Reflections on Cyberspace as the New “Wired World of Education”

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ABSTRACT

Developments in Information Technologies (ITs) like the Internet have transformed information exchange. Moreover, since information exchange and analysis are key aspects of the learning experience, these developments have had an important impact on education. Within this context, the important question concerns the sort of educational relationships that exist (or fail to exist) when information exchanges and analyses are structured by the use of ITs such as the Internet. In this paper we use ideas from writers not normally linked to discussions about IT use in education, Levinas and Aristotle, to argue that there are important kinds of relationships that, ideally, emerge within face-to-face education settings but not, typically, within education entirely mediated by the use of ITs. Further, we will argue that the importance of the relationships that emerge within face-to-face educational settings suggest that, short of the appropriate adoption and use of enhancements potentially offered by increased bandwidth such as three-dimensional learning environments or broadband videoconferencing, Internet-based education should supplement, but not supplant face-to-face education.

Keywords

Information technology, Education, Levinas, Aristotle

Introduction

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, few people had heard of, or knew the meanings of words like ‘Internet’ or ‘Cyberspace’, yet by 1997, Cairncross (1997) was proclaiming how the communications revolution, exemplified by the Internet, meant the “death of distance”. Between 1997 and now, developments in Information Technologies (ITs) like the Internet have accelerated and further transformed information exchanges (See Guri-Rosenblit, 2005), and by 2007, Fuchs (2007) could legitimately begin his Internet and Society: Social Theory in the Information Age with the observation that the “Internet is ubiquitous in everyday life.”

Since information exchange and analysis are key aspects of the learning experience, it is not surprising that these developments have had, and will continue to have a significant impact on education. For example, according to an October 2003 supplement to the Current Population Survey, conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, among U.S. children 3 to 17 years of age, 83.4% of children enrolled in school in 2003 used a computer at school, and 43.1% used the internet at school. (Day, Janus, and Davis, 2005; Also, see Rovai and Wighting, 2005) An even more recent survey by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, reporting 2009 statistics and information about online education in the United States, notes that for the past six years, 2003-2009, “online enrollments have been growing substantially faster than overall higher education enrollments.” (Allen and Seaman, 2010) This continues the earlier trend from 2004 when the same authors reported that 65% “of schools offering graduate face-to-face courses also offer graduate courses online”, while 63% of schools “offering undergraduate face-to-face courses also offer undergraduate courses online.” (Allen and Seaman, 2005) Within this context, the important question concerns the sort of educational relationships that exist (or fail to exist) when information exchanges and analyses are structured by the use of ITs such as the Internet.

If one carefully examines educational relationships, there is ample reason to believe that there is more to education than simple information exchange. (See Guri-Rosenblit, 2005) For example, while “multiple measures of learning success exist” (Song et al., 2007), in the United States it is common for universities and colleges to poll students on how “successful” the instructor has been in his or her teaching. (See Spencer and Schmelkin, 2002) Among the questions in such polls are those asking the students’ opinions whether the instructor was “enthusiastic about teaching the class”, whether the instructor “showed concern for students”, whether the instructor “had a genuine interest in students”, and whether the “instructor’s style of presentation held your interest during class.” At the very least, this suggests that successful educational relationships include much more than just the exchange of information; the manner/mode and context of information exchange also is important when it comes to assessing teaching. (See King, 2002) Thus, in what follows we will use ideas from writers not normally linked to discussions...
about IT use in education, Levinas and Aristotle, to argue that there are important kinds of relationships that, ideally, emerge within face-to-face education settings but not, typically, within education entirely mediated by the use of ITs. Further, we will argue that the importance of the relationships that emerge within face-to-face educational settings suggest that, short of the appropriate adoption and use of enhancements potentially offered by increased bandwidth such as three-dimensional learning environments (See Dalgarno and Lee, 2010) or broadband videoconferencing (Smyth, 2005), Internet-based education should supplement, but not supplant face-to-face education.

**Levinas**

On the assumption that the manner/mode and context of information exchange is an important component of successful teaching, the question is how face-to-face educational relationships differ from those mediated by ITs such as the Internet. Put differently, just what is the effect of transplanting relationships - both educational and non-educational - from their traditionally embodied context into the disembodied, or “omnilocated”, context of cyberspace? Concerning face-to-face relationships, the French philosopher Levinas’ phenomenology of the ethical encounter with another human “face” suggests that the face-to-face encounter with another human being affects us in a way that interrupts consciousness’ processing of apophantic truths. The face-to-face encounter with another human being often invites us to experience more than “information” from, or about, another human being. Accordingly, in *Totality and Infinity* Levinas focuses on the apophantic aspect of a communication as “what is necessarily plastic in manifestation” and insists that:

> The primordial essence of expression and discourse does not reside in the information they would supply concerning an interior and hidden world. [This essence is] not the neutrality of an image, but a solicitation that concerns me…. To speak to me is at each moment to surmount what is necessarily plastic in manifestation. (Levinas, 1969)

In contrast to the apophantic “image” that one may experience of another human being, Levinas insists that human sociality signifies a completely different intentionality:

> I wonder if one can speak of a look turned toward the face, for the look is knowledge, perception. I think rather that access to the face is straightaway ethical. You turn yourself toward the Other as toward an object when you see a nose, eyes, a forehead, a chin, and you can describe them … [But, when one turns toward the Other in this way,] one is not in social relationship with the Other. The relation with the face can surely be dominated by perception, but what is specifically the face is what cannot be reduced to that. (Levinas, 1985)

For Levinas, the crux of “social relationships” is not a more or less obscure perception of another’s “face.” A “clear” and “realistic” picture of faces (i.e., the type of representation that sophisticated IT increasingly fosters) does not adequately present the social significance of the person represented by such a visage. For Levinas we must treat ‘face’ as a verb (in the sense of "facing" another in order to present oneself to them). Understanding ‘face’ in this way reveals the openness and vulnerability within face-to-face encounters that grounds ethical attitudes. Indeed, the very act of formulating propositional content for the purpose of giving information - the act constituting what Levinas calls the “said” of communications - presupposes something more than mere avatars of information. Such acts presuppose a relational context for approaching another particular being, a context that Levinas refers to as the “saying”. The “saying” context, or “how” we communicate, extends further than the apophantic “said”, or “what” is communicated. “Antecedent to the verbal signs… is the proximity of one to the other, the commitment of an approach… [t]he original or pre-original saying [that] weaves an intrigue of responsibility…. ” (Levinas, 1998; Also, see Meskin, 2000)

The important point here is that the relational context in which information exchange occurs conditions that exchange. Nonetheless, it is increasingly easy to denigrate this relational context when we presume that the true meaningfulness of information can somehow be divorced from the affecting relationship that intends to initiate a specific sense of importance for the information exchanged. According to Levinas, “saying”, when we try to reduce it down to nothing more than an apophantic aspect of information, is mediated and attenuated. Levinas writes:
Disproportionate focus on the informative aspect of a communication – whether in amount, efficiency, or kind of information exchanged – attenuates and ambiguates the relational context presupposed by the communication.

What Levinas is suggesting is that face-to-face communication cuts across two realms. One is the realm of conceptual thinking and thematization that conceives of “knowledge as power”. Levinas refers to this as a realm of “ontology” (a realm of existence) that is characterized by a “language of metaphysics”. In this realm, we strive to make sense of our world by compartmentalizing experience according to conceptual schema. This is the essence of what we have referred to above as the processing of apophantic truths. Beyond the “ontological world” of apophantic judgment and perception, human relationships solicit a different type of intentionality that Levinas calls the “straightaway ethical”. Within the context of this framework, we can understand the attenuation of relational context introduced above in Levinas-ian terms as a mediation of the straightaway ethical by an economy of images, or compartmentalizing schema, that would reduce communication down to mere information exchange.

The problem inherent in technology in general, and IT in particular, is that its power rests in an economy of images. According to Levinas, though, this is not bad per se. This is a key point for the Levinas-ian critique of technological practices: technological practices are necessary and valuable, but not, by themselves, enough. Because of this, Levinas attempts to conceptualize the “straightaway ethical” as something that is beyond the “techno-political” economy. It is important to consider ethics as a supplement to (and beyond) the specifically technological power of technological practices. Thus, the ethical question of what ought to be done takes priority over the technological question of what it is possible to do. This Levinas-ian perspective would suggest that a critique of technological practices is as necessary as the practices themselves. Because of this, we can understand the attenuation of relational context introduced above in Levinas-ian terms as a mediation of the straightaway ethical by an economy of images, or compartmentalizing schema, that would reduce communication down to mere information exchange.

In asking this question, we approach what Levinas calls “a great paradox of human existence” (Kearney, 1995) affecting the ways we assess the value of technological practices. We cannot dismiss technology out-of-hand. It, of course, fulfills a valuable and sometimes necessary function in communication. Nonetheless, technological mediation poses certain problems for responsible communication, which demand a critical reflection upon technological practices that is proportional to the power and enthusiasm that the technology makes possible. An interviewer explicitly posed the question of this danger to Levinas: “We live in a society of the image, of sound, of the spectacle… If this were to accelerate, would not our society lose humanity?” (Levinas, 2001) Levinas’ reply to the interviewer’s question focuses our attention on the problem: “Absolutely… I don’t wish to denounce the image. But I contend that in the audiovisual domain there is considerable distraction.” Levinas recognizes and acknowledges the potential ethical value of technology. Levinas reinforces this point by writing:

I claim that without technology we would be in no position to feed the Third World. I know of no more frightening images than some of the scenes of African life shown on television; and those children! Nothing is nobler than exposing man’s misery. (Levinas, 2001)

Here is the key to what we would call a Levinas-ian critique of technological practices: the measure of the value of specific technological practices is not “technological” per se, it is ethical. The power of television, to take Levinas’ example, arises where it reinforces ethical concerns and not simply in its ability to uninhibitedly disseminate information to everyone while catering to a concomitant desire of participants to transcend the local, personal import
of that information. Ethical value is distinct from, and prior to, the values of technological efficiency, economy, or spectacle. To again turn to the increasing reliance on technological mediation and dissemination of information in education, we would question whether the motives driving such a shift is determined more by values of the prior kind, or more by the latter kind.

Of particular concern to Levinas was the idea that ethical responsibility is the bedrock of relational contexts structuring information exchange. When Levinas claims that apophantic language “is only mediating,” and that “antecedent to the verbal signs it conjugates”, there is a “pre-original vocation of the saying,” he means that the subject called into vocation remains essential. (See Levinas, 1969) The “truth” of propositional content is neutral with regard to who communicates that content, but insofar as ethical authority cannot remain similarly neutral, there is “an intrigue of responsibility” woven behind apophantic language (and the thought it encapsulates). It is for this reason that Levinas, in Ethics and Infinity, refers to the apophantic aspect of communication as “a content, which your thought would embrace” and claims that:

In this sense one can say that the face is not “seen”. It is what cannot become a content, which your thought would embrace; it is uncontrollable, it leads you beyond [i.e., beyond “seeing”]. It is in this that … the face is straightaway ethical. (Levinas, 1985)

Thus, our sense of ethical responsibility points us beyond the “said” to a “saying” that refuses to be reduced to apophasic thought. Concomitantly, the subjectivity attuned to moral authority also overflows the image of consciousness that would reduce subjectivity to a mere processing of the “said”. The concern is that one encourages just such a reduction of subjectivity by relying upon communications mediated by technologies such as the Internet. As Etzioni and Etzioni (1997) wrote in 1997, “[R]eal communities are better than virtual communities (at least as currently designed) in communicating affect, [and in] identifying participants and holding them accountable”. Although there appear to be advantages in affecting such reduction – e.g., the medium’s efficiency in transmitting information, the ability to transmit the information to places and people separated by large geographical distances – the point from Levinas is that essential human experiences, like a sense of responsibility and moral authority, extend beyond apophasic thought. As Kendrick notes, not everyone is worried that the use of a technology such as the Internet must lead to a reduction of an important kind of subjectivity. She writes (2001) that hypertext theorists have claimed that hypertext “truly reveals the subject, for it enacts the patterns of cognition in the human mind with its technologically created immediacy and its associative structure.” However, even if this is correct, there is still a challenge for educators – viz., how to use the Internet with its hypertext capability to reveal genuinely the student and teacher as subjects. In addition, we are also concerned whether communicative relations mediated by the Internet undermine a clear sense of other forms of authority (besides moral authority). Even if we discount the importance of teachers as authoritative sources of information, education must be concerned with the authority of the information itself (and the possibility of communicating to a student the skill of exercising such concern with regard to a particular piece of information).

From the perspective of a Levinas-ian analysis, communications and interactions of the sort required by an education that goes beyond the mere memorization of facts involves a personal commitment. Increasingly surrounded and enticed by the ephemeral world, and its “anonymous” and impersonal inhabitants, created by education delivered and mediated by ITs, what the participants miss and fail to learn is a passionate commitment to anything or anyone. In this connection, Bimber (1998) writes that “[O]n-line communication serves to insulate speakers from the consequences of their words and actions. Absent the normative force of face-to-face contact, it is not at all clear that the same degree of empathy, avoidance of conflict, and other mechanisms of social pressure exist.”

Of course, some view increased anonymity and impersonality to be a positive rather than a negative effect of the online environment. For example, Barnette welcomes these effects when evaluating his experience teaching Philosophy over the Internet:

There are no voices or accents, no noises, nor distinctions based on gender, race, ethnicity or age. Only ideas, and ideas about ideas, formulated, written, and rewritten, expressed and revisited. In fact, the ongoing discussion in the class is the set of ideas expressed. A participant becomes, in a sense, a Platonist in cyberspace, instantiated by material objects and electricity! (Barnette, 1998)
Barnette’s (1998) experiences with his “Philosophy in Cyberspace” – PHICYBER – course was that the anonymity provided by technologically mediated education delivery engendered “more civility and concern for others, not less.” Here we can contrast Barnette’s exaltation of “Only ideas, and ideas about ideas” with Levinas’ (1969) apprehension that “Philosophy itself is identified with the substitution of ideas for persons … a whole philosophical tradition that sought the foundations of the self in the self, outside of heteronomous opinions.” In contrast to Barnette’s supposedly objective “ideas, and ideas about ideas,” Levinas challenges us to question whether such supposed objectivity may not instead function to insulate interlocutors from the full, and ethically significant, force of each other’s personalities. For this reason, we can understand Levinas’ claim that heteronomy “invests” freedom as a formulation of his idea that “idealist” subjectivity is grounded in a more fundamental, ethical subjectivity.

Sullivan reports results consonant with Barnette. Based on his 2000 survey of female students who had taken at least one online college-level class, Sullivan (2002) concludes that the anonymity of the online environment was, for 42% of the reporting sample, “the most important aspect of the online environment.” Nevertheless, it seems important to ask whether there something “healthy” – personally, professionally and pedagogically – about learning to deal with difficulties associated with non-anonymous interactions. Too often, our attempts to reach beyond the framework of traditional face-to-face relationships occur because we are trying to escape them. In the world of technologically mediated education delivery, we are relatively anonymous, often escape the consequences of our “information exchanges”, and can find every position advocated and defended; thus, we need not commit ourselves to anything. This is a special concern for educational institutions and other organizations for which “ethical education and behavior” are important. For example, DeMaio (1991) writes:

I am suggesting, simply, that part of the emotional reinforcement one’s conscience receives in a personal relationship is missing in an electronic connection. Therefore, any organization that believes it will automatically get the same level of ethical response when it substitutes a terminal for a voice or a face is wrong . . . because it is disregarding the importance of emotional reinforcement in promoting ethical behavior.

In this regard, we do well to question whether the face-to-face interactions of a real-world classroom might condition an “ethic of education” that, in some way, becomes “subverted” when we transplant the teacher-learner relationship into the “virtual classroom”. Further, if Lyotard (1991) is correct that current ITs, exemplified by the Internet, remove “the close contexts of which rooted cultures are woven”, then use of “virtual classrooms” may serve to fragment and trivialize the educational process. This is a theme found in the works of both Gadamer and Levinas. As Meskin (2000) writes, both Levinas and Gadamer “insisted with considerable originality that all thinking begins not with abstract axioms but rather with the concrete and given realities of language, of sociocultural organization, and of historical situation.” Consequently, the challenge is to question the motivations for wanting to displace face-to-face, passionate and committed relationships with technologically mediated education delivery. What we need to do is acknowledge the ambiguities inherent in the technological shift in the delivery and setting of education, and be willing to question motives for it, rather than automatically deferring to presumed educational and social benefits.

Aristotle

If the use of electronically mediated communications places limitations on our sense of the relational context within which our information exchanges take place, then we may consider the effect that these limitations have on the kinds of relationship that develop out of these limiting encounters. Turkle (1995), in her consideration of the relational attitudes exhibited within “Multi-User Domains” (MUDs), captures the nature of the problem when she writes that:

Relationships during adolescence are usually bounded by a mutual understanding that they involve limited commitment. Virtual space is well suited to such relationships … electronic meeting places can breed a kind of easy intimacy. In the first phase, MUD players feel the excitement of rapidly deepening relationship and the sense that time itself is speeding up … In a second phase, players commonly try to take things from the virtual to the real and are usually disappointed…

Turkle’s description of the “easy intimacy” typical on-line is reminiscent of Aristotle’s description of adolescent friendship. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle (1999) writes that:
The cause of friendship between young people seems to be pleasure. For their lives are guided by their feelings, and they pursue above all what is pleasant for themselves and what is at hand. But as they grow up [what they find] pleasant changes too. Hence they are quick to become friends, and quick to stop; for their friendship shifts with [what they find] pleasant, and the change in such pleasure is quick. Young people are prone to erotic passion, since this mostly accords with feelings, and is caused by pleasure; that is why they love and quickly stop, often changing in a single day.

Aristotle (1999) contrasts this immature relationship to “complete friendship”:

… complete friendship is the friendship of good people similar in virtue; for they wish goods in the same way to each other insofar as they are good, and they are good in their own right … Now those who wish goods to their friend for the friend’s own sake are friends most of all; for they have this attitude because of the friend himself, not coincidentally. Hence these people’s friendship lasts as long as they are good; and virtue is enduring.

In Aristotle, as in Levinas, we find the deepening of relationships, beyond that which Turkle sees so “well suited” to virtual space, as essentially dependent upon the ethical context shared by those bound together in face-to-face relationship.

For Aristotle, “complete friendship”, in which people work to help one another, depends on an ethical context because what is “loved” in the mature relationship is virtue itself. Thus, it is the virtuous character that each experiences in the other that binds people together in “complete friendship”. As Cooper (1980) writes, for Aristotle “a [complete or perfect] friendship exists only where you wish to the other party what is good for him, for his own sake, and this well-wishing is reciprocated.” Aristotle specifically distinguishes this form of “complete” or “perfect” friendship from an attraction grounded in mere utility or in titillating pleasures. (Aristotle, 1999) A key aspect of this distinction is that the actual person befriended gains a special centrality in complete friendship not found in the “lower” forms of friendship. As Aristotle (1999) puts it, in the lower forms of relationship people are drawn to a friend “not in his own right, but [only] insofar as they gain some good for themselves from him.” This, however, indicates the importance in a mature relationship of knowing who the friend really is (i.e., “in his own right”). This is a concern for discerning the character of the person with whom we engage in the relationship; and, it is a concern that is difficult to exercise without a real face-to-face encounter with the other person as he or she acts in the real world. As Aristotle (1999) writes, complete friendship requires time for the people “to grow accustomed to each other” and to share experiences with one another. The point here is that while simply exchanging information may, for Aristotle, be enough for a friendship based on utility, it is not sufficient for complete friendship where the object is development of a moral insight in practice. Development of this practical insight requires a kind of intimacy that, following Gadamer, comes from a “being-with or living-with each other.” (Walhof, 2006:) As Cooper (1977) notes, for Aristotle “one recognizes the quality of one’s own character and one’s own life by seeing it reflected, as in a mirror, in one’s [complete] friend.” Further, the importance of “being-with” to complete friendship runs counter to what Turkle (1995) suggests is characteristic of online relationships – an easy intimacy. The consistent and enduring life patterns established by a person’s actions, evident when observing the person “in action”, is the standard of evaluation that makes Aristotle’s “complete friendship” possible. For complete friendship, what is important is not the amount of information, but the kind and consistency of the information since, as Stallabrass (1995) notes, “the extreme mutability and multiplication of identity possible in cyberspace collides with the desire to build communities based upon honest communication … Role-playing, and the potential for dishonesty which goes with it, militates against community.”

Aristotle, then, believed that education (in the sense of gaining the ability to act wisely on information) depends on the presence of this deeper kind of relationship. This is not surprising when we recall the close relationship, for Aristotle, between character and good deliberation on the ends of human activity (prudence; phronēsis): “… prudence is inseparable from virtue of character, and virtue of character with prudence. For the principles of prudence accord with the virtues of character; and correctness in virtues of character accords with prudence.” (Aristotle, 1999) In this connection, Miller (1997) writes that, for Aristotle, “because human beings are perfected or fully developed in part by entering into friendships or co-operative relations with others, they are not self-sufficient as individuals: they cannot achieve their ends in isolation from one another.” For Aristotle education is not simply the acquisition of facts (what Levinas calls the “said” of communication). Successful education also imparts the ability to make use of that information in a way that contributes to the well-being (happiness) of the individual (and
so too, to the society of which the individual is a member). Accordingly, from the Aristotelian perspective, part of what is important for the successful education of students is that they enter into cooperative relationships with their teachers wherein the teachers can “express virtues of character” and so create a context of a common ethical commitment to virtue and learning. (See Shuskok, Jr., 2008) Burnet (1967) expresses the point this way:

[The educator] is an artist who… produces goodness of character…. So much is this the case, that under different [ethical doctrines] the methods of education will have to be quite different.

It is just this characteristic of the teacher that is being assessed by the use of the criteria of successful teaching referenced at the beginning of the paper - viz. whether the instructor “showed concern for students”, and whether the instructor “had a genuine interest in students,” etc.

While remaining neutral about the claim that an important part of the educator’s task is to “produce goodness of character”, we do agree that the educational relationship, to be effective and successful, requires a maturity and commitment greater than the “easy intimacy” that Turkle believes characterizes those exhibited by MUDs and that Aristotle believes are typical of immature, adolescent relationships. Though it may not be the educator’s task to train these capacities in the student, Aristotelian virtue, “goodness of character”, linked as it is to prudence in the student, reflects specific capacities for good action essential for education. The following suggestion from Moravicsik (1995, italics added) about Aristotle’s ethics captures our concern:

What is ethically relevant is not the mere possession of these capacities [for good action], but the creating of contexts which facilitate the manifestations of these capacities, or dispositions.

The obvious question is whether cyberspace does an adequate job of creating a context that facilitates those manifestations of character that condition excellent educational relationships. This is not just an issue for the student-teacher relationship, but more broadly for the collaborative learning experience. As noted by Mitchell (1996), by the “1990s many academics found that they simultaneously inhabited local scholarly communities, which provided their offices and paid their salaries, and virtual communities, which supplied much of their intellectual nourishment and made increasing demands on their time and loyalties.” Thus, the dynamics of collaborative relationships between faculty members have themselves changed because of the introduction and use of IT in education.

Once again, these reflections on the relational context provided by technologically mediated communications suggest that we do well to question whether face-to-face interactions of a real-world classroom might condition an “ethic of education” that is undermined when we transplant the teacher-learner relationship into the “virtual classroom”. By placing undue stress upon the amount, efficiency, or kind of information exchanged, does the virtual classroom encourage relationships grounded in mere utility or titillating pleasures rather than eliciting a requisite deeper sense of relation? Similarly, we question whether the virtual classroom, at least in its current form emphasizing text and asynchronous image/video sharing, encourages a context that facilitates concern, on the parts of student and teacher, for something other than the expressions of character that make the best educational experiences possible.

**Conclusion**

We believe that the above considerations broaden significantly the challenges faced by the “virtual classroom.” That challenges are not simply – and perhaps not even mostly – due to problems of information exchange and access. In creating the “new wired world of education”, we must not become excessively enamored with the “mechanics” of how to disseminate and affect technological access. Rather, we agree with the claim of Aivazidis, Lazaridou and Hellden (2006) that the main purpose of integrating information and communication technologies “into schools would be to develop a new learning environment for educating the skills of communication, critical thinking, independence, and responsibility.” What this means is that we should concern ourselves with how to establish, within such a medium, the sense of personal responsibility and maturity that education requires of its participants. Varying the language in one of the key trends that the 2010 Horizon Report identifies, the “abundance of resources and relationships made easily accessing via the Internet” challenges us to revisit our roles as both educators and students (Johnson et al., 2010).
Elsewhere we have noted that it is often difficult, when relying exclusively upon IT mediated communication, for people to free themselves from the sense that they are talking to “a box” rather than another human being. (See Ward and Prosser, 2002) With “the box” standing between us, the reality of the situation is altered just enough, and we are permitted to feel just enough detachment and anonymity that the rules which bind us in embodied, face-to-face interactions are diminished. As Moody (1998), in a commentary for ABC News puts it, “[A]ny time we go online, we are replacing direct human contact… with an arid, indirect, stilted form of contact with strangers.” The lesson here is that successful educational relationships (for both teacher and student) rely upon a robust contact with other human beings, and not “an arid, indirect, stilted form of contact with strangers.” The importance of such contact is borne out by research suggesting that successful “E-learning” for K-12 children requires a supportive environment (Lord, 2002), as well as research on college student retention where “the evidence that novice college students need to spend time engaged in appropriate on-campus academic and social integration activities is overwhelming.” (Allen, 2006)

Let us be clear here. We are not claiming that it is impossible for appropriate uses of IT to carry us beyond the limitations suggested by Moody’s comment. We acknowledge the potential of ITs to break down barriers that, otherwise, would inhibit interactions between students. As Mitchell (2004) writes, “the introduction of campus wireless networks in the early 2000s, combined with portable wireless devices and the growth in electronic distribution of educational material, quickly began to break down the rigid person-to-person connections that had hitherto characterized campus life.” Making use of “engaging technologies”, such as social networking Websites and Instant Messaging, (See Junco and Cole-Avent, 2008) can, when used well, enhance the social presence of online students. Moreover, IT may provide access to formal institutions of education to people who might not otherwise have any access. Nonetheless, we believe that the ability to retain those elements present in face-to-face communications essential to successful and rewarding educational experiences is both the most formidable and the most urgent challenge facing the IT “revolution”, as exemplified in computer-mediated delivery of instruction, in its impact upon education. How do we make Cyberspace a context in which we can “look at the other and know that he or she has feelings, states, desires, that are different from our own … see the other creature looking back at us, both of us knowing we are separate beings who nonetheless communicate”? (Ullman, 2002) Our intention in this paper has been to stress that this context, described by Carr (2000) as establishing “some form of personal contact with students” and by Levinas as the encounter with the “Otherness” of the “face”, is integral to genuine inter-human relationships, and thus necessary to whatever forms the delivery of education may take. It may be that as education makes increasing use of real-time video-streaming, virtual, interactive three-dimensional environments, and other consonant types of technological enhancements, entirely technologically mediated education will capture the essential inter-personal elements of education. However, for this transformation of the current state of technologically mediated education to occur successfully, we must understand just what the essential inter-personal elements of education are. This is not a trivial task, and ensuring that the needed interpersonal context of education is not lost amidst the “whistles and bells” of increasingly sophisticated technological deployments requires the kind of critical, thoughtful reflection we hope to have contributed to in this paper.

References


