Rethinking Bodies in the Traditional Classroom

Heather Greenhalgh-Spencer
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

This essay is meant to challenge one of the more pervasive critiques of online education: that online education is a pale substitute for the traditional classroom experience *because* traditional education is embodied and online education is — somehow — disembodied. This is an odd critique because it suggests that there are some places or times when people can literally be *without* their bodies.[1] As this is impossible, we can assume the critique is driving at the idea that having bodies together in the traditional classroom space creates a more humanizing learning environment. I want to question this assumption by drawing attention to the ways that students — and even teachers — are *actually* embodied in rather inhumane ways in the traditional classroom space. Critics of online education tend to derogate the "absence" of bodies in a classroom, while not attending to the ways that bodies are shaped by disciplinary regimes in real time and space in the traditional classroom. To be clear, in this essay I will not suggest that online education is better than the material classroom experience. I am suggesting that we need to take a closer look at the ways bodies are actually used/produced in schooling spaces.

This essay excavates some of the productions of bodies in the material classroom by targeting four practices or objects of the traditional classroom: the gaze, the chair, the desk, and the ability to move and touch. While the bulk of this essay will be spent in critiquing the idea that the traditional classroom is always/already more humanizing, I will end the essay by briefly parsing out some of the affordances offered by the online classroom that might make it a more humanizing space. However, I begin with a brief overview of the debate on traditional and online schooling spaces, aiming to point out the ways that the traditional classroom is *presented* within the debate as *automatically* more humanizing.

The Debate

In the late 1980s, the 1990s, and early 2000s there were many claims that technology and the World Wide Web would revolutionize education and completely change the way we learned and taught. Barker suggested that the web would revolutionize the lack of resources experienced by most rural schools.[2] Anne Batey and Richard Cowell proclaim that the web would provide greater access to information for all schools, thus closing the achievement gap.[3] Alan Chute, Katherine Bruning, and M.K. Hulick suggest that online learners did better on tests.[4] Many critics came forward to push against these overblown claims, suggesting that online teaching was an exercise in dehumanization because bodies were never really *present*.

Here, I recount a few of the criticisms of online education. Notice the ways that the traditional classroom space is automatically assumed to be humanizing because of the presence of bodies together, and the online space is positioned as bereft of

bodies. Terry Anderson advocates the "importance of the body in establishing and maintaining human relations."[5] Because of the centrality of the body to learning, Anderson concludes that cyberspace and its so-called communities of learners are actually "detrimental to establishing intimate lasting human communities." Says Anderson: "virtual communities by comparison to real ones [are] abstract, diminished, fragile and tenuous relationships, easily broken precisely because they lack the concrete situatedness of embodied subjectivity and intersubjectivity."[6]

Hubert Dreyfus furthers this critique by claiming that online education is but an anemic simulation of the real, embodied, experience of the traditional classroom.[7] Dreyfus suggests that the traditional classroom creates an atmosphere of learning precisely because it is an atmosphere where people take social risks and make social commitments by choosing to engage with each other in a conversation. Says Dreyfus: "Only those willing to take risks go on to become experts. It follows that, since expertise can only be acquired through involved engagement with actual situations, the possibility of acquiring expertise is lost in the disengaged discussions and deracinated knowledge acquisition characteristic of the Net."[8]

Dreyfus is sure that learning can only take place when bodies work in nearness to each other. There must be the potential for empirical engagement; for the touching of the world and each other. Dreyfus believes that this potential for nearness is impossible online. Robyn Barnacle draws on the work of Dreyfus and others to suggest that, in our engagement and negotiation with others in a social space, we actually create the knowledge structures necessary for other types of knowledge. Barnacle writes, "What Dreyfus calls 'embodied intentionality' forms the basis of all propositional knowledge in that it is the driver for the establishment of new forms of understanding. Crucially, then, not only are formal and embodied knowing integrated but the former is dependent on the latter."[9] As Barnacle points out, all learning is embodied learning. And yet, her essay draws on and continues the critique of online spaces as somehow impoverished of bodies. Thus, online education is framed as disembodied and education that takes place in a material classroom is framed as both embodied and "real" because it draws on the body in order to learn.

I find it curious that the debate has raged on in this good-versus-bad, all-or-nothing stance for so long. Surely it is more appropriate to mark out both the affordances and the challenges of these spaces, rather than continuing to suggest that one space is bad and the other is good. I also find it curious that the body has stood in as the marker — the signifier — of why the material space is so crucial and edifying. While I believe that bodies are important for learning, I do not see the material space as allowing for the use/performance/practice of the body in particularly laudatory ways. In order to draw attention to the challenges and affordances of particular spaces — and in the spirit of critique — I want give a thick description of what happens to bodies in the traditional classroom. What becomes allowed and expected (afforded) for our bodies in the traditional classroom space? As mentioned before, I will pay specific attention to the ways the body interacts with and is shaped by the gaze, the chair, the desk, and the ability to move and touch.

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The Gaze

In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault considers that technologies of discipline presuppose "a mechanism that coerces by means of observation; an apparatus in which the techniques that make it possible to see, induce effects of power." This is to say, that the power to train or discipline a body becomes most effective through the "exact observation" of that body. Says Foucault:

> The perfect disciplinary apparatus would make it possible for a single gaze to see everything constantly. A central point would be both the source of light illuminating everything, and a locus of convergence for everything that must be known; a perfect eye that nothing would escape and a centre towards which all gazes would be turned.[10]

This description of the perfect apparatus of power to discipline bodies sounds remarkably like the traditional classroom space.[11] For, while online classrooms also involve surveillance, surveillance is disrupted because embedded in the online modality is the choice to be seen and heard or not. Not so in material spaces, where the body is always under the gaze.

In the material classroom, students' desks are usually situated to face the teacher. The students are positioned to view the teacher as the locus of knowledge. Even when the teacher moves around the room, the students tend to follow the teacher with their eyes. The landscape of the classroom dictates a traditional power structure. For example, think about how often you can enter a classroom and tell where the "front" of the room is meant to be. While rooms may have several walls of chalkboards or learning stations, there is often a larger desk, a more central chair, the location of a movie projector, or some other object that locates *how* the classroom should be situated in order that the students may be fully observed and the teacher may be fully followed.

In the traditional classroom space, students' bodies are meant to be fully visible. It is that very visibility that is supposed to act as a dissuasion from texting, Facebooking, talking out of turn, daydreaming, or doing any number of things other than focusing on the teacher. While it would be nice to say that this visibility makes it possible for people to read body language in order to better understand the students, often this "reading" is done as a means of finding out who is paying attention and who is not. In other words, often, visibility functions as a disciplinary technique more than a technique of loving attunement to, or dialogue with one's fellows. In the traditional classroom, the body is made visible in order to have *power over*, rather than to empower, students. Something similar can be said about the ways that bodies are situated and shaped by chairs within a traditional classroom.

Chairs

Chairs function to discipline, normalize, and captivate the body — especially within a traditional classroom space. As John Dewey notes in *The School and the Society,* some chairs are made for listening and some chairs are made for actual work. Dewey suggests that chairs have a way of shaping students to become a particular type of learner.[12] In addition to philosophers, kinesiologists and sociophysiologists also offer a critique of the chair in the classroom. Jonathan Crary posits that, since the nineteenth century, Western modernity has insisted that "individuals define and

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shape themselves in terms of a capacity for 'paying attention,' that is, for a disengagement from a broader field of attraction, whether visual or auditory, for the sake of isolating or focusing on a reduced number of stimuli." The ways in which we "accomplish certain productive, creative, or pedagogical tasks" links in to power, ideologies, and histories."[13] Crary deliberately points to the schoolroom bench or chair as a technology that functions to create "a subject [who] is productive, manageable, and predictable."[14] The chair literally positions the body to look forward, remain still, and be accessible. The chair also teaches the body through habituation to stop noticing other signals or stimuli around the body.

Galen Cranz further discusses the ways the chair actively erases the perceptions of the body — erases the ability of the body to *feel* and know itself.[15] Cranz posits "that years of sitting in chairs have contributed significantly to this problem [of kinesthetic awareness] because chair sitting distorts and reduces … perception of comfort."[16] Cranz suggests that in order to successfully sit in chairs, especially for long periods of time and on a regular basis, we must teach our bodies to ignore signals of pain and discomfort. We must teach ourselves to, literally, ignore the feelings and perceptions of the body. This bodily captivity — made possible through the chair — is justified by the societal expectation that chairs help us to "pay attention": pay attention to our work, pay attention to those who are giving us knowledge, pay attention to authority. The act of paying attention is discursively aligned with the act of sitting still, being quiet, tuning other things out, and focusing forward. This is problematic, says Cranz, because chairs *hurt*.

Cranz traces out exactly why and how chairs are harmful. Interestingly, she notes that her work specifically focuses on chairs — the kind you would find in a classroom — and not on recliners, or lounge chairs, or anything that is actually designed for the ergonomics of the human body. Cranz notes that some chairs actually do support and sustain the body in a position that allows for proper alignment, but she critiques the types of chairs that are canted back, have no support, and are enclosing structures: chairs typically found in schooling spaces are specifically mentioned. These chairs tend to compact the head-neck jointure. "Any chair that puts people in a posture that distorts this joint upsets the equilibrium of the entire body." If the head-neck joint is compacted, then the back slumps out, the shoulders round, and the body is thrown out of alignment. "The cervical vertebrae including the first cervical vertebrae extend forward, while the weight of the head comes back and down, rather than forward and up, in relation to the neck." The problems of this off-kilter posture "include back ache, neck ache, problems with vocal production, eye strain, sciatica, shallow breathing."[17] Often, chairs condition the body to slump back in the chair rather than sit with a tall spine. Chairs — specifically classroom and office chairs — cause "thoracic humping" where the neck and upper back must slump forward in order to counteract the backward canting of the chair. This move to bring the head forward causes such strain on the neck that, often, people will then move the upper chest forward in order to relieve strain on the neck. "This then collapses the ribcage over the abdominal region and exaggerates the curve in the mid-back."[18] This will often lead to back injuries such as Gleno-Humeral tension,

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migration of the scapulae, cervical lordosis, brachial plexus compression, prolapsed discs, disc protrusion, spinal stenosis, and collapsed vertebrae. Repeated and prolonged tension on the vertebrae — produced from a slumped over or tucked under sitting position — often results in disc and vertebrae injury, and neck and back pain.

So, once again, I want to draw attention to the ways the body is actually practiced and used in the traditional classroom. Most often, bodies are not used to do some sort of kinesthetic performance that leads to a deeper understanding of truths — a deeper and more relevant learning. They are not used to find deeper levels of intimacy and relationality between students and teachers. Often, bodies *are used* — made to fit within a chair, forced to stay in that chair, and conditioned to ignore the perceptions of the body in order to more fully focus on the information delivered by the teacher. Desks can similarly be critiqued.

Desks

Ashley Hetrick and Derek Attig write extensively about the myriad ways that "desks hurt us."[19] And while their research focuses on the ways that desks confine and shame the "fat body," I find that much of their work and observations extend to the ways desks work on *all* bodies. Regardless of body weight, desks are not "neutral and benign spaces; they are, rather, highly active material and discursive constructions that seek to both indoctrinate students' bodies and minds into the middle-class values of restraint and discipline, and inscribe these messages onto the bodies that sit in them."[20] Desks function to both physically shape the body and socially normalize particular types of bodies.

Bodies are made visible as abnormal the moment they overflow or move out of the space of the desk. Bodies are noticeably *out* the moment we feel too big, too tall, too fidgety to comfortably contain the body under or within the space that the desk prescribes. This is to say nothing of the ways that disabled bodies, or even left-handed bodies, are pinpointed as "not normal" in the classroom space where desks assume mobile, small, and right-handed bodies. The desk makes bodies visible only through the matrix of ab/normalcy. In addition to directly fashioning the body as a docile, quiescent, mind/subject, desks *hurt* the body.

The desk/chair combination creates a space of "hard materials" and "punishing shapes."[21] The wood, plastic, and metal of the desk precisely surrounds most of the student's body. This makes moving from side to side, or even bending over to fetch something from a backpack, almost impossible. The desk is actually placed quite low vis-à-vis the chair, which causes people with long legs to have to round their back more fully in order to comfortably fit the legs under the desk. This rounding of the back can lead to the backaches and other problems listed in the section above. The placement of these desks also means that many people have to lean forward, slouch to the side, and, once again, round their backs in order to rest their elbows on the desk. And, the act of resting the elbows is conditioned by the fact that the desk surrounds the body in such a way as to make it awkward to place the hands at the sides, in the lap, or any where other than on the desk. This further shapes the body into a hunched over position, leading to strain and compacting of the vertebra.

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School desks *produce* a painful posture in the body. Because we have become so habituated by these desks, we barely notice that our bodies are uncomfortable in them.

The desks and chairs of the classroom coerce, make visible, normalize, and physically shape the body of the student. In addition, the desks and chairs tend to forbid a very human aspect of flesh. Perhaps one of the more enjoyable and humanizing aspects of being together in the same physical space is the potentiality of moving together — of touching. These desks and chairs (incarnations of societal norms) inhibit moving and touching. Here, I would like to say a bit more about the importance of movement and touch in a learning environment in order to illuminate another way that traditional classrooms actually work against a positive learning space.

The Ability to Move and Touch

Maxine Sheets-Johnstone and others have written extensively on the importance of movement and touch to the acts of learning and cognition.[22] In order to fully understand objects and the self-object relationship, we must be able to move around said objects and touch them. As Sheets-Johnstone points out, the very act of moving strengthens our brain's ability to make connections between what we see, what we think, and how we reason. This is because, as we move, our body takes on a greater sense of awareness of the world (in order that we will not run into something or be harmed by something), and we are more likely to come into contact with (touch) other objects or subjects in the world. A body in motion *is* a body in learning.

Think of how often movement is limited within a traditional classroom space, not only by the actual objects of the classroom, but by the teacher's eye — by societal norms. I have been in classrooms where the fidgeting of students is called out as being "disruptive" — all by a teacher's glance. How and why does the traditional material classroom space *signify* embodiment, if this classroom structure so rarely allows for the movement of the body? Bodies in the traditional classroom space are not only limited in when and how they can move, they are also limited in their ability to touch.

Think about the proscriptions against touch in the classroom. Teachers tend to stay away from students' bodies — particularly in the context of secondary education — so as to avoid the appearance of sexual impropriety. There is a simultaneous awareness and disavowal of students as sexual and physical beings. Students are also discouraged from touching other students. There are societal norms that prohibit and make shameful both sexual and violent touch in the classroom to the extent that *all* touch between students becomes suspect, ill-advised, and unexpected.

So often, the critics of online education argue that distance learning is inferior to the traditional classroom *because* it happens at a distance. There is no presence of bodies together. But then, what does this presence matter if those bodies — while together in this traditional space — are coerced, normalized, made visible, shaped, injured, enclosed, and precluded from touching and moving? The traditional

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classroom can hardly be said to serve the body in any humanizing way. Hence, it seems curious that *the body* — being embodied — is so often deployed as the reason we should venerate the traditional classroom space above the online classroom space. When advocates of the traditional classroom invoke *the body* as the reason why traditional classroom spaces are superior to virtual spaces, what kind of body is being invoked?

Online Education as a Position of Choice

To conclude this essay, I would like to offer a brief view of some of the ways that online education deals with the body differently. I would like to point out some of the affordances of the online space. My point is not to position online education as the solution to or the superior version of traditional education. Online education has many problems of its own. However, I would like to point out that online education offers some creative ways of getting around some of the strictures of the traditional classroom space. Online education offers a more attentive *choice* for the body.

While online education can be a less than empowering experience, it still offers the potential for choice in ways not possible in the traditional classroom. As both a student and a teacher in online classroom spaces, I have been struck by the ways I move my body differently in the online space. Online, I am free to get up, walk around, sit on the floor, sit on an exercise ball, sit on a chair made for my body, use a desk designed for my size and height, use a book, use my computer, shift position, fidget, make faces — all of this without the strictures of the material classroom space. Indeed, while the online space does not guarantee that I will have good posture or that I will move my body, it does at least offer this as a *choice*. I have the choice, through the use of my webcam, to make myself visible to students and teachers, or to choose to avoid being "seen." I have the choice to sit in a chair that encourages better posture, or not. I have the choice to use a desk that is proportioned for my body, or not. I have the choice to move around the room, or not. (Interestingly, I do *not* have the choice to reach out and touch fellow students, but, while there is the potential for bodily touch in the material classroom, rarely does this bodily touch actually happen). While online education may not be the answer to all of the problems I have listed about education in a traditional classroom space, at least online education offers some measure bodily of choice. This level of choice is an affordance only possible in the online space; an affordance that may make the educational experience more empowering and more embodied.

More work needs to be done to parse out what the online space offers, what is inherent in the traditional classroom space, and what kinds of educational spaces are yet to be fully realized. We need to enlarge and enrich the debate over online education by asking, what is made possible, and what is made awkward or unlikely in these various spaces? The focus should be on a deeper understanding of what every modality brings to the table, and not on a rush to condemn or laud one modality above another. Perhaps, by looking in an open way at affordances of all modalitites, we may be able to come up with a third way, a fourth way — a better way — of schooling.

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1. Even while using avatars in the online world, or simply engaging in text conversations on a blog, we are still embodied. We are in our bodies, somewhere, even while we are interacting online.

2. Bruce Barker, "The Effects of Learning by Satellite on Rural Schools," *Learning by Satellite Conference* (Tulsa, OK: ERIC, 1987).

3. Anne Batey and Richard Cowell, "Distance Education: An Overview," in *Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory* (Portland, OR: ERIC, 1986).

4. Alan Chute, Katherine Bruning, and M.K. Hulick, "The AT&T Communications National Teletraining Network: Applications, Benefits, and Costs," in *AT&T Communications Education* (Cincinnati, OH: ERIC, 1984).

5. Terry Anderson, *The Theory and Practice of Online Learning* (Edmonton, AB: AU Press, 2008), 153.

6. Ibid., 156.

7. See Hubert Dreyfus, "Overcoming the Myth of the Mental," *Humanities, Social Sciences, and Law* 25, no. 1/2 (2006): 43–49; Hubert Dreyfus, "What Could Be More Intelligible than Everyday Intelligibility? Reinterpreting of Division I of Being and Time in the Light of Division II," *Bulletin of Science, Technology and Society* 24, no. 3 (2004): 265–274; and Hubert Dreyfus, "Anonymity Versus Commitment: The Dangers of Education on the Internet," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 34, no. 4 (2002): 369–378.

8. Dreyfus, "Anonymity Versus Commitment," 374.

9. Robyn Barnacle, "Gut Instinct: The Body and Learning," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 41, no. 1 (2009): 29–30. Note that her paper is far more nuanced and agrees that when we go online we do not leave our bodies. Still, she draws some of the same conclusions that position online spaces as places where the body is not used or drawn upon for learning.

10. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 170–173.

11. *Discipline and Punish* includes a picture of a lecture given at a prison. Notice how remarkably similar this picture is to one of the traditional classroom; see, 169–170.

12. John Dewey, *The School and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

13. Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Boston: MIT Press, 2000), 1.

14. Ibid., 4

15. Galen Cranz, "The Alexander Technique in the World of Design: Posture and the Common Chair," *Journal of Bodywork and Movement Therapies* 4, no. 2 (2000): 90–98.

16. Ibid., 93

17. Ibid., 92.

18. Ibid., 95.

19. Ashley Hetrick and Derek Attig, "Sitting Pretty: Fat Bodies, Classroom Desks, and Academic Excess," in *The Fat Studies Reader*, eds. Esther Rothblum and Sandra Solovay (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 197.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid., 199.

22. See Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, "The Primacy of Movement," *Zeitschrift Psychology* (2000): 11–98; Rafael Núñez and Walter Freeman, "Restoring to Cognition the Forgotten Primacy of Action, Intention and Emotion," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 6, no. 11/12 (1999): ix–xx; Andy Clark, "Visual Awareness and Visuomotor Action," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 6, no. 11/12 (1999): 1–18; and Jana Iverson and Esther Thelen, "Hand, Mouth, and Brain: The Dynamic Emergence of Speech and Gesture," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 6, no. 11/12 (1999): 19–40.

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