

## Like a Version: playing with online identities

NICHOLAS C. BURBULES

*University of Illinois*

The worst enemies of advocates for the thoughtful and critically reflective adoption of information and communication technologies in education are the exaggerated claims made on behalf of computers and the Internet by other advocates.<sup>1</sup> In *On the Internet*, Hubert Dreyfus debunks many of these hyperbolic claims.<sup>2</sup> Dreyfus properly cautions that online interactions *cannot* and *should not* replace other, more familiar human activities and relationships—particularly in the contexts of teaching, learning, and interpersonal communication.

In this argument Dreyfus serves an invaluable purpose. His concluding recommendations on how these new technologies *can* appropriately support teaching, learning and interpersonal communication are sensible and balanced:

How then can we profit from the Web ...? Obviously we need to foster a symbiosis in which we use our bodies and their positive powers, to find what is relevant, learn skills through involvement, get a grip on reality, and make the risky commitments that give life meaning, while letting the Web contribute its amazing capacity to store and access astronomical amounts of information, to connect us to others, to enable us to be observers of far-away places, and to experiment without risk with other worlds and selves. (p. 94)

In fact, by the time one reads these concluding recommendations, some of the heat of the preceding critiques is dissipated somewhat—and those who might wish to draw on Dreyfus' early criticisms to support their own Luddite sensibilities will, in the end, be disappointed. After all, though it is not Dreyfus' concern here, there is hyperbole on *both* sides of this debate, and the danger of missing out on the potential educational benefits of these new technologies, because of an exaggerated fear for their potential misuses, would be as damaging as their wholesale uncritical adoption. Indeed, as Dreyfus makes clear, he uses many of these technologies in his own teaching.

Still, I finished the book with a sense of disappointment. Nearly every chapter begins with a sweeping statement such as, 'Some people claim that the Internet ...' and then a careful dismantling of such claims. But for readers who never gave such exaggerations much credence in the first place, this debunking of false absolutes will often seem to miss the deeper issues at stake. I offer several examples below. Behind my dissatisfaction with parts of this book lies the expectation of something more from Dreyfus: easy overgeneralisations make for easy criticisms, and today we need

to be asking tougher questions and confronting more conflicted choices about these new technologies. We need to raise the level of discussion by framing it in new terms. Instead, I thought that Dreyfus often muddled the discussion by, for example, contrasting comments such as this:

Where meaning is concerned, what the Net is doing to us is, in fact, making our lives worse rather than better. (p. 102)

With comments such as this:

As long as we continue to affirm our bodies, the Net can be useful to us in spite of its tendency to offer the worst of a series of asymmetric tradeoffs: economy over efficiency in education, the virtual over the real in our relation to things and people, and anonymity over commitment in our lives. (p. 106)

Dreyfus seems to want all of the rhetorical force of blaming the Internet for robbing our lives of meaning and authentic human interaction, while coming down, in the end, for the usefulness of the Internet so long as its use is bounded by an affirmation of our embodied selves. But none of the problems he cites in the preceding quote (educational entrepreneurialism, a ‘culture of simulation,’ to use Sherry Turkle’s phrase,<sup>3</sup> or a lack of personal commitment in many of our relationships) is *primarily* a problem of the Internet—nor are they particularly amenable to change just because we affirm our bodily identities.

Moreover, the loss of meaning and authentic interaction, to the extent that they are felt concerns for people, are in fact considered by many of them to be *alleviated* by their lives online. One way to view this book is as a sustained argument with the ideas expressed in Turkle’s *Life on the Screen*.<sup>4</sup> For Turkle, the Internet is a zone of enormous creativity and experimentation. Decoupled from the apparent one-to-one association of body and identity, participants online are exploring identities, perspectives and modes of interaction that are not constrained by their ‘actual’ selves: pretending to be a character of the opposite gender in a chat room; putting out provocative opinions that are not necessarily one’s own, just to see where the discussion will take them; playing with virtual interactions that do not have the consequences of such activities in the ‘real world’. Turkle reports that for many of her subjects, and for herself, these can be tremendously liberating experiments. These aren’t necessarily *false* identities; they may in fact involve exploring aspects or extrapolations of one’s actual identity that cannot be enacted without disapproval, harm or other consequences in one’s ordinary life. ‘Real’ versus ‘false’ identities is too neat a dichotomy; it doesn’t capture the ways in which these can be different *versions* of one’s identity. To be sure, Turkle also notes that these experiments can be subject to abuses—where playing with an alternative identity can become impersonation or deception (the legendary ‘Alex’ affair, in which a male psychiatrist posed in a women-only chat room as a character named Joan),<sup>5</sup> or where playful online interactions can have dire real-world consequences (a rape in cyberspace),<sup>6</sup> or where participants cannot integrate their various selves into a coherent identity (that is, a

form of schizophrenia), or where they can no longer differentiate between the real and the virtual.<sup>7</sup>

Dreyfus would no doubt emphasise the negative dimensions of these consequences.<sup>8</sup> But liberation from the constraint of bodily identity in online interactions can have significant benefits as well (which at times Dreyfus seems to acknowledge and at other times to ignore). An old MCI commercial says ‘when you’re online, there is no race, no gender, no disability’. This is not exactly true: all of these factors clearly impinge on who is participating online, who is not (the digital divide), and on how those who are online interact—many claim they can identify gender just by others’ speech patterns, for example. We don’t *lose* our bodily identities when we act anonymously or pretend to be other than we are. But the relative anonymity of online interaction *can* suppress the effects of prejudice or discrimination. Others are forced to deal more with the content of what one says or does, not necessarily with what one looks like. Thus at times there seems to be a circularity to Dreyfus’ argument: the Internet is okay as long as you don’t use it in many of the radical ways in which people actually do choose to use it. From his standpoint many of these uses are illegitimate and dehumanising, but what Dreyfus wants to characterise as a kind of alienation is simply not experienced as such by many participants. Turkle’s book makes this clear.

Educationally, it can be extremely useful to have the distance and impersonality that online interactions afford. Some students speak up *more* under such circumstances; there is more time to reflect on what one is writing or reading in an online discussion, as opposed to the rapid flow of live conversation; students are required to be more independently motivated, and to find other sources of feedback and support than immediate teacher recognition or approval. To be sure, each of these can be viewed as a drawback too—but this is just my point: what can be seen as a limitation from certain standpoints, or for certain students, can be seen as a benefit for others.

Dreyfus’ chapter on distance education begins with the typical hyperbolic claims about how computers and the Internet will transform schooling and solve all of its problems. He rightly shows how naive such claims are. He says that education must be about something more than the consumption of information (p. 31). Indeed that is true. But the true target of this critique is not the Internet (as if it alone had created this information-driven view of education); it should be all the other trends over the past several decades that have driven education into didactic modes of lecturing, content-driven assessment, standardised testing, and so on. The virtues of fully engaged, face-to-face instruction are relatively rare already—especially in much of higher education. Dreyfus tends to over-romanticise a familiar status quo as a way of contrasting the dangers of excessive reliance on the Internet, without acknowledging the extent to which the romantic ideal is already a myth in many settings. Indeed, it is arguable that the Internet can foster and support modes of pedagogy that are *more* engaging, *more* intellectually stimulating, and foster *more* teacher–student interaction than the actual experience in many existing educational institutions.<sup>9</sup>

Dreyfus also says that distance education can never go beyond teaching mere

'competence' to the level of 'mastery', and levels beyond that, which require direct experience and active involvement in the company of experts. This is a subtle argument that he develops at length and I cannot do justice to it here (pp. 33–46)<sup>10</sup> To a large extent I would share this analysis. But a simple question remains: for many students and subject matters, why is competence not adequate? How many get to the level of 'mastery' at present, anyway? Dreyfus rightly warns against the threat that we could be building a 'two-tiered' system in which distance education is judged 'good enough' for some students, while others get the kind of fully engaged, face-to-face (and more expensive) instruction that is necessary for truly 'higher' learning (p. 63). Still, this is not all that different from the educational inequities we have at present, and for a considerable number of students even the 'second-rate' option of distance education would be a great improvement over what they have access to right now. Here all the tough questions for social and educational policy come to the fore.<sup>11</sup> But thinking that distance education (I prefer the term 'online education') will make those choices more difficult, or less equitable, than they would otherwise be misplaces the emphasis; and in the mix of realistic policy options, denigrating the value of online education for certain purposes and certain clienteles is counterproductive.

Ironically, when Dreyfus talks about his own teaching (pp. 96–98) he acknowledges that in fact he does use these technologies to stream lectures, to allow students to access the class from their dorm rooms, and to maintain discussion sections outside of the classroom (but it's okay because it is in 'a class in which students are bodily present and there is already a shared mood of concern for learning,' p. 96). So, now we arrive at the interesting questions: *Where* and *how* can these technologies be used to support particular educational purposes, and where can they not be? Can we create a 'shared mood of concern for learning' in online contexts? Those are the questions we should have started with.

At the heart of Dreyfus' concerns here is that a certain kind of embodied 'cultural style' is an essential part of learning beyond a merely rote level (p. 48). He wants to contrast 'full-bodied presence' (p. 69) with 'disembodied telepresence' (p. 50). But as I have already tried to show, this is an exaggerated dichotomy, which assumes what needs to be proven. On the one hand, there is a danger of circularity here: if certain aims are *assumed* to have an embodied component, then by definition online interactions can never fully approximate them. But if the issue is seen not as the approximation of a particular cultural style, but as the *invention of new ones*, then it is an open question whether and how embodiment will play a role in them. Education is always about both initiation into familiar cultural practices and knowledge *and* bringing into being something new.

At the heart of most of Dreyfus' arguments is this theory of embodiment and its centrality to human identity, human intelligence and human interaction. Because computers don't have bodies, they can't ever accommodate the full range of human thought and interests. This is an argument Dreyfus has been making for more than three decades, updated now to include the ways that the Internet, while it clearly fosters personal communication and interaction, cannot ever replace real, embodied communication and interaction (whether in educational contexts or in others). But

strong pronouncements about ‘what computers can’t do’ (the title of a famous earlier book by Dreyfus)<sup>12</sup> always run the risk of being overrun by later developments: Turkle points out that Dreyfus’ earlier prediction that a computer would never be able to beat a top human chess player has not held true, for example.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, developments on the Internet, including new media for communication and interaction, may make the disembodied experience of virtual interactions much less different from face-to-face encounters. Claims about ‘what the Internet can’t do’ could prove just as time-bound as the others.

Dreyfus also decries virtual interactions for their lack of context. But the online world is not a lack of context; it is a *different* context. The ‘virtual’ is not the *opposite* of the ‘real’—it is a medial term, *between* the real and the artificial or imagined. There are many regular users of the Internet who report preferring interactions there to the experiences they have with people offline. Dreyfus cites the famous Carnegie-Mellon study that reports that *during the first year or two online*, many Internet users report less communication with family members and friends, and increased loneliness and depression (pp. 2–3). Yet it is at least plausible to guess that early users are less able to weigh and balance their engagements with this novelty, and may tend to get overly caught up in it; over time they can become more selective and better able to integrate the distinctive benefits of online engagements with the distinctive benefits of non-online ones. This certainly reflects my own experience and that of many users I know.

And here we reach my final point, which is that Dreyfus’ claims about a loss of meaning and authentic human contact simply do not agree with what active users of the Internet report. (Here again Turkle’s extensive interviews with users offer revealing insights.) Dreyfus says, ‘Perhaps one day, we will stop missing this kind of bodily contact, and touching another person will be considered rude or disgusting’ (pp. 69–70), and by this he means a dark future where something humanly necessary has been lost. But who is the ‘we’ here? Such contact is, after all, already disapproved of in many circumstances by other cultures (are they less human?); and in many circumstances in our own culture bodily contact, at least certain types, *is* considered rude or disgusting. And who is most at risk for unwanted bodily contact? What forms of intimidation or harassment are experienced by people in circumstances where such contact is always a possibility, and *for those persons* is it obvious that a medium such as the Internet, where such contact is not possible, may not be experienced as *more open, more free*, than the embodied ‘risky’ one?

Similarly with Dreyfus’s arguments about trust:

I have to be in the same room with someone and know they could physically hurt me or publicly humiliate me and observe that they do not do so, in order to feel I can trust them and make myself vulnerable to them in other ways. There is no doubt that telepresence can provide some sense of trust, but it seems to be a much-attenuated sense. (pp. 70–71)

It simply must be said that only certain people have the luxury of thinking this way, that purposely putting themselves in the way of physical harm is a way of building trust. Rather than calling the vulnerability, and corresponding trust, of the online

experience an 'attenuated' form, one ought to consider it a different form, with its own attendant risks of 'harm' and 'humiliation' (as in the 'rape in cyberspace' example). Otherwise, again, one simply makes the argument circular, by insisting that only by putting our physical bodies at stake can we foster trust. In fact, many people report finding it much easier to trust others in online interactions.<sup>14</sup>

Dreyfus says,

We should remain open to the possibility that, when we enter cyberspace and leave behind our animal-shaped, emotional, intuitive, situated, vulnerable, embodied selves, and thereby gain a remarkable new freedom never before available to human beings, we might at the same time necessarily lose some of our crucial capacities ... If our body goes, so does relevance, skill, reality, and meaning. If that is the tradeoff, the prospect of living our lives in and through the Web may not be so attractive after all. (pp. 6–7)

Dreyfus explores the possibilities of telepresence and other virtual modes in replicating the quality of such embodied encounters, and finds them wanting. But very few people have been talking about virtual engagements 'replacing' ordinary embodied ones, and of course by definition virtual engagements will always lack some qualities that ordinary embodied ones have. Yet an equally important question is the obverse: what qualities can virtual engagements have that ordinary embodied ones lack? The advantages aren't necessarily all on one side. After all, the embodied experience for many people is seriously limited: by disability, infirmity, illness, chronic pain, isolation, or a physical appearance that leads others to prejudge, ignore, or despise them. For many of these people, the opportunity for interaction online, precisely because it does not require mobility or energetic effort, or precisely because it can be relatively anonymous, is preferable to ordinary embodied interactions. Here as elsewhere in these sorts of arguments, claims about which mode of interaction is 'better' must always be tempered by asking, 'better for whom?'

Dreyfus runs the danger of his own kind of overstatement: first, because no one—no one serious, in my view—is claiming that we *should* live all or even most of our lives in and through the Web; and second, because we do not in fact 'leave behind' all those aspects of our embodied selves when we go online; they continue to affect us and our interactions, but in *different* ways, not necessarily *inferior* ways. And this is the crucial issue: as Turkle and others have shown, the relatively disembodied space that is the Internet is not, by and large, regarded by people who live and interact there as a *substitute* for their 'real' lives, but as a *supplement* to it, indeed as *part* of it. Dreyfus is concerned by those who might come to prefer virtual interactions to real-life ones generally (and some do); but the far more frequent case is that people appreciate what is different about online interactions—they see *specific* advantages to such interactions, for *particular* purposes, and for them to be deprived of such interactions (because it does not support or express their embodied identities) would result in a net *loss* to the meaning and creativity in their lives. Is Dreyfus really arguing that they are wrong to feel this way?

In the end, it is not the Internet that has raised contemporary questions about the necessity of our bodies for our sense of identity; it is a much larger cultural shift that foregrounds the 'performative' rather than 'essential' character of our embodied

selves. Many people play at other roles in relation to gender, race, sexuality, etc., regardless of their ‘bodily’ facts. Dreyfus seems to favour a kind of ‘bodily determinism,’ which suggests that our bodies fundamentally shape who we are, how we experience the world, and how we interact with each other. For others, I have tried to make clear, this is seen as an artificial constraint, falsely prioritising *one* dimension of identity (which is itself an artefact of social construction, after all) over others. For the different, the hybrid, the disabled, and others, it is experienced as tremendously liberating *not* to allow an embodied physical ‘fact’ to be so determining; and the Internet is proving a fascinating zone of experimentation in how people can move beyond these embodied physical facts, not for the sake of ‘escaping’ them or denying them, but for *changing what they mean to us and to others*. Dreyfus, to my dismay, minimises and denigrates the powerful human capacity for ‘as if’ thinking, itself a crucial dimension of human identity and one with particular relevance for opportunities to learn, grow, and change as a human being.<sup>15</sup>

## Notes

1. See Nicholas C. Burbules and Thomas A. Callister, Jr. (2000) *Watch IT: The Promises and Risks of Information Technologies for Education* (Boulder, CO, Westview Press), chapter 1.
2. All page references in the text, unless otherwise identified, are to Hubert L. Dreyfus (2001) *On the Internet* (New York, Routledge).
3. Sherry Turkle (1995) *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York, Simon & Schuster) p. 10.
4. See, for example, his rather critical comments on pp. 82–84.
5. Turkle, *Life on the Screen*, pp. 228–230.
6. Turkle, *Life on the Screen*, pp. 250–254.
7. Turkle, *Life on the Screen*, pp. 258–262.
8. In a somewhat puzzling pair of footnotes (pp. 121–122), he says that ‘A year after the publication of her book, Turkle seems to have had doubts about the value of [experiments in alternative identities]’, and cites a 1996 publication in *The American Prospect*. But the quotes he cites from that article were not second thoughts; they were reprinted almost verbatim from Turkle’s original book, *Life on the Screen*. In other words, Turkle understood all along that experiments in alternative identities could have a downside; but she didn’t see this as inconsistent with acknowledging their potential value as well. It is still unclear to me where Dreyfus comes down on this issue.
9. See Nicholas C. Burbules and Thomas A. Callister, Jr. (2000) Universities in transition: the promise and the challenge of new technologies, *Teachers College Record*, 102 (2), pp. 273–295.
10. However, Dreyfus’ prime example to illustrate these arguments is coaching football (pp. 67–69), a fortuitous example from the standpoint of establishing the centrality of physical involvement, certainly, but also a perplexing one as a paradigm for education generally.
11. See Burbules and Callister, ‘Universities in transition’.
12. Hubert L. Dreyfus (1972) *What Computers Can’t Do: A Critique of Artificial Reason* (New York, Harper & Row). See also *What Computers Still Can’t do: A Critique of Artificial Reason* (Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1992).
13. Turkle, *Life on the Screen*, p. 129.
14. Turkle, *Life on the Screen*, pp. 240, 244, for example.
15. I am grateful to the students in my seminar this term, EPS 490: Identity, Embodiment, and Power in On-line Interactions, for conversations about Turkle and Dreyfus that have influenced my thinking on these matters. I also appreciate the comments of A.G. Rud and Sherry Turkle on a previous version.