The Promise and Limits of Online Learning:
Reexamining Authority in the Classroom

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Addressing the challenges of higher education today, Louis Menand notes, "there is always a tension between the state of knowledge and the system in which learning actually takes place. The state of knowledge changes much more readily than the system."[1] The rapid expansion of knowledge and global networks of learning powerfully impact the traditional system of instruction. In this context, many sense a shift today in the culture of education, borne on the tide of technologically mediated forms of learning. The shift, which centers on the rapidly expanding universe of learning opportunities that exist online, carries the promise of deep changes in the system of classroom-based instruction.

In this context we focus on one central component of instruction, the authority of teachers. What does the rise of online instruction mean with respect to the authority of those who teach in higher education? Does it involve a mere adjustment in the way authority is exercised, or something more than that? And if something more, what is at stake in the prospect of more learning online?

Decentering the Teacher in Authority

In their recent study of the "digital revolution" in education, Allan Collins and Richard Halverson note, "computers act to dilute the authority that teachers have in classrooms — especially the authority over what constitutes legitimate knowledge. When connected to the Internet, computers open classrooms to a wide variety of information from many different sources."[2] This, they suggest, is a profound development, for whereas in traditional forms of education "a teacher controls the official information flow," going forward we need to recognize that "education should be about students constructing their own understanding using computer tools."[3]

As Collins and Halverson see it, the shift toward the learner dislodges the authority of those positioned to define what is to be learned. As they put it, "In the traditional view, learning consists largely of memorizing essential facts and concepts, and performing procedures until they are automatic." They anticipate that as the locus of control shifts to learners, a fundamental change will follow. Instead of the kind of "just-in-case" learning that traditional forms of educational authority has demanded of students, we should welcome "just-in-time-learning," the notion "that whenever you need to learn something in order to accomplish a task, you can find out what you need to know."[4]

In another prominent commentary, Terry Moe and John Chubb decry the grip of teachers in authority and hail the movement to "liberate learning." For them it is nothing less than a "freedom struggle" for students to learn in the best, most effective way possible."[5] In their view, "online technology enables students anywhere — poor

inner cities, remote rural areas, even at home — to take any course they like, from the best instructors in the world, and to customize learning to their own needs, schedules, styles, interests, and academic growth."[6]

Reading overheated accounts of this kind — which suggest near limitless capacity of individual learners to pursue their learning online — calls to mind Kieran Egan's remarks about the longstanding dream of educational reformers who, bemoaning the limits of traditional schooling, foresee the emergence of freely unfolding educational development.[7] Stemming in part from Jean-Jacques Rousseau, explicitly advanced by Herbert Spencer, and as Egan suggests, underscoring major currents of progressivism in education, there is the idea that learning should be all but effortless, as natural as learning one's first language, or how to jump and run.

This way of thinking about education celebrates the primacy of the emerging learner whose development is hamstrung in conventional school settings. It is a way of thinking that draws strength from its critique of traditional forms of authority in schooling as something more or less stultifying, once necessary perhaps, but better off supplanted by efforts to facilitate student learning (instead of demanding and controlling it).

Teacher authority remains a ready target, as schools are everywhere dependent on its exercise. Faced with a group of students, teachers can do little if they must at every turn persuade students to take part or believe what they say. Likewise, while sanctions may be wielded (diverse rewards and punishments), coercion is a blunt and crude instrument in pedagogical settings. In the space between persuasion and coercion, it is in the exercise of authority that teachers find whatever efficacy they possess.

But that observation raises troubling issues, and generates the frustration and disdain noted above. For one thing, the exercise of authority is far easier said than done and much of the sheer waste of time and energy in educational settings comes from the inability of many teachers to command the necessary and desirable forms of respect for the authority they would wish to wield.

Second, and more troubling, is the question of what grounds the authority teachers claim to possess. The glib answer is that those who are "an" authority in some domain of study warrant respect for their efforts while "in" authority in school and university settings. But here arises a deeper critique of traditional forms of education. The central issue was exposed by Helen Freeman a generation ago, who took up the question of whether epistemic authority — the authority of someone who does deserve respect as an authority in some field of knowledge — could be insulated from the kinds of challenges arising from the "new sociology of knowledge."[8] Freeman's analysis demonstrated convincingly that, in the institutional context of school practices, educators are never only "an authority," but always function simultaneously to exert forms of social–political control, even in the domains of learning and questions of knowledge over which they are empowered to preside.

From the perspective of this critique, traditional forms of teaching practice are always suspect with regard to the ways in which power is expressed and exercised

in them. So Moe and Chubb's libertarian hailing of the possibilities of liberated learning resonates with longstanding concerns on the left with respect to the authority of teachers and the way that authority often operates to keep people in their place, even where questions of knowledge are concerned.

The guardian role for teachers in authority remains hopelessly suspect; but what is new, perhaps, are the technological means of shifting the locus of control to the learner. As the comments of Collins and Halverson, and of Moe and Chubb, suggest, one may well portray teachers as, in effect, waging a rear guard defense of a kind of privileged position vis-à-vis the many and diverse cultures and domains of learning. It is understandable that many teachers resist the decentering of their authority. Nevertheless, as the resources for alternate routes to the knowledge and information learners seek become available, any particular teacher's possession of authority with respect to that domain of knowledge declines in value. As the marketplace of ideas and information on any subject opens up and becomes easily accessible, the standing and significance of particular authority figures recedes.

In this context, many people see the rise of online instruction as a promising, if partial, step in further shifting the locus of control. It clears the way for a wide range of practices detached from traditional moorings in the time and space of classrooms governed by the presiding authority of the teacher. The promise resides in putting learner engagement at the center of things. This is not to deny the forms of authority implicit in various subjects of study or the teacher's role in selecting content for study. But crucially, the learner will be empowered to control, to a greater extent, the pace, circumstances, and direction of learning.

And although online classes are still managed by teachers, their design — typically governed by one or another of the "course management systems" that universities purchase from software vendors — requires a clear commitment to specifying the content and activities to be undertaken so that it's usefulness to the learner, against the burgeoning backdrop of other learning opportunities online, can be scrutinized and assessed. That is, online instruction tends to focus the teacher's mediating role on the fundamentally facilitative tasks of organizing content, specifying activities, and assisting in generating outcomes that the learner finds useful and has reason to pursue.

Conceptions of Authority in Teaching

Against the backdrop of such changes, the standing of teachers in authority — guardians of the canon and traditions of learning to which students are expected to submit and defer — becomes increasingly irksome. The shifting locus of control from the teacher to learner is energized by this sentiment.

But sentiments can be blinding; is there something about face-to-face authority relations that such feelings may lead us to ignore? In order to explore this question, it is fruitful to consider authority more closely with regard to the way it emerges in the dynamics of discourse. Bruce Lincoln, drawing on the continental tradition of inquiry about "discursive authority," centers attention on the interplay of factors that result in the many forms of authoritative speech. Setting aside the attempt to

formally characterize its epistemic and institutional forms, Lincoln argues that authority

> is best understood in relational terms as the effect of a posited, perceived, or institutionally ascribed asymmetry between speaker and audience that permits certain speakers to command not just the attention but the confidence, respect, and trust of their audience, or — an important proviso — to make audiences act *as if* this were so.[9]

Such effects are enormously important in all aspects of social life and learning. And of course they are open to interpretation as to their value and warrant.

Where education is concerned, Lincoln's perspective raises important questions. It is a basic condition of education that we find ourselves as learners in asymmetrical relationships with those who know more than we do; but whom should we trust and respect, when and in what contexts? What about those occasions when we are not sure; in what circumstances is it appropriate to feign respect and go along? And importantly, Lincoln emphasizes as well the vital social category of resistance to authority, which "can take the form of simple inattention or disrespect" but can be expressed in ways that spread and, "when it becomes visible to the speaker … an amount to — or be taken for — a sign of open defiance."[10] As with other authority effects vital questions arise, when is resistance exactly the right attitude to express, and then, in what way? What is learned in witnessing such displays and the ways they are addressed? Experiencing such patterns of response and interaction is deeply instructive for all concerned.

In short, Lincoln provides a precise way to analyze a fundamental dimension of human experience centered on the crucial asymmetries of social and intellectual experience and the full range of discursive authority relations they involve. It is worth reflecting on his summary account of discursive authority as an effect that results from

> the conjuncture of the right speaker, the right speech and delivery, the right staging and props, the right time and place, and an audience whose historically and culturally conditioned expectations establish the parameters of what is judged "right" in all these instances. When these crucial givens of the discursive situation combine in such a way as to produce attitudes of trust, respect, docility, acceptance, even reverence, in the audience, or — viewing things from the opposite perspective — when the preexistent values, orientations, and expectations of an audience predispose it to respond to a given speech, speaker, and setting with these reverent and submissive attitudes, "authority" is the result.[11]

Authority, on this view, is not something one simply possesses on the basis of one's expertise or position or anything else for that matter. In educational contexts, the diverse settings of classroom practice generate a wide array of authority effects that deeply condition the experience, content, and impact of learning.

THE THEATER OF AUTHORITY IN THE TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM

Lincoln's treatment of "authority effects" underscores an important category of human experience in the classroom, the drama of asymmetrical relationships. We would like to accentuate the nature of this relationship by examining the traditional classroom as a form of theater, defined by Paul Woodruff as "the art by which human beings make human action worth watching, in a measured time and space."[12] Theater for Woodruff encompasses a wide variety of human action, from bartending to

football, acting on stage to learning in a traditional educational context. Just what the theater of the classroom means can be best appreciated through careful consideration of its distinctive features, for example, its structure, social dynamics, liberatory promise, and educational ideals.

As theater, the classroom has a structure that is insular, detached, and transformational in character. The quality that most clearly distinguishes the traditional classroom from its virtual cousin is its spatial-temporal encapsulation. Students and teachers enter the confined space of the classroom with the expectation of attending to the matter-at-hand for a set period of time. Their encapsulation designates a special place for the pursuit of learning that clearly affects the quality of the learning experience. Like children who utilize fenced in spaces more fully than open ones, the measured time and space of the classroom promote an intensity of focus, energy, and purpose. What might be dismissively labeled as excessively narrow and insular, can, in the best of cases, provide the necessary break from one's self-absorbed preoccupations and the daily iterations of play and work.

This detached quality of the classroom has not escaped the attention of scholars. Hannah Arendt describes the school as the intermediate space between private life and the public world.[13] In a similar vein, Michael Oakeschott refers to a university education as "the gift of the interval," where you are not there to be left alone, but to pursue learning in the company of others, in conversation, briefly freed from many temporal and spatial burdens of the outside world.[14] Of course, not all scholars see the separateness of a classroom favorably. Many worry about the singularly academic focus of this space and its incongruity with student interests and realties. Some online proponents go even further and, appealing to progressive ideals or those of the market, seek to redesign higher education to fit seamlessly into the everyday world of busy people.

However dismissive one might be about the artificial structure of the classroom, it is nevertheless true that the art of classroom instruction depends on human action and human relationships. An active role is expected of its participants; like all theater, there is an art to watching as well as being watched. Since both watchers and those being watched determine or rather validate what constitutes the "right speaker, the right speech and delivery, the right staging and props, the right time and place,"[15] there exists what Giambattista Vico terms a "*sensus communis*" that is both culturally sanctioned and notoriously difficult to pinpoint. It is precisely this nameless authority that holds each participant accountable to the proper respect for the place. Hans-Georg Gadamer calls it "the sense that founds community."[16]

It goes without saying that this *sensus communis* functions in myriad ways. Like the parameters of discursive authority, what constitutes the proper conventions of watching and being watched are fluid; they vary according to subject matter, venue, and the actions, moods, and cultural background of participants. Nevertheless, even in the cases where there appears to be a lack of genuine respect, good will, or group solidarity the effect of the *sensus communis* can create the conditions for these feelings to emerge. That is not to say that the role of *sensus communis* in the

classroom is beyond reproach or critical scrutiny; one need only recall how groups can become insular and oppressive to see its inherent dangers.

More obvious ethical issues are raised by the asymmetrical relationship between the teacher and students, or more experienced students and their peers. Even when a teacher is the "right speaker," in the "right place," with the "right props," (especially then), there is the potential, even likelihood, of exerting socio-political control on students. (This is also the case, we might add, with any dynamic social interaction between unequals.) The speaker's knowledge and insight can be overestimated, misinterpreted, or oppressive; there is always potential that the experience will serve as the wrong kind of enabler. In the face of genuinely acknowledged authority, students can sometimes not only accept what is given, but also fail to recognize the source of their own authority and the active role they play in the educative process.

The problem of authority is therefore inherent to learning itself. With transformation comes risk and teachers bear a responsibility to at least recognize this fact. Of course, the teacher is not the only responsible party. One of the remarkable qualities of the traditional classroom is that it compels all participants to attend in some way to the shape and effects of authority. Students must choose to show genuine respect, feign respect, or confront authority with indignation, resistance, or even slumber. In spite of the institutional and epistemic advantages afforded to the teacher, classroom authority effects are open to critical scrutiny and the shifting parameters of sanctioned behavior. Sometimes the most liberating moment comes in the form of a decision to sit quietly and refuse to learn.

In contrast, authority in online learning environments is more hidden from view and there is often little sense in confronting it. One is presented with a consumer's choice, to engage or not to engage. The results of this choice often escape the attention of other participants; it may not even elicit a reaction from the teacher. For all the hype attached to the autonomous learner, online instruction offers little more than crude gadgets with which to confront the effects of authority. In many cases, it is not even clear just what it is that one can and should confront. Michel Foucault's mantra that "everything is dangerous" is especially apt here.[17] Whether authority is said to rest in the hands of the classroom teacher or is diffused throughout the depersonalized network of online instruction, it still exerts influence over participants.

But authority and freedom need not be incompatible. Gadamer's analysis of the distinctions between authoritative and authoritarian forms of authority and dogmatic and critical forms of freedom offers a useful way to think about the range and quality of authority effects in the classroom. Authority that is authoritarian is stripped bare of its genuine bonds and legitimacy and is reduced to institutional force as a means for attaining and wielding power. A logical reaction to such force is the appeal to dogmatic freedom, "the desire for control which brings with it a false sense of certitude."[18] Not surprisingly, both conceptual positions, authoritarian authority and dogmatic freedom, privilege an image of autonomy that is detached from the

socio-ethical bonds of human relationships and dialogue. In such an antagonistic environment, one learns (if at all) almost despite the other.

Gadamer's notions of authoritative authority and critical freedom suggest a more promising approach to the asymmetrical relationships of the classroom. Teacher authority is authoritative when it is based on "a form of validity which is genuinely recognized, and not one which is merely asserted."[19] Authority plays out as an expectation of superior knowledge, ability, and insight with regard to the matter at hand, rather than as a prostration before institutional power. This genuinely acknowledged authority in turn widens the space for what Gadamer calls critical freedom, "the capacity to criticize" that includes "and is a precondition both of our own recognition of the superior authority of others and of others' recognition of our own authority." Integral to this critical capacity, is the most difficult criticism of all: self-criticism. "Every posing of a question is an admission of ignorance and, in so far as it is directed towards someone else, a recognition that they may possess superior knowledge."[20] This freedom can also be antagonistic; we often only reluctantly accept the knowledge and insight of others. And yet, both authoritative authority and critical freedom reside in human relationships. It is precisely our fallibility that limits human authority at the same time that it makes our critical freedom dependent on it.

THE TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM AS GOOD THEATER

While the grey areas of authority, freedom, and human relationships inherent to the classroom make talk of quality both contested and contingent, a few general remarks on what makes good classroom theater can illuminate the dynamics of authority effects in a traditional educational context. Ultimately, good teaching is connected with good learning and subject matter worth learning. The triadic relationship between teacher, student, and subject matter is so integral to the experience of the classroom that it is difficult to evaluate learning without considering all three parts.

The human action on display in an ideal traditional classroom begins and ends with worthy subject matter. While the specific nature of the curriculum is context dependent, the subject matter most worth learning in a university setting extends beyond content, programmatically defined and organized, and beyond the acquisition of generic, interchangeable skills disconnected from inquiries about specific ways of knowing and distinct modes of thought. Its scope is also greater than the knowledge possessed by any individual, including the teacher.

As theater, the meaning of the subject matter cannot be entirely divorced from its presentation and reception in the understanding of participants. It is only through presentation that the subject matter can be understood. Each person interprets differently, shapes, and is shaped by what is passed along. The dialectical nature of this process and its implications are nicely captured in Oakeshott's vision of liberal learning as a sharing of culture that transcends mere recognition to reach the level of an encounter. He contends,

> Culture … is not a set of abstract aptitudes; it is composed of substantive expressions of thought, emotion, belief, opinion, approval and disapproval, of moral and intellectual discriminations, of inquiries and investigations.… [L]earning is coming to understand and respond to these substantive expressions of thought as invitations to think and to believe.[21]

The teacher plays a pivotal role in this sharing of culture. "The teacher's qualifications," writes Arendt, "consists in knowing the world and being able to instruct others about it, but his authority rests on his assumption of responsibility for that world."[22] Taking responsibility for the world entails respecting students enough to present the subject matter in its full complexity. While there is no hope of completeness or perfection, teachers can nevertheless embody for students compelling human possibilities; they can model different modes of thought, disciplinary practices, and ways to fruitfully engage in conversation. Students can see in the actions and words of good teachers how one might live in ideas and find new meaning in the world. At the same time, like a good actor who disappears in the play, good teachers dissolve into the presentation of the subject matter. While students have been known to imitate the mannerisms of their instructors, good teaching does not lie in mere imitation but in the broadening of critical freedom and an "understanding that always places itself in question."[23]

There is also an art to watching. In the classroom, this entails patience, perseverance, and other intellectual and ethical virtues that support a thriving learning environment. Good watchers suspend belief and adopt charitable attitudes towards those being watched and the matter to which they attend. Far from passive gazing, good classroom watching requires diligent effort, sustained attention, active understanding, a willingness to be watched as the situation calls, and the resolve to work through the drudgery of bad theater, flawed performances, and the natural inarticulateness of complex subject matter.

While Moe and Chubb may be right that the internet provides anyone anywhere with access to the best instructors on everything, we contend that many things worth learning require more than authoritative sources, efficient managers, and a "just-in-time" curiosity. That one can, with a click of a button, retrieve the full corpus of Platonic dialogues, along with spark notes and scholarly commentary, may be of little value if one cannot also find the time, place, and supportive community conducive to making the leap from mere recognition to the level of an encounter. Within the last century or more, the classroom has served this role. At its best, it provides a place of preparation for serious engagement with various modes of inquiry, disciplinary practices and theoretical speculations that are less likely to organically emerge in the normal course of everyday life.[24]

Thus, the image of the autonomous learner, who knows what she desires and needs and is immune to the entanglements of viewpoints and values other than her own, has little place in the traditional classroom. This is true not only because of the deeper commitments required of its participants, but also because if the subject matter worth learning is truly encountered, then one's very wants and values, not to mention the reasons for learning, are likely to be transformed in the give-and-take of educative experience.

<div align="center">C<small>ONCLUSION</small></div>

We noted at the outset Menand's recent reflections on the state of higher education. For Menand, the challenge for those working and teaching in higher education is clear: "there are things that academics should probably not be afraid to do differently — their world will not come to an end, but there are also things that are worth preserving, even at a cost, because the system cannot operate without them."[25]

This essay begins with observations about the widespread willingness to extend the space of online instruction, trimming back the historic reliance on teachers and students meeting in the place of a classroom. Part of the allure is the desire to decenter the embodied presence and authority of teachers. We have argued that, whatever the costs of maintaining the system of classroom teaching, the educational costs of replacing such teaching with online instruction would be far greater.

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1. Louis Menand, *The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University* (New York: Norton, 2010), 15.

2. Allan Collins and Richard Halverson, *Rethinking Education in the Age of Technology* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2009), 41.

3. Ibid., 43.

4. Ibid., 14.

5. Terry Moe and John Chubb, *Liberating Learning* (San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 2009), x.

6. Ibid., ix.

7. Kieran Egan, *Getting it Wrong from the Beginning* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2002).

8. Helen Freeman, "Authority, Power, and Knowledge: Politics and Epistemology in the 'New' Sociology of Education," in *Philosophy of Education 1981*, ed. C.J.B. Macmillan (Normal, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1981).

9. Bruce Lincoln, *Authority* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 4.

10. Ibid.*,* 10.

11. Ibid.*,* 11.

12. Paul Woodruff, *The Necessity of Theater: The Art of Watching and Being Watched* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 39.

13. Hannah Arendt, "The Crisis in Education," in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 188.

14. Michael Oakeshott, *Voice of Liberal Learning,* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2001), 114.

15. Lincoln, *Authority*, 11.

16. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2d rev. ed., Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1999), 21.

17. Michel Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," in *The Essential Foucault*, eds. Paul Rabinow and Nikolas S. Rose (New York: New Press, 2003), 104.

18. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Authority and Critical Freedom," in *The Enigma of Health*, trans. Jason Gaiger and Nicholas Walker (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996), 123.

19. Ibid., 121.

20. Ibid., 123.

21. Oakeshott, *Voice of Liberal Learning*, 21.

22. Arendt, "Crisis in Education," 189.

23. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Letter to Dallmayr," in *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer–Derrida Encounter*, ed. and trans. Diane Michelfelder and Richard Palmer (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY press, 1989), 95.

24. Jaron Lanier, known as the father of virtual reality, makes the same point about the critical role played by similarly protected places in the music world before the expanse of Internet culture. See Jaron Lanier, *You Are Not a Gadget: A Manifesto* (New York: Knopf, 2010).

25. Menand, *The Marketplace of Ideas*, 18.