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MAINTAINING CLOSE CONTACT FROM A DISTANCE DIGITAL AIKIDO TRAINING UNDER COVID-19 CONDITIONS

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ABSTRACT

This work explores, reports, and reflects on the teaching and learning aspects of online courses in aikido under COVID-19 lockdown conditions in Greece. The essay is based on research and auto-ethnographic accounts of the digital courses the authors have set up as teachers of aikido during the pandemic. There is little research on pedagogic and didactic issues of designing online courses in martial arts or on outcomes of digital learning. Thus, the present text aims to explicate the theoretical background drawn from different scientific disciplines in designing an online course in a martial art. This course attempted to meet the challenge of teaching online an art that 'normally' is taught face-to-face, entailing physical practice in pairs. Thus, the ramifications of online teaching and learning are far reaching as they affect the participants and their families helping them to maintain a sense of wellbeing or normality under trying conditions. The social aspect of teaching a martial art online showcases its changing nature as well as its potential and possibilities for contributing to social cohesion, in the face of the grave dangers the current pandemic poses for humanity. It is an aspect of martial arts that could be taken into account when discussing their future in society.

1 INTRODUCTION

This article reports and reflects on research and auto-ethnographic accounts of issues and challenges arising from online teaching and learning in aikido, a martial art, under COVID-19 lockdown conditions in Greece.

In the unprecedented times of the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, athletes faced a range of challenges, such as social isolation, fear, stress, anxiety and grief over the world pandemic, job and income insecurity, or changes in body image and composure [Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) 2020]. Team and contact sports including self-defence were particularly affected by the lockdown and subsequent restrictive measures. In addition to teaching technical skills, sport teachers, instructors and coaches are often providers of care and support to their athletes, especially in times of crisis, to help them maintain their psychological and physical wellbeing. Currently, this aspect of social support seems to be particularly relevant: because of 'social distancing', athletes could not meet with their teachers, nor could they train face-to-face. Ideally, in crisis situations, sport teachers, instructors and coaches assume a particularly caring attitude and provide their athletes training environments that are 'caring spaces' [Dohsten, Baker-Ruchti, and Lindegren 2020; Samuel 2017; Noddings 2012, 2005].

Martial arts are not usually associated with distance learning as the training involves skills associated with the 'body'. This became apparent in the collective perplexity of athletes and teachers on the question of how to proceed with training during the first lockdown in spring 2020.

Synchronous virtual conferencing, asynchronous YouTube tutorials and other social media as well as telephone calls provide useful tools to bridge social distancing and continue with training and physical exercising, albeit in different forms. In a 'caring' online dojo it becomes possible to spend time together 'being in a microcosm of the socially connected world, a place where there was no "other"; there were only all of us' [Samuel 2017: 77]. For us, reaching out to the members of the aikido group – that is, children, adolescents, and adults in a suddenly restricted living environment – meant organising remote self-defence lessons. In martial arts, learning depends on direct physical contact with the teacher and with the other co-athletes, because training in pairs constitutes the customary – and for some teachers and athletes the only – way to progress in one's art. The lockdown conditions thus posed an immense challenge to aikido teachers and students as how to proceed from there.

There is little research to date on pedagogic and didactic issues of designing online courses in martial arts or on outcomes of digital teaching [Koerner and Staller 2020]. This essay aims first to explicate the pedagogic and didactic issues involved in designing an online course in a martial art. Secondly, the text reports on learning outcomes, especially on the importance of maintaining contact for group cohesion. Thirdly, on the basis of the experience acquired from the online courses we have set up, the article reflects on the wider implications of digital and remote teaching of martial arts for the art itself and for maintaining social cohesion from a sociological perspective. These issues form concerns of the debate for the future of martial arts and on relevant research on sports [see e.g. Bowman 2020; Evans et al. 2020; Brown and Johnson 2000].

The essay aims at answering three interrelated questions: how to design an online course in aikido in pandemic conditions that meets several technical, pedagogic, and social requirements of the art along with individual needs of the students? What are the outcomes we observed of the online course we implemented on individual students and on the group? What insights are gained that may contribute to the study of martial arts and the debate on their future under pandemic conditions?

The first question is answered by undertaking a literature research on relevant approaches in different disciplines. The second question is answered on basis of observations acquired using the self-authored ethnographic approach. The material comes from the online, synchronous, courses we designed and implemented in aikido. The third question is taken up in the concluding and reflective part of this work.

We have devoted much of our lives to the art of aikido. At the same time, we are experienced sociology and pedagogy teachers and researchers, respectively. Our plan from the outset was to continue training aikido in lockdown conditions and at the same time to focus on ensuring that our aikido students were learning something new that could help them progress towards mastering more of the art. The Greek government instituted the lockdown of schools including sport facilities on the 10th of March in 2020. Two weeks later, schools commenced online teaching. Much to our own and our students' surprise, we also started online aikido lessons.

We soon realised that remote teaching brought us all closer as group members. This seeming paradox is part of what we would like to explore further in this article. The subsequent lockdown conditions in the autumn months of 2020 showed that it was important that online courses continue. Our own motivation and determination

were strengthened by the encouraging feedback we received from our students. With this article, we share our thoughts, findings, and experiences, to advance the conversation with other scientists and practitioners inside and outside of the martial arts training world.

This article consists of five parts: this introduction is followed by the second part which discusses the theoretical background of designing an online course in martial arts. The third part focuses on the design and implementation of the online courses. The fourth part provides a short description of the learning outcomes, and the fifth and final part reflects on the course by discussing several issues involved in teaching and learning in martial arts under the pandemic conditions.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND (OR 'WHAT WE KNEW BEFORE') AND METHODS OF RESEARCH

In this part we discuss the research undertaken, the design of the online course, and the methods used to report and reflect that underlie this essay. In relation to the theory, the framework cuts across different disciplines, such as sports education, media pedagogy, with a focus on visual perception, and sociology of education from the point of view of promoting participation, social support, and community. The digital courses in aikido described in this essay could be viewed as best practice that cut across these various disciplines. The different disciplines that are related to our project are explained in the subsections below.

2.1 Sports pedagogy

The aikido online courses that took place during the COVID-19 lockdown were informed by sports pedagogy. Martial arts can borrow from sports pedagogy that focuses on aspects of education, training, providing support, advice, and information. Furthermore, the online, synchronous course we designed was embedded in the theoretical framework of critical-constructive approaches in sports pedagogy [Light and Harvey 2017; Fitzpatrick and Russell 2015; Fitzpatrick 2013; Lather 1998]. These approaches emphasise attitudes of self-determination, participation and solidarity between the athletes that are at the same time key points of training in aikido. These aspects are further discussed below.

2.2 Social support, social networks, and teachers' professionalism

One focus of the project was on the aspect of supporting each other as a relevant factor for mental and physical health as well for strengthening individuals' resilience [Cobb 1976; Gallant 2013]. Social support¹ is ascribed a protective and intervening effect for human wellbeing and it is provided and maintained in social relationships and supportive interactions. Social isolation may have negative effects on mental and physical wellbeing, and it may cause stress symptoms increasing the risk of illness. Thus, social support in social networks became particularly important under COVID-19 [Liu and Heinz 2020].

Friendly interpersonal relationships in a sporting context have been identified as an important resource for athletes. The quality and type of social support an athlete receives promotes injury recovery, strengthens participation, prevents burnout, boosts self-confidence, and enhances performance [Sheridan et al. 2014]. According to the literature on sports, social support is identified as one of the key strategies in coaching, and effective coaches create an environment to enhance close, committed, and caring relationships with athletes in order to support their development both as performers and as individuals. Therefore, coaching, teaching, and instructing can be defined as pedagogical activities with an inherent 'duty of care' [Dohsten, Barker-Ruchti, and Lindegren 2020; Jones and Kessler 2020; Cronin and Lowes 2019; Teck Koh et al. 2019; Samuel 2017; Noddings 2012, 2005].

According to Moore [2010], the relationship-building process between coach and each athlete is central for creating a caring climate. This does not mean becoming best friends. It does mean learning about their lives in and out of training.² According to authors, a caring climate 'will make us and our training sessions a 'safe place' to be – a place, athletes want to be!' [Moore 2010: 6]. The strange pandemic situation presented sport teachers, instructors, and coaches with the challenging tasks of overcoming social isolation, building social connectedness, and creating a sense of belonging for their athletes to make them feel more secure. Leaning on the concept of social support the focus is on social relationships between individuals and therefore involving social networks. Social network theory assumes that individuals do not act

1 Social support is defined as information that gives the impression that a person is cared for, loved, valued and is part of a network of mutual obligations. As a coping resource it can protect people in critical life situations from a variety of harming conditions [Cobb 1976: 1].

2 We are aware of the abuses of the so-called care some teachers show to students, but this aspect is beyond the scope of this paper.

as isolated atoms but are embedded in a network of interpersonal relationships. In pedagogy, the network perspective is traditionally adopted in the context of interventional and coping strategies [Brisette, Scheier, and Carver 2002; Gallant 2013], and is thus applicable to the pandemic situation. The adult, adolescent and child members of the three training groups of the 'Aikido School Athens' organisation including their families, the two female teachers and selected aikido instructors from other dojos are defined as a social network and as a community that is part of a larger collectivity. In sociology, the best-known approach to the issue of cohesion is Durkheim's work stressing the importance of sustaining social ties. To this end, he mentioned 'attachment' or 'commitment' to a group as a way of promoting social cohesion. In his theory of moral education, Durkheim, the classical theorist in sociology, argues that teaching students to acquire personal discipline, group attachment and autonomy contributes to their socialisation as part of the community they find themselves in [Durkheim 1973]. The online aikido courses we designed had this approach in mind and fostered attachment to the group. Social cohesion is achieved for ties and bonds between people are sustained first at a micro level, that is at a group level [Kantzara 2011]. As individuals move through different circles and networks of relationships, from smaller to larger webs they carry with them the sustaining ties and experiences and affect those around them. The image of throwing a stone in a lake and the successive far-reaching waves to the shore, capture the idea of social influence we have in mind.

Furthermore, aspects of teachers' professionalism inform our work both towards the students and towards the wider community. Teachers' professional attitude explains much of our own motivation to set up the online courses and to report on them for a wider community. To explain it briefly, a well-known approach on teachers' professionalism is developed by the sociologist, Oevermann. He distinguished three different professional responses teachers may adopt in crises and refer to human cooperation. The responses may include: (a) maintaining a shared understanding of reality as the basis to be able to intervene successfully in the world, (b) creating a consensus on norms and values of living together, and (c) sustaining the physical and psychological integrity of an individual, a group or the representatives of an organization that is placed in such a context [Oevermann 1996: 88-91]. These aspects form important aspects of teachers' work though often go unacknowledged.

During the pandemic, according to our sources, many teachers attempted to care for their students and kept contact with them in various ways. It is likely that most did not, however, undertake online synchronous teaching, something worthy of further research.

Next, we discuss aspects of digital learning.

2.3 Digital learning and visual perception in martial arts

The use of digital media in physical education and training is theoretically substantiated in sports pedagogy and follows didactic reasoning. With the expansion of the use of the Internet and corresponding software, sport didactic processes can be stimulated and supported by digital media [Novak, Antala, and Knjaz 2018; van Hilvoorde and Koekoek 2018; van Hilvoorde and Pot 2016]. Video-supported training is defined as a method for self-reflective and action-oriented learning that focuses on learning or improving motor skills, as well as possibly visual skills or techniques. Videos are used for independent movement correction, in which, with the help of extrinsic (visual) information, the athlete can correct her/his intrinsic movement to approximate it to an ideal technique [Nowowski et al. 2012]. Apps, tablets, and smartphones are also used in modern physical education and training so that athletes can observe and assess their movements themselves. Increasingly, sports e-learning platforms are being developed to help athletes improve or excel in their performance [Huang et al. 2010]. Other examples – and not solely because of the coronavirus lockdown – include online lessons for activities, such as yoga and taiji (also known as 'tai chi'), provided via synchronous and asynchronous digital courses. Usually, most of these digital learning activities are supplementing the live, face-to-face training.

Learning martial arts techniques is a time-consuming training activity and can be assisted by the use of digital media. In the field of competitive self-defence sports, the professional use of digital media is increasingly used to learn movements, techniques, and correct body postures [Vahidi and Müller 2017]. In Brazilian Jiu Jitsu for example YouTube channels are additionally used to communicate new techniques, convey attitudes, and to create a community of practice [Spencer 2014]. For aikido training purposes, practitioners have long used both professional and amateur videos and instructional films. Theoretically, these audio-visual videos are based on model learning: the practitioner tries to copy the teacher's movements. However, there is seldom a demonstrable pedagogically structured use of these digital media in aikido training and the production is often not based on sports didactics. Some, but not all adult and adolescent athletes from our school used relevant videos to improve their learning and performance, especially when they prepared for exams. The children, however, were not accustomed to this way of learning aikido. Nevertheless, it could be assumed that aikido practitioners of all ages have the distinctive ability to learn a movement through visual perception, because it is already promoted in self-defence training through the training structure: Every technique or exercise is shown by the teacher and, if necessary, also explained verbally. Meanwhile, all trainees sit at the edge of the mat and watch the teacher's movements when s/he executes techniques.

In addition to the kinaesthetic perception for self-movement and the anticipation of external movements, for example, from an opponent or instructor, visual perception is thus fundamental to aikido as it is to all martial arts [Ju et al. 2018; Jendrusch 2014; Sickenberger 2011]. By implementing our digital courses, we could assume that all participants would be accustomed to visual-based learning of aikido movements.

2.4 Methods of research

The perspective we adopt draws on the concepts of online, synchronous teaching, caring attitude, keeping contact with students, and developing suitable teaching material. The concepts and their grounding in literature have been explained in the subsections above.

This essay draws on the qualitative paradigm that focus on uncovering relationships and exploring social phenomena and different areas of social life, including sports. As Brustad succinctly formulated it:

Sport is an entirely human endeavour. Our involvement in sport and physical activities is full of personally and socially generated meanings as our participation occurs in interaction with other individuals in various social and cultural contexts. Qualitative researchers in sport and physical activity have an essential role in uncovering the meaningful nature of this involvement.

[Brustad 2009: 112]

Since no reference experience in a comparable context was available, this essay has an exploratory character and is grounded in the study of relevant literature regarding critical sports pedagogy, media pedagogy in sports as well as sociology of education. This work is also based on self-authored ethnography aimed at showcasing the dynamics of interpersonal relations from a distance that sustain both the individuals and the community they find themselves in [Chang 2008; Tombro 2016]. The auto-ethnographic material includes keeping detailed notes (i.e. diary keeping), video recording of all the online lessons, and photography as well as notes from talks and reflections with some experienced students, other aikido instructors in other countries, and from participating in the discussions that take place in international aikido fora.

For answering the second question of our students' learning outcomes, we were keen to note changes in a diary during the online training; when we could return to training together outside, we observed the progress made. Furthermore, we asked for feedback in various stages of the lessons and in various ways. The feedback was voluntarily provided via WhatsApp messages, comments in the Facebook group, as well as

verbal comments and discussions during the outdoor training. We also devised a questionnaire in the form of a small-scale survey, which we explain below. Additionally, our ideas, reflections and findings from the auto-ethnographic material are substantiated by other ongoing research on teachers in formal education in Greece and Germany that focused on studying their stance and work during the pandemic [Kantzara and Loos 2021].

In sum, the design of an online course draws from different disciplines that emphasise exercising different skills, like visual perception and kinesthetics skills in a digital training environment. The challenge has been to use digital means not as a supplementary training but as a 'normal' one, and for the time being the only available way of teaching and learning under the pandemic conditions. In addition, the discussion within the wider community but also in sports pedagogy and sociology of education emphasises contact, support, and creating ties to sustain individual students and the community they live in. Methodologically, this essay draws on the qualitative paradigm and uses a variety of tools to explore approaches, ideas, and implementation of an online course and reflect on them.

The next part explicates issues in teaching and the setting up of the course.

3 AIKIDO TEACHING AND TRAINING

Aikido is a self-defence martial art emphasising cooperation and peaceful conflict resolution. It lacks competitive games, and the practice consists of training physical as well as mental components. The ideal of aikido as expressed by the founder Morihei Ueshiba (1883-1969) is not about fighting or defeating an enemy, but about learning how to harmonise and create room for peace instead of conflict.

The student is expected to learn aikido techniques by close observation of the teacher, who apart from presenting physically a technique, uses verbal explanation as well. Additionally, aikido teachers usually attempt to give to their students an understanding of the whole 'system' of forms and principles, while explaining the techniques. Furthermore, (wooden) weapon techniques enhance and deepen the understanding of movements and principles of 'connecting' to the opponent while responding to attacks.

To make it easier to practice we implemented two training strategies: complicated movements were divided into several parts to be

performed singularly and shadow training was introduced especially for the children training, but also for adults preparing for exams. Self-defence is not understood as practicing in a violent manner, but rather how to preserve self-control and react non-violently in potentially volatile situations [May 2014; Sutton 2020]. Therefore, aikido practice and training is enriched with exercises directly aimed at calming the mind, connecting body and mind, helping one to extend from within and to achieve balance and grounding. The usual training in our 'dojo' already included ideas of this concept before the COVID-19 lockdown: children and adults, beginners and advanced practitioners were used to the idea of transferring aikido principles to other situations in their everyday life. Selected aikido exercises and movement patterns were used to convey ideas related to conflict management, violence prevention and stress reduction.

The above-described orientation provided for us an appropriate basis for designing the synchronous (online) digital aikido courses during the pandemic. The next section describes the issues that make an online course a challenge to be addressed.

3.1 Teaching via a screen – a challenge

When schools, gyms and other sports facilities closed their premises, the first reaction in many countries has been to stop with teaching and training till the restrictive measures were lifted. At the same time, a discussion that we personally followed on social media emphasised the responsibility of teachers and aikido schools to keep contact with students and take the courses online. The idea behind was that by reaching out to students, this may favourably affect them personally and by extension their families and the communities they live in. This thought fits squarely with aikido peace making principles and philosophy. Aikido was changing or had to, that much was obvious, but the problem was how to achieve all this? Moreover, what does contact mean? And most importantly, how to set up a course that is meaningful by serving so many purposes?

From the outset, the online course fulfilled many purposes: to keep contact and support members and through them the community of which we all are part; to continue with training and learning and in so doing to cultivate one's art and skills; to spend time meaningfully; to keep children busy with learning and to help them grow; to provide a sense of 'normality' in adverse circumstances; and to provide a perspective for the future.

There was only one obstacle: the provision of a synchronous online course was novel, though video and films were used for learning as we mentioned above, it was quite different to meet online through

the medium of a screen that permitted a partial visual perception that was adequately comparable to actual, physical presence. Additionally, the challenge was not simply to design a course with training that repeated things learned or substituted the physical part of the training with weapon training – all of which are valid learning aims – but also to be able to address and motivate individual students and to tackle new learning material that would further their skills without a training partner on the spot.

Below we explain how the course was set up and implemented.

3.2 Design of the Aikido online lessons and digital means

The online aikido courses addressed two different groups: one for children aged 5-12 and a second one for adults including adolescents from 12 years old. The group composition (mixed groups in terms of age, progress, gender) as well as the schedule was kept similar to the live training. Jotting down the names of the students who participated in the online training was done like in the dojo and provided a means for the teachers to follow individual student participation. Thus, many things related to the training remained the same, but in a different context.

The digital means used to provide the online courses and keep contact with group members were the following:

Digital synchronous conferencing (videoconferencing): in the beginning, we chose an open-source platform named Jit.si that seemed easy for teachers and students to set up and handle during the lessons. Some athletes followed the online training via their mobile phone, and so difficulties arose in the beginning before changing it for a larger screen.

Video platform: The teachers created a channel on the free platform YouTube to post videos from the lessons to inform other athletes and the public. Taking data protection into account, all the lessons were recorded by a different camera than the one provided by the video conference application. The channel gave all group members, their families, and friends as well as aikidokas from our wider network of Aikido schools in Germany and Greece the possibility to follow some of the digital lessons and to use the material for their own training.

Virtual classroom: The teachers created a classroom called 'Online-Aikido for Kids', in the free platform Google Classroom, to keep contact with the children and their parents beyond the training. The teacher gave once a week a task, as for example asking the

child to paint the place at home where the child was exercising during the course. Half of the children in the group used the opportunity: paintings and pictures were sent to the teacher who forwarded them to the other group members. Since the children were dependant on an adult's presence and technical expertise, this medium was not used very often.

Social media: Additionally, we set up a network of various degrees of inclusion for the adults. The aim was to support and connect the group beyond the virtual classes. Thus, we set up a group on the Messenger application that provided the opportunity for day-to-day virtual discussion and exchange of information between the members. At a second level of inclusion, we used a previously set up 'private group' on Facebook in which a larger number of people participated including ex-members and friends. At a third level, there was a more formal page on Facebook that had been set up years earlier for our aikido organisation.

Thus, in a way there was a centre of a small group that radiated through different circles, sharing information on aikido related issues, like the stone in the lake we mentioned above. The circles in our group were constituted by the different group members that signified different levels of privacy and digital intimacy facilitating connection to the teachers and to each other. The group on Messenger was active daily in posting anything that was relevant to the members, e.g., an interesting poster, a photo of an aikido master, a link to a video, as well as many pictures group members made of the teachers (i.e. screen shots) and of themselves as participants. The contact in the group was informal and humorous at times that helped create a feeling of daily participation in a common project with a shared target; this group created a feeling for participants of belonging to a community.

Contact via email and telephone calls: At the same time there was very often an informative email sent out to students and to the parents of the minor members. The invitation to the virtual courses was sent before all trainings to remind them so that they could prepare accordingly. In addition, an occasional phone call by teachers to parents or adult students proved an important means in maintaining contact and showing care from a distance.

In short, the contact between the group members themselves and between students, parents and teachers was organised on different levels of intimacy and privacy, ranging from formal to informal and friendly.

3.3 The setting and the course content: home dojo

The living room in our shared house was arranged as a dojo and fortunately we had all the necessary equipment at hand: the mats (3 tatami), the aikido clothes to wear (keiko-gi), aikido logo and the picture of the founder to make a dojo at home, including the wooden weapons. It was important, that this small 2x3 meter training location corresponded with the environment that other participants had in their own homes. In this way the teachers adapted their movements to a restricted space the same way the participants had to. Nearly all participants had one disadvantage compared to the teachers: they did not have sufficient mats to allow for the normal falls or rolls that are usual in aikido. This had to be taken into consideration in order to prevent injuries.

In the beginning of the digital training, the aim had been to connect with everyone and solve possible technical problems. This was followed by teaching aikido movements and principles. A calm composure and balance while physically exercising was experienced as energising by the students and during the many weeks of online training. Since conflict resolution by peaceful means forms the main target in aikido, calmness, grounding, and cultivation of balance contributed to this aim. Additionally, as teachers, we had to invent a new concept of teaching, a time and energy consuming task, but a very creative challenge. We had to adapt to the fact that nearly all participants were following digital training alone in front of their computer or smartphone screens. Therefore, the exercises and techniques had to be changed from executing an exercise or technique with a partner to an individual, solo, movement. In martial arts there is a concept for this, it is called shadow training as we mentioned above. In addition, the limited space had to be considered to prevent accidents or cause damages to the individual or the room, especially, when training with the (wooden) weapons.

The very first lessons for adults and adolescents were devoted to teaching principles of movement instead of techniques or forms using humour to relax everyone. We also spent time to teach principles of aikido with philosophical underpinnings, like *zanshin* (awareness) or *mushin* (empty mind). The first children's lesson was designed to be very playful, and the instructor did not introduce any new elements except the possibility of using household items for exercising (e.g. a ball or a broomstick). All movements and techniques were already known by the children from the training before the lockdown, and so they gradually became familiar with performing them in an unusual virtual situation.

Soon we modified the concept of the adults' lessons and incorporated more body movement and wooden weapon training. We thought that

we all lived in a secluded environment and needed the exercise more than an elaboration of a philosophical principle, which students could read about instead of being told during lesson time. Thus, the training began to start normally with the warming up and aikido techniques followed combining techniques or forms (i.e. shadow training) with principles for individual participants. Gradually, we incorporated into the course training with wooden weapons, such as the *jo* (staff), the *bokken* (sword) and the *tanto* (knife). We had to concede that falling and rolling from a standing position was not possible, because of limited space.

Self-defense can be conceptualized as a mode of physical communication with dense body interaction; because of social distancing this physical component had to be adapted. To make the virtual practice more tangible, we implemented more functional optical and acoustic stimuli in our training. Additionally, for participants without a training partner, individual tasks and exercises of defense techniques included kinesthetic stimuli from, for instance, a wooden weapon, a ball, or even a small pillow [Koerner and Staller 2020]. During the synchronous online training, interactive defense reactions to a simulated attack by the teacher, visually and acoustically mediated by the camera, was possible. On the other end of the screen, the participants could also take on the part of the attacker and the teacher showed the defense part. Our athletes, especially the children, liked this kind of virtual interaction.

As the weeks went by, we changed some aspects of the course content and kept others steady. There was progress in learning techniques, principles, and forms with the wooden weapons, and the students had the feeling of learning something new. We also included meditation and elementary qigong exercises. Additionally, group members were invited to contribute with exercises, for instance, from pilates, movements from wing chung or karate or to present a principle of aikido.

The course content gradually acquired a familiar recurring structure: a welcome talk in the beginning followed by training and ending with some talking. During these informal talks, students expressed themselves and their concerns. Information on COVID-19 was imparted by the teachers as well as information on the situation in other aikido schools inside and outside of the country. In this way, the feeling of belonging to a wider community was strengthened. Almost the same course structure was developed for the children's training. First talking, then doing aikido and then again talking so that kids could express wishes for their next lesson. The courses included warming up exercises, and techniques for developing balance, flexibility, and coordination skills in a very playful manner. Exercises with the *jo* staff (in some cases made from a newspaper) and ball as well as 'Brain Gym'

movements delighted the children. They understood that falling and rolling from a standing position was not possible and they adapted quickly; children even invented new exercises and felt free to ask for special techniques.

The first online training period lasted ten weeks. Then followed outdoor training during the summer months. After the training, it seemed like nobody really wanted to leave the outdoor training location and the group including the children felt like a big aikido family. Parents and partners took part in much post-training communication. After this period, we had a summer break and resumed training in September. Initially we could train in the gym, but soon the second lockdown was issued, in November 2020.

The online course was set up very quickly, our aikidokas followed the online lessons regularly and we even had some new students joining us. Our online teaching improved during the pandemic, transforming more and more aikido movements, adapting them to individual, solo, training, known as *kata* (form) or shadow training, common in other martial arts, but not in aikido. Initially, we showed simple techniques and step movements as *katas*; we then developed exercise sequences for more complex techniques that could be performed by individuals alone. Because there were always the two of us in the home dojo, the participants could also be shown the technique in the pair version, so that they were not solely dependent on their imagination. It was found beneficial both by advanced learners and, above all, by beginners. We should mention that the focus was on performing the technique alone, because most athletes did not have a training partner.

As teachers we had to navigate through all these changes and adapt curriculum, timetable, and digital means along the way, managing ideas and people in an altered working condition and precarious situation. Students responded positively to teachers' efforts, and this helped us as teachers to propel forward with renewed energy. The participants including the kids increasingly contributed their ideas, expertise and wishes to the training. We learned a lot about the bases of martial arts during this period and so did our students.

The next section addresses issues of learning.

4 LEARNING OUTCOMES

In our digital synchronous courses, many things related to the training remained the same though in another context. This routine helped maintain a feeling of continuity in learning even though the conditions had significantly altered. The motto that was expressed by aikido schools who endorsed online lessons was 'the dojo is where we train'. It had a ring of truth in it, as aikido students know that they can study aikido everywhere, literally, and this includes the digital world as well. According to the level of digital skills, all attending adults found a way to participate; over the weeks, most of the children were able to handle the computer, smartphone, and the software on their own (e.g. muting and unmuting the microphone, and switching on the video function). Children especially were proud of themselves for mastering this new knowledge.

Approximately 16 adult and adolescent students stayed with the group until the end of the first digital training period; they all followed the outdoor practice and most of them joined the second online courses during the second lockdown in November 2020. For the children, the situation developed differently: some parents did not find the time to bring their child to the outdoor training location. Other children could not attend the outdoor lessons, because they lived with family members who belong to the COVID-19 risk group. Four children who attended the online course were able to participate in the outdoor lessons regularly. The links to the videos uploaded on the aikido school channel on YouTube, which we made from the kids' online training, were sent to all parents during the summer break. Some children asked for this as a favour during the last outdoor course.

During the outdoor training, we could observe that the regular students had progressed in their kinesthetics and gross motor skills (i.e. balance and coordination) as well as knowledge of the art of aikido, especially in (wooden) weapon training. The mastering of the aikido defence techniques did not progress as it would have been when training in a dojo, but the visual perception and understanding had progressed enormously: e.g. changing hands in handling the wooden staff or self-correction of stances and steps without verbal explanation. We could also observe that many participants showed a quick and adequate reaction to attacks, even if these did not always correspond to the correct technique. Children, for example, stepped aside instead of freezing as they normally do. This observation led us to adjust accordingly the content of the online course during the second lockdown in autumn 2020.

For purposes of formative feedback, we invited comments from the students, and we conducted an anonymous online survey. For the minor participants, two questions were crafted that were sent to their parents, who could respond via email or telephone.

This feedback will be briefly discussed. The unsolicited comments we received during the outdoor training encouraged us to continue with our work:

'You [two teachers] set a millstone, not only for our daughter but for the whole family. We waited for the courses every week and they were something steady in the week, heartfelt congratulations' (Father around 40 years old, about his daughter, 6 years old).

Another example from an adult student:

'Probably you have heard this from everyone, but you [to us as teachers] were great; we followed the training with the whole family; we did all the exercises, and in the morning, we repeated them with the whole family; bravo to you, congratulations, it was great' (man, about 55 years old, with two kids 10 and 13 years old and a wife).

The above quotes are not meant as self-congratulatory, but rather as an indication of the kind of comments we received during all the months (now nearly a year) of providing online, synchronous, training. The reason did not lie solely in the content, as one may think, but that we took the lessons online, something that during the first lockdown was not at all common.

The questionnaire in the form of a small-scale survey we conducted contained nine closed and one open question and was carried out with the online tool Survey Monkey. The survey was open for several weeks. The questions were answered by nine regular attending students of the adult course, i.e., more than half of the group members. (The survey link was not sent to the adolescents for privacy reasons.)

The main results of this survey are described in qualitative terms. In terms of importance, students thought that contact and connection to teachers and contact with other members was most important, followed by keeping up with the art and their personal routine as well as doing physical exercise. Less important were information given on topics such as COVID-19 measures, progress, or preparation for aikido exams. In terms of what they missed in the online training, most of the students missed the rolling and falling exercises on the ground. The course furthermore provided them with a meaningful way of dealing with the everyday precarious world.

For purposes of receiving feedback from the children, two questions were sent to the parents by email and Google classroom: (1) Could you please describe what you liked about the digital aikido training with Ms. Vasiliki and Ms. Martina? (2) Could you please describe what you did not like about the digital aikido training. We received answers from 4 children aged 6, 8, 10, 12 and from their parents.

From a 6-year-old girl, who had attended aikido classes for 10 months before the lockdown, the father sent the scan of her handwritten answer to question (1):

'When the Corona lockdown began everything was completely broken. When the digital lessons began, I was happy again.'

And to question (2):

'I did not like that we could not be [physically] close.'

The other children, all boys, liked to meet the teachers and the other children, to learn aikido in a different way, namely at home, appreciated that the digital training distracted them from being secluded at home and enjoyed the exercises with the jo (wooden staff).

Personally, we did not expect such a positive feedback, and this gave us more energy to continue with our lessons and also to start writing up this article and share our experience with others inside and outside the field of martial arts training.

5 CONCLUSIONS, DISCUSSION, AND KEY POINTS OF DEPARTURE FOR THE FUTURE

From this online teaching project, we could draw many conclusions: for the children it was very important to have contact and physical exercise, especially, because normal schools and other sports did not do this during the first lockdown. Thus, they and their parents had a steady point of reference in their lives, a schedule that they looked forward to and to help them face the everyday challenges. The children developed further their coordination skills, visual perception and digital media skills and progressed in techniques and other components of the aikido training.

The same holds true for the adults. The fact that there was a possibility to continue online and get support from teachers and co-athletes were

often more important than the content of the training itself: for two hours their minds were distracted from their problems. Later, after solving the technical issues with the internet they were also grateful for the content, and they liked the design of the course; they even began contributing to the course material with suggestions, ideas, or techniques from other martial arts. Athletes learned to handle the wooden weapons and they progressed in the relevant knowledge and skills that are part of the aikido curriculum. Except from movements, techniques and principles, students learned to endure and to come through a difficult period. In doing so, their resilience and self-determination was enhanced, which are skills that students of aikido are required to learn and make their own if they want to succeed not only in their art, but arguably in their daily life as well [Tudor, Sarkar, and Spray 2019]. From time to time, we, as teachers had the impression that the possibility to teach online and connect to the students had a symbolic value of 'participation' that was greater than the teaching of the technique itself. Students and teachers felt that they were part of a community, serving ideals that were greater than themselves.

During the period of the first lockdown as well the time with less restricted measures, the lessons were adjusted to the situation and from online we went to outdoors training. The dialogue on international fora provided a starting point how to frame the training locally. There was a clear mission to connect and care for our group members and they in turn would help support their families and/or friends. The first target was to provide a kind of steadiness and normality to hold onto during the uncertain times of the lockdown. Then priorities were set as to the content of the actual training together with the technical means to ensure that the project could be grounded and get safe roots. Various social media were utilised in such a way as to provide different degrees of connection, and closeness, and contact between students (as well as the parents of the children) and teachers and between teachers and the outside world of ex-members and other interested parties.

The training helped everyone in our group, students, and teachers, to propel forward and endure a precarious situation. The course setting and the training provided a space, as well as time, and connection to other people, even if this was mediated by technology. The group members could tap from common resources that gave everyone involved more courage and hope while it facilitated the individual coping with the situation in a decent and creative manner.

From personal observations, students who take part in online courses and are satisfied with them seem more positively oriented to the possibility of going on with the online, synchronous lessons and are also more patient with the precarious situation of the pandemic. The same pattern was observed by other teachers with whom we have contact.

When those students who had initially refused to take part in the online lesson finally did participate, they also changed their views on digital learning.

In answering the third question we posed in this essay, namely the insights gained for the future of martial arts. We have drawn several lessons approached by different angles.

Considering online training from a pedagogical perspective, the courses integrate and may offer:

Caring attitude: Central to the design of the courses during the pandemic was for us developing a caring sphere with each student and with the group to foster emotional and psychological wellbeing.

Self-determination and participation: These were cultivated as gradually the participants increasingly contributed their ideas, expertise and wishes to the training and we encouraged this attitude. On the other hand, not all our students could take part in the synchronous online training, due to the lack of technical equipment, time, or space at home. For some of them we provided the possibility to participate from a distance through relevant teaching material posted on the social media and the YouTube channel. Some of the students joined us later during the outdoor training though they had not taken part in the online lessons. Participants had the opportunity to act upon the restrictive situation and they could choose to participate in different ways or choose not to take part; in other words, students had the feeling of having control over the situation.

Solidarity: Some participants took responsibility for maintaining the aikido community and care for other individuals by offering support with technical issues and individual problems. Others shared their concerns and difficulties due to the social distancing in general, like worsened work situation or health issues.

Considering the online synchronous course from a sociological perspective, rather than knowledge of a craft, the courses are important, for they provide participants social benefits as for instance:

Social support: Providing support is a resource that individuals could use to overcome difficulties in critical or threatening life situations. Individual athletes may feel empowered and resilient.

Community: Anchoring an individual in a group and the group in a community creates a larger network from which individuals can tap resources to overcome a difficult situation creating lasting ties.

Social cohesion: Martial arts contribute to social cohesion when helping individuals and groups to manage critical situations in various ways, such as staying calm, seeking solutions to problems in a composed manner and extending a helping hand.

The above-mentioned characteristics of martial arts do not of course function seamlessly: the world is full of conflicts and the martial arts world is not an exception. However, we chose to showcase those elements that contribute to the preservation of society from a sociological perspective.

Considering the online synchronous course from the perspective of martial arts, we observed the following:

Extension of martial arts principles: The training was enriched with practices and exercises directly aimed at bringing peace to the mind and enhancing awareness. In addition, body movement that expressed flow of energy was given room in the practice. New and seasoned aikidokas attempt consciously to apply these principles in everyday life settings extending the principles of martial arts to everyday situations.

Inventing different training strategies: The kinesthetic stimuli can certainly also be used to support 'normal' training; the children even asked for it. Using optic and acoustic stimuli, exercising shadow training, and developing forms (katas) were among the positive outcomes of online training. The syllabus of aikido was modified; other elements were stressed and the syllabus was enriched in several ways.

Self-defense in aikido involves in the first instance avoiding attacks and conflicts. Following from this comes a response that it should be void of force or violence. The use of force in aikido forms only the last resort when all other preventive measures have failed. It should be also considered that even experienced athletes might have difficulties in applying a simple technique effectively under the pressure of a real attack. Physical skills, for example, such as getting out of the way of an attack by stepping back, and staying calm, being grounded, or showing a non-aggressive attitude can be exercised by individuals in remote, digital lessons [Sutton 2020]. Additionally, conflict de-escalation skills (verbal and non-verbal) could become important in our future digital as well as face-to-face aikido training.

Although the isolated training of defense movements offered an opportunity for developing competence, many teachers and students point out that this could not completely replace face-to-face contact and physical proximity. Overall, we found that learning physical self-

defense techniques to face violence in a real world can be assisted by intensive online training, because a large part of learning has to do with mastering how to move one's own body before s/he applies a technique to another person [Sutton 2020].

The argument we have put forward is that regular contact with group members beyond the digital lessons, openness, flexibility in the course design and communication played a vital role to keep the group together during the first lockdown. Contact and the online courses motivated them to keep coming back to the online lessons. Later, students followed to the outdoor, then again back to the indoor training and back to the online training again. From a pedagogical and a sociological perspective, it could be said that the online courses had an empowering effect on the group members and on group cohesion. These aspects are also supported by the disciplines mentioned in the theoretical grounding of the digital learning. In addition, the constant exchange of views between the two authors in their function as aikido teachers as well as their scientific expertise, professional attitude, and the regular communication with other Aikido teachers in Greece and Germany have benefited this project.

In relation to the future of the martial arts and aikido in particular, the pandemic poses many challenges, the most important of which – in our eyes – is to open the discussion on the mission and the social role or function we would like these arts to play when the ground on which they are based, face-to-face physical training, is not possible. In addition, the discussion shall probably open other issues like syllabus content. The work we have been doing shows that there are promising areas of development, such as restructuring the lesson from a pedagogic and didactic aspect. Furthermore, martial arts, like any human institution have a role to play in society that goes beyond becoming skillful in a craft. This 'beyond' needs to be addressed, discovered, and created.

There is a lot to be done, and certainly more research is needed on a variety of issues that arose during the pandemic, as for example to explore the situation, map the problems and solutions martial arts teachers, schools and students gave depending on context in different countries. Most aikido teachers did not take their classes online as far as we can gather from informal sources on social media. Perhaps this disheartening image changes completely if research is done to uncover the myriad ways student of martial arts keep up with training that is not visible in general and in lockdown conditions particularly.

It is also worth adding that during the second lockdown (autumn-winter 2020-2021) gradually but steadily the number of schools taking their lessons online increased. Lastly, many schools, like ours, that had

provided online training acquired new members from other countries as well. Invitations to teach in another city and forging friendships with teachers living far away became suddenly possible through the extensive use of digital technology and people changing views, attitudes, and practices. These are promising facts for the future practice of martial arts.

In conclusion, connecting with and maintaining active contact between teachers and group members, showing care and concern, going on with the training online even if circumstances or locations were not 'perfect' or 'normal' helped many individuals from our aikido community and us personally to better cope with the precarious pandemic situation.

Finally, online, synchronous lessons changed us and our training. It is a transformation witnessed by other teachers as well, one that enriches our lessons, makes us more creative in designing lessons and opens up possibilities for cooperation and training beyond borders. Martial arts may benefit from these developments, which certainly make up a rich field of study.

Dedication

To Anita Köhler (1961-2018), and to Paul Köster (1954-2021), honoured to have been your students in our history of walking the path of aikido.

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