation, the

closure of libraries meant that students were unable to access sufficient literature, which led to delays in the preparation of papers for 23% of students (Bayreuth Survey 2020). Libraries are not sufficiently equipped for online access, as many texts are not available in digital format. Delays in studies were also caused by the cancellation of practical laboratory courses and internships.

Therefore, the German government decided not to include the summer term 2020 in the calculation of, for example, BAföG (the German Federal Training Assistance Act). De facto, students will receive financial assistance for one semester longer. This intervention was necessary because some students had less time for their studies due to care tasks (I will discuss this in detail below).

Spatiality

Due to the Corona pandemic, all HEIs were closed and could no longer be accessed by lecturers and students as social space. All HEIs' employees worked from home, resulting in (on all sides) technical issues with laptops, headsets and internet connections. For example, 36% of students professed to having insufficient internet access to participate in online courses (Lörz et al., 2020).

In addition, a problem for almost half of the students was the situation regarding domestic space. Only 59% of the students surveyed at the University of Bayreuth, for example, where able to state, "I have access to a quiet room that I can use to participate in online group sessions," (Bayreuth survey, 2020), while in Göttingen the number was 52% (Göttingen survey, 2020) and Lörz et al.'s survey of 28 HEIs resulted

in 32%. Students and lecturers alike had to create opportunities for teaching without giving up their own privacy. As a consequence, screens during live video teaching often remained black.

Due to the limited space available, many students moved back to their parents residences during the semester if they could provide sufficient space (Traus et al., 2020). However, inequality is also evident here. Only students from families with sufficient economic capital benefited from this option. Students with little economic capital had to quit their apartment or shared apartment for financial reasons (Traus et al., 2020). Moving back to the parent/s often meant returning to limited space. Due to the closure of kindergartens, schools and social services, students and lecturers with care tasks also had to find ways to reconcile these tasks spatially.

Processuality

As already mentioned, especially the mode of "Emergency Remote Teaching" is process-related. The HEIs were forced to quickly make technical acquisitions, clarify data protection issues and develop concepts for online teaching. This process continued throughout the semester. The learning experiences of lecturers and students regarding online teaching were also processual. The semester can be described as "trial and error.

Multi-layeredness, gender, intersectionality and inequality

The aforementioned challenges students are facing in the German HE system have intensified during the Corona crisis. Many international students could not even enter Germany in the first place. For international students in Germany, the lockdown meant social isolation because they did not have family around and were not allowed to see more than one other person at the same time. For international students, the main meeting place was the campus, which was unavailable. The social isolation also affected German students; for example, 26% of German students mentioned that they have strong concerns about managing their studies under the current conditions (Traus et al., 2020). In addition to the psychological stress, which only intensified in people with chronic illness or disabilities, 37% of the students had less money than before the Corona crisis (Traus et al., 2020). A job loss hits students from lower social backgrounds particularly hard. These students lost not only their financial security but also the necessary social space of HEIs.

As mentioned, the social space campus or classroom is central to successful studies for students with low social background. Accordingly, these students would need more support and interaction with lecturers in online teaching. However, as the survey of lecturers shows (Bochum survey 2020), the opposite is more likely to happen in "emergency remote teaching". The survey showed that 53% of lecturers stated that they interact less with their students than in face-to-face teaching (Bochum survey, 2020), 58% rated the volume of interaction as too low and 47% rated the quality of interaction as poor. Students also see the loss of social interaction in the online-semester as a huge problem (Bayreuth survey, 2020).

Due to the reduced interaction and the resulting reduced possibility for supervision, it can be assumed that international students, students from non-academic families and students with a

migration background are more likely to drop out in the Corona crisis, develop psychological problems or have strong doubts about their studies. These students require particularly intensive supervision, which was mostly unavailable, even before Corona. The Corona crisis, however, has made this lack of supervision even worse (Traus et al., 2020).

Students indicated in all surveys that their workload has increased during the digital semester, thus aggravating the situation. (Bayreuth survey, 2020; Göttingen survey, 2020; Lüneburg survey, 2020). Indeed, most lecturers assign additional tasks to compensate for the lack of presence. Obviously, this also increases the burden on lecturers, especially as most lecturers first had to familiarize themselves with the online teaching format. Accordingly, 84% of lecturers stated that their workload had increased (Bochum survey, 2020).

As well as for lecturers, dealing with online teaching is also new for students. As shown above, interaction and supervision declined. Thus, the digitization of higher education could lead to an increase in inequality. As has already been described by Zilllien & Marr (2013), there is a digital knowledge gap in society. Therefore, unsurprisingly, only 52% (Bayreuth survey, 2020) or 54.8% (Lüneburg survey, 2020) of the surveyed students state that they feel able to complete the summer semester in a purely digital way. 53.8% feel able to study with fellow students in online groups (Bayreuth survey, 2020); almost half of them do not, although most students are familiar with, for example, WhatsApp. In this way we see the difference between everyday practices (communication with friends/family) and the practices incorporated for study (Steinhardt, 2020).

As a possible way to help students cope with the new requirements, 75% of students responded that they prefer recorded lectures rather than live lectures, as recordings are easier to combine with other tasks (Göttingen survey, 2020).

The problem of compatibility applies to working students as well as students with children (about 6%). Buß et al. (2018) conclude that students with children have more difficulties in combining their studies with their additional demands. Attending courses, spending self-study time, and taking exams at the scheduled time are the most common difficulties (Buß et al., 2018). In the lockdown, all kindergartens and schools were closed and as Speck (2020) shows, women mainly take over the care work. In addition to looking after children or caring for relatives, this also includes coping with household duties. Household duties increased during the Corona crisis due to the permanent stay at home and these duties were also mainly adopted by women (Speck, 2020). There are indications that old role patterns are (re)strengthened in the Corona crisis and social inequalities emerge more strongly than before (bukof, 2020; Inno et al., 2020; Myers et al., 2020; Oleschuk, 2020; Zinn et al., 2020).

Contradictions

The Corona crisis on the one hand has reinforced or aggravated inequalities in Germany, especially inequalities related to gender, social and migration background. Thus, student learning in times of Corona has involved moments of crisis that students (and teachers) need to deal with in social isolation. On the other hand, the Corona crisis has created opportunities, for example, in transitioning from teaching

face to face to online teaching. At German HEIs, the Corona crisis has opened the window of opportunity for all lecturers to deal with online teaching. The same applies to students. In the best case, lecturers and students are able to acquire new skills. In addition, the expansion of online teaching (if it is asynchronous) provides opportunities to combine, for example, childcare or a job with studies.

Collaborative autoethnography as a possibility to create a Community of Learning

As shown, the Corona crisis has confronted students with new challenges. These challenges affect students differently due to intersectional factors. Lecturers, especially in sociology, are often aware of the structural inequalities in the higher education system. At the same time, they often know little about the personal circumstances of students and the challenges they face. For lecturers, it is not possible to ask directly about the social background of students, sexual preferences, or experienced discrimination. Furthermore, experiences of inequality and discrimination are only shared when trust is built up slowly. If existing inequalities are not to be reproduced in a seminar, a setting must be found that takes into account the diversity of students and allows for individual development. This is particularly important in the current crisis. Therefore, to readjust the power difference between lecturers and students, it is critical that students are seen as partners (Acai et al., 2019). In the concept "Students as partners" (SaP), students are seen as co-creators and co-learners, who contribute their expertise

to the teaching-learning situation in a different but equal way (Acai et al., 2019). "SaP is a values-based ethos underpinned by principles of respect, reciprocity and shared responsibility" (Acai et al., 2019). The concept of SaP corresponds to autoethnography as a scientific approach, since it allows for a focus on individual perceptions. In the presented case, the focus was on the experiences of the students: "Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)" (Ellis et al., 2010). Collaborative autoethnography extends this approach and focuses on the collaborative collection and analysis of autobiographical data: "researchers work in community to collect their autobiographical materials and to analyze and interpret their data collectively to gain a meaningful understanding of sociocultural phenomena reflected in their autobiographical data" (Chang et al., 2016, p. 23f). Through the collaboration in the seminar, stimulated by the method, a community of learning could arise. In the current crisis, this was important to build trust and thereby address the specific challenges of the students. I describe how this occurred in the following way: First, I will describe the seminar setting and the practicing collaborative autoethnography. Secondly, I will analyze why a community of learning (with me as a part of it) arose and how the community helped to meet the challenges of the crisis.

Design and software tools[1]

To make the seminar as inclusive as possible, it was mainly asynchronous. Regarding the above-mentioned challenges, the students and I as a lecturer faced two challenges in particular: First, often having a poor internet connection. Secondly, having to combine care tasks and/or work with studying or teaching. Asynchronous teaching allows for the fulfillment of the tasks set, if there is time and space for it (Sund, 2020, p. 1). For the asynchronous teaching, I chose programs that were already available at the university, easily accessible, and open-source software. Moodle, a learning management system (https://moodle.org), allows me to provide content, set up chats and forums and communicate with students. Students can experience a joint learning environment in Moodle. Moreover, it is also their course and their forum. I also used Mahara (https://mahara.org/) an eportfolio tool that allows students to write texts, share them and give peer-feedback within the seminar or self-created smaller groups.

As Moodle is the common LMS at my university, all students are familiar with it, having used it from the first day of their studies. I uploaded all relevant information and content before the semester started, so that all students could get a comprehensive picture of the seminar and its requirements. The access to the course was open (Moodle also offers the possibility to restrict access via password) thus all interested students could first get an overview.

My role as lecturer: Leading by example

The seminar was an elective course in the second year of a BA in sociology. In order to help students decide for or against the seminar, I also recorded a welcome video. In the video, I first wanted to establish a connection with students. Although this connection was only one-directional, as only the students could see me, I wanted to convey the feeling that I am a real person who can be addressed. Secondly, I spoke openly about the new situation of online teaching, which was new to everyone. I verbalized the challenges to lessen any possible fears among the students. I emphasized that we could adapt parts of the seminar to the needs of the students, but there are fixed requirements that are necessary to make the seminar successful. These fixed requirements were: Firstly, to create 18 diary entries about the everyday use of digital technologies on Mahara; secondly to provide peer feedback on the diary entries; thirdly to collaboratively analyze the diary entries in small groups.

In setting out these requirements, I certainly did not address people who prefer to work alone. For enabling a community of learning, those who prefer to work and learn alone are not the appropriate group of people. More problematic is the question as to whether people did not feel addressed because, due to their personal circumstances, they could not foresee being able to write regular journal entries. Unfortunately, it is not possible to find out whether this was the case.

After I introduced myself via video, I asked the students to introduce themselves in a

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[1] You can find the syllabus here (but in German): https://sozmethode.hypotheses.org/981

forum in Moodle. For the introduction, I asked for the motivation of selected the course, the available equipment (computer, internet connection), if they needed additional support, and if the students wanted to change anything about the proposed syllabi. Of the 26 students who registered for the seminar in Moodle, 23 wrote an introduction in the forum. In the introduction, many of them expressed positive feedback about the possibility of writing about their situation, even though no one mentioned any challenges. Many were positive about the welcome video and the opportunity to introduce themselves in the forum, as this overcame the initial fear of total anonymity in the digital semester.

To gain an overview of the students' academic skills, the first task was to write a summary of the text Ellis et al. (2010). I gave students feedback on their summaries via e-mail to connect to the students individually. Additionally, I didn't want to embarrass anyone with the feedback. Honest feedback means making clear where weaknesses lie, but in a friendly and helpful way. It was important to me to emphasize positive aspects as well as justified criticism.

To remove the students' fear of writing something "wrong" in the diaries, I wrote diary entries about my use of digital technologies myself and shared them with the students via Mahara. As I revealed personal information (family, work), the diary entries allowed a deep insight into my everyday life. This seemed only fair to me, as I wanted the same from the students, in the sense of a learning community based on partnership. The task for the diary entries was to write down which, how, when and why digital technologies are used.

Working collaboratively

Since most of the students in the seminar had never worked with Mahara, I created a step-by-step instructional video and answered questions via the forum. The feedback from some of the students showed how insecure they were in using a new tool and how few digital skills they ultimately have. Once again, it became clear that not all students of the same generation are "digital natives" (Bond et al., 2018) who can intuitively learn new programs without any problems. Instead, there is a "digital competence divide" (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2019). Accordingly, it is important to provide precise instructions and support for students who have not yet been able to acquire adequate digital skills.

In Mahara, the students had the opportunity to read all the diary entries. For three diary entries, each student was required to give feedback each week. The guiding questions for the feedback were "Which diary entry made you think and why?" "Which diary entry resembles your own usage behavior and why?" "Which diary entry describes usage behavior that differs strongly from your own and why?" Every week I also gave each student feedback on the diary entries.

The aim of the peer feedback was firstly to initiate reflections among the students. In the diary entries, students named differences and similarities in the practices of other students after the peer feedback and questioned their own practices. Secondly, I wanted the students to get to know each other through asking them to read their peers' entries and by giving and receiving peer feedback. As it turned out, only two students on the seminar knew each other personally before the course. This means

that the students could not fall back on any social contacts made face-to-face before the lockdown.

After the phase of diary entries, I conducted a theory session on social practices. In the theory session, students learned about the connection between social practices, habitus and types of capital (Bourdieu, 1984). Before the session, I conducted a short survey on the students' technical equipment because it was important for me that nobody was excluded. The result of the survey was that not all students had a stable internet connection. In addition, Corona had caused some students to change their working times and care tasks, so that not all students were able to attend the dates listed in the course catalogue. Therefore, I conducted a live-Moodle chat rather than a live-Zoom meeting. The chat could be recorded and read afterwards while, for data protection reasons, my university prohibited the recording of Zoom sessions. The short survey showed how important it is to involve students in the planning. At the end of the theoretical part, I asked the students to write a reflection on their own habitus (Bourdieu, 1984). These reflections helped me to see if the students understood the theory. Furthermore, the students could use the reflections as background information for the analysis.

To analyze the journal entries, groups of 2 to 4 students were formed. Eight groups were formed, six of them without my involvement. The group formation process took place because of commonalities in the diary entries or because of the same interest in a practice. The groups analyzed practices such as "the digital morning routine", "killing time with mobile phone" or "music on demand". Due to the short time available to the students, I chose the dense description (Geertz, 1973) for the process of analysis[2]. According to Geertz (1973), the following steps are decisive for a thick description: Firstly, describe what was observed, in this case, the autoethnographic self-observation of the use of digital technology. Second, understand what was observed, and third, interpret what was observed.

The students organized the work in their groups independently via Moodle and Mahara and wrote the thick description. In the five weeks of writing, there were three deadlines to upload parts of the thick description. Both I and the students gave feedback on the papers. I also offered two live-chats to discuss the interpretations and answer open questions. In the end, we decided to publish the thick descriptions in a special issue.

Discussion: How could a community of learning arise?

To reflect on the didactic considerations of my seminar, I reuse Bergman-Rosamond et al's (2020). aspects of crisis In doing so, I transfer their concept from the political, social, psychological and geographical field to the field of (sociological) teaching.

The first aspect is time. If social interaction cannot take place face-to-face and not

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[2] Autoethnography and collaborative autoethnography has no standardised data analysis process (Chang et al., 2016).

synchronously, then time becomes less important because the interaction does not take place at a specific point in time. However, interaction becomes more time-consuming. Digital asynchronous seminars are much more time-consuming than face-to-face seminars, especially for lecturer. For example, the lecturer cannot give feedback in a seminar at the same time but must write the feedback to each student individually. The same applies to written peer feedback. In the described case students gave peer-feedback to each other. Written feedback costs more time, but it also leads to more intensive reading of the texts. In addition, the students got to know each other better through the peer-feedback of the diary entries than would have been possible in a face-to-face seminar, which led to the formation of a community. Building a community is a process that takes place slowly and begins with getting to know each other. That is why I had placed the creation of the diary entries at the beginning of the seminar and not started with the teaching of theory. In the time aspect, it was important not to overburden the students. In Germany, students receive credit points for their courses, which are linked to a time budget. In this respect, it was necessary to estimate how much more time the asynchronous event would cost and to adjust the seminar schedule accordingly.

The next aspect is spatiality. As shown, the social space of the university was (and is) closed. As Tinto (1973; 1996) shows, the social space classroom is crucial for the development of a community. Therefore, it is crucial to create a digital classroom where social interaction is possible. Through social media, most students are already familiar with such digital spaces. So far, digital social spaces are seldom used at HEIs. With Mahara, such a space is available. As an open source tool, it does not track students' data and is therefore secure. In Mahara, students could get to know each other through diary entries and communicate with each other and thus interact socially. It was irrelevant where they were in the real world, which meant high flexibility for the students.

In contrast to the Bochum Survey (2020) where lecturers reported that there was less interaction with students, I experienced the opposite. I think this was due to the insights gained into the students' everyday lives and biographies through the diary entries. This enabled me to be sensitive to current challenges, to ask specific questions, write words of encouragement, and, when necessary, to handle deadlines flexibly. In this way, I could establish a basis of trust, which enabled students to ask questions and request help at any time. The basis of trust is also reflected in the low dropout rate during the seminar. Only three of the 26 students who originally registered did not complete the seminar. The low dropout rate reflects the commitment to the seminar, despite the multi-layered challenges the students faced[3]. As the diary entries showed, students had to cope first with the switch to digital studies, which was challenging enough for many. Second, students helped with home schooling their siblings so that their parents could continue

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[3] It also can be seen as argument why an honest and detailed course description is beneficial for students and teachers alike.

to work, which also meant that they had less time for their studies. Third, students who had psychological problems before Corona reported an increase in problems due to isolation and lack of structure. Fourth, students reported financial worries due to the loss of side jobs.

The students met the challenges to varying extents. The inequalities that apply to the higher education system in general were also present in my seminar. I could see a connection between social background and academic expression. The differences were particularly evident in the ability to reflect on the students' own diary entries and those of the fellow students. Autoethnography as approach to collect and document everyday experiences offered a substantial way to make these differences visible (to me as a teacher). Autoethnography is a method that relies on verbal expression, self-observation and self-reflection. The autoethnographic entries, which provided a regular rather than one-time glimpse into students' written thoughts, gave me the opportunity to look deeper into their verbal, academic, and reflective competencies. Through this insight, I was able to provide individualized learning support through formative feedback.

Verbal expression, self-observation and self-reflection are rarely taught in German schools and even less so at German HEIs. The skills are usually only available to students who learned them at home. Furthermore, students whose families have an academic background tend to have acquired relevant academic competencies before entering HEI, whereas first generation students often do not.

If we as lecturers are expecting these competences and do not help in the learning of these competences, we reproduce social inequality and rate students worse without these competences. To avoid the reproduction of social inequalities, lecturers must recognize structurally determined differences in competence and, above all, provide comprehensive support. It is important to provide this support in a non-discriminatory and habitus-sensitive manner. Clear rules for peer feedback, for example, are helpful here and should prevent discrimination. Furthermore, I checked all comments to prevent harmful peer feedback but did not notice any. I also saw this as a sign of a functioning community: the positive and helpful attitude towards each other.

I would like to reflect on one last point. The students formed the groups for the analysis themselves. As I have already explained, only two people knew each other before the seminar and then worked together in a group. Through the diary entries, the students had a very good impression of each other. Through this knowledge, students formed socially homogeneous groups, as was foreseeable with Bourdieu (1984).

At first, I had considered intervening to mix the groups socially so that the students could learn from each other. However, I decided against it because I see it as my task to support students in learning academic competences and not to leave this to the students themselves. Because of the homogeneous groups in which the students have similar levels of competence, I was able to give specific help and conduct a competence-oriented assessment so, in this respect, not reproducing the social inequalities. By focusing on the students' competences in the different groups, I was able to support students who had little experience with digital technologies. This

resulted in an additional increase in competence, which would not have been possible without the Corona crisis and shows the contradiction of the crisis.

Conclusions

Due to the Corona crisis, German HEIs had to close their campuses and lecturers had to teach online. As shown in the analysis of the crisis, the closure of the social space (and the Corona crisis as a whole) hit students who had previously been affected by (intersectional) inequality particularly hard. To soften the particular challenges associated with the ad hoc transition, the creation of a digital community of learning can help. A helpful way to generate such a community is to choose a method that places students at the center. Autoethnography enabled the students to reflect on their own challenges and those of their fellow students in the Corona crisis. Through this collaborative reflection, a common space of experience was created. For this purpose, it was important to have a digital space (in this case Mahara) where the exchange could take place. A community of learning only develops over time and if all participants take the time to get involved (e.g., through comprehensive feedback). The case presented has shown how the use of autoethnography has made it possible to mitigate inequalities in the academic context that have been exacerbated by crisis situations. The continuous insight into the "learning status" of the students made it possible to promote their learning and provide individual assistance.

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Author Biographies

Dr Isabel Steinhardt holds a position as assistant professor at the Department of Social Sciences of the University of Kassel since 2018. She is a member of the International Centre of Higher Education Research INCHER-Kassel, mentor of the fellowship-program "open knowledge" of wikimedia and associate member of the Weizenbaum-Institute Berlin. Since 2015, she is a member of the Competence Centre for Empirical Research Methods at the University of Kassel and offers advice on qualitative research methods. The blog "social science method consulting" was created because of this activity. Isabel has studied political science at the Goethe University in Frankfurt and obtained her doctorate in sociology with the thesis "Program development as a strategic moment of professors" (Lehre stärkt Forschung). Her main foci are higher education research, sociology of education, digital technologies and practices in research, teaching and learning as well as qualitative research methods. Currently she leads the project "Autoethnographic research of digital teaching and its support in the Corona-pandemic". She is also part of the international and collaborative project "Mapping Open Science Research - A Systematic Review of Empirical Studies on Open Science".