

Networked learning in the time of pandemic: Intersubjectivity and alienation

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Abstract

Digital networking technologies have allowed lecturers and students to remain connected while being physically isolated during global lockdowns resultant from the COVID-19 pandemic. We argue that the increased utilization of online spaces for teaching and learning during the time of isolation has brought the question of intersubjectivity and alienation in cyberspace to the forefront.

As part of an ongoing phenomenological analysis of the virtual, we survey the experiences of networked learning reported by a group of South African university students in their end of course surveys. We track particularly their experience of alienation, their capacity to engage with material in the online environment, and their awareness of self as a learner.

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. In terms of the virtual, a redeployment of Merleau-Pontian thought (and particularly his concept of the flesh) reveals that the body-subject and digital technology artefact are co-implicit in the generation of the virtual. The virtual serves as a point of networked intersubjectivity that concretely expands and constrains human experience and behaviour.

Furthermore, 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 leads us to an alienated networked intersubjectivity, whereby all potentialities are founded in ordered and carefully arranged systems that promulgate pragmatic and capitalist logics.

We investigate how reification makes up the virtual, and how our engagement with the virtual points us back to the nature of alienation (indeed, for Marx, alienation is an intersubjective social relation). We find in the virtual therefore not isolation, but rather a deficient mode of intersubjectivity. While the individual never becomes atomized, for even in the virtual 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. We suggest in conclusion certain teaching methods that may minimize or mitigate students' experience of alienation.

Keywords

Intersubjectivity, Alienation, Merleau-Ponty, Pandemic, Online Pivot, Video Feedback,

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic represents a continuing crucible for teaching and learning in higher education institutions – especially those institutions forced into so-called 'emergency remote teaching'. While digital networking technologies have 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 regard has not been unproblematic. Students have reported negative effects upon their capacity to engage with learning material and an altered awareness of themselves as learners. Furthermore, both students and lecturers report feeling distanced from each other.

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 conduct online teaching and learning. Firstly, such reported experiences suggest that we need to consider how individuals encounter each other in virtual space - therefore, the question arises, what conclusion can we learn concerning intersubjectivity in cyberspace in the

current context of pandemic-necessitated online teaching and learning? 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?

As part of an ongoing phenomenological analysis of the virtual, we survey the experiences of networked learning reported by a group of South African university students in their end of course surveys and through informal feedback provided to lecturers. We track particularly their 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 study we make use of phenomenological perspectives to explicate student and lecturer experiences of online teaching and learning. A challenge as regards the use of phenomenology in describing the virtual in this context is represented by the critical perspective that asks whether this school of thought in general, and particularly its accounts of embodiment and corporality, have become more and more marginal exactly due to the predominance of virtual engagement in contemporary societies.

Sceptics claim that the early phenomenologists, such as Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, could not have foreseen existing forms of digital communication technologies, and that contemporary applications of canonical phenomenological works are therefore archaic in their engagement with technological questions. It is postulated that modern technologies are breaking down and altering old concepts of bodily presence, often displacing phenomenological arguments for arguments that favour disembodied accounts. So, for example, Han (2013) argues that "the digital medium divests communication of all tactility and corporeality." Similarly, the problematic nature of concepts such as 'presence' in the computer age had already led Marvin Minsky to, in 1980, coin the term 'telepresence' as alternative to accounts of physicality in interpersonal communication (Minsky, 1980). See also Norm Friesen's discussion on telepresence and tele-absence (2014).

While these points of criticism seem to be potent at the offset, we find that (as inherent response to such criticism) it is exactly phenomenological concepts are increasingly being adopted *from* phenomenology *into* other technical fields. An example of this is found in Artificial Intelligence studies, a field which has taken questions of embodiment and corporality seriously since the 1980s, as Hubert Dreyfus highlights (Dreyfus, 2001: 9-24). Increasingly, we have seen such concepts begin to play a crucial role in the programming of AI systems in the present day (Floridi, 2020). Indeed, phenomenological concepts are more likely to see expansion rather than complete revision in the face of continuing technological development.

In this paper we argue that intersubjectivity – a canonical phenomenological concept – presents a similar 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 particularly well 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).

The Husserlian concept of intersubjectivity is advanced and developed by Merleau-Ponty in *The Philosopher and his Shadow* (1964) through his description of intercorporeality – famously illustrated by his description of mutual touch in 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: 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 begs the question as to how such intercorporeality may be understood to figure into digital screen-based communication technologies. How do we recognise such intercorporeality when we as lecturers are presenting an online class using Zoom, for example? When presenting a university course online there is no physical presence, for indeed the technology utilized serves to connect individuals over distances while keeping them physically isolated (a prudent course of action due to the infectivity of Covid-19, and as is 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 corporeality has moved beyond the realm of shaking hands. Rather, the shaking of hands during the pandemic is highly discouraged.

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, 1962: 185f).

Gestures are not just isolated movements, in other words, but rather a part of a community of flow wherein 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 Luff (1991) describe the role of gestures in their insightful 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: 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. 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: vii).¹ It is through phenomenological description that one "[re-achieves] a direct and primitive contact with the world" (Merleau-Ponty, 2002: 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 body (Merleau-Ponty, 2002: 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: 67, Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 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: 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: 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 of a perceptual attitude that will lead to the sensible thing's disclosure. The perceiving individual represents the pre-reflective 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: 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: 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 emergent characteristic of this circuit between body-subject and digital artefact. The

¹ Merleau-Ponty set out to emplace the origin of both the individual, perception and the natural theoretical attitude in embodiment following Husserl's inquiry into the life-world (*Lebenswelt*) as the predicative sphere of 'praxis' (Carr, 1967: 373, 374). Merleau-Ponty took up the life-world, or in his nomenclature, the lived world (*monde vécu*), as the intentional object of experience, while perception was the activity through which this object is constituted by the embodied individual (De Waelhens, 1951: 92). Perception occurs not as an isolated psychological activity 'in' the world; perception is for Merleau-Ponty the Husserlian 'origin' of the world, that towards which one is turned in experience.

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. We therefore 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 *n*th degree through continual engagement with a variety of different digital technological artefacts.

Virtuality is conceptually more broad than the individual's engagement with a single digital technology artefact because virtual space is generated in the encounter of the individual with more than a single digital technology artefact over a 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, i.e. 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 that promulgate pragmatic and capitalist logics. Merleau-Ponty recognizes the political aspects 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: 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: 281).

Adorno's statement suggests alienation along the same practical lines that Merleau-Ponty sketches in 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 (or provided by capitalism).

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 (Swier & Du Toit, 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 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 Swier & Du Toit, 2021).² 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 involvement is stripped of everything other than the most reproducible elements. Lecturers become little more than 'content parrots'.³ 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

² Importantly, this critique relates mainly to the so-called 'emergency online teaching' that has popped up in various universities as a result of the unexpected onset of the current pandemic.

³ 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).

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 as 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 (Swier & Du Toit, 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 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.

Video feedback

We next consider a strategy to counter – to an extent – the alienation described in the foregoing section. A relatively novel strategy that has been employed by Swier in his courses has been the abandonment of providing written feedback on essays to students, instead opting to deliver asynchronous video feedback on all undergraduate essays (for a first year course). Based on his end of course analysis, Swier concluded that student response to the video feedback was incredibly positive – fantastically so. The overwhelmingly positive student response to a relatively novel form of feedback indicates that, through utilizing technologies in online teaching in contra-capitalist fashion, the lecturer may succeed in 'reconnecting' those once 'disconnecting' students.

We posit that video feedback engenders an enhancement of an interpersonal connection, rather than a further distancing. While the student often feels neglected during online classes (and also in large groups), video feedback on essays allows face-to-face contact time with the students: Detailed feedback may be provided, a supportive tone of voice may be used by the lecturer, supportive facial expressions may be seen, and sympathetic gestures may be made through such one-to-one feedback opportunities. The true importance of video feedback lies in the fact that it is a technique that employs various forms of technological media, while negating problematic forms of capitalist productive processes engendered by mass feedback systems and automated marking.

Naturally, the allotment of video feedback time by the lecturer is supplemented by course lectures, and therefore students are provided with the chance to both watch class lectures and receive personal interaction. Video feedback engenders a sense of community, and the personalized feedback provided to the student allows them to see the lecture anew because the lecturer is talking closely to, and dealing specifically with, their own work in a manner that may have been unfeasible in in-person contact sessions and traditional lecturer-student setups.

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. 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.

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