

Experiences of Closeness in Online Learning Environments

by

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Abstract

In the online classroom, students often find themselves in front of a computer, looking at a bright screen, interacting with classmates and teachers through a keyboard and a mouse, and in some cases, listening to and watching someone that is not physically present with them. Some researchers claim that students may feel socially isolated if they are geographically distant from their classmates and teachers, resulting in a lack of engagement and motivation, and subsequently poor academic achievement. And so we may begin to wonder, is it possible for students experience meaningful moments of engagement in online classrooms? And if so, what is the nature of student engagement online and how might it differ qualitatively from face-to-face classroom interactions? Drawing on phenomenology of practice (van Manen, 2014), in this study I explore what it is like for students to experience a sense of closeness to others in an online learning environment. The aim of this research is to bring attention to the ways some students may share close and personal experiences with their classmates and teachers in online pedagogical spaces, despite the possible technological constraints in such settings.

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Luis Francisco Vargas Madriz. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project Name “Course Project Ethics Package for Graduate Students in EDSE611 Phenomenological Research and Writing”, No. Pro00039872, September 22nd, 2013.

Dedication

*“Other things may change us,
but we start and end with family”*

(Anthony Brandt)

To my father, José Ángel Bonilla Cordero.

To my godmother, Hilda María Toruño Díaz.

To my mother, María Eugenia Madriz Bonilla.

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Introduction

[L]ife will be carried into the twenty-first century by new realities and new visions. Some of these realities will be exciting and positive experiments in human living. But we must recognize also that spheres of human intimacy increasingly come under strain from consumer, economic, bureaucratic, corporate, and political technologies and ideologies. The notion of education, conceived as a living process of personal engagement between adult teacher or parent and a young child or student, may well disappear in an increasingly managerial, corporate, and technicized environment. How can educating and bringing up children remain a rich human and cultural activity? (van Manen, 1991, p. 4)

In the midst of today's technological transformations, are we getting closer or farther apart from each other? Recently, there have been concerns expressed regarding the role of digital technologies in the apparently increasing experience of loneliness among newer generations. On the one hand, there is a general apprehension about the lack of in-person social engagement that this population partakes due to the extensive use of social media. People are living more networked lives than ever before in the history of humankind, but paradoxically, we may also be experiencing more disconnection than ever, which may have consequences for mental and physical health and well-being (Davidow, 2013; Fox, 2013; Marche, 2012). And so, a variety of mainstream media, like newspaper articles and video commercials, seem to be battling this experience of loneliness, by encouraging people to pay more attention to the present moment instead of being all consumed in whatever digital technology they might have at hand (Bernstein, 2013; Foer, 2013). On the other hand, some researchers propose that the use of digital technologies contributes to the development of

youth social relationships, and that contrary to current concerns, there is no relationship between well-being or loneliness and the use of social media (Apaolaza, Hartmann, Medina, Barrutia, & Echebarria, 2013). Regardless of these very different positions and beliefs about digital technologies, it is undeniable that social interactions have been significantly altered, and that we are gradually moving from a world characterized by face-to-face communication to more and more digitally-mediated contact.

From an evolutionary perspective people are social animals, and as such we interact with other human and non-human beings for much of our lives. Researchers have suggested that the motivation to self-enhance, self-verify, as well as self-expand seems to be deep-rooted in people's desires for social approval and acceptance, and that self-conscious emotions tend to emerge in response to events that have either real or imaginary consequences for others' judgements of the individual (Leary, 2007; Leary & Kelly, 2009; Silvia & Kwapil, 2011). Since interpersonal relationships seem to be so central for human beings, it is not surprising to notice the necessity to establish close, enduring, and significant relationships with others. Our most basic motivations and emotions, therefore, are not only operating to maintain our self-image, but also to facilitate people's social interactions and relationships (Leary, 2007).

Thus, in the twenty-first century technological milieu, the question arises: how do current communication technologies influence our social natures? For educators, a question must also be: how are digital technologies altering learning environments and pedagogical relationships? Digitally-mediated contact is not only growing swiftly in our personal lives, but it is also changing the way educational environments are convened, delivered, and experienced both by students and teachers. Here, online learning environments refer to any kind of education system accessed on the Internet, such as flipped classrooms, blended

learning, eSchools, MOOCs, and distance learning, among others. And so, with online learning, the feelings of alienation and loneliness are not only concerns related to an individual's personal life, but they may also point to issues present in these new technologically enhanced learning settings.

Previous studies have addressed some of these concerns. Some investigations, for instance, have focused on the issue of geographic distance in online education (Dolan, 2011; Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011; Owens, Hardcastle, & Richardson, 2009; Zagorski, 2011). Other research has explored factors that may contribute to social presence in the online classroom, in order to improve students' academic performance (Baker, 2010; Belair, 2012; Borup, West, & Graham, 2012; Cleveland-Innes & Campbell, 2012; Kim, Kwon, & Cho, 2011; Kuo, Walker, Schroder, & Belland, 2014; Murphy & Rodríguez-Manzanares, 2012), or a sense of community online (Shackelford & Maxwell, 2012). Phenomenological research has also delved into some of the interpersonal questions concerning relations via email (Dobson, 2005), online learning environments (Adams, Yin, Vargas Madriz, & Mullen, 2014; Friesen, 2005), wireless mobile technologies (van Manen, 2010), and on Skype (Aguila, 2011). Yet, none of the aforementioned research studies have specifically focused on the experience of closeness in online learning environments.

This study is of potential interest for (1) educators who are considering or are already using online learning environments in their teaching, (2) education policy makers, especially the related to the use of educational technologies and digital literacy and curriculum, (3) software developers specializing in the production of digital tools with educational goals, and (4) academia, on the one hand, for faculties preparing future teachers to instruct in this new

digital world, and on the other hand, for expanding the scholarly literature, ultimately improving practice, and public policy.

Research Question

The experience of proximity through texting is a distant kind of intimacy. Of course, lack of distance is not equivalent to nearness. Although computer-mediated and wireless technologies overcome physical distance between people, they do not necessarily bring them intimately near to each other. (van Manen, 2010, p. 1027)

“Lack of distance” is indeed no guarantee of a sense of nearness. Moreover, distance bridged via a communication technology does not necessarily equate with “lack of nearness”. In thinking about an online learning environment, we may immediately imagine a group of students geographically distant and isolated from one another. The picture may be of learners sitting each by themselves in front of a computer, and barely communicating with the others online. Perhaps some of them feel invisible since they are not talking directly to anyone else, or because they wrote something hoping for a response, yet no one else has replied. But is this a true picture of the situation as it is lived?

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to gather and explore experiences of closeness to others in an online learning environment. In this investigation, experiences of closeness are those that are characterized by a sense of camaraderie, of belonging, of connection, or of nearness that students might experience when interacting with their classmates or their teacher in this digital setting. The main research question that guides this study is: What is it like to experience a sense of closeness to others in an online learning environment?

Literature Review

The introduction of technologies into the classrooms brings the promise of a positive change for both teachers and students. And yet, some of these seemingly magical digital alternatives have fallen short when put to the test. Even so, the important thing to remember is not just what we have lost with their addition, but what we may have gained. In this section, I review some of the challenges related to online learning environments and geographic distance. Then, I explore some of the proposed alternatives and solutions to these issues, such as the promotion of social presence practices in these environments, and the possibility of creating online communities of learning. Finally, I delve into some of the phenomenological research on the topic of interpersonal relations and online environments.

Online Learning Environments and Geographic Distance

Studies have previously addressed some of the issues regarding the potential impact of being geographically remote for both students (Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011; Owens et al., 2009), and teachers (Dolan, 2011; Zagorski, 2011). Owens and her collaborators (2009), explored the experiences of students studying in geographically remote locations, and found there were some general issues that affect these learners. The general concerns that they found in their qualitative study included feeling isolated, missing the actual face-to-face contact with the teachers and other students, as well as a lack of confidence in managing the technology that was required to study. Interestingly, they also mentioned that for some people the online learning environment presented barriers to their engagement with some of the synchronous learning activities required, and somehow the staff had no idea of the barriers that were obstructing student engagement (Owens et al., 2009).

Some of these concerns were also forwarded by Erichsen and Bolliger (2011), in a study about international graduate student isolation in face-to-face and online environments. The authors concluded that online education carried a strong possibility of feeling isolated since most of the people involved did not meet in person during the course. And although these digital environments did seem to offer some advantages to students, such as having additional time to think about an answer, to reflect on instructional material, to carefully write and edit a written response to a discussion, and so forth, there were also some limitations. For example, "...students may experience higher levels of isolation because they have limited opportunities to participate in engaging learning communities and to receive important peer support" (Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011, p. 313). In the findings of this mixed-methodology research, these authors suggested that even when these international students could potentially perceive isolation in person, they might feel even more isolated when taking an online course.

Thus, these investigations suggests that online learning environments could potentially give the students an experience of seclusion and isolation, due in part to the actual geographical distance that prevent them to meet with their counterparts. Nonetheless, learners are not the only ones conceivably influenced by this phenomenon. Zagorski (2011), conducted a quantitative study to explore the effects of the online classroom on self-efficacy for elementary teachers. The author described that teachers might also experience isolation when instructing in an online environment, which could be associated with decreased levels of self-efficacy in their teaching practices. And so, these environments seem to be potentially troublesome not only for students in their learning process, but for teachers in their pedagogical practices too.

Another study, conducted by Dolan (2011), also centered on the experiences of isolation of online adjunct faculty members and its impact on performance. In this qualitative research, the author mentioned that not only the teaching practice was altered when dealing with online education. Too, the teacher could also experience a lack of sense of affiliation and loyalty to the institution, mainly due to the lack of recognition of their value to the school, the lack of opportunities for professional development from the institution, and an inadequate channel of communication with the school when working entirely off-campus.

In light of this seemingly unfavorable recount of online learning environments, it would seem that most of the experiences would involve some sort of barrier or limitation. However, a recent study on the evolution of online education at a small university told a different story (Carter & Graham, 2012). The authors stated that despite the geographical distance, online education had the potential to provide access to remote and rural communities where people had difficulties connecting with enriching and inspiring learning experiences. “Programs involving physical separation between teachers and students are best positioned if they are constructed around pedagogies that reflect the changing realities of 21st century learners and technological advances” (Carter & Graham, 2012, ¶ 22).

Online Learning Environments and Social Presence

Social presence refers to the “...feeling of being socially present with another person at a remote location” (Sallnäs, Rasmus-Gröhn, & Sjöström, 2000, p. 462). The authors mention that this construct is a combination of different factors such as capacity of a medium to transmit information concerning the tone of voice, gestures, facial expression, direction of looking, posture, touch, and other non-verbal cues. These different elements affect the level of social presence to which a medium could be perceived as warm, sensitive or personal when

interacting with other people, or impersonal and distant (Sallnäs et al., 2000). But how could this be applied to online learning environments? Some of the available research addressed the different factors regarding online social presence (Belair, 2012; Borup et al., 2012; Cleveland-Innes & Campbell, 2012; Murphy & Rodríguez-Manzanares, 2012), as well as the possible impact of social presence in student academic achievement (Baker, 2010; Kim et al., 2011; Kuo et al., 2014), and even a sense of community (Shackelford & Maxwell, 2012).

Exploring some of the factors that might influence online social presence, Murphy and Rodríguez-Manzanares (2012), completed a qualitative study on the subject of rapport in distance education. The authors mentioned that rapport has been recognized as an important component in learning, but still little was known about its importance in distance education. Their study explored the importance of rapport in distance—online—education as well as challenges and indicators of rapport-building in these education settings. The authors used open-ended interviews with 42 Canadian high-school teachers in online distance education settings, and their findings showed that rapport seemed to be particularly necessary in online distance learning because of the absence of face-to-face communication. Their results also mentioned that some of the challenges to building rapport were related to geographic distance of students, the asynchronous nature of these settings, teacher workload, limits of the software, as well as teachers and students not seeing the need for rapport.

On the same line, Cleveland-Innes and Campbell (2012), focused on studying the possibility of emotional presence in the online learning environment, and if this was deemed as a fundamental factor in such settings. This mixed-method research used information from a total of 217 student online surveys, as well as student discussions regarding their online experience. Their results described how emotions might be a constraint for learning if not well

managed, but they might also “...serve as an enabler in support thinking, decision making, stimulation, and directing. Online learning is replete, not fraught, with emotion” (Cleveland-Innes & Campbell, 2012, p. 285). Thus, the study showed how emotions could make another person seem socially present despite the geographic distance between the people involved.

Belair (2012), using a qualitative case study method explored how daily phone calls by teachers influenced students, and how those interactions contributed to the work habits of the learners involved in a virtual high school. The results from 18 teachers and 11 students observed and interviewed, showed that even though communication was an essential component, it seemed that written interaction, or a combination of multiple forms of communication, might have been more effective than just regular phone calls. Interestingly, as the author stated, this suggested that “...the transactional distance was not dictated by the school or location, but rather by the actions and perceptions of the students and teachers involved in the communication practices” (Belair, 2012, p. 115). Indeed, the different factors that influenced social presence seemed to be subjective, and perhaps it was not just about the amount of teacher-student interaction, but also the quality and the medium where it took place.

But what about another type of technological interaction? That is what Borup and his collaborators (2012), tried to investigate when focusing on improving online social presence through asynchronous video. This qualitative cross-case method research used semi-structured interviews with 18 participants that were enrolled in three different online courses with three different asynchronous video lectures strategies. Their results showed that for the majority of the students this video-based communication made the instructors seem more real, present and familiar, even comparable to some of their relationships with face-to-face teachers.

However, some of these studies also tackled the issue of how social presence in the online learning environments could potentially impact students' academic achievement, motivation and satisfaction. Kuo and her collaborators (2014), using a quantitative survey method, explored how interaction, Internet self-efficacy and self-regulated learning could be predictors of student satisfaction in online education courses. The authors collected data with an online survey in a sample of 221 graduate and undergraduate students that were currently enrolled in this type of courses. Their results showed that student-teacher interaction was a significant predictor of student satisfaction, as well as having an impact on the overall performance of the student.

Similarly, Kim and his collaborators (2011), studied different factors that might influence social presence and their relation with learning satisfaction in higher distance education. Using a quantitative method, the authors collected data from 81 distance education students, and their results revealed that variables such as gender, online learning experience, and work status might not have been as weighty to influence social presence or learning satisfaction in these online distance settings. However, their results also showed that media integration and teacher's quality of instruction seemed to affect both of these dimensions, and interestingly, the level of interactivity among participants was a strong predictor of social presence in the study. And so, it seems that in order to facilitate social presence in an online environments having seamless communication is key.

Baker (2010), sought to explore instructor immediacy and presence in an online learning environment, and determine how these two variables were related to student affective learning, cognition, and motivation. Especially, the author aimed to discover whether there was any evidence in which the reported instructor immediacy and presence differed by student

gender, classification (undergraduate or graduate), or course type (synchronous or asynchronous). Using a quantitative method, 699 online undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in any online courses at a mid-size regional university were asked to participate voluntarily in the survey. The results showed a statistically significant positive relationship between instructor immediacy and presence. Also, the findings revealed that both the instructor immediacy and presence were statistically significant predictors of student affective learning, cognition, and motivation. Moreover, the study also showed that students in synchronous online courses reported significantly higher instructor immediacy and presence than the learners enrolled in asynchronous online courses.

Since the experience of social presence might be utterly important for students' academic achievement, satisfaction, and even motivation in online learning environments, some research has been also focusing on the sense of connectedness and community online. For instance, Shackelford and Maxwell (2008), using a quantitative survey method, explored how learner to learner interaction could contribute to experience a sense of community in graduate online education. The authors gathered data from 381 surveys which centered on what types of interaction are most predictive of students' sense of community in these courses. Their results showed that interactions such as introductions, collaborative group projects, sharing personal experiences, entire class discussions, as well as exchanging resources were most predictive of a sense of community in online learning environments.

Online Learning Environments and Phenomenology

Technology mediated relations have also been explored phenomenologically. Dobson (2005), for instance, asked what it was like to keep in touch by email, and studied this experience by comparing this type of correspondence with the traditional letter writing. For

the author, both instances were revealing forms of writing: by telling about ourselves we direct our gaze to the other, and by sending a text we know ourselves as gazed upon. And so, this type of correspondence could make possible the experience of a certain in-touchness: “Internet or email contacts are often experienced as highly intense also because of the nature of the language used in electronic writing” (Dobson, 2005, p. 98). The author commented that, despite email being usually characterized as less personal than letter writing, the sensation of immediacy of contact of this medium seemed to carry a sense of presence, and ultimately the possibility of a high degree of intimacy.

Friesen (2005), inquired about what happened to classroom conversations when the people involved were not physically present to each other. The author claimed that

We have to look beyond the explicit “cues” or “signals” that are the domain of communication theory. Instead, we need to be aware of phenomena like the lapidary, abstract character of writing, the interplay of naming and identity, or the role of the body’s absence in experiences like lurking and delurking. We have to recognize that an online class is, in many senses of the word, a place where there is no “body”.

(Friesen, 2005, p. 235)

In his study, the author attempted to describe the nature of everyday conversations in the online learning environment. He stated that in order to understand the many potentialities and characteristics of the online setting, we are required to be attentive to the lived experiences to those who actually have participated in this medium.

Similarly, van Manen (2010), examined the forms of contact afforded by instant messaging and texting on wireless mobile technologies such as the cellphone. The researcher compared these technologies, as well as social networking technologies, with the Greek

mythology god Momus, which was the first to express an explicit desire to access what was hidden in the human heart by means of a technology. And so, he asked if these technologies are "...profoundly altering the quality and nature of social relations, and especially the possibility of and need for self-identity, solitude, intimacy, and closeness among young people?" (van Manen, 2010, p. 1023). After exploring both the shift from public and private spheres, as well as the possibility of experiencing *textual intimacy*, the author appealed to still maintain opportunities for the experience of secrecy and the hidden, even "...in our increasingly technological and digital world" (van Manen, 2010, p. 1030).

Aguila (2011), explored experiences of togetherness while apart on Skype. She paid special attention to the existentials of lived time and lived space. "Digitizing and simplifying the complexity of intimacy may come at price. That price may be in how technology intensifies, magnifies, and qualifies the intricate play of closeness and distance in our relationships" (Aguila, 2011, p. 311). The author described how Skype seemed to create the illusion of being together because it allows people to bring distant sound and distant images closer. And yet, it seemed that it could also emphasize the distance between people, since the very screen that drew them together at the same time kept them apart.

Returning to online learning environments, Adams (2014), researched the experiential significance of the use of one's own and others' given names in virtual classrooms. The author explored the enigma of the other in the names without faces, but also the sense of *who-ness* that we may end up experiencing through their online names. Too, being named was delineated as a way to be drawn into a sphere of closeness and responsibility in the online classroom.

The teacher pairs an online student with another, and it awakens in him a sense of responsibility for his classmate. This same student, in finding himself mentioned by a fellow student in the context of an online forum discussion, is drawn into a more intimate, attentive relational sphere with this individual. Such moments remind us that when we are addressed by name—whether online or offline, we feel singled out in our personhood. (Adams, 2014, p. 58)

In another study, Adams, Yin, Vargas Madriz, and Mullen (2014) investigated students' experiences of learning in an xMOOC. An xMOOC is a Massive Online Open Course that is primarily organized around test-like examinations and focuses on teacher video lectures. The authors mentioned that the online learning setting afforded by these kind of courses seemed to create unique relations of pedagogical effect and influence, which may be described in some cases as a unique and intimate tutorial sphere. "On the one hand, the student was aware he was participating in a class with tens of thousands of others, on the other hand, in his day-to-day ... the student came to perceive the instructor as engaging him personally in a private, tutorial way" (Adams et al., 2014, p. 7). The authors noted that the possibility of experiencing a sense of one-on-one instruction has captured the interest of many scholars for its potential in online teaching and education, even if this particular sense of personal guidance is only experienced by a comparative small group of the xMOOC students.

Methodology

The fundamental idea of phenomenology is to orient to the primordial sphere of human existence, where meanings originate, well up, percolate through the porous membranes of past sedimentations (memories, habits, cultural and personal styles)—

then infuse, infect, touch, and stir us, and exercise a (trans)formative affect. (van Manen, 2013, ¶ 3)

This study uses a qualitative research methodology called “phenomenology of practice” (van Manen, 2014). This particular phenomenological approach was developed especially for studying educational environments, and therefore it is particularly suited for revealing practical insights in different learning settings (van Manen, 1990, 2014). For that reason, phenomenology of practice is more than appropriate to explore the sense of closeness to others in online learning environments, and then providing pedagogically relevant insights for current and potential online instructors, developers in charge of learning tools, as well as academia.

Doing phenomenology means developing a pathos for the great texts, and simultaneously, reflecting in a phenomenological manner on the lived meanings of everyday experiences, phenomena, and events. Writing phenomenology, in this sense, is not done primarily for philosophers, but for professional practitioners and others who are interested in approaching their professional tasks, personal activities, and everyday experiences in a phenomenological style. (van Manen, 2014, p. 23)

Phenomenology pays attention to the primordial stream of the lived *now*, as it is presented to us in everyday life, before we attempt to theorize, conceptualize or reflect in some way upon the living moment. However, trying to attend to this lived *now* is a complex task, since the researcher always arrives too late. Adams (2014), mentions that a participant’s description of a recollected moment is never going to be the same as the originary experience, since time, distance, the limits of language and the quirks of memory will tarnish the actual description. Too, there is always more to every lived moment than we can possibly describe in words.

Thus, the phenomenological researcher proceeds with an understanding and respect for the limits of language.

Doing phenomenology calls for the investigator to cultivate insights by reading phenomenological literature, to reflect on lived experience descriptions in a phenomenological way, looking for themes that “...give meaning to the phenomenon, signifying its unique lived-through qualities” (Adams, 2010, p. 3), and to continuously write in a phenomenologically-sensitive manner as well. This later component is particularly difficult for researchers since writing itself is a reflective aspect of the phenomenological method. “To write is to reflect, to write is to research”, and too, such writing is “writing in the dark” (van Manen, 2014, p. 20). Thus, phenomenological writing is a challenging process of trying to recover the way we experience our lived world, our lived *now*. To assist in this process, van Manen (2014), has provided multiple approaches to analysis including macro and micro (line-by-line) thematic reflection, exploring the existentials (*lived time, lived space, lived body, lived things, and lived relation*), and different forms of the reduction. The reduction derives from Husserl’s and later Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical approaches and intends to rediscover a more direct and originary contact with the lived world.

Data Sources

In this study, data was generated via in-depth phenomenological interviews with five adult university students recruited via snowball sampling, starting with someone who was known to the investigator, and who had previously taken any form of online course. “A central feature of phenomenological research is the gathering of a field of descriptive evidence from which underlying patterns and structures of experience can be drawn” (Adams, 2010, p. 4). The goal of these interviews (*see Appendix A*) was to obtain a more detailed and concrete

picture of what it is like for students to experience closeness in the context of an online learning environment. The interviews were transcribed; then these transcripts were examined for Lived Experience Descriptions (LEDs), which refer to recollected moments from students' experiences of closeness in online learning environments. The intent of collecting these remembered moments is to be in a better position to describe and re-evolve "...our immediate, pre-reflective consciousness of life" (van Manen, 1990, p. 35). In phenomenology, these moments have a distinct importance because they are the foundations for later reflection, and serve to orient all subsequent analysis on the phenomenon.

Ethical Considerations

Because this study involved human participants and their interview data, ethics approval was needed, specifically in compliance with the Canadian Tri-Council Policy Statement (*TCPS 2*) guidelines and the University Human Research Ethics Policy. The study had the approval of the University of Alberta Ethics Board—obtained through the course EDSE 611 Phenomenological Research and Writing under the supervision of Dr. Catherine Adams—in order to ensure the ethical procedures related to the investigation. All the participants received a research letter (*see Appendix B*), and an informed consent form (*see Appendix C*) with detailed information about the study, the researcher and the background, before they engaged in the study. The anonymity of the participants was ensured during the collection, transcription and reporting of the data, by (1) the use of pseudonyms, and (2) avoiding asking about personal information—with the exception of age and gender. The transcript data and consent forms will be stored in a secure location for a period of 5 years from its original collection, and after this period of time they will be completely deleted and destroyed.

Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were closely examined for LEDs. These prereflective, recollected moments were extracted and then returned to the research participants to ask if that was what it was like for them to experience closeness in an online learning environment. These LEDs were then analyzed phenomenologically via the application of multiple human science and philosophical methods. Human science methods include analyzing each LED across the existential dimensions of *lived* time (how clock time may be experienced as moving quickly or slowly) , *lived* body (how our bodies often seem to disappear when we go about the day), *lived* space (how we may find ourselves in a place other than our actual physical location) , *lived* things (how things often seem to become an extension of our bodies), and *lived* relations (how we may find ourselves connecting with one another) (van Manen, 1990, 2014). These existential dimensions are common to all human experience so they are very helpful in teasing out unique phenomenological aspects of a given phenomenon. Two types of thematic analyses are also used to explore some of the underlying meaning structures of each LED—wholistic and line-by-line. In phenomenology themes are not intended as a generalized outcome of the research, but as heuristics to help uncover the possible meanings inhering in a particular description and are subsequently integrated into the phenomenological writing.

Philosophical methods include van Manen's (2014) "reductions", a term derived from philosophy and adapted for this qualitative approach to research and writing. The reductions include the heuristic reduction which wonders about the phenomenon through trying to bracket one's attitude of taken-for-granted-ness; the experiential reduction which aims to attend to the concreteness of the experience; the hermeneutic reduction which tries to bracket all previous interpretation and theoretical biases; the eidetic reduction which intends to draw

nearer to the phenomenon by identifying possible variations of the experience as well as describing what the phenomenon is not; and the methodological reduction whereby previous approaches to the phenomenon are laid aside and new ones tried. During the analysis process, the work was continuously submitted to other peers who continued the process of questioning whether this was what the experience was like, and also to counterbalance my own bias. The following is an example of a lived experience description collected in a phenomenological study of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC):

I login on Canvas and look for the information for the first week. I complete the video tutorial, and start going through the other links. There is little guidance, I don't know if I have correctly understood the required activities. I feel a little overwhelmed. I am supposed to choose some readings among the reference list, but which ones are the more relevant to the topic of this week? Which ones does the teacher recommend? I notice that there's no interaction yet: no messages, no announcements, and no signs of the others. I am sure this will be some interactions when I reach to the co-op tasks, but where are the people now? I start to feel a bit lonely. (Adams et al., 2014, p. 11)

In this LED, the student is recalling the first time that he logged into his MOOC. He describes how he thought that there was little guidance in the online course, and that he noticed there was no interaction of any kind, and shortly after he started feeling lonely wondering about the apparent absence of others, both students and the teacher. Lived relations, as illustration of an existential reflection, may be examined here as painting a picture of what the online student says about the experience of others in his anecdote, and paying special attention to the underlying meaning structures. What is he revealing about the quality of classmates and teachers in a MOOC? What is he telling us about the importance of interaction and guidance

in educational settings? We could answer these questions by using a line-by-line analysis in which we would try to understand the meaning of the experience of the individual, and drawing out preliminary themes around the lived relations existential. What is “*there is little guidance*” really saying? What does “*I don’t know if I have correctly understood the required activities*” say about the relations in this online classroom? We could then make use of some theoretical insights, not as a way to support our reflection, but as a way to gain a deeper understanding about the phenomenon. Too, an eidetic analysis could compare the lived dimensions of his online classroom to experiences that may similarly happen in face-to-face settings. We may wonder about what it would be like to start a face-to-face class without the presence of any classmates or teacher. How would this look like in another environment? What would be another possible variations of this phenomenon? Perhaps, what would it look like if the student had logged in and had found study guides and lots of conversations? In the study that immediately follows, similar techniques were employed in analyzing the phenomenon of closeness as experienced in an online learning environment.

A phenomenological study, and most especially a phenomenology of practice (van Manen, 2014), is characterized by a particular approach to writing that reflects on the reductions. Perhaps the most noticeable aspect of this type of writing is the consistent pattern of lived experience description (denoted by italicized block quotes below) followed by an in-depth reflection on the *lived* moment, in order to draw out nuanced phenomenological meanings and insight into the experience. This “anecdote-reflection” writing couplet (Adams, 2014, p. 52) demonstrates adherence to the experiential reduction, and depending on the quality of the reflections, to the balance of the reductions.

A Phenomenology of Closeness in Online Learning Environments

When we think about a moment when we have felt close to another, we may recollect spending time with a loved one, or sharing some moments with our childhood friend, tossing a ball back and forth, skipping rope together, or passing notes under our desks at school. Perhaps, we may recall a family celebration, the time when we felt a special connection to our parents or maybe one sibling in particular. We may even remember the sense of warmth we felt toward another creature, for instance the dog or cat who always seemed to be there for us despite what may have been happening in our lives. And yet, if asked about an experience of closeness, how many of us would immediately think of an online experience, when our relationship with one another is mediated by one of today's many social and communication technologies?

Right now, if we think of the people closest to us in our life, we may realize that our most recent conversations with them have probably occurred via text messaging, a phone call, or even over the Internet on Skype or Facebook. It seems that this technologized environment may now be mediating many of our closest relationships. But what about building a relationship with someone we have not yet met, or that perhaps we will never meet in person? Can we still get a sense of closeness to this someone?

Nowadays, online components in courses, or even an entirely online classroom, are not out of the ordinary. We may find ourselves going to school by sitting in front of a computer, and talking to teachers and classmates through a chat box. In such situations, we may be communicating with people that we will may never meet in person. And so, what does the advent of online learning environments mean for our relational sensibilities with one another?

How, if at all, may online students experience their classmates or teacher in a personal way?

Indeed, what happens to our experience of others in the virtual classroom?

It is the first time I am meeting simultaneously with the rest of my online class. I have only read some of their comments on the forum, but we have never been interacting at the same time. It is almost 7 o'clock. The instructors start greeting everybody, asking us to introduce ourselves to the rest of the group. I am feeling excited and anxious at the same time. Suddenly, lots of names, sharing different backgrounds and interests start to pop up on the screen. Everything is happening so fast that I can barely keep track of what everybody is writing. Too, this more personal information adds to what I had already begun to think of these people. As the synchronous session continues, the instructors pose different questions for us to reflect on. I try to answer most of them to show people that I care and that I studied. Still, no one has responded to my comments. I feel somewhat lonely. Then suddenly one of my answers somewhat seems to catch everyone's attention. "You are right!" "That is a good point." "I agree with you." "Such an interesting perspective." I start receiving replies from almost all of my classmates and even the instructors. I am stunned. For me, it seems almost surreal that people from all over the world are talking directly to me, replying to me, and agreeing with me. They do not have a clue of who I am, nor do I have a real sense of who they are, and still we are all speaking to one another as if we do. Before I know it, the instructors are saying that it is time to say goodbye. An hour has already passed, yet it felt like no time at all! I look away from my screen and I notice the books on my desk. It is past 8pm and all of a sudden I begin to feel very hungry. It is almost as if I had

forgotten where I was, or that I had not eaten dinner yet. I was utterly immersed on the online space, together, with them. (Online student)

In the space of a synchronous online classroom, this student describes initially feeling secluded and somewhat lonely. Then suddenly, an exchange of words moved her to feel a sense of closeness and togetherness with the others in the class. As the session ends, she is surprised to re-emerge in her everyday surroundings, and to her hungry body. She was clearly somewhere else, she was “in” her online class, a space where she seemed to have experienced an initial sense of collegiality, and companionship with others. We may even start to wonder if a sense of closeness to another online is as impossible or unusual as it may first appear. Now, consider for a moment a face-to-face classroom.

Walking to campus on my first day after the Christmas break, I am feeling a bit anxious about going back to school. This is certainly an advanced class, and I am not sure if I will be up for the task. I wonder who is going to be there. “At least I already know the teacher.” I say to myself in a reassuring way. I enter the building, walk through the hallway and I find myself a little lost. It is my first time in this building. I finally find the classroom after a while of wandering around, and as I walk in, I encounter a sea of unknown faces. Smiling, I timidly say “Hi” and quickly start to explore the rest of the room. I look to the front and the teacher greets me with a smile. I choose to sit next to him. I am eagerly waiting for somebody I know, maybe a former classmate, to arrive. But I grow uneasy as the minutes go by and no signs of a familiar face. Then suddenly the door opens. I look up and I recognize her. I wave my hand feeling animated and smile. She greets a couple of people and head my way to sit next

to me. "Hi, Kate! I didn't know you were taking this class." She smiles and nods, and just before we could start chatting the class starts. (Face-to-face student)

In both the online and the face-to-face anecdotes, it seems that, as a student approaches a new classroom situation, the experience of closeness with other classmates may be an eagerly anticipated or at least a hope for event. These two students find themselves waiting to become acquainted with the rest of the group, hoping to get to know who their classmates are, and perhaps even to develop a sense of camaraderie with the others. And yet, we may also ponder if simply meeting a familiar face gives us a definitive sense of closeness. We will hardly feel close to every acquaintance, though at times we may feel momentarily close to someone that is not necessarily our friend. Thus, as part of our social contact, we may get to know many of our classmates well, be familiar with their concerns and joys, without necessarily feeling close to any of them.

But perhaps in the virtual setting, as the online student describes, there may have been a special enthusiasm to communicate, to have some sort of connection that could help her transcend the obvious distance, and get to know her online classmates despite not being able to meet them in-person. Joining others in a "*simultaneous meeting*" carried a distinctive significance for this student, beyond the regular asynchronous online learning environment. Technology seems to present a puzzle as it both introduces limits to our conversations, but also allows these interactions to happen in the first place. Do we get a sense of closeness when we feel like we are moving beyond the technology, or is technology actually situating our experience of closeness? For the online students, there would not be a simultaneous meeting to go to, or an opportunity to talk with people from all over the world if the technology did not exist.

Face-to-face, we do not even contemplate the idea of a simultaneous meeting, since that is how we meet in person. Is an asynchronous face-to-face meeting even possible? But online, a synchronous meeting seem to be valued in a different way. Here the student may finally find the conversational semblance of an ongoing and extemporaneous interplay with other that is simply taken-for-granted in person. Moreover, although both the online and the face-to-face students seem to expect some sense of closeness to the others, the way they seem to experience the classroom appears to be very different. Online, the student is unable to apprehend the smiles, hear the tenor of the greetings, or notice the familiar friend that walks into the room, social aspects of the classroom experience that are readily available to the face-to-face student. In the virtual setting, it is the words, comments, and conversations that unfold that provided a context in which a sense of closeness could take root—or not. And so, what seems to be happening to our relational sensibilities with one another in the online classroom?

Closeness Online May Be Found “With Real People, With Real Questions”

The lecture just finished, but we had decided to stay and talk about ideas for our group presentation. It is the second class, and we need to define our topic. “The purpose of our presentation is.” I see that one of my classmates is starting to type some very academic ideas. The rest of us begin typing and throwing most of our ideas textually in the chat room. I am trying to contribute with some ideas, but I have no clue of what we need to do. Then, one of my group members enables her microphone. “Well, I am confused. I am not sure what we are supposed to do. I am not sure this is the right course for me.” He sounds a little timid and insecure. He clicks off his microphone. There is a pause, but then another person says the same thing. I start to feel an unexpected sense of relief. “I am dealing with real people, with real questions.” I

remember thinking. “Me too! I do not know what are we supposed to do with this course.” Now everybody is talking instead of texting on the chat. I feel that I can relate to these people now, that I can start letting down my guard. After that, I stopped trying to make sure all my postings are perfect, and just share my own uncertainties, thoughts, and questions. (Online student)

A student used to the presence of her classmates through face-to-face conversation may be confronted with a sense of loss in a silent, and somewhat isolated, online environment. But when the student hears the uncertainties and vulnerabilities in the voices of others, a sense of closeness begins to grow. As the virtual group reveals personal concerns about the course, the student seems to cultivate a sense of shared experience and hints of camaraderie that were absent up until that moment.

An online student hesitant about what to contribute may choose to follow the lead of another classmate in order to collaborate and feel a part of the group. Even without a clear understanding of what the assignment requires of her, she chooses to carry on typing and contributing. Then all of a sudden, a new dimension is revealed. In the middle of the academic discussion, a virtual classmate risks speaking via his voice rather than continuing to text. He shares his uncertainties with the rest of the group, and reveals a hidden aspect of himself that immediately resonates with the others. “I do not really experience the subjectivity of the other until I am able to overcome the centeredness of myself in the world. The fascinating fact is that my possibility of the experience of the otherness of other, resides in my experience of the vulnerability of the other” (van Manen, 1991, p. 140). The student’s own confusions, hesitations, and insecurities—those emotions that a moment ago she thought she needed to guard from the rest of the group—emerge and are recognized by her.

Her classmate may have possibly felt somewhat safe to confide his hesitations because he was sharing with just a part of the whole class, in a work group brought together for a presentation. Perhaps, the fact that the instructor was not present also allowed him to speak freely and share his private uncertainties. Maybe he sensed that the other students did not have an idea about what to do either, despite the fact that they were all writing about the assignment. Disclosing we do not understand something or that we are confused may be daunting for some people, especially for students in an academic context. A revelation of this kind may be easier, and even safer, to keep hidden from others, in an attempt to safeguard our academic integrity. And so, in some ways, it is almost as if this online classmate was confiding with the rest of the group a little secret that ended up being highly resonant for the rest of the students. But, does sharing something personal like a secret give people a sense of closeness?

The word *close* comes from the Old French “*clos*” for *confined, concealed, secret*, and from the Latin “*clausus*” for *close, reserved*. If we look in a dictionary we see that *close* may denote *to be confined to specific persons or groups*. And so, *close* can refer to a shared secret, or even a shared sense of secrecy between people. Perhaps, we may imagine two school friends, wishing to have some fun, decide to skip school for a day and instead play their favorite sport or video game. They swear never to tell anyone, and the secret is confined only to them. We may believe that a secret may indeed bring two friends closer to each other. But we may also ponder what happens if one of them is caught and is forced to reveal their escapade.

“[W]hen secrets are shared, disclosed, and confined between partners, then the interpersonal relation tends to turn even more intimate, more close, more sharing” (van

Manen & Levering, 1996, p. 12). The sense of shared secrecy may seem to bring some people closer when secrets are kept confined, when people involved know they are holding something personal that binds them together. The possibility of a shared sphere opens up to us, and we have the opportunity to decide whether we want to be part of it or not, to share the secret or not. And so, for the online student it seems that the invitation to share in the opened sphere of the personal gave her the opportunity to begin experiencing a sense of closeness to others in this virtual environment. Perhaps for online students, this kind of information is an invitation to start thinking about the others as “*real people with real questions*” and recognizable concerns. But we may also start to wonder about what this would be like in a face-to-face classroom.

After a brief introduction, the teacher starts to explain the syllabus. We all have a printed copy, and we can follow along as she reads it aloud. I see that Kate and some people are skipping ahead to the evaluation section. I see their strong facial reactions to what they are reading. “What could it be?” I wonder nervously. I look at Kate and she does seem to be upset. The teacher starts reading the evaluation section: now I understand their faces. “So much work!” I whisper to Kate. She looks at me with a concerned look on her face and nods. Then, during the break, she tells me she does not feel suited for the course. “Me neither” I admit with a strange sense of relief. A group of classmates close by overhear our conversation and join us. “Are you also planning to drop the course?” one of them asks. “I think I will drop this one. After all I am only a part time student.” Says another. We all start talking. (Face-to-face student)

Does sharing a secret thought or revealing a personal feeling really bring us closer? Perhaps for the online student, sharing a sense of secrecy may be the portal through which she sees

herself in the words of the other group members. In the context of a timid expression of a concern, enduring the difficult silences between each phrase, the small but brave confession of the virtual classmate seems to draw the student close not only to this person, but to the group of others that also shares her own uncertainties. In the face-to-face classroom, although confiding in one another may too gather people close, a secret in such a situation may not necessarily reveal to the student that she is talking to “*real people*”.

An online student may possibly have a sudden sense of dealing with no real—or perhaps unreal—people in the virtual classroom. Without their faces or their physical presence, the online classmates may not be seen as real as their in-person counterparts. Merely words with names are what continuously keep popping out on the screen, and the student is not able to see any face or hear any voice. “Perhaps it is this conspicuous absence of the body that has something to do with [the student’s initial] hesitation to get involved” (Friesen, 2005, p. 226). Our sense of being present with real people online may not emerge until there is a tone, literally giving voice to the concerns being shared that resonate with us. Thus allowing the student to let down her guard, stop concealing herself behind seemingly perfect comments, and find a sense of closeness with her virtual group mates. And still, does simply hearing another’s voice bring a sense of closeness?

In the face-to-face classroom, a student may be accustomed to the voices of their classmates, the idiosyncrasies in their choice of words, the different tones in their speech, as well as their moments of silence. And yet, the student may be so used to them, that he may not be actually hearing any of these voices. In person, we all notice the presence of the others through their physical appearance, gestures, facial expressions, tones and accents. But then we seem to take all of this for granted until we find ourselves in a virtual environment. Although

still important, perhaps listening to his classmates' voices may not be of particular significance to the sense of closeness for the face-to-face student.

For the online student, perhaps the unexpected shift from text to speech may have set an unexpected opening and invited a new attentiveness to the words of her classmate. "What lies within these voices, central to the very way we experience world, is almost too complex to deal with. For much is said in even the single expression... For the sound of voice already bespeaks much." (Ihde, 2007, p. 196) Voices seem to endorse a much more fluid dialogue, in which ideas are more rapidly expressed, and allow the online student to get a better sense of what her group is experiencing in the moment. Too, perhaps the voice is not only an easier way to share and express ourselves online, but a reminder, a reminiscence, of the personal presence of the others. Online, a voice may tell us that someone is real, a "*real person*". With their laughs, their sighs, their doubts, confessions, and shared uncertainties, the spoken voice online may provide invitation to know one another more intimately, and to potentially grow closer with one another.

Closeness Online May Be Found Sharing a Distancing Experience

A lecture had just been given online by a really renowned person that our instructor had invited, and now he is asking us questions about what he just said. I can only hear his voice, but I cannot see him right now. I know what he looks like because I googled him, but that is about it. I notice he brings a very different energy to the group, and it almost seems like it is impossible to communicate with him. I am dreading the moment he asks me to answer one question. He is being very imposing and authoritative, giving us exactly two minutes and forty seconds to answer the question he posed. In our class, we usually have open discussions. I grow restless. Suddenly, it is my turn to

respond to his question. I feel tense, my shoulders are all the way up to my ears; I barely get a breath out and mumble some words. I keep looking out of my window, wanting to escape, and wishing this is over. I am finished and he moves on to my next classmate. I notice nobody has much to say, and it dawns on me that we are all experiencing the same discomfort. I feel like we are all enduring this moment, thinking what we should give this person to make him happy and get it over with. In this, we are all together. I can hear in their voices that one by one they are going through what I just experienced. "Come on! You can do it! Hang in there! It is almost over!" I start to think as the rest of the group takes its turn. I almost want to wrap my arms around them to help them feel that they are not on their own. (Online student)

In the midst of feeling unexpectedly alone and distant, a sense of closeness seems to suddenly arise. An online student, accustomed to having more open discussions with her fellow classmates, finds herself frustrated and alone in the face of a question-answer regime being imposed by a distinguished lecturer. Then, having lived through her own moment of responding to the timed demand of the guest, she recognizes the same fluster and confusion in almost all of the following students. Surprisingly, it is in her sense of the shared-ness of each other's experience that her sense of closeness unfolds. Yet, we may once more wonder if this is so different from a similar situation in a face-to-face classroom.

After the break, Kate and I return to the class holding a cup of coffee. We find a surprise guest at the front instead of our teacher. We look at each other somehow wondering if any of us recognizes who he is, but we both seem lost. Suddenly, the teacher walks in with a bottle of water for the guest, and resumes the class by introducing him. "He is the former instructor and founder of this course." He says in a

seemingly proud manner. "He looks completely different from what I thought." I start to think as I examine him from head to toe. We all know he is a very important person in the faculty, and a big name in the area. Everybody seems now eager to listen to him, to know what he has to say. Then, he starts to talk but strangely nobody seems to understand what he is saying. After he finishes his presentation, he asks if there are any questions for him, but all we hear is silence. I look at Kate and she rapidly glances at me with apparent discomfort. Nobody is looking at him. Instead, all of us are looking at each other trying to decipher who will break this awkward silence with a question. Then, after a few seconds that feel like minutes, a fellow classmate asks a question. Kate looks at me with a sense of relief. (Face-to-face student)

In person, a student can more easily distinguish that none of his classmates has anything to say with just a glance at each other's eyes. The students may simply look at one another and recognize their implicit understanding of staying quiet. Silence, and even direct questioning, may not be experienced as threatening by these students, since they are all sharing an unspoken shared non-understanding, an awareness about each other's lack of contributions to the discussion. But still, is this mutual recognition also the experience of closeness?

If we go back to the dictionary once more, we discover that another definition for the word *close* reads *to be bound by mutual interests, loyalties, or affections*. We may consider, for example, lovers enjoying each other's company over a romantic dinner suddenly finding themselves in the middle of an argument. Here the sense of intimacy and connection is unexpectedly replaced with disconnection and aloneness, and only the wine glasses and candlelight suggest closeness was once present. How strange that we may feel so close to someone, and then all of the sudden we may start feeling so utterly alone. How odd that

despite being able to distinguish feelings such as love or passion, we may nonetheless find ourselves feeling distant and disconnected from one another. And yet, even in this moment of argument, compared to the strangers eating beside the couple, they may feel closer to each other than they do to the strangers. A couple may still find a modicum of closeness even if they are angry with each other. Closeness seems to be both relational and relative; but too, it is fragile, though once built, it may not ever fully dissipate.

Knowing many or few things about someone may tell us little about how we may experience a moment with that person. Indeed, just by hearing his voice, the online student notices that sharing, connecting, or feeling close appears to be difficult or practically impossible, despite her previous hearsay knowledge about the guest speaker. Whether online or in a face-to-face class, a sense of closeness may be difficult to attain if the student feels it is impossible to communicate with the other. Instead of wanting to converse, she may now find herself apprehensive, even dreading to talk to this apparently unfriendly individual. Intriguingly, the voice of the other may not only be the path to closeness, but may also stand as an obstacle that separates us, or at least signal an otherwise implicit disconnection.

In the context of the online situation, evoking the artificiality of the question-answer system may at the same time hinder the possibilities of a conversation, whereby the online student is asked to respond mechanically. We may even be reluctant to consider this as an account of real communication. Here, feeling drawn to and close to someone may involve recognising, or at least respecting, class dynamics and the structure of the virtual group, and appreciating the possibilities and technical affordances for conversing with one another. Online, inflexibility, time constraints, and tampering with the familiar seem to obstruct the experience of closeness for a student.

Too, despite or perhaps even because of unfavourable circumstances, closeness may be found when we notice that there are others sharing our same experience. Suddenly, the online student may understand she is not the only person enduring the situation, but that the rest of the group is also going through this nervousness, this uneasiness, and this jittery feeling. She may find herself in a new place in the online class, where she stops being isolated, and starts participating together with the others. And yet, we may also wonder how does the student sense they are really sharing the same experience?

The student seems to discern a sense of shared-ness from the voices of her classmates, suggesting her that they are going through a similar experience: "*In this they are all together*". We may feel close to our friends, but sometimes we may also feel somewhat disconnected, even lonely, standing in front of them or talking on the phone. We may too feel close to a teacher, or some friends from our class, or maybe we may have never experienced such connection with anyone at school. In spite of going through similar experiences, each person seems to live each encounter with their own particularities and interpretations. And yet, thinking that we may somehow be sharing the same or similar experience as our peers seems to give us a sense of closeness. For the online student, it does not actually matter if in fact they are all experiencing the same or not, it is the experience of shared-ness that is important for her, what gives her a sense of closeness.

And so, when a student feels as part of the group, even when enduring a distancing or difficult experience, she may find herself connected and unexpectedly close to her virtual classmates. The student may even experience this tacit communion as a desire to encourage her classmates through the difficult experience. Thinking she knows how it feels like to be in their position, she may be supportive and strive to develop an even closer relation with the

others. “It is neither my original life, nor yours, rather, it is what is common to us” (Patočka, 1988, p. 68). Interestingly, the experience of closeness seems to be most palpably felt in the wake of feeling distant.

Closeness Online May Be Found Sharing a Personal Space

Sitting at my home desk with my laptop, I am ready for the weekly online meet-up with the rest of the class. I am 10 minutes early and I notice that I am the first student to login. Both instructors are already online and one of them eagerly greets me. “You are the first one! Welcome! How was your week?” The words pop out on the screen as she types. I smile and immediately start typing my response: “I am fine! How are you?” I am trying to be friendly. We start chatting about the course, my work, and what needs to be done during the next hour of our online meeting. Before I notice, it is time for the session to officially start; but strangely enough, I am still the only student online. “This is awkward.” I start to think. Both instructors are focusing on my work while none of my classmates is here to help out. But after a while, my concerns fall away. I am receiving one-on-one guidance on my writing, my overall performance and what I need to improve. This time both of them are here just for me, and instead of being frightening, it is a warm and personal encounter. Indeed, it is the closest I have ever felt to them. I even forgot that we are thousands of kilometers apart: for a brief moment, for me, they are just a few words away. (Online student)

An uncomfortable moment in an online classroom may suddenly and unexpectedly transform into an experience of closeness. While a student may feel at ease with the online presence of many virtual classmates, she may feel awkward realizing she is the only one online with her teachers, perhaps feeling in the spotlight of being evaluated. But as she grows accustomed to

the one-to-one communication, she enters a sphere of closeness where she finds herself sharing with her virtual teachers.

Learning in an online environment, a student may feel the need to prepare herself for the lecture, arranging a quiet space to reduce interruptions, or maybe logging in earlier to confirm there are no changes in the class. Indeed, by doing this the student opens up the possibility to experience some awkwardness when finding herself online with just the teacher, yet not really knowing what to talk about. But at the same time, showing up early to the class may too be the opportunity for a more personal contact between the group members.

In the face-to-face class, if a student shows up early to class, he may purposefully sit a bit far from his schoolmates and the teacher to avoid interaction. Still, he remains present in the eyes of the others, even if he neither participate in any in-class activities nor converse with anyone. In the online setting, in contrast, it is not as easy to identify someone's presence. Here, an eager greeting from the teacher may break the disconnection and build a rather personal contact. Instead of waiting for the lecture to begin, the student is now engaging in a conversation with the instructors. How interesting that something that seems as basic as our presence could be so different from one setting to another. It seems to be so ordinary for us to notice other people, even if we are not really paying any attention to them, that perhaps realizing we may not be noticed online seems to draw us closer to one another. Is it even possible to be in a classroom with another person without noticing her presence? Let's consider what would happen in a similar face-to-face situation.

The teacher announces this is it for the first class. Everybody heads towards the door and quickly disappears into the hallway. I take my time picking up my things, and I wave good-bye at the newly known faces of the classroom. Kate says "Bye" and tells

me to text her later to go for lunch one of these days. Then suddenly, I am the only one left with the teacher. I smile at him. I feel a bit uncomfortable, and I try to hurry up to head outside. Then, I hear his voice. "What do you think of the course?" He says in a friendly tone. I feel on the spot and start to wonder if he has heard about what we were talking about during the break. "It seems very interesting, but I am not sure if I have the experience required for the course" He appears to be reflecting on my words as if he did not expect an answer like this. "No, you should not feel that way. I know you and I am sure you are more than adequate for this course." I smile politely. As we both walk out of the classroom, I start talking about my concerns and he listens carefully. "Let's talk some more next week." He says as we getting close to his office. I nod and wave my hand good-bye. (Face-to-face student)

The teacher's pedagogical interest in one particular student may denote the distinction between a common and unexceptional educational experience and an experience of closeness for that student. But still, how could an online classroom be very personal when they are not even in-person? As a student, perhaps there is a certain expectation of what goes on in a classroom, and realizing that she is the only one online may be something entirely unexpected, turning into an awkward personal experience. Indeed, the unpredictable-ness of the event carries certain discomfort. We have grown used to the idea that current technologies seem to afford to some extent the feeling of protection and security behind the screen and the keyboard. "Technology [is] the knack of so arranging the world that we don't have to experience it" (Frisch, 1957/1959, p. 178). Thus, online, a student may not be comfortable feeling in the spotlight when typing a response or posting a comment, less to have the undivided attention of two teachers focusing on her work.

Then again, a face-to-face student can certainly find himself being also the center of attention, being on the spotlight. Running into our teacher, either before or after the class, can open up the possibility for an awkward or a personal experience. Picking up his things, saying good-bye to his classmates, the student suddenly realizes his teacher is the only one left in the classroom. Feeling uncomfortable, and trying to hurry up to the exit, the student seems to similarly evade the potential close contact with his teacher. Here, contrasting with the times when the students recall feeling close to classmates, the possibility of a personal experience with a teacher seems to be anticipated with some sort of apprehension and concern.

How come both students talk about this experienced as being on the spotlight? Perhaps, as students we are used to maintaining a certain pedagogical distance with our teachers. We acknowledge their authority over us as students as supposedly experts in what we are just about to learn, and we know one of their main tasks is to evaluate our overall performance in the course. But perhaps to get a sense of closeness with a teacher, we may need to move beyond this formal relationship, and step into a sphere of personal contact. A space in which we notice the teacher's pedagogical interest in us as students, a space in which the teacher is there "*just for us*". And so, a personal contact with a teacher may not be as common for an online student. Interestingly, although we know that not everyone gets a sense of closeness to others, it seems to be less daunting for a student to get this experience with classmates.

Nonetheless, at some point, perhaps after the student becomes acquainted to this unexpected educational contact, she surprisingly finds herself in a somewhat intimate and personal communication. "[P]recisely here, with this experience, a new dimension opens before me, first qualifying me as *fellow being*, not as the author of the other being; *life shared*

is no mere copying but rather mutual enrichment, increase” (Patočka, 1988, p. 65). Not being treated merely as another online student, she experiences being recognized and addressed as an individual. At this shared moment, it may not even matter whether there are other students around or not. What seems to be important is that the teacher is paying attention to her, and creating the instances that allow her to experience a shared personal moment that may conceivably alter the meaning of her online education.

And so, when we find ourselves encircled in a sense of closeness as this student, time falls momentarily into the background and physical distance seems to lose significance as the student starts to connect with the teacher in a deep pedagogical level. “[T]he frantic abolition of all distances brings no nearness; for nearness does not consist in shortness of distance” (Heidegger, 1975, p. 165). In the experience of pedagogical closeness, it does not matter if the student is sharing the same classroom with her classmates and teachers, or if they are thousands of miles apart from each other. In this shared intimate space, distance means no remoteness or separation between them, since a personal contact may indeed bring all of them together.

[B]eing together (the relation I-Thou, I and the other I in the mode of We, We-You[-all]) is a relation of mutual nonindifference, of mutual internal contact; the other is relevant to me; indifference, irrelevance are only the negative mode of this initial relation of mutual relevance. Humans are never indifferent to each other, never alongside each other like two stones. (Patočka, 1988, p. 66)

If we look in the dictionary one last time, we see that the word close may also refer *to being near in space or time*, just like the face-to-face student that sits in the middle of the classroom. This student is certainly near to his new schoolmates both in space and time, and so we may

think that he must feel close to the other students, or at least in some way since they all have come together in the same room, for the same class, at the same school. However, a student may also be feeling rather alone sitting in the middle of the classroom before his friend arrives. Perhaps, he may not be ready to connect and to relate to any of his classmates, despite the fact of meeting them in the same place and at the same time. How odd it really is that someone could meet in person with another without feeling close at all, that we could be near in space and time, or even sitting next to someone, without experiencing any closeness or togetherness. It seems even odder that after all these illustrations a student may still get a sense of closeness, and even companionship in an online setting.

And yet, as remarkable as the fact that being next to someone may not bring any closeness, other people may feel so close that sharing the same space is not even necessary to feel together. Like the couple of school friends who text each other during the day, opening a sphere of togetherness despite being in different classrooms. Perhaps supported by memories of watching a movie on television, eating popcorn, sitting together on a comfy couch, sharing some mutual friends, or even studying together for the same test. We may be able to recognize ourselves in any of these moments and we may realize as well that sometimes just sharing a text message, a smiley face, or a call may create a sense togetherness to one another.

What then seems to be the essence of closeness when there is always something closer or further in our experience? Perhaps, the experience of closeness is particularly loaded with a sense of relativity. We remain indifferent to certain events, but in other circumstances they may seem especially relevant to us. We may get a sense of togetherness when sharing a personal story, and yet we may also remain untouched and aloof by the presence of the others. Moreover, closeness seems to have a temporal dimension, since it requires time to build, time

to grow. It is subtle, and as something that requires time, not everyone may find themselves at the same degree of closeness from each other. Still, we are always at some point in the spectrum of this experience, always moving away or moving closer from one another.

But even so, the sense of closeness also seems to be attained in a different fashion, whether face-to-face or online. The basic ingredients for an online close experience, such as the awareness of the presence of the virtual others, or even the realization of a shared experience, may be overlooked and taken for granted in a face-to-face setting. Furthermore, we may find ourselves anticipating this kind of experience in a different way if we look for togetherness with our classmates, and if we sense the possibility of closeness with a teacher. We may even wonder if we lean towards a sense of closeness with a teacher of any kind. Is the student looking for a connection with her teacher or just with her classmates? Is the personal contact with the teacher truly a surprise, unlike the sense of closeness she is hoping to get from her peers?

In the online classroom, the sense of togetherness may unfold when the student starts to communicate with her virtual classmates and teachers. A voice, a virtual presence, or a personal story may allow the student to step out from behind her words on the computer screen and actually be heard, and reveal herself as a voice and member of the class. For the online student, closeness may not involve sharing a classroom or meeting with a classmate for coffee after class. But still it does seem to involve some sort of shared-ness. "Making the other present is a mode of access to the other. It does not mean simply bringing the other into spatial and temporal proximity. But we do need to have some access to the other" (Patočka, 1988, p. 65). Too, the online student seems to be in a constant relational experience of closeness to others, despite the fact that she may still not sense any togetherness with them. And so,

accessing the other through online communication seems to be key for her sense of closeness. Her online exchanges are then fundamentally altered by communicating with others, and thus accessing the virtual others is almost a way to access a virtual self, and gaining access to a new meaning of what being online with others really involves. And although not all online contact will open up the possibility for a sense of togetherness, the ones that personally and intimately touch the student and the others will. Perhaps, in some way, this will allow the online student to transcend the actual geographical distance, and join her virtual class in a single digital space.

Conclusion

Even shallow communication online, ironically, may provide the participants the feeling of a certain kind of depth and certain qualities of intimacy. The more important question is, therefore, not just what is lost but also what is gained in the way that technology alters the experience of intimacy, social nearness and distance, and personal proximity. (van Manen, 2010, p. 1026)

What is gained and what is lost when digital communication technologies are inserted into the educational equation? From the beginning of the study, I have explored the meaning of building a sense of closeness in learning settings. Moreover, this dimension acquires a special significance when we talk about online learning environments (Baker, 2010; Borup et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2011; Kuo et al., 2014; Murphy & Rodríguez-Manzanares, 2012). On the one hand, the growing pervasiveness of different online technologies for educational purposes is undeniable (Allen & Seaman, 2013), and as such debating whether an online classroom is a better option than a face-to-face environment is no longer the issue. Nowadays, it seems that

an overwhelming amount of educational institutions are venturing into virtual education (Allen & Seaman, 2013).

On the other hand, current online learning environments seem to still obstruct students engagement in social exchanges as they would usually do in a regular classroom. Even at the present time, when students "...experienced this sense of disconnect, they described their online experiences as being less enjoyable, less helpful, and more frustrating than those individuals who made more personal connections and interactions through their courses" (Boling, Hough, Krinsky, Saleem, & Stevens, 2012, p. 121). And so, one important question to ask is in what ways may students develop a sense of relational closeness to their classmates or pedagogical closeness teacher in the online classroom? Surprisingly, despite all the limitations, it appears that these technological tools still afford learners the possibility to experience a sense of closeness to others online.

Thus, is the image of the online student really a lonely one? If we only take into consideration elements such as the geographical and physical distance (Dolan, 2011; Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011; Owens et al., 2009; Zagorski, 2011), removing from the experience all the other components, then perhaps we could say so. Other studies have shown the *potential* of technological tools to afford a sense of togetherness (Aguila, 2011), closeness (Adams, 2014; Dobson, 2005), community (Shackelford & Maxwell, 2012), or even intimacy (van Manen, 2010). In this study, I also discovered the possibility of experiencing a sense of closeness in the online learning environment: through encountering the humanness in the others, by being surprised by the realization that we are not alone online, and through relating to what the others are going through.

As the face-to-face student illustrates, when he meets with his group of classmates he enters the relational space of the class. He senses the presence of the others, and his presence is perceived by the group as well. He listens to the different voices, new and familiar. He encounters strange faces, and some he already knows. Perhaps he even receives a handshake as a gesture of being welcomed or recognized. Clearly, in this situation, the student is coming together with the group and that they are near to each other, coexisting in the same space at the same time. And even though in person we may certainly be distracted, day-dreaming, isolated, or not really feeling a sense of belonging with the rest of the people, we can still sense the presence of the others in the room. Indeed, as Heidegger (1995) shows, human beings are, in some sense, always both present and absent—though in varying degrees—in every moment of our lives.

But for the online student, the experience of meeting her fellow students and teachers may not be so easily defined. The online student may not be sure about whom she is meeting, where she is meeting them, what the others are doing, or even if any or all of them are actually online at the same time. And yet, possibly seeking contact or connection, this student may truly find herself meeting another online, sharing with others in a simultaneous virtual environment. As the online student describes, meeting online may bring a sense of closeness to others, for example, through a shared understanding that they are all experiencing a similar moment, or by revealing some of the same uncertainties with the rest of the virtual classroom.

It would be certainly unwise to deny the many barriers that still exist with our current technological tools, but it would be also risky to entirely deny what they presently afford. As social creatures, we not only find ourselves in need to establish close, enduring, and significant relationships with others (Leary, 2007; Leary & Kelly, 2009; Silvia & Kwapil,

2011), but we also catch ourselves creating social connections in every new interaction we make, sometimes even despite what type of medium we are using to communicate with one another. And yet, how do we actually experience a sense of closeness to others online?

As with other psychological constructs, *closeness* represents a significant challenge to the measurement-minded social scientist. Although the closeness that people can feel for others is undeniably palpable, it is not easily captured by the standard methods and approaches used to assess other important relationship constructs (Agnew, Loving, Le, & Goodfriend, 2004, p. 103)

The experience of closeness, as any other complex human experience, seems to be quite difficult to pinpoint or even to describe. And while those students interviewed primarily relayed stories of closeness through conversational voices online, it is clear that closeness may also be conveyed through text alone (Adams, 2014; Dobson, 2005). Moreover, this particular experience seems to be modulated and altered not only by personal traits and characteristics, but by cultural and social preferences as well (Seepersad, Choi, & Shin, 2008). Thus, it seems that in regards to this experience, we always find ourselves situated somewhere on a continuum of relational closeness (or distance) to others. Even if we may not be explicitly aware of it, we may also find ourselves moving from moments of feeling as sense of togetherness to moments of loneliness. Such relational sensibilities are clearly experienced not only in face-to-face settings, but in online environments too.

Social presence, a sense of community, closeness, they all appear to be essential not only in online learning, but in every educational setting. And still, we may wonder if closeness is always achieved in the face-to-face classroom. Does the image of the lonely student only apply to online learning environments? “Short distance is not in itself nearness. Nor is great

distance remoteness” (Heidegger, 1975, p. 165). Closeness is a *lived* sense of nearness to another.

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Appendix A

Research Interview Protocol

Research question:

- What is it like to experience a sense of closeness to others in an online learning environment?

Preliminaries:

- Set-up: (1) schedule interview, (2) book a room, (3) take two recording devices, and (4) bring pen and notepad.
- Research Information Letter and Informed Consent Form: (1) go over the information letter, (2) ask if the person has any questions, (3) bring to copies of the consent form, (4) go over the consent form carefully and confirm the person has read it and understood, and (5) sign the copies and give one to the participant.

Describe the interview intent:

During this interview, the main purpose is to try to help you recall what it was like for you to experience a sense of closeness when you were in an online course. The intent of asking you some questions is to help you tell your stories, and then have you describe, in as much detail as possible, specific moments or any noticing that you may have had in relation to this topic. The interview is not going to be centered on possible opinions or judgements that you may have toward your online experience, but instead, we will try to explore your moments of closeness.

Possible interview questions:

- What online courses have you taken? How many?
 - Describe the courses
 - Did you want to take them or did you have to?
- Recalling your most recent online learning experience:
 - How was the overall experience?
 - What do you remember about the others? Students? Teachers? Colleagues?
 - How was the interaction with others? Where?
 - Do you think you got a sense of who they are? Students? Teachers? Colleagues?
 - How does this experience compare to other experiences? F2F? Facebook? Chatting?
 - Did you experience closeness? Intimacy? Another term?
- Deepening questions:
 - Where were you? (Lived Space)
 - What device(s) were you using? (Lived Things)
 - When was it? How was time experienced? (Lived Time)
 - How were you feeling? How was your body? (Lived Body)
- Helping questions:
 - Anything surprising? Memorable? Overwhelming? Frustrating?
 - What happened next?
 - Can you give me an example?
 - Can you walk me through that experience?
 - Let's go back to...
 - Watch out for (1) emotional reactions, (2) the words usually, typically, often, sometimes, would, and (3) questions such as Why? Feeling?
- Participant may also be asked to write a “lived through” description of the recollected moment, event or incident.

Appendix B

Research Information Letter

Dear participant,

My name is Luis Francisco Vargas Madriz. I am writing to ask whether you are interested in participating in an interview and/or writing activity with me on the topic of what it is like to experience closeness in online learning environments.

I am currently working to complete the requirements of a M.Ed. degree in the Department of Educational Psychology/Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta. I would like to ask you to do an interview or writing activity to provide data for a project on the above topic as part of a course assignment in a research course I am taking in my graduate program. I will write a paper on the topic in my research class. The paper will be shared with the other members of the graduate course, and it may eventually be presented at a conference or submitted to a journal for publication.

If you are interested in participating, our interview or writing activity will explore some of your experiences related to the research topic. Two sample interview questions are can you recall a particular example when you've felt close to somebody online and can you describe feeling closeness in an online learning environment. The interview or writing activity would be scheduled at your convenience. After I have studied the interview or written material, I might ask you to clarify some points from our discussion.

Your participation is voluntary. If you consent to be involved in this interview and/or writing activity, your anonymity will be maintained. You are free to withdraw at any time. If you decide to withdraw your participation after the interview, any data collected from you would be withdrawn from my interview activity assignment. A digital audio recorder or note pad may be used to record our interview and I may transcribe some or all portions of the recordings. If your material is used then I will use a pseudonym to represent you in all work that is written about the topic and I will keep your interview recording, transcripts, note-pad, or written material locked in a secure place for a maximum of five years following completion of this research activity.

I do not foresee any harm resulting from this activity. Instead, people often find the opportunity to reflect on their experiences to be beneficial. If you are interested then I would share with you the paper I write on this topic.

If you have any further questions about the interview activity, please feel free to contact me at (780) 224-4616 or vargasma@ualberta.ca, my research course instructor, Dr. Catherine Adams (780) 492-3674 or caadams@ualberta.ca, or the Chair of the Department of Secondary Education, Dr. Florence Glanfield, at (780) 492-0743 or glanfiel@ualberta.ca. Please complete the attached consent form to indicate your decision. If you are willing to participate, please return the consent form to me. Thank you for considering this request.

Yours sincerely,

Luis Francisco Vargas Madriz

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by Research Ethics Board 1 at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

Appendix C

Research Informed Consent Form

Project Title: Interview / Writing Activity for Phenomenological Research and Writing Course Assignment (EDSE611)

Investigator: Luis Francisco Vargas Madriz (780) 224-4616 vargasma@ualberta.ca

Research topic: Lived Experiences of Closeness in Online Learning Environments

I have read and understand the invitation letter and give my consent to be interviewed and/or to write on the above topic for this research course. More specifically,

- I agree that my participation in all aspects of the study is voluntary.
Yes No
- I understand that the interview may be recorded digitally and/or by note pad.
Yes No
- I understand that the investigator may also ask me to write about the research topic.
Yes No
- I understand the interview notes will be shared with me to clarify themes or insights drawn from the interview.
Yes No
- I understand that only the investigator will have access to the content of the audio recordings, transcripts, notes, or the written materials shared by me.
Yes No
- I understand that the information I provide will be kept anonymous by not referring to me by my name or location, but by using a pseudonym.
Yes No
- I understand that the information I provide may be used in a written paper shared with the members of the research class but that my name will not be used.
Yes No
- I understand the interview recordings, transcripts, note-pad, or written material will be locked in a secure place for a maximum of five years following completion of this research activity.
Yes No
- I understand that I am free to refuse to answer specific questions, and/or to withdraw my participation at any time up until 3 months after the interview.
Yes No

- I understand that there will be no risks involved in this study. I may, in fact, benefit from reflecting upon my experience.
Yes No
- I acknowledge that the research procedures have been adequately described and that any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. In addition, I know that I may contact the to contact the investigator Francisco Vargas at (780) 224-4616 or vargasma@ualberta.ca, the research course instructor, Dr. Catherine Adams (780) 492-3674 or caadams@ualberta.ca, or the Chair of the Department of Secondary Education, Dr. Florence Glanfield, at (780) 492-0743 or glanfiel@ualberta.ca, if I have further questions either now or in the future.
Yes No

I understand my rights as a participant and agree to take part in this study. I have received a signed copy of this document for my records.

Please **sign and date** below indicating your willingness to participate in the interview and/or writing activity.

(Date)

(Signature of Participant)

(Date)

(Signature of Investigator)

Two copies of this form have been provided: One for the participant to submit to researcher, the other for participant to keep.

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by Research Ethics Board 1 at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.