Towards a New Teaching/ Learning Experience: A Benjaminian Proposal

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1. **Introduction**

In 1936 the German philosopher Walter Benjamin wrote one of his most famous essays, "The Storyteller". Here he highlights and discusses the gradual disappearance of oral, collective communication – as a mode of telling that is largely proper to pre-modern times – in favour of the delivery/fixation of communication in written forms that are open to wider anonymous audiences whose members often enjoy the texts individually. In fact, through a historical-materialist approach to communication and technology, Benjamin contends that in modernity the storyteller has been substituted first by the birth of the printing press and the diffusion of novels – as texts that require solitude and silence to be enjoyed rather than a collective audience – and later by the rise of mass media where the practice of storytelling has been reduced to the mere delivery of information as self-standing and self-validating facts.

Alongside such idea, Benjamin's conceptualization of two different kinds of experience runs. These two kinds of experience are identified by the German words "Erfahrung" and "Erlebnis". The former is a collective qualitative experience that leads to forms of shared reflection, knowledge, and understanding; the latter is a kind of immediate experience that is focused on the moment and is lived through momentarily by the single subject. According to Benjamin, the passing from oral storytelling to written storytelling and further down to the technologized information conveyed by mass media has produced a decay of Erfahrung in favour of a blossoming of parcelled and individually lived experiences as Erlebnisse. The latest occurrence along this line is certainly represented by digital technologies, especially with regard to social media and their impact on today's mediated socialisation and the dissemination of news. In this respect, through the discussion of some examples coming from a course-based digital ethnography conducted in Hong Kong, it is advanced here that social media have turned, respectively, socialisation into an algorithmically-based form of self-isolation and the dissemination of news into an a-dialectical process.

This also links our discussion to Benjamin's concept of aura: while the German philosopher considers such trend mainly – if not exclusively – in relation to the (technological reproducibility of the) work of art, it is contended here that the decay of the aura is a process that comes to affect all forms of human experience, as soon as these are mediated by technology. In other words, the decrease in the communicability of human experience that Benjamin laments in "The Storytelling" – of which the best example is the impossibility for the returning soldiers of WWI to share their traumas due to the fact that the technologization of warfare has produced too big atrocities – may be just another form of that decay of aura that the German philosopher discusses in relation to artworks and their reproducibility.

This article aims to apply the dual concept of "Erfahrung/Erlebnis" and that of "aura" to the realm of teaching in order to define the ground for a Benjaminian comparison between two different forms of (higher education) teaching: in class and online. The basic assumption is that the class is a performing space that favours a mutually beneficial transformation (teacher-students) in the form of "classic" Erfahrung, while online courses tend to isolate the "actors" at stake and create subject-customized learning experiences – indeed, Erlebnisse – in line with what van Dijck, Poell and de Waal (2019) call "learnification", that is, the fragmentation and parcelling of the learning process into self-contained units. The consequence of that is a loss in both communicative experience and the transmission of knowledge, which has recoils on its acquisition and retention.

Previous studies on this subject have shown that if we consider three forms of teachings – i.e. in class, online, and blended courses (i.e. which include lectures in class plus some teaching online) – blended courses are those in which students perform better, while online-only courses give the weakest results. On the one hand, it is argued here that these results are due to the fact that online-only courses force students into a teaching environment that lacks completely any form of Erfahrung. As such, the knowledge that is transmitted through these courses, by being turned into technologized information that is grasped as Erlebnis, is more difficult to be processed and retained. At the same time, blended courses give the best results because the potentiality of digital technologies, such as the chance to tailor study's practices, is implemented on top of traditional in-class courses in which the sharing of knowledge is still done collectively and dialectically. Subsequently, in line with Benjamin's utopian approach to technology, it is suggested that a way of improving online-only courses is to rely on Augmented Reality and Virtual Reality technologies, so that the teaching environment becomes so hyper-technologized to eventually restore – somewhat paradoxically – the aura of traditional in-class courses.

On the one hand, the results of previous studies on in-class, online, and blended teaching require to be further integrated with other experimentations because these studies present three major criticalities: 1)

the evaluation of the students' results is chiefly quantitative (i.e. how students score in the final tests); 2) the evaluation usually comes straight after the end of the courses (i.e. when knowledge acquisition – but not retention – is at its peak); 3) these studies have been mainly conducted with regard to scientific disciplines. Therefore, it is important to reconsider and extend such findings in the direction of a qualitative approach that: 1) evaluates the students' retention of knowledge (not only acquisition) in the long run i.e. also after some time beyond the conclusion of the courses; 2) looks also at humanities courses, and 3) adopts an ethnographic methodology (e.g. interviews with the students) that considers the running of these courses in their wholeness (i.e. not only the students' final tests, but also how they deal with these three different teaching modalities along the way). For reaching such objectives one possibility, it is advanced, is to organise a purposely-created course in new media literacies, designed according to the three forms of teaching running in parallel over a whole semester. In this way, both students and analysts can obtain a deeper awareness of the impact of digital technologies on the processes of knowledge acquisition at the end of the semester and of knowledge retention at the end of the academic year.

Benjamin's production is known for being rather heterogeneous and a-systematic. For instance, he never fully elaborates on the distinction between Erfahrung and Erlebnis. Yet, it is in "The Storyteller" (and in "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire") that it is possible to find an involuntary characterisation of these two different kinds of experience and their implications. According to Benjamin, Erfahrung is a kind of experience that is strictly connected to memory and to the possibility of passing on messages and teachings among people and across generations. It is, then, a collective qualitative experience that leads to forms of shared reflection, knowledge, and understanding, as those created by the oral "counsels" of the storyteller: "A man listening to a story," Benjamin writes in "The Storyteller", "is in the company of the storyteller." Erlebnis, by contrast, is a kind of immediate experience that is focused on the moment and is lived through momentarily by the single subject. The example, in this respect, is the modern reader: "the reader of a novel is isolated. (…) In this solitude of his, the reader of a novel seizes upon his material more jealously than anyone else." It is no coincidence that Benjamin identifies (printed) novels as the textual artefacts that opened a gap with (epic) oral storytelling. In fact, by developing a typical materialist conception of how storytelling/writing has evolved, Benjamin writes that:

> The earliest symptom of a process whose end is the decline of storytelling is the rise of the novel at the beginning of modern times. What distinguishes the novel from the story (and from the epic in the narrower sense) is its essential dependence on the book. The dissemination of the novel became possible only with the invention of printing. What can be handed on orally, the wealth of

the epic, is of a different kind from what constitutes the stock in trade of the novel.[1]

Here we have a clear understanding of the decay of communicable experience as a consequential effect of the rupture that the printed book – as a material artefact easy to reproduce, disseminate and enjoy individually – has brought about. On the other hand, Benjamin refers to the epic as the genre that has given voice, more than any others, to pre-print stories. From here, it is quite natural to link this reflection to Bakhtin's (1980) work on the chronotope of the novel in which the Russian philosopher advances a similar parallelism: the epic is framed into "an absolute past" while the novel "continues to develop, that is as yet uncompleted." It could also be said that the novel creates a self-determing and constantly changing plot, an immanent plot, while the epic pictures a world out of this world, that is, where characters and events are out of reach for both the storyteller and the audience. As Georg Lukács, timely quoted by Benjamin in his essay, contends "time can become constitutive only when connection with the transcendental home has been lost." The transcendental dimension to which Lukács refers is clearly that eschatological, fate-governed (ir)reality of the epic. Or, one could say, a virtuality.

The concept of "transcendence" is also apt as it recalls the 1919 essay by Paul Valéry titled "La crise de l'esprit." It is no coincidence that in "The Storyteller" Benjamin writes that "the intellectual picture of the atmosphere of craftsmanship from which the storyteller comes has perhaps never been sketched in such a significant way as by Paul Valery." The text by Valéry to which Benjamin refers is not "La crise de l'esprit"; nonetheless, also this latter text is fruitful for the present discussion. Indeed, similarly to Benjamin's discussion on the condition of impoverishment of human experience, Valéry's argument in "La crise de l'esprit" is that all the knowledge (one could say: all the experience) gained by humanity up to the present (i.e. his present, the beginning of the 20th century) has led, in fact, to "nothing": "if I disregard all detail and confine myself to a quick impression I see... nothing!"[2] This is what leads Valéry to speak of a crisis of the spirit, which has to do with the way in which knowledge has been sought after and commoditized:

> Our science became a means of power, a means of physical domination, a creator of material wealth, an apparatus for exploiting the resources of the whole planet – ceasing to be an 'end in itself.' The utility of knowledge made knowledge a commodity.[3]

Here we understand better that the "spirit" for Valéry consists not much of the mind, as the misleading English translation, "The Crisis of the Mind", suggests, but rather the idea of a transcendental vision which considers (or better considered) people's actions and achievements as an "end in itself". The mapping of Valéry's argument onto Benjamin's is clearer when we associate the concept of "spirit" to that of "aura", which for the German

philosopher stands as a marker of uniqueness and integrity, both temporal and spatial, a gist that today's technology cannot reproduce but only annihilate; briefly said, something that has not been commoditized. Interestingly, in a letter to Adorno – and here the circle comes to an end – Benjamin detects a link between the impoverishment of communicable experience and the disappearance of aura:

> I have recently written a piece on Nicolai Leskov and although it does not remotely claim the range of my writings on the theory of art, it does reveal certain parallels to the thesis concerning 'the decline of aura' insofar as I emphasize that the art of story-telling is approaching its end. [4]

Here we have a glimpse of the connection between the decay of the aura and the impoverishment of Erfahrung. Although Benjamin does not develop this parallelism any further it is possible to suggest that the decay of the aura, which he assigns, for the art world, to the intervention of technology and its logic of reproducibility, is in fact a phenomenon detectable in all fields of life and human activity to which technology has been applied. In other words, it is technology – or better the commodification it brings with itself due to the fact that its development is based on a logics of exploitation of both natural and human resources – that is responsible for dispelling the "esprit" of reality.

According to Benjamin the decay in the communicability of experience – and of experience as Erfahrung per se – has continued after the advent of the novel as the exemplary genre of (bourgeois) modernity. Always in his essay "The Storyteller" he points out that:m

> We recognize that with the full control of the middle class, which has the press as one of its most important instruments in fully developed capitalism, there emerges a form of communication which, no matter how far back its origin may lie, never before influenced the epic form in a decisive way. But now it does exert such an influence. And it turns out that it confronts storytelling as no less of a stranger than did the novel, but in a more menacing way, and that it also brings about a crisis in the novel. This new form of communication is information.[5]

Here we go a further step down along the historical materialist line traced by Benjamin. After the novel, with the second industrial revolution at full steam and the consolidation of the middle class, together with the blossoming of newspapers and mass media, we witness, according to Benjamin, to the birth of a new way of communicating, a way that further objectifies the collective shared ethos of Erfahrung and pushes communication in the direction of an experience as Erlebnis. This new way of communicating is information and news as produced and disseminated by mass media. Once again, we are led to intend "information" as a form of communication that has been further fixated, commoditized and, in fact, technologized: "Every

morning brings us the news of the globe, and yet we are poor in noteworthy stories. This is because no event any longer comes to us without already being shot through with explanation." The idea that events, turned into news, have been "shot through with explanation" is a symbolic way for saying that mass media have expelled the "transcendental" from reality even more than the novel was able to do. On this point Adorno is more radical when he states that

> The objects of information [have an] indifferent character [that] predestines their being and they are incapable of transcending the abstract fact through any immanent quality of their own. As facts they are arranged in such a way that they can be grasped as quickly and easily as possible.[6]

Here the two German philosophers share a mutual scepticism about the impact of mass media and their positions deeply resonates with each other. Information is responsible for producing an increasing atomization of reality that is broken down into a series of self-standing moments to be grasped instantaneously. Erfahrung is eventually shattered, annihilated:

> The value of information does not survive the moment in which it was new. It lives only at that moment; it has to surrender to it completely and explain itself to it without losing any time. A story is different. It does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time.[7]

Here we arrive to the decisive distinction between technologized communication and oral storytelling: the former is intertwined with the moment that has produced it and can never surpasses it: news simply demands to be consumed on the spot, as an endless chain of snapshots; stories, on the other hand, overcome contingency and it is precisely because of that that they remain meaningful over time, leading to the possibility of being passed on and shared collectively. The concept of time plays a major role here and it is worth discussing because it is also useful when the article will compare in-class and online courses. Especially in "Theses on the Philosophy of History" Benjamin claims that there are two different kinds of time: a conception of time as "chronos", which is the linear and placid accumulation of single experiences, and a conception of time as "kairos" – or what he calls "jetztzeit" – that is, a heterogeneous constellation of "now-moments", of meaningful experiences, in which time condensates, loses its linear unfolding and comes at a standstill accumulating a revolutionary energy. The parallelism between a chronological time that produces Erlebnisse and a kairological time as the substrate of Erfahrung is by no means immediate and overt. However, to the extent to which, according to Benjamin, the energy of "jetztzeit" needs the intervention of the artist to be fully released, we may contend that kairological time is the temporal dimension that characterises the storyteller's performance.

Going now a step further and overcoming Benjamin and Adorno's discussion on mass media, we may ask whether online media ecology follows along the line traced by the two German philosophers or somehow departs from it. Elsewhere (Calzati 2018), I have contended that social media produce an even more radical self-seclusion and commodification of information. Socialisation results, on a closer look, only as an apparent phenomenon; it is a fake socialisation in that it is based on an algorithmically-shaped network – the famous "filter bubble" – that tends to restrict and homogenise the users exposure to others rather than favouring it. Similarly, digital technologies impose such an acceleration on the dissemination of news that it becomes even difficult to perform the grasping mentioned by Adorno: in fact, information online is elusive and often contoured by a phatic connotation that impairs its effective processing and understanding.

These considerations find also proof in the findings of a digital ethnography conducted at a major Hong Kong University. Over six weeks I analysed, together with a colleague, the posts shared on Facebook by a corpus of 38 students enrolled in the practice-based course titled "Facebook and Autobiography" that we purposely designed for investigating printed and online forms of self-writing. As part of the assignments for the course we asked the students-participants to keep a diary on a weekly basis in which they noted all the things they did on social networks so as to provide a temporally-distanced account of their social-networks' diet.

Thanks to these assignments and our monitoring of the students-participants' profiles we detected an evident tendency in our students-participants to forget soon what they shared and, most importantly, what they liked. Here two problems arise. On the one hand, digital technologies are promoting a form of fully objectified communication that is also, by now, incorporated; it is, in other words, ingrained in the users experience as an habitus that is soon forgotten by falling below the threshold of consciousness. This, in turn, means an impoverishment of experience and of its communicability: as soon as users are led, by technology itself, to act mechanically, their acts are deprived of meaningfulness, of spirit. It is no surprise that 45% of posts and 60% of all comments surveyed were labelled by both us, as analysts, and the students-participants as phatic, that is, a kind of content that has no real significance apart from that of keeping in contact. More in general, the online space cannot represent an arena for a truly collective experience (Erfahrung) because there is no time to do that: "the intensive modalities of pleasure and knowledge have become stressed to the point of exhaustion"[8], Franco Berardi notes. Messages appear as a fast, uninterrupted chain of units that are just meant to be exchanged for provoking a superficial, transient tingle in the subject – indeed, an Erlebnis. To this, it must be added that digital technologies, by turning users into commodities (i.e. consumers), foreground messages and friends that more

closely affiliate to the users' ideas, tastes, attitudes. This means that socialization, as a form of dialectical encounter, is much more limited than we might believe.

On the other hand, while users tend to quickly forget what they have liked, it is not so for the platform, which tracks and remembers everything they do on it. The problem is that, technology's taking over of the (human) privilege of remembering opens the way to fully stackable and exchangeable memories; souvenirs that, deprived of their worthiness, flatten over a depthless time. Technology does not "remember" (*Erinnern*) events, but only "repeat" (*Wiederholen*) them because it does not really "work thorough" (*Durcharbeitun*) memories, but only store and relaunch them according to an algorithmic, quantitative logic. This is what Bernard Stiegler calls the "mercantile production of memory," that is, a process by which memory, by being commoditized, becomes a function of technology. As also Benjamin notes "memory is an epic faculty" but, while the epic is based on a kind of memory as "reminiscence" – the irreducibly subjective and always different effort to remember by the storyteller – the novel promotes memory as "remembrance", that is, a kind of memory that relies on the fixation of the story; to these two poles we could add now the type of memory crated by today's digital technologies: a memory conceived as mere (quantitative) repetition. Digital technology, by having turned communication into objectified self-enclosed items, has supplanted the (human) ability and need to retrace their roots.

Once we associate Erfahrung and storytelling to a form of shared knowledge as the one performed in "traditional" in-class courses – indeed, it is Benjamin himself to make such a connection by stating that the storyteller "joins the ranks of the teachers and sages" – the question becomes: Is it possible to recreate (or at least simulate) a transcendental dimension through technology so that even in online classes communication regains its aura as a collective experience? After all, across various texts Benjamin argues that in and through technology "a new physis is being organized",[9] meaning by that the organization of a "collective body"[10] in which humans and technology are mutually integrated. To be sure, for Benjamin this "physis" can be beneficial for humans to the extent to which technology is used as a "liberating"[11] tool and not as an enslaving one. This is, in fact, Benjamin utopian vision at work.

In recent years studies that compare in-class and online courses have boomed. At the core of these studies is often the assessment of students' results at the end of course in terms of their exam's performances. Because of that, subjects interested by this kind of studies are overwhelmingly scientific insofar as it is easier to objectively measure the impact of traditional and web-based pedagogic approaches on them. By contrast, little attention is paid to the humanities and to the perception that students and teachers alike have of the whole learning processes. Beyond that, as a comprehensive

American survey on this topic has found out[12], only a small number of rigorous studies have been conducted on K12 students and curricula, rather focusing on adult learners in varied educational contexts. These findings already call for further research that takes into account: 1) the whole educational system, especially in a period when, in class, two digitally-divided generations meets: teachers have grown in an analogue world and through an analogue-based curriculum, while students are now by and large digital natives; 2) a broader spectrum of disciplines as this may impact not only on learning outcomes, but also on learning practices; 3) the whole learning process as well as knowledge retention in the long run (for example after a semester). In order to do that, it is advisable that ethnographic studies involving both teachers and students at different levels and involved in different disciplines are studied in order to provide a more comprehensive and qualitative assessment of this comparison, insofar as the outcomes of the mentioned studies might be biased by the very sample they focus on.

According to the meta-analysis conducted by the American survey on several studies and papers dedicated to in-class and online teaching, students in online learning conditions perform better than those receiving face-to-face instruction. And yet, the gap enlarges when into the equation are also included blended courses, that is, courses that mixes online and traditional face-to-face classes. This means that blended courses are those in which students perform best also due to the fact that these blended conditions often include additional learning time and instructional elements not provided in the two other conditions. Hence, it could be argued that while online teaching practices lead to better performances, it is when online tools are combined with in-class instructions and presence that students do best. Overall, as the study reports, the question of the relative efficacy of online and face-to-face classes needs to be constantly updated due to evolving web-based technology. It is clear, indeed, that so far technology-mediated learning experience alone is still insufficient for having better results than those with in-class conditions.

Rescuing Benjamin's comparison between Erfahrung and Erlebnis, as well as his utopian vision, it could be asked whether a further improvement of technology, for example in the form of Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR) which create immersive multisensorial experiences, might ultimately fill this gap and impact positively on techno-mediated courses with respect to traditional and blended ones. In other words, to what extent do AR and VR – which are the technological improvements that might be reasonably applied to teaching and learning in the next decade – can represent a new "phsyis" in which it is possible to recreate a (technologized) Erfahrung?

When the Internet was on the rise we thought, as some scholars have remarked,

> "that education could be improved on a dime by delivering many
> online courses (in different forms such as the massive open online

courses, MOOCs) to many people at any time and any place. Of course, this helped, as millions of new individuals obtained access to education that was not available to them before. However, the interconnections were not symbiotic. We must develop a new class of symbiotic interconnections."[13]

This statement makes clear that at stake is not only the development of new technologies that will improve online and/or techno-mediated courses, likely in the direction of an increasing embodiment of such technologies, but rather to what extent such embodiment can produce a productive synergy – indeed, a symbiosis – in which the mediation of technology will be eventually overcome qualitatively and foster a new learning experience.

Here, we enter the realm of speculation; and yet some considerations can be drawn. In order to recover that kind of collective experience that digital technologies have so far dispelled, we need a qualitative jump: it is necessary to rethink, at once, both the "human" and the "machine". On this point, Benjamin is again of help: in a 1933 article titled "Experience and Poverty", he notes that the unprecedented development of technology at the beginning of the twentieth century has led to a condition of widespread poverty, meaning by that, poverty of collective experience. Despite such unpromising premise, Benjamin contends (showing one of his typical twists), that it is precisely starting from this impoverished condition and through technology, notably by again putting technology "to humane use" that people can eventually create a new connection (innervation) with the surrounding environment and also among themselves.

For our discussion this means that, prior to any technological development, or at least at its base, we need to develop a new human-machine relation that is neither centred nor oriented towards mere mechanisation, acceleration and control, but rather focused on providing users/students with the needed (critical) tools, competences and skills for mastering the new techno-learning environment (be it in form of AR, VR or else). The study mentioned above points out, in this regard, that

> "online learning can be enhanced by giving learners control of their interactions with media and prompting learner reflection. Studies indicate that manipulations that trigger learner activity or learner reflection and self-monitoring of understanding are effective when students pursue online learning as individuals."

This is the crucial point: no matter where technological development will lead us, and even before discussing how to apply it to learning processes, we need to foster in the students a technological awareness that must constitute the *conditio sine qua non* for any radical change in the way in which we conceive and will increasingly deliver techno-mediated courses. Such technological awareness, which can be fostered since today, aims at unveiling the potentialities and drawbacks of technology, as well as the ethical

implications of its use. In other words, while technology may one day be able to recreate a form of Erfahrung as that of storytellers, what we need to do now is to instil such collective experience directly in today's generation of students, especially considering that they are the first fully digital native generation.

In this respect we need to develop media-centred curricula that not only rely on digital technologies, but also put them at the centre of the attention, so that technology and its use is assimilated critically rather than merely acquired as a set of disjoined tasks. Most importantly, these curricula overtly call for a cooperation between three poles: the students – who are those using technologies the most (and possibly those who are most vulnerable to its effects), scholars in the humanities, who are able to provide a critical and ethical understanding of media and media archaeology, and technology designers and programmers, who are specifically responsible for promoting an effective comprehension of how technology works. It is only via this preliminary symbiotic re-conception of the teaching/learning processes that we can hope to create pedagogical experiences that are founded on a solid coupling of students and technology.

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Notes

[1] Benjamin, "The Storyteller".
[2] Valéry, "The Crisis of the Mind".
[3] Ibid.
[4] Adorno-Benjamin, *Complete Correspondence*, 140.
[5] Benjamin, "The Storyteller".
[6] Adorno, *The Culture Industry.*
[7] Benjamin, "The Storyteller".
[8] Berardi, *And: Phenomenology of the End.*
[9] Benjamin, "One-Way Street", SW1, 487.
[10] Benjamin, "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia," SW2, 218.
[11] Benjamin, "On Scheerbart," SW4, 386.
[12] "Evaluation of Evidence-Based Practices in Online Learning: A Meta-Analysis and Review of Online Learning Studies".
[13] "Impact on Education 2050".

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