

The Vulnerable Exchange

Face-to-Face Interaction as an Antidote to Virtual Detachment

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Abstract

This paper explores the anthropological foundations of empathy, emphasizing how in-person encounters counteract the detachment fostered by digital communication. As education increasingly shifts online, there is a pressing need to reaffirm the intrinsic value of physical presence and shared space. Drawing from phenomenology and philosophical anthropology, this study argues that face-to-face interaction uniquely nurtures empathy, a vital disposition for human flourishing and authentic communication. Focusing on pedagogy within higher education at the University of Asia and the Pacific (UA&P), this research examines why digital natives—despite their fluency with technology—consistently express a preference for traditional, in-person learning. Through students’ testimonies and philosophical reflection, we demonstrate that the immediacy of embodied communication deepens relational bonds, supports emotional growth, and cultivates a richer, more humane educational environment.

Keywords: Human connection, Empathy, Virtual communication, Face-to-face communication, Non-verbal cues

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1 INTRODUCTION

The digital revolution profoundly transformed the way we live, learn, and communicate. It has collapsed geographical boundaries, providing instantaneous access to information and creating networks of interaction that span the globe. Through online platforms, individuals now experience a sense of proximity to loved ones, colleagues, and communities. Yet, paradoxically, this heightened connectivity often comes at the expense of genuine closeness. While we are linked by constant streams of messages, updates, and notifications, many experience a growing sense of isolation and detachment.

Virtual interaction, though advantageous in numerous ways, lacks certain qualities essential to authentic human connection. Historically, interpersonal skills were honed through direct, face-to-face encounters in which body language, eye contact, tone, and gesture formed a rich tapestry of meaning. These embodied cues are indispensable for understanding and responding to others, navigating complex emotions, and cultivating empathy.

Edith Stein, in *On the Problem of Empathy*, describes empathy (*Einfühlung*) as the unique act through which one perceives another's inner experience while recognizing it as distinct from one's own.¹ It is neither a mere inference nor an imaginative projection but a direct, non-inferential form of awareness. Empathy thus bridges the gap between individuals, making it possible for a profound sharing of experiences. For this study, we treat empathy as both an emotion and a relational act: the capacity to feel with another person, to be moved by their suffering or joy, and to respond with genuine care.²

The question this paper explores is whether the virtual world can support

¹E. STEIN, *On the Problem of Empathy*, trans. by W. Stein, ICS Publications, Washington 1989. For Edith Stein, empathy's key features are: 1. That it is a distinctive act of consciousness. This means that it is an intentional act directed at the lived experiences of another; 2. The otherness is preserved. Unlike sympathy, empathy maintains a clear boundary between self and other; and 3. Empathetic acts are distinguished according to stages—primary empathy (direct perception of another's expression), reenactive empathy (imaginatively enriching the perception to grasp the other's inner state more fully), and comprehensive empathy (a deeper grasp of the other as a whole person). Most importantly, Stein views empathy as that which enables perception of the unity of body, psyche, and spirit. When one is empathetic, one does not just see physical pain but grasps the psychic and spiritual dimensions of the other's experience.

²In this paper, empathy will be regarded not only as an ability or social skill that individuals must cultivate but also as a virtue. We will also implicitly refer to Aquinas' views on empathy as he discusses the virtue of justice. For the Angelic Doctor, the virtue of justice enhances and fosters interpersonal connections by rendering true goods more present and prominent in one's mind. This connection necessitates the involvement of the *affectus* of the will that accompanies the virtue of justice. This *affectus* encompasses emotions such as empathy, which entails a direct and intuitive sharing of mental or psychological states between two individuals. See THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. by The Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Benzinger Bros., New York 1920, II-II, q. 58, a. 4-5; I-II, q. 22, a. 1-3; I-II, q. 28, a. 2.

such empathic encounters. While online communication offers undeniable advantages—especially for dispersed families or during crises—its inherent limitations threaten the depth of relationships. This is especially clear in educational settings, where teaching goes beyond just transferring information. The Latin root of “education,” *educere*, means “to lead out.” Education, then, is a formative process that unlocks learners’ potential, shaping both their minds and characters. It requires presence: not only the teacher’s presence with the student but also the students’ presence with one another in a shared quest for truth.

2 THE LIMITS OF THE VIRTUAL

Digital platforms create new modes of interaction that can mimic certain features of in-person dialogue. Through shared documents, video conferencing, and virtual classrooms, students can collaborate across distances and engage in meaningful exchanges. Recent developments in social Virtual Reality (VR) even attempt to simulate physical co-presence, enabling participants to inhabit shared digital spaces. Studies, such as those by Sykownik *et al.*, have shown that these environments can foster a heightened sense of “social presence,” thereby strengthening bonds between friends and facilitating encounters with strangers.³

Nonetheless, these innovations are still incomplete. Research conducted by Kirchner and Nordin Forsberg on virtual conferences demonstrated that, although immersive and engaging, virtual reality platforms encounter difficulties in conveying subtle cues such as facial expressions and nuanced body language.⁴ Minor technical issues—such as audio delays, absence of tactile feedback, or discomfort caused by head-mounted displays—interrupt the flow of interaction.⁵ In summary, these systems can imitate, but never completely replicate, the intricacies of embodied communication.

From a neurological perspective, Morgan notes that our brains are “hard-

³See P. SYKOWNIK *et al.*, *The Most Social Platform Ever? A Survey About Activities and Motives of Social VR Users*, 2021 IEEE Virtual Reality and 3D User Interfaces (VR), Lisboa, Portugal, 2021, pp. 546–554, DOI: [10.1109/VR50410.2021.00079](https://doi.org/10.1109/VR50410.2021.00079).

⁴K. KIRCHNER, B. NORDIN FORSBERG, “A Conference Goes Virtual: Lessons from Creating a Social Event in the Virtual Reality,” in: *Innovations for Community Services*, 21st International Conference, I4CS 2021, Bamberg, Germany, ed. by U. R. Krieger *et al.*, Springer, Cham 2021, DOI: [10.1007/978-3-030-75004-6_9](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-75004-6_9)

⁵Head-mounted displays (HMDs) are the most prevalent immersive devices for virtual reality. According to Y. ZHANG, *et al.*, “These devices utilize cutting-edge information and communication technologies such as near-eye display, perceptual interaction, and rendering processing to develop products and services related to immersive and mixed reality experiences.” See Y. ZHANG, *et al.*, *A survey of immersive visualization: Focus on perception and interaction*, «Visual Informatics», 7/4 (2023), pp. 22–35. Accessed January 18, 2025. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2468502X23000499>

wired” for face-to-face interaction.⁶ When we are physically present with others, mirror neurons activate, enabling us to resonate with their emotional states. This spontaneous attunement forms the foundation of empathy: we laugh collectively, cry collectively, and share in each other’s joys and sorrows. However, in virtual environments, these mechanisms are considerably diminished. “Put us in the virtual space,” Morgan states, “and empathy also cannot operate. The mirror neurons do not fire as readily. We remain dissociated”.⁷

The absence of physical cues results in subtle yet profound losses. Text-based communication cannot capture the fleeting expressions, hesitations, or gestures that give depth to dialogue. Even video calls, while visually richer, lack the immediacy and mutual presence of being together in the same room. Asynchronous exchanges, such as emails or chat messages, further fragment interaction, making it difficult to respond with the spontaneity and vulnerability that foster trust. These limits raise urgent questions: How can one express genuine emotion in a space where the body is partially absent? How can one be truly vulnerable online, or perceive the vulnerability of another?

3 THE INHERENT VALUE OF FACE-TO-FACE INTERACTION

To address these questions, it is necessary to consider the unique significance of physical presence. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in his *Phenomenology of Perception*, argues that our bodies are not merely instruments we use to communicate but are themselves expressive realities.⁸ “The spoken word,” he writes, “is a gesture of

⁶Nick Morgan, Ph.D., is the president and founder of the Public Words Inc., a communications consulting company. He is also the author of several books, including “Can You Hear Me? How to Connect with People in a Virtual World.” Morgan is an expert in non-verbal communications skills for public speakers and has coached and written extensively on this topic. See N. MORGAN, *Can You Hear Me? How to Connect with People in a Virtual World*, Harvard Business Review Press, Boston (MA) 2018. For this paper’s purposes, we are using Morgan’s observations and findings reflected in the abovementioned book.

⁷N. MORGAN, *Can You Hear Me? How to Connect with People in a Virtual World*, cit., p.47. Also, Neuroscience has illuminated the neurological foundations of empathy. “Mirror neurons constitute a unique category of neurons that activate both when an individual performs a motor action and when they observe another person executing the same or a similar motor action. These neurons were first identified in a monkey’s brain. In humans, brain activity akin to that of mirror neurons has been detected in the premotor cortex, the supplementary motor area, the primary somatosensory cortex, and the inferior parietal cortex.” (S. ACHARYA, S. SHUKLA, *Mirror Neurons: Enigma of the Metaphysical Modular Brain*, «Journal of Natural Science, Biology and Medicine», 3/2 (2012 Jul), pp. 118-124, DOI: [10.4103/0976-9668.101878](https://doi.org/10.4103/0976-9668.101878)). In essence, mirror neurons enable us to vicariously experience the emotions and actions of others. For instance, when we see someone smiling, our brain’s reward centers are activated, mirroring the experience of joy. This neural mechanism enhances our comprehension of others’ emotional states and nurtures empathy.

⁸See M. MERLEAU-PONTY, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1974.

the body”.⁹ Communication, in this sense, is fundamentally embodied: through tone, movement, and posture, we manifest our inner states to others and perceive theirs in return.

This view aligns with the testimony of students at the University of Asia & the Pacific (UA&P), many of whom describe in-person classes as vital to their learning.¹⁰ They emphasize the spontaneity of face-to-face interaction, the natural flow of conversation, and the bonds formed through shared space. One student explains, “Spontaneous interactions increase our camaraderie. We are given more chances to make learning more enjoyable naturally, without the guise of filters online.”¹¹ Another highlights the simple yet profound experience of presence: “Feeling the presence of others, even if you do not know them well, fosters a shared bond of being fellow learners.”¹²

Martin Buber’s philosophy of dialogue provides a deeper understanding of this phenomenon. In *I and Thou*,¹³ Buber distinguishes between two fundamental modes of relating: the *I-It* and the *I-Thou*. In the *I-It relation*, others are approached as objects useful, measurable, or instrumental. In the *I-Thou relation*, by contrast, the other is encountered as a whole person, in their unrepeatable uniqueness. Such encounters are reciprocal and transformative. They cannot be reduced to information exchange; they require mutual openness and vulnerability.

In the classroom, this dynamic is crucial. Education thrives when teachers and students engage in I-Thou relationships, co-creating knowledge through dialogue. Face-to-face interaction provides the conditions for this encounter: shared eye contact, subtle gestures of encouragement or confusion, and the immediacy of response. Non-verbal cues, often dismissed as secondary, are, in fact, integral to this process. A teacher’s supportive nod or a classmate’s furrowed brow can reveal more than words alone, guiding the flow of discussion and deepening understanding.¹⁴

⁹*Ibidem*, p. 212.

¹⁰An Action Research on person-centered classroom dynamics was conducted last 2023-2024 at the University of Asia and the Pacific, involving more than a hundred participants, which examined the students’ perspectives on a person-centered approach in a face-to-face learning setup and classroom dynamics’ personal and communal impact, as well as its strengths and weaknesses. The rest of the references to the University of Asia and the Pacific’s students in the succeeding pages come from this same survey results. Access the full data set here: <https://ctl.uap.asia/action-research-3225/>

¹¹Quoted from the 2024-25 survey results on Classroom dynamics and face-to-face interactions administered to college students at the University of Asia and the Pacific in Google Forms format. Refer to the previous footnote to access data set.

¹²See the same data set for more details.

¹³See M. BUBER, *I and Thou*, trans. by R. G. Smith, T&T, Edinburgh 1937.

¹⁴The I-Thou relationship signifies a sincere, direct, and reciprocal encounter whereby individuals engage with one another as complete persons within a spirit of openness and mutual under-

4 EMBODIMENT, EMPATHY, AND HUMAN FLOURISHING

Human beings are fundamentally embodied. Burgos asserts that “human existence is not comprehensible without the body. In any human action, whether external or internal, corporeality is involved”.¹⁵ Our physical presence is not incidental to who we are; it is the medium through which we relate to the world and to one another. This insight has profound implications for empathy.

Martha Nussbaum describes empathy as a recognition of another person’s reality—a seeing with the eyes of the other. This recognition is grounded in shared vulnerability. When we encounter someone face-to-face, their gestures, expressions, and even silences reveal aspects of their inner life. Such encounters invite us to respond not merely with cognitive understanding but with affective resonance.¹⁶

Students at UA&P articulate this experience vividly. For them, face-to-face classes are not only intellectually engaging but emotionally formative. Being physically present with peers allows them to perceive others as whole persons rather than disembodied profiles or icons on a screen. One student notes, “By being in the presence of our fellow individuals and appreciating it genuinely, there is already a shared sense of togetherness. This presence is the minimum condition for truly knowing others and their needs.”¹⁷

From a neuroscientific perspective, Medina underscores that the human brain evolved to thrive in dynamic, physical environments. Learning is most effective

standing. As Buber articulates, “When two people relate to each other authentically and humanly, God is the electricity surges between them”. This vivid metaphor accentuates his conviction that authentic dialogue is inherently transformative, fostering spaces in which something transcendent beyond mere exchange is realized. This is the opposite of the I-It interaction which characterizes others as objects of utility, analysis, or control, producing interactions that are utilitarian and transactional. This distinction has profound implications for contemporary educational practice. Pedagogies grounded in relational education and emotional intelligence resonate with Buber’s vision by fostering learning environments where teachers and students engage in dialogue rather than transmitting information unidirectionally. When educators adopt an I-Thou orientation, they move beyond hierarchical models, cultivating classroom cultures characterized by mutual respect, empathy, and collaborative meaning-making. See M. BUBER, *I and Thou*, cit., p. 89.

¹⁵Cf. J. M. BURGOS, *Personalist Anthropology*, Vernon Press, Wilmington (DE) 2022, p. 47.

¹⁶Nussbaum highlights that empathy is rooted in our embodied and vulnerable human condition. It constitutes more than an intellectual exercise; rather, it is a profoundly emotional recognition of another’s inner experience. Through empathy, we acknowledge the suffering, joy, and humanity of others as genuine and significant, thereby establishing the groundwork for moral concern and compassionate action. This experience is most intensely encountered in direct, face-to-face interactions, where mutual vulnerability facilitates authentic understanding and connection. See M. NUSSBAUM, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2001, pp. 301-322.

¹⁷For a comprehensive view of the survey findings, please refer to the dataset available through the link provided above.

when it engages the senses and involves active participation. Digital platforms, by contrast, limit this richness, often reducing interaction to visual and auditory channels alone. As a result, the depth of connection and the empathy it engenders is diminished.¹⁸

This biological grounding finds philosophical depth in Stein's account of empathy, which unfolds through progressive stages delineated earlier. Face-to-face encounters allow for what Stein describes as a direct perception of the other's inner world. When students share space with their classmates and professors, they do not merely exchange ideas; they witness one another's struggles, aspirations, and emotions. This witnessing is transformative. It expands one's horizon of concern and deepens one's humanity. Empathy thus becomes not only an educational outcome but a cornerstone of communal life.

In-person encounters can be transformative for students and teachers, fostering empathy and a deeper appreciation for the richness of human experience and one's ability to understand another person, especially those students who are more academically or emotionally in need. This can be seen as something so simple, but when reality strikes, when one is faced with persons who have more needs, require more attention and understanding, and, perhaps, just a little bit of care and ears to lend, one could sometimes forget how to be gentler and warmer toward them. When students experience firsthand some of the challenges that relationships with others come with, such as in a classroom setting, they grow in their capacity to take on another person's problems. Listening actively and paying attention to other people's body language and nonverbal cues dramatically helps.¹⁹ Exposure to the display of vulnerable emotions, such as fear, rejection, anxiety, helplessness, hurt, and many others, allows one to be more in tune with

¹⁸J. MEDINA, *Brain Rules: 12 Principles for Surviving and Thriving at Work, Home, and School*, Pear Press, Seattle (WA) 2014, p. 5. From a neuroscientific perspective, Medina argues that the human brain evolved for active engagement within dynamic, physical environments, which are best mirrored in direct, embodied encounters. For example, in schools and educational settings, face-to-face learning environments are well-suited to support overall development by creating chances for spontaneous conversation, shared experiences, and detailed feedback. These are conditions that more closely match the complex, interactive settings where our brains develop and thrive. This fits with modern teaching methods that focus on hands-on learning and relationships, making face-to-face interaction not just preferred but essential for the best human growth and understanding.

¹⁹N. Morgan further asserts this. He claims that "Every face-to-face communication is two simultaneous conversations: the content (what you say) and the body language (how you say it). Both these conversations are essential to human communication, but they are different. The content is the stuff of everyday chitchat, high-level planning, offers of employment and marriage, negotiations to end wars, and secret deals to share marketplaces around the world. The second conversation is far simpler and far more important in one sense: if the two conversations are not aligned, then the second one always trumps the first. We've all had the experience of saying one thing and meaning another. Sometimes we want to convey something else, we want to hide something. Body language trumps content because body language is concerned with some very basic questions about our individual survival and the survival of the species. We ask ourselves, *Is*

their own emotions, needs, and preferences, and thereby understand others. Morgan purports that.

This is what human connection really is: the hard wiring in our brain forces us to feel the same emotion that other people around us feel. We crave this emotional connection because we're hardwired to experience it, and we suffer when it's removed. In the virtual space, mirror neurons don't fire because they don't get the information they need to do so. How does this failure happen? Take away the visual field, restrict the tonal field, and you hugely hamper the connection.²⁰

5 CONCLUSION

We live in an age of paradox. Technology has given us unprecedented means of connection, yet many find themselves lonelier than ever. In education, this paradox is sharply felt. While online classes offer flexibility and access, they cannot replicate the embodied richness of face-to-face interaction.

At UA^{OP}, students express a profound appreciation for physical presence. They value the immediacy, spontaneity, and shared vulnerability that arise when learning together in person. These experiences foster empathy, transforming classrooms into communities of care and compassion.

Philosophically, this study confirms that human beings are relational and embodied.²¹ As Buber reminds us, true dialogue occurs only when persons meet as whole beings, not as mere avatars or abstractions. Stein's phenomenology of empathy, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of the body, and contemporary neuroscience all converge on this insight: our capacity to connect depends on our physical presence to one another.

The challenge for educators, then, is to resist the temptation to view virtual tools as sufficient substitutes for in-person engagement. While technology has its place, it must remain subordinate to the deeper goal of education: to form persons

this person a threat? Then, if this person is not a threat, is he or she more or less powerful than me? [...] Have I seen this person or pattern before, or is it new? These are not questions that we vocalize explicitly, for the most part. Most often, we're not even conscious of them; they are posed and answered by our unconscious minds to other unconscious minds and back again. But take these questions away, and suddenly our interest in the conversation becomes minimal to nonexistent." (N. MORGAN, *Can you hear me*, cit., pp. 86-87.)

²⁰*Ibidem*, p. 94.

²¹J. A. LOMBO, F. RUSSO, *Philosophical Anthropology: An Introduction*, Midwest Theological Forum, Downers Grove (IL) 2014. "Human nature is neither purely material nor purely spiritual; rather, it is a reality made up of a material principle (i.e., the body) and a spiritual principle (i.e., the rational soul). Thus, soul and body are united as integral parts of one single substance — man — and constitute a 'substantial unity'." (*Ibidem*, p. 35).

who can see, feel, and act with empathy. Only through embodied communication can we cultivate the vulnerable exchanges that sustain our shared humanity.

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