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Digital Herrnhut: From virtual excursions to complex blended learning setups

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Abstract

The aim of the DigitalHerrnhut project was to digitally index and didactically prepare the extensive, interdisciplinary knowledge archives of the Moravian Church within the framework of digitally supported university teaching. The core activities included the creation of virtual excursions, on the basis of which four immersive self-learning modules were developed as Open Educational Resources (OER) and combined with subject-related case studies in blended learning seminars to promote practical and collaborative skills. In addition, ImagoFolio was developed in the context of the project, a cost-effective, mobile digitization setup that has been successfully used in teaching and in international collaborations, for example in South Africa, to digitize tens of thousands of manuscripts. The text sources thus made available formed the basis for seminars in the Master's program in Digital Humanities, in which students acquired digital skills in areas such as XML annotation, metadata linking, and (semi-)automatic transcription using eScriptorium, and linked their results to the virtual excursions.

Ziel des Projektes DigitalHerrnhut war die digitale Erschließung und didaktische Aufbereitung der umfangreichen, interdisziplinär relevanten Wissensarchive der Herrnhuter Brüdergemeine im Rah-men einer digital gestützten Hochschullehre. Zu den Kernaktivitäten gehörte die Erstellung von virtuellen Exkursionen, auf deren Basis vier immersive Selbstlernmodule als Open Educational Re-sources (OER) entwickelt und in Blended Learning-Seminaren mit fachbezogenen Fallstudien kom-biniert wurden, um praktische und kollaborative Kompetenzen zu fördern. Darüber hinaus wurde im Projektkontext ImagoFolio entwickelt, ein kostengünstiges, mobiles Digitalisierungs-Setup, das erfolgreich in der Lehre und in internationalen Kooperationen, beispielsweise in Südafrika, zur Digi-talisierung zehntausender Handschriften eingesetzt. Die so erschlossenen Textquellen bildeten die Grundlage für Seminare im Masterstudiengang Digital Humanities, in denen Studierende digitale Kompetenzen in Bereichen wie XML-Annotation, Metadatenverknüpfung und (semi-)automatischer Transkription mittels eScriptorium erwarben und ihre Ergebnisse mit den virtuellen Exkursionen verbanden.

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1. A project report

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed enormous challenges for higher education worldwide and at the same time acted as an unprecedented catalyst for digital transformation. The sudden restrictions on face-to-face teaching led to unprecedented changes and innovations in teaching formats. These forced changes have yielded valuable experiences and concepts for modernizing teaching. At the same time, however, there is still a need to standardize and evaluate the formats that have emerged, as they were implemented as spontaneous innovations rather than as part of a larger teaching concept.

As part of the "Collaboration & Internationalization" field of work, the DigitalHerrnhut subproject focused on the digital development and didactic preparation of the extensive knowledge archives of the Moravian Church. This project report summarizes the findings and experiences gained in the project and places them in the context of the consortium. First, the initial situation and the preliminary work on which the project was based are discussed. This is followed by a summary of the project activities, before the findings from the evaluation of the teaching formats developed are discussed. A brief conclusion, including an outlook on the continuation and consolidation of various project results, concludes the article.

2. Initial situation

The Moravian Church is a Pietist religious community that was founded in the early 18th century and spread worldwide within a few decades. As such, it represents (1) a unique subject of research for a wide range of disciplines – from theology, history, and art history to linguistics [a] and geography and botany [b], to name but a few. On the other hand, it (2) opens up a field of work that spans generations and institutions.

Founded in the 1720s in Berthelsdorf, eastern Saxony, by Nikolaus Ludwig, Imperial Count of Zinzendorf, the community was characterized by the international mobility of its members and close networking among European scholars and patrons.[1][2] As early as the 1730s, it began its worldwide missionary work, which brought it into contact with numerous cultural circles that were often little known in Europe.

Fig. 1: The Herrnhut Mission in Suriname (from 1735) from the Mission Atlas of the Moravian Church (1860).

The Moravian Church's extensive publishing activities contributed significantly to European perceptions of the world and created central archives of European knowledge. These included handwritten and later printed periodicals, letters, and extensive descriptions of missionary activities and areas such as Greenland, North America, South America (see Fig. 1), and South Africa.[3] These writings, supplemented by works on missionary theology, created an incomparable textual cosmos that describes the activities of a globally networked community over 300 years and brought knowledge about other cultures and continents to Europe. Many of these textual records have not yet been made accessible; many others have been 'forgotten'.[4]

The digital cataloguing of these sources is therefore important, as it makes a forgotten part of cultural history visible and accessible. At the same time, this thematic context offers great potential for (research-oriented) university teaching. For example, working on unexplored topics can be a valuable experience of self-efficacy . This subject also offers various opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration and the testing of digital methods. This potential should be tapped for academic teaching with DigitalHerrnhut.

Digital skills have become essential in today's university and working world in the wake of digital transformations. Accordingly, modern university teaching should offer added value in this area as well, in addition to imparting content and skills for reflection and critical engagement with a subject. At the same time, the

coronavirus pandemic has made it clear how diverse the possibilities are for supplementing face-to-face teaching with digital and hybrid teaching methods. Significant added value can be achieved in terms of accessibility, flexibility, and learner motivation.

Fig. 2: Networking of digitally developed sources at the relevant location in virtual excursions (illustration: Alexander Lasch CC BY 4.0 Int.).

So-called virtual excursions served as the starting point for the development of innovative teaching modules in DigitalHerrnhut. These are virtual models of historical buildings that are enriched with multimedia content and can thus be made useful for teaching. At the start of the project, the Kleinwelka nurses' home was the first building from the context of the Moravian Church to be developed as a virtual excursion (see Fig. 2 with internet reference [c]). The experience gained from this pilot project revealed great potential for university teaching and other educational contexts.[5] This potential was to be utilized, tested, and evaluated in DigitalHerrnhut.

3. Project activities

An important part of the project activities was data indexing and, more specifically, the development of a workflow for indexing handwritten texts from the 18th and 19th centuries. The digitization setup developed was intended to (1) deliver high-quality (i.e., long-term archival) results, (2) be easy to use with a low barrier to entry, (3) be inexpensive and portable, and (4) be suitable for use in teaching contexts.

In order to meet these criteria, ImagoFolio was developed,[6] improved, and put into practice during the project period.To make it easier for users to get started, instructional videos were created in German and English, among others, with our dissemination partner, the Saxon State Library – Dresden State and University Library (SLUB Dresden), which now offers the rental of the setup as a service based on our experience.

Fig. 3: Presentation of the ImagoFolio primary digitization setup and training at the Genadendal Museum, South Africa (photo: Jördis Römer CC BY 4.0 Int.).

ImagoFolio was successfully used both in project-related teaching and in a collaboration with two archives in South Africa (see Fig. 3). As an external transfer of project results, student employees of the Genadendal Museum and the Moravian Theological Centre Cape Town were trained in the use of ImagoFolio as part of international, hybrid workshops . Within a few months, the students trained in this way were able to digitize over 50,000 pages of historical manuscripts.

The text sources developed in the context of the Moravian Knowledge Network project hub are put to practical use through their integration into university teaching. They formed the basis for various seminars that, in addition to primary digitization, focused in particular on the preparation and evaluation of data on the subject and were integrated into the master's program in Digital Humanities. The seminar From Manuscript to Edition, for example, focused on the annotation of digitized texts in XML format. The standardized linking of metadata in WikiData and FactGrid also plays a decisive role in this context and was promoted in collaborative teaching projects.

In the context of events such as the seminar on the indexing of pre-modern manuscripts, stu-

dents worked in particular on the (semi-)automatic transcription of manuscripts using the open-source software eScriptorium. Due to its free accessibility, ease of use in a browser, and the possibility of collaborative work, this software proved to be particularly suitable not only for academic teaching, but also for integration into non-university contexts such as schools and citizen science education in face-to-face and hybrid environments (see Fig. 4).

Fig. 4: Working with the eScriptorium Desk in a hybrid workshop between Genadendal and TU Dresden and SLUB Dresden in March 2025 (photos: Judith Balie CC BY 4.0 Int.).

Overall, collaborative work on data indexing in the context of academic teaching has proven to be extremely useful. In this way, students were not only able to acquire various digital skills that may also be beneficial for their future careers. Working together on research topics that were perceived as relevant – in South Africa, for example, the 100-year history of the Genadendal community can only be accessed through German-language manuscripts – and on material that had not yet been accessed was repeatedly highlighted as particularly motivating. In addition, it became apparent that a collaborative and low-threshold workflow accessible to a larger group (ideally browser-based) is essential given the amount of data available.

During the course of the project, not only were a total of ten new virtual excursions in the USA and South Africa recorded, but four self- s were also developed based on these, which use gamification elements to convey various topics in language history in an immersive way. On the one hand, these modules can be completed as a stand-alone self- course. They are available for free use via Wikiversity (see Fig. 5 with internet reference [f]). On the other hand, they form the basis for a blended learning seminar, which, in addition to the content focus of the self-study modules, is specifically designed to promote digital and collaborative skills.

Fig. 5: Self-learning courses based on virtual excursions in Wikiversity.

Fig. 6: Virtual excursions at Whitefield House Nazareth, PA USA (Image: Alexander Lasch CC BY 4.0 Int.).

The self-study modules make use of virtual environments by storing content in thematically appropriate locations. The module Introduction to the Moravian Church, for example, is based on the digital twin of a museum in Nazareth, Pennsylvania. The various museum rooms each represent a thematic section in the self-study module. An exhibition room furnished like a prayer hall contains information on the theological foundations of the Moravian

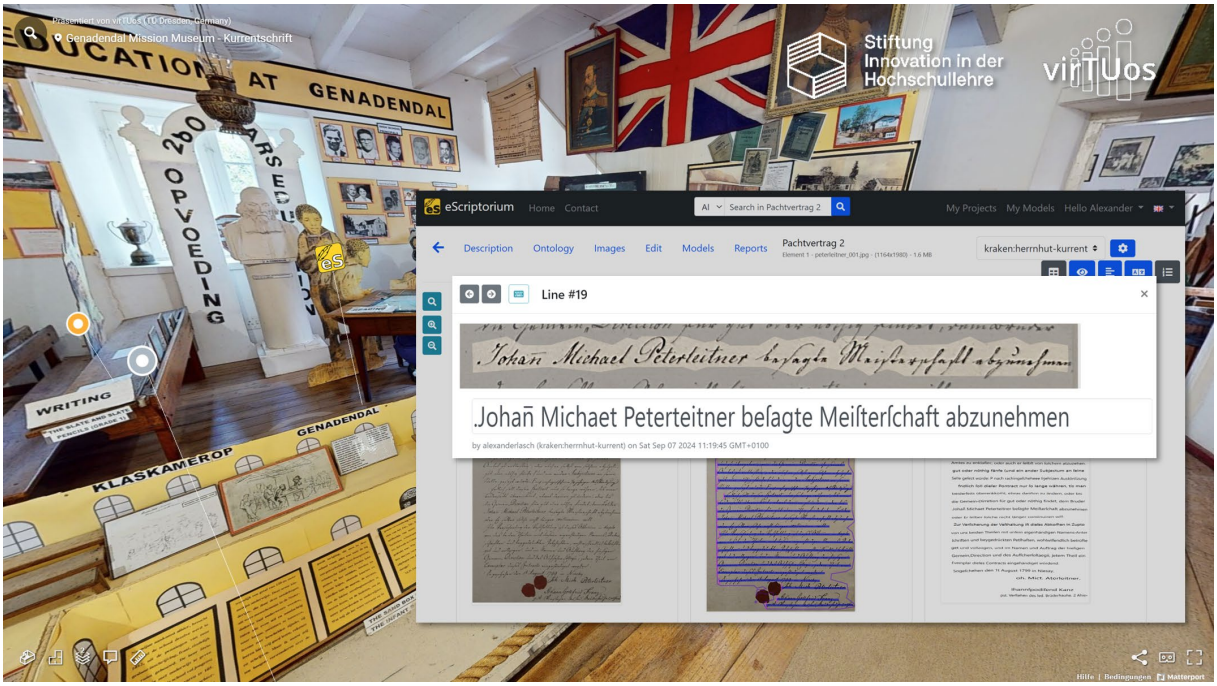

Fig. 7: Self-learning module on German cursive script at the Genadendal Museum, South Africa (illustration: Alexander Lasch CC BY 4.0 Int.).

Church and their linguistic implementation; a room with historical musical instruments is used as a place to explore the interplay of language and music in the Moravian context. This thematic division by room connects content with visual anchors. Furthermore, this approach allows learners to move freely through the building and thus work on topics according to their own interests and in their own chosen order – or simply wonder why Herrnhut stars hang in the museum shop of Whitefield House Nazareth, Pennsylvania (cf. Fig. 6 with internet reference [f]).

The self-learning module on German cursive script in particular also makes use of gamification elements (cf. Fig. 7 with internet reference [f]). The aim of this module is to teach readers how to read the handwriting that was common in German-speaking countries until the beginning of the 20th century.

In addition to introductory audiovisual materials, the self-study module includes exercises of varying degrees of difficulty. Correct answers to more difficult questions unlock access to further exercises. To do this, the link to another virtual room where these are stored is hidden behind a password. The password corresponds to a solution word that must be identified from a historical manuscript. This manuscript originates from the location of the corresponding building, which is unlocked by a correct solution. In this way, the connection between the topic and the location is established.

In the blended learning seminar mentioned above, the self-study modules are used for input phases between face-to-face sessions. The design of this teaching format was based on findings from the DikoLint project with regard to the format of Virtual Collaborative Learning (VCL) (see the article in this volume). For example, the approach of subject-related case studies, which are worked on in student working groups, and the distribution of clear roles such as group leader or secretary were adopted from VCL. Development and analysis projects dealing with the documents digitized in the project context were selected as case studies. Targeted work in groups on a text indexing project brings a number of didactic benefits:

- The practical and methodological skills taught in the self-study modules, such as reading Kurrent script or corpus linguistic analysis of digital text collections, can be tested, deepened, and consolidated in a practical way.

- Working with sources that have not yet been scientifically explored is a highly motivating factor.
- The development of collaborative skills in the areas of organization, task distribution, and project planning through self-directed and research-oriented work promotes critical thinking and practice in problem-solving strategies.

At the end of the project, the project groups develop a creative, digitally supported presentation. This not only gives students the opportunity to understand the projects of the other groups. The development of digital presentation formats also represents another field in which students can develop and further develop their skills. These may include, for example, programming skills, the use of digital presentation tools, or the recording and editing of audiovisual media. Examples include the "Digital Herrnhut Cemetery"[10] and the visualization of Christian Ignatius Latrobe's journey to and through South Africa in 1815 and 1816. [11][12]

The work of the project groups is continuously supervised by tutors. Based on the role of e-tutors in the VCL, they form the interface between students and the teacher. They accompany the group process and are integrated into the communication channels used by the groups for coordination. In this way, they are readily available for questions, help the teacher track the progress of the groups, and can alert the teacher to any difficulties within the groups. In practical testing, the tutors proved to be helpful support for the project groups, keeping the barriers to asking for help low, as students often find it easier to turn to other students with problems in project work than to the teacher.

A central aspect of the project work was the dissemination of the results. Throughout the entire project period, work progress and results were disseminated in a variety of ways to a wider audience beyond the university via . The teaching materials developed are available for reuse as open educational resources via Wikiversity and Twillo. In addition to the virtual excursions and self-learning modules described in detail in the previous section, these also include lectures, instructional videos, and the source code for an exercise page for reading Kurrentschrift.

The activities of DigitalHerrnhut were also documented in the blog of the Moravian Knowledge Network project hub, to which DigitalHerrnhut belongs.[a] In addition to continuous updates, this blog also provides overviews of lectures, publications, and workshops related to the project.

In addition to the digital provision of resources, there was also a strong focus on disseminating project results in a variety of face-to-face events. As already mentioned, the ImagoFolio digitization setup was shared with project partners in South Africa. In addition to academic teaching, the self-learning module German Kurrentschrift was also tested at the St. Afra Landesgymnasium Sankt Afra in Meissen in a group of upper school students.

Fig. 8: DigitalHerrnhut presents project results as part of the SLUB Dresden's Citizens' Academy (photo: Alexander Lasch CC BY 4.0 Int).

Research results as well as developed teaching concepts and modules were also disseminated in various formats in the field of science communication. Particularly noteworthy here are regular lectures as part of the Dresden Senior Citizens' Academy of Science and Art in the Open Science Lab of the SLUB Dresden (see Fig. 8) and the collaboration with citizen scientists. DigitalHerrnhut was also significantly involved in organizing the TU Dresden Campus Classics Rally 2025.[14] This annual event combines a classic car rally with a destination where input on a different topic each year is provided. Together with the Schwesternhäuser Kleinwelka e.V., DigitalHerrnhut 2025 organized such a program in the historic Kleinwelka nurses' home. What was particularly appealing was that this allowed the digitally enriched vir-

tual excursion of this very Schwesternhaus to be linked to the real building, thus enabling a special form of hybrid knowledge transfer to be tested (see Fig. 9).

Fig. 9: Presentation of the project as part of TUD Campus Classics 2025 (photo: Jördis Römer CC BY 4.0 Int.).

4. Project activities

When new approaches are taken with teaching concepts, a detailed evaluation is essential to check which innovations actually promote and facilitate learning processes and at which points the developed concepts need to be refined. In addition, as mentioned at the outset, one of the initial questions for the project was which digital teaching concepts developed during the coronavirus pandemic offer added value as a supplement to face-to-face teaching and where they need to be revised for this purpose. Evaluation was therefore particularly important for the project in two respects. In the DigitalHerrnhut subproject, an evaluation was carried out primarily in two contexts: (1) The participants in the blended learning seminar developed in the project in a university context were surveyed on various aspects of the event using an anonymous questionnaire. (2) As part of the testing of the self-learning module Deutsche Kurrentschrift in schools, the experiences of the participants were also evaluated using a questionnaire. A detailed evaluation of this test run is available in the form of a thesis.[13] The key findings of these evaluation processes are described in separate sections below.

In the course of testing the blended learning seminar developed in the summer semester 2024 and winter semester 2024/25, the extent to which the goals pursued in the design phase could be achieved in practical application was examined. The seminar participants completed a questionnaire that included both predefined questions with answer options on a Likert scale and free text fields.

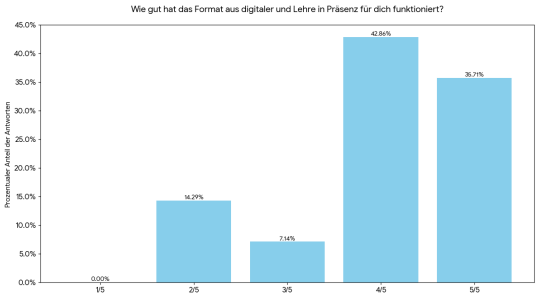

Fig. 10: Results of the question on the quality of the blended learning approach in the seminar (1=very poor; 5=very good).

The overall finding of the evaluation is that the blended learning approach described, which combines elements of face-to-face teaching, self-directed learning, and group collaboration, has proven to be practical and beneficial for academic teaching. More than three-quarters of the 14 participants who completed the questionnaire chose one of the two highest categories on a five-point scale when asked how well this 'format combining digital and face-to-face teaching' had worked for them (see Fig. 10). Various free-text responses also made it clear that the intended motivational effect had been achieved. Both the immersive learning environment and the collaboration in project groups, in which each member is responsible for their own sub-area, were highlighted.

Reading German cursive script is an application skill that was to be taught using one of the self-learning modules developed. In order to test the effectiveness of this module, the seminar participants were asked in the evaluation to assess their competence in this area at the beginning and after completion of the seminar. On a five-point scale, where 1 represents the lowest and 5 the highest possible competence, the average competence at the beginning of the seminar was 1.5. After completing the seminar, participants rated their skills in reading Kurrent at an average of 3.9. The self-learning module's approach, based on immer-

sion, practical exercises, and gamification, has thus proven to be a useful tool for teaching practical skills in an academic context.

Criticism was expressed during the evaluation regarding the clarity of the self-learning modules. Although the virtual environments were perceived as stimulating and motivating, some students found it difficult to orient themselves in the unfamiliar environment and quickly gain an overview of the topics presented. When implementing novel digital teaching formats, a balance must always be found between innovation and accessibility, or this must be ensured in face-to-face formats. While innovation often has a motivating effect and the disadvantages of established teaching formats can be addressed, a certain amount of additional effort is usually required to familiarize oneself with a new format. In this case, the self-study modules were supplemented by additional introductory videos that provided an overview of the virtual excursions and the content they contained, and the self-study phases were structured by face-to-face sessions, which then also had a special relevance: Even though the students appreciated the opportunity for self-directed learning , they also clearly expressed their preference for a significant proportion of (social) face-to-face learning – whether in the regular seminar context or in project group work meetings. Most participants saw self-study modules as a useful addition to the established curriculum, but preferred to work through only a limited portion of the content on their own and to combine these learning phases with learning in direct exchange with teachers and/or other students.

Overall, the evaluation results of the two test runs of the blended learning seminar confirmed that this is a useful concept that expands and complements the possibilities of traditional academic teaching. In addition to motivational factors, it offers the advantage that learners can study at their own pace and set individual priorities. However, it also became clear that digital self-study units should be introduced sufficiently and ideally combined with phases of direct exchange. While courses had to be developed that take place entirely online during the coronavirus pandemic, the targeted, selective use of digital tools appears to be much more promising in the long term. Blended learning represents such a combination of digital and face-to-face learning and has proven to be a promising concept in project work that significantly enriches university teaching.

Fig. 11: Implementation of Renzulli's enrichment phase model in the process of self-directed learning, incorporating the self-learning mode Deutsche Kurrentschrift (German cursive script) (illustration: Friederike Lasch CC BY 4.0 Int.).

In a group of twelve eighth and ninth grade students, the self-learning module Deutsche Kurrentschrift developed in DigitalHerrnhut was tested and evaluated for use in schools. As part of a thesis on "Promoting self-directed learning through the digital self-learning module 'German Kurrentschrift' in talent-promoting teaching" (cf. Fig. 11 and [13]), an evaluation of its implementation in school teaching was carried out using a detailed questionnaire. This focused on the practical application of the tool, the quality of the content taught, and possible areas of application for future learning structures.

A key finding was the high level of motivation among young people working with the self-learning module. Eight out of nine learners said they would like to explore such digital learning environments more often. The virtual excursion in which the module is embedded was highlighted as a stimulating learning environment. Learning Kurrent script as a concrete skill also seemed to offer a greater incentive than purely content-based engagement. This motivating effect was also evident in the fact that individual students proactively inquired about additional practice material. The evaluation also showed that the contextualization of (linguistic) historical topics was successful and aroused lasting interest. Even after completing the self-study module, the students continued to show great interest in delving deeper into

the Moravian Church and its topics. In addition, the evaluation also revealed that the usability of the self-study module was rated highly and that the learners had virtually no problems finding their way around the virtual environment on their own. Only the use of the self-learning module on smartphones was described as somewhat problematic – an example of the importance of not losing sight of the learners' hardware requirements in addition to adequate digital teaching materials. With regard to the acquisition of skills, efficient learning of Kurrent script was observed. All students reported that they had significantly improved their ability to read German Kurrent.

Despite the positive results, areas with potential for improvement were also identified. Some students found the clarity of the materials in the self-study modules, especially in the introductory videos, to be too dense and sometimes overwhelming. While it can be said that, on the whole, the self-study module developed for academic teaching could also be used profitably in schools, it is clear that this sometimes requires additional support for young people in order to avoid overwhelming them. In this context, open educational resources, which are not only available for reuse but also for editing, offer a decisive advantage. These enable the transfer of teaching materials designed for a specific context by allowing them to be adapted to a different field of application.

In summary, the results of the evaluation show that digital self-learning modules, such as the one tested for German cursive writing, are promising tools for promoting talent in a school context. They not only promote the acquisition of skills and motivation, but also open up new avenues for individualized, project-oriented, and practical learning, from which students with a particular talent or commitment to a specific subject can benefit in particular. On the one hand, this provided additional opportunities to test and evaluate the teaching materials that had been developed. On the other hand, their use in schools represents a valuable opportunity to disseminate academic content in a broader social context.

However, the two brief surveys presented here indicate, at best, a trend that will need to be supplemented in the future by qualitative evaluations (e.g., guided interviews or focus groups in combination with reliable tests of learning progress).

5. Work in the virTUos project network

The exchange with the other subprojects in virTUos not only had a stimulating effect on the design of DigitalHerrnhut's project activities, but also promoted the adaptation of various concepts and teaching approaches in other virTUos projects. For example, virtual excursions were integrated into the TUTORING hybrid and Praktika Hybrid projects as supplements (see the articles in this volume). Such synergy effects illustrate the added value offered by interdisciplinary collaborative projects such as virTUos. In addition to networking, the exchange across disciplinary boundaries also promotes innovation and the transfer of teaching concepts and methods. With regard to overarching issues that are also relevant to DigitalHerrnhut, the following aspects were identified in collaboration with other subprojects:

- Good cooperation requires a shared interest in a subject and/or the use of specific tools that are examined for their potential in different teaching environments.
- Workshop-style exchange formats are essential, as they allow for open discussion of the potential and limitations of learning environments after testing.
- The heterogeneity of the institutions involved, organizational processes, technical objectives, university teaching requirements, and the resulting materials and tool environments can quickly lead to confusion at each of the levels mentioned. Solidly financed coordination with strategic objectives is helpful, but success also requires the commitment of all those responsible and involved.
- Not being able to work together in person during the first phase of the project was a challenge to which even DigitalHerrnhut did not always have adequate answers. Although collaborative work using digital tools worked well in principle, the lack of physical co-presence was a considerable disadvantage for motivation to work together. The central question that arose for DigitalHerrnhut was: How do we make co-presence valuable?
- Many limitations (i.e., structural, mostly institutional obstacles of a legal or curricular nature) cannot be overcome by technical innovation, motivating classroom design, or

resorting to internationalization. For this reason, the project and consortium identified long-term change processes[h] that lead to innovation in higher education teaching as part of lifelong learning.

6. Conclusion and outlook

As this brief report on the project activities in DigitalHerrnhut clearly shows, the choice of appropriate collaboration and dissemination platforms is ultimately crucial for communication, connectivity, and the reusability of project results. In addition to the virtual excursions, the blog environment *hypotheses* was of particular importance to us, as it not only enabled ongoing documentation throughout the project, but also developed into a publication venue with scientific standards during the project period. It is ideally suited for broad dissemination for research and teaching.

The largely positive experiences gained during the project clearly demonstrate the added value offered by hybrid teaching on the one hand and interdisciplinary collaborative projects on the other. Interdisciplinary, internationally networked work is not only in keeping with the times in a dynamically changing, globalized society—as the project work in virTUos once again showed, it also results in a wide range of synergies and inspiration for the respective subprojects. Furthermore, experiences in such contexts represent an important learning environment that promotes a variety of skills from which students benefit in their professional and personal development.

The concepts and materials developed in DigitalHerrnhut will be reused and further developed within the *Moravian Knowledge Network* project hub. These have already been firmly established in the Master's program *in Digital Humanities* at TU Dresden, and the teaching and digitization cooperation with South Africa will continue beyond the end of the project. This makes it possible to consolidate project results and continue to use the teaching concepts and materials developed, making them accessible to broader target groups.

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