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Chapter 15

Kierkegaard and the Internet: The Role and Formation of Community in Education

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In the last decade of the twentieth century, with the advent of computers networked through Internet Service Providers and the declining cost of such computers, the traditional topography of secondary and post-secondary education has begun to change. Where before students were required to travel to a geographically central location in order to receive instruction, this is often no longer the case. In this connection, Todd Oppenheimer writes in *The Atlantic Monthly* that one of the principal arguments used to justify increasing the presence of computer technology in educational settings is that "[W]ork with computers – particularly using the Internet – brings students valuable connections with teachers, other schools and students, and a wide network of professionals around the globe."[1]

This shift from the traditional to the "virtual" classroom[2] has been welcomed by many. As Gary Goettling writes, "[D]istance learning is offered by hundreds, if not thousands, of colleges and universities around the world, along with a rapidly growing number of corporate and private entities."[3] Goettling's statement echoes an earlier claim by the University of Idaho School of Engineering that one of the advantages of using computers in distance education is that they "increase access. Local, regional, and national networks link resources and individuals, wherever they might be."[4]

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It is, though, all too easy to fail to reflect critically on the broader ramifications of Internet use. For example, a 1998 study conducted at Carnegie Mellon concludes that "[G]reater use of the Internet was associated with small, but statistically significant declines in social involvement as measured by communication within the family and the size of people's local social networks, and with increases in loneliness … [and] with increases in depression."[5] The study goes on to say that the paradox of the Internet is that it is "a social technology used for communication with individuals and groups, but it is associated with declines in social involvement and the psychological well-being that goes with social involvement."[6] At its worse then, rather than the Internet providing a tool for the creation of an interactive environment, we have a situation in which, as Fred Moody, in a commentary for ABC News puts it, "[A]ny time we go online, we are replacing direct human contact …with an arid, indirect, stilted form of contact with strangers."[7]

While the Carnegie Mellon study is provisional, it at least suggests that it is prudent to reflect upon how the use of the Internet in education might affect both students and instructors.[8] With this in mind, the purpose of this paper to is to examine whether it is truly the case that students are more closely linked together as a "community" of learners through the use of virtual classrooms. In this connection, University of California-Berkeley Professor Hubert Dreyfus has made use of the writings of one pre-digital skeptic, the 19th century philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, to explore potential limitations in using the Internet as a means for establishing social commitments.[9] In what follows we use Dreyfus' exploration in looking more closely at problems accompanying use of the Internet as a tool for creating "distributed communities" of teachers and learners.

Dreyfus argues that Kierkegaard's writings show concern about a diminishing ability to discern "quality" or meaningful information. As Kierkegaard saw it, the use of technologies to disseminate information distorts our relationship to that information in ways that foster an ability to ignore the potential "meaningfulness" of particular pieces of information. For Kierkegaard, it was the technology embodied in populist newspapers that was of the greatest concern. Dreyfus contends, however, that Kierkegaard's concern is even more appropriate in characterizing and evaluating on-line behavior. For Kierkegaard there is a link between the power of our information technologies to uninhibitedly disseminate information and a concomitant desire of participants to "transcend the local, personal involvement"[10] of information. It is this disembodiedness and dislocatedness (*omni*locatedness) of cyberspace that makes it an attractive replacement for the classroom. Placing educational materials in an omnilocated state makes them available to everyone who has the technological means to "transcend the local".

However, before we can approach the question of *how* cyberspace may be used to meet the goals of quality educational communication, there is the question