

The Erosion of Face-to-Face Pedagogy: A Jeremiad

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Abstract

This chapter presents an essay on the escalating influence of computer technology in the affairs of pedagogy and the possible decline in face-to-face encounters in the pedagogical environment. It states that the development of online education has caused the quality of pedagogical interaction to deteriorate. This development has undermined the implacable power of face-to-face experience and highlighted the diluting character of distance as illustrated by voice mails. It suggests that the wider the physical gap, the more indirect the experience and the lesser the quality of educational experience.

Keywords: computer technology, face-to-face pedagogy, online education, voice mails, educational experience, essay

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Their foot shall slide in due time.

—Deuteronomy 32:35

The jeremiad is rooted in wisdom literature and has many variations. Nominally, in this chapter I use that which has come to us courtesy of the prophet Jeremiah—neither a full lamentation nor a Cassandra-like prophecy of doom, but rather a “dew-line,” an early warning system, or the ever-present and ever-dangerous “tipping phenomenon.”

In modern times, the jeremiad is an American cultural staple, first appearing in the election sermon of Samuel Danforth in 1670. Two recent major jeremiads have to do with the subject at hand, high technology, electronic technology, or more directly, with the potential loss of our sense of person as primarily felt, as embodied. The first is the 1995 Unabomber Manifesto of T. J. Kaczynski, which linked technological prowess with the systemic destruction of the environment necessary to sustain and foster human life. Surprisingly, a guarded sympathetic response to the concerns of this manifesto was presented by Bill Joy, a major technology wizard and founder and chief scientist of Sun Microsystems. Although clearly opposed to the person and violent activities of the Unabomber, Joy nonetheless sees merit in that section of the manifesto, “The New Luddite Challenge,” where Kaczynski writes: “If the machines are permitted to make all their own decisions, we can’t make any conjectures as to the results, because it is impossible to guess how such machines might behave.” Bill Joy adumbrates this worry by stating,

Perhaps it is always hard to see the bigger impact while you are in the vortex of a change. Failing to understand the consequences of our inventions while we are in the rapture of discovery and innovation seems to be a common fault of scientists and technologists; we have long been driven by the overarching desire to know—that is the nature of science’s quest, not stopping to notice that the progress to newer and more powerful technologies can take on a life of its own.

The language in both documents is simple and straightforward. The message is identical. The issue is consequences and the worrisome context is that consequences can yield both amelioration and disaster. How do we know which of these upshots is forthcoming? Can we know which will emerge? Most often we think we do know. Yet, frequently we do not. Think here of the baleful consequences of so-called side effects in the use of pharmacological regimens to treat assorted afflictions and diseases.

Consequences

In the *Meno* of Plato, Socrates is pressed to answer the following questions: How do you know what you are looking for? And if you find that, how do you know that it is what you sought? At this point, Socrates backpedals and appeals to a priestess, who has a claim staked on knowledge beyond our experience. That will not do. One is reminded here of that telling and poignant piece of dialogue in Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*. After chastising her son, Jamie, Mary Tyrone opines: "But I suppose life has made him like that, and he can't help it. None of us can help the things life has done to us. They're done before you realize it, and once they're done they make you do other things until at last everything comes between you and what you'd like to be, and you've lost your true self forever."

This is how I view contemporary technology: dazzlingly creative, exponentially explosive in its speed, spatial shortcuts, and shrinking of equipment necessary to the endeavor. Nonetheless, the working strategy is single-minded and often oblivious to consequences beyond the ken of immediacy. For an increasing number of us, the dominance of this approach to technological "breakthrough" is foreboding. The difficulty here is a paramount problem for all pedagogy, namely, how to build an awareness of consequences into the fabric of *all* decisions.

Infrequently considered in discussions of these matters are the underlying philosophical assumptions. For many, the point of departure is that we, human beings, "belong," inherit a purpose, and have a fixed end that is both explanatory and exculpatory. In this view progress, however one-dimensional, is good and the nefarious instances of fallout are the price we pay. Or, contrariwise, we could work off a different philosophical bedding, one that holds that we do not so belong and therefore have to create, to build, to protect, and to endow as sacred a human place, a human abode. If this is so, as I hold it to be, then we as the human community are responsible for all that has taken place and for all that we choose to take place from here forward. Given that, the consequences of all thoughts and actions are inseparable from the quality, the merit, the worth of what we think and do. Scoping and scaping, evaluatively, is a major task of pedagogy. Echoing Dewey here, "it is the quality of the experience which counts."

In order to understand how one assesses consequences we must have an awareness of processes as they press into future experience. Put simply and directly, we have to grasp the ongoing web of relations that adhere, inhere, cohere, surround, penetrate, ob-

viate, float, shrink, squash, deceive, render inert, cause perversion, erupt idiopathically, iatrogenically, and just lurk as a buried landmine. These are some of the sensibilities and concerns that should be at the forefront of the present attempt to impose electronic technology as the prime medium for pedagogy. Lamentably, for the most part none of these beacons for spotting consequences are under consideration.

Who among us has the temerity to sound an alarm with regard to the overwhelming explosion of computer technology as addressed to matters educational? The term *distance learning*, in a remarkably short time span, has become a talisman for the resolution of educational problems, globally. The claims of accessibility to online education are astounding. We have been told that in one area of India more than 700,000 persons are online. In that conversation, we have not been told that in the very same geographical area, several hundred thousand women rise very early to squat on the railroad tracks before the arrival of the commuter trains, for they have no toilet facilities. This conjunction of glaring opposites can be played out over and over again when technological prowess is set against the dolorous circumstances that plague the lives of most people on the planet.

Such is the larger setting. Here, I address a more immediate question, namely, should we be distressed by the escalating influence of computer technology in the affairs of pedagogy? How seriously are we to take the erosion of face-to-face encounters in the pedagogical environment? And how seriously are we to take the obsolescing of our language, our embodiment, and our intentional communities, the latter understood here as the teaching classroom, the seminar room, and the counseling session?

Surely, even a neo-Luddite, of whom I am not one, cannot gainsay the extraordinary achievements of computer technology. In many areas of concern, accessibility has been increased dramatically, or in some cases made available for the first time. One thinks here of families separated throughout the nation and from other nations, for whom the opportunity to exchange information, relay messages of affection and announcements of disaster, act as a binding hitherto never seen. Analogously, we recall the difference between the sending and arrival of letters before the advent of the telephone. We cite as well the contributions of medical informatics such that health care professionals in areas egregiously distant from the most advanced diagnostic equipment can have virtually immediate access to information protocols and advice that would otherwise be hidden from them. True, also, is it that the arrival of the computer-generated database has enabled us to store vast sources of information easily retrievable and yet without needing the existence of comparatively vast physical space. (I mention here a small example of the space question. By domestic standards I have a large personal library. Recently a student acknowledged the size of the library and waggishly stated that in a short time I would be able to put all of it in a shoebox.)

So, I repeat, who among us would display the audacity to stand up, chafing in the face of this scientific and technological power? Yet, apace, there emerge demurrers. We isolate here the dilution of embodiment and the worship of speed.

Embodiment

Thinkers as different as Aristotle, Freud, and Dewey warned against patterns of disembodiment as a vestibule for conducting and understanding human life. Even the mystics, in spite of their constant and intense concentration on the ever-present sensuality of the spiritual, were persons in bodies. Unless one is an orthodox Cartesian or embraces some other type of psycho-physical dualism, all knowing is irreducibly and patently embodied. A colleague once remarked to John Dewey, “The trouble with you, Dewey, is that you think philosophy is done with the hands rather than with the eyes.” Dewey responded, “Thank you for the compliment.” Following Alfred North Whitehead, we are prehensile animals. And as such to touch is to be touched. To obviate the tactile whether it be of the face or of the hand is to run the risk of severe disconnection from the way in which we experience ourselves as organisms. To fly in an airplane from Honolulu to New Zealand is not to be a Polynesian voyager, nor is it even to be outrigging. To fly from St. Louis to San Francisco is not to be a mountaineer. In fact, in both instances one has traveled through space but has neither traversed nor overcome space. In these travels neither the ocean nor the mountain has been experienced as embodied, only seen from afar. Put simply, no feet, no hands are at work.

Certainly it is impressive and, upon reflection, startling to “travel” distance online. And, as we have noted, much is salutary about this revving up of accessibility. Yet, citing the insight of Whitehead, we must be wary here of committing the fallacy of “misplaced concreteness.” An e-mail message to Bangkok has its “place,” but we are not in Bangkok, not in Thailand, nor for that matter anywhere but where we are. The fallacy of misplaced concreteness tells us that contemporary physics holds there to be no solids, so this table on which I write is a rush of electrons. Coming up from this table hurriedly and awkwardly, I hit my knee. The resultant hematoma tells me that though some things may be true, they are not so. Consequently, I hold that the “traveling” of distance by online technology is true but there is a crucial way in which it is not so. By analogy, and with regard to the anecdote above, my “library” may very well be reprised in a shoebox. In what sense is it still my library if I say goodbye colors, goodbye scents, goodbye shape and size, goodbye touch, and goodbye the personal history of *this* book?

Since the time when the first human beings evolved or emerged, speaking generically, all humans have experienced the same bodily functions, physiologically and emotively. Defecating and urinating, laughing and crying, sweating and breathing are constants, among other responses appropriate for a “natural” in the world. In this consistent mix are the presence and the activity of the human face, which is not the sole way but the most revealing way by which we communicate with each other. To wit: I can see it in her face; his face is tight, grim, lined, furrowed, distressed; her face is laced with mirth; he uses his face to hide his depression, or to reveal his depression; she has the look of confidence; I see rage in his face; ad infinitum. The human face is not flat. The

human face is not one-dimensional. It is textured, contoured, and expressive beyond words. The human face has reach and finds its way into the voice, the smile, the hands, and even the gait. Our face sends messages by a myriad of gestures, some continuous, some discontinuous, some mysterious, answering and resonating to affects deep within our person. The human face is rarely bland and if so, that, too, is a messaging. Human facing connotes joy, sorrow, guilt, shame, fright, repression, anxiety, alienation, anomie, perplexity, curiosity, and intellectual hunger, an attitude incomparably more profound than the seeking of information.

I am aware that faces are beginning to show up online. Such a development, no matter how sophisticated it becomes, cannot gainsay the implacable power of face-to-face, physiognomically undergone. The wider the physical gap, the more indirect the experience. Following William James, we have knowledge only “about” rather than “by acquaintance.” As an example of the diluting character of distance, I point to the distance between voice-to-voice and “voice” mail, another technological marvel that has a negative hook. Quite aside from the mounting complexity of the “convenience,” of the “step-(fast)-forward,” and the ensuing corporate strategy for its use to deter messages rather than accept them, I find that the protected person on the other end of the voice mail carousel frequently welcomes a live, personal voice with whom to speak. By now, all of us know how it goes with voice mail. After pushing anywhere from five to twenty buttons in response to Byzantine directions, the caller is chastised for hitting the wrong button, providing information that does not compute or simply for falling off the carousel. Obviously irritated with our incompetence, voice mail tells us, tough luck, call back. Still, once in a while the system will give up on us and track us into the voice of a live person. Usually, they are friendly, sympathetic with our voice-mail travails, unabashedly confessing that they also are unable to navigate the system. Sometimes it is my lead, sometimes theirs, whatever, the conversation slowly transcends the business at hand, yielding conversations about geographical location, the weather, medical ailments, and sports, embodied concerns, all. Although these conversations are not face-to-face, they are not voice- to-machine nor communication by password. We do not hold that voice mail, especially for personal reasons, does not have a salutary place in our lives. The problem is that having such a place, it has quickly ratcheted itself up to an overarching place, thereby replacing my place and replacing your place with a place that is no place. In the interest of efficiency and on behalf of speed, we have further enervated embodiment herein found as the human voice.

The just noted marriage of efficiency and speed is a reigning characteristic of the revolution in electronic technology. On closer look, this marriage sits on very rocky soil. In the history of American attitudes, efficiency has been a frequent target of critics who hold that when used single-mindedly, “the cult of efficiency” blocks imagination, innovation, and, ironically, when locked up in its stubbornness, fails to see the inefficiency of efficiency. I cite but one illustration. Now rarely heard, less than ten years ago, we were told that e-mail would lighten our workload and introduce us to efficiency

undreamt of. That rhetorical nostrum has vanished, taking its place as one of the truly authentic canards.

What, then, of the second partner in this efficiency-speed conjugation? One of the more misleading, actually treacherous, American mantras is “safe at any speed.” Not so. Speed is deceptive on two accounts. First, it is not simply an arithmetic progression. Speed picks up force, exponentially, as we know from our attempts to stop an automobile when adding five mile-per-hour increments. We quickly proceed from difficult to perilous to impossible. In a different vein, writing longhand, typing, and computer word processing is not only a question of speed. These three viaducts for sentences, paragraphs, and pages are working under a very different timing gear, sufficient to result in a very different outcome. Yes, speed is energizing. Yet, we must beware of its impatience, its reluctance to stop, to reconnoiter, and to maintain those boundaries that cannot be violated with impunity. For instance, I note the execrable prose of e-mail communication. This is now a genre overrun with abbreviations, many intelligible only to self-styled initiators, and well on the way to a private language ostensibly on behalf of widening and extending connections.

A second deception is that increased speed has an endless future, and, in time, ironically, all speed barriers will evaporate. Think of poor Mr. Bernard Lagat, who won the fabled Millrose mile run in the year 2003. He was criticized for running that mile in a “slow” 4:00.36. Now, it is just several decades since the centuries’ long-standing barrier to the 4-minute mile was broken. Today, that speed is slow. So determined are we to go faster, we have added hundredths of seconds to our measurements and then thousandths of seconds. Soon we will measure our human speed in millionths of seconds, billionths? trillionths?—in a word, using a measurement that has no connection to how fast we are going, as experienced by us. We then have a measurement that relates only to itself, namely, the heightened speed, the heightened capacity that is the hallmark of computer worth.

Community

To cut to the quick, here is my response to the aggressive takeover of pedagogy by variant, ever-more powerful, and intrusive versions of electronic technology. The fundamental claim is that contemporary technological innovation forges, widens, and intensifies connections between human beings, especially in a pedagogical setting. That this can happen and, at times, does happen has some evidential support. That it always happens is false. That it most often happens is also false. To the contrary, paradoxical though it be, this vaunted claim on behalf of generating connections has fostered, in reverse, an abiding pattern of disconnections. In my understanding of pedagogy, a systemic move away from interpersonal embodiment is a move away from who we are and how we experience ourselves as human beings, ineluctably.

In his work, *The Hope of the Great Community*, Josiah Royce (1967), a philosopher committed to globalization long before that term was coined, writes of the danger of becoming a “detached individual.” He has in mind a person who, despite access to communication and information, remains isolated from the burdens and nectar of social union, in short, the community. I do not see us obviating this warning if we shed embodiment and face-to-face intentional community life. To bypass, to transcend, or to move beyond the pace, the gait, the deliberate, the considered, the slow, is to ignore the taproots of genuine communal growth. Fructification has no future without roots. Globalization is hollow if it does not embrace the centrality of an affective, liturgical, and aesthetic binding, none of which seems to be the province of the mavens of speed, heightened capacity, and communication absent reflection. A plethora of information and electronic contact will not suffice for comprehending the issues in globalization that demand simmering rather than boiling, watching and waiting rather than seizing and managing by intrusion. Is that why, traditionally at least, we always shake hands, even in times of tension? I repeat, to be touched is to touch.

Pedagogy is at its best when one person touches another by virtue of imaginative and intelligent reconstruction of experiences had and experiences novel. For me, teaching is a response to the most fundamental of all human questions, “Can you help me?” I believe that you can see the existential urgency of this question in the faces before us, given, of course, that we remain face-to-face.

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