

## Classrooms as Places of Productive Friction

Lana Parker  
*University of Windsor*

Classrooms are commonly constructed as contact zones and educational philosophers have long deliberated the characteristics of that contact. With the changing nature of how young people spend their time both in and out of school, however, new questions of digital liminality ought to be considered. The online world is a space of tensions and contradictions. On one hand, we are alone, facing a screen, and anchored to a void rather than the particularities of this space and time; on the other, we are immersed in possibilities of abundance. The dichotomy produces anxiety, as we are pulled toward the promise of knowledge and community but are simultaneously overwhelmed by a cacophony of information. Technology companies understand this anxiety and seek to exploit it. They design algorithms for the twin purposes of addiction and control.<sup>1</sup> By employing filter bubbles and cultivating echo chambers, they simultaneously satiate our need for belonging and addict us to the prospect of garnering “likes.” It is no wonder, then, that we are diminished in our abilities to connect outside of the algorithm or that we find contradictory views abhorrent. If classrooms are diminished places of contact, it is because the online world has stultified our abilities to listen with humility or respond with care. This paper seeks to analyze these evolving digital ontologies, the new information environment, using Emmanuel Levinas’s conception of ethical possibility through face-to-face interaction and Hannah Arendt’s rendition of the public realm.

Levinas offers an ethics of first philosophy that is rooted in encounter.<sup>2</sup> He determines that our ability to meet one another face-to-face provides us with the space and time of the Other. This is an Other who is always above us, at a height, and who provokes a dual sense of vulnerability and humility. Levinas writes that this intersubjective relation cultivates possibilities for responsibility and wisdom. The former is demonstrated through the act of listening, such that the self is open to fracture. This fracture of our ego—what Levinas terms

our *bonne conscience*—is ethical possibility enacted, if not ever completed or perfected. The latter, wisdom, is accrued as we move from encounter to encounter, toward an impossible to reach horizon. This wisdom is distinct from the mastery of Western knowledge as it is unplanned and always unknown. The ethical encounter posits a primordial and indefinite responsibility, just as it promises a limitless horizon of possibility for wisdom. This is one of many aporia inherent to Levinas's work and it is this feature—of recursive tension that is itself maintained by holding ideas apart—that renders Levinasian ethics so useful for the analysis of our collapsing, interstitial spaces.

If Levinas offers insight into the interpersonal and ethical, Arendt is useful here for her consideration of the political. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *The Human Condition*, Arendt characterizes the public realm as a space of appearance and as a common-for-all space.<sup>3</sup> The metaphor she employs is one of a table at which we are invited to sit, listen, witness, speak, and debate. This somewhat idealized description emerges from Arendt's understanding of the *polis*, and it serves to cleave what Arendt determines as two separate realms: the private and the public. In the private realm, we can be concerned with the basic functions of life, with our survival. In the public, by contrast, we are called to attend to the common world, to the needs of others, and to those yet to be born. Here, too, then is an aporia that engenders space: The private and public are equally necessary in the functioning of a democracy. It is helpful to parenthetically note that I use Arendt here instead of Habermas in recognition of some important differences.<sup>4</sup> First, that Arendt's public realm emphasizes spatiality and presence. Political actors meet and engage in face-to-face discussion, rather than in atomized segments. Second, Arendt's public realm is underpinned by an agonal character—debate and disagreement are central features of the space. Lastly, and related to the insistence on common space for presence, Arendt foregrounds the importance of acting together. These distinctions become especially significant when analyzing the digital sphere as a failed public realm.

#### ENCOUNTER WITHOUT FRICTION

The new information environment is characterized by high levels of

online engagement, rising tides of mis- and disinformation, intentional technological manipulation, and the imperilling of democracy through strains of post-truthism and radicalization.<sup>5</sup> Youth, spending hours online and using social media, are particularly vulnerable. They increasingly turn to digital spaces to form communities, be entertained, and learn about the world.<sup>6</sup> Often, they do so without any substantive awareness of the way that data are collected, algorithms operate, or how their role as producers and consumers contributes to a larger public. As these digital spaces become the “real world” for youth who grow up with it, there is much to be understood about how digital immersion reconditions our abilities to encounter one another in real life.

### HOW DO WE LISTEN?

Key to Levinas’s conception of the ethical encounter are descriptions of facing and listening. As noted, Levinas contends that the face-to-face encounter is unique in providing us with the space and time for ethical encounter. He writes, “prior to any particular expression and beneath all particular expressions, . . . there is the nakedness and destitution of the expression as such, that is to say extreme exposure, defencelessness, vulnerability itself” and that “one comes not into the world but into question.”<sup>7</sup> This is, for Levinas, the expression of a pre-ontological responsibility, a responsibility that comes before the development of our self and our ego, before even our conception of “*moi*.” One characteristic of the encounter is the asymmetry between self/Other, another is the responsibility of the self to be a listener who is vulnerable to rupture. The ethical moment is fleeting and fragile: it is impossible to sustain or perfect. Nonetheless, if it is to come to pass, the self must approach the encounter with no claims on the Other, with no hope to comprehend them. In this way, I listen with a desire for the surprise of alterity. I listen with the humble recognition that the words of the Other are already beyond me and my patrol of consciousness, my thought. I express responsibility by listening, but also by remaining content that the Other is ungraspable and unknowable, and it is I, “*moi*”, my self, that must fracture in response.

The new information environment renders this expression of listening nearly impossible. Technology conditions us to live in a world without friction.

It employs algorithms to produce filter bubbles and echo chambers, where like minds find community, reinforcement, and solace. Online spaces, rather than open vistas of possibility for encounter, are instead funnels to uniformity. Even if one encounters an opposing point of view, one's anger is blunted by the smallness of possible reply: a Tweet, a Post, a hashtag. The moment of encounter is dampened by the cavernousness and the anonymity of the space. We are, online, nowhere and everywhere. Time, too, loses meaning. There is no sustained discourse, no possibility to be gifted with the time of the Other. Instead, the Other has come and gone. We are engaged with echoes.

### WHAT OF HUMILITY AND RUPTURE?

It is unsurprising that the persistent numbness of online affect and the persistent pressure to conform eventually coalesce into a simple reified form: Us versus them. It is also unsurprising—though often surprise is performed—that the sputtering rage expressed online and its lack of ramifications for the perpetrator increasingly leads to real world harm. When actions from the dulled non-sensory digital world spills into the streets, it can result in broad and staggering violence. For example, in April 2018, a man drove a van down the sidewalks in Toronto, murdering ten people and injuring sixteen.<sup>8</sup> He later disclosed that he belonged to an online community of Incels, or involuntary celibates, and, in the lead-up to the attack, posted, “The Incel Rebellion has already begun.”<sup>9</sup> A further example of this online-to-real-life pipeline of violence occurred on January 6, 2021, when an angry mob stormed the US Capitol.<sup>10</sup> Despite years of online rage, experts were caught off guard by the real-life actions of a group that had previously confined their rage to online environments. The sudden and shocking violence seemed to come from nowhere, but it had been nurtured in online fora for years. This “community” did not have to confront the friction of encounter, but was instead able to engage in the superficial digital ontologies, listening only to hear what reinforces their existing ideas and reifies their boundaries of thought.

Levinas gives us a construct for this, too. In his discussion of the ethical encounter as a rupture of self, Levinas notes that the ego or *bonne conscience* finds comfort in the “*chez soi*,” the at home resting place of the self.<sup>11</sup> While it

is a space of contentment and ease, it can never lead to wisdom. In contrast, he contends that the *mauvaise conscience* is expressed in wandering, the “*hors-de-soi*,” the affordance of the self to go outside itself toward moments of encounter and rupture.<sup>12</sup> Further, in “Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism,” Levinas argues that when we listen with a view to reinforce the *bonne conscience*, we are essentially engaged in games of thought that buttress our thinking, our meagre understanding of knowledge, rather than furnish occasion for wisdom.<sup>13</sup> The examples of violence delineated above reveal that the ossification of the *bonne conscience* leads to radicalization. In April 2018 and January 2021, radicalized individuals were goaded into action by a frictionless environment—an environment that allowed for the petrification of the *bonne conscience* by a superficial performance of listening online that was, *de facto*, nothing more than a game of thought.

#### FOR WHOM ARE WE RESPONSIBLE?

We are left now with questions of how to be responsible and for whom does our technology want us to be responsible? For Levinas, our capacity for goodness is contingent upon our expression of responsibility for the Other. There is no opportunity for ethics that begins with me attending to my own needs or me following prescribed laws. To do so would be to fail to take the bread from my own mouth to give to my neighbour; it would be to leave her to hunger.<sup>14</sup> Levinas notes that this responsibility is expressed through listening and radical passivity. Having been born into responsibility, this radical passivity obliges me to exist in response to the gift of time of the Other: I come into the fullness of being only through encounter, and only through an unmitigated embrace of the Other’s alterity.

This is in high contrast to the inherent affordances of modern technology, which encourage hyper-individualism. These technologies did not arise in a neutral sociopolitical vacuum; rather, they are designed in support of neoliberal hegemony.<sup>15</sup> This facet of neoliberalism is predicated on autonomy and prizes our ability to demonstrate our Goodness, our worth, through relentless accumulation. Advocates for the digital world sometimes gesture to heretofore unknown possibilities for connection and global community. Yet, over time,

the euphoria at the potential to build relationships has diminished in recognition that the internet is not an untrammelled public space. It is governed by profit-seeking mega-corporations eager to exert control over user experience: each of us is atomized into a collection of data that is designed to provoke consumption. That is the true currency of the internet: we consume content as we used to consume goods, with a voracious thirst, with almost no meaning, and with little compunction. Technology companies manage our friction: in some online interactions, just enough to cultivate tribalism; in others, in our communities of followers and echo chambers—in the coalitions of thought on Reddit, Facebook, and Parler—we are emptied of friction. The Other exists only in service of our blinkered quest for more.

### SOCIAL MEDIA AND MASS SOCIETY

If we consider the internet to be a force shaping intersubjective relations and democratic engagement, then it is useful to contrast the spaces online life cultivates with a framework for publics.

#### HOW IS THE PUBLIC REALM CHALLENGED BY THE MASS SOCIETY OF SOCIAL MEDIA?

Arendt conceptualizes speech and action as the necessary constituents of appearance and politics in the public realm, but in the online world correlative forces are at play.<sup>16</sup> This is not a realm of individuals contesting ideas in a public, but instead a space polluted by digital manipulations, algorithms, and bot accounts that drive undisclosed political agendas through lies and misinformation. Even without consideration of these adulterations, Arendt's analysis of the rise of the social provides avenues for understanding the online environment less as a public realm with the possibility of appearance and more as an extension of the social. Her critique of conformism and of the appeal of belonging to a mass society evokes echoes of Levinas's problematic of the *bonne conscience*. That is, that the allure of sameness and the comfort of assimilation seduce us into behaviour rather than action; we seek to adhere to norms and to cleave to the group. This phenomenon is apparent as social media users evince an insatiable thirst for "likes" and seek out the latest "trending" topics as a way of partici-

pating in the discourse. It also finds expression as a troubling tendency toward authoritarianism.<sup>17</sup> It is notable that technology companies design platforms and algorithms to reward *only* the law of large numbers (e.g., followers, likes, subscribers), and to reward these in the only currencies of value: attention and money.<sup>18</sup> This is not and cannot be a productive expression of political action. As Arendt determines,

The application of the law of large numbers and long periods to politics or history signifies nothing less than the wilful obliteration of their very subject matter, and it is a hopeless enterprise to search for meaning in politics or significance in history when everything that is not everyday behavior or automatic trends has been ruled out as immaterial.<sup>19</sup>

The frictionless environment online is designed to produce mass societies. The cultivation of the online *only* social realm suppresses opportunities for meaningful in-person encounter and diminishes both our skills and tolerance for in-person debate.<sup>20</sup> It creates the conditions for totalitarianism and intolerance. Rather than speech and appearance as political actions in the public realm, evident in the examples outlined above and in countless other instances, in-person action instead finds expression in extremism and the “mute” enactment of violence.<sup>21</sup>

#### WHAT OF THE VANISHING TABLE?

The loss of space and time for politics in the real world is best understood as a collapse of the common world. Neoliberal hyper-individualism, the expansion of “private matters of the individual,” contributes to the shoring up of an endlessly social realm and to the lack of ability to posit or even imagine a commonly shared existence and future.<sup>22</sup> This is exacerbated in the vacuum of the frictionless online environment, where we are rewarded in our pursuit of individual attention and consumption. Foreshadowing current issues with digital environments, Arendt determines that tendencies toward individual vanity and greed undermine participation in the common world. She links the futility of the insatiable need for public admiration to the emptiness of monetary gain.<sup>23</sup> In addition to greed, the online world does not foster meaningful speech or

possibilities for exchange. Sue Spaid notes the difference between Arendt's public realm and the recursive navel-gazing of the online environment:

While the political insists on persuasion, the Internet encourages non-action, the form of speech whereby banter and chatter matter more than exposing one's actual perspective. Hardly requiring courage or demanding that one risk one's life, netizens opt instead to hide behind anonymity or assume some avatar, unlike free participants in the *polis*.<sup>24</sup>

In combination, the technological affordance for non-action on the Internet combines with the vacuousness of content focussed on "private matters" of individuals to vanish the common world—and by extension, common ground. Arendt notes that "What makes mass society so difficult to bear is . . . the fact that the world between them has lost its power to gather them together, to relate and to separate them."<sup>25</sup> She offers a way of conceptualizing the common world and the space for appearance as "a world of things . . . between those who have it in common" or as "a table . . . located between those who sit around it."<sup>26</sup> We are no longer sitting at Arendt's table; instead, each of us is isolated with a screen that cannot engender a sense of responsibility. There is no common world that furnishes a context for a going-between or exchange across perspectives. Instead, we now mourn the loss of the political center, which reflects the non-metaphorical loss of the common world and evokes the perpetual disorientation of worldlessness.<sup>27</sup>

### CLASSROOMS AS PLACES OF PRODUCTIVE FRICTION

It would be naïve to assume that the damage of our online environment is confined to adult life. Instead, the harms to prospective relationality and politics emerge between the entanglements of youth digital life and in-person schooling. It is imperative, then, that pedagogy takes seriously the question of how to attend to the changing sphere of identity, meaning, and politics that online life presents for students by reconceptualizing classrooms as places of productive friction. One of the first considerations is how to attend to the inevitable alienation students feel as school is increasingly peripheral to their



interests, learning, and community. A second is to think about how to address the desire to seek homogenous or affinitive echo chambers. Finally, a third is to distinguish online participation—consumption and production—as distinct from political action.

It may seem self-evident to note that youth inherit the world without lived experience of its history; however, when tying this realization to intersubjectivity and politics, it becomes evident that today's youth have no understanding of how to engage in either without the affordances of technology. They are born into a life dominated by screens and a frictionless environment of the attention economy, overconsuming “content” and seeking illusory gratification. Most will be online “on a near-constant basis.”<sup>28</sup> That these children will be socialized differently or will have different conceptions of “school readiness” when entering Kindergarten is inevitable. If we hope that classrooms can set the stage for productive friction, then students must be present in the fullest sense of that word. They must not see school as entirely distinct, a compartmentalized academic exercise that has nothing to do with their “real” digital lives. How can the messiness—the already imperfect intrusions—of the school environment be encountered without a growing sense of alienation? This is inherently a pedagogical question and ought to be treated as such. It is insufficient to gesture to “21<sup>st</sup> century skills;” it is wrong-headed to emphasize instrumentalist techno-rationalist aims for “digital literacy.” Instead, education must engage completely with the core of how students make meaning, form identities, and develop relationships by teaching with, through, and in open critique of digital worlds. Educators can provide students with time and space, in the real-life classroom, to learn and practice how to listen and respond, wherein listening is characterized by openness to the Other rather than obeisance to digital hegemony and responding is not expressed as a claim of alterity.

Secondly, if the classroom is to become a space of productive friction, then educators ought to provide students with opportunities for diverse encounter, challenge, and dissent. Arendt's metaphor of the table is uniquely applicable here. Outside of education contexts, students—and, indeed, adults—have few occasions for sitting across from one another and expressing varied perspectives

while engaging with art, literature, histories, and politics. As such, educators must attend, and be supported in efforts, to engage as much diversity of thought and perspective as possible. This suggests that teachers would move away from textbooks and canon to engage a geopolitical and sociocultural plurality of modes and narratives. It would also be useful to avoid teaching technology as a set of pragmatic skills; instead, it would be productive to address the literacies underpinning them, including seduction of digital addiction and echo chambers, the role of affect, and the influences of marketization.

This should be done not as a standalone topic in a single “media literacy” course, but by soliciting student-sourced texts across grades and subject areas. This gives students an opportunity to discuss—at length—what they encounter, how they feel about various topics, and what their enticements are for response or action. If texts on Reddit, TikTok, and Parler live entirely outside the classroom, there is no educational opportunity. There is no ability for teachers and classmates to trouble the reifying external echo chamber or internal *bonne conscience*. More troublingly, students may never have a chance to talk at length, to argue with someone, to rebut or refute an idea, in real life. This leaves them with the mistaken impression that all engagement about things that matter to them occurs online. A benefit of sitting at a table is that it furnishes us with both a scope of the problem and a stake in the outcome; that is, there is an inherent sense of locality that engenders both care and manageability. A significant issue with the disappearance of the table and the vacuum of the internet is that all issues are projected out of context, into no space and time. As a result, people are either superficially engaged or entirely distanced from the outcome. A classroom that serves as a table restores embodiment and locality. It returns us to the sensate space and time—not of all others—but of the Other.

Thirdly, if students are to become prepared for an active political life, then the major concerns of our time have to be addressed through pedagogical encounter, drawing on a framework for democratic participation that is neither procedural nor normative. Bringing together Levinas and Arendt, Topolski offers a “political ethics” or, more specifically, a “politics of relationality,” which offers some further framing for prospective teaching and learning.<sup>29</sup> Topolski underlines

the importance of relationality as a point of departure for politics by noting,

Relationality seeks to (1) strengthen the political by prioritizing alterity—the cornerstone of plurality—and in doing so acts as an extra precaution against undemocratic political alternatives; (2) creates an ethos of openness and ‘equality’ (without denying that power dynamics are inherent to all human interactions) necessary for a basic trust to develop between people; and (3) redefines politics such that each person—in her individuality and distinction—has something vital to contribute to the collective, making each voice significant.<sup>30</sup>

Reading this from an educational stance, each of these three points are instructive for how to talk and teach toward democratic engagement. The ideal of prioritizing alterity sets a discursive and ontological premise for the classroom. The recognition of power imbalance held in tension with individual political potency furnishes a reason for participation: Hope for change. If we contend that present-day democracy is imperilled, then there must be a commensurate urgency for pedagogical response. In addition, then, to a framework for a politics of relationality, classrooms as places of productive friction must also address the content of contemporary challenges and opportunities. How can students prepare to attend to the existential threat of climate change? How can they evaluate the merits of a shift to stakeholder capitalism rather than renouncing capitalism for a different system altogether without ample discursive space and time to make meaning?<sup>31</sup> With hours a day online, students’ digital lives bring them into close encounter with these issues, along with a profusion of axiomatic rhetoric and misinformation, and an absence of nuance. In her only direct writings on education, Arendt argued that “the child must be protected from the world,” but children are no longer introduced to the world through school.<sup>32</sup> Children now carry the world—with all its complications and intrusions—within themselves and, by consequence, the classroom. Educators cannot, then, leave politics without.

## CONCLUSION

What is urgently needed is a way of recuperating friction in our schools as one potential response to the new information environment, its overload of s(t)imulation, and the affirmative tendencies of the communities it cultivates. The digital world contributes not only to the collapse of contact in the public realm broadly, but also the changing liminality between students and schools. If schools are meant to be sites of contact, connection, and relationality, then classrooms ought to be intentionally constructed as places of productive friction, where students' real lives—that is, their digital lives—can be shared, troubled, and wholly engaged.

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