

Visual Mediated Dialogue in Distance Education

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Abstract: The way people communicate, work, and socialize has changed in the 21st century. Using a virtual environment, we lose connection and dialogue with the person. A person becomes an object. Losing a relationship, we lose responsibility. Only dialogue allows us to become individuals who are not selfish and limited. When education moved to the Internet, the issues mentioned above became crucial. Virtual dialogue in digital space can be termed as a quasi-dialogue focused on creating and maintaining superficial, consumer, short-term relationships, which are not based on values and intrinsic connection. Directness, the certainty of emotions and feelings, disappears here. Mediated communication has become the norm, but interactive dialogue constructed through the Internet only mimics the illusion of closeness because the human face and voice remain inauthentic. Without personal dialogue, education is not possible. It is possible to learn but not possible to transfer the values to develop thinking. The article presents the view of the learners about visual contact during their distance lectures. The purpose of the research is to reveal the harmony between Buber's and the learners' views on the role of the use of video cameras in the study process. A qualitative research (an open-ended question) was conducted. The research participants comprised 82 1st year students of their studies: 47 were studying online for their undergraduate diploma (B), and 35 were studied online for the doctorate diploma (D). Qualitative research showed that the widest role of using a video camera is associated with a quality study process, emphasizing information transfer and reception, concentration of attention, active learning and settlements. The pursuit of the quality of distance studies rests on Buber's philosophy in search of a person, life and the constant manoeuvring between the relationship I-Thou and I-It. In remote studies, as in face-to-face studies, the most important focus remains the relationship, connection, the interaction of people, exchanging values, information and perception. Regardless of the political, economic situation, and at the same time the change of educational paradigms, learners are looking for the I-Thou relationship in the education/study process.

Keywords: Buber, communication, distance learning, interaction, connection, education.

Introduction

M. Buber was unique in the 20th century. Philosopher, existentialist, theologian, representative of the philosophy of life and pioneer of the philosophy of dialogue. His philosophical interests and research areas included questions of the meaning of human existence and culture, art, education, sociology, and politics. His philosophical ideas are studied both from an existential and an educational perspective (Guilherme, Morgan, 2009, 2012, 2016; Tsabar, 2019; Richardson, 2019; Soares et al., 2019; Rumianowska, 2020; and etc.). In principle, he does not try to impose an obvious formula on his students, but asks questions that force them to find answers for their own lives (Hodes, 1972). M. Buber's educational ideas are important not only in order to show the individual, but also the social and intercultural benefits of dialogic education, as well as the dangers of non-dialogic education.

In today's media society, the rapid penetration of technology into each person's individual life and areas of professional activity has opened up new opportunities (Choi et al., 2023; Bosworth et al., 2023). A year ago, the Covid 19 wave that swept the whole world moved many social and professional fields, including education, into the virtual space. Although the practical benefits of mediated communication in the field of economy and business are obvious (Parida et. al., 2019; Wardana et. al., 2022; Santoso, Fianto, 2022; Aguilar-Rodríguez et. al., 2023), there are still many dangers for the world of the human spirit, the development of values, especially for people's interpersonal relations and communication. According to F. Peach (2012), in this age of technology and computers, people increasingly lose face-to-face interpersonal communication skills in their personal lives. M. Buber (1991, 1998, 2002) in his

philosophy draws attention to technical personalized dialogue / non-dialogical relations and substantiates the importance and impact of live dialogue on the development and education of human personality. These concepts can help to understand not only the crucial problems of interpersonal relations, but also the problems of modern education and to evaluate the nature of distance studies, which are based on the virtual relationship between the teacher and the student. What changes do mediated/virtual relationships (between teacher and student) bring to the educational process? Existential education, advocated by M. Buber, was based on the assumption that education is not only about gathering facts and presenting knowledge, but primarily that the educator must reveal to the student what it means to be human, help him understand himself, convey the meaning and values of life perception.

In the famous work "I - You" (1998), M. Buber delves into the relationships between people, their essence and meaning, presenting two different types of relationships "I - You" and "I - It". The first type - "I - You" - is a mutually dialogic, authentic relationship. The second "I - it" is an objective, consumerist, egoistic and utilitarian relationship, where the "it" person becomes only an object, a tool, a thing. These two relationships are among the essential starting points of M. Buber's philosophy of education. He formed an education direction based on a dialogic I-Thou relationship. The desire for a relationship is primordial, it manifests itself in early infancy, the baby feels a natural desire to be in a relationship everywhere, to seek communion, communication, and the touch of another person (Buber, 1998: 97). According to M. Buber, individual personality growth is determined by the active involvement of a person in a relationship with another You, with nature, with the world. This is why he asserts that "the development of relational skills" is an essential function of education (Yaron, 2000, p. 140). For the education and development of a young person and even an adult, interpersonal living dialogic I-Thou is necessary. In M. Buber's understanding, people are often treated as objects (rather than subjects) in business, science and education. M. Buber wanted people, regardless of profession or situation, to learn to say and see another as "You" with a capital letter. Working with young people means being able to act on the principle of "I-YOU" dialogue. This principle is one of the necessary conditions for other methods or creative, practical activities to be effective and achieve results. Thus, in the educational process, it is essential to establish a dialogic relationship between the teacher and the student as I - You (subject to subject/personality to personality) (Ozmon, Craver, 1996:297; Avnon, 1998: 22).

Distance studies are based on the new media (Internet), which becomes a means of mediating relationships. In the context of M. Buber's existential-dialogic education, establishing dialogic relationships in the virtual space is a big challenge. Mediated space is not reality, but only a reproduction of reality. The interactive dialogue constructed in the virtual space only simulates the illusion of closeness, because the person's face and voice remain inauthentic (Asakavičiūtė, 2020), and emotions are difficult to read and even more challenging to interpret. So in distance learning, in most cases, we create a technical relationship (I-it), but not a dialogic relationship. In remote studies, the maximum approach to the I-Thou relationship is possible only through the active use of smart technologies and their accessories (for example, cameras), individual mutual efforts, and the initiative to broadcast the factors that support human communication.

In order to better understand why distance studies cannot create and maintain a dialogic relationship between student and teacher as "I-Thou", it is essential to pay attention to M. Buber's concept of "engage". The teacher can play his role of starting the "real educational process" only after "experiencing the other side", which means a deep inner involvement. In his work "Education", Buber uses the example of a person hitting another and receiving "in his soul the blow that he strikes." The educator aims to hear the student (not only what he says, but what he experiences inside), through this to understand his emotions and attitude towards reality (Ozmon, Craver, 1996: 296-297). Technical dialogue only promotes the need for objective understanding. Such dialogue is supported by the principle of use and use between teacher and student, causing tension and struggle. Often students accept the teacher as a stranger - "it". Especially when the cameras are turned off, interactions with students lose their human identity. According to M. Buber, this inability to enter into a dialogical relationship increases the individualism and egocentric self of the students. An egocentric person does not participate in a relationship, does not enter into a relationship, but on the contrary, contrasts himself with others (with the teacher, with other classmates), "uses others, appropriates others, tries to take from them as much as he can" (Richardson, 2019).

Another important aspect that emerges when analyzing distance studies in the context of M. Buber's philosophy is that education is closely connected with ethical education - primarily with empathy and responsibility. The development of responsibility was significant to M. Buber. The other You helps a person to see himself, the other You is my own mirror. The dialogic relationship - I - YOU encourages commitment, creates a relationship of responsibility: "I - You are not only in a relationship, but also in responsibility" (1998: 169). Thus, the development of responsibility is possible only through a dialogic relationship, a person learns to hear, accept, and understand the other.

A prominent follower of Buber, E. Levinas (1994), a dialogue philosopher and phenomenologist, emphasized the importance of the "Other - the Face" in the value and self-knowledge process. The other's face reminds me of my responsibility. The book "Ethics and Infinity" says, "The other person is the face <.> The face speaks <.> The face asks me and commands me. Its meaning is the command. More precisely when the face in front of me means a command" (Levinas, 1994). The direct experience of the "other" shows me the limits of my operation and the ship. Thus, interpreting the thoughts of E. Levin, in the process of distance education, the opportunity to see the face of the teacher develops the responsibility of the student and reminds him of his duties. Therefore, we can say that if the video camera is not turned on during remote studies, not only does the student's involvement in studies and the assimilation of knowledge decrease, but also the students' perception of responsibility for the study process and the perception of their duties (as a student) weakens. The research problem is formulated as a question: what is the attitude of learners towards the role of using video cameras in the study process and how does it affect learners? The purpose of the research is to reveal the harmony between Buber's and the learners' views on the role of the use of video cameras in the study process.

Methodology

An empirical study was conducted in order to determine the role of the use of video cameras during distance learning. The article analyzes an open-ended question about the role of video cameras in the process of distance learning. The research was carried out 3–16 March 2021. The research participants were the face-to-face students who during the quarantine period of the COVID-19 pandemic, were forcibly switched to distance learning. Study participants provided synchronously written answers (all parties responded in real-time) using a ZOOM chat tool. The researchers left students free to choose to provide an answer to the question to the researchers by sending a private message on Zoom or providing a visible answer to the group in the Zoom chat. Then analyzed the data, the informants' answers were grouped according to meaning, and categories were created. Based on the aforementioned distributions of learners' opinions, a scheme was created (Figure 1). Four categories of the role of video cameras in remote studies are distinguished: better communication, interaction between participants, prerequisites for a high-quality study process and convenience of contact without a video camera.

Participants. The research participants comprised 82 1st year students of their studies: 47 were studying online for their undergraduate diploma (B), and 35 were studied online for the doctorate diploma (D). They were invited to participate in the research through a letter of an invitation following their enrolment in the courses with access to the virtual classroom space. Zoom was the virtual classroom platform for this trial.

Results and Discussion: Analysis of Students' Opinions About the Role of the Video Camera in Distance Studies in the Context of Buber's Ideas

Qualitative research showed that the widest role of using a video camera is associated with a quality study process, emphasizing information transfer and reception, concentration of attention, active learning and settlements. The category of prerequisites for a quality study process consists of as many as seven subcategories (Figure 1).

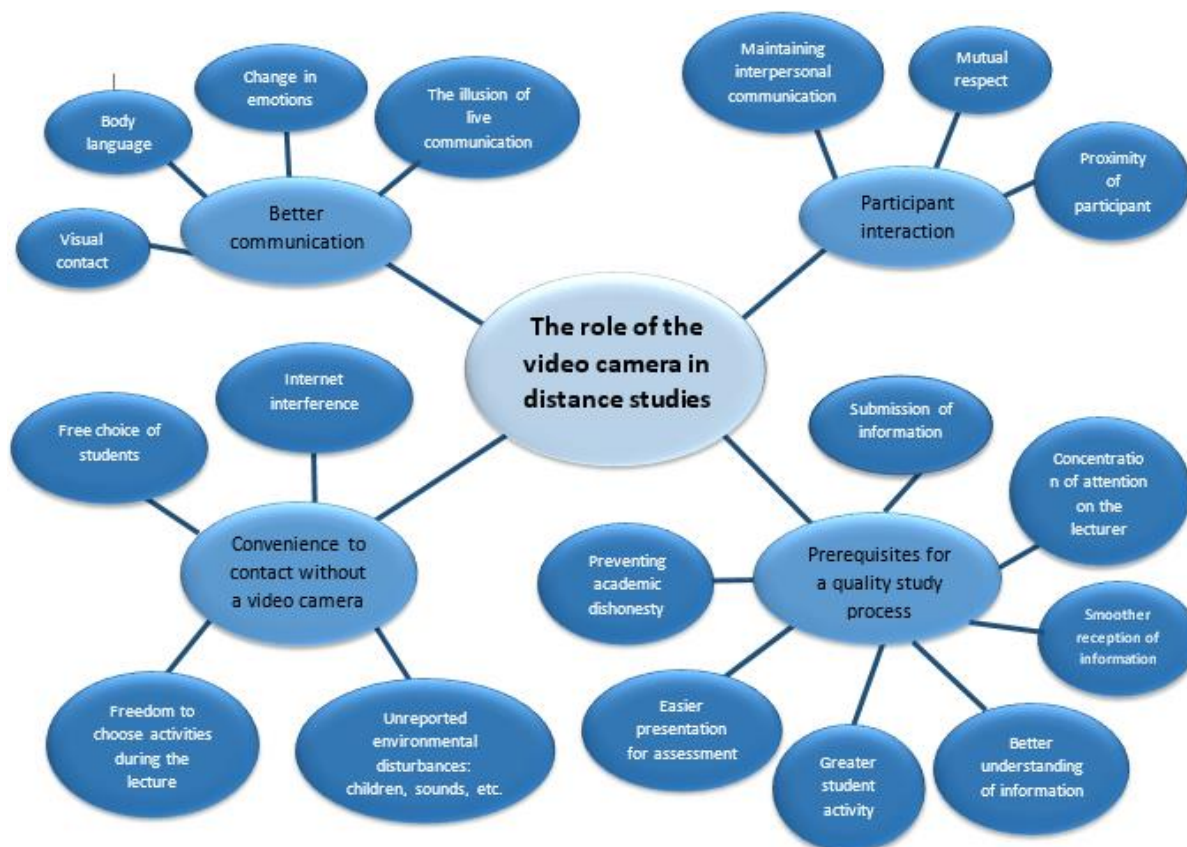


Figure 1. Distribution of the role of the use of video cameras in the process of distance learning

Informants note that the use of a video camera in remote studies helps to *"maintain concentration throughout the lecture"* (B25) and *"not to be distracted during the lecture"* (B14). The use of the video camera seems to discipline the learner not only to listen or follow the visual material, but also to observe the teacher, his facial expression, emotions, etc. In addition, *"the image conveys a much larger amount of information than just the sound"* (B13), *"without the camera, remote studies would be incomplete, we would get too little information"* (B3). The aforementioned research data substantiate the breadth of the educator's functions in the educational process. A teacher is not and cannot be a transmitter of information detached from emotions.

The students who participated in the research associate the study process with an exchange-based process, when they want not only to receive from the educator, to *"actively participate"* (B24), but also to provide feedback to the educator, giving meaning to the activity: *"the meaning of the video camera is to show the teacher that you listen carefully to the lecture"* (B17). At the same time, the educator, by observing the faces of the lecture participants, can respond more accurately to the needs of the learners: *"the teacher can see from the student's expression whether he understands what is being said, whether he understands the theory, whether he is listening attentively"* (B5), *"I think it is important for everyone to see each other, because it is very unpleasant to talk to 'yourself'"* (D12). The need and necessity of the I-Thou relationship (according to Buber) becomes apparent. *"Having a video camera on is more representative of live communication, which isn't happening much these days"* (B36).

The second broadest category, better communication, consists of four subcategories: visual contact, body language, exchange of emotions, and the illusion of live communication (Figure 1). First of all, the video camera makes it possible to *"see a person"* (B24), *"see whom we are communicating with"* (B13), even *"remember group colleagues"* (B16), *"the camera during these studies is a very important tool to ensure full communication"* (D8). Used, constantly repeated things, including the image, remain in our long-term memory. The analysis of the opinion of the students who participated in the study shows that the constantly unremembered image of the teacher and colleagues can begin to change both

the image of the university and self-perception of it. According to Buber's ideas, from the I-Thou relationship, which was widely developed at the university, there is a transition to the I-It relationship. The analysis of the research data allows us to say that the separation of the student from the human relationship can be seen if video cameras are not used in the lectures, and it leads to isolation or even loneliness.

We also observe the perspective of human exclusion in the subcategory of body language (Figure 1). Informants read the body language of another person and create a more comprehensive and thus deeper picture of the analyzed topic: *"a video camera is a way to see body expressions"* (B4), *"reaction to emotional state and eye contact help maintain attention"* (D22). At the same time, it is noticeable that body language also helps the speaker to convey his thoughts more precisely and clearly: *"the image is very important in communication, because it is 100% possible. to say what we want and how we want"* (B8). *"Seeing a person's face, reaction or movements makes it easier to communicate and assess the situation. Also, don't feel like you're talking to a wall"* (B7). It can be said that the I-Thou relationship analyzed by M. Buber in remote studies is supported by a video camera.

The informants distinguish the video camera as a tool for conveying the emotions of the participants in education, correcting the feeling and even the behaviour: *"the camera is important to see the reaction"* (D2), *"the video camera allows seeing the smiles, emotions, reactions of colleagues"* (B2), *"it is more fun to pay for work when you see the groups, their emotions and you know that they are really listening to you"* (B32), *"it is easier to present the completed task when you see the groups instead of a grey background"* (B33). The informants name the video camera as a necessity to exchange emotions and even thoughts: *"to see other people's emotions, glowing faces!"* (B19), *"it allows you to show your emotions and thoughts, self-expression is easier between communicating people"* (D9), *"I think that without a video we wouldn't be able to convey all emotions with a camera, because a video camera is a really good way to communicate, see each other, convey thoughts"* (B6). We find emotions in every form of communication. In most cases, they decide whether to continue the communication further.

The participant interaction category comprises three subcategories: maintenance of interpersonal connection, mutual respect, and participant closeness (Figure 1). In the study process, the informants highlight the importance of the interaction between the participants of education as a necessary element of studies: *"to maintain such a connection, at least through the distance"* (B1), *"to recreate the atmosphere of live lectures, the connection"* (B22), *"when you can see a person, a connection is established"* (D16), *"with the video camera on, teachers feel that students want to interact with them and show some effort and respect"* (B17). Only a relationship based on cooperation and mutual respect can lead to quality studies, regardless of the type of studies (face-to-face or distance). The educational process is based on communication, during which the educator not only conveys knowledge, but also forms values, forms a personality, a responsible representative of some profession. If the educational process were limited to the transfer of knowledge, then in the 21st century, all educators could easily be replaced by technology, this process could be robotized. However, this will never happen, because the educational process requires people, their relationships, mutual change in their interaction.

The category of convenience to contact without a video camera consists of the following subcategories: freedom to choose activities during the lecture; unannounced environmental disturbances: children, sounds, etc.; Internet interference; students' free choice (Figure 1). During remote studies, the unused video camera creates a sense of freedom for the learner: *"when the video camera is on, it makes you stretch more, and when the video camera is off, you can do whatever you want"* (B14), *"with the video camera off, you can not worry about how you look"* (B18), *"when the video camera is off, you can eat in a lecture and no one sees"* (B26), *"since the student is listening and trying to understand and summarize, it can interfere with seeing himself on the screen"* (D27), *"it depends on the lecture, if you listen to certain material during the lecture, you don't need a camera at all"* (D5). The feeling of freedom from demanding one's appearance, the freedom to choose activities not related to studies are associated with non-involvement in the study process. An academic session is taking place, and the learner does not participate in it at total capacity, allowing the study process to be nearby. Following M. Buber's ideas, the following questions arise: can the such presence of the learner be treated as studying? Can a learner without a video camera establish and/or maintain contact with other participants? Do such studies make it possible to achieve the results envisaged in the study program?

Discussion

M. Buber points out that the educational development of young people must first of all be based on a dialogical relationship between the teacher and the student (subject - subject). This includes both a comprehensive, practical toolkit and insights into the challenges around embedding classroom dialogue in real settings (Barak & Lefstein, 2021) while retaining the complexity of classroom dialogue itself (O'Connor & Michaels, 2017). We often hear virtual communication described as more convenient, easier, safer (Gu, Chen, 2021; Renqiang, Wende, 2022), which we can control, while covering large groups of students. However, virtual communication promotes the alienation of the teacher and the student, the lack of connection and the elimination of values, especially responsibility, from the study process.

Thus, from the perspective of Buber's philosophy, in virtual reality teachers and students (as well as students among themselves) exist only as unrelated human units, alienated and anonymous. Since the virtual space contradicts the authenticity of reality and denies the possibility of having a dialogic relationship, distance studies form more of a technical dialogue or monologue (*I am*), when students and teachers look at each other in a depersonalized space. Therefore, the online space (in which there is no direct eye contact, the person no longer has a connection with the "real face", with the real *You*) makes the dialogue between the teacher and the student very superficial and instrumental - *I-this*. Online communication requires a different set of cultural competencies to interpret conversations that may be lacking in the richness of non-verbal cues. By the way online communicating can also require technical skills to utilize devices, which less technologically savvy students may find stressful (Ishii, et. al, 2019).

The media encourages isolation and self-isolation (with the cameras off). The development of student values, including responsibility for studies, and the study process decreases.

Therefore, we have to admit that during distance studies, the teacher sitting in front of the screen often leads not to a dialogue, but to a monologue, when the teacher talks to himself. Losing a relationship, we lose responsibility. Only dialogue allows us to become individuals who "are not selfish and limited" (Johannesen, 2000, p. 153). In a monologue, "everyone talks to himself, <...> everyone is left only to himself" - writes M. Buber (2001, p. 71). A certain paradox arises here - others seem to participate in the monologue, even more so - a conversation can even take place with them. However, according to Buber, there is no dialogue here, because there is no listening to the other, there is no acceptance of the other - *You*, there is no viewing the other as an object. Thus, remote virtual studies pose a challenge to existential education, which focuses on the complete and comprehensive upbringing of a personality as a future specialist, as a social being.

It is noticeable that M. Buber's philosophy does not provide specific dialogue techniques or formats, his philosophy of education represents more views on the communication between the educator and the educated, indicates the direction that should be taken in order to prepare young people for life, not for obtaining a diploma. Buber cared little about curricula, methods and exams, but the priority was how to give the student an authentic identity, how to form a complete personality, show him the way to responsibility and love (Hodes, 1972).

Conclusions

The analysis of empirical data shows that the pursuit of the quality of distance studies dictated by the 21st-century COVID-19 pandemic rests on Buber's philosophy in search of a person, life and the constant manoeuvring between the relationship *I-Thou* and *I-It*. The technology-created possibility to continue studies remotely can be considered as an achievement of the 21st century. However, the appropriate and comprehensive use of technology is extremely important in order not only to ensure the quality of studies, but also the learner's quality presence in the study process, communication and even in society. Virtual communication without the use of a video camera is associated not only with limited transmission, reception and perception of information, but also with the isolation of a person and the feeling of *I-Thou* in the *I-It* relationship. In remote studies, as in face-to-face studies, the most important focus remains the relationship, connection, the interaction of people, exchanging values, information and perception. The formation of personality as a future representative of the profession is directly related to the ability of the participants of the study process to maximally restore and maintain the process of direct communication based on communication. Technology must be used as a tool to ensure

such communication, as the functions of the educator cannot be replaced or compensated by technological advances. Regardless of the political, economic situation, and at the same time the change of educational paradigms, learners are looking for the I-Thou relationship in the education/study process.

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