ONLINE EDUCATION: TEACHING IN A TIME OF CHANGE

• Paper / Proposal Title:

Going to Places and Staying at Home: Critical Reflections on Thematic Cartography and Desktop Documentation in Online Education

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• Abstract (300 words):

This contribution critically reflects on an urban planning seminar and master studio designed with experimental online formats as alternatives to traditional place-bound approaches to urban planning education. We argue that a thematic course focus that links everyday practices in the home with spatial processes happening “elsewhere” enables students to engage with assignments that directly question the epistemology of digital learning, research, and presentations. To do this, we started in the home, choosing to work with a theme that would tie together everyday life, urban/rural space, global flows, and fluctuations due to COVID: food.

In the seminar, students mapped the status quo of complex food chains. Food cartography based on desk research, architectural and urban analysis, and narrative analysis, allowed students to “follow” the paths of food products from origin to refuse, simultaneously discovering intersections with gender, ecology, land-use conflicts, policy, cultural identity, and power relations. Students were encouraged to try out various interactive formats such as image and literature discussions, (online)interviews, digital
surveys, interactive mappings and whiteboards, to put critical topics up for discussion in independently designed and moderated seminar sessions.

The studio examined the regionalization of food systems in a rural area southeast of Berlin, Germany. Instead of the final paper commonly required, students created a “desktop documentary.” This form of video essay, created by the filmmaker Kevin B. Lee, uses screen-capture to record on screen actions. The author tells their story through browser windows, video clips, note-taking, drawing, etc. The assignment enables the students to analytically reflect on how the knowledge they attain and generate is mediated through the digital programs they used.

The normalization of video-conferencing software allowed for a significant increase in guest inputs, which we found helped fight online learning fatigue. We also planned a digital field trip, where students were led by a guest via a camera through distant environments. This experimentation had significant added-value to courses. However, the issue of compensation for guests in academic settings, technical difficulties, and frustration due to the lack of human contact remain important themes to discuss.

• Author(s) Biography (200 words each):

Dr. Emily Bereskin is a senior researcher at the Department of Urban Planning at BTU Cottbus-Senftenberg. Prior to joining BTU, Dr. Bereskin worked on two EU-HERA projects at the Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut Essen and at the Technische Universität Berlin’s Habitat Unit. She was also a DFG (German Research Foundation) postdoctoral fellow at the TU Berlin’s Center for Metropolitan Studies. She received her doctorate in 2012 from Bryn Mawr College.

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