BOOK REVIEW

Steve Stakland. *Exploring What is Lost in the Online Undergraduate Experience: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Meaning of Remote Learning*

**New York and London: Routledge
2023, 182 pages**

In this timely and poignant book, Steve Stakland, Associate Professor and Philosophy Department Chair at Northern Virginia Community College, laments the tradeoffs involved in the wide-scale shift to online classes, especially during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Even though remote or distance learning has been around since the heyday of mail correspondence courses, the increasing popularity of massive open online courses (MOOCs) and the rise of online learning management systems have normalized what the author calls "non-face-to-face learning." He defines this phenomenon as "the experience of the kind of learning that takes place in institutions of higher education, colleges, universities, etc., where the face is removed completely or to some degree," replaced by such technologies as recorded lectures, online synchronous interactions, and online forums (Stakland 2023, 2-3). He draws a connection between non-face-to-face learning and the technological ethos toward education, which tends to reduce embodied personal interaction or even eliminate it entirely. The problem is that "merely making educational degree attainment faster, less expensive and more transportationally convenient, by moving it online, might not guarantee that it will be better" (Stakland 2023, 4).

Citing technology skeptics - in particular Martin Heidegger, but also contemporary thinkers and writers such as Albert Borgmann, Nicholas Carr, and Shirley Turkle - Stakland presents a pioneering and comprehensive analysis of the encroachment of technology into the domain of pedagogy. Of course, his concerns had been voiced as early as the ancient times by Plato, who bemoaned the seduction of writing and the concomitant loss of dialectic conversation. However, his take on online classes speaks to us about what is unique to our times. Many an educator has faced the frustrations of Zoom ("There is something about the format that is like wading in concrete" (Stakland 2023, 165)). Many a student has experienced the twin burdens of isolation and depersonalization while navigating a course management system. Despite the nagging intuition that something is not quite right about the new normal, we are assured by pat predictions that, especially after the kinks have been worked out, we would reap the benefits of efficiency and cut costs.

To illustrate, Borasi *et al*. (2022, 154-155) assert that "the *quality* of *online offerings* is now on par with comparable traditional offerings," something which the researchers claim has been achieved even before the pandemic. On the other hand, according to an earlier and more cautious study, "the evidence about learning in online versus classroom environments is mixed" (Baum and McPherson 2019, 239). Hybrid learning models, in which technology is supplemented by in-person interactions, yield much more positive results (Baum and McPherson 2019, 241). In any case, more than the question of the comparative effectiveness of these two modalities, Stakland is interested in exploring *what is lost* in non-face-to-face learning. After all, any shift in media will be accompanied by the loss and gain of certain unique affordances, and the power of his book lies in its perceptive observations about what it is exactly we stand to lose.

Using the method of hermeneutic phenomenology, Stakland explores the lived experiences of nine participants, whom he groups into three types: (1) those who had taken some online classes and were currently enrolled in one; (2) those who had recently taken online classes but were not currently enrolled in any; and (3) those who had taken online classes several years before the interviews. He had an initial conversation with all the participants, after which he encouraged them to write down their reflections. This was followed by a second and final conversation. In keeping with the variational method in phenomenology, which aims to distill the essential structures of an experience, Stakland's process uses the different "facets" of non-face-to-face learning gleaned from the participants. He arrives at commonalities concerning their memory of and temporal distance from events, their perception of asynchronous versus asynchronous activities, the immediate observations of students currently taking non-face-to-face classes, and the difference between taking many online classes versus taking only one. Finally, he supplements his analysis with a careful attention to language, for example by reflecting on the etymology of words and on relevant lines from poetic works.

The body of the book consists of short, themed chapters with provocative titles such as "The Withdrawn or Lost Face of Online Undergraduate Learning," "Experiencing the Synchronous but Absent Face," "Writing to No Face and Everyone: The Present Absence," "Reciprocal Voyeurism: Hiding from Others Together," "The Game of Facelessness," "Facing the Void: Body and Soul," and others. Indeed, the Stakland invests the face with much significance. The face is a synecdoche for our being fully human, a quality that allows us to transcend the causal order and accords us with the power to communicate (Stakland 2023, 11). "A subtle way of rejecting someone, though usually obvious, is to avoid face-to-face encounters," for example, by turning off one's camera during Zoom meetings (Stakland 2023, 15). Ignoring the face is but the first step toward dehumanization. It lets us focus on other things and escape the experience of complexity and ambiguity, which, per Levinas, is inherent in the encounter with the face (Stakland 2023, 16). Stakland's analysis reveals different types of losses associated with the erosion of the human visage in non-face-to-face learning.

First, there is the *loss of personal interaction and conversation*. Genuine, real-time conversations seem to be rare in online classes. Students lose interest in discussion forums, where it is tedious to read others' rote posts, and teacher feedback is often

delayed or generic. The quantity of material covered is valued over the quality of delivery and reception so that a tacit compact of mutual non-responsibility is made between teacher and student:

> In order to reach a kind of truce that achieves their desired outcome, the student says, "I will not require you to teach." In reply to being alleviated from the need to do the hard work of teaching, giving detailed and individualized feedback for each student, for example, the teachers say, "I will not require you to learn." (Stakland 2023, 107)

Second, there is *the loss of embodiment*. One student participant confesses to adopting a dualistic Cartesian attitude toward his classmates. While he respects them in the virtual sessions, he's not sure he would even recognize them if he physically encounters them (Stakland 2023, 109). This Cartesianism is also manifest in students' common preference to eschew vulnerability by not turning on their cameras, even as they assert the right to surveil others (Stakland 2023, 82). The anonymity of profiles with switched-off cameras may enable a more efficient transfer of information, but it also forces us to relinquish the mystery and risk of an authentic face-to-face encounter (Stakland 2023, 96-97).

Finally, there is *the loss of the sense of wonder*, which inheres in learning considered as an end-in-itself. Stakland thoroughly critiques the instrumental view of education, in which the goal is not so much to learn from the encounter with other people, as to absorb as much information as possible, most easily so when the process is automated and impersonal. Stakland singles out for special opprobrium the all-too-common habit of multi-tasking, exacerbated by the computer, that multipurpose device of distraction. I myself have witnessed a colleague simultaneously attend a department meeting *and* conduct an online class, a feat he could not have accomplished without the Zoom platform. Multitasking is tragic to watch. As Stakland (2023, 161) writes, "Our intellectual capacity can fill in the gaps a bit and again give us the sense that we are doing two things at the same time, but in fact, we are just degrading the experience of both in order to have a sense of doing two things at once."

In response to the degradation of education by the twin forces of capitalism and of "enframing" via the technological attitude (per Heidegger), Stakland calls for the re-valuing of face-to-face learning as a "focal practice." Albert Borgmann employs Heidegger's concept of "the thing" to describe the power of focal practices to keep us in constant contact with our experience. Borgmann's examples of such activities, like running and partaking in a communal feast, are resistant to the pressure to be efficient, since to make them efficient is to destroy their essence (Stakland 2023, 150). To make face-to-face classes a focal practice is to let them be, to accept their risk (Stakland 203, 152). Above all, they should not be obviated by technological solutions—we have far too much to lose.

Ultimately, the meaning of what is lost in non-face-to-face learning has to do with the *layering* that is involved in in-person classes, which is unique to that modality and cannot be replicated.

> In a face-to-face setting, there is an experiential sedimentation. As people take turns talking to each other, they can also begin to talk over each other. In conversation, there is a need to listen but also participate…. In a traditional class, there is an overall *layering* of the experiencing. Teaching face-to-face multiple things can be happening at the same time. (Stakland 2023, 173)

Arguably, a synchronous online class conducted via Zoom, assuming that everyone's camera is on, may provide a reasonable facsimile of this type of interaction. However, Stakland notes that the difference is significant:

> It is hard to tell when to stop talking, and on Zoom you quickly realize how much of conversation depends on not necessarily interruption, but at least signals of the need to interject so as to feel like you are contributing and not being left behind. On Zoom, you can only wait. I make deliberate pauses and ask for input to allow students to speak up. The emphatic pauses and explicit requests are most awkward at first, but they always stand out as different because in a normal conversation, when people are involved, you do not have to be so deliberate. (Stakland 2023, 174)

As an educator familiar with the constraints of Zoom classes, I understand Stakland's reservations. Even before the pandemic, my own university adopted the hybrid mode of education, which eased the transition to fully online classes in the first quarter of 2020. At first, I marveled at the convenience of it all: Learning would seem to proceed even as my students and I all stayed safely ensconced in our respective homes. After several terms of this, however, and as "Zoom fatigue" set in, I realized that I missed in-person classes, but couldn't quite articulate exactly what was missing in online-only encounters. Didn't we accomplish the learning outcomes, and probably much more, given all the commuting time saved?[1] Reading Stakland's book helped me realize what that ineffable essence of education might be, and to be thankful for the resumption of in-person classes post-pandemic.

The intriguing question remains, however: *Supposing that the technology is both improved and mastered over time, can non-face-to-face learning achieve parity with traditional classes?* Stakland rejects this possibility; for him, we could grant that online classes are better than nothing, but not that they are better than *anything* (Stakland 2023, 153). Online classes can never replace in-person ones, and if we rely on them at all, they should be a last resort. Some literature on the pandemic-era reliance on Zoom would seem to support this idea. Peimani and Kamalipour (2021, 643-644) conclude that the online learning format is less conducive to peer-to-peer interaction and that it promotes a non-reciprocal voyeurism. Other studies suggest that the very format of Zoom and similar videoconferencing platforms may be inherently pernicious. For example, Almonte *et al*. (2021) describe the isolation that students felt, as well as the dangers of blurring the boundaries between the classroom and the home. This blurring of boundaries may be construed as a form of violence, to which certain groups may be especially vulnerable. Reflecting on her experience of teaching theater performance, Ferdman (2022, 80) writes, "For many of my students, performing at

home was simply not an option. Home was simply there. Home was the body they inhabited."

On the other hand, we should also ask if any comparison between non-face-to-face learning and in-person learning is not ultimately unfair. If we use embodied personal interaction as the gold standard for education, as Stakland does, then any mode of pedagogy lacking this will *ipso facto* fall short. But what if "non-face-to-face" is not essentially a disembodied mode of learning, but merely a differently embodied one? Interestingly, Finatto Canabarro *et al.* (2022, 7) describe what a student participant in their study has termed "Zoom being," or "the successful re-embodiment of student-researchers in the dematerialized world."

> From a sociotechnical perspective, Zoom beings might be considered examples of… "digital cyborg assemblages"…. As a digital cyborg assemblage, the Zoom being has successfully incorporated new online-based digital education technologies, which are not only mastered as tools but taken up into bodily space…, forming part of the body schema…. Therefore, the proficiency achieved as Zoom beings blurs the differences between the online and physical worlds. (Finatto Canabarro *et al.* 2022, 10)

It's not just students who can become Zoom beings. Teachers' online nonverbal communication behaviors—which involve animating, replicating, reciprocating, and self-monitoring—show that for them, "the Zoom room is at once an extension of the physical classroom and a deviation from it" (McArthur 2022, 212). The adaptability of both teachers and students to online synchronous classes has been observed, in spite of the absence of "multimodal contextualization cues" such as gaze direction and localizable origins of sound and speech. This indicates that "even drastic changes in the contextual circumstances of teaching may be accommodated: in the hands of experienced teachers, robust and solidary learning communities may emerge" (Bannink and Van Dam 2021, 18).

Granting that there is such a thing as a "Zoom being" belies Stakland's claim that embodied personal interaction is necessarily lost in non-face-to-face learning. This claim makes sense only if we think of online education as a degraded attempt to replicate the in-person mode, as opposed to an altogether *different way of being*. It is hard to shake the idea that it is an inferior simulacrum, given that remote learning first arose out of the need to extend the geographic reach of traditional learning. I think that it is time we thought of online education as an end-in-itself. This way, especially in a hybrid setup, we can appreciate its gifts without necessarily acceding to the enframing tendencies of technology. These gifts, far from being mere conveniences, are significant and many, including, most obviously, the overcoming of distance and cost (Baum and McPherson 2019); the wide sharing of electronic resources, and an extended mode of peer interaction (Stoian *et al.* 2021); enhanced options for interaction that exceed those available in physical space, as in the case of filters and emojis (McArthur 2022, 206); and, particularly in the case of international classes consisting of students from developing countries, the building of cultural intelligence and collaborative knowledge creation (Black *et al.* 2019).

Perhaps the problem may not be the medium itself—of videoconferencing platforms and sundry learning management systems—but the market-driven ethos of contemporary educational institutions. The neoliberal university wields these technologies in such a way as to transform education into a "standing reserve," to use Heidegger's phrase, fostering what Maise (2021, 287) refers to as a consumerist "online learning habitus." However, this habitus is not exclusive to the online mode, as evidenced by the commercialization of university "brands," overpopulated classrooms, overburdened adjuncts, and the transformation of academic leadership into corporatized management (see Connell 2019). Just as the enframing of education is already occurring offline, so it seems naturally to happen online. Yet the solution is not to get rid of online classes entirely, which Stakland does not seem to be advocating either: "As a teacher, I would never define myself as *essentially* anti-remote learning" (Stakland 2023, 177). We should instead seek ways to transform our online pedagogical practices to better express our embodiment and address our natural impulse to connect. As many educators may have surely realized by now, far from being a cheap(ened) alternative to the traditional classroom, non-face-to-face learning is much harder to pull off than the so-called real thing.

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NOTE

1. For a more detailed narration and analysis of my experiences teaching online during the pandemic, juxtaposed against the social justice problem of the "digital divide" in the Philippines, see Dela Cruz 2024.

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