Embodied Individuals Navigating Virtual Spaces: Addressing Intersubjectivity and Alienation in Emergency Remote Teaching During the COVID-19 Pandemic in South Africa

Jean du Toit (ID) **and Gregory Swer** (ID)

Abstract Digital networking technologies facilitated connection between lecturers and students during the physical isolation (global lockdowns) of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2023). However, we argue that the sudden pivot to online modes of education brought significant questions regarding online intersubjectivity and resultant alienation to the forefront. This form of intersubjectivity involves the virtual as an integral feature. We argue that Merleau-Ponty's account of intersubjectivity (as a founding corporeity) and its related concept of 'the flesh' provides an essential theoretical framework for the conceptual analysis of these issues since the body-subject and digital technology artefact are co-implicit in the generation of the virtual. Furthermore, the tendency to treat the virtual as concrete from the basis of our embodiment results in virtual reification, and this in turn results in an alienated form of networked subjectivity. The current chapter investigates how reification constitutes the virtual, pointing us back to the nature of alienation (which, following Marx, we view as an intersubjective social relation). The virtual on this account involves not isolation and individual atomization, but rather a deficient mode of intersubjectivity in which the individual functions in a deficient and distorted intersubjective network (particularly in terms of teaching and learning).

Keywords Intersubjectivity · Alienation · Emergency remote teaching · Merleau-Ponty · Pandemic · Online pivot

J. du Toit (✉)
School of Philosophy, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa
e-mail: jean.dutoit@nwu.ac.za

G. Swer
School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic was a crucible for teaching and learning in higher education institutions in South Africa—especially for those institutions forced into the mode of so-called 'emergency remote teaching' by the sudden onset of a national lockdown in the country (in terms of not just a country-wide lockdown, but also an interprovincial one). The sudden pivot to pandemic-necessitated online teaching provides the content and scope for this paper, illustrating how an unavoidable and seemingly temporary switch to a deficient form of online teaching and learning may see networked learning go awry. Particularly problematic in this regard is the enforcement of such a deficient teaching-learning strategy, using digital technologies, in post-pandemic times to address economic problems and massification in the higher education institutions of South Africa particularly (and the Global South more generally).

While digital networking technologies allowed lecturers and students to remain connected to each other while being physically isolated during global lockdowns, we argue that the increased utilization of online spaces in this manner has not been unproblematic. What began as a reaction to a crisis has begun to be normalized as a new status quo in post-pandemic South Africa by management at higher education institutions. This takes place against a background of reports that have highlighted negative effects upon students' capacity to engage with learning material, and an altered awareness of themselves as learners. Both students and lecturers reported feeling distanced from each other.[1]

There was a strong sense that emergency online teaching made it difficult for the lecturer to engage with students during virtual lectures—the lecturer could not make eye contact with the attendees in the classroom (particularly when students switched off their cameras *en masse*) and could not rely on bodily cues to judge whether students were following along with the lesson or mastering the content. In a physical classroom setting, such bodily cues crucially inform the lecturer that they can proceed with new material (several students may nod in agreement, for example) or that they should dwell on the current material for a moment longer to explain in more detail or to ask clarifying questions (students' faces may show a confused expression). On the other hand, students similarly struggle to connect with their peers in an online discussion forum and may feel distanced from the lecturer since they are not physically present—they may be 'hidden' or 'disappear' into the crowd in this virtual setting.

Such experiences, noted by both students and lecturers, seem to highlight two central issues that we argue are crucial for conceptualizing (and rethinking) the ways in which we approach online teaching and learning. Firstly, such reported experiences suggest that we need to consider how individuals encounter each other in

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[1]It should be noted that these observations are not necessarily representative of all students and lecturers who experienced emergency online teaching during the pandemic, and instead reflect a recurring sentiment based on the lived experience of individuals.

virtual space. And from this the question arises of what lesson we can learn about the nature of intersubjectivity in the virtual in the context of pandemic-necessitated online teaching and learning? To this end we propose analysing the learner's relationship with online teaching as an alteration of embodiment. Secondly, how can the feeling of being 'disconnected', as noted by both students and lecturers in online teaching, be explained? In other words, are these students (and lecturers) experiencing a form of alienation in cyberspace? If so, what does this form of alienation entail? In this chapter we track particularly students' experience of alienation in terms of their capacity to engage with material in the online environment, and their awareness of self as a learner.

Intersubjectivity and Intercorporality

In this chapter we employ an existential phenomenological perspective to explicate student and lecturer experiences of online teaching and learning.

Intersubjectivity, a canonical phenomenological concept, is a vital concept for making sense of contemporary digital technologies in general, and of the virtual specifically. Intersubjectivity, or other-awareness, relates to the question of how the other exists for the subject (Carr, 1973). The concept is developed by Husserl in his *Fifth Cartesian Meditation* wherein, rather than placing the other "outside" one's experience, he places it within the realm of one's inevitably intersubjective perception of objects in the world (as part of his three-fold account of the body). Thereby he highlights the other in the context of the various aspects of embodied experience. For Husserl, one experiences the other not as an object but as a subject, based in the empathy that one feels for the other—indeed, one experiences the other in terms of their embodiment. In turn, the experience of the other shapes one's own self-awareness (understood as I am an other for an other person) (Husserl, 1950).

The Husserlian concept of intersubjectivity is advanced and developed by Merleau-Ponty, in *The Philosopher and his Shadow* (1964), through his account of intercorporeality as mutual touch via the image of shaking hands. As regards the encountering of the other, he says:

> The reason why I have evidence of the other man's being there when I shake his hand is that his hand is substituted for my left hand, and my body annexes the body of another person in that 'sort of reflection' it is paradoxically the seat of. My two hands 'coexist' or are 'compresent' because they are one single body's hands. The other person appears through an extension of that compresence; he and I are like organs of one single intercorporeality (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 168).

His description recounts the immediacy of perceiving while also being perceived, the physicality that allows for an intersubjective awareness through one's practical orientation. Intercorporeality is therefore for Merleau-Ponty, first and foremost, a reciprocity of one's own body and that of another, for he argues (along Husserlian lines) that we engage with the other not as a mere object (*Körper*) but as a living being that appears to the self in activity (*Leib*). For Merleau-Ponty there resides in

intersubjectivity a founding corporeity that serves to explicate the composition of the intersubjective world as based in a plurality of anonymous subjects and in the intersubjectivity of intellectual consciousnesses.

A crucial aspect of Merleau-Ponty's intercorporeality is its basis in physical excitation, which is illustrated through his image of two hands touching (i.e., touching and being touched at the same time). Merleau-Ponty's pre-digital account of intercorporeality asks us to consider how such intercorporeality may be understood to figure in digital screen-based communication technologies. How do we describe intercorporeality when lecturers are presenting an online class, for example? In such cases there is no physical presence, for indeed the technology utilized serves to connect individuals over distances while keeping them physically isolated (a course of action necessitated by the threat of COVID-19 infection, and as regulated by lockdown conditions during the pandemic). In the physiological sense, participants are at a remove from one another to prevent the spread of a contagion—indeed, to understand virtuality in this context requires a recognition that intercorporeality has moved beyond the realm of shaking hands, and that new embodied conceptualizations of this phenomenon are needed.[2]

In a contemporary, though non-technological register, Tanaka (2015) sees intercorporeality as a theory of social cognition that allows for the recognition of the other through behaviour matching and primordial empathy while simultaneously generating interactional synchrony and a sense of mutual understanding. In Tanaka's account we find that intercorporeality is based much more on visual excitation than on touch. It therefore seems that gestures, as a point of 'contact' between individuals, may play an important role in conceptualizing virtual space. As regards gestures, Merleau-Ponty suggests that

> The communication or comprehension of gestures comes about through the reciprocity of my intentions and the gestures of others, of my gestures and the intentions discernible in the conduct of other people. It is as if the other person's inhabited my body and mine his. (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. 185f).

Gestures are not just isolated movements, in other words, but rather a part of a community of flow whereby a shared pursuit renders a group of individuals absorbed and focused on an activity together (compare, for example, the engagement of sports teams, collaborative projects, and creative group activities). The concept of a gestural dimension to a community of flow suggests that intercorporeality may be achieved (in either the agreement or rejection of the gesture) even across a distance (whether by physical in-person means or virtually). Not just volitional and subjective intent is expressed in such gesturing, but we rather see sense-making occur as part of a broader social context—therefore, a gesture is a social act and does not merely relate to one's own point zero.

The role that gestures and gesturing plays in digital communication technologies thus seems crucial for making sense of online teaching. In this regard, Heath and

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[2]Indeed, the shaking of hands during a pandemic is highly discouraged.

Luff (1991) describe the role of gestures in their work on videoconferencing in an office environment. They argue that

> Despite having the facility to witness a co-participants visual conduct (...) many actions, which are performed non-verbally, do not achieve sequential performative significance in the interaction. In particular, gestures (...), which are systematically employed in face-to-face communication (...) to organize how the recipient participates, prove in large part ineffectual. For example, a speaker will attempt to produce a description and (...) use gesture to gain a visually attentive recipient. The gesture becomes increasingly exaggerated and meets with no response, the description reveals various linguistic difficulties and it may even be abandoned. Even gestures, which are not (...) concerned with organizing co-participation lose their sequential significance. For example, gestures which illustrate (...) objects (..) referred to in the accompanying talk appear to achieve little communicative significance when performed through video. For some reason (...) the technology transforms the ability of certain forms of conduct to engender action from another. (Heath & Luff, 1991, p. 40).

The foregoing seems to suggest that the gesture, while indeed playing a role in 'connecting' with the other via screen-based digital technologies, may play a minimal role in expounding intercorporeality in virtual spaces. Certainly, gesturing achieves little when filtered through the technological medium, per the account of Heath and Luff (1991). How then can we explain intercorporeality in the virtual space?

We suggest that one must move beyond a mere account of gestures in describing online teaching and learning, and instead consider gesturing as just one aspect of a broader ontological account of screen-based interaction. What is suggested is not 'disembodied' communication, or an embodiment that is merely related to the observation of gestures, but rather that virtuality suggests a differently embodied intercorporeality. We argue that, to make sense of such an altered intercorporeality, we need to investigate the ontological basis by which embodied individuals engage with the digital technology artefact and with each other.

The Virtual as Arising in Perception

A redeployment of Merleau-Pontian thought in terms of the virtual, and particularly the use of his concept of the flesh (*la chair*), reveals that the body-subject and digital technology artefact are co-implicit in the generation of the virtual (Du Toit, 2020). Merleau-Ponty's thinking on how embodied perception shapes our engagement with the world, from his early critiques of objectivism and intellectualism to his postulation of *la chair* (the flesh), conceptualizes the body-subject as an integrated surface of engagement with the world. For Merleau-Ponty, the world is already there as an inalienable presence before reflection begins; and phenomenology serves to give philosophical status to the direct description of one's experience through the "direct and primitive contact" of the individual with the world (through her embodiment)

(Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. vii).[3] It is through phenomenological description that one "[re-achieves] a direct and primitive contact with the world" (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. vii).

Perception is the individual's entire bodily inhabiting of its environment, and it is this theme that is central to Merleau-Ponty's thought. He argues that perception is perspectival and finite from the basis of the body (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. 81), that through perception the individual is absorbed within and directed towards objects within the world, 'forgetting' the essence of consciousness in perception (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. 67; Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 213), and finally that this sensual perceptual experience of the world extends to a perspectival structure of all human experience and understanding (in *The Visible and the Invisible*) (Carman, 2008, p. 1–3).

Sensing may therefore be understood as the concomitance of the body with the world in the form of a reciprocal exchange. Merleau-Ponty argues that

> a sensible that is about to be sensed poses to my body a sort of confused problem. I must find the attitude that will provide it with the means to become determinate ... I must find the response to a poorly formulated question. And yet I only do this in response to its solicitation .... The sensible gives back to me what I had lent to it, but I received it from the sensible in the first place. (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. 222).

Such a concomitance is representative of an intentionality that is finely attuned with the sensible thing—both the perceiving body and the perceived thing form an active and reciprocal part of the intertwined circuit of sensibility. In other words, the sensible thing calls forth to the body to partake in a perceptual attitude that will lead to the sensible thing's disclosure. The perceiving individual represents the prereflective and anonymous subjectivity of the body, which remains enmeshed in the world that is being perceived as perception takes place.

The embodied facticity of the individual suggests that the virtual may be understood from the perspective of the body-subject as experiencer of the virtual. Furthermore, the notion of the flesh provides a means to understanding the individual's experience of the virtual. The flesh builds upon Merleau-Ponty's description of the unity of the senses and refers to the entirety of sensed things with which the body forms a continuous surface, through the concurrent crossing of the body-subject to the world and the body-subject's simultaneous intertwining with the world. The flesh is "the underlying ontological foundation of sensory receptivity and motor spontaneity" (Carman, 2008, p. 123). It is 'on' or 'through' this surface that the crossing to and from the world (in its fullest sense) takes place—rather than the individual just being in the world, the flesh positions the individual as of the world (Carman, 2008,

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[3] Merleau-Ponty's discussion of perception is developed from the basis of Husserl's inquiry into the life-world (*Lebenswelt*) as the sphere of 'praxis' (Carr, 1967: 373, 374). For Merleau-Ponty this lived world (*monde vécu*) is the intentional object of experience—it is constituted as object or thing through the act of perception for and by embodied individual (De Waelhens, 1951: 92). This suggests that Merleau-Ponty understands perception not as an isolated psychological or physiological activity that takes place 'in' the world, but rather as a turning towards the world that at the same time originates a world for the individual.

p. 123), including thus the virtual one. There is a tight intertwined unity of consciousness and the physical in Merleau-Ponty's description of flesh, whereby consciousness is a characteristic of the lived world (it is not separated from it), and perception (through the flesh) gives access to this unity of subject-object (the intertwined relation between consciousness and world).

Indeed, if we take Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodiment and his postulation of the flesh seriously, virtuality could only arise as an emergent characteristic of this circuit between body-subject and digital artefact—it is the "'between' in the relationship between the digital technology artefact and the embodied individual" (Du Toit, 2020, p. 5). The virtual enmeshes and encompasses the body-subject to such a degree that engagement with the self, the world and the other is actively and continuously affected. It entails a "unique embodied existential-ontological structure" (Du Toit, 2020, p. 5). In this paper we argue that the virtual serves as a point of networked intersubjectivity that concretely expands and constrains human experience and behaviour.

Reified Virtuality

Understanding the virtual as an emergent characteristic in the relation between the embodied individual and the digital technology artefact provides a crucial avenue for explaining how the individual's embodied sense-making of the self, the other, and the world is challenged and altered through one's encounter with the digital technology artefact. Hereby, the flesh (as ontological concept) is descriptive of the matrix of intertwined and reciprocal relations serving as the foundation of the body's relational engagement with the technological artefact from which the virtual arises.

A Merleau-Pontian account of virtuality, again understood as ontological through the flesh, has crucial implications for how we can describe the world as 'constructed' by means of digital technologies. We may thus posit that in the virtual we navigate a reified landscape. Virtual reification, though seemingly a contradiction, sees us treating the virtual as concrete from the basis of our embodiment. This reification takes place not only from the zero-point of the sole individual, but as part of a broader intersubjective engagement with others and with a range of technological artefacts. Indeed, in industrialized societies we find that the multiplicity of virtual encounters by the individual is expanded to the nth degree through continual engagement with a variety of different digital technological artefacts.

Virtuality has broader implications than the individual's singular engagement with a solitary digital technology artefact because virtual space is generated in the encounter of the individual with a plethora of digital technology artefacts over an extended period of time. Modern society is typified by a 'symphony' of virtuality, a variety of digital technology artefacts functioning in tandem to create our virtuality-enmeshed world. There is an immersion of the individual within the overwhelming and continual stimulus of digital technology artefacts; the individual is 'surrounded' by the phenomenon of virtuality. This relates, firstly, to the sheer mass of digital

screen-based technological artefacts that the contemporary individual encounters throughout their day. Secondly, such a 'surrounding' of the individual by digital technology artefacts affects the individual's behavioural project (habitude). For example, the contemporary user of a smart phone is generally spatially near their phone, and when they are not within reach of the device their expectations are still shaped around it (one may feel 'disconnected' from others, or may 'imagine' that one's phone rings) due to the perceptual and experiential characteristics of said device having become a part of the individual's behavioural project (habitude).

Furthermore, beyond artefactual engagement, we find that the virtual arises in the realm of an intersubjective interplay—between agents that are both other embodied individuals and also artificially intelligent. For the purposes of the current study we shall only be focusing on the former, that is, those other embodied individuals that we recognize as similarly human to trace intersubjectivity in the virtual. Such intersubjectivity is a useful tool to explain how alienation, as reported by both students and lecturers in online learning, may come about.

Alienating and Delimited Virtuality

The virtual, understood as a reified landscape, leads us to consider the possibility of an alienated networked intersubjectivity, whereby all potentialities are founded in ordered and carefully arranged systems. Such an alienated networked intersubjectivity suggests that one must recognize the multitudinous potentialities that exist for alienation in the virtual, specifically in those spaces that are often problematically assumed to be open and free (also in terms of online teaching and learning). Merleau-Ponty recognizes the importance of the political reading of alienation when he argues that

> The proletariat is universal de facto, or manifestly in its very condition of life.... [I]t is the sole authentic intersubjectivity because it alone lives simultaneously the separation and union of individuals (Merleau-Ponty, 1969, p. 116–17).

Insofar as the virtual is an intersubjective space, so we may also suggest that it functions as a space for alienation. The link between intersubjectivity and alienation is also reflected in the work of Enzo Paci, who argues that alienation is an intersubjective experience. In trying to think about the political relationship that exists between alienation and technology from this type of phenomenological perspective, we find that Adorno provides a (uniquely embodied) account of alienation when he suggests that

> Everything is to be at the service of the hand that grasps it, but the grasping hand regresses to the repetition of what is available, which is not actually that at all. (Adorno, 1997, p. 281).

Adorno's statement suggests alienation along the same practical lines that Merleau-Ponty sketches through embodiment (i.e., when he says that the body allows one to 'get a grip' on the world). Tool usage (such as the use of contemporary forms of

digital technology) and the 'grasping hand' as instrumental perspective suggests a functioning in a reified landscape that utilizes only what is available in or provided by said delimited systems.

Such a consideration of 'what is available' has several important facets in considering the virtual. Firstly, if we assume that our lived world is 'acquired' by perceptual means (and through the technological medium which both enables and is part of the perception), then we must recognize also that a form of sensory delimitation occurs in the virtual (Du Toit & Swer, 2021). The use of screen-based technologies is centred on the visual and auditory, while remaining ignorant of the full sensorium of embodied experience (in terms of touch, proprioception, spatial awareness, and so on). Such a delimited virtuality entails a deficient ontological shaping of individuals' perception of the world on a mass societal scale.

Secondly, in recognizing technology as such a delimited experiential 'means to an end', we cannot ignore the fact that the contemporary human being functions under the auspices of capitalism (or rather, a kind of techno-capitalism). Indeed, merely viewing technology as a means to an end often leaves capitalistic societal structures outside our consideration. A recognition of the capitalist agendas that underlie contemporary technologies is essential for countering the reduction or regression of behavioural and embodied possibilities of the body-subject in virtuality to dull, repetitive, productive actions (we see also this danger arising in online teaching). There is a danger, following on from Adorno's thinking, that the virtual may increasingly become typified by a deficient hand and a reduced practice.

Online Teaching and Alienation

As regards the online learning experience during the pandemic, we argue that students feel 'disconnected' from the lecturer and class content due to their engagement through such an alienating and delimited virtuality (see also Du Toit & Swer, 2021).[4] What students are confronted with is the experience of the systematization of underlying structures that reflect the neoliberal ordering and priorities of the modern capitalist university education in its purest form.

While the virtual is delimited, we suggest that the student is not really receiving a deficient form of university education (keeping outside the present discussion the inherent underlying delimitations of such technologies). Instead, what students are receiving is the mainlining of neoliberal capitalist education—a form of education whereby students are expected to act as information processors and whereby lecturer

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[4] Importantly, while this chapter relates centrally to so-called 'emergency online teaching' in various South African universities as a result of the 2020–2023 COVID-19 pandemic, similar experiences were noted in various other countries. What is unique in the South African context, however, is the extent of socio-economic inequality in the country ("the most unequal society in the world") and how these factors shaped online education in the emergency mode (Coetser & Batchelor, 2023).

involvement is stripped of everything other than the most reproducible elements. Lecturers become little more than 'content parrots'.[5] Such a state of affairs has two effects: Firstly, what the students are encountering is a 'minimal' lecturer (i.e., a lecturer that is misrecognized in terms of their embodied subjectivity); the lecturer acts as little more than a content deliverer. Secondly, the student is confronted by the actual practicalities of the capitalist work world through their university education, whereby they absorb minimal knowledge and are rendered mere consumers of knowledge geared to enter the global work force.

Students are therefore required to refine the knowledge they have gained (to rework it along fairly low-level, well laid out assembly line instructions) and to then reproduce and regurgitate such knowledge along the lines of a quantifiable scoring of marks and progress through the system. There is very little opportunity to develop a relationship with the lecturer or with fellow students, and thus the virtual can only provide an environment that is already set up to foster alienation. What such students are encountering in the online space is the pure (or purified) structure of the modern capitalist university, stripped of all the Medieval and Neo-Medieval trimmings that make a university education bearable and justifiable to both staff and students. Problematically, students come face to face with a reified manifestation of capitalist education that has as its goal the preparation of students for the capitalist work-world while misrecognizing the broader scholarly goals of the institution itself.

Therefore, student alienation (which we have introduced from a Merleau-Pontian perspective) is the inevitable experiential consequence of deficient virtual embodiment through praxis. Taking inspiration from Adorno (as cited above), we may argue that everything appears through the virtual as reified objects to be manipulated by the hand. Importantly though, in this case the virtual hand is deficient—it is less than—it is a withering that entails deficient practices.

One may object that, from the student's point of view, they are indeed engaged in and participating in an intellectual activity. We recognize this point while at the same time also noting that the nature and contours of such activity are deficient. While one may argue that, to a minimal degree, the alienation encountered in the virtual is a by-product of the system *qua* system (of technological artefacts) as an inevitable consequence of engaging with a virtual world (Du Toit & Swer, 2021), we suggest that the nature of engagement with knowledge by the student as part of the 'optimized' and 'streamlined' neoliberal university machinery during online teaching underlies a much broader and encompassing alienation of the student—an alienation that impacts their capacity to engage with study material in the online environment, and that negatively shapes their awareness of themselves as a learner. This is a direct consequence of the specific capitalist ordering of the virtual learning environment, and we suggest that the lecturer should be cautious of such problematics when the

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[5]Lecturers also don't own the content they themselves are creating. University management could repeat the lectures created during the pandemic until the lecturers themselves have died (and beyond) with little involvement of the lecturers from the point of creation onwards (we also recognize that some American universities are already doing this).

neoliberal university (as an institution) may come to utilize students' experience of online alienation as a point of entry for the promulgation of contemporary capitalistic thinking rather than fostering critical analysis and scholarly engagement.

The Problematics of Emergency Remote Teaching

We have thus far considered the problems posed by emergency remote teaching in the Southern African context from a phenomenological perspective. Importantly, this form of online teaching and learning does not entail a well-considered form of networked learning; rather, technology is utilized in a haphazard fashion, with learning management systems becoming little more than distribution nodes of course material and essay-style assessments. The learning management system, in this mode, becomes the entirety of the online teaching and learning strategy. The roll-out of technology for teaching and learning in this manner, as necessitated by a global crisis which rendered in-person teaching impossible and left as only alternative the forms of networked learning facilitated by learning management systems, was driven by crisis management of higher education institutions in South Africa (Coetser & Batchelor, 2023, p. 6,7). It was the only possible solution to an extreme situation and was resultantly embraced—and rolled out—across the entirety of the country with often serious detriment to the students and the staff (who didn't have any training in the use of these learning management systems). The continuing legacies of Apartheid in the country, even 30 years after the country's emancipation, and the pervasiveness of corruption (particularly after "state capture" by former president Jacob Zuma) contributed to the challenges faced in terms of education during the pandemic (Coetser & Batchelor, 2023, p. 3). In fact, most higher education institutions did not have the resources nor could provide the kind of logistical support that staff and students required during this emergency. In addition, infrastructural challenges of South Africa became unbridgeable chasms for higher education institutions (Coetser & Batchelor, 2023, p. 6,7). Consider, for example, the fact that African countries generally have the most expensive costs for mobile data globally (Moyo, 2021) and that, during the pandemic, South Africa experienced—and continues to experience—loadshedding (rolling blackouts). These factors indicate that the challenges facing networked learning in the Global South differ significantly from those of the Global North, and suggest that the real-world considerations specific to periphery countries may be overlooked by the more utopian advocates of networked learning.

Post-pandemic we find that, even though emergency remote teaching was (begrudgingly) embraced by both staff and students as the only alternative to a critical situation, what had been a short-term crisis response came to be considered a viable means for the continuing delivery of education in South Africa. Importantly, this kind of logic is driven by neoliberal motivations such as cost-effectiveness and increasing penetration into the student market, thereby maximizing university profits. An example of this is the reduction of lecturer cost and the maintenance of

facilities, but potentially also the political motivation of countering student protests—virtual students cannot riot to stop business on campus, nor can they cause damage to property. Problematically, the needs of staff and students do not figure into the decisions made by university management as regards this continuation of, in a sense, emergency remote teaching in post-pandemic times. The danger is that while emergency remote teaching functioned reasonably well during a situation with no alternative (in this sense, emergency remote teaching was a success in the specific context of national lockdown), neoliberal motivations continue to encourage a deficient form of networked learning in the present.

This deficient form of networked learning is emphasized by the fact that online learning by the student takes place in a material mode—the virtual is not open and free-range, but rather represents a structured and repeating logic. The phenomenological perspective of Don Ihde in *Technics and Praxis* (1979) is insightful here, particularly in terms of his description of embodied technologies (through sensory-extension-reduction relations) and hermeneutic technologies. Ihde argues that a particular sensory focusing through technology concurrently leads to a diminution of other sensory faculties (1979, p. 273). We argue that an embodied perspective on virtual technology reveals a blurring of the lines between embodied technologies and hermeneutic technologies, particularly as viewed through an embodied Merleau-Pontian perspective (Du Toit & Swer, 2021).[6] Thus, we find there is a trade-off in higher education in the emergency online teaching mode, which entails an extreme sharpening on the one hand, but also a loss of sensory sensitivity on the other—that is, while there may be an increase in communicability, we find a concurrent and unavoidable decrease in the sensory modality. We can therefore expect a loss, or an impoverished form of embodiment, in the use of these technologies. Such forms of online teaching and learning entail a largely delimited or reduced embodied subjectivity—an embodied subjectivity that, while being impoverished, can serve to enhance teaching and learning if a balanced approach is taken.

Importantly, online teaching and learning cannot simply function as correlative to online banking or online shopping (mechanistically deployed)—Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy provides a guiding principle in this regard (Freire, 1970). Freire argues that liberation through education may only be achieved through dialogue and critical consciousness that allows those who are oppressed in society to mobilize their own agency and to challenge oppressive structures. Teaching (whether in an emergency online mode or not) must serve to challenge existing power structures and patterns of inequality—in other words, it must allow students to utilize their education for liberatory purposes. These forms of online teaching can therefore only ever be a supplement to the real, material, concrete character of students' lives in the Global South, and cannot merely inculcate an 'online banking' model of education.

Worryingly, the continuing utilization of the online model of education deployed during emergency remote teaching in post-pandemic times has the potential to leave

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[6]While this hybridization of the hermeneutic and embodied modes does not occur with old technology, we do find it in terms of virtual technologies.

unaddressed and to even exacerbate existing inequalities in Global South societies because it is structured exactly like the Freirean 'banking' model of education. Emergency remote teaching saw the limited utilization of networked learning technologies to distribute content to students, allowing students to complete low-level tasks to indicate their 'mastery' of said content in a manner that closely echoes Freire's critical discussion of an educational system that sees the teacher deposit knowledge into passive students. Such an approach is inadequate for providing students with cognitive tools to engage with the social and economic pressures in the Global South, a context which includes the problematic legacies of colonialism and resultant power differentials, as well as vast disparities and inequality in terms of income, wealth, opportunities, and access to basic services. The emergency remote teaching model, in increasingly becoming the status quo, stands in sharp contrast to a humanizing and liberating education that promotes dialogue, the co-creation of knowledge, and active participation.

While we do not deny the well-established possibilities of network learning to supplement and enhance our teaching and learning, our commitment to a phenomenological mode of analysis and a pedagogy driven by critical phenomenological principles compels us to prioritize student's nature as embodied beings in our considerations. Restrictive strategies, such as those deployed during emergency remote teaching, can only ever be a means to an end and never an end in themselves. As has been mentioned in the discussion of Ihde's views on embodied technologies and hermeneutic technologies, technological use provides sensory expansion in certain areas at the price of sensory diminution in other areas. We argue that anything that has the effect of truncating, diminishing, delimiting, or curtailing a student's embodied learning experience must be foregrounded in the consideration of teaching strategies. And, once identified, must then be mitigated. The experiential reduction that occurs in one aspect of networked learning must be offset by fully embodied educational experiences in another. Thus, we argue that the wholehearted embrace and conditioning of staff and students to these modes of learning poses an ongoing danger to higher educational practice in the Global South. The limited (and limiting) engagement with networked learning is not sufficient for the development of a sustainable higher educational model, and the embrace of technology in this regard, for neoliberal ends and only to the extent that was necessitated by the emergency situation of the pandemic, signals a need for caution.

Could the utilization of specific technologies in novel ways, against the background of a continuing educational strategy that echoes emergency remote teaching, solve the problems inherent in the promulgation of the 'banking' model of education? One suggestion is that the lecturer could utilize technologies in online teaching in a contra-capitalist fashion to 'reconnect' those once 'disconnected' students. A strategy to counter—to an extent—the alienation described in the foregoing section may be the abandonment of providing written feedback on essays to students, instead opting to deliver asynchronous video feedback on student essays. It is posited that video feedback may engender an enhancement of an interpersonal connection, rather than a further distancing, by providing face-to-face contact time for the student. Detailed feedback may be provided, a supportive tone of voice may

be used by the lecturer, supportive facial expressions may be exhibited, and sympathetic gestures may be made through such one-to-one feedback opportunities—thereby negating problematic forms of capitalist productive processes engendered by mass feedback systems and automated marking.

The use of such alternative forms of feedback in networked learning is not new. Rotheram (2007), for example, discusses the use of voice feedback for student assignments by using an MP3 recorder. Hall et al. (2016) indicate that video feedback is useful for addressing both cognitive and affective barriers in philosophy education, since markers can more easily explain and illustrate philosophical goals and methods using this technique. However, a recurrent issue as regards such small-scale technological interventions relate to quality assurance of a large group of students—are all students provided with the same beneficial experience, and is parity achieved when implemented at scale? Furthermore, while educational innovations may contribute to a more personable form of online education, we argue that they cannot overcome the broader problems instilled by an emergency remote teaching mindset and managerial strategy, and the capitalist agendas that underlie such an approach.

What is required is the critical and humane reconsideration of the function and effective deployment of networked learning as supportive for the educational systems of the Global South, with the goal of addressing societal inequalities and disparities through a liberatory pedagogy. Again, we emphasize here the experience of alienation by students, the reduction of learning materials to assembly line instructions, and the reduction of any educational experience which is not mitigated by a concurrent sensory payoff (i.e., there is no compensation for the increase in communicability by a concurrent contributory movement in terms of the sensory modality, for example). And furthermore, to have nothing but an experiential diminution, driven by a concern for profit and managerial convenience, presents the students to themselves as a partial learner, a truncated learner, a lobotomized learner. Contrast here Freire's recipient of the banking model of education, in which the student is being treated *as if* they were merely a dumb object, with the outcome of the use of virtual technology and network learning in this deliberately restricted fashion. The latter alters the students' experience of themselves, for in the virtual they appear to themselves as truncated selves, as dumb virtual objects. In a sense the situation is more dire than in Freire's banking model of education since the students' materiality of themselves and their encounters with the other students cannot provide an antidote or possibility for solidarity in this delimited structure. Thus, we conclude that emergency remote teaching must remain a supplement, and never a substitute, for networked learning activities in the Global South.

Conclusion

It has been argued that virtual space is found in neither the digital technology artefact alone, nor in the individual as embodied being alone. Rather, virtual space arises as that 'between' in the relationship between the digital technology artefact and the

embodied individual. By means of virtual space the individual's perception and behaviour are emergently altered, foundationally affecting the individual's sense-making of the self, the world and the other. Such emergent alteration of the individual's perception and behaviour, rather than being tangential to virtual space, must be essentially accounted for to allow a foundational, encompassing and multimodal description of the embodied individual's functioning and emplacedness in contemporary society. The virtual is typified by the ontological—it is an intersubjective and reified space.

Since reification makes up the virtual, our engagement with the virtual points us back to the possibility of a virtual alienation (indeed, for Marx, alienation is an intersubjective social relation). We argue that we find in the virtual not isolation, but rather a deficient mode of intersubjectivity. While the individual never becomes atomized, for such a deficient mode of intersubjectivity remains nevertheless a mode of intersubjectivity, we find that the individual functions as part of a deficient and distorted network.

A central problem here, which we have highlighted in investigating the alienation of students in online teaching, is that the contemporary capitalist system and the neoliberal university is mainlined in such forms of online education (particularly emergency remote online teaching). Enforcing a deficient teaching-learning strategy, which utilizes digital technologies, to address economic challenges and massification in higher education institutions of the Global South during the post-pandemic era is particularly fraught. While we do not consider all forms of online teaching problematic, we do suggest that careful notice should be taken of the interplay between student's experience of online alienation and neoliberal agendas in the university—especially since this relation has come to the forefront due to the complete online pivot caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. We suggest in conclusion certain teaching methods that may minimize or mitigate students' experience of alienation and which may therefore counter such capitalist agendas.

In conclusion, we would like to explicitly answer the question posed for this Section of the book, as regards the phenomena we investigate here, *What is revealed by a phenomenological investigation of emergency remote teaching (as a deficient form of networked learning)?* Since phenomenological description entails paying rigorous attention to subjective experiences as they are directly perceived and lived by individuals, a phenomenological analysis of emergency remote teaching brings to light the presence and interrelation of alienation and intersubjectivity. This in turn points to the phenomena of virtual reification (treating the virtual as concrete from the basis of our embodiment), and this deficient mode of networked subjectivity leads to the profound delimitation of student experience in this mode of teaching and learning. This has clear implications for how we should approach networked learning in future (especially during times of crisis) and draws attention to the necessity of taking account of the unique socio-economic and cultural contexts in which remote learning takes place. One cannot remain ignorant of political consideration, such as alienation and the intersection of capitalist logics in the operations of remote learning, since they are an integral feature of what it means to engage in the virtual. The overcoming, or mitigation, of such experiences of alienation online must be a central consideration.

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