



## Experiences of Online Closeness in Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs)

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### Abstract

*In virtual learning environments (VLEs) 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 most cases, listening and watching someone who is not physically present. Virtual components (or even an entirely online classroom) are not rare, and growing concern is currently surfacing about students' potential feeling of isolation, which has been found to increase educational barriers such as lack of motivation or engagement, or poor academic achievement. We may therefore begin to wonder whether VLE allows for the necessary interpersonal involvement required for learning. Using a qualitative phenomenological research methodology called phenomenology of practice, the aim of this study was to understand what it is like to experience a sense of closeness to others in a VLE. Data was gathered by means of in-depth phenomenological interviews with five adult university students recruited via snowball sampling who had previous experience in VLE settings. The findings revealed that students may experience closeness with their classmates and teachers when they suddenly look beyond the superficial technological hurdles and find the humanity in the virtual others, when they share a difficult group experience, or when they create a personal virtual space. This study showed that closeness is indeed essential in education, and that even online we repeatedly find ourselves in a continuum of closeness to others, moving from an experience of togetherness to an experience of loneliness, or vice versa.*

[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 transformation, are we getting closer or farther apart from each other? Many concerns have recently surfaced about the role of digital technologies in the increasing experience of loneliness, and the simultaneously decreasing social engagement face-to-face (F2F). Paradoxically, even though we now seem more networked than ever before in history, we

also seem to feel more disconnected than ever. This has been shown to impact adversely on well-being – mental and physical health (Davidow, 2013; Fox, 2013; Marche, 2012) – to such an extent that even mainstream media have seen fit to start cautioning people against becoming absorbed by digital devices (Bernstein, 2013; Brooks, 2018; Foer, 2013).

However, digital technologies have also been shown to aid the development of social relationships and skills (Sutcliffe, Binder, & Dunbar, 2018), or to have no impact on loneliness (Apaolaza, Hartmann, Medina, Barrutia, & Echebarria, 2013). As social beings, we constantly interact with other human and non-human beings for much of our lives. In fact, the motivation to self-enhance, self-verify and self-expand seems deeply rooted in our desire for social connection, approval and acceptance (Leary, 2007; Leary & Kelly, 2009; Silvia & Kwapil, 2011). Hence, a desire to establish close, enduring and significant relationships with others, even through digital technologies, is to be expected, social connection being so crucial to our sense of self.

In this milieu, we should then not only consider how digital technologies influence our social nature, but also ponder how they are altering learning environments and pedagogical relationships. Virtual learning environments (VLEs) in this study refer to any education system accessed through the Internet (e.g., flipped classrooms, blended learning, eSchools, MOOC, distance learning, etc.). These environments are growing swiftly and, in the process, changing how educational environments are convened, delivered and experienced by students and teachers respectively.

Previous studies have already addressed some of these concerns. For instance, some studies have focussed on the issues that arise from having geographically distant students (Dolan, 2011; Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011; Owens, Hardcastle, & Richardson, 2009; Zagorski, 2011). Other authors have investigated the factors that could improve social presence in the online classroom (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 elements that could enhance the sense of community online (Shackelford & Maxwell, 2012). Phenomenological research has previously explored interpersonal relations via email (Dobson, 2002), in the VLE context (Adams, Yin, Vargas Madriz, & Mullen, 2014; Friesen, 2002), using wireless mobile technologies (van Manen, 2010), and on Skype (Aguila, 2011). Yet, none of these studies have focused on experiences of closeness in VLE.

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 nearness, just as interaction using digital technologies does not always warrant *lack of nearness*. Thinking of VLE, we may

envision a group of students sitting alone in front of a computer, hardly talking to each other, and perhaps geographically distant. But is this the only feasible depiction of a VLE scenario as it is lived?

Thus, the purpose of this phenomenology of practice study is to explore student experiences of closeness to others in VLE. In this investigation, such experiences are characterized by a sense of camaraderie, belonging, togetherness, connection or nearness as experienced by students when interacting with their classmates or teachers using digital technologies. The main research question that guided this study was: *What is it like to experience a sense of closeness to others in a VLE?*

## Literature Review

This section briefly describes some of the challenges and opportunities in VLE.

### Geographic Distance

Geographic distance has potentially negative impacts both for students and teachers in VLE. For instance, although VLEs allow students to have additional time to answer a question, reflect on instructional material, or carefully edit a written response to a discussion, these settings still have important limitations. “[S]tudents 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). They also experience more isolation in VLE, when compared to F2F courses, because of the reduced interpersonal interaction (Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011), and long for F2F contact with teachers and classmates (Owens et al., 2009).

However, students are not the only ones who experience this. Teachers also feel isolated when instructing in VLE, which correlates with decreased levels of self-efficacy (Zagorski, 2011), and has a negative impact on teaching performance (Dolan, 2011). Teachers not only transform their practices compared to F2F settings, but also lack a sense of loyalty and affiliation to the institution. They feel that they receive less recognition from their school, fewer opportunities for professional development, and poorer communication when practising entirely off-campus (Dolan, 2011).

Therefore, VLEs are potentially challenging both for students in their learning process, and for teachers in their pedagogical practice. Nevertheless despite this unfavourable account, VLE has also shown the potential to provide access to enriching and inspiring learning experiences for students in remote communities. Thus, “[p]rograms 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).

### Social Presence

Social presence refers to the “feeling of being socially present with another person at a remote location” (Sallnäs, Rassmus-Gröhn, & Sjöström, 2000, p. 462). It comprises the capacity of a medium to transmit information concerning tone of voice, gestures, facial expressions, direction of looking, posture, touch, and other non-verbal cues. These elements affect the level to which a medium could be perceived either as warm, sensitive or personal when interacting with others, or as impersonal and distant (Sallnäs et al., 2000).

Rapport and social presence in distance education, for instance, seem to be essential because of the absence of F2F communication (Murphy & Rodríguez-Manzanares, 2012). Although VLEs are intrinsically challenging because of software restrictions, geographic distance, and their mostly asynchronous nature, asynchronous videos have helped increase social presence, students having revealed that video-based communication makes instructors seem more real, present and familiar, even compared to some of their F2F teachers (Borup et al., 2012). Furthermore, emotional content also makes students feel socially present despite their geographic distance. Emotions even “... 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).

Social presence also seems to have an impact on student performance. Daily teacher phone calls influence student work habits in VLE, which suggests 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). Integrating interactive media in VLE also seems to influence social presence and student satisfaction because of the higher levels of interaction among students (Kim et al., 2011). Similarly, synchronous environments have significantly higher instructor immediacy and presence than asynchronous settings, and are statistically significant predictors of student affective learning, cognition and motivation in VLE (Baker, 2010). Moreover, social presence impacts academic achievement, student motivation and satisfaction, and their overall performance (Kuo et al., 2014).

Considering the challenges and opportunities in these settings, we may further ponder the question guiding this study – *What is it like for students to experience a sense of closeness to others in VLE?*

### Methodology

The approach of this study was that of phenomenology of practice, which was particularly developed to study educational environments (van Manen, 1990, 2014) and describes “a variety of phenomenology that may be regarded, in a broad philosophical sense, as meaning-

giving methods for doing inquiry” (van Manen, 2014, p. 16). This phenomenological approach “does not aim for technicalities and instrumentalities – rather, it serves to foster and strengthen an embodied ontology, epistemology, and axiology of thoughtful and tactful action” (van Manen, 2014, p. 15).

A phenomenology of practice study is characterized by a particular approach to writing that reflects on the reductions. The most noticeable aspect of this type of writing is the consistent pattern of Lived Experience Descriptions (LED) (denoted by italicized block quotes below) followed by an in-depth reflection on the *lived* moment. This “anecdote-reflection” writing couplet (Adams, 2014, p. 52) facilitates drawing out nuanced phenomenological meanings and deeper insight into the lived experience.

### Method

#### Study Participants

The participants in the study were 5 university students (3 women, 2 men) with previous experience in VLE. A purposive snowball sampling strategy was employed to recruit adult participants regardless of gender or age who had experienced closeness in VLE at least once. The researcher initially contacted potential participants with detailed information about the background, purpose, methods, risks and benefits of the study. They were each encouraged to ask any questions before agreeing to participate in the study.

#### Data Collection Procedures

Data was gathered via in-depth phenomenological interviews with the goal of obtaining a more detailed and concrete picture of what it was like to experience closeness in VLE. Interview questions also probed the participants’ experiences of closeness in traditional F2F classrooms. “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 interviews were each transcribed and examined for LED using NVivo. LED both describe and re-evoke “... our immediate, pre-reflective consciousness of life” (van Manen, 1990, p. 35), and, as such, they thus oriented all subsequent analysis of the phenomenon.

#### Data Analysis Procedures

LED were analyzed using phenomenological reductions (van Manen, 2014): the heuristic reduction wonders about the phenomenon, trying to bracket the attitude of taken-for-granted-ness; the experiential reduction aims to come back to the concreteness of the experience; the hermeneutic reduction tries to be open by bracketing all previous interpretation and reflection; and the eidetic reduction looks for possible variations of the experience in relation to similar phenomena (e.g., experience of closeness in F2F classrooms).

LED were further examined across the dimensions of *lived time*, *lived body*, *lived space*, *lived things*, and *lived relations* (van Manen, 1990, 2014). Inductive thematic analysis was also used to explore some of the underlying meaning structures of the phenomenon. These themes are not intended as generalizations, but rather as heuristics to help uncover the possible meanings in a particular description (van Manen, 2014).

### Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was applied for and obtained from the Human Research Ethics Board. Confidentiality and anonymity were attained by assigning pseudonyms and by removing any identificatory information that could potentially pinpoint the participants.

### Discussion of Findings

When we think about a moment when we have felt close to another, we may recollect spending time with a loved one, for instance 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, or a time when we felt a special connection to our parents or a sibling. We may even remember the sense of warmth felt toward another creature, like the pet that was always there for us despite what may have happened in our day. And yet, if asked about closeness, how many would immediately think of a virtual experience, when our relationships with one another are mediated by one of today's many social and communication technologies?

If we start to think about the closest people in our life, we may realize that our most recent conversations were probably conducted via text messaging, a phone call, or even over Facetime, Snapchat, Instagram or Messenger. We may discover that this technicized environment may indeed mediate many of our closest relationships. But what about establishing a relationship with someone we have not yet met, or who we may perhaps never meet in-person? Could we ever experience a sense of closeness with this person?

In contemporary society, virtual course components, or even entirely online classrooms, are common. We may now find ourselves going to school in front of a computer, and only talking to teachers and classmates through a chat box. In such settings, we may be interacting with people we will never meet in-person. What, therefore, does the introduction of VLE mean for our relational sensibilities with one another? How, if at all, may VLE students experience their classmates or teacher in a personal way? Indeed, what happens to our experience of others in the virtual classroom?

Consider how the following student experiences her first synchronous meeting with all her virtual classmates.

### Meeting Simultaneously in VLE

*It's the first time I'm 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's almost 7 o'clock. The instructors start greeting everybody, asking us to introduce ourselves to the rest of the group. I feel excited and anxious at the same time. Suddenly, lots of names, backgrounds and different interests start to pop up on the screen. Everything is happening so fast that I can barely keep track of what everybody is writing. Although, this personal information adds to what I already think of them. 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've studied, but no one responds to my comments. I feel somewhat lonely. Then suddenly one of my answers 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 classmates and even the instructors. I'm stunned. For me, it's almost surreal that people from all over the world are talking directly to me, replying to me, and agreeing with me. They don't have a clue of who I really 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's 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's past 8pm, and suddenly I feel very hungry. It's almost as if I had forgotten where I was, or that I had not eaten dinner yet. I was utterly immersed in the online space, together, with them. (VLE experience)*

In the synchronous space of a VLE, this student initially describes feeling excluded and fairly lonely. Then a sudden exchange of words makes her feel such a strong sense of togetherness with others that she is surprised to re-emerge in her everyday surroundings, and to her own hungry body, when the session ends. She is indeed somewhere else: she is *immersed* in her virtual class, a space where she suddenly begins to experience a sense of collegiality with others. Is a sense of closeness to another online thus as unusual as it may first appear?

Also consider how the following student approaches his first course lecture in a F2F classroom.

*Walking to campus on my first day after the Christmas break, I'm feeling a bit anxious about going back to school. This is certainly an advanced class, and I'm not sure if I will be up*

*for the task. I wonder who's going to be there. "At least I already know the teacher" I tell myself in a reassuring way. I enter the building, walk through the hallway and I find myself a little lost. I find the classroom after a while of wandering around, and, as I walk in, I face 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'm 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 I smile. She greets a couple of people and heads 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. (F2F experience)*

Both anecdotes show that, as students approach new learning environments, experiencing closeness with other classmates may be eagerly anticipated. Both the students find themselves waiting to become acquainted with the rest of the group, hoping to get to know who their classmates are, and perhaps to even develop a sense of camaraderie with them. And yet, does simply knowing more about others, or seeing a familiar face, give us a sense of closeness? We will hardly feel close to every acquaintance, although at times we may momentarily feel close to someone who is not our friend. It is, therefore, possible that we may know many of our classmates well, and be familiar with their joys and worries, without necessarily feeling close to any of them.

But perhaps, in VLE, as this student describes, it only transpires as such because of a special eagerness to connect, to get to know other classmates, and thus to transcend the palpable geographic distance. Meeting other students *simultaneously* seems to be significant in these environments, as it challenges the typical asynchronicity of most interactions. Yet, do we get a sense of closeness when we feel that we are moving beyond technology, or is technology actually situating our experience of closeness? Indeed, the dilemma that technology introduces is that it not only limits the nature of our conversations, but that it also permits some interactions even to occur in the first place. For instance, there would not be a simultaneous lecture to attend, or an opportunity to chat with classmates from around the world, if the technology behind VLE did not exist.

In contrast, we would rarely contemplate the notion of a simultaneous F2F meeting, because that is how we always meet in-person. Is an asynchronous F2F meeting even possible? But online, a synchronous lecture seems to be valued in a different way. A simultaneous lecture

may have the conversational semblance of an ongoing and extemporaneous interplay with others that is simply taken-for-granted in-person. Moreover, although both virtual and F2F students seem to anticipate a sense of closeness to others, how they experience each classroom appears to be very different. Online, students cannot apprehend the smiles, hear the tenor of the greetings, notice the familiar friend walking into the room, or other social experiences that are readily available to F2F students. In VLE, it is the words, the comments, and the conversations that unfold that provide a context in which a sense of closeness might prosper. So, what seems to be happening to our relational sensibilities with one another in the online classroom? Consider how another student discovers the humanness in her virtual classmates.

### **Real People with Real Questions in VLE**

*The lecture just finished, but we'd decided to stay and talk about ideas for our group presentation. It's the second class and we need to define our topic. "The purpose of our presentation is...". I see that one of my classmates is typing very academic ideas. The rest of us also begin typing and throwing most of our ideas textually in the chat room. I'm trying to contribute, but I have no clue of what we really need to do. Then, one of my group members enables his microphone. "I'm confused. I'm not sure what we are supposed to do, and honestly now I'm 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 group member admits that he feels the same way. I start feeling an unexpected sense of relief. "I'm dealing with real people with real questions" I remember thinking. "Me too! I don't know what we're supposed to do in this course." Now everybody is talking instead of texting on the chat. I feel that I can relate to these people, that I can start letting down my guard. After that meeting, I stopped trying to make all my postings perfect, and I just started sharing my own uncertainties, thoughts, and questions. (VLE experience)*

Students accustomed to the presence of classmates in F2F conversations may be confronted with a sense of loss in a silent, and somewhat isolated, online environment. But, when this VLE student hears the uncertainties in the voices of others, a sense of closeness begins to grow. As the online group reveals personal concerns about the course, the students seem to cultivate a sense of shared experience and hints of camaraderie that were absent until then.

Hesitant about how to contribute, virtual students may choose to follow the lead of another classmate in order to collaborate and feel part of the group. In this VLE experience, the student chooses to keep contributing

despite having no clear understanding of what the assignment requires. But then, in the middle of the “very academic” discussion, a new dimension is suddenly revealed. An online classmate uses his voice to share his uncertainties, revealing a novel aspect of himself that immediately resonates with the rest of the group. “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 confusions, hesitations and insecurities that, just moments before, the virtual student had thought she needed to guard from the others, are unexpectedly recognized in the other group members.

Disclosing that we do not understand something or that we are confused may be daunting, especially for students in an academic context. A revelation of this kind may be easier, and even safer, to keep hidden from others in order to safeguard our academic integrity. Perhaps, this classmate felt safe enough to confide his hesitations because he was in a small work group. Maybe the fact that the instructor was not present may also have encouraged him to speak freely and share his own uncertainties. He may have sensed that other classmates did not know what to do either, even though they were all contributing to the assignment. It is almost as if this classmate is confiding a secret that ends up being highly resonant with the rest of the virtual group. But does sharing something personal, like a secret, facilitate a sense of closeness in VLE?

The word *close* comes from the Old French “clos” for *confined, concealed, secret*, which is rooted in the Latin “*clausus*” for *close, reserved*. Thus, *close* may denote *being confined to specific persons or groups*. And so, to be close could refer to sharing secrets, or even sharing a sense of secrecy. For instance, we may imagine two school friends who, hoping to have fun, decide to skip school one day to play their favourite sport or video-games. This secret is confined to them after promising never to tell their families, and perhaps it indeed brings these two friends closer to each other.

“[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). This sense of shared secrecy seems to bring some people closer when those involved know that information is kept confined, and that they hold something personal that binds them together. As this shared personal sphere suddenly opens up, we have to decide whether we want to be part of it by sharing a secret. Thus, it seems that this shared sphere containing the personal gave the virtual student the opportunity to begin experiencing a sense of closeness to others in her VLE. Perhaps, for online students, this personal information invites them to start thinking about

the others as *real people with real questions*, instead of letters typed on a screen. But how is this different from an in-person classroom? Consider how the previous F2F student finds himself being invited to be part of a shared personal sphere.

*After a brief introduction, the teacher starts to explain the syllabus. We all have a printed copy, so we can follow along as she reads it aloud. I see that Kate and some other classmates are skipping ahead to the evaluation section. They all have strong facial reactions to what they are reading. “What could it be?” I wonder nervously. I look at Kate and she seems upset. The teacher starts reading the evaluation section, and now I understand the look on their faces. “So much work!” I whisper to Kate. She looks at me with a concerned look and nods. During the break, she tells me that she doesn’t feel suited for the course. “Me neither” I admit with a strange sense of relief. A small group of people overhear our conversation and join us. “Are you also planning to drop this course?” one of them asks. “I’ll definitely drop this one. I’m only a part time student after all” says another. (F2F experience)*

Although confiding in one another may indeed bring students close, a secret in a F2F classroom may not necessarily reveal to a student that he is talking to *real people*. But, in the context of a timid expression of concern, the small but brave confession of a virtual classmate not only seems to draw students close to this person, but to the rest of the group that shares these very real uncertainties. Perhaps, in a VLE, sharing such a sense of secrecy may be the portal through which online students recognize themselves in the words of other group members.

Merely as names that keep continuously popping up on the screen, virtual classmates may not be perceived as being as real as their in-person counterparts without seeing their faces or hearing their voices. “Perhaps it is this conspicuous absence of the body that has something to do with [the student’s initial] hesitation to get involved” (Friesen, 2002, p. 226). In VLE, a sense of sharing with real people may not emerge until a tone literally gives voice to student concerns, and allows them to let down their guard, to stop concealing their truth behind perfect comments, and to find a sense of closeness with their virtual classmates. Yet, does simply hearing a classmate’s voice bring students closer?

In a F2F classroom, students may be familiar with their classmates’ voices, their choice of words, their tones, and their silences. However, students may be so used to them that they may not be actually hearing any of these voices or paying attention to all these nuances. In-person we notice the presence of the others through their physical appearance, gestures, facial expressions, tones,

accents, but maybe we take all of this for granted until we find ourselves in a VLE.

Although still important for F2F students, listening to their classmates' voices may not be as pivotal to the experience of closeness. For virtual students, however, the unexpected shift from text to speech may evoke a new attentiveness to the words of their classmates that may lead to a close encounter. "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 certainly endorse a more fluid dialogue in VLE in which ideas are more rapidly shared, but perhaps voices are also a reminder of the personal presence of others, a reminder that someone is a *real person*. Sharing sighs, doubts, confessions and uncertainties, voices may invite students to know one another more intimately, and potentially to grow closer online. But could this sense of sharing with real people develop into an experience of togetherness? Consider how another student finds herself experiencing the same situation as the rest of her virtual classmates.

### ***All Together in VLE***

*A lecture had just been given online by a renowned professor our instructor had invited, and now he's 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's about it. I notice he brings a very different energy to the group, and it seems difficult to communicate with him. I'm dreading the moment he asks me to answer one of his questions. He's 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, so I grow restless. Suddenly, it's 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 finish, 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 about what we should give this person to make him happy and get it over with. In this we're all together. I can hear in their voices that, one by one, they're 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're not alone. (VLE experience)*

Accustomed to open discussions with her classmates, this online student finds herself frustrated and alone in facing a newly imposed question-answer regime. But then, having lived through the timed demand of this renowned lecturer, a sense of closeness unexpectedly seems to arise as she recognizes the same fluster and confusion in her virtual classmates. Surprisingly, it is the sense of the shared-ness of each other's experience that enables her sense of closeness to unfold. And yet, we may again wonder how the F2F student experiences a similar situation.

*After the break, both 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 wondering if any of us recognizes who he is, but we're both lost. Suddenly, our teacher walks in with a bottle of water for the guest and resumes the class by introducing him. "He's 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's a very important person in the faculty, and a big name in the area. Everybody now seems eager to listen to him and to know what he says. He then starts talking but strangely nobody seems to understand what he's saying. After his presentation, he asks if there are any questions, but all we can hear is silence. I look at Kate and she glances at me with obvious discomfort. Nobody's looking at him. Instead, all of us are looking at each other trying to decipher who will break the awkward silence with a question. After a few seconds that felt like minutes, a classmate asks a question, and Kate looks at me with a sense of relief ... (F2F experience)*

In the F2F classroom context, a student can more easily distinguish that classmates have nothing to say with just a glance at each other's eyes. Students may simply look at one another and recognize an 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 agreement about each other's lack of contribution to the discussion. But is this mutual recognition an experience of closeness?

The word *close* also means *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 candle-light remain to suggest that closeness was once present. How strange that we may feel so close to someone, and then, in an instant, 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 suddenly 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 thus seems to be fragile, even though, once built, it may never fully dissipate.

Knowing personal things about someone may tell us little about how we may experience a moment with that person. Indeed, just by hearing the guest professor's voice, the virtual student notices that sharing, connecting, or even feeling close appear to be difficult despite her previous knowledge about him. Whether online or F2F, a sense of closeness may be difficult to attain if students feel it is impossible to communicate with one another. Instead of wanting to converse, students may find themselves apprehensive or even dreading to chat with this seemingly unfriendly individual. Intriguingly, here the voice of the other emerges as representing not only the path to closeness but also as potentially an obstacle that separates us and signals an implicit disconnection.

Feeling drawn to and close to someone in VLE may involve recognising, or at least respecting, both class dynamics and the structure of the virtual group, along with appreciating the affordances technology offers for conversing with one another. In this context, evoking the artificiality of a question-answer system may hinder the possibilities of a real conversation, as students are asked to respond mechanically. Inflexibility, time constraints, and tampering with the familiar thus seem to obstruct the experience of closeness in VLE.

But despite, or perhaps because of, unfavourable circumstances, closeness may be found when we notice there are others sharing a similar experience. Suddenly, virtual students understand that they are not the only ones enduring a difficult situation, but that the rest of the group is also experiencing nervousness and uneasiness. They may suddenly find themselves in a new virtual place, where they stop being isolated and start to participate with others. But how do students happen to sense that they are really sharing the same experience?

This online student seems to discern a sense of sharedness from the voices of her classmates, suggesting that *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 telephone. We too may feel close to a teacher, or some friends from our class, or maybe we may never have experienced connection with anyone at school. In spite of going through similar experiences, each person seems to live each encounter with his or her own 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. In VLE, it does not actually matter whether the students are all in fact experiencing the same or not, for what is important is the experience of shared-ness, that experience being what gives them a sense of closeness.

And so, when students feel part of the group they may find themselves connected and unexpectedly close to their virtual classmates. Students may even experience this tacit communion as a desire to support their classmates through a difficult or uncomfortable experience. Thinking they know how it feels to be in their position, students may even be supportive and strive to develop a closer relation with the others. "It is neither my original life, nor yours, rather, it is what is common to us" (Patočka, 1998, p. 68). However, it is noteworthy that an experience of closeness seems to be most palpably felt in the wake of feeling distant.

### ***A Warm and Personal Encounter in VLE***

*Sitting at my desk with my laptop, I'm ready for the weekly online meet-up with the rest of the class. I'm 10 minutes early and I notice that I'm the first student to login. Both instructors are already online and one of them eagerly greets me. "You're 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'm fine! How are you?" I'm trying to be friendly. We start chatting about the course, my work, and what we need to do during the next hour of our online meeting. Before I notice, it's time for the session to officially start; but strangely enough I'm 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 me out. But after a while, my concerns disappear. I'm receiving one-on-one guidance on my writing, my overall performance and how I need to improve. This time both of them are here just for me, and instead of being frightening, it's a warm and personal encounter. It's actually the closest I've ever felt to them. I even forgot that we were some thousands of miles apart, because for a brief moment they were just a few words away. (VLE experience)*

An uncomfortable moment in a VLE may thus indeed suddenly transform into an experience of closeness. Being used to sharing with all virtual classmates, it may be awkward for students to realize they are the only ones online with their teachers. They may begin to experience some discomfort as they feel in the spotlight, but as they grow accustomed to the one-to-one communication, they enter a new sphere of closeness where they are sharing with their teachers.

When learning in a VLE, students may feel the need to prepare for the virtual lecture. They may arrange a quiet space to reduce interruptions, or even log in earlier to confirm that there are no changes in the schedule. By doing this, students avoid the possibility of experiencing awkwardness if they find themselves alone online with just the teacher, not really knowing what to talk about. But arriving early for the class may also open up the opportunity for more personal contact with the teacher.

In the F2F class, when students show up early to class, they may purposefully sit at a distance from their classmates and teacher to avoid interaction. Nevertheless, they remain present in the eyes of the others, even if they neither participate in any in-class activities nor converse with anyone. In VLE, it is not as easy to recognize someone's presence, but an eager greeting from a virtual teacher may break the disconnection and create a sense of personal contact. How interesting that something that seems as basic as our presence could be so different from one setting to another. It seems so ordinary for us to notice other people, even if we are not paying any attention to them, that perhaps realizing that we may not be noticed online seems to draw us closer. Is it even possible to be in a F2F classroom with another person without noticing his or her presence? Let's consider what would happen in a F2F situation.

*The teacher announces the end of the first class. Everybody heads towards the door and quickly disappears into the hallway. I take my time clearing up my things, and I wave goodbye 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'm left alone with the teacher. I smile at him, but I feel a bit uncomfortable and I try to hurry up. Then, I hear his voice. "What do you think of the course?" he says in a friendly tone. Feeling in the spotlight, I start to wonder if he heard what we were talking during the break. "It seems very interesting, but I'm not sure if I have the experience that is required for the course." He appears to reflect on my words as if he didn't expect this candid answer. "No, you shouldn't feel that way. I know you and I'm sure you are more than adequately equipped for this course." I smile politely, and as we both walk out of the classroom, I start talking about my concerns. "Let's talk some more next week" he says as we get close to his office. I nod and wave goodbye. (F2F experience)*

From a student perspective, a teacher's interest may denote the distinction between an unexceptional educational experience and an experience of closeness. But the unpredictability of this event seems to carry a certain discomfort for the virtual student. "Technology [is] the knack of so arranging the world that we don't

have to experience it" (Frisch, 1957/1959, p. 178). Perhaps virtual students have grown used to feeling protected and secure behind the screen and the keyboard, and therefore they may not be comfortable feeling in the spotlight when typing a response, posting a comment, or having the undivided attention of their teachers.

Then again, F2F students can certainly find themselves in the spotlight too. Running into a teacher, either before or after the class, can also open the possibility for an awkward personal experience. Here, as the student picks up his things and says goodbye to his classmates, he suddenly realizes that his teacher is the only one left. Similar to the VLE experience, this student also recalls being uncomfortable and trying to avoid this potential close contact. Unlike previous recollections of students who felt close to their classmates, the possibility of a personal experience with a teacher seems to be anticipated by them with some measure of apprehension and concern.

How come both recollections are experienced as being in the spotlight? Perhaps, students are accustomed to maintaining a certain personal distance in relation to their teachers. They acknowledge their authority over them as supposedly experts and know that teachers assess their performance. But, perhaps, in order to get a sense of closeness with a teacher, students may need to move beyond this formal relationship and step into a sphere of personal contact: a space in which they notice the teacher's pedagogical interest in them as students, and in which the teacher is there *just for them*.

Experiencing a personal contact with a teacher may not be as common for students in VLE, and although indeed not everyone experiences a sense of closeness, it seems less daunting for students to get closer to other classmates. Nonetheless, when students are introduced to this unexpected educational contact, they may find themselves enrichingly engaged in intimately 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, 1998, p. 65). Not being treated merely as one of the bunch, this virtual student is recognized and addressed as an individual. During this shared moment, it may not even matter if there are other students around her, because what seems to be important is that these teachers are paying attention to her and creating a space that allows her to experience a shared personal moment.

And so, when students find themselves encircled in a sense of closeness, as this virtual student does, time falls momentarily into the background and physical distance seems to lose significance as they start to connect with the teacher at a deeper pedagogical level. "[T]he frantic

abolition of all distances brings no nearness; for nearness does not consist in shortness of distance" (Heidegger, 1971, p. 165). In these experiences of pedagogical closeness, it does not matter whether students are sharing the same physical classroom, or whether they are thousands of miles apart; for, in this shared intimate space, distance means no remoteness, since a personal contact may indeed bring them all 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, 1998, p. 66)

The word close may also refer to *being near in space or time*. F2F students that sit in the classroom are near to others both in space and time. We may think that they must feel close to the other, at least in some way, since they all have come together in the same room, for the same class, at the same school. However, students may also feel somewhat alone sitting in the middle of the classroom before their friends arrive. Perhaps, they may not feel ready to connect to any of their classmates despite being in the same place 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 stranger that, after all these illustrations, a student may still experience a sense of closeness, and even companionship, in a VLE.

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 a couple of school friends who text each other during the day, opening a sphere of togetherness despite being in different classrooms, 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 also realize that perhaps just sharing a text message, a smiley face, a GIF, a meme, or a call may create a sense togetherness with one another.

What, then, seems to be the essence of closeness when there is always something closer or further in our lived experience? The experience of closeness is perhaps 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 by and aloof from the presence of others. Moreover, closeness seems also to have a temporal dimension, since it requires time to build and to grow. It is subtle, and as something that requires time, not everyone may find themselves at the same degree of closeness to each other. We are nevertheless always at some point on the spectrum of this experience, moving away from or moving closer to one another.

Even so, closeness seems to be attained differently depending on whether students are F2F or online. The basic ingredients for a close experience in VLE, 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 F2F. In VLE, the sense of togetherness may unfold when students start to communicate with both their virtual classmates and teachers. A voice, a virtual presence, or a personal story may allow students to emerge from behind their words on the computer screen, and actually be heard. For online students, closeness may not involve sharing a classroom or meeting with a classmate for coffee after class, but it nevertheless does seem to involve a kind 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, 1998, p. 65). Virtual students seem to be in a constant relational experience of closeness to others, even though they may still not sense togetherness with any of them. Accessing the other through online communication thus seems to be key for their sense of closeness. Online exchanges are then fundamentally altered, and accessing the virtual others is almost a way to access a virtual self and a new sense of what being online with others means. Although not all VLE contact will open the possibility for a sense of togetherness, the ones that personally and intimately touch students most probably will. Perhaps, in some way, this will allow VLE students to transcend the actual geographical distance and join their virtual class in a single digital space.

### Concluding Remarks

Even shallow communication online, ironically, may provide the participants with 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, we have explored the importance of social presence in building

a sense of community and closeness in learning settings. This dimension acquires a greater significance when thinking about VLE (Baker, 2010; Borup et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2011; Kuo et al., 2014; Murphy & Rodríguez-Manzanares, 2012).

The pervasiveness of digital technologies for educational purposes is undeniable, and thus debating whether VLEs are better options than F2F environments is no longer a central issue. Moreover, an overwhelming number of educational institutions are now venturing into virtual education (Allen & Seaman, 2013). However, current VLEs still seem to obstruct student social exchanges. Even now, when students "experienced this sense of disconnect, they described their online experiences as being less enjoyable, less helpful, and more frustrating than [did] those individuals who made more personal connections and interactions through their courses" (Boling, Hough, Krinsky, Saleem, & Stevens, 2012, p. 121). And yet, surprisingly, it seems that, despite the limitations, digital technologies still allow certain learners to experience a sense of closeness to others online.

Are virtual students thus essentially lonely students? If we take into consideration only elements such as the geographical and physical distance (Dolan, 2011; Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011; Owens et al., 2009; Zagorski, 2011), removing from their experience all the other components, then perhaps we could say so. Digital technologies have been shown to have the *potential* to afford a sense of togetherness (Aguila, 2011), closeness (Adams, 2014; Dobson, 2002), community (Shackelford & Maxwell, 2012), or even intimacy (van Manen, 2010). The present study also identified the possibility of experiencing a sense of closeness in VLE by encountering the humanness in the others, by being surprised by the realization that we are not *alone* online, and by *relating* to what the others are going through.

As the F2F student illustrates, when he meets his classmates he enters the relational space of the class. He senses the presence of the others, and his presence is perceived by the group. He listens to the different voices, new and familiar. He encounters strange faces, and some he already knows. There is no doubt that he 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 absent, distracted, isolated, we can nevertheless still sense the presence of the others.

For online students, however, the experience of meeting with someone is not so well defined. These students are unsure who they are meeting, where they are meeting

them, what the others are doing, or even if they are all online simultaneously. And yet, as these VLE students describe, meeting online may bring a sense of closeness to others by adding recognizable dimensions to who their classmates are, by understanding that they are all experiencing a similar moment, or by sharing some of the same uncertainties as the rest of the virtual class.

Social presence, a sense of community, closeness, all appear to be essential not only in VLE, but also in F2F settings. And yet, is closeness always achieved in-person? Are F2F students indeed close students? "Short distance is not in itself nearness. Nor is great distance remoteness" (Heidegger, 1971, p. 165). Closeness thus does not inhere in proximity but rather in *lived* nearness to one another.

It would certainly be unwise to deny the many barriers that still exist with current digital technologies, but it would also be risky to deny entirely the value of what they presently afford. As social beings, we not only find ourselves in need of establishing close, enduring and significant relationships with others (Leary, 2007; Leary & Kelly, 2009; Silvia & Kwapis, 2011), but we also create social connections in every new interaction we engage in, regardless of the type of medium we use to communicate with one another. How, nevertheless, can students actually experience a sense of closeness to others in a VLE?

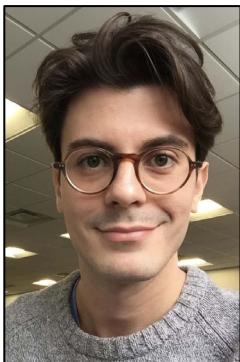
... As with other psychological constructs, *closeness* represents a significant challenge to the measurement-minded social scientist. Although the closeness that people can feel for others is undeniably palpable, it is not easily captured by the standard methods and approaches used to assess other important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

The experience of closeness, like any other complex human experience, seems to be quite difficult to pinpoint or even to describe. And, while the students interviewed primarily relayed stories of closeness through conversational voices online, it is clear that a sense of closeness may also be created through text alone (Adams, 2014; Dobson, 2002). Moreover, this particular experience seems to be modulated not only by personal traits and characteristics, but by cultural and social preferences as well (Seepersad, Choi, & Shin, 2008). Thus, we can find ourselves in a continuum of closeness to others even if not yet explicit. We may move from an experience of togetherness to an experience of loneliness, or vice versa, both in F2F and in VLE.

## Referencing Format

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