

# E-learning during the Covid-19 Pandemic in a Philosophical Reflection

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## **Abstract**

This paper is part of a postgraduate research project examining the possibilities and limits of e-learning. The aim of this study is a philosophical reflection on e-learning during the Covid-19 pandemic from the perspective of the Czech philosophy of education and phenomenology. E-learning has become an integral part of the educational process in recent years, especially due to the Covid-induced lockdowns between 2020 and 2022. Based on the background of the Czech philosophy of education, this paper examines the characteristics, possibilities, and limits of the e-learning method.

**Keywords:** philosophy of education; e-learning; phenomenology; Comenius; Covid-19

## **Introduction**

The main distinction between the classical educational setting and the online setting is the absence of physical cohabitation among people while being part of educational activity. Being together online, without bodily presence, has many circumstances and implications that make online education interesting to researchers in the fields of sociology, developmental and social psychology, cognitive science, and pedagogy. But why think about e-learning philosophically? As a new phenomenon, the possibility of e-learning emerged in the background of advanced communication technology, apparently on the assumption that it is a useful and meaningful way of meeting and educating. The means of the educational process are always related to its meaning, which is always there, hidden or explicit, clear or unclear.

From a philosophical perspective, we ask whether online education, as we perform it, carries the essential meaning of itself. The question of the very meaning of education is a philosophical problem with a significant impact on society and every individual. During the most formative years of their psychological development, everyone must be a part of an educational system that is built upon a certain, actual understanding of the human being. In this text, we will briefly summarise the main ideas of the Czech philosophy of education and attempt to see the method of e-learning as a tool that can bring us closer to understanding the meaning of education.

## The Czech philosophy of education – main ideas

Education, according to Comenius,<sup>1</sup> is a process of self-discovery. Comenius' work was dedicated to the creation of pedagogical approaches that would lead to, apart from gaining diverse knowledge, uncovering human beings' spiritual freedom. School is understood as a “workshop of humanity” (Patočka 2007, 395).

In the first place, all who have been born to man's state have been born with the same end in view, namely, that they may be men, that is to say, rational creatures, lords of other creatures, and the images of their Creator. All, therefore, must be brought on to a point at which, being properly imbued with wisdom, virtue, and piety, they may usefully employ the present life and be worthily prepared for that to come. (Comenius 1907, 66)

Jan Patočka<sup>2</sup> devoted a considerable part of his professional interest to Comeniological studies. He developed Comenius's ideas about education in the spirit of phenomenological philosophy. Patočka, following his teacher Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), elaborated on the idea of the natural world of man (Lifeworld), which in the modern era of reason is overlaid by scientific abstraction and technology (Kohák, 1993, 55).

In his reflections on education, Patočka talks about the role of philosophy and the shock that is an essential part of the educational path. It is a developmental experience that shakes the pupil's unquestioned security and safety. He further notes:

The certainty of the original natural man must be shaken in some way, refuted. At the time when this happens, man feels something new, he feels a strange movement taking place within him, everything takes on a new meaning, the world suddenly opens up in wide horizons in which it has not appeared before. Something like this, a real breaking through of the everydayness, of dull normality, is the starting point of the actual process of education that has given meaning to European humanity throughout history. (Patočka 1996, 367)

Patočka's explanations are inspired by Greek philosophers such as Socrates. The essence of the shock is captured in Plato's *Cave myth*, where the prisoner comes out into the light of the world of ideas. He is blinded and shaken to the base of his being. The ground where he stands, which has been naturally taken over from the outside, is questioned (Plato 2007, 365). Patočka further describes the role of the teacher and the relationship that must prepare the pupil to withstand the uncertainty that comes with self-knowledge (Patočka 1996, 408–411).

In his works on the philosophy of history, Patočka defined the Socratic-Platonic inquiry as the “care of the soul” and as the foundation of the European spirit (Svobodová 2022). Patočka

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<sup>1</sup> John Amos Comenius (Czech: Jan Amos Komenský, 1592–1670) was a Czech philosopher, pedagogue and theologian who is considered the father of modern education.

<sup>2</sup> Jan Patočka (1907–1977) was one of the most important Czech philosophers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Patočka's work and his personality greatly influenced contemporary Czech thought.

praised Socrates for revealing “the human being as originally imperfect but given into the hands of the self to grasp its essential will, to give meaning to its life” (Patočka 1996, 146).

Against the background of Comenius and Patočka’s founding ideas, the latest Czech philosophy of education criticises education which is understood mainly as learning in the sense of passing on skills, competencies, and information. The critique sees the meaning of such education as determined mainly by the needs of the political system. The ultimate product of such an education system is a human being who is useful for the given hierarchy and, in the case of modern societies, for the economic market. Being well-educated in this sense means being well-prepared for the competitive environment. Czech philosophers such as Radim Palouš or Anna Hogenová (Palouš and Svobodová 2011) describe such an understanding of education as misleading from its meaning, as it rather diverts the student from the ability to see the essential, from self-understanding and independent, critical thinking (Hogenová 2008, 171). To be able to appreciate and care about the life direction oriented towards self-knowledge, a developing human being needs guidance, attention, kindness, and trust. According to the Czech philosophy of education, such characteristics should be the cornerstones of any school.

To summarise the main ideas of the Czech philosophy of education in a few points:

1. Education is a process of self-discovery and self-creation,
2. It is based on the European philosophical tradition of the “care of the soul”,
3. It requires a shock that leads to doubt and independent thinking,
4. It needs relationships that create a safe and trustworthy culture,
5. It is a lifelong process leading to individuation and self-unity.

### **E-learning in a phenomenological reflection**

E-learning is an educational process using information and communication technology. For the past two years, through the Covid-19 pandemic, it was also the only strategy for keeping the educational system going. It was due to the technological advancements of our time that we could carry on with the economic and educational life of our societies in the same structures, only remotely. The technology of online communication proved to be effective. Despite many lockdowns and restrictions, most schools and universities all over the world kept using alternative ways of online communication.

A part of our research involved interviewing teachers about their experience with e-learning during the pandemic. The phenomenological study of teachers’ experiences is, in our opinion, irreplaceable, as teachers and students are the ones who participate in, encounter, apply, rely on, and have long-term experience with online education. We used a semi-structured interview with interpretative phenomenological analyses. This allowed us to reflect on the themes that emerge in such a way that the respondent has the space and time not only to talk about what they think about their experience but also to let the experience itself do the talking once they have exhausted their reflections.

The main findings about the nature of e-learning were the noticeable changes in the perception of the group dynamics of the classroom, the changes in the culture of the learning process due

to the individual comfort and possibility of visual anonymity in e-learning, the problem of the flattening of the learning process, and the problem of closeness. Due to the limited scope of this paper, we will elaborate mainly on the phenomenon of closeness, which seems to be the most important from a philosophical point of view.

In phenomenology, the essence of technology is understood as a way of revealing the truth. Heidegger's assertion that "the essence of technology is by no means anything technological" emphasises that technology is mainly a philosophical, rather than a technological problem (Heidegger 1977, 287). According to Heidegger, technology reveals and uncovers possibilities of things. People, thanks to their inventions, obtained the power to take more from the world than is given naturally by nature. For instance, with the mastery of mining, the earth opens up to produce iron or gold. Similarly, with the mastery of craft and the right tools, a tree can become a bowl or a boat.

Online communications have opened up the possibility to communicate, work and educate without the condition of shared bodily presence. From a historical perspective, such a possibility would be unthinkable for a medieval scholar. Yet, we have come to an age where bodily presence is not at all a condition for human communication. Without being together in the same room, we can see and hear each other. In this sense, Heidegger later wrote that technology bridged all distances but did not bring any closeness.<sup>3</sup>

Based on our theoretical presumptions and the interviews we have conducted with teachers, this insight has proven to be worthy of special attention. Our suggestion is that the phenomenon of closeness is the key to understanding e-learning from a philosophical perspective. One of the hints was the significant deterioration of children's mental health during pandemic isolation. The radical leap into the non-physical digital realm has shown that the consequences on the mental health of teenagers are not only a pathological reaction to stress caused by the pandemic situation but also a broader developmental problem that is correlated with the time spent online (Mesman et al., 2021).

We believe that the correlation between mental health and time spent online is a problem of ontological closeness.<sup>4</sup> By closeness, we mean a feeling of relation and familiarity, dialogue, understanding, and authenticity. Closeness means the possibility of being in the world, a relation defined by M. Buber as "I-Thou", instead of "I-It". "Relationship is reciprocity. My Thou affects me as much as I affect it. Our students shape us, our works build our personality" (Buber 2006, 48). Being close to somebody or something applies to other people as well as to all other beings, things, or ideas. Closeness creates culture and shapes human beings' relationships with the world. It makes one's existence feel real, seen by the world and others.

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<sup>3</sup> This popular quote is an abbreviation. The whole statement is: "But this liquid elimination of all distances does not create closeness; for a slight measure of distance is not yet closeness. What film and radio have brought within our grasp with their images may nevertheless remain distant. What lies in sight may be close to us. A small distance is not yet closeness. A great distance is not yet far. What is closeness if, in spite of the longest distances having been reduced to a minimum, it constantly escapes?" (Heidegger 1993, 7).

<sup>4</sup> Ontological closeness is not a philosophically established term. We suggest this term to capture closeness that does not refer to the spatial and measurable distance of an object, but to intimate closeness, familiarity with the essence, with the being of a thing or the other.

The feeling of closeness contains a dialogue with the other, which means mutual confirmation of realised existence. Ontological closeness is, therefore, a condition for human beings' growth towards the educational goal of self-discovery.

In e-learning, the possibility of perceiving or building ontological closeness is limited. Online meetings change the character and conditions of human encounters. The senses of smell and touch are left out, as they are not yet technologically transferable. Teachers as well as pupils have experienced severe fatigue, problems with attention, and increasing doubts about the meaning of their efforts. The phenomenon of closeness relates mostly to point number 4 in the summary of the educational ideals: to the condition of relationships that create an open, safe, and trustworthy culture. E-learning, with its characteristics, makes this essential condition for education more distant. Indeed, in this case, e-learning seems to have bridged the physical distance in a fascinating way and enabled collaborative working, but it has not brought the perception of closeness an inch closer. It is possible that the deterioration of the adolescent's psychological state can be seen as a response to this progressive distancing.

If we take into account these findings and our personal experiences during our school years, we can conclude that it is moments of this ontological closeness that remain vivid in the memory throughout our lives. Whether it's a real understanding of a mathematical problem, understanding the essence of an idea or thought, an insight called the "aha moment", or the experience of an outdoor school or ski course where one feels fully accepted and part of a larger whole – these experiences of closeness shape a person's life in significant ways since they are the moments of encounter with the truth of being.

## Conclusion

The pandemic situation was a life experience that could be characterised as shocking. The questions that have arisen for many pupils are of an existential nature. From the perspective of the Czech philosophy of education, the pandemic was an opportunity to bring not just youngsters but most people closer to themselves and the world. However, the great potential of online communication and e-learning was used mainly to continue the transmission of skills, competencies, and information. The questioning and the dialogue, which are the core of education, are nowadays located in the psychological or psychotherapeutic field. Such an approach creates a paradoxical problem when omitting the "care of the soul" tradition of education in schools and placing it somewhere else brings mental health problems for pupils, which often prevent them from attending the classes themselves.

Heidegger, when asking about the essence of technology, found that it was nothing technological. Technology is not something that inevitably leads us to objectivisation and framing of the world. E-learning could be, and in some cases we heard of it as the tool that allowed individuals and communities to take care of each other. It is surely possible to reach and keep the ontological closeness in the mode of being-together that is provided by technology.

The technology of e-learning, with proper methodology, can support education in the pursuit of authenticity and self-discovery. To make e-learning truly useful and perhaps a

transformative educational tool, it is necessary to include subjects that are dedicated to developing ontological closeness in the school curriculum. Our first suggestion would be a subject dedicated to the life of the community (class) itself. Such a subject creates time and space for the recognition and sharing of personal experiences while living and learning together. Other necessary subjects are, for instance, emotional literacy, mindfulness, and philosophy. By philosophy, we primarily mean the guidance to philosophical thinking and questioning, not just the teaching of the history of philosophy.

With these insights, we would like to contribute to the understanding of e-learning and the creation of adherent educational strategies, knowing that these strategies are not only formed by institutions but also largely by each individual teacher, whose work and impact on our society are indispensable.

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