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Rethinking the phenomenological meaningfulness of bodily presence and absence in online education

Online education was once considered a convenient and flexible educational channel. However, COVID-19 forced most teachers and students to have no other option but to move lessons online. Academic publications on online presence can be categorised into two independent fields: theoretical discussions and practical frameworks for improving online presence. Among these publications, some authors are holding pessimistic attitudes towards the idea of online presence. Some of them, following Heideggerian Gelassenheit, argue that online education is more or less a result of participants' exhibition of controlled and judgemental performances due to its disembodiment, which freezes the reality and is devoted to calculative thinking. Others, following the Levinasian phenomenology of the face, claim that online education, with the screen as the barrier, jeopardises the embodied sensitivity and responsiveness of teachers' ethical attuning to students. To negotiate with these authors, we would like to remind them of its possibility. Therefore, we draw on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodiment to introduce an opinion confirming online presence in education. We then point out the danger of reducing learning to the state of being present in classes, whether bodily or virtually, by inviting readers to rethink "absence" as a concealed side of presence and to confirm the roles of absence and presence in co-constructing a person's perception of things. We thus emphasise the importance of teachers' and students' intentionality to teach or to learn, which determines the effects of online education. Finally, this study concludes with a post-digital view that beckons us to transcend the current debate of teaching online or offline, recognising a blurred boundary between the virtual and bricks-and-mortar modes of education.

Keywords: *online presence, absence, embodiment, Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology.*

Introduction

Presence in tradition is a philosophical concept. In this viewpoint article, we define presence as a subject's feeling of embodiment, and we may interchangeably use presence and embodiment in this article to articulate our meaning. In education, it was not commonly debated or discussed until the recent COVID-19 pandemic gave most teachers and students no other option but to move lessons online. Of course, online education was once believed to be a convenient and flexible educational channel for some people, but since the pandemic, studies have reported students' and teachers' many challenges with feeling presence in synchronous or asynchronous teaching platforms [Shao 2021; Siah, et al. 2022; Zizka, & Probst 2023; Li 2023]. However, since the pandemic, online education has become more accepted because many people have seen its merits and become used to it [Almahasees et al. 2021; Van Wigm et al. 2022]. From the debate on the matter, it seems that understanding the embodied feeling of presence in online teaching and reflecting in depth on its challenges and opportunities may bring benefits to post-pandemic education. Moreover, contemporary attitudes towards digital technology tend to take on either a pragmatic or constructivist lens; in other words, most people tend to be concerned about the affordance of the technology. However, as du Toit (2020) pointed out, there is the potential to use classical phenomenological thinking to understand the embodiment issues of digital technology. Therefore, the present viewpoint article focuses on a major phenomenological discussion of the pros and cons of online education in terms of the feeling of embodiment.

The remainder of this article begins with an introduction to Berenpas' (2021) and Ucok-Sayrak and Brazelton's (2022) phenomenological opinions on online education, representing criticisms of the loss of embodiment. After reviewing the theoretical tradition and opinions of Berenpas (2021) and Ucok-Sayrak and Brazelton (2022), we negotiate with them by drawing on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodiment to introduce an opinion confirming the possibility of online presence in education. We then rethink "absence" as a concealed side of presence and the co-construct of absence and presence in formulating a person's perception of things, emphasising the importance of teachers' and students' intentionality to teach or to learn, respectively. Finally, this study concludes with a post-digital view that transcends the online and the offline, seeking to advocate a seamless boundary between the virtual and bricks-and-mortar modes of education.

1. Theoretical debates on online presence

1.1. Online education as the concealment of students' beings

As a representative of the studies with a phenomenological perspective of presence, Ucok-Sayrak and Brazelton (2022) followed Heideggerian

Gelassenheit (releasement toward things), thinking that learning should happen when teachers and students inhabit an uncontrolled and spontaneous encounter with each other; on the contrary, online education is more or less a result of participants' exhibition of controlled and judgemental performances due to its disembodiment, which freezes the reality and is devoted to calculative thinking. Gelassenheit is a meditative thinking form that Heidegger (1966) created in his late years as a suggestion for humans to dwell in the increasingly technicalised world. Heidegger (1966) realised that the whole world is becoming entirely technical. Every natural thing is challenged and demanded to reveal itself as stockpiles of products and fuels at human command for further exploitation and ordering [Heidegger 1977].

Even human beings are unconsciously challenged into exploitation and order due to their participation in the process [Heidegger 1977]. Beholding such danger, Heidegger (1966) alerted that it is more uncanny that humans are unprepared and unable to meditate on such transformation. He advocated for people to develop Gelassenheit – meditative thinking, releasement towards things – and be open to the alternative meanings hidden or concealed by technology [Heidegger 1966]. In *The Origin of the Work of Art*, Heidegger (2002) used Van Gogh's painting of a pair of peasant's shoes to exemplify how the essential meaning of things can be unconcealed by art as meditative thinking, rather than be carried away by technical thinking in treating art as a replica of objects or an item for exhibition. He said:

> "From out of the dark opening of the well-worn insides of the shoes the toil of the worker's tread stares forth. In the crudely solid heaviness of the shoes accumulates the tenacity of the slow trudge through the far-stretching and ever-uniform furrows of the field swept by a raw wind. On the leather lies the dampness and richness of the soil. Under the soles slides the loneliness of the field-path as evening falls. The shoes vibrate with the silent call of the earth, its silent gift of the ripening grain, its unexplained self-refusal in the wintry field. This equipment is pervaded by uncomplaining worry as to the certainty of bread, wordless joy at having once more withstood want, trembling before the impending birth, and shivering at the surrounding menace of death. This equipment belongs to the earth and finds protection in the world of the peasant woman. From out of this protected belonging the equipment itself rises to its resting-within-itself."[Heidegger 2002: 14].

The painting of the peasant's shoes unconceals the real soil it steps on, which is the shoes' being and essence. Heidegger (1966) stressed that the prerequisite for a genuine artwork to flourish is its rooting in the native soil, which is often concealed by human proximity to a world fabricated by modern technology. Like art, the spirit of Gelassenheit is an unconcealment of essence,

too. With Gelassenheit, teaching should be aimed at unconcealing the beings of every student in their naturally embodied contexts, rather than purporting an edited and performative presence under a controlled teaching methodology, as in online lessons [Ucok-Sayrak, & Brazelton 2022]. Thus, if seen through such a lens, online education will not provide a reliable presence for students in education. Although Ucok-Sayrak and Brazelton (2022) recommended using performative writing to share students' "being-here-now" circumstances, as a unique teaching method in its own right, performative writing may not be a generalisable practice for every teacher at the current moment.

1.2. The screen as the barrier to attuning to the student's face

As another representative of the studies with a phenomenological perspective of presence, Berenpas (2021) followed the Levinasian phenomenology of the face, thinking that online education jeopardises the embodied sensitivity and responsiveness of teachers' ethical attuning to students. Levinas (1985) believed that the human face is the ethics of ethics, because the face is the most direct and self-explanatory signification of identity to mean that you are you. It is the most exposed, destitute, and fragile part of the human body, always beckoning others' responses, answers, and responsibility. Just like he explained, "[B]efore the face I do not simply remain there contemplating it, I respond to it...It is difficult to be silent in someone's presence...It is necessary to speak of something, of the rain and fine weather, no matter what, but to speak, to respond to him and to already answer for him" [Levinas 1985: 88]. Such answering to the face of others is the pre-reflective responsibility to others, not to mention to murder or harm them, thereby formulating Levinas' ethics-of-ethics face as the foundation for all authentic relationships [Levinas 1985]. Levinas (1985) also mentioned that the face could not be equated with the gathering of organs, because when we pay attention to the nose, chin, mouth, or even the eye colour of someone, we are not meeting the person as an object but meeting them in an authentic relationship. From a Levinasian perspective, teaching is not simply delivering knowledge but responding to students' needs and emotions in embodied presence. However, online education causes students' faces to be unseen, blurred, or plastic in their appearance through the screen, disabling the ethical aspect of teaching [Berenpas 2021].

2. Justifying the possibility of online presence via Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology

Different from Heidegger's and Levinas' phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is based on his daring objection to Descartes' influential dualism of body and mind [Primozic 2001] and his careful observation of the

human body's key role in its own being and perception: "[R]ather than a mind and a body, man is a mind with a body, a being who can only get to the truth of things because its body is, as it were, embedded in those things" [Merleau-Ponty 2004: 56]. The ownership of bodies enables us to have perception; similarly, the same mechanism enables others to be perceptible to us; like he said, "[I]f I did not have a body and if they had no body through which they slip into my field, multiplying it from within, and seeming to me prey to the same world, oriented to the same world as I" [Merleau-Ponty 1973: 138].

The body is the foundation of all perceptions, and one's intentionality towards things is not because of their thinking but because of their capability from having a body: 'I can' [du Toit 2020: 3]. Thus, people's perceptions of things are the results of their bodily intentionality, such as perceiving a door handle so as to be able to use the door handle to open a door [du Toit 2020]. However, such bodily intentionality is not bounded only to concrete movements or things; one can have intentionality on abstract movements or things, too [du Toit 2020]. With this intentionality, an exterior artifact like a cane could become an extension of a blind man's body after it is habituated into his virtual schema as the result of having a constant bodily intentionality on it to learn to embody the cane skilfully [du Toit 2020]. If a cane could be embodied into one's virtual schema, then so could a computer screen and knowledge delivered through the screen, but this demands habituation over time [Kostenius, & Alerby 2020]. Thus, becoming used to online education requires habit formation in students, but they all have their bodies in front of the classrooms on the screen, through which they could perceive others and could develop the audio and visual hardware as virtual extensions of their mouths and eyes. In order to solidify our claims, in the paragraphs below, we intend to explain why online education is possible for students to perceive through their bodily lived experiences.

2.1. The other is "forever my second"

Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the co-existence of the body and human perception motivates us to use his theory to explain the possibility of online presence, even when the body of myself (teacher) or the other (student) becomes virtual, invisible, or plastic. This is because while Merleau-Ponty stressed the bodily presence of us and others, he equally pointed out the importance of myself and the other being in "the same world", which lays the foundation for and signifies what he believed to be the "universality of feeling" [Merleau-Ponty 1973: 137-138]. Because of such universality, Merleau-Ponty explained that the body of the other is always a replica of my body and, thus, the experience of the other is also a replica of mine [Merleau-Ponty 1973: 136]. He exemplified this as follows:

"I am watching this man who is motionless in sleep and suddenly he wakes. He opens his eyes. He makes a move towards his hat, which has fallen beside him and picks it up to protect himself from the sun. What finally convinces me is that my sun is the same as his, that he sees it and feels it as I do".

Thus, the other being "forever my second" or another me [Merleau-Ponty 1973: 135] may enlighten us that when the students' bodily presence is concealed or unavailable for direct contact, teachers – as the students' second selves (or vice versa), who were once students, too – could largely capture what a student may need even when they are online. Additionally, teachers and students usually encounter the same lesson with common teaching aims and materials, which is what Merleau-Ponty mentioned as others "slip[ping] into my field" as a basis for mutual recognition and understanding [Merleau-Ponty 1973: 138].

2.2. The separation is the whole

From a different angle, when students or teachers only show their bodies partially online, like their voices being heard, faces being shown, or even words being seen, they can still sense each other. Merleau-Ponty (2004) thought that a human is like any item, forming a unified whole, rather than being composed of separated sections, so that even each seemingly separated section has an affective correspondence with other parts. To further explain his opinion, he used Jean-Paul Sartre's example of the colour and the taste of lemon as an organic unity:

"The lemon is a unified entity of which all these various qualities are merely different manifestations…'It is the sourness of the lemon which is yellow, it is the yellow of the lemon which is sour…each quality [is] through the others'" [Merleau-Ponty 2004: 59–63].

The unity of the object is manifested in the person. A person is inseparable from their voice, accent, tune, body figure, characteristics, and even their tastes in decor, colour, and places for having a walk [Merleau-Ponty 2004; Merleau-Ponty 2019]. To some, misfit in a holistic unity may be easily noticed: "This is readily apparent in the case of dubbed films, where thin people are made to speak with the voices of fat people, the young have the voices of the old, and tall people the voices of tiny ones – all of which is absurd if what we have said is true" [Merleau-Ponty 2019: 108]. Merleau-Ponty (2019) revealed why humans never fail in constructing the captured piecemeal perceptions of an object to a unity even when what one saw is only a facet of the object; he believed that it is the human's lived experience to convince themself that the unnoticed sections continue existing so that the whole thing is still present.

He went on to exemplify this with how one sees a cube (where some facets are often concealed to us):

> "I am at the cube itself in its manifestness through what I see. The objects behind my back are likewise not represented to me by some operation of memory or judgment; they are present, they count for me, just as the ground which I do not see continues nonetheless to be present beneath the figure which partially hides it" [Merleau-Ponty 2019: 104-105].

Therefore, when the teacher cannot perceive a student as an embodied unity, only as their facial expression or voice online, the teacher is still sure of the student's existence at the other end of the screen. Particularly, the teacher may have lived experience face-to-face with the student before the online education period, so the student's presence undoubtedly counts for the teacher. Furthermore, even if the teacher has never met in person with the student before, a teacher must have some lived experience with interacting with other students, or, at least, the teacher was once a student, so it is also impossible for a teacher not to be able to feel the student's presence and needs. Vice versa, even when all teaching is online, students may have lived experience of education, how to behave as students, how to interact with teachers, and the meanings of teachers' instructions and expectations, but a precondition for a student to know what to expect and how to behave in classes is that they have a lived experience of schooling.

2.3. When reading your words, "I become you"

Even from written or typed words, teachers and students can perceive each other's meaning, not just because the words represent a person's unity but also because "language leads us to things themselves to the precise extent" [Merleau-Ponty 1973: 14]. To Merleau-Ponty (1973), words as signs are so magical that as long as a reader understands what the author expresses, the signs are forgotten, but meanings stay. He calls it the virtue of language, and a prerequisite of language to produce a such effect is the reader and author dwelling in the same world, speaking the same language, and living the same stock of linguistic significations [Merleau-Ponty 1973]. Merleau-Ponty (1973) recalled how he read Stendhal's novel, and when Stendhal depicts a character, Rossi, as a rogue, Merleau-Ponty's accumulated signification of a rogue brings him to know what Stendhal wants to express. Through reading, the reader becomes closer to the writer and their world; as he justifies it, "I am Stendhal while reading him." [Merleau-Ponty 1973: 12]. However, Merleau-Ponty (1973) did not forget to point out how the body, particularly crossed sight or a moving body, can make reading available.

This is how Gallagher defended the integrity of the embodiment of Merleau-Ponty against Levinasian opinions in treating the face as an isolated

entity: "We relied on a variety of bodily aspects in social interaction—posture, movement, gesture, vocal intonation and prosody—as well as communicative and contextual factors, background knowledge and our own prior experience" [Gallagher 2014: 3]. In summary, through Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology centred around embodiment, we found a school of thought that supports the possibility of online education and the teachability of online presence.

3. Embracing "absence"

3.1. The "sameness" of presence and absence

Despite noticing the possibility of presence in online education, it is necessary for us to know that learning is more complex an issue than simply being present, bodily or virtually, in classes. To meet such complexity, it is time to take a critical turnaround to rethink "absence", which was regarded as empty intention in many of the studies that reported the uncomfortable students in online classrooms. The attention that educationists pay to presence in online education demonstrates their concerns about the abrupt and imperative transition to online education from the brick and mortar classrooms; however, such attention, while usefully assisting their understanding of presence, may lead them to overlook the affordance of absence. Likewise, in the classics of Western philosophy, absence was not given much distinction from presence until Husserl expressed insightful opinions on the role of empty intention (absence) in human beings and perception [Sokolowski 2000]. A scholar from the Husserlian phenomenological perspective pointed out that "things are given in the mixture of presences and absences" [Sokolowski 2000: 36]. He then exemplified how the same painting of Leonardo da Vinci could be intended by its visitors:

> "If I talk to you about Leonardo's painting, you and I intend one and the same painting, the same one that we will see directly when we walk into the room where it is present. The presence is the presence of the painting, the absence is the absence of the same painting, and the painting is one and the same across presence and absence" [Sokolowski 2000: 35-36]. "Presence and absence thus are intertwined and mixed, joining to formulate the sameness of an object in one's perception. The sameness of presence and absence is the identity" [Sokolowski 2000].

3.2. Absence taking meaning for presence

Absence contributes to some important emotions and perceptions in human beings; for example, the feelings of despair, hope, regret, and homesickness occur due to a feeling the subject has intuited as a once-filled intention in the past or something yet to come as a filled intention in the future or in the distance. However, these are all empty intentions (absence) at the current

moment [Sokolowski 2000]. An emotion brought on by absence takes on important meaning for the feeling of presence [Sokolowski 2000]. The feeling of presence can be recalled as the amazing experience when we surprisingly find an important missing item we have been looking for (which was an empty intention at the time the item was missing). The reclaimed item regains its presence with the diminishing of its absent status. In online education, it might be due to sensed absence or jeopardised presence that educators make great efforts to enhance the presence of teachers and their students [Lowenthal, & Dunlap 2020; Parrish, et al. 2021; Chew 2022] and create so many thought-provoking discussions of online presence [Berenpas 2021; Ucok-Sayrak, & Brazelton 2022]. All their efforts accumulate energy to push the boundary, despite a temporary new breakout remaining an empty intention.

3.3. Absence and presence are both temporary

Rather than seeing humans' fulfilment of intention as a direct transition from absence to presence, Sokolowski (2000) hypothesised two other processes involving a chain of intermediates of presence and absence. The first chain Sokolowski introduced is a cumulative process of intuition, exemplified as follows: "We might, for example, go from a name of some person to a sketch of his face to a life-sized portrait to a statue to a televised image to the person himself" [Sokolowski 2000: 39]. The second chain is an additive process of deepening or widening our understanding of things after reaching a direct intuitive presence of an object. For example, when seeing a famous golf player play golf in person, the audience begins to observe and study the player's golf skills afterwards [Sokolowski 2000]. Sokolowski's two chains of intention explain that humans' fulfilment of intention could be a process, a time consisting of so many moments of empty and fulfilled intentions. He gave the following instance (with our own notes provided in parentheses):

"I once attended a golf tournament and wanted to see Jack Nicklaus play. I had read about him in the sports pages (here, Nicklaus is an empty intention). I saw his picture in the newspaper (an empty intention of Nicklaus). I saw him being interviewed on television (an empty intention of Nicklaus). After I got to the tournament, I walked around the golf course, trying to find his threesome (an empty intention of Nicklaus). Finally, I saw the leader board with his name on it (an empty intention of Nicklaus); on seeing his name there but not yet seeing him, I still intended him signitively or emptily, but now I was closer to fulfilment because I was no longer seeing his name just in the papers or the sports magazines, but on his leader board, which was something like an indication sign or signal of his presence (empty intentions of Nicklaus). Then I saw his caddy, whom I recognized from other pictures (an empty intention of Nicklaus). Finally, I saw Jack Nicklaus himself (a filled intention of Nicklaus). At that

point, I entered into perception and left the empty, signitive intentions, the pictorial intentions, the sociative ones, and all the other intermediate kinds. Once I entered into perception, I could not move into any other kind of better fulfilment, but I could continue to have more and more perceptions (Nicklaus can become empty intentions again in books, in magazines, or on TV)" [Sokolowski 2000: 38–39].

From these examples, we may infer that students' fulfilment of learning intentions is a process in time, needing their consistent efforts. Even when students are present with teachers, they still need to deepen and exercise what they have learned after class when teachers are not present with them. They may be present again in person or in some other virtual learning platforms to consult with teachers when they encounter confusion, or they do research by themselves elsewhere at home, in public libraries, or online. It takes time for students to fulfil intentions traversing among presences and absences, as it takes time to learn. Similarly, it takes time for teachers and students to develop perceptions of each other, regardless of whether they are online or offline. The reachability of the identity of things, regardless of their presence or absence, is due to human intentionality. Like Zahavi [Zahavi 2003: 22] explained, "the intentionality of consciousness is not caused by an external influence, but is due to internal moments in the experience itself". Thus, anybody, including students in online settings, can have intentionality towards certain objects, such as the learning contents and class objectives. In other words, as long as the student intends to study, they will be autonomous in overcoming challenges, whether online or onsite.

Concluding thoughts: transcending the presence–absence dichotomy

Of course, there will be some students who are not willing to learn or are challenged by online conditions or other factors. This is what the post-digital philosopher Fawn (2019) described: even in embodied education contexts, some students do not benefit from study. Thus, it is helpful to look at how post-digital opinions see presence and learning in online classrooms. The post-digital philosophers deny the necessity of an online presence because they believe in an increasingly seamless boundary between the online and offline [Fawn 2019]: a bricks-and-mortar classroom is equipped with ICT facilities supporting teachers and students using online resources, while in online classes, students' thinking and learning are not only restricted to the online [Fawn 2019; Fawn, et al. 2019]. As Fawn said, "learning spills out beyond the classroom and the computer, blending face-to-face and online, asynchronous and synchronous, bodily and cognitive forms" [Fawn 2019: 134]. Thus, the long-held division between online and offline concepts is outdated. Agreeing with the post-digitalists' belief, Chew also argued that "presence in the online

environment is consequently no less embodied than it is on-site" [Chew 2022: 397], as long as teachers arrange their teaching bodies properly, e.g., uploading images of themselves, posting written instructions and feedback, fine-tuning their facial expression, maintaining eye contact, and dressing professionally to provoke an affective reaction in their students. Meanwhile, overstressing the downsides of absence (or jeopardised presence) and using standardised assessments, or other teaching practices that demand students' immediate or performative online presence, may give rise to the calculative thinking that Heidegger (1966) warned against. To transcend the presence–absence dichotomy with the post-digitalist ethos, perhaps we should nurture students' and even teachers' postdigital literacy, imbuing them with the readiness to synthesise online and offline educational resources [Bhatt 2023].

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***Юлонг Лі, Чжень Чень*. Переосмислення феноменологічної значущості тілесної присутності та відсутності в онлайн-освіті**

Онлайн-освіта колись вважалася зручним і гнучким освітнім каналом. Однак COVID-19 змусив більшість вчителів та учнів не мати іншого виходу, окрім як перенести уроки в онлайн. Наукові публікації про онлайн-присутність можна розділити на дві незалежні категорії: теоретичні дискусії та практичні рамки для покращення онлайн-присутності. Серед цих публікацій деякі автори песимістично ставляться до ідеї онлайн-присутності. Деякі з них, дотримуючись Gelassenheit Мартіна Гайдеґера, стверджують, що онлайн-освіта більшою чи меншою мірою є результатом демонстрації контрольованих і осудних виступів учасників через її безтілесність, яка заморожує реальність і присвячена калькулятивному мисленню. Інші, дотримуючись феноменології обличчя Емануеля Левінаса, стверджують, що онлайн-освіта з екраном як бар'єром ставить під загрозу втілену чутливість і чуйність етичного ставлення вчителів до учнів. У дискусії з деякими авторами, які песимістично ставляться до ідеї онлайн-присутності, ми хотіли б нагадати їм про її можливості. Тому ми спираємося на феноменологію втілення Моріса Мерло-Понті, щоб представити думку, яка підтверджує онлайн-присутність в освіті. Потім ми вказуємо на небезпеку редукування навчання до стану присутності на уроках, фізичної чи віртуальної, запрошуючи читачів переосмислити «відсутність» як приховану сторону присутності та підтвердити роль відсутності та присутності у спільному конструюванні людського сприйняття речей. Таким чином, ми наголошуємо на важливості інтенційності викладачів і студентів викладати або вчитися, що визначає вплив онлайн-освіти. Нарешті, це дослідження завершується постцифровим поглядом, який спонукає нас вийти за рамки поточних дебатів про онлайн- чи офлайн- викладання, визнаючи розмиті межі між віртуальним і звичайним режимами освіти.

Ключові слова: *онлайн присутність; відсутність; втілення; Мерло-Понті; феноменологія.*

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