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## REVIEW OF *ON THE INTERNET*

by Hubert L. Dreyfus  
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1. The rush by American universities to offer online classes raises questions about the nature of higher education—specifically, about its pedagogical methods, commitments, and priorities. Philosopher Hubert Dreyfus considers these questions by focusing on community. He asks if distance education, using the Internet, can foster anything resembling a real community. If it cannot, Dreyfus thinks distributive education will be limited to training. It will fall short of true education, which Dreyfus suggests requires creating a temporary community dedicated to shared values. The relationship between a dedication to intellectual values and how that fosters a discourse community are complicated by Internet classes in which there is no shared physical presence with others. Perhaps the question to ask Dreyfus is whether his sense of an elite and highly competitive academic community provides the sole model for education.

2. I was especially eager to read Dreyfus' new book because he is the most prominent humanistic philosopher to write about the Internet. A UC-Berkeley professor, Dreyfus' publications include a definitive guide to Heidegger's *Being and Time* (*Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division I*) and *What Computers Still Can't Do*. Now in its third edition, his work on computers remains the classic response to the eager promises of the AI (artificial intelligence) community, which has been and often continues to be unaware of the pragmatist understanding of perception, language, and learning.

3. As a pragmatist, Dreyfus explains that the development of language, personality, and community are long, complex, and embodied social processes. By "embodied" Dreyfus means inhabiting a body and culturally interacting with other embodied persons through language. Dreyfus suggests that the sense of community evident on the Internet is only a kind of residue left from embodied, linguistic, social processes. Like other pragmatists, Dreyfus does not believe we can develop thoughts, meaning, or character without embodied social experience. What we know is always more than what we can say or write, more than we consciously have in mind. For example, since we were toddlers we have known how to maintain balance to walk. Unless we are congenitally blind, we learned how to construct gestalt visual patterns to render depth perception. We know ten thousand other such tacit things through embodied social experience. In *On the Internet*, Dreyfus points out that "in order to produce artificial intelligence," computer programmers "would have to make explicit and organize the commonsense knowledge people share" by virtue of inhabiting a body, having years of embodied experience, and talking with one another in ways that tacitly rely on that experience (16). "Most of our understanding of what it's like to be embodied" he goes on to say, "is so pervasive and action-oriented [i.e., performative] that there is every

reason to doubt that it could be made explicit and entered into a database in a disembodied computer" (17). An unconscious background or context that informs computer actions to make them meaningful does not simply emerge; it is always imposed by a programmer's judgment.

4. Pragmatism characterizes the unconscious as embodied habits and skills we take for granted in focusing on intentions or conscious thought. Temporal performances create a background, context, or situation. In contrast, Freudian thought renders the unconscious as a kind of space, like the basement, attic, or closets of a house. It suggests that dreams and unconscious "thought" are a kind of broken or deformed version of conscious thought—junk stored in the basement or attic. Dreyfus sums up the pragmatist view by suggesting that "there can be no understanding of relevance [of what is important or even what constitutes a human situation or problem] without commonsense understanding, and no commonsense understanding without a sense of how the world meshes with our embodiment" (25). As though in a dream, "in cyberspace, then, without our embodied ability to grasp meaning, relevance slips through our non-existent fingers" (26). Real communities offer temporal continuity, shared concerns, and mutual support. In contrast, the Internet is always there in the background to offer a kind of temporary suspension from responsibility. Lacking a real community to provide context, reading and writing on the Internet are like doodling, role-playing, or watching TV. There are few, if any, authors to be found—authors, like Dreyfus, whose names evoke an intellectual context to imply a community. Because there is only anonymous graffiti and endless advertising, the Internet offers a suspension from familiar contexts and communities. This is evident in the claims that the Internet offers an opportunity to express "a postmodern self—a self that has no defining content or continuity but is open to all possibilities and to constantly taking on new roles" (81). Dreyfus does not, however, celebrate this as liberating or creative. He believes it is adolescent, offering at best only a dream of actual identity.

5. Dreyfus predicts that "distance learning will produce only competence, while expertise and practical wisdom will remain completely out of reach" (49). Dreyfus relies too much on his own experience to imply that elite universities offer true education, while thousands of lesser schools throughout America offer mere training and competency—training which is, if possible, being further degraded by the shift to Web classes. By practical wisdom Dreyfus means the kind of knowledge one acquires from first being in the presence of an expert who performs some difficult skill, like surgery or playing the violin, and then trying to imitate the skill while being coached by the master. In contrast to this model, Dreyfus suggests that online learning simply provides a vast library without guidance, much less mentors and coaches. There are also problems with the kind of library the Internet offers. Dreyfus explains that unlike actual libraries or books, the Internet offers no comprehensive organization of its millions of pages of data, which can be associated quite diversely. They are rarely associated in any meaningful way, though, because search engines cannot act on the level of meaning, judgment, or relevance.

6. Dreyfus' model implies that far from replacing traditional classroom education, using the Internet as an educational tool has the reverse effect. It makes judgment, associative thinking, and coaching by a teacher all the more important. For example, I used to require students to find background material on the Internet for a nonwestern literature course. I was amazed to find that almost no one questioned the rhetorical motives of what people made available on the Internet. My students would dutifully print page after page of Islamic proselytism as though it were an encyclopedia article. Rhetorical and analytic skills do not simply emerge from leafing through randomly selected books in the library or from browsing through a few hundred Websites on the Internet. One of my colleagues had her students examine a very professional looking Internet site devoted to medically following "the first male pregnancy." When she asked if this were reliable research information, more than half of her students thought it was! What is lacking on the Internet is an analytic community possessing the authority to make judgments about the merit of material "published" there.

7. The issue here is authority. We are all familiar with objections to any imposed authority on the Internet. Such objections typically lack a context or have an implied context. In talking about controlling

information on how to make bombs or biological warfare agents, the context is one of law, government, civil rights, and ethics. Within those discourse communities authority is not imposed—it is developed. Institutional processes determine who gets into law school, who passes the bar, who becomes a judge, and who is indicted for a felony. We may be cynical about hidden forces at work in these processes, but such social forces construct truth and authority in every discourse community. The Internet sustains no such communities and consequently cannot offer guidance to sort the chaff from the grain.

8. Dreyfus understands education to require fostering a sense of community in a traditional classroom where a master illustrates how to perform a technical process—such as how to do philosophical analysis on a specific text or idea. He views the erosion of hierarchical structure or traditional authority as an educational loss, not as liberation or freedom. It could be construed as freedom only in the sense of being liberated from some imposed, rather than self-chosen, dedication. The question then is what are you going to do with your freedom? Identifying a social process as "instruction" or a "class" implies that there is an instructor who knows how to do something that students aspire to learn. Newsgroups provide an obvious contrast. They are not "classes" because everyone has an opinion and no one has the authority to sort them out by awarding grades and explaining why one argument is better than another.

9. Dreyfus predicts that

[w]e might well end up with a two-tiered educational system where those who can afford it will pay five times as much as the distance learning students pay, in order to be in the presence of their professors. This would amount to an elitism not much different from the English elitism of Oxford and Cambridge vis-à-vis the other universities that don't have tutorials—the very elitism that . . . the democratic leveling produced by distance learning is supposed to eliminate. (63)

Even so, I doubt that the situation is as bad as Dreyfus implies. Many of us can tell stories like the one Geoffrey Cain tells in an Amazon.com review of *On the Internet*: "I took one of Dreyfus' classes at Berkeley as an undergraduate and I never got to talk to him, there was no face to face learning." Cain ironically advises, "If you want to feel like a 'disembodied presence' go take a class at Berkeley as an undergrad." Except for a few Ivy League schools, American universities have never offered the British tutorial model in which students come to a professor's office to explain what they know about a topic and to be questioned as junior colleagues. Nonetheless, American universities offer unparalleled education in science, engineering, and in the arts and humanities, partly because they offer so many diverse communities and models of education to meet the needs of students with different learning styles.

10. Dreyfus teaches Ph.D. students at one of the most elite universities in the world. His students are destined to become philosophy faculty at other elite research institutions. This constitutes a tiny part of American higher education. When I taught online classes at a Texas university, I was surprised to find a frequent student comment. Internet students often said they felt free to ask questions and make comments about the texts we were reading without fear of sounding stupid or being ridiculed by their peers. There is something more positive in this than is evident from Dreyfus' statement about what a student loses in an online class by not having an opportunity to "risk making a fool of himself" (39). My students were not the elite. They would not even risk speaking in a traditional classroom situation when I suggested there were standards that determined what was accurate or insightful and what was uninformed or wrong.

11. Some of my colleagues get their students to speak in the traditional classroom by abandoning academic integrity so that community becomes not the background and context, but the focal point of the classroom experience. In such "classes" the experience of sharing feelings becomes the content of the course. Such classes resemble monitored newsgroups. Everyone expresses an opinion, but no one's opinion means anything. Dreyfus wonderfully explains Kierkegaard's understanding of how our personal

judgments construct our identities. I will not attempt to paraphrase that process, but instead follow Dreyfus' application. "Kierkegaard," he says, "saw that the public sphere was destined to become a detached world in which everyone had an opinion about and commented on all public matters without needing any first-hand experience and without having or wanting any responsibility" (76). We recognize this as descriptive of Internet classes, but traditional classrooms that abandon instruction to offer therapy also foster short-lived crypto-communities. In these classes, as with email and newsgroup posts, "anonymous amateurs . . . post their views from nowhere" without risking a putdown from peers or a judgment from an instructor (79). "The anonymous spectator takes no risks" and consequently does not construct a real identity or character with the hallmark of authority in some specific community (81). It is no wonder that "facilitators" of such "courses" have problems giving grades.

12. Kierkegaard's sense of faith and decision is nothing if not demanding. Faith and judgment are overwhelming and engrossing processes for him. I do not suggest that Dreyfus' sense of education necessarily parallels this unconditional commitment, but the model of education that his students and classes provide is far removed from the kind of students I taught or from the tens of thousands in community college classrooms throughout America. Should we simply abandon those who lose the risks offered in Dreyfus' classes? And what of the many who never have the opportunity to rise to the level of taking intellectual risks in elite schools? Using Dreyfus' own terms, students must achieve basic competence before aspiring to professional expertise and mastery. Online instruction offers many students a chance to gain college level and even professional competency in some classes—a chance that is either not otherwise available to them or that they would not take in traditional classroom lecture situations. Except for the Ivy League and research institutions, the American model of education invites everyone to college. It also invites students to change majors until they find a community fascinating enough to become dedicated to. If online instruction redefines the traditional classroom situation as elitist, that may not be such a bad thing. Traditional classrooms often contain silent, begrudged, and bored students. In my experience, the four, five, or ten interested students were often so intimidated that they spoke to me only after class or during office hours. If I could have partitioned classes so that I had the equivalent of honors students in the traditional classroom and those who were there only because they wanted the credit in online classes, everyone would have been more satisfied.

13. I venture to guess that in Dreyfus' classroom the sense of community is more professional than local. Even though journal and university press editors and prominent philosophers are not physically present, I imagine that they are very much part of the community that Dreyfus fosters. When the Internet attempts to sustain something comparable to Dreyfus' classes, it ends up with list-serve email and a community that is too tenuous to engage scholars very deeply. At the other extreme, "courses" with little content and few standards will no doubt be popular as long as they fulfill degree requirements at state universities. As Dreyfus suggests, such courses will ultimately shunt many students off into low-level terminal degrees. Between these two extremes there is still a vast area for effective online instruction. I presently design and teach Internet courses in technical writing. It involves much more work than going into the classroom but in some ways it better reflects the professional activities of technical writers who increasingly build Websites and work on the Web with colleagues scattered across the country or around the globe. More than half of my students are nontraditional and many are scattered in small towns. These can take graduate level technical writing classes only because they are offered via the Internet.

14. We should not expect the Internet to offer authentic communities to rival the real communities we are involved with every day: families, jobs, traditional schools, churches, neighborhood friends, childhood friends, and the like. This does not necessarily mean that the Internet cannot sustain some limited form of community, especially for those who come together to share an enthusiasm for some focal concern, which may indeed be educational in nature. At the same time, we should not expect online instruction to rival the best education offered by elite institutions. Online instruction can do some things well, such as encourage reticent students to ask questions and become engaged in analytic study without worrying about peer judgments. Other things it does less well. I can quickly show a room full of technical writing students a

half-dozen case solutions that failed and compare this set to another half-dozen that succeeded. There may be 30 skills illustrated in the work, but only one or two that a particular class is interested in better understanding. Despite hours of effort to author dozens of webpages, the online process still lacks the immediacy, complexity, responsiveness, and effectiveness of the traditional classroom. In the classroom I can quickly tell if a student has mastered organization, writing, or software techniques, and coach her in areas where she needs help. In online courses there are blanks between authoring Webpages to offer instruction, receiving student work, and coaching the student about the work.

15. Undoubtedly American universities will continue to hope that online instruction will be the answer to many of their problems. Unfortunately, these problems tend to be financial, political, and logistic rather than educational. Committed and dedicated teachers can certainly use the Internet as a medium of instruction but there is little incentive for them to do so. Hard work and creativity expended to produce excellent online classes rarely pays. Such work is invisible to senior colleagues and administrators who have never taken, much less developed, a Web course. Although I appreciate Dreyfus' thought on the Internet and distributive education, I cannot imagine him developing and teaching a Web class. I would be the first to admit that it would be a waste of his great talent. However, the pragmatism that Dreyfus advocates stresses that knowledge resides more in technique and performance than in theory. I spend months developing Web courses—time that I would otherwise spend to produce work for traditional print publication. For annual reviews I describe how to access the WebCT courses I develop. I doubt that any administrator has bothered to look. Even if they did, I doubt they could assess the quality of the work, having themselves never authored a Webpage. Their concern seems to be entirely fiscal and political. Thus, the threat to education is not, as Dreyfus suggests, the Internet or online instruction, but the anti-educational agenda that underwrites so much education policy.