

The Possibility of Life in the Index: A Phenomenological Search in Online Zoom Teaching

Ying Ma

E-mail: ying.ma2@kpu.ca

Received February 2024

Accepted for publication February 2024

Published May 2024

Abstract

The pandemic has resulted in unprecedented school shutdowns all around the world. Teaching was, in a very abrupt way, transitioned to online settings; however, it often neglects the fundamental questions including what technology does to our teaching. Insufficient research has been conducted on teachers' lived experiences of online teaching in the search for renewed meanings and alternative possibilities. I attempt to explore my own online teaching experiences with the phenomenological lens, investigating the possibility of subjective presence in my story of teaching via Zoom to work from within. I hope to tap into the experiential ground of online teaching. The lingering voices, the faces of others, a multiplicity of thoughts and emotions all animate the teaching and learning space of Zoom. However, filtered through the screen, our humanity still grows and thrives in the technologized sphere.

Keywords: *Phenomenology; teaching via Zoom; subjective presence*

I am behind the screen

I look at the screen

I am stared by the screen

I disappear into the screen

I become the screen

If only the Wifi were always good

Zoom, YouTube, Google,

I slide, type and click

*to the next slide, next picture, next video, next
page*

*a virtual society is taking its shape in front of me,
for me, in me,*

and in us, for tomorrow

*Vibrating sympathetically with my cell phone,
fingers swiftly dancing on the keyboard*

Alas

*Who was I? Who am I? Where am I? Who am I
becoming?*

I am thinking, I am asking, I am imagining

*Who is behind the screen? What is filtered by the
screen? What is enabled by the screen?*

What is left despite the screen?

Is it a web that I have to cling to?

*Is it a web that I could pull and poke and dance
on?*

*I hear not only my own echoes from the screen
but listen to the voices from the other
look at different faces
see their smiles back to me
even on the screen
the possibility of life in the indexical traces
the subjective presence
is still here and there*

In summer term of 2021 I was teaching an online course, EDST 404 Ethics and Teaching, to 30 students in the Bachelor of Education program at the University of British Columbia (UBC). With the pandemic situation still evolving, online teaching had been adopted by UBC and most post-secondary institutions in Canada since March 2020. My students told me that they had all the B.Ed. courses via Zoom. The opening little poem captures a snapshot of my own lived experience of online Zoom teaching in 2021. It might resonate with many teachers who taught online during/post the pandemic: the lingering voices out of laptops, the profound faces of students appearing on the screen, the wondering about “*Who was I? Who am I? Where am I? Who am I becoming?*” in the face of this virtual community.

This is the third year since COVID-19 hit the globe. During the pandemic, there were numerous unprecedented school shutdowns all around the world. Teaching was, in a very abrupt way, transitioned to online settings. Education has changed dramatically with the distinctive rise of e-learning, whereby teaching was undertaken remotely and on digital platforms (Li & Lalani, 2020). Even as the pandemic subsides, online courses and meetings continue to be prevalent.

There is a diverse range of attitudes towards online teaching. On one end of the spectrum, online teaching is believed to be as good as and even better than those face-to-face instructions (Allen & Seaman, 2012). There are enthusiasms around how-to questions embedded in the belief that technology is an inevitable solution, if not a panacea, to the educational and teaching “problems” in today’s schools and post-secondary institutions, especially exacerbated by the pandemic situation. How-to questions have been a central concern in research on and discussion around online teaching. To enhance the benefits of online learning, research has been done on how to improve instructional strategies that can help implement online teaching (Mahmood, 2021) and how to engage student interest and engagement in their online courses (Lai, 2021). In brief, literature around online teaching, informed with the how-to questions, has been primarily focused on its instrumental design for teachers to deliver their teaching efficiently, fantasizing “education unbounded by material and temporal constraints....promising access to teaching, learning, and education regardless of where students are located or which time zone they inhabit” (Bayne et al., 2020, p. 13). On the other end of the spectrum, however, we could detect that there is an automatic taken-for-granted belief that online teaching is inferior to in-person teaching and a critique of online teaching (Kessler & Wall, 2016). Kessler and Wall (2016) believe that online teaching keeps moving instruction “toward approaches that focus on standardization and efficiency concerns, alongside learning goals” (p. 2). Techno-instrumentalism drives visions of a future defined by the values of corporate interest, efficiency, and productivity, rarely taking into account the values and experience of teachers and students themselves (Bayne et al., 2020, p. xvii).

It seems that the educational system today, in this post-pandemic era, desires more advanced technology to fix the immediate issues. This claim could be supported by increased investment in educational technology companies to develop online learning platforms, virtual classrooms and digital delivery systems (Sprenger & Schwaninger, 2021). Internationally, there is a growing interest in incorporating technology into education across disciplines (Perifanou, Tzafilkou, & Economides, 2023; Viberg, Grönlund, & Andersson, 2023). This often neglects the fundamental questions including, "What is technology? "And What does it do to us?" (Grant, 1969; Pinar, 2013). Technologized education often monitors and supervises, colonizing and erasing the inner sacred space of each particular human subject. The consequences of data colonialism on individual freedom and autonomy are serious:

Whereas specific human subjects face danger from the new social hierarchies that are being built through managing extracted data, all human subjects face a threat to the minimal integrity of the self from data colonialism's reliance on ever expanding mechanisms of surveillance and tracking (Couldry & Mejias, 2019, p. 191).

Sherry Turkle (2011), more than a decade ago, expressed concerns about the way technology is changing the way we relate to one another. She argues that the constant connectivity and presence of technology can hinder authentic human connections and empathy. Ursula Franklin (2014) shares similar worries with Turkle, and suggests that the uncontrolled proliferation of technology is without adequate consideration of its ethical and social implications. As a teacher I wonder, when teaching is orientated around the market, regulated by standardized

models and procedures, and particularly filtered by the online tools in today's context, then what will remain? The concerns regarding the encroachment of technology into every facet of human existence are articulately elucidated by the aforementioned scholars. Nevertheless, one may also ponder whether any avenue exists for evading this seemingly inexorable technological intrusion, or if there is even a margin within the digital realm for the genuine lived experiences of individuals to thrive and flourish. Seldomly, research has been conducted on teachers' lived experiences of online teaching in the search for renewed meanings and alternative possibilities. Wong (2022), as it has rarely happened, in her book chapter in the newly published edited book *Lingering with the Works of Ted. T. Aoki*, observes student endeavours and experiences of online learning in a more balanced view, a "third option." She suggests:

...students were neither "boosters" nor "knockers" of technology (Aoki, 1993/2005, p. 294); sidestepping the limiting perspective of being for or against technology, these adolescents suggest a *third option*: A mixture and balance of both to generate understanding. The students' shift from miscommunication to a mutual understanding is afforded by opening themselves to a blended practice and way of interacting (p. 118).

I am wondering if attending to my lived experiences of teaching via Zoom can speak to a renewed understanding. I am orienting to my own lived practice, anecdotally and autobiographically (Pinar, 2021), in teaching with "a phenomenological description of [the] present situation, ... historical, social, physical life-world" (Grumet, 2015, p. 43). Phenomenology, as "the study (*logos*) of phenomena (appearances or what

gives or shows itself in experience or consciousness)" (van Manen, 2014, p. 60), helps me dive into "lived-through experience ... [as] the bearer of meaning" (van Manen, 2014, p. 65). With a lens of phenomenology (van Manen, 2014; Pinar & Grumet, 2015), I am hoping to investigate the "third option" to "live with an intimate enemy" (Couldry & Mejias, 2019, p. 204) of technology and search for the possibility of life, the subjective presence in the index (Pinar, 2021) as a teacher through my lived experience of teaching via Zoom, a very prevalent form of online teaching currently. The index can be often understood as an indicator, a sign of something. What Pinar implies is that whether human subjectivity can be still glimpsed or manifested through/despite the screen. Pinar (2023) is cautious that "embodied educational experience is eclipsed by staring at the screens of devices, screens into which children and teachers can disappear" (p. 140). I am aware of the corrosion of embodied experience in Zoom, while I am curious whether there could be anything left or something else emerging in my Zoom teaching. I would engage myself with/in cyberspace for possible moments of subjective emergence despite the screens.

Phenomenology advocates for a kind of special attitude that "aims to establish access to the primordialities of life as it is lived and experienced from moment to moment" (van Manen, 2014, p. 61). Phenomenological inquiry hopes to reveal or unconceal what is hidden and buried over, "[delving] deeper, or better, to explore the lived experiences more concretely" (van Manen, 2014, p. 66). With a "primacy of practice" (van Manen, 2014, p. 67), phenomenology encourages us "to describe ... experience in the world without distorting it, to contain it without reducing it, to

analyze it without atomizing it" (Grumet, 2015, p. 41).

I attempt to investigate the possibility of subjective presence in my story of teaching via Zoom to "work from within" (Pinar, 1972). I hope to note the subjective presence I am referring to here is always, already complicated by the intersubjective presence and experience, as just the personal is always, already social, political and cultural (Pinar, 2004). I hope to tap into the experiential ground of online teaching, "thriving on a certain irrevocable tension between what is unique and what is shared, between immanent and transcendent meaning, and between the reflective and the pre-reflective spheres of lifeworld" (van Manen, 2014, p. 68). Educational experiences are not solely captured by a predetermined curriculum or the preparedness of the student, but they are also influenced by each unique situation. As Grumet (2015) points out, not only does the running of the course of the planned curriculum or the readiness of the runner matter, but also "the experience of running of one particular runner, on one particular track, on one particular day, in one particular wind" (p. 47). My lived experiences are to generate a genuine personal twist to bring the theories, models and templates "back to the rough ground" (Dunne, 1993), concretizing the abstract and the theoretical.

I am curious, how do I live through/in/with my online teaching experiences? How do the meanings of the online teaching experience arise? In these quests, I am becoming more "aware of the phenomenal phenomenality of a phenomenon" (van Manen, 2014, p. 31). My concerns and wonders are about not only what is contained, suspended, mediated, hidden, but also what is unveiled to us as truths in my lived

experience of online teaching via Zoom, to search and re-search for the possibilities of life simultaneously contained and enabled by the screen, in the index.

In both a cautious and hopeful way, Pinar (2021) proposes that subjective presence is still possible, "it is imagistic and auditory, contained within the screen, confined to the Cloud, but ... an 'indexical trace of the real'" (p. 146). Pinar continues to cautiously conclude that "simulations of subjective presence through dialogical encounter remain possible, if threaded through the software from which Zoom profits" (p. 147). What especially intrigues me is that the index seems to sustain "a less clear-cut relation to its object compared with "icon" or "symbol" (Doane, 2007). Doane observes a dialectic tension in the language of the index:

The index seems to harbour a fullness, an excessiveness of detail that is always supplemental to meaning or intention. Yet, the index as *deixis* implies an emptiness, a hollowness that can only be filled in specific, contingent, always mutating situations. It is this dialectic of the empty and the full that lends the index an eeriness and uncanniness (p. 2).

The emptiness of the index, in Doane's terms, means neither a void nor a nothingness. Behind the seemingly empty indexical traces, there is a generative space with a touch of uncanniness. Index could be understood as the digital space that allows for human beings to gather and relate to one another and hence the indexical traces are endowed with humane meanings. Teachers listen to students who make their subjective appearance in Zoom when they voice their ideas, show their faces, share their opinions and raise their questions. A multiplicity of voices animate the

virtual classrooms, the faces of each one of us are amplified as they take over each other's screen. The spatial differences, the temporal tension between separation and connection, the dynamics of students remaining a certain degree of anonymity and appearing solo on the screen all add to the complex layers of being online. "Indexical traces of the real" (Pinar, 2021), in its very nuanced and generativeness, may allow for the presence of human subjectivity in the gathering and connecting cyber space, even on the constrained screen.

Lingering Sounds

Carrying my teacup to the study room a couple of minutes before the session, I posed myself on the wooden chair with red leather back, more straightly than usual. The sun has hidden behind the clouds leaving my north-facing study room darker yet sweetly cooler on this hot summer afternoon. Dusting off the computer camera with a soft and moist cotton pad, as if I was preparing the sofa for my guests who will soon arrive. I clicked Zoom, a familiar round blue button with a white camera in the center, and got a faithful reminder about the upcoming scheduled EDST 404 session in 12 minutes. After a moment of hesitation, I wondered where my PowerPoint was: I better find and open the PowerPoint that I had prepared for the class first before I entered the Zoom room. All settled, I then pressed the start button and found myself entering the virtual room with my own face showing up on the screen, with a background of a blue-striped basketball hoop hanging attached to the door behind me (Shooting some hoops was my younger son's favourite sport during the quarantine). With a bit of uneasiness, I felt a more acute awareness of myself, with square-shaped glasses, the lenses reflecting the greenish light from my banker's lamp. I took a

deep breath since I felt my heart beating more heavily. I often calmed myself first with a big smile (shown on my screen) and then waited for my students to join, one, two, three.... I greeted my students as I watched their names (or their faces if they chose to open the camera) starting to show up in Zoom "Hi, Josh! How are you today?" "Hello, Melina, great to see you today". I hesitated to say "see" you since I didn't really "see" them. Maybe, I think, I could use the popular statement of e-seeing or e-meeting next time as an alternative. "Hi Ying, I am good! How are you?" Josh said: "Hello, Dr. Ma, Great to see you too!" I heard Melina's voice too.

My greeting of "How are you today?" is not merely part of the routine of asking how my students are doing on that particular day at that particular moment but out of my genuine curiosity about their wellbeing, especially during the continuous pandemic quarantine situations. A warm welcome with a concerned and caring voice may send out my good wishes to them, and invite my students to enter the virtual space of "being with" each other (Hansen, 2021).

A juxtaposition of the familiar surroundings of my home, the wooden chair, the green banker's lamp glowing warm light, the white door with a bright blue striped basketball hoop and the unfamiliar voices coming from my students in different corners of the world seemed to animate my teaching space. My students' voices, low or high, buoyant or somber, engaged or detached, filled and lingered in my study room, a private room of my own. When I listened to them attentively, I could hear their worries about evolving pandemic situations as much as I did. I could also imagine their feelings of boredom and tiredness in their flat-toned voices lack of excitement, having spent the whole day in their apartment having zoom

sessions. I was wondering about the people who carried these both immanent and distant voices. I was imagining beyond their voices, behind their tones, what messages their voices might reveal and unconceal, together with my own.

Their voices reach me and touch me in the seemingly "out-of-touch" Zoom room. A rhythm of teaching forms itself out of the distinct and multiple voices. We improvise and compose a chorus, recalling Madeleine Grumet's metaphor here, in the Zoom room with unexpected questions in the chat, with lingering voices, behind the silent icons of a thumb up. I start to "witness being in several layers: me and you, me in you, us in 'neither me nor you'" (Machado de Oliveira, 2021, p. 60). In our *chorus*, there might be a route out of the objectifying gaze is in the location of "voice"; although understood multivocality, it always has our own voice in it (Pinar & Pautz, 1998, p. 66). Teachers are invited to hear the voices and silences of their own and their students. Human voices (as well as silences) offer us room for connectivity and imagination. Pinar (2005) also refers to the auditory character of Aoki's pedagogical approach. He emphasizes, "Aoki is critical of scientific observation (and its uncritical privileging of the visual), emphasizing instead the sound of conversation (and its privileging of the auditory)" (Pinar, 2005, p. 9). Aoki, reverberating with Grumet's chorus, attends to "polyphonic voices" where there are melody and rhythm of human voices and silences in their multiple layers and interconnecting dynamics (Pinar & Irwin, 2004, p. 77).

The voices in Zoom are at the same time distant and near and they come to resonance in a shared space. Voices are often layered: the voices are complicatedly overlapping one another, emerge simultaneously in chat, with similar volumes.

When Pinar (2021) recalls his Zoom teaching in the fall of 2020 he says, "I was able to engage with each student who appeared solo on the screen, their voices and images constituting 'indexical traces of the real,' as if 'they have a power that energizes reality itself'" (Koepnick, 2020, p. 118; cited by Pinar, 2021, p. 146). The human voices in Zoom, in unmediated, spontaneous, overlapped, emergent ways, could be "excluded from Big Data analytics" (Couldry & Mejias, 2019, p. 148). Of course, I am well aware of that I am now using "data" from this phenomenological study to inform my research. What I hope to emphasize is that the Big Data analytics highlights mastering, calculating and attachment to metanarratives, which my phenomenological attention to the fragments and messiness in concrete stories particularly hopes to disturb and renew.

Pronounced Faces

"Linda, I saw you raised your 'hand', do you have a question?" I waited for a few seconds before Linda opened her camera. As the speaker, her image took over my entire screen. Linda was sitting against her purplish square-patterned sofa, wearing a wide grin. Her blonde curly hair shone with the sunshine. Her face was lit not only with the sunshine, but also with some curiosity and warmth.

Suddenly, a white furry cat jumped onto her shoulder into the screen. My attention was directed to that "intruder" cat. From the shoulder to the sofa back and back again. I was fascinated by the agility of the cat. My memories were then brought back to the days in high school when I worked for a few years in Beijing, China. I remembered "Big Yellow," the wild cat who often visited my classroom in the beginning years of my teaching. She would just lay down below a

window, on the soft mat I prepared for her, bathing in the afternoon sunshine. "Hi, Big Yellow" I often stroked her hair with a few of my students after my class. "Oh, his name is Bobo," Linda proudly introduced her animal friend to us, holding his forelegs and waving at us.

Without the video sharing, the students seem to be hidden behind their index, far away from me. However, whenever students open the camera and start to talk, they suddenly take over my screen. Linda's face was pronounced on my screen and other students' screens as well. The golden sunshine, the square patterned sofa behind her, and her animal friend Bobo also entered the screen without prediction and anticipation. There were no desks between us, no piles of books blocking the view, no physical distance which might shrink the image. Mediated by the screen, the face only appeared with more profoundness. The Otherness of Linda, in her pronounced face on the screen, encountered me in the cyber dimension ethically. The Other challenges my identity by presenting itself as a face that exceeds any idea I can have of him or her. This radical alterity confronts me and obligates me to give more of myself than I can expect from the Other (Drummond, 2002, p. 12).

I felt myself obliged to respond to her ultimate otherness in the presence of her face. The Other "approaches me from on high, disconcerting my conscious intentionality and contesting my freedom, calling both into question in such a way that I have no choice but to respond" (Drummond, 2002, p. 12). The ethical relationship between myself and the Other is highlighted at the moment with his or her pronounced face in Zoom. I encounter and feel obliged to respond to the alterity of the Other (Levinas, 2001/1995) as his or her face takes over my screen. The centrality of the human subject, which is often unfortunately

missing in face-to-face classrooms, could be, to some extent, made possible in online settings.

When Linda started to share her screen, I felt myself entering Linda's private space, while Linda entered mine without knocking at each other's door. It felt like a moment of transgressing, moving beyond accepted boundaries (hooks, 1994). It requires "a full recognition of the fact that there could never be an absolute set agenda governing teaching practices" and "agendas had to be flexible, had to allow for spontaneous" (hooks, 1994, p. 7). The transgressing moment in Zoom involves me seeing the student not only as a student to be instructed but as a real person who is behind the screen, with all her worries, concerns and cares in a space of her own, with her cat, in the sunshine, like me. My agendas for the class cannot govern Linda in her own space. She was allowed to choose to remain silent and unseen; she was allowed to choose to close the camera, and she could also choose to welcome me to enter her space. I also welcomed Linda unconditionally as a teacher, welcoming her pronounced face to take over my screen, welcoming her voice to reverberate in my study room, welcoming the unexpected cat she adored and introduced. There was a subtle transformation of the power dynamics. Linda made her unique and noticeable appearance. I thus became the "me-teacher", who leaned into the moment, rendered herself more vulnerable, receptive and open to unexpectedness instead of trying to manage and take control by a preset agenda. Linda's white furry agile cat jumping back and forth unexpectedly reactivated my memories of "Big Yellow," the cat who visited my classroom when almost two decades ago.

The teaching in Zoom seems to be still able to hold room for Dasein to emerge, the existential being with others, however mediated by the screen

(Pinar, 2021). Subjective presence still remains online (Pinar, 2021). Cultivating and allowing for the subjective presence or Dasein online may need "an opportunity afforded, even encouraged, by appearing solo on the screen in the midst of others" (Pinar, 2021, p. 146). Then, the relationship of Being "can be expanded: for instance, the bench is in the lecture-room, the lecture-room is in the university, the university is in the city, until we can say that the bench is 'in world-space'" (Heidegger, 1968, p. 79). In Zoom, there are possibilities that the relationship of being can be expanded beyond the indexical traces to the study room, the house, the neighbourhood, the city and world-space when we enter complicated conversations as humans or become more aware of our situatedness. In comparison, the actual classroom often implies a setting where one's voice and his or her appearance can be muted or even erased "under the psycho-social press of other physically present students" (Pinar, 2021, p.146), the online classroom offers chances for us to appear, to make our voice heard, to remain truthful in the juxtaposed space of our own and the shared.

The pronounced face, the wandering thoughts, the feelings of awkwardness in transgressing and warmth in unconditional welcoming jointly animate rather than fossilize my teaching via Zoom. Zoom is no longer "out of touch" or "out of tone," it is, at this moment, even in this fleeting moment, in touch and in sync again. As I felt compelled by Linda's face to respond and act, the "rhythm of pedagogy" (Hansen, 2021, p. 37) danced to the subjective presence of each of us, different and unique human beings.

Growing Multiplicity

“Ok, now, let’s join the break-out rooms and discuss the three Rs in social justice lens. You will have around 10 minutes to have a group discussion”. I pressed the break-out rooms button for the first time in today’s class. It asked me to choose how many people in a break-out room, Ok, let’s have three to four people in a group. I continued to press one more button to confirm. I stared at the screen, my students’ flashing icons were disappearing and I was finally the only one in the big Zoom room. Where were my students? What were they doing in the breakup rooms? What should I do now? I felt a sense of disorientation, left alone in the Zoom now. I sipped my no longer warm coffee, and stretched my arms when I noticed that it was raining outside. I continued to wonder where my students were, and what they were doing now. Were they at their home or at school or somewhere else? Were they seeing the rain like myself now?

I decided to join their break-out rooms and listen. When I entered one room randomly, I felt a sense of relief that I didn't interrupt them. Three out of four students had their cameras on and they continued their conversation without noticing me joining them. “It is good!” I thought. “I am not sure what is the difference between recognition and representation.” Jeff asked. I waited. Lin tried to respond: “For example, you could recognize me as Lin but you don't let me represent myself: sharing what I like or what I want... Does it make sense?” ... “Hi, Ying, You are here!” Lin noticed me while she was talking. I was still lingering on her lovely example. I was still searching for words before I heard Cody say with an eager tone: “It seems that we haven't discussed something other than us. Our needs, our likes... What about trees, air, and water? Do we do justice to them?” There

was a long silence in the breakup room after Cody's question.

All the questions, wonderings, arguments, and continued conversations are nurturing complexity in thinking and understanding. Multiplicity, as Aoki (1993/2004) refers to Deleuze, is not a noun. It is like a dynamic process attending to the tensionality in the complexity, to the in-betweenness in the constant flux of life. Could Zoom room be an “open landscape of multiplicity” (Aoki, 1993/2004, p. 207)? Could Zoom be a third space which may transcend duality and opposing differences, “where we slip into the language of ‘both this and that’ The space moves and is alive” (Pinar & Irwin, 2004, p. 78). Multiplicity may “grow and thrive in the third [dynamic and alive] space, within which we can dwell both incorporates and leads us to the world outside” (Pinar, 2005, p. 5).

If the Zoom room does not submerge the “minimal integrity of the self” (Couldry & Mejias, 2019, p. 199), allow room for the inner space of non-coincidence (Pinar, 2021), it may welcome a multiplicity of perspectives in poetic and authentic dwelling within technology. For Pinar (2021), a space of non-coincidence is a prerequisite for subjective presence to emerge and hence be the key for the multiplicity to grow. It is “an inner empty space wherein one comes to form as an individual through relationships with self and others (including non-human animals and objects)” (p. 144). The space of non-coincidence is like the skin that protects our inner space. Thich Nhat Hanh (1999) once refers to a cow with skin disease. The cow does not seem to have any skin anymore due to the severe skin disease. When the cow is close to a tree all the tiny living beings will come out and suck the blood on the body of the cow. When the cow is near an ancient wall, all the

tiny animals living inside the wall will come out and suck the blood of the cow. The cow has no means for self-protection. The skin of a cow protects its integrity from the penetration of external toxins. Being online, though inevitably exposed to big data and algorithms, we are not a skinless cow invaded with and merging with whatever ever offered online, we can still be wide awake (Greene, 1973) and preserving ourselves online.

In the breakout rooms, the supervision pressure from the teacher could be weakened and even missing. Students may feel more at ease and at home with their familiar physical surroundings, they may be more daring to wander off-track in their discussions. In the breakout room discussions, Jeff asked for clarification, Lin responded with interesting examples, while Cody continued to expand the topic with challenging questions and critiques. It could be the relatively off-record, unsupervised way in the breakout Zoom rooms that may allow the discussants to be more off topic, exploring thoughts and ideas, playfully pushing the boundaries. A multiplicity of perspectives emerge and grow in the rich soil of such conversations.

The non-coinciding space forms the minimal integrity of preserving each unique self. This is a space that teaching on Zoom, in its ideal form, has to protect. Rather than streamline our Zoom teaching, demand students to follow the preset procedures and learn from the pre-chosen articles, as teachers, we encourage open-ended conversations, and allow our students to be free from preset and immediate goals. Pauses, the silences, the uncertainties, and the confusions can be woven organically into the Zoom class. Embracing them without resolving them too quickly could be an art of teaching, online or

offline, “[laying] bare the questions hidden by the answers” (Baldwin, cited in Hansen, 2021, p. 39).

In my online teaching, I listen to and have conversations with others behind the screen, be patient with their silences, create room for pauses and confusion, and invite my students to make their unique and genuine appearances in Zoom. I withdraw from my eagerness to take control, transforming pedagogically from a manager or technician to a witness (Hansen, 2021). Bearing witness, for Hansen, is “the witness aspires to amplify, not to ‘improve upon’” (p. 33). I believe “amplifying” captures the dynamic, embodied process which attends to the complexity of the lived experience, bearing the risks to be transformed, nurturing the sensitivity to notice and generate the significance in the trivial and everydayness. When I entered the breakout Zoom rooms, I was a concerned and caring witness who would love to amplify the hidden humane sparks, rendering myself vulnerable in very nuanced, subtle and complicated ways in being with others.

A multiplicity of understandings may also arise from our insufficient feelings and constraints in online settings. I am aspiring to teach well online yet always feeling a sense of inadequacy. The screen is not good enough and I long to see them in person. However, these feelings of insufficiency and longingness to see them may enable me to humbly embrace the difficulties and uncertainties of being a human in the technologized world, and release my imaginations of different possibilities. In Zoom, I experience ‘facticity’ (Heidegger, 1968, p. 82) or the thrownness into the world, being-in-the-world, with technology, with others. Being *out there* and *in here* are the constant dynamics of my Zoom classrooms. I am there in the Zoom room, while I am also here in my own place, on my chair, in my study room.

Disconnected wifi, broken voices, frozen screen, even the unpleasant barks of my dog could interrupt my “thereness” on the cloud and bring me back to the here and now, back with my being, my thinking, my feeling and my presence in the world. The unexpected cracks may create an awareness of my being with others both online and offline. I am neither entirely submerged in my online teaching nor totally in sync with my everyday life concerns. The simultaneous detachment and attachment from the device and the seemingly mundane everydayness give me a stance to witness and reflect. In the room of my own, with my worries about the school closures and how I could arrange for my two young boys during the time while I was teaching online, I am more aware that my students may have different struggles online and offline: imagining they may be stuck and feel lonely in their quarantine room in the pandemic; thinking about possibilities that they may have to worry about their rising tuition fees and have to search for part-time jobs despite their heavy coursework; understanding that their worries about the unpromising jobs. Online, students are not only *being* there for marks but also as *being* there, sharing their thoughts and feelings with one another.

Pushing the Rock up Again and Again

A phenomenological question may arise any time we have had a certain experience that brings us to pause and reflect, “even the most ordinary experience may bring us to a sense of wonder” (van Manen, 2014, p. 31). In Zoom, with our attentiveness and wide-awakeness, we are still capable of capturing the glimmering and glittering lights of humanity yet the subjective presence still remains (Pinar, 2021). The lingering voices, the faces of others, the differentiated thoughts and opinions all animate the teaching and learning

space of Zoom. However, filtered through the screen, our humanity still grows and thrives in the technologized sphere.

People gather in Zoom to teach, have conversations and connect. It is still possible for us to transform Zoom into an animated space to generate meanings structured by subjectivity threaded with historicity and ethics, however filtered or determined by the software and screen. Despite Sisyphus's condemned effort to keep pushing the big rock up the mountain, he was considered the happiest person in Camus's eyes. Sisyphus was creating meanings in the meaningless world with endurance, courageously overcoming existential difficulties of being a human. To what degree are we struggling to push the rock of technology up again and again in *our own* Zoom rooms when it seems to filter, reduce, control, and overwhelm our teaching, suppressing the subjective emergence? In response to Chapsal, Merleau-Ponty (2007) asks, “Is it inconceivable to you that one could at once be there and be distant? And yet this is the very definition of the philosopher and perhaps even of human existence” (p. 382). This is a space with possibilities where Zoom, with indexical traces of humanity, may dwell and thrive. Merleau-Ponty's exploration of simultaneous presence and distance resonates with the holistic understanding that education is not confined to physical proximity but encompasses a shared, transcendent space where genuine connections can thrive.

Grumet (2015) that suggests “education requires a blending of objectivity with the unique subjectivity of the person, its infusion into the structures and shapes of his psyche” (p. 44). Non-coincidence with inner struggles is a constant subjectifying process and a dwelling in a “civic square and [Zoom] room of my own” (Pinar, 2013). We have

to have genuine conversations as human beings, listen to the voices of the other with more attention, recollect a piece of memory, be together with nature, have “poetic encounters” (Leggo, 2016) with the now, juxtaposing the past, present and future, with oneself, others and the world, online and offline. In attending to the subjective encounters in lived moment from moment online, we may still be able to generate alternative languages and discourses beyond modernity’s emphasis on efficiency and bureaucracy, resisting the logic of technology itself. Online teaching would bear renewed possibilities and it becomes a “palimpsest” (Pinar, 2013), a manuscript whose original traces remain yet leaves room for new later writings by each unique person. I almost imagine, with modesty, the indexical traces flicker and twinkle with the lights of humanity. In my ongoing Zoom teaching, I will continue to open myself to the different voices, loud or small; I will often be addressed by the faces of my students, smiling or puzzled, which take over my screen; I will celebrate the multiplicity of thoughts and understandings, expected or unexpected, in chat or split-up rooms. In our togetherness, we wonder, connect and become despite of/through Zoom.

The exploration of Zoom as a dynamic pedagogical space may transform and transcend the mere utilitarian functionalities of the digital platform. The subjective presence of the teacher and the students enlivens the Zoom room with lingering voices, profound faces, allowing for a multiplicity of thoughts, emotions and spirits. With optimistic caution, I believe Zoom may still serve as a canvas for educators to cultivate a rich, transformative, and interconnected educational experience for both themselves and their students.

References

- Allen, I. E., & Seaman, J. (2012). *Changing course: Ten years of tracking online education in the United States*. Babson Survey Research Group.
- Aoki, T. T. (1993/2004). Legitimizing live curriculum: Toward a curricular landscape of multiplicity. In W. F. Pinar & R. L. Irwin (Eds.), *Curriculum in a new key: The collected works of Ted. T. Aoki* (pp. 199–218). Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Bayne, S., Evans, P., Ewins, R., Knox, J., Lamb, J., Macleod, H., O’Shea, C., Ross, J., Sheail, P., & Sinclair, C. (2020). *The manifesto for teaching online*. The MIT Press.
- Couldry, N., & Mejias, U. A. (2019). *The costs of connection. How data is colonizing human life and appropriating it for capitalism*. Stanford University Press.
- Doane, M. A. (2007). Indexicality: Trace and Sign: Introduction. *Differences*, 18(1), 1–6.
<https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-2006-020>
- Drummond, J. J. (2002). Introduction: The phenomenological tradition and moral philosophy. In J. Drummond & L. Embree (Eds.), *Phenomenological approaches to moral philosophy* (pp. 1–14). Springer Science + Business Media.
- Dunne, J. (1993). *Back to the rough ground: Practical judgement and the lure of technique*. University of Notre Dame Press.

- Franklin, U. M. (2014). Thinking about technology: A public "University lecture," University of Toronto, 2004. In Sarah Jane Freeman (Ed.), *Ursula Franklin Speaks* (pp. 73). MQUP.
- Grant, G. (1969). *Technology & Empire*. Anansi.
- Greene, M. (1973). *Teacher as stranger: Educational philosophy for the modern age*. Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc.
- Grumet, M. R. (2015). Existential and phenomenological foundations. In W. F. Pinar & M. R. Grumet (Eds.), *Toward a poor curriculum* (3rd ed.). Educator's International Press.
- Hanh, T. N. (1999). *The heart of the Buddha's teaching*. Rider.
- Hansen, D. (2021). *Reimagining the call to teach: A witness to teachers and teaching*. Teachers College Press.
- Heidegger, M. (1968). *Being and time*. Blackwell.
- hooks, B. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. Routledge.
- Kessler, S., & Wall, A. (2016). Do the best parts equal the best whole? A critique of online teaching and learning. *Journal of E-Learning and Higher Education*, 1–8. [https://DOI: 10.5171/2016.827620](https://doi.org/10.5171/2016.827620)
- Koepnick, L. (2020). Face time with Hitler. In J. A. Thomas & G. Eley (Eds.), *Visualizing fascism: The twentieth-century rise of the global Right* (pp. 111–133). Duke University Press.
- Lai, V. K. (2021). Pandemic-driven online teaching-The natural setting for a flipped classroom? *Journal of Biomechanical Engineering*, 143, 1–6.
- Leggo, C. (2016). A poem can: Poetic encounters. *Learning Landscapes*, 9(2), 351–365. <https://doi.org/10.36510/learnland.v9i2.780>
- Levinas, E. (2001). *Alterity and transcendence* (M. B. Smith, Trans.). Columbia University Press. (Original work published 1995).
- Li, C., & Lalani, F. (2020, April). *COVID-19 pandemic has changed education forever: This is how*. World Economic Forum.
- Machado de Oliveira, V. (2021). *Hospicing modernity: Facing humanity's wrongs and the implications for social activism*. North Atlantic Books.
- van Manen, M. (2014). *Phenomenology of practice: Meaning-giving methods in phenomenological research and writing*. Left Coast Press.
- Mahmood S. (2021) Instructional strategies for online teaching in COVID-19 Pandemic. *Hum Behav & Emerg Tech*, 3, 199–203. <https://doi.org/10.1002/hbe2.218>
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (2007). *The Merleau-Ponty reader* (T. Toadvine & L. Lawlor, Eds.). Northwestern University Press.
- Perifanou, M. A., Tzafilkou, K., & Economides, A. A. (2023). Teacher intention to transfer ICT training when integrating digital technologies in education: The teacher

- transfer of ICT training model (TeTra-ICT). *European Journal of Education*, 58(1), 111-129.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12534>
- Pinar, W. F. (1972). Working from within. *Educational Leadership*, 29(4), 329–331.
- Pinar, W. F. (2004). *What is curriculum theory?* L. Erlbaum Associates.
- Pinar, W. F. (2005). A bridge between Chinese and North American curriculum studies. *Transnational Curriculum Inquiry*, 2(1), 1-12
- Pinar, W. F. (2013). George Grant’s cosmopolitan critique of education. *Encounters in Theory and History of Education*. 14, 49–69.
<https://doi.org/10.24908/eoe-ese-rse.v14i0.4950>
- Pinar, W. F. (2021). Indexical traces of the real: Teaching in the Techno-Nation-State. In D. Tröhler, N. Piattoeva & W. F. Pinar (Eds.), *World yearbook of education 2022: Education, schooling and the global universalization of nationalism* (pp. 136-149). Routledge.
- Pinar, W. F. (2023). *A praxis of presence in curriculum theory: Advancing currere against cultural crises in education*. Routledge.
- Pinar, W. F. & Pautz, A. (1998). Construction scars: Autobiographical voice in biography. In C. Kridel (Ed.), *Writing educational biography* (1st ed.) (pp. 61-72).Routledge.
- Pinar, W. F. & Irwin R. L. (Eds.). (2004). *Curriculum in a new key: The collected works of Ted. T. Aoki*. Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Pinar, W. F., & Grumet, M. R. (2015). *Toward a poor curriculum* (3rd ed.). Educator's International Press.
- Sprenger, D. A., & Schwaninger, A. (2021). Technology acceptance of four digital learning technologies (classroom response system, classroom chat, e-lectures, and mobile virtual reality) after three months’ usage. *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education*, 18(1), 1-17.
<https://doi.org/10.1186/s41239-021-00243-4>
- Turkle, S. (2011). *Alone together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other*. Basic Books.
- Viberg, O., Grönlund, Å., & Andersson, A. (2023). Integrating digital technology in mathematics education: A swedish case study. *Interactive Learning Environments*, 31(1), 232-243.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10494820.2020.1770801>
- Wong, L. E. (2022). Walking across contexts with technology: An Aokian Methodology. In N. Y. S. Lee, L. E. Wong, & J. M. Ursino (Eds.), *Lingering with the works of Ted. T. Aoki: Historical and contemporary significance for curriculum research and practice* (pp. 115-127). Routledge.

Author Bio

Ying Ma is an instructor in the Department of Educational Studies at Kwantlen Polytechnic University. Prior to her Master's and Ph.D. studies at UBC, she had been a high school teacher in Beijing China for seven years.

She is the author of her 2024 new book "*The Ethics of Becoming a Good Teacher: In Conversation with Aristotle and Confucius*," under Routledge. In recent years, she published in different educational journals such as Research in Education, Prospect, Transnational Curriculum Inquiry, Asian Pacific Education Review, as well as book chapters on topics of ethics, curriculum theory, pedagogy, equality, evaluation, Western and Eastern wisdom traditions. Dr. Ma hopes to humbly contribute to the ongoing conversation surrounding education, with a focus not only within Canada but extending to the broader international community.