BEYOND SOCIAL PRESENCE: FACELESSNESS AND THE ETHICS OF ASYNCHRONOUS ONLINE EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT. In this position paper, I argue that a focus on achieving and increasing social presence in online courses tends to derail a consideration of the ethical implications and dimensions of the essential facelessness of asynchronous education. Drawing upon the work of Emmanuel Levinas and Nel Noddings, who contended that the face is the basis of caring, ethical relations, I explore what it means for human relations, education, and society in general that learners increasingly come face-to-face with screens rather than with embodied, different others.

AU-DELÀ DE LA PRÉSENCE SOCIALE : L'ANONYMAT ET L'ÉTHIQUE DE LA FORMATION EN LIGNE ASYNCHRONE

RÉSUMÉ. Dans cet article, je prends position et soutiens que la volonté de mettre en place et d'augmenter la présence sociale dans les cours en ligne a tendance à nuire à une prise en compte des implications et dimensions éthiques de l'anonymat, lequel est inhérent à la formation à distance asynchrone. Pour ce faire, je me base sur les travaux d'Emmanuel Levinas et Nel Noddings, qui allèguent que le visage est à la base de relations éthiques et bienveillantes. J'explore la portée de ce concept en termes de relations humaines, d'éducation et de société en général, dans un contexte où les apprenants sont de plus en plus en relation avec des écrans plutôt qu'avec d'autres êtres humains.

In *Understanding Media*, Marshall McLuhan (1964) contended that every technological extension entails a concomitant "amputation." He offered the example of the wheel, which, while it extends the human foot, enabling us to get around much more quickly, also amputates it, in the sense that the foot on the gas or bicycle pedal is no longer being used "to perform its basic function of walking" (Gordon, 1997, p. 203).

McLuhan's theory is also borne out in a consideration of asynchronous e-learning. Learning management systems (LMSs), which are digital platforms for the delivery of online instruction, extend the bodies of teachers and learners into hyperspacial learning environments; at the same time, however, LMSs "amputate" teachers' and learners' faces, which, in these virtual environments, no longer play a role in constructing and sustaining human identity and relationality. Thus, teachers and learners engage with others who are faceless, known only as names associated with tiny photos that appear beside their discussion posts.

The fundamental facelessness of mediated exchanges has been a concern of communications scholars since the emergence of interest in nonverbal communication in the 1970s, and that concern was amplified with the subsequent burgeoning of research in computer-mediated communications (CMC) that began in the late 1980s. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to review that vast literature, it is worth noting that, after several decades of study, there is general agreement that face-to-face and mediated interactions are significantly different, but precisely what facelessness means for human communications is far from being settled.

Certainly, the issue remains unresolved in the literature of educational communications and technology, where studies comparing pedagogy, participation, and learner satisfaction in online and face-to-face courses produce mixed results. As Bikowski (2007) observed, inconsistent findings suggest a need for "more research" (p. 139) on the importance of face-to-face contact for relationship- and community-building.

However, given that many years of investigation have not significantly furthered our understanding, it is unclear that more research is the answer — particularly research that continues to focus on what it is possible to achieve in e-learning environments, while failing to adequately consider what is displaced or lost. This tendency, according to Neil Selwyn (2014), is ingrained within the discourse of educational technology, which has become "highly charged and value-laden — conveying a definite sense of what should be happening, and often silencing other possibilities" (pp. 129-130). The result, in McLuhan's terms, is a scholarship about online learning that tends to focus not on media amputations and their implications but on the ways technology can be used to extend the body — particularly in the form of "social presence."

Social presence theory posits that, in teleconferenced or online communications, the "degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationships" (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976, p. 65) is a function of the capacity of the medium to transmit audio, visual, and verbal cues. The more cues available, the more social presence others will have; thus, face-to-face communications are rich in social presence while purely textual communications have little or none. In the 40 years since

Short, Williams, and Christie first advanced the theory, distance education has become increasingly technology mediated, finally morphing into online learning. At the same time, scholarship has tended to "[celebrate] interactive possibilities" of the new technologies, "thus reducing the concern" that this was a "presence-deprived form of learning" (McKerlich, Riis, Anderson, & Eastman, 2011, p. 325). This trend continues, with the result that, rather than acknowledging the absence that is inherent to asynchronous e-learning technologies and environments, many discussions emphasize the strategies individuals can use to project their presence textually, suggesting that such techniques adequately compensate for the loss of the face.

Tellingly, I find that this is the case even when research participants in qualitative studies on presence draw attention to facelessness as a defining aspect of their experience of online teaching and learning. For example, in their study of how social presence develops in online discussions, Swan and Shih's (2005) only comment on the following quote from a student was that it shows how "low social presence students" evince "little interest in getting to know their classmates" (p. 125):

> In class, you know, people come to class so that you could see who is there and who is not, whereas online it was not the case because you couldn't see their faces. I couldn't put any names with any of them, and sometimes, you know, there were two people who had the same names and it was difficult to tell who was who. (p. 125)

Similarly, Stodel, Thompson, and MacDonald (2006) dismissed comments from learners about the facelessness of classmates in online courses with the conclusion that the issue can be rectified by simply "[i]ncreasing social presence" (p. 14).

When facelessness arose as a consistent theme in my own research,[1] I found that I could not dismiss it quite so easily. In interviews, online instructors and learners repeatedly said that the faceless others with whom they interacted in courses did not "feel real." Despite the abundant use of presence-enhancing strategies, other people in the course were experienced less as *present* than as ghostly *presences*, described by one student as "these floating slightly tangential figures in the room or presences in the room that aren't full; I mean, they're not there." Both students and instructors emphasized the importance of the living physiognomy when it came to forging a sense of personal connection with classmates: "When you see them face-to-face," said one, "I feel more of a connection with that person than I do online." Both students and instructors repeatedly emphasized the challenges they experienced in caring about and forming meaningful relationships with faceless others.

Ursula Franklin (2014) advised that, when it comes to the use of technology in education, we should begin "by considering not only what a specific new technology *does* but also what it *prevents*" (p. 123). Following her sage advice, I

choose, in this position paper, to look squarely in the face of facelessness. Of course, discussions about social presence, and about the instructional strategies that create or enhance it, may help instructors design more interactive, responsive, and engaging pedagogies and online learning environments. However, no amount of presence-enhancing techniques can alter the experiential reality of mediated exchanges: online teaching and learning are fundamentally faceless experiences, and this has implications that go beyond pedagogical or communicative efficacy. As largely instrumental discussions about the creation of social presence elide absence — in particular, the absence of the face — they forestall a vital consideration of facelessness and its implications for the ethics of asynchronous online education.

ONLINE EDUCATION AS AN ETHICAL PRACTICE

Education is, as Jacques Maritain (1943) rather famously asserted, "an ethical art" (p. 2). Decisions about teaching and learning practices that we tend to consider in purely pedagogical terms — for example, decisions about what will be taught, the kinds of activities that will support learning, or the extent to which we will give students a voice in determining what and how they will learn — are inherently ethical, or moral.[2] Not only are they rooted in particular beliefs about what is worthwhile and necessary to human flourishing, but they shape relations between human beings, and embody applied forms of justice, equity, and respect.

Maritain's claim certainly extends to online educational practices, which, as Zembylas and Vrasidas (2005) asserted, "always participate in a field of ethical signification" (p. 63). Thus, the decision to offer instruction online rather than face-to-face should be understood, like other decisions about teaching and learning, foremost as an ethical rather than a pedagogical choice, based on particular judgments about what is worthwhile and necessary in educational relationships and processes.

However, with the exception of Zembylas and Vrasidas's own research, as well as that of Ward and Prosser (2011), the discourses of online learning are overwhelmingly concerned with what *can* be done with new technologies rather than with what *should* be done. At best, issues of morality are dismissed with assertions that flexible asynchronous delivery is inherently more equitable than face-to-face education — "lofty rhetoric" that often does not jive with "the reality at the local level" (MacKeogh & Fox, 2011, p. 149; see also Johnson, Macdonald, & Brabazon, 2008). In addition, we have abundant consideration of the moral issues that arise when teaching and learning move online — issues such as plagiarism, netiquette, and intellectual property (see, for example, Coleman, 2012; Ramim, 2008; and Toprak, Özkanal, Aydin, & Kaya, 2010). However, the kinds of questions that should precede such considerations — the question about the ethical ramifications of replacing face-to-face educational

experiences and relationships with faceless, mediated exchanges; the question, indeed, of whether it is a form of education that is morally justified – remain by and large unasked.

In approaching such questions, my particular interest is not in abstract pronouncements about right and wrong – an approach called into question by Mark Johnson (2014) – but in how ethics transpire within lived experience and, particularly, lived relation. In this, I am aligned with and strongly influenced by feminist care ethicists, particularly the work of Nel Noddings (2007), who emphasized that ethical decisions are made not in a vacuum but in our dealings with other people: "the ethic of care gives only a minor place to principles and insists instead that ethical discussions must be made in caring interactions with those affected by the discussion" (p. 223).

Noddings (1984/2003) further emphasized that "the maintenance and enhancement of caring [is] the primary aim of education" (p. 174), essential insofar as it both nurtures the learner's "ethical self" and activates his or her receptivity to the subject matter. She characterized care in terms of "engrossment" and "motivational displacement." In the former state, "I receive the other into myself, and I see and feel with the other" (Noddings, 1984/2003, p. 30). Engrossment leads to motivational displacement, in which "[m]y motive energy flows toward the other and perhaps, although not necessarily, toward his ends...I allow my motive energy to be shared; I put it at the service of the other" (Noddings, 1984/2003, p. 33). However, Noddings (2005) emphasized that caring is not a virtue possessed by the carer, but the embodiment of a lived, reciprocal relation between the carer and the cared-for. Lacking such reciprocity, "there is no caring relation" (p. xv).

While the turn to e-learning is an inherently ethical decision, little is known about the ways in which online learning environments and practices shape human relations, or specifically, "about how [Noddings's] care theory is translated into the virtual setting" (Marx, 2011, p. 99).

THE MEANING OF THE FACE

In order to approach questions about the implications of faceless online education for ethical, caring relations, it is first necessary to understand precisely what the face signifies.

Discussions about what and how the face communicates often begin, and end, with the ideas of sociologist Erving Goffman, who, in works such as *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (1959) and *Interaction Ritual* (1967/2007), described the complex nature of face-to-face contact. For Goffman, the face as a concept had to do with self-presentation: in social interactions, we perform "face-work" – a "repertoire of face-saving practices" (Goffman, 1967/2007, p. 13) such as suppressing emotions, asserting that something was said in jest, or behaving courteously – in order to preserve our positive social value in others' eyes.

Goffman's theories construct the face as a front, a "put-on," and face-work as a process whereby, according to Barry Smart (1996), "a particularly self-interested individual calculatingly seeks to manage and promote, if not exploit, impressions.... The clear implication is that the modern subject is less concerned...with being moral than with appearing to be so" (p. 71). Smart went on to argue that the form of social analysis Goffman offered was distinctly amoral, based on a view of the social world as constituting nothing more than "a performance," "a display in which moral concern is simulated" (p. 72).

Goffman's notion of the face as a "put-on" aligns, rather paradoxically, with the concept of social presence, which, as noted earlier, refers to the extent to which faceless individuals with whom we communicate online use communicative "performances" (Xin, 2012, para. 20) and "strategies" (Mitchell & Shepard, 2015) in order to "[present] themselves to the other participants as 'real people'" (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000, p. 89).

In order to approach questions about the ethical implications of online learning, I believe that it is necessary to begin with a very different understanding of what the face signifies, an understanding based primarily upon the ideas of philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas (1998) specifically disputed the notion of the face as "a mask" or "a sign allowing us to approach a signified" (p. 33). Rather than a façade, he regarded "this chaste bit of skin with brow, nose, eyes, and mouth" as a doorway, an opening: "The face is the very identity of a being; it manifests itself in it in terms of itself, without a concept" (p. 33). When the face of the Other, in its "nakedness," "defencelessness," and "vulnerability" (Levinas, as cited in Hand, 1989, p. 83), appears before me — and speaks, in particular, with "the language of the eyes, impossible to dissemble" (Levinas, 1969, p. 66) — it awakens me to an overwhelming understanding of "the very *mortality* of the other human being" (Levinas, 1998, p. 167, emphasis in original).

In Goffman's construct, I look into the faces of others to see myself reflected back. However, Levinas insists that, when another's living face comes before me directly and vividly, "[c]onsciousness loses its first place...the I is expelled" (as cited in Peperzak, Critchley, & Bernasconi, 1996, p. 54). In other words, confronted with a revelation of the humanity, singularity, and "otherness" (or alterity) of the individual before me, my self-interest becomes secondary to a sense of obligation to care for the Other: "[I]n its expression, in its mortality, the face before me summons me, calls for me, begs for me...and in so doing recalls my responsibility, and calls me into question" (Levinas, as cited in Hand, 1989, p. 83). Noddings (1984/2003) similarly described ethical, caring relations as being grounded in the face-to-face encounter: the moment when the Other's "gaze falls upon me" (p. 113) and "real eyes look into mine" (p. 39). However, Levinas took the idea further, arguing that, at the moment that I am called into question, into responsibility, by my encounter with the face of

the Other, I am also called into being. In other words, my subjectivity is not constituted by how others see me but emerges from my ethical response to and relationships with others.

Pointing to the "slippery" (p. 49) nature of Levinas's construct of the face, Johnson (2007) argued that "the conceptual status given by Levinas to 'face' should be attributed to the interface" (p. 54). In making this argument, Johnson quickly dismissed the "obstacles to the use of Levinas in studies of CMC" (p. 49) — particularly the fact that Levinas was explicitly concerned with "the simultaneous presence of the interlocutors in close proximity, with exposed and visible faces" (p. 50) — by claiming that Levinas's focus on the proximate human face was merely a reflection of his dysfunctional relationship with technology. Similarly, Zembylas and Vrasidas (2005) began with the question of "what Levinas's ideas mean within a context that lacks face-to-face interaction, especially given the notion of the 'face,' which is central to his thought" (p. 62), but then quickly proceeded to dismiss that central notion in order to argue that the interface is equally conducive to ethical engagement with the Other.

I believe that such attempts to extend the concept of the face to the computer interface are untenable and not supported by Levinas's writings. Levinas (1998) repeatedly emphasized "the epiphany of the face" that occurs "in the face to face" (p. 185), a moment of ethical connection with the Other that "the facade of the building and of things can only imitate" (p. 57). He clearly stated that no "plastic form like a portrait" (Levinas, 1998, p. 104) — or, presumably, a thumbnail-sized photo on a screen — can replicate the immediacy and pure vulnerability of the proximate, living human physiognomy. As Ward and Prosser (2011) explained,

> For Levinas...[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). (p. 170)

In short, the interface of a learning management system — even, perhaps, the interface of a conferencing system that transmits live video images — can in no way eliminate the fundamental facelessness of the online learning experience.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF FACELESSNESS

If we begin with Levinas's construct of the proximate human face as the incitement to ethics, and Noddings's premise that ethics is expressed within caring relations, then it becomes clear that we must consider the facelessness inherent to online teaching and learning not merely as a pedagogical challenge that can be overcome through the use of clever presence-enhancing techniques and strategies, but as a moral issue with serious implications for the individuals who participate in online courses and, in fact, for society as a

whole. Indeed, we are provoked to ask a new set of questions: questions about the nature of human relations that are enacted within faceless online learning environments; questions about how the meaning and nature of education are altered when learners increasingly come face to face with screens rather than unique, different others; and questions about the kind of society we might expect those so educated to create.

Faceless human relations

Can those who come together in online learning environments form truly caring relations with faceless others? While "the question of whether [online] interactions engender an environment of caring is unanswered" (Sitzman & Leners, 2006, p. 254), initial attempts to address it are not encouraging. Kim and Schallert (2011) charted the complexities and challenges that "block the development of a caring relationship" (p. 1066) in text-based online interactions between a teacher and three students; Friesen (2011) asserted that the "characteristic of being oriented to the other, of non-purposive openness and receptivity, is...more difficult to enact in technologically mediated contexts" (p. 160); Ward and Prosser (2011) contended 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" (p. 170); Marx's (2011) mixed methods study of eight online graduate classes suggested that reciprocity is lacking in virtual learning environments; and, based on interviews with twelve university instructors, McShane (2006) concluded that it is "difficult to care online" (p. 202): "the carer as online facilitator cannot convey empathy, trust, passion and emotion online, and teacher-student relationships break down due to the inability to convey responsiveness and reciprocity" (p. 203).

These findings are substantiated by the work of psychologist Sherry Turkle (2015), who, based on hundreds of conversations and interviews, situated such failures of caring within a larger social phenomenon that she labeled an "empathy gap." According to Turkle, as we increasingly choose to communicate and learn online, our ability to "put ourselves in another's shoes," as well as our willingness to put ourselves at risk through close involvement with others, declines. Faceless communications are thus implicated in "lost practice in the empathetic arts — learning to make eye contact, to listen, and to attend to others" (p. 7). This empathy gap grows wider when our discomfort with face-to-face contact compels us to shun it in favour of yet more electronic, faceless contact "with people — and sometimes a lot of people — who are emotionally kept at bay" (p. 29). In other words, early research suggests not only that is it difficult for those who come together in online learning environments to form caring relations, but that the prevalence of such faceless contacts may contribute to a further inability to engage empathetically with others — and, indeed, to a devaluation of human contact in general.

Noddings (1984/2003) contended that, when caring relationships fail, the fault may lie not with the carer or the cared-for but with the structures in which teaching and learning take place – structures that make it difficult for the teacher to experience caring as anything but "cares and burdens" (p. 18). The preliminary research findings described above suggest that we might consider whether the LMS is one such structure, a platform that facilitates the 24/7 connection of teachers and learners to faceless others whose constant communications may be experienced as a homogeneous, "technology enabled bombardment" (Rose & Adams, 2014, p. 9), eliciting feelings of obligation rather than care for unique others.

The meaning of education

Given such findings, it is perhaps not surprising that research further suggests that, in opting to take online courses, postsecondary students frequently prioritize flexibility and convenience over human contact and relationships (see, for example, Braun, 2008; Clayton, Blumberg, & Auld, 2010; Gaytan & McEwan, 2007; Hannay & Newvine, 2006).

As educational institutions, particularly universities, respond to student demands by seeking to provide "anytime, anywhere" learning options, options that bring learners face to face with screens rather than each other, how do the fundamental nature and meaning of education begin to change? Can faceless education remain an ethical, relational process, "through which subjects emerge and are...made responsible for the other, that is, living for the other" (Safstrom & Månsson, 2004, p. 360)? Or should we expect the concept of education to undergo transformations, subtle or not so subtle – even to become "hollowed out" (Cooper, 2002, p. 28) – as it is increasingly considered not only possible but desirable for teaching and learning to take place in the absence of proximate, face-to-face relations?

Definitive answers to such questions may have to be deferred to a future retrospective; nevertheless, the consensus, among many commentators, is that the shift to online learning is going hand-in-hand with an increasing emphasis on the efficiency and rationalization of education. Thus, according to Selwyn (2014), faceless online environments tend to "re-characterize" higher education as a form of commodified, efficient, and "disembodied information transfer" (p. 120), uncomplicated by sometimes messy human interactions and relationships:

> [T]he increased use of digital technology in educational settings encourages the formation of a "digital mind-set," where most elements of the education system are visualized in terms of being composed of data rather than personal relations.... [D]igital technologies can easily be used to frame the relationships between teachers and students in terms of finite services or contracts rather than sustained human interaction....There is little or no recognition of the non-instructional elements of being a tutor – for example, in terms of pastoral care or basic forms of sociability with students. (p. 119)

Crawford (2015) concurred that online courses contribute to a "deep supposi-tion that...any field [is] transmissible by impersonal means" (p. 139) — that is, that knowledge can be divorced from the kinds of ethical relations built through face-to-face contact. Ward and Prosser (2011) made a similar point about "the attenuation of relational context" in technology-mediated exchanges that "reduce communication down to mere information exchange" (p. 171).

In short, stripped of its relational context, hijacked by marketing and managerial imperatives, online education is seen to be devolving into efficient information transfer. Given that educational changes inevitably connect with wider social transformations, we should expect the increasing predominance of faceless, impersonal, efficient pedagogies in lieu of human interactions in which the formation of ethical relations is central to have implications that extend well beyond the realm of education.

A new society

It might seem that, in asking questions about the kind of society that will emerge with the increasing prevalence of faceless education, I am compelled to speculate rather than turning to research evidence. However, inquiries into the kinds of relationships and communities that are formed in online spaces provide a telling starting point.

One body of research that provides significant insight into the nature of faceless relations is that exploring the phenomenon of online disinhibition. Since the rise of the Internet in the 1990s, researchers in psychology and CMC have found that, when people interact online, they tend to do so with less restraint than in face-to-face interactions, and this unrestrained behaviour tends to occur with greater frequency and intensity (Joinson, 2007). As Suler (2004) observed, "people say and do things in cyberspace that they wouldn't ordinarily say and do in the face-to-face world" (p. 321). Hence, the prevalence of such phenomena as flaming, cyberbullying, and excessive self-disclosure.

Several studies have specifically focused on disinhibition in online learning. For example, Galbraith and Jones (2010) asserted the prevalence of what they call "incivility" in online postsecondary education while, based on their experiences as first-time online instructors, Rossi and Hinton (2005) described "ugly" interactions that, they contended, transpire only in virtual learning environments and have "a negative effect" upon learning (p. 14).

Research on the causes of online disinhibition is not conclusive; however, most studies identify the primary contributing factors as anonymity, or the "pseudo-anonymity" conferred by invisibility, and lack of eye contact (Joinson, 2007; Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012; Suler, 2004) — factors related to the essential facelessness of online communications. Johnson (2007) further sug-gested that, if "anti-social communicative practices are par for the course on the Internet," it may be because those interacting online have "a diminished sense of responsibility toward other participants" (p. 49) whom they cannot see.

While disinhibition works against ethical, caring relations, so, paradoxically, does its apparent opposite: "pathological politeness" (Garrison, 2011, p. 40). In her study of an online adult education course, Conrad (2002) found that students exhibited not disinhibition but "an *increased* sense of inhibition" (p. 206, emphasis in original) — that is, an excessive "niceness" that had them attending scrupulously, even compulsively, to matters of netiquette in order to avoid conflict. Describing the phenomenon, a student in a study by Stodel, Thompson, and MacDonald (2006) highlighted the resulting banality of much online discussion: "The constant 'Good work', 'Good thought'. What really detracted from the so-called reality of the interactions was this virtual sense of touchy-feely camaraderie. Few people participated in head-shaking, in disagreement, which is what makes a discussion flow" (p. 8). Another student concurred that online "congeniality...can actually stand in the way of 'straight talk'" (Garrison, 2011, p. 40).

Conrad (2002) regarded extreme politeness largely in positive terms: learners "wanted to behave well online and they did not want to offend other group members" (p. 202). However, it is important to distinguish this kind of online "face work" from ethical relations. In fact, several commentators have contended that the avoidance of conflict — the increasing reluctance of online learners to engage with "the full, messy presence" of face-to-face others (Crawford, 2015, p. 176) — actually undercuts ethical caring. According to Ward and Prosser (2011), as learners increasingly choose "'anonymous' and impersonal" online learning as a way of insulating themselves "from the full, and ethically significant, force of each other's personalities," they "miss and fail to learn...a passionate commitment to anything or anyone" (pp. 172-173). Crawford (2015) concurred, arguing that "genuine community is possible only among people who are willing to put themselves at risk in this way and *present* themselves... beyond politeness" (p. 187, emphasis in original).

Swan and Shih (2005) observed that "[m]ost studies of social presence have noted the highly democratic nature of online discussion" (p. 118). However, to what extent can true democracy — beyond collegiality and politeness — be realized when individuals seek risk-free, "frictionless" relationships with faceless, homogeneous others in lieu of coming face-to-face with unique, different others? Franklin (as cited in Freeman, 2014) cautioned that "the greatest cost" of using asynchronous technology in teaching and learning "is the non-developed people skills...The skill of cooperation, the skill of tolerance, which are essential skills that develop slowly and painfully, are frequently short-circuited when you can just go back to the solitude of a computer screen" (p. 123). She contended that the development of these social skills depends upon an exposure to difference that is unavailable in faceless online environments, which therefore produce an unhealthy "monoculture of the mind" (p. 166). Franklin compels us to ask: if students cannot see differences, if they are not put in positions

where they have to face each other with openness and vulnerability, to pay attention to each other, to try out ideas, and to negotiate a common ground of understanding, then how can they learn to live together?

Franklin's reflections, as well as the studies on online disinhibition and "niceness," suggest that, as learners negotiate the challenges of relating to faceless others who are experienced as somehow unreal, undeserving of consideration or commitment, online communications and relations veer from excessive politeness to unprecedented incivility, and may fall short when it comes to the kind of give and take that is the basis of ethical relationships, genuine communities, and, indeed, democratic society as a whole.

CONCLUSION

In this position paper, I have argued that, as we busily investigate the pedagogical efficacy of online learning, we fail to give sufficient attention to the ethical implications and import of asynchronous education. Specifically, in focusing on how social presence can be achieved within the parameters of faceless systems, the discourse of online education tends to neglect what is necessarily lost in such environments: the face. Indeed, inherent within the fundamental binary in the research — online / face-to-face — is a tacit disavowal of facelessness, a repudiation of its centrality to the experience of online teaching and learning.

Drawing upon the work of Emmanuel Levinas and Nel Noddings, I have further argued that the face is the basis of caring, ethical relations, and that those relations represent an integral, essential element of education. Therefore, the fact that more and more education transpires within faceless environments has serious ethical implications not only for the nature of human relationships within those environments, but also, more broadly, for the nature and meaning of education, as well as for the social relations and configurations that those educated within faceless systems might produce.

Although my focus has been on interactions and relationships within asynchronous systems, I would discourage readers from concluding that we can eliminate the issue of facelessness by turning to synchronous platforms. Video-streamed faces are often choppy, pixelated, and difficult to read, and my conversations with students and teachers suggest that they still tend to experience challenges perceiving synchronous interactions as being with real people rather than computer screens. Further, as Friesen (2014) pointed out, the face-to-face experience in such systems is compromised — and rendered rather paradoxical — by the fact that it can never be reciprocal, for it is only when the user chooses to look at the camera rather than at the face on the screen that he or she appears to be making eye contact. Ward and Prosser (2011) suggested that, as technology advances, it may be possible for such systems to provide "the essential inter-personal elements of education" (p. 176),

but they added the important caveat that this will only be achieved if we take the time now to fully understand just what those elements entail — and that certainly includes appreciating the important role of the face in building and maintaining teacher-student and student-student relations.

In the meantime, I believe that there is ample reason to question the morality of the rapid, wholesale transfer of teaching and learning to online formats. Rather than continuing to work on strategies for extending social presence, based on the assumption that such courses can be both pedagogically and ethically equivalent to face-to-face experiences, we might instead direct our efforts toward obtaining a better understanding of what the trend means for students and society. At the very least, we can explore ways of preserving as much as possible elements, even if only small, of face-to-face contact within online courses — from incorporating face-to-face orientations and conferences to designing learning activities that encourage students to work with each other in small remote groups.

I began this paper with McLuhan, and it is appropriate that I conclude with his blunt reminder that no technology is neutral: to assert that all that matters is how a technology is used "is the numb stance of the technological idiot" (McLuhan, 1964, p. 26). The learning management system is a case in point. Regardless of how they are used — regardless, in particular, of whether strategies to enhance social presence are implemented — e-learning environments and practices are inherently faceless, and they therefore fundamentally alter the nature and ethical experience of human communication, education, and relation.

NOTES

1. This research, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, was conducted during 2010-2013 in collaboration with Catherine Adams. The study (reported in Rose, 2013; Rose & Adams, 2012, 2014) was based on phenomenological interviews with 17 online learners and 19 online instructors.

2. In this paper, I will use the terms "ethical" and "moral" synonymously. As *The Blackwell Dictionary of Western Philosophy* (Ethics and morality, 2004) points out, the terms are etymologically identical, both referring to "social regulations that are embedded in cultural and historical traditions governing people's character and behavior" (para. 2). Since the mid-twentieth century, philosophers have increasingly sought to distinguish between the two terms, but "the value of the distinction is still in dispute" (para. 4) and is unnecessary for the purposes of this paper.

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