



# ‘Field research in the time of COVID-19: how creativity saved the day’

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## Getting involved in the CoLearn SEE project

When I got involved in the ‘Changing the Story’ project as a research assistant, one of my biggest motivators was that I would be given the opportunity to travel to amazing countries, such as Kosovo and Bosnia & Herzegovina. The subject of my work would be quite exciting in itself: as part of the [Co-Learn SEE](#) project, I had been assigned with writing a critical review of a series of interdisciplinary, arts-based, participatory projects in the Balkans, conducted by, for and with young people; projects aimed at bringing social change via the exploration of cultural heritage and less known aspects of history.

Frankly speaking, I cannot imagine anything more fascinating than documenting social change; living history in the making; embracing it, becoming a part of it. An essential part of my work would be based in field study involving interactions with participants and trainers. I was looking forward to visiting the venues where the projects had taken place and meeting the young people and mentors involved. My heart longed to live the experience to the fullest: explore the urban spaces with all my senses: the colors, the aromas, the sounds of the city...and most importantly: the conversations with the people. Anthropological research is very much dependent on lived experience, personal interaction and ethnographic observation.

Travel bans due to the pandemic in early 2020 subverted all plans to visit the settings of the projects. With the team it was decided that projects would now have to continue online. This meant a new challenge for each project per se; also, for me, as a researcher, who had to get swiftly acquainted with carrying out research without having any direct contact with the main drive of an anthropologist’s work: humans.

Furthermore, there was the question of how to evaluate remotely projects where urban space has a pivotal role. By ‘space’, I do not simply mean surrounding infrastructure or topological properties and aesthetics, but rather spatial setting as a point of academic reference, social and historical significance or artistic inspiration (as in the case of projects like [BOOM](#) or [Izazov](#)). Also, space as an outcome per se, in the case of highly symbolic settings which have been re-visited within the projects (as in [ReSpace](#)) and even aspire to be re-constructed (like [‘The Museum of Education’](#)).

My colleagues and I chose to see this situation as an opportunity rather than an obstacle. This is my personal narrative of how I have been experiencing research with the CoLearn SEE project in the time of corona and how creativity transformed my routine.

Would you call it ‘fieldwork in less-than-ideal situations’?(1)

Field trips have always fascinated me, especially when these were in places considered remote or exotic. I remember a phrase from a book by Smith & Davies (2008) that I had read as a university student:

“Many anthropologists do voyage to places far off the beaten path, and they have to be ready for a variety of circumstances before going out to do their fieldwork.”

Little did I know back then that in the years 2020-21, the places ‘far off the beaten path’ would be ‘zoom’ and ‘google meets’!

The critical review had been epistemologically designed, since the beginning, based on grounded theory, combined with discourse analytical approaches as suggested by Foucault and Goffman. Emphasis had been given on methodological tools involving personal interaction with participants, such as ethnographic (participant) observation and in-depth conversations. Due to coronavirus related travel bans, this plan had to change. Thankfully, vital aspects of the projects (referring, here, to [Re-Space](#), which has been an ongoing project throughout [Co-LearnSEE](#)), as well as completed activities of other CtS projects have been transferred online: 3-D digital representations of urban spaces in Re-Space; a repertoire of short films easily accessible online ([Izazov!](#)); videos and documentaries of completed activities ([Boom](#) and the [Making the Museum of Education](#)). Follow-up activities (including communication among groups of young people) have also been taking place on social media platforms.

I have been invited to many of these activities as an observer. It is hard to tell whether one could call this ‘ethnographic observation’. The fragmented instance of a person who finds the time to participate in an online meeting, despite having spent the entire day on digital activities, barely resembled the energetic, inspiring image of people in ‘real’ settings, where one could participate using all their senses. ‘Interaction’ on e-platforms would mean virtually raising a hand and unmuting oneself after getting approval from the moderator.

How does the group react to a researcher observing the e-meeting? In field study conducted under ‘normal’ circumstances, the mere presence of an outsider is enough to change participants’ behavior, even if this is done unconsciously. Participants may become self-conscious or act in ways that would make them appear pleasant or ‘correct’ in the eyes of the observer. In digital meetings, the primary observer -and principal source of distraction- is the camera recording the meeting. People who are not experienced speakers tend to refrain from speaking their minds openly in front of an audience, especially when this consists of people that they have not met before, at least in real life, and with whom they will not have the chance to chat unofficially during a coffee break. Standing in front of a microphone and a camera can be awkward, especially when talks to profile photos of muted participants. And then, there are also unexpected difficulties, such as bad internet connection or a family member interrupting the videocall the moment that you have taken the floor.

Observing people on zoom made me miss real contact even more. You may hear voices and sometimes see faces, yet you miss a large part of non-verbal information coming from gestures, body language and physical interaction within a group. What I realized, however, is that the digital world follows many of the ‘rules’ applying to the real world. Just like in real life, where people need time to adjust to the presence of a researcher, the same applies to research conducted online. Showing consistency and building a relationship of mutual trust via more regular contact is an investment which will eventually reward both the observer and the participant with a meaningful and truthful conversation. My experience with digital observation is that people feel safer after our second or third meeting. I specifically remember the case of a young female participant, who has been very enthusiastic during the interview (which had been conducted in the presence of another colleague, too). The interview had lasted for over an hour and the young girl would always provide very positive feedback. In the following weeks, I talked to her quite a few times over the phone, discussing dissemination activities. It was after long, informal conversations that she started sharing her perspective of what could have been done differently in her project, outlining certain gaps or deficiencies that she had not had the courage to mention before. Her input, however, cross-checked later with information coming from other participants, was in fact what I truly needed for the purpose of my research: a critical insight into what had worked and what hadn’t worked; and how this could be fixed.

Attempting to conduct personal interviews over zoom is also a sensitive task. Goffman’s methodological approach suggests that semi-structured interviews should be conducted in a relaxed and friendly manner. Back in the days when I could travel to do field research, I would wholeheartedly invest energy into building an atmosphere of trust with the person I would interview. That was the least I could do to express my gratitude for the time and information that they would be unconditionally offering me. I would even try to motivate my potential interviewees by offering to buy them tea or coffee, imitating the techniques of Bronislaw Malinowski, who would reward his respondents with tobacco sticks (Malinowski 1967 : 69). I must admit, however, that any attempt of ‘gastronomic bribery’ is probably doomed to fail in the Balkans: all over the region, local people’s hospitality makes it nearly impossible for a guest to pay the bill.

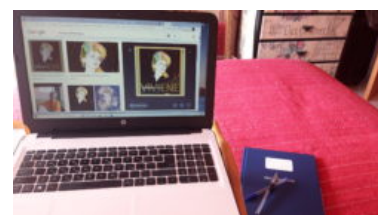
The blissful days of conducting interviews in cozy cafés or parks seemed so distant now. Working from home, under strict lockdown, I would look back to those times nostalgically, thinking how I could possibly add a human touch to an interview conducted online.

Searching for ways to make my daily routine of working alone from home a bit more pleasant, I started customizing the way I would send invitations to online interviews. Together with the link to the e-meeting, I would set up the digital meeting in a location familiar to me; a nice café which I had visited before or a place that I would like to visit, such as an art gallery that I had checked out on Instagram or a fancy bistro, famous for its brunch menu.



In the beginning, I would experiment with this just on my own calendar, so as not to confuse interviewees, but later, when I started having focus groups or follow-up meetings with the same people, I would 'invite' them on an imaginary date. My electronic invitations would be accompanied by colorful images or even music clips. Being creative is easier when you are addressing young artists, like I did. Young people got the idea immediately and started 'inviting' me too to virtual meetings in cinemas, parks, conservatories... Once I was even introduced to a 'space restaurant' in Prishtina, as you can see in the photo attached (photo 1).

Before or after the interviews, my respondents would share with me video clips, books or short films relative to their project. It is through this way that I had the chance to 'participate' in their workshops too. I may not have been physically there, but I surely enjoyed listening to



those talented young people ardently sharing with me what they had learnt; analyzing for me the image and public stance of Violeta Rexhepagiqi (photo 2), juxtaposing her in terms of social symbolism and feminist theory to artists I knew, like Cyndi Lauper and Dua Lipa.

### Re- Imagining the space and context: drawing upon memories and narratives

As I mentioned earlier, one of the biggest challenges was mentally situating myself in the setting of the projects. Graphic representations and documentary videos compensated partly for the venues that I couldn't visit. At least I had an idea of what buildings looked like in terms of architecture and internal design; also, what they could be potentially transformed into. Technology and documentation have been priceless tools, contributing greatly to both the final outcomes and follow-up dynamics of the respective projects.



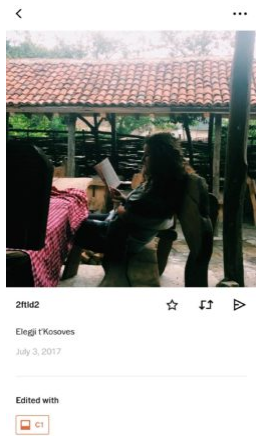
The hardest thing to illustrate, however, has been the socio-cultural context in which the projects have been taking place. When I arrived for the first time in Prishtina, back in 2016, I didn't know anyone in Kosovo except for the organizers of the conference to which I had been invited. I discovered the city first, before meeting its people. It was the city itself that invited me to discover its history; the streets, the buildings, the nature...they were all witnesses of Kosovo's past and at the same time, guarantors of its future.

I visited Kosovo many times; research always being my official pretext. Over the years, I developed strong bonds. I would move around at ease, communicating fluently in the local languages. I made friends, spent summer holidays and celebrated birthdays in outdoors parties. In other words, I made *memories*. Even now, I can close my eyes and still see the golden-gray colors of the sunset in Prishtina

as the sun casts its shadows on the catholic church of Mother Teresa; the view of red-brick rooftops curiously closely attached to each other when walking down the 'Kodrat e Trimeve' boulevard; the smell of burnt coal in the air in the first chilly nights of autumn.

When you don't have memories of your own in a country, you can always 'borrow' the memories of your friends. I think that is what many writers and poets do. I had never visited **Bosnia and Herzegovina** before, but I knew the warmth of its people, the aroma of grounded coffee in its colorful bazaars, the depressive fog over Sarajevo in grey winter days.

The image of these two western Balkan countries had been smoothly, gradually shaped in my mind over years of studying regional history and culture. I had read books; I had attended seminars and presentations. Academic knowledge could compensate for what I didn't know by experience.



The pandemic transformed the way we run projects with and for young people. We had to come up with new ways of involving youth and triggering group dynamics. In this context, research had to follow the developments and adopt to the new sociocultural phenomena, even if this meant reflecting on creative methods to study humans and artworks in the digital world. In other words, *changing the story* might also mean revisiting the approaches and tools through which the ambiguous and elusive notion of ‘change’ is being investigated and documented. By clearing up one’s lens and adjusting it to the new reality, one might see details that they had never noticed before; discover a different way of doing things that might eventually open the door to concrete social change.

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## Original photos

- ‘The space restaurant’ (ish-restoranti Marsi): spontaneous picture taken by Shend Miftari, participant in the BOOM project (P2). January 2021.
- ‘Discovering Violeta’: photo by me, while working from home, trying to learn more about the famous singer of the ‘80s, that all BOOM project respondents talked about. March 2021.
- N’Gjakove: photo by Fatlinda Daku, involved in the youth-led activities of the CoLearn SEE project. 2019.
- ‘Elegji t’Kosoves’: spontaneous photo of me by Fatlinda Daku. July 2017, in Fshat Kukaj; captured fully absorbed in reading Ismail Kadare’s *Elegy for Kosovo*.

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