

Distant yet near: text and *phronesis* in distance education

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Abstract

*The ethics of education is a complex issue, especially if students and teachers do not physically share the same space. The point of departure in this essay is that education is mediation that takes place as text. Text is a phenomenon that is material, an end in itself, and a mediative key to open up a space to learning. But is that communication? In distance and particularly in ICT-supported learning, teaching must be put in words, and the language as text thus used becomes mediating, evaluative, and a concept-creating tool. This essay will ask how language, with its mixed roles, can truly open up towards any experiential history, either of the student or the teacher. The question is based on the Greek assumption that motivation in learning arises in personal history and its practices. The Aristotelian notion of *phronesis* as the undisputed criterion of any belief, knowledge, and art will be taken here under study. The essay tries to argue that *phronesis* is needed but it must be redefined for recent democratic learning methods.*

Distance learning is both a concept and a practice that does not need any further legitimation than the overall democratization of education and the use of simple internet-based platforms that are easily achievable. The participants in distance learning, at both ends, become well aware of the shortcomings of communication by distance, but it seems that the benefits outweigh the defects. There are questions that are both historically and theoretically interesting and perhaps also import some new light to the change that has taken place in the attitude towards education in Western culture. The role of language has certainly changed, text has become more material than it was before, communication does not presume communion in a Christian sense, and the vertical hierarchy of expertise has crumbled into a horizontal line of subjective competences.

“Issue of any importance”

In the classical philosophy of education, teaching was a situation of touch and presence. Plato¹ noted on teaching that if the issue taught is of any importance, it should only be instructed under the eyes of a teacher. From Plato’s point of view, all education should have taken place in this mode, since there was really no sense at all to teach something of lesser importance.² Being near to the student gives the teacher a chance to see immediately the influence of the taught issue: the eyes, the facial expression, the corporeal gesture, the breath, and the voice give tangible information regarding the input of the education. It is actually a situation of touch even though reactions occur mostly through the other senses.

The longer the distance between teacher and student, the more possible are the chances of misunderstanding and sheer misconducting of understanding. The teacher simply cannot have an adequate touch of the student from

afar: the student becomes a number, a customer and at the same time he is lost in some alien space that cannot be controlled by the teacher. The teacher also thus has no access to the experience the education calls forth. Education is tied to experience: if something is experienced, it is learned as well. If the issue taught is not tied to experience, neither the teacher nor the student is able to evaluate its outcome because there is a lack of criterion. The criterion should be controlled in close touch range or else the fruit of the education may be bad apples.

Therefore it follows that the notion of *love* pops out so often in the philosophical texts on education: touch and the responsibility it rouses seemed to be not easily replaced by any other principle. Both touch and love are complex phenomena, full of meanings with no clear source. The complexity of education, here described as love and touch, originates in the singular development of a person. There are separately psychological, ideological, epistemological, and physical development that cannot be “managerialized” as one development: every feature proceeds under its own law.³

In education, the complexity of what happens seems devastating if one wants to control, or even just manage well, the procedure. Plato’s idea of the need for the teacher’s presence was seemingly an attempt to cope with this complexity. In the recent educational world the sheer amount of students per teacher makes it impossible to control the situation in the scale Plato required. This is even more so, when the students are present only via ICT technology, not seen, heard, nor touched. Today students are present only through highly controlled output, either in words, conceptual operations, or in images they themselves have selected, often well controlled for the purpose of communication thought to be expected by the teacher. No immediate reaction ever reaches the teacher.

This is no psychological topic but belongs to the main idea of education. Is education supposed to have an impact on the person of the student or perhaps only on an intellectual faculty thought teachable? The same question holds true also to issues taught: are the syllabi important enough, or aren’t they?

Today the student is left alone, in the sense Plato considered impossible if the issues taught are important. Either we do not agree with Plato, or we agree in that the issues taught in distance learning are not of the utmost importance and thus can be left to the random interpretations of the student. We naturally, as teachers, emphasize that we are present in the ICT space and willing to help if there is any problem in understanding. The main problem, however, is that neither we nor the student know if there is any real problem, since only a teacher that is bodily present to the student seems to be able to *see* and *hear* the problems.

Here I see a problematic area of recent pedagogical practices. We have separated the teaching and the issue to be taught. This happened already in the Modern Age but a more recent phenomenon is to *think* them separately, even to the extent that it seems unimportant who is teaching and who is the student. The teacher is displaceable and the student can be anyone who is *interested* enough. This *interest* becomes a new identity maker of a potential student, not the closeness to the teacher, although it was earlier quite common to identify oneself as being *someone’s* student. Nowadays the issues taught, i.e. issues learned, are considered of focal importance and even independent of the teacher’s person. This naturally promotes the medium of distance learning and diminishes the significance of the teacher’s person.

New space: language

In education language certainly has a crucial but complicated function. If present in the same physical space, teacher and student communicate through and in language, but they also use the non-specific auditory patterns

that human voice renders possible. Significant communication is born in multiple factors of exchange: a conceptual, imagined, eidetic, sensory, and powerful feeling of the shared reality. Thus language is only a part of the common space, never *the* space.

Language is supposed to have been born as a contact sport, people speaking to each other while they also see each other's movements, facial expression, and physical gestures, plus hear the sonic differences in speech. If all these characteristics are more or less absent, as in distance learning, language becomes the *main space* wherein the teaching and learning take place, and semantics become significant in a new way. To link a written word to an apt concept cannot be deduced from the text with the help of acoustic, visual, or intimate connotations but must be created from the extremely sparse context of the text given, be it even only a sentence or a single question.

When someone reads a book, the reader is dependent on both his language skills and the context a book constitutes. The reader may even be familiar with the writer's world, have read other books by the writer, or knows the eidetic context where the writer operates. The reader's experience may be adequate or inconsistent but certainly it is also self-correcting: the more one reads, the less astray he goes. If you know well Thomas Mann or Marcel Proust in advance, the next book you read from either of them will open up adequately enough from the start. A seasoned reader knows this and with a new writer he has patience and self-criticism that rescues him from primitive misconceptions.

If the teacher is absent or the larger context of a book is not at the reader's disposal, random interpretations during the reading become more probable. If so, we may follow Plato's statement and say that only issues that are not really important or subtle can be introduced through text. Thus such issues can be left entirely unpublished since they are not of vital importance to anyone. Or the contrary in the consumerist society: only entertainment is publishable, thus far.

In distance learning, for the student the situation is never as good as it should be since he easily goes astray if the text includes even one concept, one image, one symbol, or one icon that becomes understood in a way contrary to the writer's idea. Plato seemed to be well aware of such misconductings: just one single misunderstanding may pollute the whole reading. Therefore anything worth knowing should not be written down and become predisposed to the uninformed reader's random interpretations. Only the presence of the teacher assures the right understanding, since the teacher sees and hears (i.e. sensorily controls) the accuracy of understanding in the student's voice and physical expression (or, physical appearance). In modern society the concern about the student's physical appearance seems hyperbolic but in the tradition of education it makes certain sense.

In distance learning the theme modules, particularly if they are created for this purpose only, give less context than a book but more than a sentence. Teaching modules are quite often a short plunge into a theme that can be understood as part of the whole course; the whole course is in a student's use either immediately or in the final stage of the course. Be it as it may, the modules are textual and may open up to sources elsewhere, easily reachable (e.g. in the internet) but not present in the module. This indicates that in many cases distance learning is construed of textual fragments that are not entirely contextualized by the teacher and thus left to become understood by the student mainly proportional to his life-world, i.e. his experiences, knowledge, feelings, emotions, prejudices, and his skill to judge, conclude and value issues available to be winnowed.

These dispositions together have created, without much pedagogical scrutiny, a new paradigm of learning and teaching. The hierarchic order of knowledge, i.e. teachers who know and students who trust the teachers' judgement, is gone. The *interest* is the guiding facilitator for a student; the teachers, more or less, follow the

interest they find articulated in course evaluations, in applications to study programmes, and in generic talk that deals with training, instruction and pedagogy. The articulated interest is a postfactual phenomenon that is construed as a identifiable entity only after the factual learning; the interest reveals the factual meeting in language. Thus the quality of the teaching only becomes visible when it cannot be enhanced anymore.

Language, rhetorics, and logic: why do we trust language?

Rhetorics as a discipline may facilitate understanding when one needs constitutive elements that act as both reason and aim in learning. In classical rhetorics, e.g. in the 12th century, the role of language was not taken as a neutral and unproblematic mediator but as a half historical, half logical construction that mediates anything only so far as its users understand the discontinuous sources wherefrom its meanings arise. The discontinuity is within the user: he who writes down his ideas is dependent on his own sources of meanings which may include experiences, knowledge, misconceptions, mores, ideology, and criteria that were taught to him while he is instructed in rhetorics and logics.⁴ The second stage is the discontinuity of the reader, whose meaning building is equally multilayered in sources. Exactly such a situation inspired William of Soissons (1027-1076) to plan a device that should assist a logician to sort out the logical meanings of the sentences from those that only refer to a reader's subjective history.⁵ He introduced the idea of combinatorics within rhetorics that was later developed by Ramon Llul (1232-1315) in his *Ars Brevis & Ars Magna* (1305) and Georg Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716) in his more formal combinatorics⁶. Beginning with Adam of Balsham's virtuously uncanny text of kitchen utensils⁷ this "classification" of the world's parts became one of the least known specialities in early medieval logic and rhetorics; it, however, greatly inspired later writers who find mediation of ideas with the help of words more difficult than was normally accepted in rhetorics.⁸

From a rhetorical viewpoint anything expressed in words follows a complex procedure: language gives contours to ideas and these contours are the sole key to someone who tries to understand what was meant by the words. Habit, knowledge, context, and expectations, naturally, bring their contribution to the understanding but there is actually no way to decipher words into ideas. Putting ideas into words is a complex project where structures that are significant to the writer quite certainly dissipate before the moment of interpretation by the reader. Like Aristotle, the medieval logicians tried to solve this puzzle by bringing to light the procedures of thinking, reasoning, and naming. But like their master, the medieval logicians clearly found out how tricky the event was upon which everyday intellectual activity is based.

Pedagogically the problem around language was disregarded mainly with reference to Plato and his assertion that physical presence of the teacher is needed if anything worth learning is at stake. Utopian writers and pedagogical reformators all assume that the teacher is there, in person. Profound mistrust in the written word follows all the thinkers, through the centuries, if they ponder what learning acquires. Half theological (God's word must be in Latin and thus interpreted in person), half pedagogical, this mistrust also interprets well the birth of school: the Enlightenment idea of school was laid on the synchronous presence of teacher and students. Even in the Encyclopedia the articles were written in a special style that should make the ideas easily understandable, and rhetorical assessments were made just to ensure the simplicity of the message.⁹

If the problem around language was ever thought to have been solved during the history of rhetorics (or any other parts of Liberal Arts), the practice to civilize the masses would certainly have been solved quite differently

to how it was done. The presence of the teacher would have been discharged in an earlier stage and the written word might have become the focus of learning.

Proof of interpretation skulks in experience

In the medieval age another Aristotelian concept also proved useful. Proof by practice, i.e. *phronesis*¹⁰, gained various interpretations. *Phronesis* meant in Adam of Balsham the *principle* of practical test needed, namely, that if something was understood, probed, implemented, and again restored as an explanation that bears enough similarities with the starting point, it may have epistemological value. More often, however, something understood, probed, implemented and explained became something entirely new, alien to the starting point and thus properly mis-understood. Interpretation is man's faculty, so *phronesis* requires the comprehension and experience that makes man mature enough to evaluate ideas he acquires, whether they appear in practice or in written tongue.

Although *phronesis* is an important concept in European intellectual history its deeper message became blurred when ethical proof was disentangled from epistemological value: as Adam did¹¹, and later Modernity, *phronesis* was taken as solely an *ethical* principle that requires change and practical implementation in life but does not contribute to the interpretation of word. Aristotle, however, started with words, such as "happiness" and "good life"¹²; he stated that within words people may agree on the meaning of life but the conceptual and thus practical significance stays undifferentiated. Thus the ideas are not articulated well enough to be identified as they should if people wish to find agreement in them. In the case that a philosopher teaches "good life", more is needed than naming life good. Both naming and the idea must be understood, proven, and unified in someone's mind where experience and reason already has given the criteria that are needed for such a unification, i.e. *phronetical* understanding.

No idea comes to light out of nothing; no word signifies automatically, out of its own force. *Phronetical* understanding connects ideas (thought, comprehension) and words (language as used) with the experienced life-world of man, thus producing a heteronomic discipline that no one is able to interpret entirely. Ideal, generic historical, and experiential all have separate ontological status which causes both ethical and epistemological problems.

No hermeneutics for today

The pedagogical influence of this age-old discourse is immense. Since their Greek ancestors European intellectuals have tried to depict what happens when someone is exposed to knowledge *from without*: in words, texts, other people's stories, anything but experienced by oneself. Mediated knowledge is always tied to words (or other symbols) that are a part of language (or other symbol system). You and me may belong to the same tradition of tongue but still are not able to decipher one another's thoughts expressed in that tongue. The solution is discussion, a dialogue at its best, but what to do when the other is not physically present? In spite of a long tradition that calls for the physical presence of all parts of communication, we are now in the situation that almost every discussion happens without the physical presence of *anyone*, only on the platform of language, as if it were automous enough to execute *phronesis* by itself.

ICT-bound teaching and learning take place in a space that earlier in the tradition was purposefully avoided and claimed to be unfavourable for learning. Lack of simultaneous physical presence of teacher and student dismantles the language of its non-semantic characteristics that control the meaning building for a given moment. No one, however, can seriously claim that learning would be impossible in such a situation. The teacher may have less (or no) chance to check the understanding of the taught issues in the student's mind but learning itself happens in a way that earlier was unthinkable: whatever the teacher intends with his words, the meaning building in the student's mind is the sole criterion of a pedagogical outcome. The hierarchy, once the most important pedagogical tool, does not count at all any more.

At the same time the attitude toward the use of language has also changed. During the 20th century not only hermeneutical philosophers tried to standardize (or, normalize) the communication: first the new era after the First World War and then the political catastrophes of totalitarian states pressed the intelligentsia for a new theory of communication where all actors of society would be heard, listened to and included in any communion.¹³ Such a hermeneutical programme was anachronistic since its sources and general attitude originated in the 12th century. Political need, however, accentuated the communion of people and physical presence, thus immediate influence, of everybody in any communicative situation. It was a remote but distorted picture of Athenian democracy. The social practice was against this atopia¹⁴ but the wish-talk of philosophers was insistent. When the ICT world offered a new platform for communication, no clear-cut analysis was ever made to find out how language really "works" in a new situation where no one is present. Evidently the 20th century hermeneutics was outmoded all at once, just by a new practice.

One writer was an exception, and he tried to make evident what was at stake: Jacques Derrida was against the wish-talk about communion between people; he focused on the (written) language as a mediative force that does not need the physical presence of anyone but only the expression *as* language. When writing on Plato¹⁵, Derrida saw the difference between teaching and initiating as described by Plato. Derrida emphasized language as the carrier of the former, love as the space of the latter. Thus Derrida entirely disavowed the traditional, i.e. cultural and historical, conditions given to pedagogy.

In his dialogue with John D. Caputo, Derrida, however, introduces the principle of probe by practice, in a sense, the *phronesis*.¹⁶ "A written word" is valid only so far as a human being is able to test it, even until tears are falling, either in a moral or in physiological sense. No written text, ultimately, signifies anything if the language used does not touch the experienced life-world of man, and precisely the one present. How it touches the life-world remains unsolved but here the most basic assumption about the complexity of the world may give a hint: if two systems, here the language, or more exactly the text, and the experienced life-world, are parallel and interdependent, they share significant agents, e.g. meaning building processes. Processes that identify the one are not present in the other, at least not as structures to be identified: processes dissipate instantly when seen from the other point of view. But ontologically the meaning building processes are the same; they originate both in the world and in the mind of those present in the world. We call it "experience" in short, although the whole idea is gone missing if we only acquiesce in the short version.

In a new key

In distance learning the distance is taken as an unimportant factor. Not the physical distance but the experience of trust, acceptance, and thus shared interest in issues taught draw teacher and student nearer to each other even

if the real distance is beyond measuring. Suffice it to say that the Aristotelian notion of *phronesis* is still valid in assessing the education: anything learned should be tried in the reality of the learner to become a valid part of his world. *Phronesis* is a probe that both uncovers the criteria the learner is used to in his learning and arranges the known into the hierarchy of one's knowledge, either as an important and significative feature or dissipative structural part that will not really hold.

In distance learning pedagogy is to be seen in a new key. The concept used traditionally in education may not properly describe the processes of planning the teaching, making the teaching available technically and conceptually, creating the space where learning is possible (platforms and programs), and being present in the word, i.e. how the student builds up the meanings from the texts he confronts. The psychological concepts that originate in the physical presence of agents in learning and the hermeneutical concepts that create an ideal space of presence in communion within the written word do not properly picture the recent state of affairs. We do not have to desert the epistemologically important conditions described as *understanding* and *phronesis* but evidently their status must be thought over.

Understanding and *phronesis* emerge from language. In Modern times such emergence was mainly understood either psychologically or logically¹⁷; the meanings of language were historical and cultural or, the sheer being of language was built up on the hypothesis of its being meaning-laden. None of these assumptions are sufficient when someone is alone, without initiation¹⁸, in front of a text. The text may appear as an image, an icon, a puzzle to be solved, or a cryptogram, but the student knows that there is something for him to decipher, at any rate. He may even sense that the absent teacher has tried to construe the text in an intelligible mode: the student expects some traces of pedagogical skill. All this, however, does not help the student who has no other source than the text: from the text there should arise the understanding and a chance to probe its meanings through practice.

The phenomenon abridged as an "experience" comes very near to language when a student is left alone with text. He may or may not have experience with the topic of the text in advance; neither his teacher nor he himself can be sure whether he has or not. Language becomes experience since the terms, names, relations and the image it generates are the context where both understanding and *phronesis* become possible. The student deciphers the text as if were a part of his life-world.

The teacher, at the other end of the process, must be well aware of such a dis-contextualization of his writings. As in Plato, he knows all the problems that come into being due to the distance, in his case due to the mediator of ICT. He is not in control of meaning building, nor responsible for the understanding of the text or the *phronesis* that either gives the proof for interpretation or entirely goes astray. The teacher, however, places trust in the language the way that was not proper some, say, fifty years ago: he knows that whatever the student understands and however the student implements his practice as a method of *phronesis*, the end-product will be meaningful although it may be unexpected by the teacher, inadequate to the teacher's intentions, and not considered proper to the presumed outcomes of the course in question.

In classical pedagogy such a sentence would be blasphemous. In recent times, however, the democracy of learning has widened the domain of "good learning" into areas that are outside of benefit, truth, utility, profit, hierarchy of knowledge, and traditional political values. *Phronesis*, as a criterion by practice, is left to its sole subject, to the student himself, and others are valid to say neither beforehand nor afterwards whether the subject really "knew". We have chosen the horizontal reference instead of vertical hierarchy: the multiform life-world of people is a more significant source of learning than the discipline built upon the knowledge hierarchy. Thus

we have left the control of the world to itself since meaning building takes place in man's mind and that appears unpredictable to the extent of complexity.

¹ Plato 344bd. *Seventh letter*, written about 360BC.

² Ibid. 343.

³ Classic descriptions of this procedure can be found e.g. in Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Montessori, and Freire. Jean-Jacques Rousseau 1762. *Émile, ou De l'éducation*; Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi. 1879. *Meine Nachforschungen über den Gang der Natur in der Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts*; Maria Montessori. 1938. *Il segreto dell'infanzia*; Paulo Freire. 1970. *Pedagogia do oprimido*.

⁴ As was beautifully described by Abelard in his *Monita ad Astralabium*. Migne, Patrologia Latina Vol. 178, coll. 1759-1766.

⁵ Only second-hand knowledge is at hand: John of Salisbury, chapter 28 in his *Metalogicon*. Ed. Webb. 1929. Oxford, describes William's ideas.

⁶ The first contemporary monograph that introduced Leibniz's ideas into recent logic was written by Raili Kauppi. 1960. *Über die Leibnizsche Logik mit besonderer Berücksichtigung des Problems der Intension und Extension*. Acta Philosophica Fennica XII. Helsinki. She largely drew from unpublished manuscripts in the Hannover Archive.

⁷ Adam of Balsham, *De utensilibus* (written approx. 1134), edited by F. Alessio. 1965. 'La filosofia e le "artes mechnicae" nel secolo XII', *Studi Medievali* 3, ser. 6, 71-155.

⁸ E.g. my research on Adam of Balsham and his contemporaries, Varto 1989. *Formal and philosophical in early medieval logic*. Tampere: University of Tampere.

⁹ As was stated in the article "Encyclopédie" by Denis Diderot. 1755. *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, vol. 5. Paris.

¹⁰ Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics* 1140ss.

¹¹ See in Adam of Balsham (1132), *Ars disserendi*. Ed. Minio-Paluello, Roma (1956).

¹² Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics* 1095a.

¹³ I refer mainly to Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Jürgen Habermas and the writers who demanded change in communication in order to avoid a new Auschwitz.

¹⁴ Understood as a society which does not have territorial borders, thus no history to seal the meanings one gives to communicative agents.

¹⁵ Jacques Derrida. 1972. *La dissémination*. Paris: Seuil.

¹⁶ The dialogue gave birth to a book by Caputo, see John D. Caputo. 1997. *The prayers and tears of Jacques Derrida*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, and a collection of articles where also Jean-Luc Marion is on the edge of word, see *God, the gift, and postmodernism*. 1999. Ed. By Caputo and Scanlon. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

¹⁷ Both are well described in Lotze's and Mill's Texts; see Lotze. 1843. *Logik*, and Mill. 1843. *System of logic*.

¹⁸ Initiation belongs to the armature of hermeneutics; see Wilhelm von Humboldt. 1822. *Über die Entstehung der grammatischen Formen und ihren Einfluss auf die Ideenentwicklung*, and Friedrich Schleiermacher. 1997. *Hermeneutik und Kritik: mit einem Anhang sprachphilosophischer Texte*. Ed. M. Frank. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.