

# Teaching in Online Classes: Social Presence from the Perspective of Michel Foucault and René Magritte

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**Abstract:** This article qualitatively analyzes the virtual essence of online classes, showing, according to the theory of French Discourse Analysis, the challenges to social boundaries imposed by the interference of technology. First-year undergraduate students at a private university in Ribeirao Preto, Brazil, reported discomfort experienced in practical and theoretical activities through the Google Classroom environment. Researchers emphasize that this results from an effort aimed at social and emotional projection as real people in the virtual environment. The discussion involves works by Foucault, Magritte to explain the role of language - to define the possibilities of appearance and the values of truth - in the institutional presentation of the virtual environment: 'this is a classroom'. The language makes a 'binding' of the imaginary within the school space. The malaise results from what Foucault calls image betrayal, as there is a 'negotiation' with the body, in order to discipline it and mold it into a virtual context, for it is not being experienced or experienced directly. It is up to teachers and students to update the new 'language habit' in relation to the interweaving, in the computer window, of living and visibility of the classroom. The awareness of the culture of deception enables to interrogate simulations on the screen and the nature of appearances in themselves, making it possible to explore widely the formation process of the 'social presence', which intermediates between computers and the human being.

**Keywords:** Discourse Analysis. Language. Virtual Environment. Social Presence. Teaching.

## 1 Introduction

The online teaching practice was greatly boosted in 2020 due to the social isolation imposed by the Brazilian government. Reports from teachers and students are recurrent with respect to a certain malaise arising from this practice, which became mandatory for some months. In this article, we discuss the results of student appreciation at the end of three months of online classes, under the qualitative approach of the French Discourse Analysis theory [1] [2] [3] [4] [5] taking into account the result filling out a form filled in by students evaluating practical and theoretical activities through the Google Classroom virtual environment.

This article is guided by some works by the Belgian painter René Magritte [10][12] and the French philosopher Michel Foucault [2] [3] [4] [5]. As for the latter's works, *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* stands out (This is not a pipe) [5] in which the former's screens on the betrayal of the images are interrogated.

The social frontier [6] is an important concept for the considerations of this article that deals with the construction of the disposition of individuals in relation to study and work. The virtual quality of online classes offers challenges with regard to social boundaries, whether subjective or objective: Personal contact is replaced by a virtual image; the interference of technology accelerates the learning process, transgresses the process of classical teaching and makes those involved, teacher and student, position themselves from a place out of the context to which they were accustomed until then.

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## 2 Online Communications and Social Presence

Garrison et al. [7], in search of satisfactory educational experiences in the online modality, developed concepts that could serve as a model for e-Learning. Among them are three essential elements: social presence, cognitive presence and teaching presence. The concept of social presence is of great value for the discursive analysis of this article, as it refers to the ability of participants in a virtual environment to project themselves, socially and emotionally, as 'real people' [7] (p. 94).

In addition to social presence, other components of online education, according to the authors [7] are: Cognitive presence, which consists of using complex and critical reasoning; and the presence of teaching, which refers to a pedagogical paradigm that establishes educational value for online activity and, at the same time, refers to the satisfaction of students regarding effective learning. It is the presence of teaching that characterizes the government's action to establish educational rules and norms that make learning results possible in the social context. The educational institution puts these norms into practice when planning the learning process, facilitating teacher-student interaction.

Due to the discussion about experiences about online classes, the virtual community stands out, which in this article is represented by Google Classroom. The latter can be conceptualized as the place where there is guidance of cognitive processes directed to an educational point of view, pedagogically speaking, which must be efficient and effective for teaching and learning. The actions of teachers and students must be integrated in the online context, in a collaborative work. It should be noted that integration and collaboration, taking place in a virtual environment, gain the same quality as virtual ones, which is of fundamental importance for the discussion of the content of this article.

## 3 Methodologies and Literature Review on Online Learning

We seek to evidence a critical version of online teaching practices by shifting theory to the practical context of the classroom described by first-year undergraduate students in a university course in the city of Ribeirao Preto, Brazil. The data collected lead to question that the practice of online classes, although revolutionary, harbors an alleged 'error', the impact of which was uneasy in some respondents. It was found that this discomfort stems from the virtual quality of the classes, in an effort to build the 'social presence' [7] (p. 94). Linguistic theory is confronted with the information obtained from the students to carry out a qualitative analysis in search of a solution.

According to the discursive method [1], the individual's body is immersed in the social context under an 'immediate apprehension'. Something in the order of politics covers the subjectivity of this individual, regulates his ways of thinking, speaking and acting [8].

Language plays a relevant role in social and cultural practices precisely because it is a 'vehicle and target for complex relations of knowledge and power in the so-called disciplinary society' [9] (p. 204). Thus, the function of value and truth is given through complex social relations that imply a notion of power, determining what is lawful or appropriate to say, for example. In 'discursive practice [...] institutional, social, epistemic and historical factors must be considered' [9] (p. 205). The way 'how' information is transmitted is of interest to discursive analysis [8].

With a focus on qualitative analysis, the relationships between teachers and students are observed in a comparison between the previous experience in the classroom (reality) and the experience of the virtual classroom of Google Classroom. These experiences of the subject, whether student or teacher, coexist in the institutional space, without maintaining real relationships between them. These are two simultaneous considerations and well separated from each other, within the space of the educational institution. One element, however, unites them in a transformative way: The institutional determination that the classroom environment 'is a classroom'. The following message is sent to the student and the teacher: 'This is a classroom', overlapping previous and real classroom experiences with the experience in online classes. The nature of this connection is given by the Discourse Analysis theory, when questioning the way 'how' hypotheses are posed with their respective interpretations: the pedagogical discourse 'provides-imposes reality and, together with it, its meaning' [1] (p. 164), under evidence of the transparency of language that determines how things should be [8](p. 103).

Michel Foucault [2] shows that language is not intended to 'say' the 'reality', but it creates the dimension of discourse, which does more than designate: They are practices that form the objects they speak about' [9] (p. 223). The framework in discursive theory is not constituted by 'things', 'facts', 'realities' or 'beings', but by rules that name or designate objects, differentiating the state of things and relationships that are put into play. It is the language that defines the possibilities

of appearance and the values of truth [3] (pp. 120-121).

Pêcheux [1] (p. 295), in turn, explains that the socio-historical context gives the subject an identity to act, causing 'the material conditions of man's existence to determine the forms of his conscience', through 'repetition of descriptive evidence'.

It is under this relationship between language and context that we analyze the emergence of Google Classroom, designating the association of a concept (virtual classroom) with its situational context (the reality experienced by the individual in a classroom). The pronoun 'this' in 'this is a classroom' refers to a situation, at the time when the speech is produced by educational institutions. Personal or demonstrative pronouns are called 'deictic' because they don't have their own referential value, but refer to the situation in which the discourse was produced.

#### 4 Discussions of Results

According to the discursive theory [1], it can be said that what we have in the image of the classroom (Google Classroom) is not exactly a classroom (see Figure 1). The Classroom is presented in a way associated with the expression 'this is a classroom'. Therefore, there is a need for an effort to convince that there is a 'social presence', that is, that the participants of the Classroom virtual environment project themselves, socially and emotionally, as 'real people'[7] (p. 94).



**Fig. 1:** 'This is a classroom'.

The image of the classroom (Google Classroom) is just the didactic, imaginary continuation of a speech, which is the commonplace for image and language (spoken or written). Thus, it can be said that there is a 'mooring' within the school space. This space is institutional and, therefore, is disciplined by the government as to what is spoken and the place from which each speaks. This is previously established by pedagogical rules and regulations, giving the necessary stability for voices and texts [8].

The painting L'Apparition ('The apparition') by René Magritte [10] (see Figure 2), illustrates well the effort that must be made to adapt to the 'possibilities of appearance and [to] truth values' [3] (pp. 120-121) previously defined by the speech.

Magritte [10] (Figure 2) shows a man dressed in black, with his back, and around him are balloons with the following words: *fauteuil* (sofa); *nuage* (cloud); *fusil* (rifle); *horizon*; and *cheval* (horse). The artist challenges the viewer to imagine the landscape portrayed in his work. The same is true for teachers and students who are faced with the need to use Google Classroom to teach and attend classes, respectively. It is inevitable that they use their imagination to build a classroom with all its elements and start working on it.



**Fig. 2:** L'Apparition (Magritte, 1928).

When asked about the level of effort to attend online classes, comparing it with that made to attend face-to-face classes, most first-year undergraduate students at a private university revealed to be making a lot of effort (Figure 3). Among the responses, the following stand out:

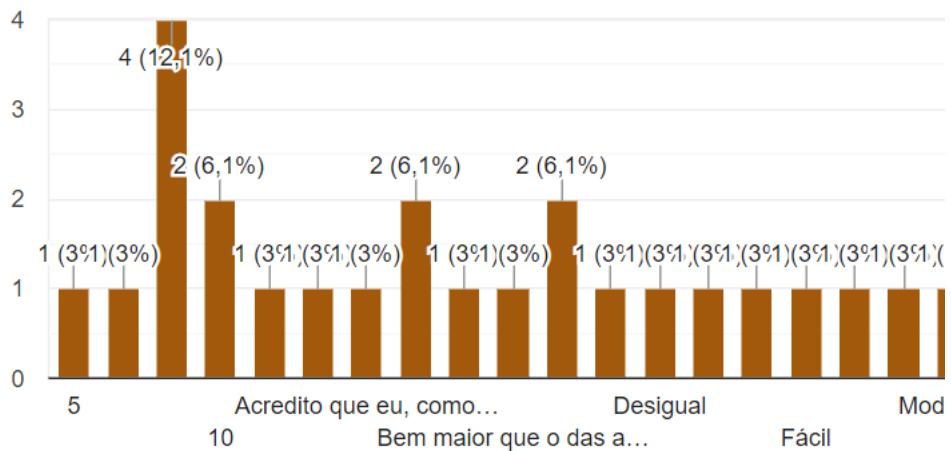
- Who was born to attend classroom classes, does not comfortably adapt to online classes.
- The lack of stimulation and the difficulty of absorbing all content in a positive way.
- In addition to having the internet fail these days, the difficulty of staying focused during class and explanation is something that concerns me. I can't focus on virtual classes the way I focused on face-to-face classes.
- Do everything on your own.
- Less productive than face-to-face classes and causes distractions at home.
- Stay in front of the computer for a long time.
- Study environment with many distractions: possibility of falling off the internet or the same crash during class; absence of face-to-face contact; absence of interactions in a pleasant environment with colleagues and teachers; cancellation of courses that could not be passed through the classroom; too lazy to wake up and get out of bed, since classes end up being attended by many in their own room.
- It is not the same thing as physical classroom.
- Interruptions and noises inside the house, it seems that in the classroom face to face the teacher has more freedom and because of that the class becomes more fluid.
- Poor connection, communication failure, distance between the student and the teacher.
- The lack of direct contact with the teachers [...], the lack of a division between leisure space (home / room) and study space (college) made the experience more complicated: we are going through a moment of great vulnerability and the lack of this division ends up overloading.

The discomfort caused by participating in online classes is related to what Foucault [3] calls image betrayal. The body is outside the real context of a classroom and participants in the virtual environment should strive to 'project themselves socially and emotionally as' real people " [7]( p. 94). There is a 'negotiation' with the body, in order to discipline it and mold it into an imaginary context, which is not being directly experienced.

The individual is brought into this situation due to different voices, whether they come from the media or from the school, who take the floor to speak for themselves: 'this is a classroom'. Although the individual, student or teacher, sees only one screen, something makes a connection for him to be complicit with what he is seeing. According to Foucault [2] [11] there is a power to designate words, which makes appearance something without reference; makes the image stand out from the reality being experienced. This power makes a link from a similarity that defies reality, in the sense of tying what the teacher and student see. On the one hand is the real experience of being personally in a classroom. On the other hand, there is the appearance of a classroom that combines, through the discourse of the school and the media, with an experience previously lived, thus simulating the affirmation of a classroom experience, which unites the individual to the virtual environment. 'as if' participating in a real classroom.

### Como você classificaria o nível de esforço para assistir às aulas online?

33 respostas



**Fig. 3:** Research carried out with first-year undergraduate students at a private university in the city of Ribeirão Preto, June 2020.

What we have in Classroom is an appearance of reality. Although the virtual environment has a screen that simulates blackboard, it has students, teachers, tasks are developed, tests and a discipline is taught, it is not a classroom. The painting *La Condition humaine et La Cascade* (The human condition and the counterattack,) [12] (Figure 4) imitates the view of a landscape through the window. What the viewer sees is a picture and not the reality of the horizon through the window; the counter attack would be the bad, unpleasant effect of not enjoying a natural landscape. A comparison of this work by the Belgian painter is established with the 'window' of the computer, in which the virtual space is based on the fluidity of identity, duplicating the presence in real presence and 'social presence'. This 'window' makes a metaphor of the 'self' by simulating it in an online room [13] [14], decentralizing it, making it temporary by mischaracterizing its truth or unity [15]. The sense of identity becomes fluid, multiple and decentralized [16].



**Fig. 4:** *La Condition humaine et La Cascade* (Magritte, 1933).

According to what has been discussed so far, Classroom brings the affirmation of a virtuality. This is contrasted with another work by Magritte [17] (Figure 5), in which he portrays a pipe and associates it with the following statement: 'This is not a pipe'.



**Fig. 5:** La Trahison des images (Magritte, 1929).

In *La Trahison des images* [17], the painter deals with the betrayal of images and puts in check the role of language in identifying the image with the thing itself [11]. The painter empties the role of language as a convention, empties the meaning of what we mean by a pipe, detaching the pipe image of a pipe of reality.

The Google Classroom is presented, under the power of image seduction, retaining the singularity of experiences in the virtuality of online classes, incorporating the 'social presence'. On the other hand, Magritte's work [17] is shown, with the image of the pipe associated with a negation - 'this is not a pipe' -, dismantling the romanticism of the image and exposing the betrayal that comes from it; protesting the way things 'need' to be [11]. The malaise results from the culture of simulation, in which being so immersed in it leads to identifying it with reality.

The lack of personal contact in online classes creates anguish, as there is a relationship between the individual and something that is similar but, in fact, is not. The discomfort stems from the imaginary. There is an effort to represent reality. In the words of the students, surface and depth are confused and cancel each other out. Although they refer to something material, the subjective phenomenon goes through the same process:

- The lack of direct contact with the teachers [...], the lack of a division between leisure space (home / room) and study space (college) made the experience more complicated: we are going through a moment of great vulnerability and the lack of this division ends up overloading.
- It is not the same thing as physical classroom.

This discomfort causes the initial problem to be reconsidered. Despite the great similarity, there is no choice of teachers and students as to differentiate the nature of representation. The function of defining 'appearance possibilities and truth values' is linked to the role of language [3] (pp. 120-121). It is language that imposes meaning.

The educational function of online classes must be recognized in order to appear, unequivocally and without hesitation, what it represents. In *L'Apparition* ("The Apparition", Magritte) [10], the balloons with the words 'cloud', 'rifle', 'sofa', 'horse', refer the observer to the mental representation of the elements that would be composing the context of this painting. This same situation of effort in composing the context is found by students and teachers in the experience of online classes. The figure of the Classroom on a screen refers the individual to determinations that are there grafted by the institutional discourse, leading the viewer-reader to 'objectify them' in the form of a real classroom. The result of this process is in the interlacing of image (Classroom on the computer screen) and discourse ('this is a classroom'), reorganizing both into a hybrid entity to better demonstrate the resemblance to a real classroom.

Qualitative analysis makes it possible to compare some elements registered under the virtual representation of a classroom with the context of educational regulations. These regulations are outside the contours of the computer screen but are registered within that perimeter through educational institutions. Thus, the text of the laws that regulate education and the image of the Google Classroom are mixed inside the represented classroom. Due to the close relationship between the two, the distinction between reality and image is impaired. The transcendental field of representation is installed, causing an update of meanings in the individuals involved.

The link between the painting by Magritte [17] showing the pipe and the Google Classroom is in the expression that presents them: 'this is...'. Although Magritte uses the expression to deny that the image is the pipe, unveiling a reality, in the context of the Classroom, on the other hand, this expression affirms the presentation of the virtual classroom. It can be seen that 'authenticity' is at stake challenging human vulnerability in search of a 'validation of the self' [18].

## 5 Final Considerations

According to the considerations made, it is understood that it is up to teachers and students to update the new 'language habit', so to speak, in relation to online classes. The body denounces the contradiction: Behind all the virtual apparatus there is a certain frustration on both sides.

Although organized in order to constitute a classroom, Google Classroom assumes the classroom's own visibility, unifying the reality experienced with what is visible on the computer screen. It aggregates the educational regulations, which give it the shape of a whole, when the virtual becomes known as the very thing that it talks about: The classroom. This is a strategy of the imaginary, which opens the way for a new discursive order in which what is seen and what is interpreted from it become indistinguishable things, intertwined with each other, in such a way that everything can seem normal, returning to a certain order of things.

This article is intended to serve as a disturbing element of this new order. It seeks to encourage a 'reading' that is adapted to the culture of deception, so that it is possible to measure, criticize, judge and interrogate simulations on the screen and the nature of appearances in themselves [19]. This is the only way to achieve a better understanding of how technology and simulation influence thinking in times of online classes and, consequently, it becomes possible to explore the formation process of the 'social presence', which makes intermediation between computers and the human being.

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