Teaching Without the Face: The Influence of Online Teaching on Professors' Sense of Relational Responsibility

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Although distance education is not a new phenomenon, the unprecedented advent of the COVID-19 pandemic left educators across the country with no option but to deliver their courses in an online format. Many studies have demonstrated the influence of distance education on teachers' practices and several studies correlate teachers' interaction to students' motivation, participation, satisfaction, and performance in distance education. There is, however, a paucity of research that analyzes the influence of students' physical presence on a teacher's sense of relational responsibility, especially at the university level and with distance education—let alone when teaching online is not an option. The purpose of this study was therefore to understand the ways in which the abrupt and involuntary shift from physical to distance education caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the absence of students' physical presence affected teacher-educators' perceived sense of relational responsibility, as articulated by Levinas. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 professors teaching in Faculties of Education across Canada. The main question driving this research was: in what ways does the physical absence of students influence professors' perceived sense of relational responsibility? Findings are presented and discussed under three main themes: relationships, responsibility, and responsivity.

Bien que l'enseignement à distance ne soit pas un phénomène nouveau, l'avènement sans précédent de la pandémie du COVID-19 a laissé les éducateurs de tout le pays sans autre choix que de donner leurs cours dans un format en ligne. Alors que de nombreuses études ont démontré l'influence de l'enseignement à distance sur les pratiques des enseignants et que plusieurs études mettent en corrélation l'interaction des enseignants avec la motivation, la participation, la satisfaction et les performances des élèves dans l'enseignement à distance, il existe peu de recherches analysant l'influence de la présence physique des élèves sur le sens de la responsabilité relationnelle d'un enseignant, en particulier au niveau universitaire et avec l'enseignement à distance—et encore moins lorsque l'enseignement en ligne n'est pas une option. Le but de cette étude était donc de comprendre la manière dont le passage brusque et involontaire de l'éducation en personne à l'éducation à distance causé par la pandémie de COVID-19 et l'absence de présence physique des élèves ont affecté le sentiment perçu de responsabilité relationnelle des enseignants-formateurs, tel qu'articulé par Levinas. Des entrevues semi-structurées ont été menées avec 12 professeurs enseignant dans les facultés d'éducation du Canada. La principale question qui a motivé cette recherche était la suivante : de quelle manière l'absence physique des étudiants influence-t-elle le sentiment perçu par les professeurs de responsabilité relationnelle ? Les résultats sont présentés et discutés sous trois thèmes principaux : les relations, la responsabilité et la réactivité.

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic left educators across Canada with no option but to deliver their courses in an online format. Despite the unprecedented circumstances caused by school closures, distance education is not a new phenomenon. Many studies have demonstrated the influence of distance education on teachers' practices (Badia et al., 2017; Comas-Quinn, 2011; Cook, 2018; Gonzalez, 2009; Moreira, 2016; Murphy et al., 2011). Several others show correlations between teachers' interaction and students' motivation, participation, satisfaction, and performance in distance education (Baker, 2010; Díaz & Entonado, 2009; Edwards et al., 2011; Falloon, 2011; Heinemann, 2005, 2007; Herodotou et al., 2019; Kupczynski et al., 2010; Park et al., 2015; Pianta et al., 2012; Richardson & Swan, 2003; Richardson et al., 2015; Richardson et al., 2016; Russo & Benson, 2005; Sher, 2009; Song et al., 2016; Song et al., 2019; Sun & Wu, 2016; Themeli & Bougia, 2016; Zhou, 2012). However, there is a paucity of research analyzing the teacher-student relationship, especially at the university level (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014; Spilt et al., 2011; Woods & Baker, 2004) and with distance education—let alone when teaching online is not an option. The gap in the literature becomes even wider when considering the influence of students' physical presence on the teacher's sense of relational responsibility.

The purpose of this study was thus to understand the ways in which the abrupt and involuntary shift from physical to distance education caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and consequently the absence of students' physical presence affected teacher-educators' perceived sense of relational responsibility, as articulated by Levinas (1972, 1982, 1995). The main question driving this research was: in what ways does the physical absence of students influence professors' perceived sense of relational responsibility?

Relationality in Online Education

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, research on online higher education was mainly focused on the experiences and perception of students. Particularly, the notions of *immediacy* and *social presence* are abundant in the literature, emphasizing the role professors play in students' motivation, engagement, and learning (Baker, 2010; Khan & Rafi, 2020; Song et al., 2019; Sung & Mayer, 2012; Woods & Baker, 2004). Albeit a complex term, social presence refers to the "perceptual experience of being psychologically involved in the interaction with others in a mediated environment" (Song et al. 2019, p. 449). Immediacy, in turn, can be understood as "the psychological distance between a communicator and the recipient of the communication" which is conveyed "through speech and associated verbal and nonverbal cues" (Tu & McIsaac 2002, p. 134).

What is noticeable across the literature, then, is how relationality (and its importance) is often conceptualized strongly unilaterally: teachers having to make themselves available to students in multiple formats (synchronously, asynchronously, through chats, email, forums, etc.), self-disclosing, managing, and promoting their interactions so that students may feel connected and thus engaged with the teacher and with their peers (Badia et al., 2017; Song et al., 2016). Murphy and Rodríguez-Manzanares (2012), for example, provided a summary of rapport indicators found in the literature in the context of online education, most of which are explicitly addressing only the teachers' responsibility (e.g., showing empathy and an understanding of students' needs, understanding the student as a person, being responsive)—a few indicators could arguably be applied to students as well, even though that does not seem to be the focus of that study (e.g., recognizing differences, showing concern).

Research shows, however, that reciprocity is fundamental to building rapport, and that faculty's emotions do play a major role in how they enact their practices (Cook, 2018; Zhou, 2012). Although it is understandable that online education requires an added layer of responsibility from teachers (i.e., connecting with students whom they do not meet in a classroom), a missing piece in the literature is the ways in which professors' immediacy and social presence is contingent upon students' immediacy and social presence as well—a gap that this study sought to address.

Theoretical Framework

Concerned with the tendency towards totalization in Western philosophy, Levinas was critical of any approach that seeks to comprehend the Other as a framing (hence possession, ownership) of alterity. For the philosopher, the attempt to grasp what makes the Other different is not only impossible, but also undesirable, for trying to reduce the Other to what is understandable, common to the self, is an act of violence against the Other's uniqueness. The alterity of the Other is irreducible, beyond comprehension, and independent of the self. However, because one is always in relation with the Other, it is the quality of such relation that will render it ethical. Thus, Levinas saw ethics as relation because it is only through alterity that community can exist: "Il y a dans la connaissance, en fin de compte, une impossibilité de sortir de soi; dès lors, la socialité ne peut avoir la même structure que la connaissance" [There is in knowledge, ultimately, an impossibility of going out of oneself; therefore, sociality cannot have the same structure as knowledge] (Levinas, 1982, p. 52). In other words, it is only when otherness is upheld (rather than reduced to what is common to the self) that genuine socialization can exist.

Therefore, "this relationality takes the form of responsibility" (Fagan, 2013, p. 51). As Fagan explained, "rather than the addition of responsibility to an already existing self, Levinas places the relation with the Other as prior to, and constitutive of, the self or ego" (p. 51). For Levinas, the self is not a pre-existent consciousness waiting to respond to the Other, but "the very position of the self *is* responsibility" (Fagan, 2013, p. 51, italics in the original). The uniqueness of the Other is also what makes one unique and thus the self, and no one else, is responsible for the Other— the self is hostage to the Other: "La responsabilité est ce qui exclusivement m'incombe et que, *humainement*, je ne peux refuser" [Responsibility is what is exclusively mine and which, humanly, I cannot refuse] (Levinas, 1982, p. 97, italics in the original).

Levinas illustrated the relation with the Other with the concept of the face. Although the human face and its features may be helpful to understand Levinas' ideas, it is important to note that reducing the Other to the conceptualization of a face is in itself a reductionist approach:

> C'est lorsque vous voyez un nez, des yeux, un front, un menton, et que vous pouvez les décrire, que vous vous tournez vers autrui comme vers un objet. La meilleure manière de rencontrer autrui, c'est de ne pas même remarquer la couleur de ses yeux ! [It is when you see a nose, eyes, forehead, chin, and you can describe them, that you turn to others as to an object. The best way to meet people is to not even notice the color of their eyes!] (Levinas, 1982, p. 79)

The concept ultimately points not to a literal face, but "something which contacts me outside of the world of my understanding, knowledge, comprehension or ownership, outside of the power and mastery of my self, my ego and my identity" (Fagan, 2013, p. 53). For Levinas, the face speaks; "le visage me demande et m'ordonne" [the face asks me and orders me] (Levinas, 1982, p. 94). The face works as a signifier of what is absolutely absent in the immanent relation; it is in itself

visitation and transcendence (Levinas, 1972). The encounter with the Other thus "places the ideas of my autonomy and identity in question" (Fagan, 2013, p. 53) by pointing to the vulnerability of the Other whose alterity one is responsible for:

> Le visage est exposé, menacé, comme nous invitant à un acte de violence. En même temps, le visage est ce qui nous interdit de tuer. [The face is exposed, threatened, as if inviting us to an act of violence. At the same time, the face is what forbids us to kill] (Levinas, 1982, p. 80).

Responsibility, for Levinas, is thus unlimited, immediate, and irrespective of one assuming it or not. Levinas also observed that responsibility is not reciprocal or symmetrical "because the unlimited nature of my responsibility means that I am responsible for the Other's responsibility" (Fagan, 2013, p. 55), "sa responsibilité *m'incombe*. C'est une responsabilité qui va au-delá de ce que je fais" [its responsibility lies with me. It's a responsibility that goes beyond what I do] (Levinas, 1982, p. 92, emphasis in the original). Responsibility, in its turn, was defined by Levinas:

> comme responsabilité pour autrui, donc comme responsabilité pour ce qui n'est pas mon fait, ou même ne me regarde pas; ou qui précisément me regarde, est abordé par moi comme visage. [as responsibility for others, therefore as responsibility for what is not my doing, or even does not concern me; or who precisely looks at me, is approached by me as a face] (Levinas, 1982, pp. 91-92).

For the purposes of clarity, when conducting this study, we adopted the term "relational responsibility" to differentiate it from obligations one may have, for example, towards an institution, although Levinas did not use such classification. It is also important to observe that Levinas did not speak of a "sense" of responsibility, for responsibility is immanent, a priori. The purpose of this study, however, was to understand how such responsibility is perceived by professors.

The abrupt shift to online instruction in the beginning of 2020 also meant an abrupt change in how professors would meet and relate with their students. Professors who were used to responding to the proximity of students' faces were suddenly challenged to relate and respond to individuals solely through a screen—in some occasions through synchronous classes, but also largely via email and asynchronous written discussions. Levinas may not have had a literal face in mind when developing his philosophy, however, the metaphor certainly has its strengths. As Levinas (1972) noted,

> le visage *entre* dans notre monde à partir d'une sphère absolument étrangère ... La signifiance du visage, dans son abstraction, est, au sens littéral du terme, extraordinaire, extérieure à tout ordre, à tout monde. [the face enters our world from an absolutely foreign sphere ... The meaning of the face, in its abstraction, is, in the literal sense of the term, extraordinary, external to all order, to all world] (p. 68, emphasis in the original).

In another place, Levinas (1995) emphasized that *sociabilité* is the alterity of the face, exposed and vulnerable, which in turn demands my unconditional response. Conversely, the metaphor of the face, indicating infinity, that which cannot be contained (Levinas, 1995), may be even stronger without the traces (*la trace*) that limit the Other as the signified. What is at stake, then, are the ways in which professors' sense of relational responsibility for the absolute Other may have been influenced by the sudden absence of students faces in their classes and the urgent demand to respond to them in an unprecedented fashion.

Methodology

After obtaining approval from the Ethics Review Board of the researchers' institution, a purposeful sampling was used to recruit professors across Canada. Invitations to participate were initially sent via email to professors in faculties of Education in 6 provinces. Universities were chosen based on their size/student population so as to increase the chances of approaching professors who would fit the criteria.

Unsurprisingly, the response rate was considerably low. Many potential participants responded saying they did not have time to participate (being overwhelmed by having to shift their courses online). Therefore, it is possible that those who responded willing to participate were likely the ones who had stronger views on the topic. The original criteria of inclusion were tenured or pre-tenured professors of a Faculty of Education, who had been in their positions for at least 4 years, and who were currently teaching online courses as a direct consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, due to the paucity of responses, two professors who were willing to participate but had less than 4 years of experience (2 and 3 years, respectively) were recruited. Although they had had to shift their courses online, some professors had already taught in that modality prior to the pandemic.

In total, 12 professors from 4 provinces (Ontario, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and New Brunswick) were recruited, having been teaching in their positions for 2 to 22 years, both undergraduate and graduate students. Because the interviews were conducted in September–October, some professors were interviewed after having taught only a couple of classes online. Although their interviews could have been greatly different had we interviewed them at the end of the term, it was also the purpose of this study to understand how professors felt at that initial moment.

The interview questionnaire was developed based on three main themes: 1) how professors conceptualize and perceive their relationship with students (before and during the pandemic), 2) how professors conceptualize and enact their responsibility, including their relational responsibility (before and during the pandemic), and 3) the ways in which professors perceive the influence of students' physical presence and/or face on their responsivity to them. Although there might be differences in the meaning, the terms "online", "distance" and "remote" are used interchangeably in this article when referring to the education that is not in-person. The interviews were conducted by Zoom, audio recorded, and lasted for about 30–50 minutes. Participants had the opportunity to revise the transcripts and make any corrections that they deemed necessary. A pseudonym has been attributed to each professor, and any information that may pose a threat to their anonymity (e.g., the name of the institution or courses taught) have been replaced by something else in brackets so as to keep the meaning of the sentence.

Findings

Interview transcripts were thematically analyzed separately by the two researchers and then compared for accuracy and refinement. The three main themes used to develop the interview guide also emerged as three overarching interconnected themes in the findings: relationship, responsibility, and responsivity, as we present in the next sections.

Relationship

Pedagogy as Relationality

Most participants defined their pedagogical approach in terms of relationality and socio-constructivism. Although content, including planning and delivery of content, is considered paramount in their understanding of pedagogy, relationality is considered for most the sine qua non of teaching: "I strive for my pedagogy to embrace relationality, establishing relationships with care" (John); "I think as a teacher my strength is in relationships" (Gabriella). For most participants, relationality was conceptualized as care and connection, which is evidenced in time spent together through student-centered practices and informal conversations in the hallway, and which lead them to "get to know" students: "Prior to COVID I think I had really positive interactions with students. And I saw them every term … And so we spend a lot of time together. I get to know them, we develop relationships." (Helen)

The Wall of Silence

For most participants, the shift to distance education was seen as an impediment to relational teaching. Indeed, many professors highlighted the important of face-to-face contact in teaching, therefore lamenting the constraints of working remotely: "Face-to-face is the ideal way to engage the students in certainly my classroom environments" (Fabien). Reflecting on the loss of spontaneity, another professor explained:

> you have to work hard at relationships, that is what I wanted to say. So, you walk into a university classroom when you are in person, and I'm not saying there's a relationship there but it's a lot easier with physical presence than it is on online. (Edmund)

For that reason, some participants felt that relationships had been "the hardest and most vexing aspect of this transition to fully online" (Antony). As this participant added,

> it feels that there is a big gap there, they feel much farther away from me relationally … It's just a wall of silence when you enter the Zoom classroom versus walking into a classroom where there is, like, the noise is huge, and I love walking into the energy of the classroom but then the Zoom classroom is total silence. (Anthony)

> And so of course the first class I'll say "can everyone turn on their cameras?" but they kept their mics off and it was this strange muffled atmosphere, like you were in a sound studio and you could just hear your voice bouncing back, there was no rustling or anything, there was just this kind of silence … and every once in a while I'd say "thumbs up if you are with me" and everyone would go oh yeah, thumbs up, but it's like, you don't realize how much you are tethered to the body signals of a group of people when you are teaching. (Brianna)

Consequently, the shift to teaching remotely also meant grief to some participants: "There is this grieving process that, you know, in one of the classes I have 77 students, I'm not going to know them in the way that I am used to knowing students in the face-to-face environment" (Deborah); "It's demoralizing, it's tough … I don't feel I know my students at all. I really don't" (Helen) "I felt in the first class that I was staring into a void. It's like nothingness" (Mary). However, grief was

also associated with seeing students on the screen, which may be related to the pandemic context and the abrupt closure of universities: "I feel excited when I see people in there, but there is also a loneliness" (Deborah). Another professor expands on the issue:

> It's nice to see their faces. But it's weird to me because there's only one student in the class I've met before … And so seeing their faces there's kind of a mix of curiosity and emptiness, because they are faces. Actually when I say faces are really different too. You are moving, that's your face but I see their faces and they don't move. They have their icon. So literally I see their face but I don't see any emotion, right? (Edmund)

Responsibility

Pedagogy of Care

Whereas preparedness and knowledge of content were recognized as paramount in teachers' responsibility, participants primarily focused on the notion of responsibility as a pedagogy of care. Prior to the universities closure, professors' care would be expressed through being in the classroom before and after the class time, leaving the office doors open, talking to students on the hallway, "engaging with students around their professional development and their professional growth" (Anthony).

In the context of COVID-19, professors felt that the principle of responsibility itself remained the same, but the way in which it was enacted had changed: "I think it's the same, it's just the way that our responsibility is enacted is different" (Gabriella). In this new context, care seemed to be expressed especially in terms of being available and make accommodations: "my responsibility is to be more patient, to give them extra time to understand things and extra time with this new modality" (Mary).

Increased Responsibility

The relational dimension of responsibility was sharply emphasized along with a greater sense of responsibility for many, given the perception that the pandemic had rendered students more vulnerable:

> I'm trying to make them feel not just welcome to the class, but I want them to feel that someone is really caring for them … I'm interested in what they are doing, of course, for my class, but beyond that, I'm also interested in learning how they are doing as people, on a more personal level. (Ian)

For many participants, this dramatic change was embraced as a strengthened belief in the importance of relationality:

> It's strengthened my beliefs and the importance of not being a talking head on the screen and not showing information as if it's a fact to deposit in a disembodied mind. It's so important to have the human contact and the human connection … And for me it's more important than ever to check in. (Mary)

Another participant illustrated how this greater sense of responsibility had led him to advocate even more for students:

> I just feel maybe a greater need to advocate and be understanding for some … I think I have a greater responsibility this term to work with them, because they've all be thrown into this, that none of them were anticipating … one of the students on the first Friday of the course emailed me and said "I won't be in class today. My father is having an emergency brain surgery". So, I immediately wrote to the student and said "don't worry, I wouldn't mind talking to you soon or emailing, don't worry about contacting your other profs, I will take that responsibility to contact your other profs," …. I definitely feel a responsibility to advocate for students. (Edmund)

One of the main reasons why this study was focused on professors of Education involved the major role played by this group, as educators to future teachers. Although we did not ask participants to comment on the extent to which they see themselves as or try to be role models to their students, many participants commented on how their roles greatly influence their perceived sense of responsibility:

> That's really important too, that we conduct ourselves in ways and we conduct ourselves in these relationships with our students that reflect and model the kinds of ethics that are critical to doing the work … outside of the program. (Anthony)

> I think that my values, my philosophies, my principles of practice are all, need to be at one with my teaching methods. So I can't really separate that, I need to both model it for my students and specially in teacher education, we can't just deliver the content, we have to be the content as well. We have to model the delivery of the content as well as the content. (Brianna)

> I'm trying to always think these will be adults impacting young leaners lives. So whatever I practice with them, they must be able to practice with young learners in schools. (Deborah)

> I also believe part of my job is to role-model what it is like to be a kind of teacher who shows up and listens. So how I do that is in my body language and the way that I show that I'm listening, for example. (Gabriella)

Responsivity

The Absence of the Face

Without in-person meetings, participants lamented the loss of connection, which was amplified by the inability to see students, or be seen by them, when cameras were turned off during synchronous classes. Most professors recognized the vulnerability associated with turning the camera on, especially being in one's home. However, as most professors interviewed admitted allowing students to choose whether or not to turn their cameras on, they recognized that such choice came with a price:

> Ethically it's like how do you connect with a blank screen? Because it's their choice if they want to show their camera or not…. I felt in the first class that I was staring into a void. It's like nothingness. (Mary)

Fabien contended: "I feel very disengaged with my students". Helen added: "The interaction I think is what I miss and when cameras are off and students are, you know, you ask questions and students are not offering to respond, it's difficult, right". Or, as Anthony put it:

> Lots of students with their cameras off, and yeah… for me it's not as alive, it's not as engaging … I feel flatter in my teaching. I'm not being fed the energy from the students and I really don't like that. (Anthony)

Having a sense of control was also associated with how professors were used to relating to students:

> As a prof, when I was teaching in class and they were working in small groups, I could see what was happening, right? I had a feeling of, a sense of control, if I try to analyze myself. Which now it's just silence, right? And then I need to go, one by one, and change the rooms and see if they are really working. And they are. But every time, it brings out insecurities. So there's a lot of things that I have that I'm trying to transpose. (Louise)

Therefore, when asked to comment on how they felt when they could see the students, most professors said they "love it" and preferred seeing students as it gave a sense of normality, because "the energy of talking to another human being or human beings is kind of lost in the Zoom experience" (Anthony); "it's a very visceral response when I see 'oh, somebody is there', like, I see the face, there are people there, right?" (Deborah); "I love when they have their cameras on. I think it shows that they are paying attention, that they are at least there" (Ian); "I can actually see them and see some reactions and feel we are still part of a community" (Louise). Another professor also commented:

> they're working on something and you can see someone scratching their head and someone … and that at least gives us a sense for a moment that there's something going on and I smile and I say "it's funny to see some of you scratching your head and some of you smiling and some of you looking at the sky," … it gives a bit of human, but it's not the same. (Edmund)

Upon reflection, most professors believed they were more responsive to those they could see versus the ones who would have the camera off: "I see student on the screen, I'm going to be more responsive to what they are conveying by what they say or convey", admits Charles. The importance of students' body language to their practices was frequently mentioned by professors as a way to be responsive to them: "it's really good to see them because they're engaged, you can feel their facial expressions and when there is excitement is there and also when there is confusion you can also see that" (Fabien); "the visual certainly helps me know my audience" (Charles). As this participant further explained:

> If I see somebody live, I have a sense of whether what I am saying is getting to them. And at first, when they are talking, because we are in a remote place, if the student is saying something and I can see them, I can see whether they're, if they're conveying a satisfaction with what they're saying, what they are doing and so on. And so it works both ways. (Charles)

Or as John put it:

> It's human nature to see a face or to at least to see a person … if a student had their camera on and they were showing some non-verbal facial expressions for example, that for whatever reason I would find not doubtful but uncomfortable, I think I would probe a little more—hopefully in respectful ways— whereas I wouldn't know that when a person's camera is off. (John)

Urgency

Notwithstanding participants recognizing that relationships are harder to build when teaching remotely, they also argued that these relationships were that much more important in the context of a global pandemic that has resulted in isolation: "At the forefront of the rethinking I do it is, you know, this constant need and wish to connect with the learners in a more relational level. And to demonstrate a relationship of care" (John). Mary added: "So, if I notice someone's camera is off, I want them to know that they still matter". With or without cameras, responsibility remains inalienable, as this professor explained:

> It doesn't matter, you still have to always be there for each other. So that piece doesn't feel different. And then I don't think I feel any different about being there for students. I just have to show it differently. (Gabriela)

Responsivity in the online context, thus, was often expressed in responding to students in a timely manner:

> I'm on my computer 7 days a week. Because I never know when a student is going to write and so trying to recognize how lonely some of these students might feel out there and so just checking-in all the time… (Deborah)

> I don't think the responsivity is much different. Perhaps the urgency is different. (Edmund)

Discussion

In Faculties of Education, as in many other fields such as Nursing Education, Social Work, and Indigenous Studies, it is clear that relational teaching is considered an essential component to pedagogy (Schwartz, 2019). For most universities, the COVID-19 pandemic has meant teaching and learning remotely, with a combination of synchronous and asynchronous components. Connecting with students, expressing care, and developing relationships for the purpose of teaching and learning have had to be reconceptualised without the physical presence and the many spontaneous opportunities for interactions possible pre-COVID (Christopher et al., 2020; Ravitch, 2019). Faculty's ability to remain committed to relational teaching and to find ways to express care while teaching remotely in the context of a global pandemic (Mutton, 2020) is undoubtedly linked to how they conceptualized responsibility in teaching. Nonetheless, the complexities of teaching online, and particularly in the context of a pandemic, demonstrated how the nature and quality of students' social presence and immediacy are intrinsically related to professors' feelings, experiences, and practices.

Responding to the (Online) Face of the Other

When relationality is understood as responsibility, as Levinas argued, the proximity of the face is not only what makes such connection but also undoubtedly crucial to the enactment of such responsibility: "La proximité du prochain—la paix de la proximité—est la responsabilité du moi pour un autre" [Closeness to neighbor—the peace of closeness—is the self's responsibility for another] (Levinas, 1995, p. 145).

Despite being guided by teaching philosophies that emphasize care and relationships, professors realized that trying to reproduce the in-person experience was not only impossible but also led to a much greater expenditure of time because students were not present in the same nature as before. As Edmund observed, "it's much easier to build relationships when you can meet people". Furthermore, such attempt led to frustration and a sense of loss: "I think one of the greatest losses of being completely online is this isolation that we experience" (Deborah). So, as Anthony concluded,

> Maybe I'm not in the right track here where I'm just trying to recreate what we have in the class through the online interface. And because I find myself looking for this and it's not there, responsivity, there is none. There is no responsivity or almost none. (Anthony)

Indeed, such a conclusion resonates with existing literature, which emphasizes that the teacher's role in online education is not merely reproducing the in-person practices (Díaz & Entonado, 2009). Attempts to get to know students through ice breakers, for example, were often perceived as "hollow and shallow" by professors. The unexpected silence was "like pulling teeth" from students, as Helen put it. Embracing the opportunities that the online platform offers, however, seemed to had been providing professors sparks of what Levinas long observed: responsibility is not universalizable.

In this context, teachers were urged to respond to students with immediacy and social presence but without being fed with the student presence they used to respond to. The metaphor of the face seems indeed to gain strength with the online platform with the presence of the absent:

> Le visage d'autrui me concerne sans que la responsabilité-pour-autrui qu'il ordonne me permette de remonter à la présence thématique d'un étant qui de ce commandement serait la cause ou la source. [The face of others concerns me without the responsibility-for-others that he orders allowing me to go back to the thematic presence of a being who of this command would be the cause or the source] (Levinas, 1995, p. 53).

This study thus evidenced how teachers are urged to respond to students' presence in whatever nature it appears—be that a text in the chat, non-verbal reaction (e.g., hands-up), a post in the classroom forum, etc. As professors showed, the urgency of responsibility goes beyond what one can see, "comme si l'ordre se formulait dans la voix de celui-là même qui lui obéit" [as if the order was formulated in the voice of the very one who obeys it] (Levinas, 1995, p. 54), it is the obedience to the absolute order.

Vulnerability, Insecurity, Responsibility

The challenge and complexity of relationality and/as responsibility in the online context became even more evident with the camera dilemma. Studies show how teacher self-disclosure in online education is directly related to student satisfaction and learning (Khan & Rafi, 2020; Song et al., 2016). Indeed, professors teaching synchronous classes had no option but sit in front of the camera in their own homes, which was not something they all felt comfortable with. As Levinas (1995) said, "L'otage est celui que l'on trouve responsable de ce qu'il n'a pas fait [The hostage is the one found responsible for what he did not do]" (p. 115). Professors had no choice but make themselves vulnerable to students but could not demand the same from them—it was the student

choice whether they would turn their camera on or not. Nonetheless, professors' perceived sense of responsibility was still present, albeit not in response to a face of the same nature they used to see. The vulnerability of the face and one's consequent being made hostage to the Other was thus greatly evidenced by the tension between seeing students' faces (on the camera) and the greater responsibility felt for the face they could not see.

Seeing students enabled professors to respond in more similar ways to what they were used to, which gave them a greater sense of security in what they were doing. However, there was a major sense of vulnerability involved with teaching online:

> We're opening ourselves up in healthy and not healthy ways that we've never done before. And I think it gets at relationship, but I think it also raises questions about identity both for our teachers but also for us as professors. (John)

The abrupt shift to online teaching meant that professors had to suddenly learn and adapt their practices to a new environment, a further threat to their sense of security. But as they embraced the vulnerability that came with it, especially in the online context, professors felt students' care for them as well, as John illustrated:

> I think what my experience is showing me, it's demonstrating this notion of care and care ethic, it is a two-way. And so we don't always know, care is a very difficult thing to understand and to identify, but I think what students are giving me is, they are reciprocating back to me, they're demonstrating or showing that they know I care about their learning experience. And they too care. I think they care about me, actually, when I make a huge mistake like yesterday. They just say "oh, that's ok!" you know, it happens in all of our courses. And so it started to demonstrate for me what I believe around this relationality and this ethic of care. (John)

John's conception of responsibility as reciprocity did not mean that reciprocity is a condition, but rather, it constitutes a gift given back by students. In other words, the teacher's responsibility in the online context remained an unconditional duty, but one that certainly challenged professors' comfort and expectations. This research thus corroborates previous studies that position the teacher-student relationship as a unilateral responsibility of the teacher—albeit not merely with the purpose of engaging learners but as an immediate and necessary ethical response. However, it also shows that a certain kind of reciprocity can indeed arise when professors take up their responsibility—although that should not be a condition to professors' responsibility. Additionally, this research illustrates how relationality and/as the teacher's responsibility in the online context can unsettle and challenge educators' sense of security and the ways in which they would normally (and more easily) respond to students, a much-needed discussion in the literature.

Meeting the Invisible Face

The experience of relating with students who they could see inevitably led professors to search for novel ways to notice and respond to students' presence in this new modality. This research thus emphasized the fluid and ever-changing nature of online education, and how teachers play a myriad of roles as their relationships evolve (Park et al., 2015). For instance, it might be argued that the abrupt shift to online education contributed to professors' reflection upon their practices and the essence of their pedagogical philosophies, as Deborah illustrated:

> I'm even more flexible now than I was prior to COVID knowing that people are dealing with such complex situations and also knowing that the weight of the world is in everybody's heart ... I try to reassure them is their well-being first and the care of their family first, and themselves and that we can flex in any way possible to help them be successful.

Online education demands that teachers make their personhood evident to students (Song et al., 2019), make students feel that they are interacting with real people and that teachers are approachable (Tu & McIsaac, 2002)—a demand that seems to have been intensified by the pandemic context they were in. Indeed, in the midst of a situation beyond their control, professors were urged to embrace the uniqueness of the moment they were living and respond to students in whichever context and conditions that might be. As Fabien said, "That's the reality, let's learn how to cope with this new reality".

Conclusion

In light of Levinas' works, this study sought to understand the ways in which the absence of students' physical presence influence professors' sense of relational responsibility towards them. The unprecedented closure of universities and the abrupt shift to online education was surely not an easy experience for many students and teachers in Canada. Online education prior to the pandemic already emphasized the importance of teacher immediacy and social presence, an approach strongly student-centered. Although some may already have been used to teaching online, the sudden absence of students led many professors to feel a great sense of emptiness in their classes. Although professors' pedagogical philosophies did not change, the absence of students' faces contributed to a feeling of urgency in professors' sense of responsibility, which in turn evidenced the complex nature of the teacher-student relationality in the online context. As Levinas long observed, responsibility was now felt as immediate, unlimited and asymmetrical; and the face, as a signifier of what is absent, was now more present than ever, despite not being seen anymore.

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