
LEVINAS AND THE "INTER-FACE": THE ETHICAL CHALLENGE OF ONLINE EDUCATION

Michalinos Zembylas

Faculty of Education

Intercollege, Cyprus, and Michigan State University

Charalambos Vrasidas

Faculty of Education

Intercollege, Cyprus

Computers have introduced into our common experience "ideas about the instability of meanings and the lack of universal and knowable truths."¹ Online education, in particular, serves as a site for alternative enactments of the self, that is, the embodiment of multiple identities in learners.² These multiple identities are rather complex: they are enactments of the self implicated in the politics, economics, and ethics of everyday life. The capacity of the Web to produce learning environments that are supportive of hybrid identities, complex discourses, and multiple relations among learners raises questions about the *ethical response* of online educators: How are identity and communication constituted in online education? What are the features of an *ethical pedagogy* in online education — that is, a pedagogy that considers the ethical implications of online communication?

These questions focus on the analysis of online pedagogies as ethical processes for creating the *Other*. Such questions do not provide us with any fixed ethical framework for analyzing the complexities of online education; however, they do help us think in alternative ways about the ethical dimensions of online education itself. In other words, online education becomes a site for ethical investigation concerning "the nature, meaning, and moral worth of the educational enterprise itself."³ In addition, this project opens up possibilities for investigating the ethics of how *difference* matters in online relations.

In this essay, we argue that Emmanuel Levinas's views on ethics and otherness can overcome some of the ethical challenges posed by online education, while, at the same time, we acknowledge some of the limitations of this approach with respect to its implications for education. On the one hand, what is ethical becomes a respect for the absolute singularity of the Other and the irreducibility of otherness; on the other hand, this assumption is not completely unproblematic, because an

1. Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 18.

2. Rick Voithofer, "Nomadic Epistemologies and Performative Pedagogies in Online Education," *Educational Theory* 52, no. 4 (2002): 479–494.

3. David Blacker and Jane McKie, "Information and Communication Technology," in *The Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of Education*, eds. Nigel Blake, Paul Smeyers, Richard Smith, and Paul Standish (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 234.

ethics of uniqueness may sometimes subvert an ethics of solidarity. This ethics of uniqueness is not simply a free-floating good. In fact, it is sometimes asserted by those in privileged positions (often unintentionally) as a tool to disempower those who depend on solidarity for their continued survival in our increasingly polarized and unequal society.⁴ The problem, then, is how one can balance an ethics of uniqueness with an ethics of solidarity.

Levinas's concern with *relationality* as an event that cannot be subsumed under the nature of existence — that is, knowing who we are does not necessarily assume that we know how to relate to others in an ethical manner, nor vice versa — is a useful starting point for problematizing pedagogical relations over the Internet. In other words, the Other constitutes the very force of the ethical demand in its relational aspect. At the same time, in reflecting on the nature of communication in online education, one may wonder 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. Nonetheless, we will attempt to show that the modality in which the otherness of the Other manifests itself is an ethical demand upon educators, both in online and in offline contexts. An ethical orientation in online education requires that we take seriously the unknowable and irreducible Other. Such an orientation, despite some limitations, enables us to respond ethically to a range of learners' experiences.

THE ETHICAL CHALLENGES IN ONLINE EDUCATION

In the past decade, the increased use of information and communication technologies (ICT), the forces of globalization, and the emergence of postmodern discourses have all had a major impact on the theory of education, its content, and its pedagogical practices. Technology has allowed education and interaction to take place at a distance on a scale never before imagined. Online education is now a potentially highly sophisticated, distributed, and interactive learning experience.⁵ In a world undergoing processes of globalization, educators can take advantage of the various ways in which online interactions are engaging and changing individuals in social, political, and ethical terms. But in a global context, online course designers and teachers face many questions concerning how to design and teach across geographic, social, linguistic, and cultural distances in ways that are ethically and

4. We are indebted to an anonymous reviewer who urged us to consider this idea.

5. Charalambos Vrasidas and Gene Glass, "A Conceptual Framework for Studying Distance Education," in *Current Perspectives in Applied Information Technologies: Distance Education and Distributed Learning*, eds. Charalambos Vrasidas and Gene Glass (Greenwich, Connecticut: Information Age Publishing, 2002), 31–56.

MICHALINOS ZEMBYLAS is Associate Professor of Education at Intercollege, Cyprus, 46 Makedonitissas Ave., Nicosia 1700, and Adjunct Professor of Teacher Education at Michigan State University; e-mail <zembylas@mail.msu.edu>. His primary areas of scholarship are science and technology education, curriculum theory, and philosophy of education.

CHARALAMBOS VRASIDAS is Associate Professor of Learning Technologies at Intercollege, Cyprus, 46 Makedonitissas Ave., Nicosia 1700, and Coordinator of Research and Evaluation at the Center for the Application of Information Technologies at Western Illinois University; e-mail <cvrasidas@cait.org>. His primary areas of scholarship are distance education, face-to-face and technology-mediated interaction, and evaluation of educational technologies.

culturally responsive.⁶ Moreover, an increasingly important issue for online educators is how subjectivity is redefined by discarding fixed notions of identity and celebrating postmodern notions of the self as something that is always *becoming*, not given.⁷

The concepts of blurred identity, nomadism, and hybridity create a completely different educational landscape in the online context.⁸ A *hybrid* or a *nomad* is not rooted in an ordered space and time, does not comprise a fixed identity, but instead rides difference. He or she knows no boundaries and wanders across diverse spaces. This circumstance challenges the unitary, binary, and totalizing models of identity in modernist thought. In online education the learner becomes a nomad defined by heterogeneity, connectivity, and multiplicity. For example, the hypertext/hypermedia nature of the World Wide Web allows users to link from document to document, including images, text, and sound, with unprecedented ease, in order to form new paths as they explore connections and co-construct knowledge.

Grounded in these notions of multiplicity, hybridity, and contingency, the Internet offers many opportunities for criss-crossing various discourses, which in turn provides opportunities to continually redefine one's identity, because one never acquires complete familiarity with any one discourse — discourses are constantly in flux. This mobility empowers the teacher and learner in online education to deconstruct fixed identities and develop a capacity for thoughtful flexibility in the pursuit of new kinds of knowledge. One may even argue that, under some circumstances, this mobility constitutes a "form of political resistance to hegemonic and exclusionary views of subjectivity."⁹

On the other hand, to the extent that the Internet, dependent on hardware and technological tools provided by multinational corporations, is a factor in the proliferation of identities and realities, then one has to admit that the hybrid self is partly complicit in the processes of commercial and technological globalization. Unavoidably, then, ICT-based educational practices always participate in a field of ethical signification, a domain in which ethical relations to the Other are inevitable.¹⁰

There is already a great need for online education, particularly in the so-called "developing countries."¹¹ In this developing world, the information revolution,

6. Greg Dimitriadis and Cameron McCarthy, *Reading and Teaching the Postcolonial: From Baldwin to Basquiat and Beyond* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2001).

7. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

8. Michalinos Zembylas and Charalambos Vrasidas, "Globalization, Information and Communication Technologies, and the Prospect of a 'Global Village': Promises of Inclusion or Electronic Colonization?" *Journal of Curriculum Studies* (forthcoming).

9. Rosie Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 23.

10. Sharon Todd, *Levinas, Psychoanalysis, and Ethical Possibilities in Education: Learning From the Other* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003). This work will be cited as *LPE* in the text for all subsequent references.

11. William Carty, "New Markets for Meeting Old Needs: U.S. Distance Education and Developing Countries" (paper presented at the annual EDUCAUSE conference, Long Beach, California, October 1999), <http://www.educause.edu/ir/library/html/edu9918/edu9918.html>.

economic liberalization, and globalization are imposing new skill requirements. Online education programs can serve the needs of people who cannot afford to attend traditional face-to-face schooling.¹² However, despite debates over the “digital divide,” a lack of representation of the underprivileged within these debates raises broader social, political, and ethical concerns. Making computer and Internet access more widely available is certainly essential. Yet, understanding the deeper genesis of educational and social inequalities, especially in the context of globalization, requires more than just a “technological fix” — it requires a different epistemology and ethics about technology.¹³

Several educational theorists are skeptical about the implications of globalization; they “refuse to accept as given the particular forms that globalization is taking and they ask critical questions about the winners and losers by this new set of rules.”¹⁴ Nicholas Burbules and Carlos Alberto Torres argue that “even as these changes [toward globalization] occur, they can change in different, more equitable, and more just ways.”¹⁵ For example, some suggest that worldwide computer-mediated communication (CMC) can be an instrument for democratizing global forces, creating more authentically cosmopolitan democratic communities, and increasing access to information and participation in decision making.¹⁶ Many of the debates about the ethical, social, and political effects of technology and globalization reflect a similar range from skepticism to optimism.

We believe that there is nothing inherently educative (or ethical, for that matter) about technology and its use in online education.¹⁷ Consequently, the term “online education” should be understood less as something that has to do with any innate value of the technologies used and more as a *possibility* that brings together the “online” and the “education” aspects. “Distance” has been wrongly identified as the defining characteristic of the field of distance and online education. Instead, as others have argued, we need to move away from the concept of distance, whether geographical or psychological, and focus our inquiry on those specific pedagogical interactions that are mediated by the technology yet are fundamentally constructed by the learners, teachers, and tutors who design and participate in distance

12. Charalambos Vrasidas and Michalinos Zembylas, “The Nature of Cross-cultural Technology-mediated Communication in Globalized Distance Education,” *International Journal of Training and Development* 7, no. 4 (2003): 271–286.

13. Jennifer Light, “Rethinking the Digital Divide,” *Harvard Educational Review* 71, no. 4 (2001): 709–733.

14. Nicholas C. Burbules and Carlos Alberto Torres, eds., *Globalization and Education: Critical Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 2.

15. *Ibid.*

16. See Martin Hand and Barry Sandywell, “E-topia as Cosmopolis or Citadel: On the Democratizing and De-democratizing Logics of the Internet, or, Toward a Critique of the New Technological Fetishism,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 19, no. 1–2 (2002): 197–225; and Anthony Lelliott, Shirley Pendlebury, and Penny Enslin, “Promises of Access and Inclusion: Online Education in Africa,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 34, no. 1 (2000): 41–52.

17. Blacker and McKie, “Information and Communication Technology.”

education programs.¹⁸ The terms "distance education" and "online education," therefore, fail to capture the essence of educational activities when the teacher is not physically present. The metaphor of "delivering education at a distance" is flawed because it fails to credit education and learning that have been taking place for thousands of years when learners learned without the physical presence of a teacher. Nicholas Burbules and Thomas Callister point out,

as the Internet becomes not only an archive of information, but an actual medium of communication and collaboration...the metaphors of "distance" and "delivery" (transporting something over a distance to give to someone) are less appropriate for the kinds of educational interactions that are possible within this new technological environment.¹⁹

The World Wide Web's educational importance is grounded on the notion that the relation, or *inter-face*, between teachers and learners provides access to people, events, and ideas of broad cultural, political, and ethical significance. In other words, the "online" concept introduces into education not only an epistemological challenge (to *know how* to integrate the Web into education) but also an ethical one (to make decisions about how the Web *should* be integrated into education).

Unfortunately, epistemological questions have dominated the instructional design of online education and have given the impression that online pedagogies are simply about knowledge and its conceptual or aesthetic organization.²⁰ One reason for this narrow focus is that the new technological tools are often nested in concepts borrowed from traditional approaches to curriculum theory and instructional design.²¹ However, in considering what aspects of online teaching should be integrated into educational practice more generally, we are confronted with the ethical challenge of how some people, events, or ideas are made *present* or *absent* — that is, we question how online education can act to "reveal" or to "conceal" the world.²²

Using technological tools in online education (such as asynchronous discussions, chat rooms, and links to Web sites) simultaneously reveals some things while concealing others: it draws attention to particular people, events, and ideas, and it ignores or excludes others. Ironically, the very fact that online interactions veil one's identity to some extent "may also foster and encourage a more vivid disclosure."²³ As David Blacker and Jane McKie argue,

This double aspect of technology is a central insight around which may be built not only descriptions but also a normative account that links technology with educational experience. For it shows how certain pedagogical directions are always being taken, consciously or not: what to reveal and conceal, in what measure and in what method.

18. Vrasidas and Glass, "A Conceptual Framework for Studying Distance Education."

19. Nicholas C. Burbules and Thomas A. Callister, Jr., "Universities in Transition: The Promises and the Challenge of New Technologies," *Teachers College Record* 102, no. 2 (2000): 271–293.

20. Voithofer, "Nomadic Epistemologies and Performative Pedagogies in Online Education."

21. Jim Dwight and Jim Garrison, "A Manifesto for Instructional Technology: Hyperpedagogy," *Teachers College Record* 105, no. 5 (2003): 699–728.

22. Blacker and McKie, "Information and Communication Technology."

23. Nigel Blake, "Tutors and Students Without Faces or Places," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 34, no. 1 (2000): 191.

They go on to raise the ethical question that troubles every educator:

[S]hould some things be hidden from the children “for their own good”?...Or, perhaps in the name of “freedom,” should the educator eschew all concealments and pursue an unmitigated commitment to pure revelation: *any* information to *any* children at *any* time?²⁴

Blacker and McKie’s response — and ours, too — is that either extreme is problematic. But, of course, the matter does not end here. The challenge lies in determining where to draw the line so that we can avoid indoctrinating students and effectively develop their critical skills. Or, as Bertram Bruce puts it,

What do we want students to learn? How can we use new technologies? How should we? Why should we? What will change when we do? Do we want those changes? What do they mean for us, our students, society? What is fair? What kind of society do we want to live in? And, perhaps ultimately, who do we want to become?²⁵

Let us consider an example that further illustrates this point. One aspect of identity that technology could be used to conceal or reveal is one’s gender. It is often argued that the text-based nature of the online environment, by hiding the physical characteristics of participants, leads to more equal participation in online discourse. However, studies have shown that men and women still have distinct ways of communicating online, and that men often dominate online discussions.²⁶ Thus, it appears that even in an online setting, it is hard to disguise the participants’ gender. Moreover, in their online interactions men tend to employ techniques for silencing women that are quite similar to those used in face-to-face situations, including ignoring the topics women introduce, producing conversational floors based on hierarchy instead of collaboration, dismissing women’s responses as irrelevant, and contributing a larger number of text messages.²⁷ As this example illustrates, the ostensible capacity of online interaction to conceal the identity of participants does not diminish in any way the underlying ethical concerns. Thus, we return to the question posed at the outset of this paper: What can one do to address these ethical challenges?

We believe that the work of Levinas may help provide possible responses to these questions, both by problematizing the *inter-face* relations between teachers and learners and by situating online educational opportunities within the context of the whole of what people value in their lives. Such an ethical problematizing of online education has to delve more deeply into what online learning opportunities “reveal” to us about ourselves and our relations to others, particularly given the

24. Blacker and McKie, “Information and Communication Technology,” 236.

25. Bertram Bruce, “Speaking the Unspeakable About 21st Century Technologies,” in *Passions, Pedagogies, and 21st Century Technologies*, eds. Gail Hawisher and Cynthia Selfe (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1999), 227.

26. Kira Hall, “Cyberfeminism,” in *Computer-Mediated Communication: Linguistic, Social, and Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Susan Herring (Philadelphia: John Benjamin’s Publishing, 1996), 147–172; Susan Herring, “Introduction,” in *Computer-Mediated Communication*, ed. Herring, 1–10; and Sherry Turkle and Seymour Papert, “Epistemological Pluralism: Styles and Voices Within the Computer Culture,” *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 16, no. 1 (1990): 128–157.

27. John Ross, “Differential Participation of Males and Females in a Computer-Mediated Communication Course,” *Canadian Journal of University Continuing Education* 24, no. 1 (1998): 83–100.

lack of physical presence in online interaction. After identifying the conflicted ways in which identity and communication are constituted in online education, we will explore the features of an ethical pedagogy for online education.

LEVINAS'S ETHICS AND ONLINE EDUCATION

"My task does not consist in constructing ethics; I only try to find its meaning."²⁸ In trying to find the meaning of ethics, Levinas goes against his teacher, Martin Heidegger, by rejecting the claim that ethics is subsequent to Being; instead, Levinas claims that ethics ("ought") *precedes* ontology (what "is"). Heidegger insisted on the "freedom" of Being while Levinas argues that the ontology of Being does not allow the freedom of the self to be ethically questioned. One has no basis for understanding ethics other than in terms of ontological possibilities and limitations. Levinas asserts that ethical responsibility to the Other is not a matter of free will, because one has infinite responsibility to the Other.

This infinite responsibility is constituted by a relation with the Other that emanates from a respect for each individual and a rejection of instrumentality — a recognition of an obligation to the Other without expectations for any exchange.²⁹ According to Levinas, "To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression...it is to receive from the Other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity. But this also means: to be taught."³⁰ By "the idea of infinity," Levinas primarily means that which cannot be included in a system of totality that encompasses all ideas — that is, what cannot be constrained within the boundaries of a particular concept. This is what Levinas calls the Other. The Other is infinitely beyond my grasp and slips away whenever I try to reduce it to a concept in an attempt to master or capture it. Thus, our responsibility to the Other is infinite precisely because our capacity to learn from the Other has no limits.

This Other is, for Levinas, best understood as the *face*. The use of the term "face" acquires a special meaning in Levinas's philosophy and clarifies his concerns about responsibility, relationship, and alterity. He observes that "The true union or true togetherness...[is] a togetherness of face to face," and he further explains, "In its expression, in its mortality, the face before me summons me, calls for me, begs for me, as if the invisible death that must be faced by the Other, pure otherness, separated, in some way, from any whole, were my business."³¹ Levinas clearly makes much of *proximity* as a condition for my ethical responsibility to the Other with whom I am face-to-face. But what then about the lack of face-to-face

28. Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 90.

29. Peter Moss, "Making Sense of Ethics," *Australian Journal of Early Childhood Education* 26, no. 4 (2001): 1–6.

30. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 51.

31. Emmanuel Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987), 77; and Emmanuel Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 131.

relations in online education? As Zygmunt Bauman asks, given the lack of physicality in online education, how do we achieve a “morality of spatial and temporal distance”?³²

FACE-TO-FACE AND INTER-FACE

One could argue that non-face-to-face relations existed long before online education. In our everyday life — both online and offline — we encounter Others, and we are called to respond somehow to their otherness, whether we are face-to-face or not. We find ourselves *face-to-face* — literally and, with the help of the inter-face, metaphorically — with the Other and in this interaction each of us questions him- or herself: What right do I have to act, or not to act? What is my response to the Other’s *gaze* (again, literally or metaphorically)? Or, to frame these questions specifically in terms of online educators’ struggle to create an ethically responsive pedagogy: Do I define my online students by gender, race, or geography, or do I ignore these characteristics? What right do I have as an educator to “link” (or not to link) my students with certain Web sites and bring them “face-to-face” with unpleasant people, images, texts, or sounds? How can I help my students bear witness to the words or silences of others?³³ Levinas’s position would suggest that an online education that promotes ethical understanding should offer students opportunities to *find* the meaning of ethics. Stated differently, the online educator’s responsibility is not to provide students with ethical codes or moral principles; rather, each individual should be encouraged to *hear* the call of the Other, not because of a moral obligation imposed by some rule, but because one “feels” his or her obligation in the face of the Other.³⁴

Before we turn to some examples of ethically responsive online pedagogy, it is important to explore further the differences between using Levinas’s ideas in face-to-face education and using them in the context of online education, through the notion of the *interface*. In relation to the Web, the notion of the interface can be theorized, with respect to Levinas’s use of the term *face-to-face*, as the *inter-face*. The inter-face refers to that which comes between various faces (us) and who or what is “out there.” Technology-mediated interaction is a common characteristic of today’s education, and an important component of such interaction is the interface, which serves as the communication medium between the user and the technology or machine.³⁵ For technology and the Web to support learning, they need to achieve a high degree of transparency, so that the teacher and students can focus

32. Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 222.

33. Michalinos Zembylas and Pavlos Michaelides, “The Sound of Silence in Pedagogy,” *Educational Theory* 54, no. 2 (2004): 193–210.

34. Mark Child, David D. Williams, Abbie Jane Birch, and Robert M. Boody, “Autonomy or Heteronomy? Levinas’s Challenge to Modernism and Postmodernism,” *Educational Theory* 45, no. 2 (1995): 167–189.

35. In the Web environment, the interface is the part of the Internet browser (along with the Web site structure) that the user sees and interacts with. The interface relates to (but it is not the same as) the code and structure that make the Web site work. Components of the interface are the windows, controls, menus, buttons, metaphors, online help, and documentation.

on the *content* of instruction rather than on the *technology* itself. As we discussed previously, the interface reveals certain things and conceals others (for instance, the interface reveals the instructional decisions made by designers, and yet, ironically, it conceals their faces). The inter-face is that which comes between the user and what lies behind the computer screen: the teacher, other students, the wider Internet. In this sense, otherness becomes a pervasive concern in online education.

Levinas uses the face-to-face situation as a starting point for analyzing otherness. Otherness is not an attribute of the face-to-face situation itself; rather, it signals a radical alterity that is *independent* of the type of interaction (face-to-face or online). From a philosophical standpoint, the most important issue is that the *face* of the Other (who may be "out there" or "next to me") resists one's tendency to simply assimilate the Other into knowledge and thereby silence the voice of the Other. The *inter-face*, as we call it, is a common significant place where we can see, feel, and respond to the Other. And when we respond to the Other with the help of the inter-face, we affirm the Other's right to exist. This sense of responsibility to the Other is a key part of ethically responsive online pedagogies. For example, in organizing synchronous or asynchronous chats on culture, race, and gender, the teacher typically provides opportunities for the learners to share their own personal examples or to find other examples of individuals who live or work in the margins.³⁶ Such interactions give learners the chance to develop an ethical understanding of subjectivity in which "the I frees itself from its 'return to self', from its auto-affirmation, from its egotism of a being preserving in its being, to answer for the other, precisely to defend the rights of the other."³⁷

Perhaps, then, the principal educational promise of the interface lies in its potential to help teachers and learners appreciate and understand alterity, which involves attempting to make sense of how to approach the Other who is behind the computer screen — a process that requires the generating of ethical meaning. Encounters with alterity through online education have the potential to help teachers and learners see the world "differently." As Steve Bramall argues, reflecting on the perspectival nature of the interface itself may help to reveal the perspectival nature of human (ethical) understanding.³⁸ Thus, it is the teacher's responsibility to *respond* to the student, which means, according to Carl Safstrom,

to be answerable to the student and defend the rights of the student from a position of vulnerability. It is the individual uniqueness of the student that exists beyond his/her institutional position as student, which teachers meet — and defend — in their answerability and self-questioning.³⁹

36. It should be highlighted here that the "Other" does not always signify the one who is marginalized. For Levinas, the Other is what I am not. See Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other and Additional Essays*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987).

37. Emmanuel Levinas, *Outside the Subject*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 125.

38. Steve Bramall, "The Educational Significance of the Interface," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 34, no. 1 (2000): 71–84.

39. Carl A. Safstrom, "Teaching Otherwise," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 22, no. 1 (2003): 28.

As this observation indicates, when teaching (in an online setting) is framed within this type of ethical understanding of relations, then (online) education becomes ethically significant insofar as worth is attached to the Other.

WITNESSING

The relation constituted with the Other marks the beginning of responsibility; in this relation, we are invited to question our own injustice.⁴⁰ There are no absolute rules prescribing this responsibility toward the Other, which means that no one ever knows if he or she responds in a just manner. Ethical responsibility, then, is a position in which one never fulfills his or her debt to the Other.⁴¹ This notion suspends the usual assumptions about stability and fixedness in one's subjectivity. Levinas's position is that subjectivity is continually constituted by our ethical responsibility for the otherness of the Other. This has nothing to do with virtues or moral codes; it is a never-ending process of suspending oneself in order to "bear witness" and "receive" the Other.

To witness, as it is commonly understood, means to *say* or to *write* about what one saw with one's own eyes or heard with one's own ears. *Saying*, according to Levinas, is the ongoing response of the "I" to the Other; the "I" speaks but the *Said* (that is, closed, finished language) fails by refusing to mean to Others what it means to me.⁴² However, the *Saying* reveals that the "I" is exposed to the alterity of the Other. The *Saying* is not addressed to something that demands a response; it is a response that escapes the determination of the relation with the Other as a teacher or learner. In *Saying*, one is vulnerable to the unknowable Other because one's ethical responsibility to the Other is exposed. The *Saying* stages an experience of witnessing *and* enacts a witnessing — my response and responsibility to the Other is thus one kind of witnessing: "I speak to witness; to announce my responsibility for others to others."⁴³

"Witnessing" is different from "spectating" in that witnessing assumes that we are engaged in learning to see differently.⁴⁴ Witnessing is a call to action — action that results from learning to see differently. While this does not ensure any change, it does represent a first step in that direction. Therefore, it matters a great deal how educators invite students to engage in witnessing, especially since, through new ICT, educators and students experience each other in virtually disembodied ways. In the context of online education, for example, a teacher may encourage witnessing by calling upon students to react to an important political and ethical issue (such as forgiving the debts owed by poor countries). As witnesses, the students should undertake their historical responsibility and investigate, for

40. Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*.

41. Ann Chinnery, "Aesthetics of Surrender: Levinas and the Disruption of Agency in Moral Education," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 22, no. 1 (2003): 5–17.

42. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*.

43. *Ibid.*, 48.

44. Megan Boler, *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

instance, what "alternative media sources" on the Internet have to say on the issue. They may be encouraged to explore questions such as, What are the motives for doing this? What are the costs and benefits? How do people feel about this issue (a) if they are from rich countries or (b) if they are from poor countries? As students come to understand how their lives are intertwined with the lives of others, they can begin to determine "for themselves what kinds of actions make sense for them to take given their own ethical vision."⁴⁵ As they come to see these issues differently, some might choose to express alternative perspectives in the classroom, in their online communication, or in the public arena. Others might choose to participate in (online or offline) groups that attempt to reformulate educational policies. For others still the transformation in their opinions may be an important first step in learning to listen to the Other.

A further example of coming to witness comes from an online course one of the authors was teaching in the Pacific a few months ago. The teacher challenged students to reflect upon and discuss the nature of the online relationships they were developing. The following comments by one student describe her sense of the impact online education is having on the Pacific region:

...I know that all of us are representing diverse cultural groups. Each of us has a different way of looking and interpreting things, even in a way you expresses ourselves. I am really amazed that the differences did not show much of how different we are. Rather, it brings us together to concur or agree about many things...Although we are separated by this huge water of the Pacific, we have been enriched by its immensity. We have learned to be adaptable and adjustable to different kinds of situations...such one is our culture. So through technology, we learned from each other. Through our discussions, we have learned to appreciate, critique, enjoy, and so forth...I have learned so much from other cultures. I have learned how to adjust myself [to] fit in others' cultures, especially in the way we discuss issues.⁴⁶

Here, the student emphasizes the importance of being able to express, share, and enrich her cultural values. Online education had become an important medium for community building and developing new cultural understandings. Online communities were being constructed through togetherness, mutual understanding, and respect. Symbolic communication, language, and shared ideas change in relation to the kinds of interactions taking place online. In some cases, online environments enabled participants to enrich their cultural understandings of the *Other* and to construct their own online communities. Through fostering improved cultural understanding, online education encourages students to become witnesses. The ecological relations among identity, culture, online education, and ethical responsibility in such settings certainly warrant further exploration.

These examples reveal online contexts in which teachers begin questioning themselves and their students about their ethical responsibilities; as Levinas would say, such interactions can encourage a "politics of listening" and witnessing.⁴⁷ As we have discussed, to listen justly is simply and profoundly to listen to

45. *Ibid.*, 198.

46. Online chat discussion, October 2002.

47. Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*.

each and every Other. Online educators have the potential to inculcate the habit of just listening when they promote it in every way possible through the use of the Internet. Thus, building on Levinas's views, the ethical is born and reborn — not in terms of sameness but in the sense of absolute otherness. Where a politics of listening is promoted in online communication, we encounter the Other not merely as an abstract member of a political community, but as a member who listens “actively.” To listen actively, Jim Garrison asserts, one must be “vulnerable” to the Other, which entails suspending those beliefs that constitute our “usual” identity.⁴⁸ The reward of “listening online” is that Others can teach us to see and tell the story of our own lives in new ways, and it “consists in this incessant reception of teaching, in this incessant overflowing of self.”⁴⁹ The Other — a person I may never have met — calls me into question, “empties me of myself and empties me without end, showing me ever new resources. I did not know I was so rich.”⁵⁰

THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF KNOWING THE OTHER

Online communication may often be ambiguous, not just because of the absence of facial expressions or other cues but, as Levinas would argue, because communication *in general* is bounded by the impossibility of ever knowing the Other. The focus, then, should not be on knowing the Other but on working toward a radical openness in communication and an attending to the (unknowable) particularity of the Other that lies beyond the words written in an e-mail message or shared during an Internet chat session (*LPE*, 3, 8–9). Under such conditions, true communication is only possible in terms of absolute otherness.⁵¹ Educators as well as learners, especially in the fluid and continually changing online environment, should give up their position as “knowers” and enter into an ethical relation that welcomes the Other and does not reduce him or her to sameness. The responsibility of online educators, then, is to stimulate and guide their students' reflections in ways that will enable them to develop their capacities for discovering the meaning of ethics in this rapidly changing cultural environment. Levinas's critique does not deny the reality of rules, laws, institutions, policies, online courses, and so on; rather, he argues that the ontology of all these things does not exhaust their meaning because ontology does not respond to the face of the Other.⁵²

In sum, an online pedagogy that is responsive to the Other creates learning opportunities that do not consider the learner as knowable and fixed. Instead, online educators should “invite online education learners into positions that they do not inhabit in their physical world.”⁵³ For example, a teacher could invite someone to occupy the position of a marginalized individual and to engage in an exploration of

48. Jim Garrison, “A Deweyan Theory of Democratic Listening,” *Educational Theory* 46, no. 4 (1996): 429–452.

49. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 204.

50. Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 94.

51. *Ibid.*

52. Child et al., “Autonomy or Heteronomy?”

53. Voithofer, “Nomadic Epistemologies and Performative Pedagogies in Online Education,” 492.

this individual's life. By entering a chat room and attempting to communicate his or her ideas anonymously, the learner has the opportunity to relate to the Other (as well as to him- or herself) in new ways. In discussing the potential of online education to bridge or to increase the digital divide between the haves and have nots, the teacher can split the members of an online class into two groups, with one group arguing in favor of online education's potential to bridge the gap while the other group maintains that online education increases it. Each group will have to think from the perspective of both their own position and that of the other group in order to argue their case effectively in an online forum.

Thus, Levinas may inspire online educators to consider the ways in which open-ended online pedagogies may or may not be ethical with respect to relationality, responsibility, and otherness. Levinas helps us to see online communication as a form of relationality between teacher and student — a kind of communication that has ethical significance which the teacher and student must discover together because it is not known beforehand. In other words, responsibility emerges from an act of communication (including online communication via an inter-face); according to Sharon Todd, this means avoiding the interpretation of students' responses "as all of a kind, as purely symptomatic of themes we can pull from our arsenal of knowledge, as though the meaning we exercise upon them is all there is to the story" (*LPE*, 41). Rather, responding to the Other means sustaining relationality and accepting that we ourselves are constantly called into question.

In the example of the online masters program in the Pacific that was mentioned previously, one online discussion focused on the role technology plays in shaping the cultural life and local ethics of islands in the Pacific region. Some responses referred to the positive impact of technology in encouraging people to "get to know each other's ethical values" while others mentioned the negative impact of technology and "the erosion of local values." One of the students, after reading her peers' responses, posted the following question to the online discussion board:

Guys, all the issues you raise are really interesting and [I] agree with several of the points you make. However, at the same time I am really frustrated because all these are simply theoretical views... what does this mean for me as teacher in the classroom and as a member of the community? What should I be doing that I am not? What is my ethical responsibility to the students?⁵⁴

Several classmates responded to this student's concerns by saying that the teacher's responsibility is to make sure the conversation remains open, because "each code of ethics should constantly be questioned and negotiated."⁵⁵ The students also provided specific ideas about projects teachers might use to help students develop stronger relations with each other via the Internet — projects that emphasize the importance of learning about each other's culture without diminishing or romanticizing the realities of the differences and conflicts among them; and that explore the prevention of future injustices rather than retribution for past abuses. After two days passed, the instructor summarized several of the practical

54. Online chat discussion, November 2002.

55. *Ibid.*

recommendations proposed by the students, added a few others, and synthesized the readings as they pertained to the student's concerns. Allowing the students a couple of days to respond to the question gave them the opportunity to discuss the issues with one another and to reflect on the practical implications of how technology affects culture and on what teachers can do as members of their communities. The instructor specifically acknowledged each student's contribution, providing everyone with feedback and purposely avoiding any categorization of students' responses. This example demonstrates how online interactions between teacher and students can lead to a richer understanding of the meaning of "ethical responsibility" for teachers, for students, and for their wider communities.

LIMITATIONS OF THIS APPROACH

Here we have suggested the potential benefits of using Levinas's ideas to develop an ethically responsive online education, arguing fundamentally that teachers need to encourage a politics of listening and witnessing. One may point out, however, that although this sounds useful, there are several limitations to this approach. For example, some aspects of identity emerge from our social positioning (whether in terms of race, economics, politics, or the like). It is important to consider whether the desire to be open to the unknowability of the other may subtly obscure those aspects of identity that *can*, in some sense, be known.⁵⁶ Such concerns are by no means easy to address, for being open to alterity — especially in the context of online interactions — is a difficult starting point for thinking about what constitutes an ethical response within the framework of social justice.

This issue becomes especially problematic when educators invite online learners into positions that they do not inhabit in their physical world. For example, can white middle-class students really put themselves in the position of an oppressed minority living in a depressed urban area, or of a paralyzed student in a wheelchair? To what extent can students inhabit the perspectives of others in this way? In what ways might this approach be useful, and in what ways might it be destructive? These questions highlight the serious conflict between according respect to diverse identities while at the same time attending to the concerns and realities of those who are marginalized. The danger of romanticizing a Levinasian approach should be clear. As Iris Young, among others, has argued, inviting learners to inhabit Others' positions is an extremely risky strategy.⁵⁷ Individuals may try to empathize with the Other — especially given that information about other cultures is easily accessible via the Internet — but this empathy often derives not from respect and care for the Other but from indifference and egocentrism. Both positions — indifference and egocentrism — carry the ideological baggage of liberal individualism.⁵⁸ In this regard, Young's contention that we must respect

56. Again, we are indebted to an anonymous reviewer who encouraged us to pursue these issues.

57. Iris Young, *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy, and Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

58. Marianna Papastephanou, "Education, Subjectivity and Community: Towards a Democratic Pedagogical Ideal of Symmetrical Reciprocity," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 35, no. 4 (2003): 395–406.

differences, not by pretending to inhabit their roles, but by letting others speak for themselves, is a vital intervention that moves us beyond a simple call for empathy in online education. Ultimately, this requires that we ground online pedagogies in certain configurations of otherness that have the capacity to move students out of their positions of complacency, apathy, guilt, or feelings of pity and mercy.

Another limitation of the perspective described here is that almost all education of this kind takes place within an institutional structure that works against fluid and nonhierarchical interactions with others. Students are given grades, and they continually seek the forms of interaction that will help ensure that they receive a good grade. How is Levinas's vision necessarily contaminated by online dialogue's location within a structure that requires such interactions to be assessed?

This criticism may initially give the impression that Levinas's vision has been derailed entirely, because it seems impossible that students will interact with total openness and responsibility given the constraints described. However, a teacher motivated by Levinas's vision as we have defined it can create alternative methods of assessment; he or she may go even further than that and embark on a long-term project of encouraging students to consider their own as well as others' existential conditions. Above all, Levinas's ideas pave the way for creating a *theoretical* space in online education that promotes *actual* engagement with and care and respect for the Other. What can be achieved is "a radicalization of liberalist tolerance," an educational ideal that "must encourage and cultivate a democratic symmetrical reciprocity among students and teachers."⁵⁹ For the aim with regard to affirming historically devalued groups is neither to bring into being nor to consolidate the essence of a group; rather, it is to affirm a nonhierarchical engagement with difference in which the others are experienced as individuals who are constantly becoming. These experiences have the potential to transform dominant groups by fostering in them an unconditional respect that acknowledges the *face* of the Other.

To suggest that "unconditional" respect, and even love, might have some ethical significance in online education would also bring into focus what might be a responsible response to the Other, despite the institutional constraints of pedagogical practices that frown upon such notions. Levinas's vision is different in its promotion of "a *committed* regard for the suffering of an other that has the potential to lead to responsibility and hopefully to responsible action" (*LPE*, 66). It is for these reasons that, at the end of day, we believe Levinas's account provides a convincing defense of both conditions of a politics of recognition — namely, that it should be transformative in its engagement with alterity and that it should be critical in its orientation to practices affecting the marginalized adversely. The ethical possibility lies in attributing to the Other the value of unconditional respect precisely in order to address historical

59. *Ibid.*, 401.

disadvantages, and it suggests that such unconditional respect can generate a critical perspective by focusing on the creation of *affective dispositions and alliances*.⁶⁰

In sum, we have argued that the principal contribution of a Levinasian ethics to ethically responsible online education is its critical and transformative account of alterity. Thus, notwithstanding problematic gaps in this perspective taken alone, Levinas's ethics seem to avoid the overdeterminism of more familiar justifications of the need to respect otherness (such as liberalism or Christian ethics). We certainly do not want to suggest that Levinas's ethics is the only or even the best answer to the question of otherness. The task we have undertaken is rather to consider how conditions of ethical responsibility and otherness in an online context can be enriched or diminished when viewed through the lens of Levinasian ethics. This approach does not undercut the need for institutional changes toward the greater inclusion of otherness; on the contrary, the capacity for unconditional respect requires an ethically responsible online education that would cultivate a collective ethos of critical responsiveness to otherness in a wide variety of forms.

Nevertheless, there is no escape from the ethical ambiguity that such pedagogies entail. After all, judgments are always *post hoc*, because we "often do not know with assurance exactly what the limits [of toleration] must be."⁶¹

CONCLUSION

The main claim of this essay is that an important challenge for online education is ethical in nature. It has to do with the ways educators and learners *respond* to the Other, to what is marginalized and excluded; it has also to do with their ethical responsibility to the Other's multiple and complex identities. We believe that online education provides a unique opportunity to help learners relate to the Other, irrespective of geographical, cultural, and other differences.

Through online education, teachers and students become virtually implicated in ethical interactions in which they have to consider how they should respond to each other. We contend that ethics in online education must confront what *cannot* be known as it explores ways of bringing individuals "closer together" despite the large physical distances that separate them. The issue cannot be addressed simply by establishing a code of moral rules deployed in computer-mediated communication (such as: be kind to your online partners, reply promptly to those who send you e-mail messages, do not use offensive language in your messages, and the like). When approached in this way, pedagogical practices in online education become instrumental in their goals. As Todd observes, even if those practices take caring for others as a goal, "ethics still enters education from the outside...since 'appropriate' forms of interaction are deduced from quite specific definitions of the concepts of democracy and care" (*LPE*, 5), as opposed to a more general recognition that ethics takes on many different forms of relationality. She summarizes the

60. Michalinos Zembylas, "Caring for Teacher Emotion: Reflections on Teacher Self-Development," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 22, no. 2 (2003): 103–125.

61. William Connolly, *Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2003), xxix.

danger of instrumentalizing ethics through education (whether traditional or online): such an approach tends to treat ethics as an epistemological problem — as if knowing more things makes one act more ethically.

However, Levinas's vision helps online educators consider ways in which "ethics is something other than acting on knowledge" (*LPE*, 7). It does this in part by emphasizing the need to pay attention to the unknowable alterity of the Other. In focusing on the conditions that make us different from one another (instead of focusing on moral rules and codes), ethics in online education should be seen in terms of how individuals relate over the Internet. Online pedagogical practices, then, would not be focused on acquiring knowledge *about* the Other but would instead consider these practices "as relations to otherness and thus as always potentially ethical — that is, participating in a network of relations" (*LPE*, 9); this involves being open and vulnerable to learn *from* the Other. In this context "learning from" means exploring "what is at stake in the *process* of learning from, and what the Other signifies in such a situation" (*LPE*, 9).

In this sense, the very structure of online education — as an ongoing struggle to engage the unknowable alterity of the Other in a context where communication is often more complex due to the lack of face-to-face interaction — signals the profound ethical dimension of teaching and learning over the Internet. An ethical online pedagogy requires paying attention to ways in which interactions across difference promote relationality, humility, criticality, and responsibility. The important idea here is that we must refuse to reduce the Other to the self — a reduction that Levinas defines as *totalization*. As Todd explains, "If I am exposed to the Other, I can listen, attend, and be surprised; the Other can affect me, she 'brings me more than I contain.' Insofar as I can be receptive and susceptible, I can learn *from* the Other as one who is absolutely different from myself" (*LPE*, 15). Thus, the Other, in bringing me to an awareness of my personal responsibility, creates me as a responsible person.⁶² But awareness, as we have argued, is only the first step. Becoming a witness of otherness means taking action to *show* the ethical responsibility one feels as a result of "facing" the Other. Many important and complex questions remain to be explored; our goals have been to initiate this conversation by examining the ethical significance of otherness in online education. More work is needed to formulate concrete educational practices that embody this ethical significance.

Any viable online education must be sufficiently flexible to foreground the sociopolitical underpinnings of technological knowledge, to underwrite the complexities of ethical pedagogies, and to acknowledge its unavoidable double character as both revealing and concealing. Online education reveals and conceals the world in many ways. By creating opportunities for meeting and responding to the Other, therefore, online education opens an avenue for critical reflection on its own presuppositions and effects.

62. Cass Dykeman, "Encountering the Face of the Other: The Implications of the Work of Emmanuel Levinas for Research in Education," *Journal of Thought* 28, no. 3-4 (1993): 5-15.

Central to this project, we have argued, is understanding the hybrid identities and complex relations among learners in cyberspace. To turn away from the Other is to behave unjustly, not because there is a universal law that defines such behavior as unjust, but because it is one's ethical responsibility to face (or inter-face with) the Other. This encounter reminds us of our duty to oppose sameness and expose ourselves to alterity.