The Difference the Body Makes: The Teacher's Presence Online and Offline

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Abstract

This paper examines the question: what is the experience of meeting online and how does it differ from ordinary classroom situations? Drawing from personal experience, the author explores possible experiences of existing in virtual space and time. How do people meet, get to know each other and, interact in a pedagogical situation? Her experience as an online student made her to seriously reflect on the experiential nature of the computer-mediated encounter. But, it was not until she happened to participate in a workshop offered by the same teacher that the contrasts began to take shape for her. If there is a difference between online and offline meetings, what is it that makes the difference? Online communication could, just as face-to-face meetings, create feelings of closeness, and friendship; from the other-as-a-text on the screen, we subjectively create the other-as-an-idea, an idea that might be perceived as the real other. But is it? What reality is for real? What is the nature of the relationship established between body-less persons on line, and what difference does the body make in a face-to-face meeting?

Introduction

After several weeks of interaction online, I called my students for their first meeting at the university. Just before ten o'clock, the door to the classroom flung open and five very happy, middle-aged women tumbled in. They could not wait to tell me what had happened on the train to the university. By coincidence, they were seated in the same compartment, and as they opened their books, they identified each other.

"Are you going to Carina Henriksson's class as well?"

"Marie, you look exactly like I thought you would"

"You must be Jean, who wrote about...."

By the time they got off the train, they giggled and chatted like old friends. In the taxi they had talked about how excited they were to meet their instructor and the rest of the class, and when the taxi driver asked: "Are you on your way to a class reunion?" they looked at each other and exploded with laughter.

"No. In fact, we have never met before!" said Helen.

"That is true, perhaps we should have gotten together sooner."

The driver looked puzzled and shook his head.

Of course, the taxi-driver had good reason to feel exasperated. His passengers obviously seemed to know each other and share a history together. So how can they say that they had not met before? Even if the women had explained that they had interacted by means of a Web Board as students of an online university class, the taxi-driver might still have insisted that they had met before. Had they not met each other online by responding to each other's comments, questions, and work?

This is the question I examine in this paper: what is the experience of meeting online and how does this experience differ from ordinary classroom situations where people meet and are present face-to-face? Indeed, whenever we meet someone in ordinary situations we first of all meet each other corporeally. Even before we have given it thought we already have a perceptual impression of the other person. It is on the basis of this immediate awareness of the other's body, gestures, expression, and presence that we later may make judgments about that person.

This corporeal dimension of meeting people is already part of the child's way of being. I recall an incident from my own childhood.

"Come and meet aunt Edith!" I feel my mother's hands at my back, pushing me towards the old woman. A dry, skinny hand meets my hand.

"My, my, you have grown a lot! How much do you weigh? Let me feel your muscles!"

Bony hands intrude my body. I am taken hostage in my personal space and no one is there to pay the ransom. The adults around me laugh as I try to shield my body from the compelling hands.

Memories of merciless childhood meetings and horrendous "hugs" and "handshakes" linger and may stay with us through life.

A ritualistic aspect of meeting and greeting is the handshake. Yet, when we meet someone the hand itself is not necessarily noticed much unless the hand is especially wet, hard, or soft we may hardly attend it. Instead, we perceive the other person's face and body. In a handshake, our lowest of motives may be given away in our voice; the deepest secret may show in our eyes; our attempt to hide something may be laid bare in our body language. Sartre has described how in the first encounter the "look" is experienced as a form of possession. "The Other's look shapes my body in its nakedness, makes it emerge, sculpts it, produces it as it is, sees it as I shall never see it. The Other holds a secret—the secret of what I am" (Sartre 1969, p. 209). Sartre has been criticized for giving a one-sided description of the "look" because the look can also be experienced in a positive manner such as in the admiring look of the lover, the inquisitive look of a teacher, or the encouraging gaze of the person who makes us feel successful.

But the point here is that meeting people through our body is a complex and subtle affair. Meeting as a bodily encounter may be experientially so different from meeting on a Web Board that my online students did not feel that they had “met” each other at all until they came face-to-face in the train.

It was not until I became an online student myself that I seriously began to reflect on the experiential nature of the computer-mediated encounter. The course participants included 15 students from various countries and continents. The teacher, Steven Morrison, tried to use an approach that would overcome some of the drawbacks of communicating by means of a Web Board. But it was not until I happened to participate in an international workshop offered by Morrison that the contrast between meeting in person and meeting online began to take shape for me.

Before I set out for the workshop in a neighboring city one of my colleagues asked, “Do you know professor Morrison?” My spontaneous answer was, “Yes, I do.” However, a moment later I hesitated, “No, I don’t...I mean...I don’t know if I know him.” My colleague may have thought that this was a rather scatter-brained-answer but nevertheless, it was the only answer I could give.

Presenting Oneself Online

When I entered the “Online” course in the previous year, I had no idea what to expect from the course itself or the participants. All I knew was that I had a desire to learn more about qualitative research methods. Beforehand we had been asked to send a personal photograph, so I began to wonder about how I wanted to present myself even before the course started. As I skimmed through the family photo albums, I realized that my options were somewhat limited. Do I send a passport photo? (We all know how “flattering” they are) or do I send a photo of myself sipping a glass of wine on the porch of my house? I decided to send the latter since that photo captured my sparkling mood and how I wanted to present myself.

But, when the course started there were no signs of any photos on the Web Board. Instead, our teacher Steven Morrison shared with us a written panorama of the Canadian landscape as seen from his office window, and we were asked to describe our personal landscapes by providing descriptions of our own environment. Instead of a forced presentation of personal statistics of who or what we were, we were invited to draw a linguistic picture, so to speak, of our immediate surroundings. We would begin to come to know each other by sharing our world, Steven explained. What a relief it was to find out that *what* I am was not at stake here. Could it really be that I did not have to dress up in my academic robe in order to gain admittance and meet my classmates? Would my favorite old cardigan do just as well as long as it was knitted out of a yearning for knowledge?

Our professor was apparently striving for symmetrical relations among the course participants. Was this a deliberate attempt to create an open atmosphere, in which genuine conversations were to take place? By means of a beautiful description of a Canadian autumn day Steven set the tone of the course and like goslings we followed. One by one, wonderful postings emerged on the

WebBoard. Someone named Anne from New Zealand entered the following text on the WebBoard: "Autumn is my favorite season because it withholds a deep secret that I have just unraveled. The leaves are not fighting their falling; they just go with the flow. They taught me to 'let go', to have confidence in the Universe." From Pennsylvania a woman called Charlotte wrote, "The creatures in our woods are preparing for winter. Outside the window next to my computer, I see the winter birds at the feeders and lots of squirrels with fat, nut-filled cheeks greedily digging for more! The wild turkeys drop by the feeders and an occasional too-young-to-be-cautious deer."

As the presentations appeared on the Web Board, I was alarmed by their eloquence. I felt like the ugly duckling in a pond full of white swans. Who were these people? Postings like "Happy birthday, Charlotte" and "George, I knew you would join us!" puzzled me. Did they all know each other? Had I intruded on a group of people who had a long history together? I continued to lurk (wait); or at least I thought I did. It was not until a few days later that I found out that a technical wizard, Pete, had designed the WebBoard, which implied "No lurking." By pressing a key anyone could easily find out how many times and when the participants had entered the Web Board. I felt like I had sneaked around in a room full of people trying to hide behind furniture, thinking I was invisible when, in fact, everybody saw me. "Shame on you, Carina!" I did, in fact, think of Sartre's statement that one cannot be ashamed on one's own. We have to be aware of the look of the other (Sartre, 1969). I blushed in front of the computer.

The revelation provided an option: Either I resign from the course or I join in now. I hesitated and then it took a gentle push from Steven before I dared to join the class. Unlike my mother's compelling hands these invisible hands felt friendly and inviting, and since my thirst for knowledge was greater than my fear of rejection, I took a deep breath and plunged myself into the unknown. I wrote, "My study faces the back garden and when a sun beam finds its way through the morning mist, my garden becomes a Turner painting embedding the scents of apples, pears, and the faint fragrance from the roses." Like a dog rolling over and laying bare his throat, I surrendered to the others, exposed to their judgments of me. Would there be any "hand" to meet mine in this virtual space? Would anyone be willing to interact with me?

Almost immediately, a response came from a woman named Sarah: "Carina, what a delightful posting. I look forward to getting to know you better as we progress in this 'experiment'." Somebody had reached out to me, acknowledged me; shaped me into an accepted member of the group. And yet there was no bodily presence. No one could know what we looked like: height, constitution, hairstyle, skin, and eye-color, clothing, etc. Our names and personalities became a secondary concern. Yet we had this weird and wonderful experience of presenting ourselves online "backwards" as it were. And when the photos finally emerged on the Web Board, I hesitated. I felt that I did not need a body; I did not even need an image of a body to feel that I had "shaken hands" with the other students and my teacher. We were present to each other through our words and texts. However, these words somehow seemed to create a sense of spiritual closeness in our online classroom.

Existing in Virtual Space and Time

But where was I when I was “in class”? Physically, I was seated in front of my computer in Sweden but I had also begun to talk to my family members and colleagues about the online course as “going to Canada.” “No, sorry, I can’t make it to the meeting. I am going to Canada tomorrow afternoon.” “Next week I am going to Canada to discuss Heidegger.” But experientially I was neither just in front of the computer nor in Canada. Yet I had these wonderful conversations with my peers from as far away as Australia, Japan, Hong Kong, Norway, or the USA. So where was I?

A few days before our last seminar a new headline appeared on the WebBoard: “Space for Carina Henriksson.” Each of us received a designated space for posting our written “paper.” Exactly where is this space I wondered? Is it in my computer? In the computers of the other course participants? Did I have a space in other people’s studies, in other people’s homes? Was “Space for Carina Henriksson” a virtual “desk” prepared by Steven, a place where I could sit down and express my thoughts? Was this space a place in Space? Or was I one of the frozen fireflies on a velvet winter sky? Would I remain in that space forever or was I just a will-o’-the-wisp? The image of us students dwelling as restless souls in this virtual universe frightened me. I could not stand the thought of not having a concrete place where I could locate my friends and myself. I began to wonder what it means to actually “be” somewhere. And what is the meaning of meeting place? Can we meet each other in space or do we need a physical place to meet? At any rate, for our online learning, this space or place needed to be accessed or found by means of the computer and keyboard.

I made another unexpected discovery. When I use my computer, I often find it difficult to grasp the overall sense of a text I receive or write by looking at the screen. I prefer to print the text. I need to feel the paper to get near the words. The strange thing is that this was not true for my experience of the WebBoard. I felt much closer to the rest of the class when I read the postings on the screen, than when I printed the postings on sheets of paper. It is almost as if the computer became transparent, opening up a space I needed to feel closeness. And yet, this space was elusive and indeterminate, unlike the familiar surroundings of my university classroom.

A peculiar aspect of online (virtual) seminar space is that we enter it through words; through the temporal and physical appearance of our writings posted on the WebBoard and made visible on the computer screen. Online we “meet” each other through our words, by entering the space of text. Van Manen (2001) observes that the term space does not only refer to extension and perspective, it also carries the meaning of time spent in an experience. Thus, in a face-to-face conversation, there is a temporal immediacy and spontaneity experienced that is different from computer-mediated conversation. In asynchronous online interaction, one can stop in the middle of a sentence, discard it, change it, or leave the computer and return to it later. As an online participant, one can choose to be deaf and mute whenever it pleases or seems convenient. The online participant has a certain control over the conversation. “Time is frozen and conversation is disentrained when partners ‘meet’ independent of one another,”

says Walther (1996, p. 17). The fact that one is not “meeting” in real time gives plenty of time to compose and edit one’s thoughts.

What would happen in a face-to-face conversation if one of the partners suddenly decided that he or she did not want to listen or talk anymore, if one of the two in the middle of a sentence just walked away? Spoken words are different from written words. As van Manen (2001) notes:

One cannot restart a conversation in the way that one can restart a written text. One cannot edit out a phrase and replace it with a more appropriate one. One cannot step back reflectively from one’s spoken word to monitor and adjust the effects that selected words and phrases seem to exercise on other words we utter (p. 7).

On the one hand, in online communication one is blissfully unaware of temporal interruptions. I read my teacher’s comments as if he is speaking to me right now, even though he may have written them with many interruptions and over several time spans. On the other hand, I never managed to work out the time zones of the course participants. Who is awake and who is asleep? When can I expect an answer or a message? Almost three hundred years ago, the Swedish scientist Carl von Linné discovered several species of flowers that open and close their petals at different times of the day. One flower may open its petals at four in the morning and gently shut them at four in the afternoon, whereas another flower may show its beauty from six in the morning until three in the afternoon. From this observation, von Linné gained a magnificent idea: He would design his garden as a fragrant clock. Thus, by looking at the flowers, he would know what time of the day it was.

Like Linné’s garden my computer grew to be a garden of exotic flowers that opened and closed. But they did so regardless of objective time. I detached myself from temporality as I had from embodiment and spatiality. “Ah, a message from Yoko—she is awake.” “No posting from Susanne...I guess the sun has not yet risen over Canada.” I dwelled peacefully in Linné’s garden-time and watched how the postings opened and folded the words on the screen. I found myself, as Heidegger said, “unexpectedly taken into a freeing claim” (1969, p. 307). Or, as Dreyfus puts it, “we enter cyberspace and leave behind our animal-shaped, emotional, intuitive, situated, vulnerable, embodied selves, and thereby gain a remarkable new freedom never before available to human beings” (2001, p. 6). When Friesen (1999, p. 5) discusses how the self is confined “in the limited, formalized strictures of the computer”, this confinement is seen as a price to be paid. However, if you accept the rigid restrictions and limitations the computer imposes as a precondition, could it not also be seen as a price to be won?

The Ambiguity of the Real

A few days before I left for the course with Steven Morrison, I had a cup of coffee with a friend. I was in a splendid mood, thrilled by the anticipation. Much to my surprise and annoyance, my friend did not seem to share my happiness. “What’s wrong with you? Can’t you be happy for me? I have waited so long for

this to happen. Why the dull face?" My friend looked a bit troubled and hesitated before she answered. "Carina, it is not that I am not happy for you, I really am. It's just...when you talk about the online course and Steven, you absolutely glow. You talk about them as if they were your secret lovers... I am so afraid that you may be disappointed or even hurt. What if it isn't as wonderful to meet your professor face-to-face, as it is online? I am just worried about you."

Suddenly there it was. My friend had uttered the words I had not dared to admit even to myself. Had I until now lived in what Baudrillard (1983) calls the hyperreality, in which the unreal had become the real? Suddenly, the thought of meeting Steven face-to-face scared me. Husserl (1960) suggests that the meaning of (an) other results from one's interpretation of the other, an interpretation, which is the working of one's own mind and quite apart from what, the other may be. When we interact with people on a Web Board do we really know them except through their words? Out of a person-as-text, I had created my own image: a person-as-idea. I had taken the person-as-idea to be the real person. Had I accordingly closed off the possibility of making contact with the real person, the whole person?

Relieved by Resemblance

When we finally met face-to-face, my first impulse was to rush into his arms and hug him, as you do an old friend. It was definitely Steven; I recognized him from the photo. But as I walked towards him, I hesitated.... Is it really he? Suddenly I did not recognize him at all. Even though I did not doubt that this was the teacher from the online course, I experienced a strong feeling of meeting someone for the first time. This man I had not met before. He was a well-known stranger. My arms that had longed to embrace and greet him, suddenly felt numb. You do not hug strangers, so I offered my hand; we shook hands. Online I had been content with the body of knowledge represented by my peers and by Steven. I was, as I most awkwardly put it: "Not interested in anyone's body." Now, all I can see is the body. All that matters is the body. I had to think of the words by Grizzuti-Harrison: "Images are more than substitutes for reality; they are dress rehearsals, plans. Anything that takes place in the world has its origin in fantasy" (1989, November 12, my translation).

How could an image correspond to a real person? The images we create of each other are subjectively founded and maintained deep inside us. The intersubjectivity between self and image of others is a precious relation, emotionally sensitive to anything that might disturb that relation. When an old neighbour is found to be a child molester; when you witness how a Green Peace member throws old batteries in the woods; when your vicar has embezzled the collection, it alters your images; it might even make you question your whole reality. Yet, in our post-modern era these things happen all the time. We are constantly forced to re-write and re-construct our images and ideas.

"Mum, I have a blister on my tongue!" It hurts when I try to eat." "Come here, let me have a look," I say to my son. He shows me his little pink tongue. "There, see it?" His tiny fingers point to something invisible. "No, sorry, I can't see it." "But, Mum, look, there it is." I scrutinize his tongue for several moments before I

give up. "Christopher, I do understand that you have a blister that bothers you, but I can't *see* it." He looks at me in amazement. "How can you understand something that you cannot see, Mum?"

The eye speaks, Levinas (1969) says. Yes, but what does it speak of? You go shopping for new clothes; you find a dress that you try on in the fitting room. Through the mirror, your eyes speak about the beauty of the dress and how well it fits you. But when you put it on at home, much to your surprise, it does not feel as good as it did in the fitting room. You notice how it is a little tight around the shoulders, the sleeves feel a bit too wide... Why did you not notice that in the shop? Does the eye speak so loudly that it drowns the voices of your other senses? Does vision blur parts of reality?

Online I had in a sense closed my eyes and opened my heart to my other senses and the images created. How would these images correspond to the vision? There was the person, there was the image, and there was the relationship between them. This relationship between the person and its image is resemblance Levinas (1989) holds. I found myself in a dark room waiting for a photo to develop. In a bath of chemical fluids, a piece of paper turns into a photo; the fogged transforms into the distinct. Only, you cannot will a photo to show what you have in mind – the photo always shows *itself* as itself. Before my eyes the photo of Steven developed, from the fogged image to the distinct person.

What Reality is for Real?

"Enjoyment is made of the memory of its thirst; it is a quenching" Levinas (1969, p. 113) says. If enjoyment includes the memory of once not having been satisfied with what now satisfies me, what had I been thirsting for online? Or rather, why had I not been aware of my thirst? Might it be possible to uphold a twofold attitude to the world? If so, could these attitudes be ascribed to face-to-face interaction and technology mediated interaction respectively? Buber (1958) explains that in an I-It relation the address is objectifying; it constitutes the other as an object to be experienced and used, whereas in an I-Thou relation a mutual relationship is initiated. Is it possible that my attitude towards Steven online was objectifying, that I treated him as a means to an end and thus left me with a feeling of contentment, of not being thirsty? Would that explain why I so easily could disregard space, temporality, and embodiment online?

So, online did I "shake hands" with an object, a figment, created by my interpretation of Steven-as-text? If, as Merleau-Ponty says, "The world is not what I think, but what I live through" (1962, p. xiv) then living through this face-to-face encounter was bound to leave me thirsty, longing for what had not yet satisfied me. But did I feel any closer in time, space, and body? In class, I was forced to accept the temporal limitations of the present. I could not, as online, decide whether I wanted to listen or talk now or later; I had to subordinate to objective time. The space between us was still, as online, a common space; I had to share the space with 23 other students. Online, I knew that there were 14 other students claiming to be seen, but I could not *see* them, they were easier to disregard. In class, the presence of the other students was apparent. Their presence occupied the personal space between my teacher and me. If temporality

and space were liberation online and a limitation offline, what remains for face-to-face interaction? What made it so special? Embodiment?

Merleau-Ponty (1962) posits that we are our bodies and that all of our experiences and the meanings, which animate our lives, are based in our active corporeal involvement in the world. When Dreyfus (2001) discusses distance learning he sees a connection between trust and embodied presence. To trust someone is to make yourself vulnerable to him or her. He states, "I have to be in the same room with someone and know they could physically hurt me or publicly humiliate me and observe that they do not do so, in order to feel I can trust them and make myself vulnerable to them in other ways" (p. 71). The feeling of trust thus influences our mode of being-in-the-world. "Our sense of reality [...] could also be the feeling of joy and security of being cared for" (p. 70). We see things and persons in the world where we can touch them (Crossley, 1996). But seeing and touching does not *per se* create a sense of trust; I do not unreservedly surrender to or trust someone who hugs me – and yet "whatever hugs do for people, I'm quite sure telehugs won't do it" (Dreyfus 2001, p. 69).

Conclusion

When Christopher asked me: "How can you understand something, that you cannot see?" I took it to be just a question of an innocent young child not yet mature enough to understand the human mind. But are we, in a way, not all innocent children online? Does not the computer make us doubt our understanding of what we cannot see? Is this for real? Is what makes face-to-face interaction so unique a feeling of relief? It *is* for real! You do not doubt what you see. To know and to doubt are interdependent terms Wittgenstein (1953) maintains. From this follows that we must be capable of doubting that which we claim to know. When I was asked the question: "Do you know professor Morrison?" I was not sure what to answer. How did shaking hands offline change our relation? Do I *know* Steven now? No, but I do not *doubt* him.

Back in my study, I look at the photo of Steven on the computer online – and I do not recognize him at all...

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