

AS THE VIRTUAL DUST SETTLES LOOKING BACK AT AND BEYOND AAACS 2020

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The AAACS 2020 conference theme invited its membership “to articulate a ‘language’ of ethical engagement” and to take up a conceptually diverse range of educational issues from an ethical point of view. Why a ‘language’ of ethical engagement, and why now? Our feeling has been that our current languages have failed us. Instrumental language serves only to reduce the human condition to data, evidence, and tabulation. The language of politics fares little better, reducing humanity in all its complexity to a stereotype through political pablum. Moreover, in an era marked by the “organized irresponsibility” (Beck, 2009, pp. 27-29) of world risk society and the refusal to take political responsibility by one of the most powerful leaders in the world (see e.g., Oprysko, 2020; Matthews, 2017), a turn to ethical engagement in curriculum studies in the United States may open up productive possibilities for our work at a time when the divisiveness of politics has led to widespread despair.

In the case of the COVID-19 crisis, we are witnessing not only a world risk but the unfolding of a global, and acutely national, disaster. This disaster has caused school closures and has subsequently demanded the utilization of new and improved technologies to stay at home while continuing to do education. The move from the “on-line” factory model to the “online” virtual model of education speaks to a central question within the AAACS 2020 conference theme: we asked our membership to consider targeted actions and arguments that our field might offer in “opposition to the establishment of pervasive surveillance regimes, data commodification and the broader degradation of the public sphere.” That this conference call was written well before the world had knowledge that a global pandemic would shut down virtually everything other than all things virtual speaks,

somewhat prophetically, to the political and ethical concerns that we raise here. Specifically, we seek to reflect critically on the educational use of new and improved technologies—particularly videotelephony and its surveillance capabilities—which provided our organization with a means to carry on with the 2020 conference at a time when the cancellation of large gatherings and events across the world was suddenly the norm. Specifically, we consider the ways that high technology for educational purposes cut two ways.

The video communications technologies that were used to hold AAACS 2020 allowed presenters to share scholarship virtually and encouraged participation from colleagues across time zones, countries, and continents. They also offered a more economically viable, environmentally sustainable, and epidemiologically responsible format to come together at a time when social distancing, quarantining, and isolation had become, as it continues to be, our new normal. In this sense, we see videotelephony to be an ethical means of conferencing regardless of the viability of being together in person. While it is not out of the question to surmise that AAACS could again use this sort of platform for an annual meeting (we would certainly not be the only organization to do so), we are also acutely aware that video communication technologies at once bring together and encroach upon realms that have been understood as separate spaces in different time periods and contexts. In this sense, we the authors are experiencing a kind of paradox: optimism about convening future videoconferences for the reasons mentioned above, but skepticism regarding the revolution or hegemony of online video communications for teaching, learning, and conferencing that is emerging in this pandemic era.

As the virtual dust settles on AAACS 2020, we have begun to critically reflect upon several realms or domains as they appear to be transmogrifying with the explosion of video communications for educational purposes. While we see multiple realms evolving with the move to working and schooling from home, the ones we intend to interrogate here concern the Public and Private, and the Monastic and Hypermodern. In describing these realms within a new virtual culture in the face of a global health crisis, we turn to political theorist Hannah Arendt's description of the active life, curriculum theorist Robert McClintock's writings on study in a world of instruction, and social theorist Ulrich Beck's insights into the boomerang effect of successful modernization to frame our thinking. By no means do we intend to provide an exhaustive analysis of these aforementioned realms. Rather, we highlight how they have been articulated by others and the ways we see them converging, emerging, and possibly collapsing with the move online amid, and perhaps even after, the pandemic. We also hope that looking backward at AAACS 2020 in the way we describe herein will open up future conversations with our colleagues at and beyond AAACS 2021.

The Public and Private Realms

In her philosophical treatise on the *vita activa*, Arendt (1958) describes the modes of outward oriented undertakings that constitute the life of doing (as opposed to the life of thinking, or the *vita contemplativa*). Doing encompasses three activities: labor, work, and action. Labor is characterized by the repetitive efforts that humankind puts forth, which provide the necessities of bare life living. Work is distinguished from labor as it fabricates human artifacts, some of which stand the test of time and others that do not. Action comes into impermanent existence in the space of appearances and speech that is the public realm. In setting up her analysis of these realms that constitute the experience of doing in its entirety, Arendt first describes the differences between the public and private realms of the ancient world in order to understand the state of modern humanity.

It is not the privatization of the public sphere in the neoliberal era, so extensively critiqued in education, that we speak of here. Rather, we look to the distinction Arendt (1958) draws between the public and private realms as they pertain to the modern, turned hypermodern, human condition. The public realm is synonymous with “the common world” (p. 55), which is where human beings come together to be seen and heard by others. The common world is what individuals are born into and what they leave behind in their death insofar as it is “what we have in common” with other human beings. The public realm is said to signify two interrelated phenomena. In the first, that which appears in public is “something that is seen and heard by everyone and has the widest possible publicity” (p. 50). In this sense, the realm of the common “constitutes reality” because others verify my existence as a speaking and acting human being, and I, too, see and hear others, which confirms that they exist. Through the presence of others, we come into existence. In the second, Arendt adds, the public realm is the world insofar as it is distinguished from the inner world of one’s thoughts, the “warmth of the hearth” (p. 59), and/or “privately owned property” (p. 61) —the latter of which may or may not be desirable.

However, there are some human beings who live and labor exclusively in the private realm. Arendt focuses almost exclusively on the example of the slave who is “a servant of necessity” (p. 65) against his or her will. The “curse of slavery consisted not only in being deprived of freedom and of visibility” (p. 55) while alive, but also in leaving little trace of one’s existence in death. Those who lived their entire lives in private did not live an entirely human life because they were deprived of being seen and heard by others: “It is as though he [sic] did not exist” (p. 58). Because Arendt’s analysis of the private realm is concerned with laboring as one of the three conditions of the *vita activa*, she does not take into consideration other persons who have been excluded from the public realm—such as the ‘insane,’ the ‘decrepit,’ the

‘contagious,’ and the convicted—because they may not labor in correspondence with and in the service of work and action.

What do the public and private realms have to do with our current context? Why think about them as we reflect on AAACS 2020 and the move to online education? In the coronavirus era, we are witnessing ways in which individuals and entire societies are encouraged via public health advisories, mandated by decrees, and in some cases physically forced to stay at home or shelter in place due to (fears of) contagion. In this sense, that which has typically taken place in public or outside of the home (e.g., work and school) has been relocated to the private realm. Simultaneously, that which was private, the home (if one has one) —a sacred space of intimacy where one may or may not rejuvenate in order to return to the presence of others—is now becoming, in a new sense, a dimension of the public. This is because the private realm is being used as the space of appearances to be seen and heard by others. The private realm is being de-privatized in order to fit an appearance made for public.

We see this reconfiguring of the public and private realms cutting two ways. On one hand, relocating that which has typically taken place in public to the private can provide new methods to control mass populations. Echoes of Foucault’s (1977) analyses of the leper colony which “gave rise to rituals of exclusion” (p. 198) and the plague-stricken town as the birth of the surveillance state (p. 196) bear hallmarks with the current pandemic crisis as social distancing and body cameras to record behavior have become normalized. Moreover, as higher education and democratic public life have been under siege for some time—a siege which includes “the growing influence of the national security state” (Giroux, 2012, p. 328) – we are highly attuned to and wary of what the online move could mean for education and public life. The everyday use of these high technologies brings to our attention the possibility of a new sort of totalitarianism on the horizon. For what totalitarianism looked like yesterday differs from what it might look like tomorrow (Spector, 2016).

Totalitarian movements seek to destroy both the public and private realms in order to attain the preeminence of a totalitarian state (Arendt, 1973). The terror of totalitarianism in power has already obliterated the public realm insofar as this form of government does not allow for public protest or dissent. The ideology of a totalitarian regime has also withered away the private realm because neighbors, friends, and family are suspect and treat me as a suspect. There is no escaping a truly total state because the individual is completely isolated even if in the company of others. While a space of solitude—what Virginia Woolf calls a room of one’s own—is necessary for the contemplative activities of study and scholarship, “solitude can become loneliness ... when [we] can no longer find the redeeming grace of companionship” (p. 476). “Loneliness,” Arendt maintains, is “the essence of totalitarian government” (p. 475). In the era of the pandemic, loneliness is a growing

concern for human beings if there are little to no opportunities for the building of community and solidarity (see also Gessen, 2020). School is a primary space outside of the home that has provided youth with such opportunities in the past. What happens when the public realm of democracies, which allow for dissent, are challenged by “performative authoritarianism” as was recently the case with the crackdown on protests in Portland, Oregon (Appelbaum as cited in Stelter, 2020)? Concurrently, when the “security of darkness” (Arendt, 2006, p. 183) that is the private realm is “thrust ... into the light” that is the public realm, as is the case with the move to teaching and learning from home, what happens to the sanctuary of one’s private life? These are questions we hope to interrogate in more depth with our colleagues at AAACS 2021.

But this changing landscape is not strictly dystopic. What makes technology at times bend toward “the Good” that Plato inspired is its fascinating potential to aide teaching, learning, and curriculum. Some have worried that the computer really would replace the teacher, that digital text would signal the end of books. These fears were premature. Although critics such as David Noble have justly decried the rise of the *Digital Diploma Mills* or online for-profit universities, most of these have gone the way of the dot.com, if not the Betamax. In fact, in the present moment, the Internet which provides high tech video communication and online course offerings is generally saving higher education. How is this so?

In the modern era, education became all about access and opportunity. The degree to which technology supports both is the degree to which modernity itself is humane and ethical. It is unethical to deny some because they cannot physically enter a doorway and access a room. It is no less unethical to allow the “digital divide” to grow, denying some children access to the Internet when learning is increasingly moving online. Likewise, it is inhumane to exclude some because their behavioral, social, or emotional circumstances do not afford them the opportunity for a traditional education. Students who had neither access nor voice are given both through assistive technology(s). Adults who have struggled with time and resources retain more of both in the new high-tech configuration. High technology allows the working adult to take courses from home, on their own time, with allowance to mothers, fathers, and other caregivers performing childcare. Hence, in rethinking schooling and education more generally, ethical educators seek to transform the university, not from the traditional to the virtual, but to a combination of both—the hybrid in this hypermodern world.

From the Monastic to the Hypermodern...and back again

When we recall the premodern and tales of antiquity, we often envision a monastic era of solitary study where book reading was the first form of education at a

distance. And though there are monastic orders that have established a kind of “counterworld” (Arendt, 1958, p. 54), this world is arguably one more associated with a life of thinking (*vita contemplativa*) than a life of acting (*vita activa*). Thinking is not done in the world of appearances, per se, but in the inner world of one’s mind that is the “soundless dialogue ... between me and myself” (Arendt, 1978, I: p. 185). If thinking is a solitary experience in which I keep myself company, it is not one characterized by loneliness. Nor is it concerned with how one appears to others because there is no performance taking place. The robes worn by monks, for example, are meant to symbolize the simple life and a retreat from the showmanship of the public realm of politics.

As historians note, for centuries book study in a private setting reigned. However, study was a privilege, largely the domain of religious leaders and an elite leisure class. For the masses, education could hardly be called study. More likely, it was training. In this telling, the history of study is recorded by Robert McClintock (1971). McClintock argued that for those seeking education, study was of the greatest importance. He reminds us that during the Classical period Plato had a great appreciation for study and – by modern standards – even a progressive understanding of what it means to be an educated person. Plato imagined everyone, from nobles to serfs, as having the innate capacity to learn:

... the soul of every man does possess the power of learning the truth and the organ to see it with...just as one might have to turn the whole body round in order that the eye should see light instead of darkness, so the entire soul must be turned away from this changing world, until its eye can bear to contemplate reality and that supreme splendor which we have called the Good. (p. 169)

For Plato, study is a deliberate attempt to step away from everyday experience, “to turn the whole body round” to a life of contemplation. A different view emerges during the 17th century when a system of schools is built. Teaching becomes the primary way of education for this “changing world,” replacing self-study:

Comenius cared naught for study ... but instead set forth the techniques and principles by means of which teachers were to impart knowledge, virtue, and faith to empty minds with such certainty that the desired result must of necessity follow. (p. 169)

Reviewing the long arc from Philosopher King Plato to Master Teacher Comenius suggests that modernity turned its gaze from private self-study to public instruction, utterly altering our conception of learning (p. 162). Monasticism had its bloom during the Middle Ages; however, it is critical to note that the monastic way of life was reserved for the people of privilege to engage in quiet contemplation. For this group, “the ways of study” (p. 164) led to self-control. This era would give way to another: mass production and ultimately universal education. Modernity

worshipped at the altar of the factory and demanded a school that looked like one with a teacher moving pupils down the assembly line. To humanize the process, pedagogy was called for. Study began to recede as industrialization exponentially grew.

With the turn toward teaching and a steady demise of self-study, the monastic state appeared to wane. The study of knowledge, of curriculum, seemed evermore reserved for a decreasing number of philosophers who find reflection and contemplation more important than “practice-based teaching,” “clinical research,” or methodization. Further still, content in the foundations and philosophy are being squeezed out of the schools of education, rendering the teaching of teaching an exercise in performativity. But is the victory of teaching heralding an end to the monastic age? Is it truly final, all-encompassing? While it is true that contemplation and study have little grip on teacher preparation programs, focused on the tyranny of performativity (Ball, 2003), some teachers long for theory, because teaching by numbers (Taubman, 1986) wears thin. The social science faculty have long bemoaned teacher education’s obsession with method. Additionally, Humanities faculty have warned that in-person Humanities courses are disappearing altogether from college campus schedules.

Nonetheless, a return to studying from the home, the private realm, vis-à-vis high technology and online learning is rising, ironically. It is ironic because the pandemic-imposed, quasi-monastic style of living and learning in the 21st century recalls and then returns us to the very conditions of life—the contemplative state of Plato—that we thought modernism had discarded. In the case of our own online AAACS 2020 virtual conference, there were no impromptu conversations in the hallways, no coffee breaks, nor smiles shared over conferences past or future endeavors. The moments between sessions were soft stops, where everyone simply turned the screens off and went back to tending to their home or garden or getting an extra bite of food in their solitary room. Simply put: a return to the monastic. Hypermodernity, let alone the pandemic, has forced us to reconsider the monastic way of life.

According to Beck (2009), hypermodernity is characterized by “the *victory* of modernity which is undermining the basic institutions of the first modernity due to unintended and unknown side effects” (p. 55). The boomerang effect of successful modernization includes un/anticipated world risks which threaten life on earth. As a global pandemic, COVID-19 serves as a potent example of world risk society. This risk and catastrophe wrapped up in one has created other unanticipated side effects, including the acceleration of remote teaching and learning. We see the move from “on-line” to “online” as one that returns the teacher and student to a quasi-monastic model of education.

Why do these paradoxes seem so evident in this hypermodern period? The expansion in usage of technologies such as the Internet, mobile phones, video, and teleconferencing collapse both public and private and give way toward the social, or the omnipresent sociality, which we are collectively participating with, receding from, or refusing to take part in. Clearly, current trends indicate that youth have almost universally chosen to create their own identity mediated through technology. 97% of high school boys and 98% of high school girls use social networking media (Twenge, 2017). They will arguably be well versed in the videoconferencing technology which is undoubtedly being readied for the commencement of school in the autumn.

The use of videoconferencing perhaps helped save the school year for school districts interrupted, as it were, due to the pandemic. By no means, was this modality administered equally or equitably by all school districts; nonetheless, the technology did serve as a reasonable stand-in for at least some face-to-face meetings of classrooms. And it will continue to do so. Again, while this new normal does raise ethico-political concerns regarding the surveillance state—specifically, how said technologies have the capacity to undermine privacy, spontaneity, and freedom—it also has the capacity to turn a private space into the commons, which is a form of political empowerment and, not inconsequentially, children can still attend school, adults can still attend conferences, and education itself can still be convened.

A world of solitude?

In this largely descriptive analysis, we have sought to understand the ways that certain realms—specifically, the private and public as delineated by Arendt, the “self-imposed” space of “inward driven study” of the monastic life as recounted by McClintock (1971, p. 161), and the hypermodern as theorized by Beck—provide a language to interpret a not exactly sudden, but also quite abrupt move to remote teaching, learning, and conferencing. We can only speculate what the converging, emerging, or collapsing of these different realms might mean over time and for education.

However, the latest iteration of ZOOM teleconferencing already suggests that we are returning to more of a shut-in society, at least with respect to education. The recent AAACS 2020 conference provided testimony to the fact that presentations of a scholarly nature could indeed occur by way of a feed right into one’s own home to be transmitted in a hyper-efficient manner to a coterie of others from their own rooms or places of living. As we noted, the experience was somewhat surreal; no between session mingling, nor, on the other hand, did we as participants need to take trains, planes, or automobiles when we essentially teleported ourselves through our computer devices. Amidst the genuine, nagging fear of an epidemic, the

cavorting through this rather seamless path to conversation and seeing each other from a distance experience was rather peaceful, almost like a sedative.

In *Digital Diploma Mills*, Noble (2002) warned that moving education online would come back to haunt us. Commercialization of the university, ushered in by the champions of high tech, would be followed by the commodification of knowledge. In a vivid description, Noble imagined a university in physical ruins, and in its stead, fiber optic cables shooting through the rubble, academics standing around wondering, “where did our university go?” His apocalyptic vision might still come true, but the demise of the university *as an idea* has not yet fully materialized. This is because the new and improved technologies being adapted to and for the virtual online experience cut two ways as we have described herein. As the means to present, discuss, study, and critically reflect have changed before, they are able to change again in accordance with a world that has slowed down and returned, if only for the time being, to a different, more solitary era.

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