



# TEACHING AND LEARNING ONLINE: COLLATERAL DAMAGE DURING THE PANDEMIC

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# MOVING CLASSES ONLINE



- While preferences differ and often sharply, for many university students, education itself is not necessarily imperiled by learning online, provided of course equipment and Internet access are available. What many students miss is on-campus social life.
- Around the globe millions of children lacked access to computers and/or to the Internet.
- Many teachers – especially K-6 – found being forced to teach online disorienting at best, even rendering classroom skills acquired over decades suddenly irrelevant. Even for those children whose parents stopping working to supervise them at home, for many learning online has meant learning less.

# PANDEMIC-RELATED PROBLEMS: EDUCATIONAL CATASTROPHE

- Leonhardt lists (1) “achievement gaps” (2) “mental health problems” (3) increases in gun violence against children. <sup>[i]</sup>
- Even when schools have re-opened, pandemic-related problems presented themselves, including “learning loss and isolation”. <sup>[ii]</sup> ... Teachers are seeing “behavior problems” among once cooperative students. <sup>[iii]</sup>
- Too late, many educators say, as the almost two-year closure has taken a “lasting toll,” erasing “decades” of educational gains. <sup>[iv]</sup> .... Thousands of schools are not expected to reopen as countless teachers will not return to their classrooms, having found other work to compensate for lost income during the shutdown. <sup>[v]</sup>
- The educational catastrophe that Covid-19 has been for K-12 students is like a tsunami preparing to flood the shore of higher education worldwide.



- Leonhardt 2022, January 5, A12
- Leonhardt 2022, January 5, A12.
- Leonhardt 2022, January 5, A12.
- Blanshe and Dahir 2022, January 11, A4.
- Blanshe and Dahir 2022, January 11, A4.

# TECHNOLOGIZATION AND ITS COLLATERAL DAMAGE

- Technologization - of even thought, as the Adorno-Horkheimer critique of the Enlightenment demonstrates – is the macro-trend of the past several centuries.
- The great Canadian theorist of media Marshal McLuhan knew seventy years ago that not only reason would be instrumentalized and people reduced to human capital by the technologization of human life, so would our bodies and emotions.
- Today I focus on its collateral damage – captured succinctly in the former Facebook motto “Move fast and break things.”<sup>[i]</sup> What may be breaking is not only school and universities, but our very selves: as citizens, as educators, as private persons.



i. Quoted in Diebel 2022, February 10, 43.

# TECHNO-DYNAMICS OF NATION-BUILDING

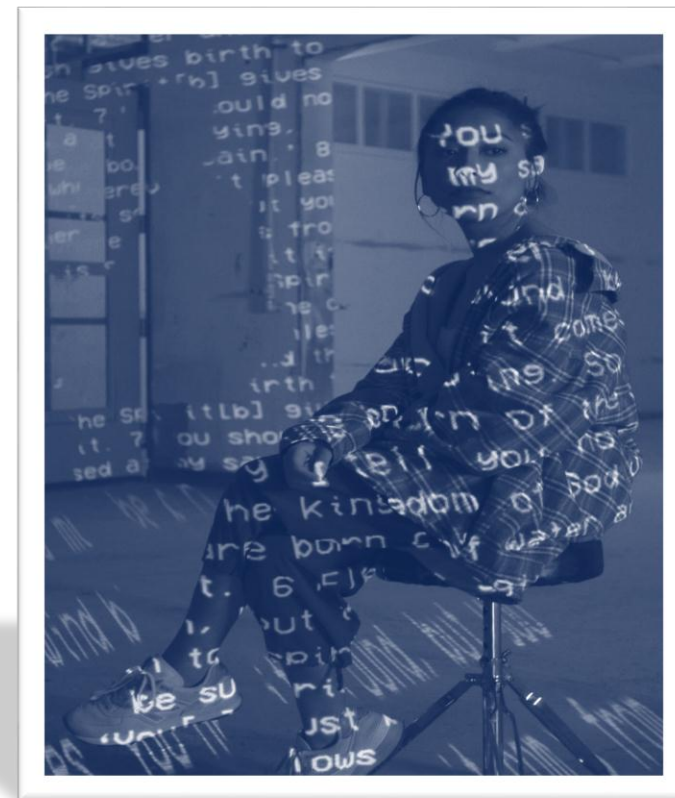


- In the new millennium, the nation-state mutates, not only a marriage of the two (nation and state), but also their fusion in software. Online learning creates (supra)national citizens, installing (supra)national literacies and loyalties, submerged in software, spellbound by the Medusa-like stare of the screen.
- The nation-state's emphasis upon its exceptionalism, sometimes associated with its (often imagined) ethnic purity and distinctiveness, with the mythologization of its history and future, goes global, one nation worldwide, united by software.
- Now development denotes technologization, infrastructure designed to connect markets, globalizing not only trade and capital but cyberculture as well. The very concept of globalization obscures the nationalism, imperialism, and colonialism embedded within it. Despite blowback (rightwing populism and other forms of reactionary nationalism), globalization continues, especially as technologization, evident in the datafication of education.

# A TECHNO-TOTALITARIAN STATE OF MIND

- “Schools” – and universities – are being converted into “data-production centers,” as “students” are subjected to “data mining” and “data analytics” technologies that “trace their every digital move.” [i]
- Children have already been reduced to “learners,” human capital, “inner-focused individuals whose own self-responsibility, competence, and well-being – their deep inner soul, interior life, and habits of mind – have been fused to the political objective of economic innovation.” [ii] “Innovation” is now an Orwellian word for exploitation.
- What roles do teacher-citizens play in this “datafication of social life?” [iii] We teachers may even be replaced, as “pedagogy” becomes a function of “automated machines,” so-called “teacher bots” and “cognitive tutors,” what Williamson terms “computerized software agents designed to interact with learners, conduct constant real-time analysis of their learning, and adapt with them.” [iv]

- 2017, 6.
- 2013, 83.
- 2017, 71.
- 2017, 7.





# “DATAFICATION” OF EDUCATION



- i. 2017, 9.
- ii. 2019, 155.
- iii. 2017, 53.
- iv. 2017, 59.

- These developments document the “datafication” of education, its recodification as “quantifiable information” stored in “databases” for “measurement and calculation”. [i]
- “The reason both traditional surveillance and datafied tracking conflict with notions of freedom,” Couldry and Mejiias explain, “derives from something common to both: their invasion of the basic space of the self on behalf of an external power.” [ii] That external power is software.
- Composed in code, software is – as you know - a set of instructions, structured and operationalized through algorithms, what Williamson summarizes as the conversion of “inputs” into “output[s].” [iii]
- Never “innocent,” Williamson concedes, code “derive[s] from the worldviews of its originators and that are projected on to its recipients.” [iv]
- Software engineers and programmers not only operate “technical systems,” then but also “social outcomes.” In effect, they codify what used to be called society.

# VIRTUAL “CITIZENRY” AND VIRTUAL “SOCIETY”

- Algorithms, ensure “social ordering, governance and control,” what Williamson characterizes as an “algorithmic ideology.” [i]
- There’s no “potentially” about it, as “private technology companies” usurp “public interests” and in so doing constitute themselves as *de facto* officials of the techno-nation-state, structuring, governing, and directing “citizenry,” a concept now virtual no longer exclusively geographical or ethnic or mythological.
- Once associated with emancipation, education becomes exclusively technical, sealed within software, the architecture of which constitutes one worldwide panopticon, the techno-nation-state.
- Learning analytics software is designed to track individual students in “real time,” to predict “future progress,” surveillance in service to the optimization of “learning” [ii]
- That “society” is virtual not actual, its “styles” software designed, homogenous, standardized, what the Canadian political philosopher George Grant suspected would be “a universal tyranny, destined to eradicate the historic aspirations of the Western world and particularly its North American experiments.” Citizenship in such “society” is ensured by seduction.



- i. 2017, 61.
- ii. 2017, 108



# NOT ONLY NURTURE BUT NATURE IS TARGETED

- The datafication of education extends well beyond students' learning, implementing what Williamson worries is a “biopolitical strategy” to produce “pathology-proofed” citizens capable of coping with the “stresses and anxieties themselves caused by government policies and capitalist culture combined.” [i]
- Not only nurture but nature is targeted: “educational genomics” draws on data “about the human genome to identify particular traits that are understood to correspond with learning,” so that corporate employees can develop curriculum according to each student’s “DNA profile”. [ii]
- No more pension payments, no more buildings (each requiring upkeep): the screen at which the student stares provides everything: total control for the sake of “learning.”



i. 2017, 146.

ii. 2017, 155

# BEING ONLINE: NON-COINCIDENCE



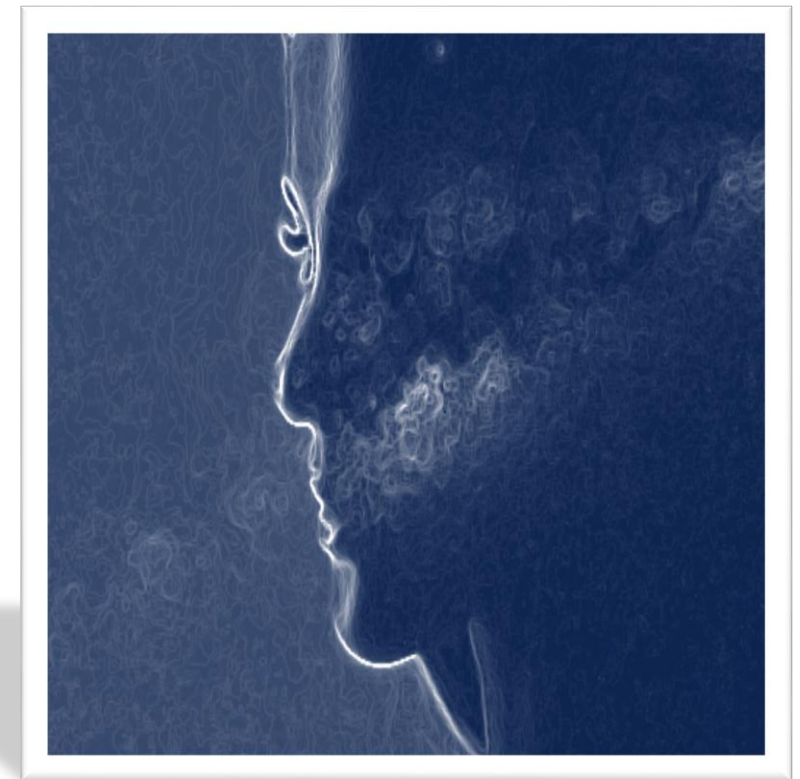
- Non-coincidence – open inner space - seems to me to be the issue here, as the “self’s minimal integrity is the boundedness that constitutes a self as a *self*,” by which Couldry and Mejias mean that inner space of separation from (non-coincidence with) what is that provides the “materially grounded domain of possibility that the self has as its horizon of action and imagination.” <sup>[i]</sup>
- This space of non-coincidence – an inner empty space wherein one comes to form as an individual through relationships with self and others (including non-human animals and objects) – is the prerequisite for forming a self-conscious relationship with devices, what Couldry and Mejias characterize as “living with an intimate enemy.” <sup>[ii]</sup> Since the device declines negotiation, this relationship requires separation for the sake of self-preservation, for freedom, a political concept with its subjective substrate.

i. 2019, 156

ii. 2019, 204..

# EMPTY INNER SPACE

- As if originating in that empty inner space, the human “voice” – that “unmodulated, nonpredictive accounting of experience, once valued as part of social life” (as Couldry and Mejas characterize it) – is “excluded from Big Data analytics”.<sup>[i]</sup>
- While the self is social, it can also be asocial, solitary, a private self, continuous through changing circumstances, including a changing self; subjective coherence comes from non-coincidence with the self itself, enabled by solitude, privacy, meditation.<sup>[ii]</sup>
- But any “reimagining of our existing relations to data is much more than saying *no*,” Couldry and Mejas caution.<sup>[iii]</sup>
- It is as if we realize – at least subliminally – that “communication and control have become one, without remainder. Now, everyone is his or her own panopticon.” “[W]e have become our data,” Koopman concludes.<sup>[iv]</sup>



- i. 2019, 148
- ii. Kumar, 2013
- iii. 2019, 198
- iv. 2019, ix.

# THREE FORMS OF IDENTITY

- Moeller and D'Ambrosio list three forms of identity: sincerity, authenticity, and what they term proficity, specifically one's profile on social media.
- Sincerity they associate with pre-modernity; it connotes coinciding with one's role, performing it as perfectly as possible, sincerely. <sup>[i]</sup>
- Authenticity they associate with modernity; it reverses sincerity, rendering one's role a reflection of one's inner self.
- Proficity Moeller and D'Ambrosio associate with postmodernity, the present period, when life is on online, where one's public presentation - one's profile - follows from and is directed toward "specific audiences," relying on "feedback processes" <sup>[ii]</sup> that prompt us to adjust our profile to fit what others will like.



- Trilling's, 1972, 2
- Moeller and D'Ambrosio 2021, 250.

# NO INTERIORITY IN PROFILICITY



- Moeller and D'Ambrosio confer apparently limitless power upon profilicity, a determinism that while possibly empirically accurate is nonetheless theoretically simplistic. Politics and morality, they note, are two domains profilicity perverts.
- In our era – an “age of infinite acceleration of the infosphere” - the “surface” is the “real thing,”<sup>[i]</sup> In profilicity there is, then, no interiority, no subjective presence, only scheming to “curate” a profile that “sells.”
- In profilicity the two as conflated, as, they suggest, “being oneself” is “much harder” without anonymous others’ “validation,” dependent as we are upon it.”<sup>[ii]</sup> No problem, all that matters is visibility, “being seen.”<sup>[iii]</sup>

i. 2021, 29.  
ii. 2021, 52-53.  
iii. 2021, 55.

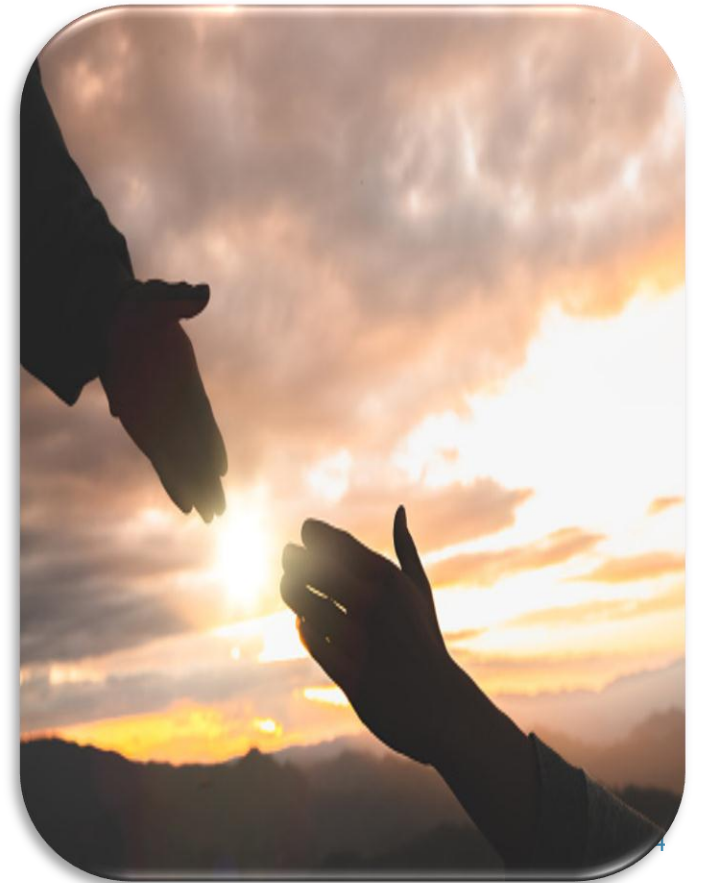


## SUBJECTIVE PRESENCE REMAINS

Being seen is the other side of surveillance, imprisonment in the software tech companies produce for profit. There may be no escape, but there is life in prison, this one virtual not physical, less awful than an actual prison of course, but confinement nonetheless, involuntary citizenship in a techno-nation-state that online learning and many forms of employment require.

As in actual imprisonment, actions and relationships are strictly structured, now by software rather than prison-building architecture and prison-guard protocols. In both actual and technological prisons subjective presence – being there, *Dasein* - remains, if overdetermined by software and screen.

Altering our relationships with our devices may be insufficient to challenge the techno-nation-state – as Couldry and Mejias insist (above) – but it seems hardly irrelevant to “living with an intimate enemy.” It may be the only move to make.





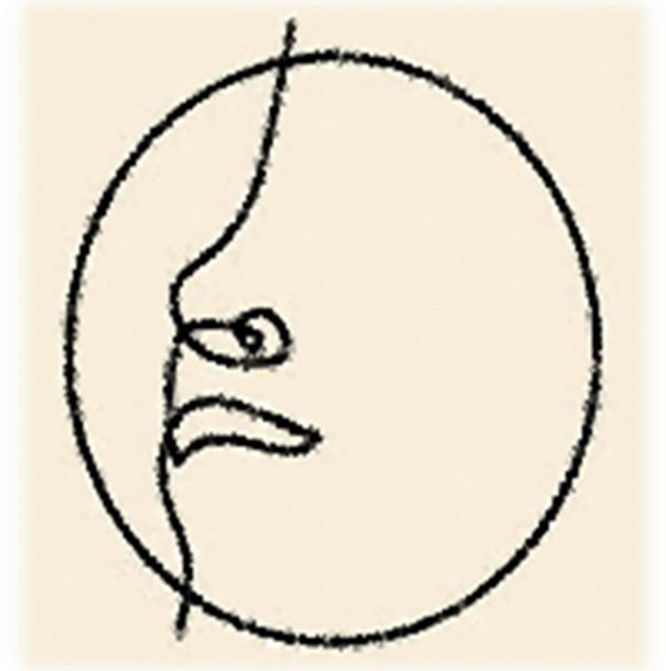
# CAUTION REQUIRED



- Caution is constantly required, as life in prison can be toxic, dangerous physically and psychologically, triggering depression and aggression, the latter self-directed against oneself or others, or by others against oneself.
- In a “total institution” - a totalitarian technological state - what resistance is possible?
- With inner struggle, including detachment from devices, becoming subjectively present within them, we may not in every instance be *reduced* to information, however channeled through information we must be.
- Zoom seems to fabricate a fusion of the two – ubiquitous visibility and a sense of immediacy - as not only students but colleagues and others one has never met suddenly appear on a screen inside the seclusion of one’s home.
- I cannot help but hear, as does Koepnick, the “uncanny echoes today between how fascism and our own image-driven times embed technological media in processes of physical and affective mobilization.” [1]

# INDEXICAL TRACES OF THE REAL

- The question of the human subject recurs. Hanafi is clear that the “subject ... is still the battlefield between threatening and threatened authority versus freedom”; she recommends that “both left and right, if capable of it, should relaunch the normativity of politics and law against the deviations of the economy and technology.” [i]
- One can still teach and study while one waits. There remain indexical traces of the real in the techno-nation-state, including the presence of the human subject, even on the screen.
- Our challenge is to make the subject central online, even if in simulated form, traces of the real. This seems to me to be our only move to make.



# NOT “HOW” BUT “WHERE”: THE SCANDALOUS REVOLUTIONARY FORCE OF THE PAST

- The question is not, I submit, “how” but “where,” and my answer is temporal not spatial.
- It is the past, no idealized era – much of the past, as you know, was a nightmare – but yes simulated experience that can maybe moor us elsewhere, not submerged in a pseudo present emptied of historical time.
- Pier Paolo Pasolini termed the “scandalous revolutionary force of the past,” rational study is not only our endpoint but also the portal to a future not foreclosed by the present.



*Pasolini Sodoma and Gomorra 120 days Painting*  
Enrico Fauchè

# IN THE METHOD OF *CURRERE*



- In the method of *currere* – I invoke the Latin infinitive to emphasize the existential experience of what we study and teach – the first step is the regressive.
- Regression into - reactivation of - the past is more than recalling what happened before, an exercise conducted from one's present positioning. Regression is instead returning to an earlier moment, immersing oneself in it, in its tone, mood, ambiance, its specificity.
- When one returns, the present – one's present – becomes activated, including its call to us to be present in it. Not only the past pulls at one, so does the future: the progressive phase of the method of *currere* invites us to fantasize our - individual, collective (intertwined as these are) – futures.
- After analysis of what we discover, we synthesize, pull ourselves together, become mobilized in the moment.
- This is a praxis of becoming subjectively present: in one's own life, with and for others, in the world that unfolds before and within us. <sup>[i]</sup>

# SUBJECTIVE PRESENCE THROUGH STUDY, EVEN ONLINE



- It is such subjective experience that can be effaced by staring at screens. While hardly guaranteed by the embodied presence of another, embodied experience can be encouraged by the subjectively present teacher unafraid of engaging emotionally as well as intellectually in conversation with those in her or his charge, not an exploitation of emotion but our testimony to academic study's capacity to bring us into presence in the material world we inhabit and labor to understand and reconstruct.
- That is no simplistically empirical world, as it is culturally and historically layered and temporally deferred.
- [T]o bear witness – at least in a self-conscious sense – does require the human subject to be conscious of its contingency, its temporality.
- If study is a “form of life,” [1] that life is human and requires a subject, threatened as the human subject is by the technology we have constructed, upon which we depend. That human subject can come to form, to presence, through study, even online.