

Lost Causes: Online Instruction and the Integrity of Presence

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In addressing an issue about teaching in higher education, we begin with a disclaimer. We love teaching. While that may make what we say suspect, it is worth noting that, as Harry Frankfurt argues, a defining element of love is the disinterested concern of the lover for what sustains and advances the interests of what one loves.¹ Such a concern has driven this inquiry from the start.

The issue in question is the emergence of online teaching. The brochure designed by our institution to encourage faculty to teach online courses is titled “Online Instruction: Creating New Connections with Today’s...Students.” The first of several benefits for faculty moving to online teaching is that, by doing so, they “remain current in the era of continuously evolving teaching practices.” Such brochures are no doubt commonplace; the trickle of online courses is becoming a flood. There is a tone of excitement that such developments spark in many people and places. But more than this, often, there is a conveyed sense of inevitability. Teaching practices are evolving, and we had better get with it.

Much of the excitement is generated by those with a large and growing stake in diverse forms of technologically mediated instruction: support staff, software designers and consultants, instructional innovators among faculty, program administrators charting the costs and benefits.

Of course, there are questions to be asked about the educational merits of online instruction. But in those settings where one would expect the questions to be raised, often they are not, and even when they are raised, they risk carrying the scent of reaction. Broadly speaking, as with the assessment of any kind of educational practice, the evaluative criteria employed are tied to the educational aims one holds dear.² Critical questions about online instruction typically are regarded as coming from those who just don’t get it — those who demonstrate, by their questions, that they are not “current” with the “continuously evolving teaching practices.” The sense is that, if you grasp the kinds of aims being sought, you would set aside the kinds of concerns (and the evaluative criteria attached to them) that generate such doubts and questions about the fundamental merits of online instruction.

In short, the situation is vexing. Sweeping changes in the nature of teaching and higher education are underway. Advocates of change are energized, while doubts and misgivings are diffused throughout the system, and readily marginalized.

This is the blueprint for a lost cause. In this essay, we want to begin to respond. Our purpose is more personal than political. Confronted with a lost cause, we want to explore just what it is that is lost — or at least in danger of being lost — when teaching moves online. As it turns out, thinking about what may be lost draws attention anew to just what it is we love about teaching.

VIRTUAL PRESENCE

In preparing for and conducting examples of online instruction, following years of experience in traditional classroom settings, we have both considered a wide range of issues regarding the way our educational aims inform, and are informed by, the ways in which we teach. Of all the various elements at play in teaching online or in traditional settings, one compelling difference stands front and center. It is the phenomenon of presence.

In traditional settings of all kinds, the teacher is physically present with students, time shared in a particular place. Online, the teacher maintains a virtual presence by way of a network of communications with students extended over time to their remote locations. Does the form of presence matter?

Teaching online involves a number of straightforward, though pivotal features concerning the form of presence for those involved. First, instead of some particular place, there is the array of settings from which those involved connect. And such choices are open with respect to time as well; typically, participants choose when to connect, how often, and for how long. The choices provide maximal control over when and for how long one will do what is called for in making one's presence felt, and in reading the presence of others involved in the course. Hence, virtual presence makes for a disconnected asynchronicity of engagement constituted by patterns of individual choice.

Along with the degrees of choice regarding place and time there are further choices as to self-presentation. Being online frees one from the obligations and constraints of embodiment. One can choose what and how much to convey and project about oneself given the freedom of disembodied interaction. And when online, one's choices extend also to the kinds of auxiliary content and options that shape the experience. Being online carries with it the ready capacity, moment to moment, to layer content (for example, background music, instant messaging, online gaming) or launch into other forms of activity altogether — whether course related or not — at any time. This is enormously appealing of course, providing as it does a heightened control with respect to one's current interests and inclinations.

The beauty and the logic of technological advancements in the way experience is mediated thus resides in the expansion of accessible locations, on the one hand — the multiplicity of potential links — and in the immediacy of chosen content on the other. Each of us, right now, can navigate with a capacity beyond that of the most powerful person in the world just decades ago. Of course such changes come with a price. In a lament on the loss of newspapers that he attributes to the diminishing sense of, and care about, the particulars of place, Richard Rodriguez comments: "Careening down Geary Boulevard on the 38 bus, I can talk to my dear Auntie in Delhi or I can view snapshots of my cousin's wedding in Recife or I can listen to girl punk in Glasgow. The cost of my cyber-urban experience is disconnection from body, from presence, from city." This, he suggests, is the upshot of the emerging culture, what he dubs the "digital cosmopolitanism that begins and ends with 'I'."³ But as Rodriguez acknowledges, the temptation is irresistible.

Advocates of online instruction invariably recognize the kinds of freedom such presence provides. It is the capacity to attend to just what one wants or needs right now and, recognizing the vast range of options, learning to dismiss or disregard the rest. This is the fundamental knowingness of savvy engagement with the forms and content of contemporary culture. Indeed, such knowingness is cultivated by the web and related forms of readily available mediated experience. Given the profusion of sites and sources at the fingertips of most people in the developed world today, the challenge of all content providers is to lure and hold the attention, encouraging and facilitating the activity, of some share of potential users.⁴ Providers gain increasing expertise in finding ways to do so: establishing the hooks, easing the use, elaborating the possibilities, and validating the choices of those they reach. And in turn, those exercising ever greater freedom to choose that to which they will now attend, encounter content, sites, apps, and the like that either gratify the one making the choice (reaffirming his or her judgment), or get quickly dismissed for something that does. Where virtual engagement is concerned, then, we suggest, the emerging ideal is utility of presence: what is in it for me, now, to maintain some connection?

Online courses inhabit this same amorphous space that is being continually conformed, from the individual's perspective, by their tastes and wishes. The knowingness of online course participants with respect to the range of daily forms of mediated experience is not suspended when one comes to an online course. Indeed, both the instructor designing such a course, and the students who choose to take it, must recognize that they have all alike chosen to "meet" in this way at the intersection of their various, distinct purposes, and that the nature and extent of their presence together is defined by the stream of choices being made.

Constructivism offers a convenient theoretical framework from which to organize this diffuse and decentralized form of learning. There is growing consensus among constructivist scholars of online instruction that a successful online experience is dependent on the establishment of what they call "social presence." Defined by some as "a feeling of community, a personal attachment"⁵ and by others as the "ability of learners to project themselves as 'real' people"⁶ social presence increases student engagement and course appeal. As one scholar argues, the main function of social presence is to increase the "cognitive presence" of students by rendering group interactions "enjoyable and personally fulfilling so that students will remain in the cohort of learners for the duration of the program."⁷

Given the ideal of the utility of presence, then, what is essential is that the students construct their own knowledge in useful and self-fulfilling ways, that they derive something from their experiences that better equips them to achieve their personal interests. And for teachers, it is their willingness to clearly indicate what material, tasks, and opportunities they have arranged to offer and the benefits that follow from attending to them. The purified material meticulously framed in a step-by-step manner creates an "effective container" or safe zone from which the teacher or student need not stray. The teacher alone configures the narrow online spaces through which all must pass. Micromanaging some mix of quizzes, discussion

forums, and diverse assignments, she virtually guarantees a more uniform, efficient, and predictable learning experience. To improve upon her delivery, she may even adopt a “teaching presence” that acts as a “means to an end to support and enhance social and cognitive presence for the purpose of realizing educational outcomes.”⁸

Online instruction brings together teachers and students whose virtual presence with one another centers on the interplay of their efforts to optimize the utility of the time spent together. Conditioned by the possibilities of online experience, participants tend to engage and contribute in ways that make sense of the moment given the current state of what they know and want. However fleeting, fragmented, or sustained, virtual presence is the product of judgments as to how to gratify one’s inclinations and efficiently serve one’s purposes online.

EMBODIED PRESENCE

We cannot begin to do justice, and will not try, to what is coming into being in the worlds of online instruction. We speculate that the tendency favors the virtues of convenience, accessibility, efficiency, personal satisfaction, (and profitability). To take hold in the boundless context of mediated choice, all involved must be attuned to what they choose to bring to the transaction and the purposes they have for doing so.

If online instruction establishes a virtual presence that is intrinsically open and flexible with regard to space, time, and self-presentation, presence in traditional classrooms is embodied and constrained. One is bound to a particular place, for a particular period of time, in a particular body, and exposed to any number of social practices and conventions bequeathed to us by tradition. Students and teachers alike are branded by their dress, gender, and skin color and time-space constraints often contribute to our anxiety, frustration, and ennui. Instead of the technology that permits us a kind of virtual omnipresence, we encounter, again, the relics and rituals of the past, designed to augment teacher authority, direct our attention to one thing, and keep us in our place.

Consider the following vignette from Iris Murdoch’s *Sandcastle*:

The evening was nearly over...Mor was answering a question. “Freedom...is not exactly what I would call a virtue. Freedom might be called a benefit or a sort of grace — though of course to seek it or to gain it might be a proof of merit.”

The questioner, a successful middle-aged greengrocer, who was one of the props of the local Labour Party, was hanging grimly on to the back of the chair in front of him, whose occupant was leaning nervously forward. The greengrocer who had made the remark that surely freedom was the chief virtue, and wasn’t it thinking so that differentiated us from the Middle Ages? Stared intently at Mor as if drinking in his words. Mor thought, he is not really listening, he does not want to hear what I say, he knows what he thinks and is not going to reorganize his views. The words I am uttering are not the words for him.

He felt again that sad guilty feeling which he had whenever he caught himself going through the motions of being a teacher without really caring to make his pupils understand. How well he knew that many teachers, including some who got high reputations by doing so, contented themselves with putting up a show, often a brilliant one, in front of those who were to be instructed — and of this performance both sides might be the dupes. Whereas the real teacher cares only for one thing, that the matter should be understood; and into that process

he vanishes. Mor hated it when he caught himself trying to be clever. Sometimes the temptation was strong. An adult education class will often contain persons who have come merely to parade a certain view-point, and with no intention of learning anything. In response to this provocation it was tempting to produce merely a counter-attraction, a show, designed to impress rather than to make anything clear. But to make anything clear here, Mor felt with a sudden despair — how could it be done?...“I’m sorry, Mr. Staveley,” said Mor, “I’ve said nothing to the purpose. Let me try again. You say surely freedom is a virtue — and I hesitate to accept this phrase. Let me explain why. To begin with, as I was saying in my talk this evening, freedom needs to be defined. If by freedom we mean absence of external constraint, then we may call a man lucky for being free — but why should we call him good? If, on the other hand, by freedom we mean self-discipline, which dominates selfish desires, then indeed we may call a free man virtuous. But, as we know, this more refined conception of freedom can also play a dangerous role in politics. It may be used to justify the tyranny of people who think themselves to be the enlightened ones. Whereas the notion of freedom which I’m sure Mr. Staveley has in mind, the freedom which inspired the great Liberal leaders of the last century, is political freedom, the absence of tyranny. This is the condition of virtue, and to strive for it is a virtue. But it is not itself a virtue. To call mere absence of restraint or mere kicking over the traces and flouting of conventions a virtue is to be simply romantic.”

“Well, what’s wrong with being romantic?” said Mr. Staveley obstinately. “Let’s have ‘romantic’ defined, since you’re so keen on definitions.”

“Surely, isn’t love the chief virtue?” said a lady sitting near the front, and turning round to look at Mr. Staveley. “Or does Mr. Staveley think that the New Testament is out of date?”

I’ve failed again, thought Mor, with the feeling of one who has brought the horse round the field a second time only for it to shy once more at the jump. He felt very tired and the words did not come easily. But he was prepared to go on trying.⁹

This scenario exemplifies the weight of embodied presence in traditional settings, with the sagging pace of conversation, conflicting interests, talking at cross-purposes, and lack of mutual respect. Our teacher is caught in familiar territory between treating the subject with the seriousness he thinks it deserves and letting go, allowing the students to take what they will from the encounter.

Is not Mor the romantic one by stubbornly clinging to an outdated ideal of teaching? His pedantic insistence on defining terms obstructs the conversational flow and tests the patience of his students. That these students happen to be adults reinforces the arrogance and futility of his attempts. Whether freedom is a virtue or a condition thereof is not *their* concern; what matters is the priority given to freedom or love, concepts they know without having to define them.

The students stare intensely, lean nervously, and hang grimly projecting their frustration, anxiety, and growing impatience. Mor is tired and full of despair. The evening is slowly coming to an end. Despite his strong resolve, it might seem wise to give up and call it a day. Students totter ever more closely to irreverence and the teacher to outright contempt. This class is stuck, as is each of them in it.

What keeps Mor going if not a glimmer of hope that one simple incident, a casual comment, a shift in mood, or slight distraction, will redeem this situation. Such things happen, as we all know, though we never quite know when, or why. Slogging along, grappling with the forms and content of face-to-face teaching, the endless iterations of classroom meetings, the situation sometimes gels. Most

everyone has been there we suspect, though here we must appeal to your experience of things coming together — maybe not for all or all at once, but tangibly — it gets “real,” the body language changes, eyes brighten, a restless desire of some to jump in and take part becomes evident, perhaps a hearty gale of shared laughter, a plenitude of significant connections and avenues to pursue comes into view, the enervation morphs into heightened energy.

The redemptive moments of teaching that we call to mind are those that most clearly answer the basic question: in the embodied presence of face-to-face teaching, burdened as it is by spatial, temporal, and social limitations, just what is there to love? What we love about teaching resides in the way that embodied presence, despite all of its constraints, sometimes, and unpredictably, generates experiences of a certain character that, for a time, dissolve the frustrations and constraints of assembling people together with some prospect of learning in view. If the logic of online instruction optimally gravitates towards utility of presence, the redeeming quality of traditional instruction emerges from what we want to call the integrity of presence. Let us elaborate on the character of such presence.

The first thing to note is that, when gathering to address various kinds of subject matter, its worthiness as subject matter arises from a sense, however slight, of reverence. The virtue of reverence, described by Paul Woodruff as the “well-developed capacity to have feelings of awe, respect, and shame when these are the right feelings to have”¹⁰ is clearly pertinent to the complex dynamics of a classroom. Reverence cannot be imposed from above, but emerges in the hermeneutic process as due forms of respect for the subject matter and those present.

This implies the need for subject matter compelling enough to bind together, in the “here and now,” teacher and student in the shared pursuit of understanding. Towards this pursuit, students earn a teacher’s respect by a desire to understand, rather than by virtue of academic talent alone. Students in turn respect the teacher’s authority as an acknowledgment of her superior knowledge. Mutual respect is thus reinforced in the attendance to the subject at hand.

There is a certain self-less quality to this common effort. If learning is authentic, it represents a movement away from self towards something other. Hans-Georg Gadamer describes this process (and its achievement) as *Bildung*; it is finding a home in the alien and rising from the particularity of one’s private desires and purposes to a higher universal.¹¹ Murdoch’s description of learning Russian captures this engagement nicely.

I am confronted by an authoritative structure which commands my respect. The task is difficult and the goal is distant and perhaps never entirely attainable. My work is a progressive revelation of something which exists independently of me...Love of Russian leads me away from myself towards something alien to me, something which my consciousness cannot take over, swallow up, deny or make unreal. The honesty and humility required of the student — not to pretend to know what one does not know — is the preparation for the honesty and humility of the scholar who does not even feel tempted to suppress the fact which damns his theory.¹²

We acknowledge that linking integrity with reverence is likely to raise hackles. The very term integrity evokes imagery of elitism and power, professional and academic

status. One thinks of a person “having” integrity as one who remains true to herself, clinging fast to moral absolutes in the face of adversity and temptation. This is not the view of integrity we are advancing here.

Integrity as we are speaking of it is not a matter of the fixed character of an individual; rather it is inherent in the quality of attention, and arises as an effect of the engagement of those present. Such presence is de-centering, it broadens and deepens the perspective of those involved. More importantly, integrity of presence in learning situations doesn’t imply fixed positions, settled opinions, unwavering commitment. The effect of integrity often springs from fluid, flexible, unpredictable forms of engagement; it is sometimes the product of the spirited play of ideas, of assuming different perspectives, saying outlandish things, explaining counter-intuitive ideas, or experiencing what Deborah Kerdeman, drawing from Gadamer, refers to as “being pulled up short,” those occasions when expectations are thwarted and one becomes most aware of one’s limitations, the absurdity of one’s own certitude, the limits of one’s projects.¹³ In fact, while the integrity of presence, as we conceive it, begins in reverence, it is paradoxically sustained by irony.

Referred to by Kierkegaard as “a disciplinarian feared only by those who do not know it but loved by those who do”¹⁴ and by Woodruff as “silence twisted into words that provoke and do not satisfy,”¹⁵ irony functions to put us in our place. It frustrates and humbles us; it demands that we think further and more deeply. So much so that the absence of irony is really a failure of integrity, the Pyrrhic victory of our smug conclusions over what is real.

There is integrity to irony as well. Irony is appreciated only by those “in the know” and is lost to casual observers. (Quite often, the joke is on them.) Irony cuts to the bone when it refers back to something taken seriously and appears trite when nothing is at stake. By redoubling and reorienting our attention, begging further justification, challenging our common sense notions, and instilling humility, irony contributes to integrity of presence.

But just as integrity, as we are speaking of it, is tempered by irony, irony is motivated by reverence. We can appreciate compelling schemes for what they are, that is, our best attempts to understand something ultimately beyond our full comprehension. Reverent irony recognizes that the very nature of the subject, coupled with our hermeneutic limitations, permit a multiplicity of plausible perspectives that demand our deep respect. This does not prevent us from making thoughtful, fallible judgments. As with Kieran Egan’s treatment of ironic understanding, we are skeptical of postmodern forms of irony that destroy all distinctions and are prone to radical epistemic doubt.¹⁶

Integrity of presence is thus tenuous and unpredictable, not the product of pure will. While we all know exemplary teachers who possess the phronetic agility to regularly elicit such a sense of presence within a variety of situations, the emergence of this presence is never entirely in their control and cannot be taken for granted. Even when physical, emotional, and intellectual energies align to draw forth deeper understandings and unanticipated possibilities, even then, one cannot help but notice

and appreciate the limits of what our shared engagement provides. There is always more that could be said and felt, new questions and prospects that the fullness of attention brings into view. And so, as it turns out, the real lost cause is not the battle over online instruction, but the seductive imperfectability of teaching itself.

CONCLUSION

It is hard not to appreciate the promise of online instruction. As a vehicle of free exchange, online instruction promises egalitarian relationships of utility and a field of choices with which one can tailor one's presence, secured from critical scrutiny and unwanted entanglements. This is a space where silence, conflict, and perplexity — to say nothing of humor and reverent irony — have little foothold, where disruptions to the smooth and transparent educational exchange are design flaws needing to be addressed. Buyer's remorse is rare; the product confirms our expectations. While students may struggle with the tasks, they are unlikely to be taken aback or pulled up short.

For those addressing education in terms of the earnest pursuit of useful results, it is therefore easy to dismiss face-to-face instruction as a relic of the past, cumbersome, and needlessly confining. Instrumentally speaking, it is unclear that traditional instruction can compete. The embodied presence in teaching, even in optimal cases, is inefficient; it demands our time and undivided attention and calls on us to risk ourselves. One rarely gets what one expects; often one is pulled up short. We understand the lure of education gravitating toward the utility of presence, then, a free and relatively unfettered transaction of individual wants and purposes. Such a perspective promises that a great and growing abundance of possibilities will be brought within the control of teachers and students alike, an emerging market of learning opportunities.

The ongoing debate about the relative viability and worth of online and traditional teaching — and the characteristic forms of presence they involve — will surely rage on. There is much to say about the future direction and political economy of higher education. Be that as it may, the starting place is simply this. What we love about teaching is precisely the fact that, at its best, eliciting the integrity of presence, it is not the kind of thing that can be served up neatly on demand and controlled. If it were, it would scarcely inspire our love. With our students, thrown together, we choose to embrace the lost cause of redeeming that time together in the ways that we can, given what we care about and hope to understand.

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 3. Richard Rodriguez, "Final Edition," *Harper's*, November 2009, 37.
 4. See Thomas deZengatita, *Mediated: How the Media Shape Your World and How You Live in It* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2005).
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