

# Sharing Love for a Common World On and Off Screen. A Pedagogical and Technocentric Account

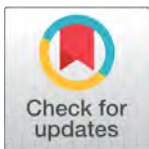
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## ABSTRACT

This contribution deals with the impact of digitisation on what it means to educate and to be educated, especially in the wake of the massive switch to on-screen learning during the COVID-19 crisis. It is argued that we can only adequately relate to this phenomenon if it is based on a strong pedagogical and technocentric account of (school) education. Drawing from authors such as Arendt, Lahire, Stiegler and Serres, the argument is made that four basic pedagogical operations (sharing love for the world, showing newcomers that there is a common world, drawing attention to things that matter, creating the student experience and sense of belonging within a new generation) is under considerable threat. At least, this is the case if we don't try to conceive of new digital technologies in a pedagogically meaningful manner, instead of unreflectively relying on existing conferencing technologies.

**Keywords** HANNAH ARENDT, BERNARD STIEGLER, DIGITIZATION OF EDUCATION, SCREENIFICATION, ATTENTION



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## 1 INTRODUCTION

In this contribution I want to develop a new perspective regarding the impact of the omnipresence of digital media in the life of the new generation concerning what it means to educate today. Although this has been a topic I have been researching for a long time, this issue has gained a new relevance: as a result of the prolonged social distancing matters due to COVID-19 and the massive and rapid introduction of distance learning in many schools and universities, online and on-screen education has not only become one of the most important pedagogical issues to deal with today, but moreover the present condition also showcases with great clarity what we might gain and what we might lose when we introduce digital education on such a large scale. This concerns a discussion that is all the more important, as in many universities today there are quite dominant voices to be heard, defending the viewpoint that even after the pandemic distance education is here to stay forever (cf. Iniesto et al., 2021).

In the first part, I elucidate the meaning of the question central to this article, I introduce the phenomenological approach I will use throughout this text and I briefly discuss the normative stakes of the analysis presented here. In the next two sections I lay the groundwork

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of my analysis by working out what I will define as a strong pedagogical and technocentric account of education. I do this with the help, mainly, of the work of Hannah Arendt, Bernard Lahire and Bernard Stiegler. In the fourth part, I draw out the profound educational consequences of substituting traditional, i.e. face-to-face forms of teaching and learning with digital ones, to conclude in the last section with larger cultural-philosophical reflections. Here I take my argument from the work of Michel Serres.

## 2 ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS AND TAKING LESSONS FROM THE PRESENT

When the extent to which the use of digital tools affects education is discussed in the media or amongst policy makers, the focus is as a rule on the effects that this shift has on learning outcomes: the question is whether students learn better and with greater effect in online contexts and at home, as compared to within classical school set-ups. A further concern, then, if it proves to be the case that the impact of distance education is negative, is the challenge of how we can make our tools more adaptive and more effective to stimulate learning and guarantee learning outcomes. I won't deny that these questions are valid and relevant ones, but it could be argued that they leave the most fundamental issues untouched. As I have explained elsewhere (Vlieghe, 2012), framing the issue in this way risks forgetting about some assumptions that are nevertheless highly questionable.

*First*, this framing comes with accepting the idea that education *itself* –i.e. what it means to teach and to learn, what educating and being educated is all about– never changes. However, as I hope to make clear in this contribution, the tools we rely on to teach and learn make all the difference. The way in which the world is disclosed to the new generation and the attitude from which students can start relating to this world radically change when the old and the new generation are principally placed at a distance, and when access to the world is mediated via screens. This speaks to my *second* concern: the framing of the debate today comes with a very shallow understanding of education, i.e. as a merely technical and psychological process of obtaining knowledge, value and skill –a process that addresses individuals and one that works effectively and efficiently, or not. However, as I also hope to make clear, there are other dimensions to education that cannot be understood if we solely approach it in terms of learning achievements. More precisely, education also relates to the issue of how we have come to inhabit a shared world and from which perspective we do this (Arendt, 1961; Masschelein & Simons, 2013; Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2019). This is not a matter of learning. Hence, we have to take a step beyond a learning-focused account and carefully investigate how the more important aspects of education are affected by the screenification of our life in common.

This is not to make a normative assumption here myself, viz. that I am opposed to digital forms of education (and, more dramatically, that I think everything that was good about traditional education is forever lost). Much depends on how digital tools are actually used, as I will also try to clarify. Digitization, and the screenification it implies, can have both beneficial and harmful consequences. My point here is rather that, especially today, due

to the scale and pace with which we have switched to distance learning, the potential affordances and threats have become clear to an extent that was impossible to perceive before. As Havi Carel claims in relation to the issue of social distancing (Carel, 2021; Carel, Ratcliffe, & Froese, 2020), the conditions of breakdown that we experience today under COVID-19 restrictions have the benefit of showing with great pertinence what was (and is) essential to our old ways of interacting, and hence what has fundamentally changed. This also comes with making the vital and urgent decision to care for these older ways, or not. I want to take a similar perspective in this article, and also join Carel in advocating the need for a *phenomenological* approach towards this issue. What needs to be analyzed, in relation to the massive switch to distance education, is *the difference in experience* that comes about when the face-to-face classroom is substituted with screened teaching and learning. This is in line with how Friesen (2011) defines phenomenological work, viz. highlighting those aspects of our experience that make a difference. The approach I take here is, moreover, close to what I have termed, together with other colleagues, a post-critical perspective on education: my aim here is not solely to criticize digital forms of education, but to safeguard pedagogical practices that are worth drawing our attention to today (Hodgson, Vlieghe, & Zamojski, 2020).

### 3 A STRONG PEDAGOGICAL CONCEPTION OF EDUCATION: SHARING LOVE FOR A COMMON WORLD

In this and the next section I want to oppose the assumptions behind the dominant discourse about screen education today, viz. that education can be reduced to a matter of learning and that the form and context –face-to-face or digital– don't fundamentally matter (Vansieleghem, Vlieghe, & Zahn, 2019). I do this by introducing a strong pedagogical and a strong technocentric conception of school education.

To start with, *a strong pedagogical conception of education* tries to capture what it is all about in ways that are richer than the obvious and trite idea that in education some instruct and others learn (Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2019). If this were the case, then all pedagogical questions would become merely psychological issues: education would then be all about cognitive and other processes in individual learners that can be optimized by working on conditions such as class size, teaching styles, features of study materials and handbooks, etc. Today this would mean for example that we are concerned with the question: does it matter whether or not pupils and students are instructed under face-to-face or under online conditions, and what is the measurable impact on learning outcomes? What we then leave out of the picture is that education also has a strong existential, communal and cultural meaning, which we find explicated most precisely in the famous essay by Hannah Arendt, "On the Crisis in Education" (1961).

More than an issue of instruction and learning, education is also an *intergenerational interaction* during which an already existing generation meets with newcomers in a shared world, which demands from them to take up the responsibility to pass on this world to this new generation. Similar to the challenge wherein we all (if we like it or not) need to relate

to the knowledge that we will die one day (mortality) and that we don't live alone in the world, but together with people that are quite different from ourselves (plurality), we are also (unless the human species became infertile) now and then confronted with the fact of new life (natality). The advent of these newcomers requires more than the biological birth as we know it in non-human animals (viz. upbringing and maybe socialization in a way of living that never changes): it imposes upon us, the elder generation, the question of whether we love the world enough to share it with these newcomers –i.e. to make them attentive to it and to show to them what is so important in the world that it is in need of preservation. However, this also entails that we disclose the world to the newcomers in such a way that they are really addressed as *new*: they must have the chance to start anew with the world, add novelty to it and protect it against decay by rejuvenating it (and that is why lions have always lived like lions and will continue to do so, whereas every human generation differs, sometimes dramatically, from that of its predecessors).

Important to this strong pedagogical account are the notions of *love* and of *world*, and that what defines a situation as educational is precisely love. One cannot teach about something if one isn't convinced that what one tries to show to the next generation is intrinsically worthwhile. This also means that the true object of education is *not* the pupil or student (i.e. the 'learner'), *neither* is it the teacher per se: it is the world itself, and the things in it. To Arendt, education is not teacher-centered or student-centered, but *thing-centered* through-out (Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2019).

What is at stake, fundamentally, is that the older generation tries to convey to the next generation a particular attitude of love and care for the world, because it is the world –our common world more precisely– that matters. Hence the importance of making the claim that from a pedagogical point of view *there is and there can only be one world* (whereas from a psychological perspective it makes sense that different groups of people live in different worlds: the world of skateboarders is a quite different world than the world of retired people). That is why Arendt (1961) is opposed to child-centered education, as it would come down to separating the generations to such an extent that children are locked up in their own world –one that is different from the existing generation. Likewise, such a view comes with abandoning teacher-centeredness, as the teacher must be defined in terms of love for the world. Teaching is a matter of *internal necessity*: a teacher is somebody who has fallen in love with a particular aspect of the world (a 'thing', i.e. a subject matter like music, mathematics, cooking, etc.) to such an extent that she has no choice but to pass it on to the newcomers by making them attentive to it –so that they can start sharing this love and start caring for the world (in their own unique and unforeseen ways).

In this strong pedagogical sense, education is through and through a practice of care for the world –a meaning that is brushed under the carpet when we only look at education as consisting of processes of learning. In that case, the only 'care' required is the *banal* care for securing learning outcomes. This also means that what defines education as such relates first and foremost to *the kind of attitude we want to entertain vis-à-vis the world*, and which we want to sustain in the new generation: Arendt's main question is, indeed, do we care (or not) for the world? Do we *love* the world?

## 4 A TECHNOCENTRIC CONCEPTION OF EDUCATION: SCHOOL AS SUBJECTIFICATION TECHNOLOGY

This brings me to the second reason why the approach to education presented here is a specific one: education as conceived of in the last section cannot take place everywhere and under any conditions (cf. Masschelein & Simons, 2013). What is required are particular technological circumstances. Hence a strong technocentric account of education is needed (Vlieghe, 2015). More exactly, what is needed is *school technology*.

To substantiate such a claim, it is necessary to refer here to the work of Stiegler (2010), who defines human subjectification (the process of becoming who we are, as human subjects) in terms of the technologies we happen to rely on, against the background of the transition between generations during which the existing generation introduces the new one to the use and knowledge of culturally dominant technologies. Technologies can be broadly defined as the tools that allow us to think, speak and act and to the routines and practices we need to incorporate in order to be able to handle these tools. According to such a broad definition, the more ancient prostheses we relied on (e.g. flint stones) are as much technological as more recent ones (e.g. cars). Likewise, pen and paper are as technological as a keyboard and a screen are. They are just different writing technologies.

For Stiegler, *anthropogenesis is technogenesis*. It is the dominant technological apparatus we depend on at a given time that defines us. That is to say, it is thanks to our learning to embody the practices and routines required by particular and historically situated technologies that we are who we are. Given that technology has its own history, this implies that the definition of the human also may shift, sometimes dramatically. Learning to write with pen and paper makes us, so Stiegler claims, literally into different people compared to when this technology was not available. One has to bear in mind here that, in fact, this technology, contrary to what many people assume, is of a rather recent date, viz. the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Before the invention of the pencil, cheap cellulose paper and cursive notation systems, it was virtually impossible to get the hang of longhand writing (as this requires protracted exercise, and hence the likelihood of wasting tons of paper). In former times, hence, pupils only learned how to read, but not how to write. It is only thanks to particular school inventions (calligraphy based on repeated exercise) that we acquired a particular stance towards the world (Vlieghe, 2015). Because we are not only readers (i.e. consumers), but also writers (i.e. producers of that what we consume), we get another understanding of what literacy and the creation of words and texts is all about. We enter a new space of experience because we have gained an intimate and inside-out perspective on making texts (Ibid.). This comes with a new form of subjectification, Stiegler (2010) would hold. But with the more recent advent of digital writing and reading technologies, things might change suddenly again. In order to read and write electronically, other gestures and routines are involved. Pressing buttons and seeing signs appear on a screen (without any further knowledge of how our digital devices make this happen) is an altogether different experience as compared to the formation of letters on paper, to give a very elemental example. If we stop writing longhand en masse, this might come with yet new forms of subjectification (Vlieghe, 2012, 2015).

The educational point here is that, due to particular processes of subjectification during our formation process, which vary according to different dominant technologies we need to learn and master, we experience ourselves and our world in different ways. We are literally educated to become another sort of human being. Hence, a strong *technocentric* account is needed. However, rather than only focusing on educational technologies we use (or no longer want to use) at school, it could be furthermore argued that the school *itself* is a technology. Taken as such, the school is a particular time and place that brings bodies together and where specific gestures and routines take place (Masschelein & Simons, 2013). Indeed, schools can be minimalistically defined as architectural arrangements that allow for gathering young people (students) together with a representative of the elder generation (a teacher) around a thing of study (the subject matter). Youngsters are literally removed from the sphere of their homes (the original meaning of the Latin word 'educere') to go to another, specially designed place, so that they can fully give their attention to study material. Only then can they become students. Under such circumstances they can develop love and care for the subject matter they are gathered around, spending their time just for the sake of studying. This defines the school as such (conforming to the Greek etymology of this word, as *skholé* precisely means free time, i.e. time that is not destined to something else): here society allows the new generation to just study instead of being preoccupied with the business of the household or the worries of the adult generation. Mathematics and cooking are studied just for the sake of mathematics and cooking (Masschelein & Simons, 2013).

Importantly, and returning to the claim that school is a technology, all this requires particular material arrangements, e.g. the existence of school buildings and classrooms that are differently constructed than say, homes, industrial plants and parliaments. Moreover, particular gestures and routines are required. I already mentioned the characteristic 'school' manner of learning to master longhand writing, but this could be extended, as Bernard Lahire (2008) claims, to *all* forms of 'scholastic' endeavor. At school, 'the point is to make pupils interiorize forms of knowledge that have gained their own coherence in and through some kind of writing' (p. 25 –My translation). Lahire's main idea is that in every discipline we come across at school, this happens in a unique manner. A thing pertaining to the world is made into school material. That is to say, it is 'grammatized': it is cut away from the 'real' world, cut up into smaller pieces, classified and articulated, and the smaller bits that ensue can now be brought into relation to one another, and compared, etc. so as to study the internal coherence of the thing in question and also the possibilities of its further development. At school, the main task is then –through exercise– to come to embody the particular grammar of cooking, mathematics, music, gymnastics, and so on. We get acquainted with the fundamental elements and operations lying behind the preparation of delicious food, the construction of stringent theorems, the creation of music that sounds pleasing, the possibilities of controlling and intensifying our motoric capabilities, and so on.

There exists, in other words, a vocabulary and a grammar typical to, for example, music and human movement, and it is at school, thanks to exercising these in music and gym class, that we come to internalize them, so that we fully master them, but also can go forward with

them in new and unforeseen ways. Again, this requires that we approach things that belong to the world outside of school in a way we normally don't: in real life we just *consume* music and we just move about, but at school we *grammatize* music and bodily movements. In that sense, it could be argued that the school stands out as a *technological* arrangement without equal, that school activities cannot be reduced to the purposes outside of the school (family or adult, productive life) and that the school is therefore a place and time that has an intrinsic meaning. School is school *sui generis* (Lahire 2008).

## 5 (DIGITAL) EDUCATION AS PHARMAKON

Taking the strong pedagogical and technocentric accounts I developed above together, I now want to return to the issue of physical presence and education in an era in which screen-based technologies are possibly becoming the new dominant instruments to rely on. An important idea I have not developed thus far is that all technologies, so Stiegler (2010) holds, are actually 'pharmaka'. Drawing from Plato's famous condemnation of writing technologies, 'pharmakon' means simultaneously cure and poison. The drug we use to recover from a disease may also kill us when taken at the wrong dosage. One and the same drug can operate in opposed ways.; this also applies to our technologies. It is the reason why, from a Stieglerian perspective, there is just no point in claiming that *all* pre-digital technology is good and *all* digital technology is harmful. For instance, it goes without saying that predigital writing technologies have often been abused in order to sustain violence and oppression (e.g. indoctrination through propagandistic pamphlets; alienating ourselves from the world by learning definitions from books instead of engaging with the real world). And, obviously, there are many very commendable examples of screened education that take place today.

To give such an example, I refer to the *Manifesto for Teaching Online*, written by scholars of the Centre for Research in Digital Education at Edinburgh University (Bayne et al., 2020). Analogously to the strong pedagogical view I endorsed above with Arendt, their suggestions about reforming (higher) education from scratch in an entirely digital manner deserve full support. After all, this Manifesto is informed by a rich and substantial view of education in general, and of teaching in particular. More specifically, the Manifesto is highly critical of forms of digital education that exist today (especially in COVID-19 times), because too many schools and universities have *just* unwittingly introduced from one day to the other conferencing technologies such as Skype and Zoom, so as to copy traditional classroom or lecture hall practices online. This testifies to a lack of profound pedagogical thinking, they claim, and it also comes with what Giroux (1988) calls the proletarianization of the teaching profession: teachers themselves are not involved in educational policy, but are just instructed to carry out plans made by experts and policy makers (viz. the massive switch to using these conferencing technologies).

What the authors of the Manifesto propose, on the contrary, is that teachers themselves need to think together about the curriculum and the format of their future digital education, i.e. that they are intensely involved in giving shape to new digital practices. To give a simple example: instead of delivering a lecture from behind one's kitchen table, teachers might opt

for building a website together with their students. And instead of taking an online oral exam on-screen, they might decide to grade students solely based on their collaborative work online. One is thus challenged to think carefully, on a case to case basis, what teaching, learning and assessment activities to develop. Only then are teachers addressed as educators in the strong Arendtian sense of that word, and are they allowed (again) to be ‘transformative intellectuals’ (to refer once more to the work of Giroux (1988)).

If my contribution is understood as an attack or a critique on digital education, it is only meant in the sense that it takes issue with a particular form of screened education –one that is not pedagogically thought-through, i.e. one that is, educationally speaking, nonsensical and one that turns the teacher into a brainless executioner of poorly-conceived instructional technologies. When we solely rely on conferencing techniques to try and create school time and place, then we might be well on our way to arriving at the exact opposite: a perfected version of the disciplinary format of the Panopticon. It is a bizarre paradox that many educational experts today, who in the past severely criticized the school as a power configuration that only brought about oppression and created completely passive, uncritical and docile human beings that were perfectly trained and drilled for a dull and mechanized life in our productivity-obsessed capitalist world, defend Zoom-education and even dream of finally getting rid of physical school arrangements.

If we look, from a phenomenological perspective, at what happens during screened education today and how teachers and their students are positioned, isn't this the most optimized form of disciplinary education? Students are expected to be telepresent at certain times, meaning that they are actually condemned to remain confined to the sphere of their household, just to appear in a small box on a teleconferencing interface –i.e. in their own private prison cell. Here, the teacher appears as a perfect analogue to the Panopticon prison guard as she can detect with a glimpse of an eye who is attending and who not. In this way the students discipline themselves and make themselves into the passive, uncritical and docile creatures that are beneficial to a disciplinary society. I should of course immediately add –conforming to the idea that all technologies have the ambivalent nature of *pharmaka*– that the same digital infrastructure has also been used by students to escape the disciplinary gaze of their teachers, simply by turning their camera off and by merely giving the illusion of being (tele)present. In that sense, a careless introduction of digital technologies in education might also provoke unintended, undesirable and insurgent responses.

## 6 BASIC PEDAGOGICAL OPERATIONS IN JEOPARDY ON-SCREEN

From the last section it should be clear that we have to think very carefully when we all too *quickly and impulsively* yield to digital quick-fixes. Again, my main intent here is not solely to criticize the current COVID-19 policies implemented at many universities and schools today, but to stimulate a discussion about the desirability of a (total) screenification of education for the times that lay ahead. In the following section, I want to add some extra concerns, viz. four basic pedagogical operations that follow from the framework set out in sec-



tions 3 and 4, and that are currently under threat, especially when we just replace traditional face-to-face school education with an ill-conceived digital alternative based on conferencing technologies. Rather than using these four operations to unconditionally extirpate all forms of digital education, what follows is above all meant to promote more cautious thinking about the conditions needed to give shape to future screen-based environments so that they can become *truly* educational.

As far as things stand now, I would argue that the physical, i.e. face-to-face, togetherness of pupils and students among themselves and of pupils/students with their teachers is crucial because the digital tools we have developed thus far don't go well with the following pedagogically crucial operations (Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2019). The first of these operations is *that the teacher shares her love for the world with others*. As previously referenced per Arendt (1961), what above all makes a teacher into a teacher is her love for a subject matter, which urges her to spread this love to the next generation. Such a view might sound odd today, especially for those who conceive of education in psychological terms, i.e. as a matter of efficient learning. What counts then is predominantly the competence a teacher has to facilitate learning in her students. But, if the figure of the teacher gets defined in this way, the logical consequence would be that a good teacher can teach virtually anything. And this means that everything is equally important and hence equally meaningless. From an Arendtian perspective (Arendt, 1961), this would entail the teacher failing to teach the most important thing, viz. taking a certain attitude towards our world: that we love particular things because they are intrinsically worthwhile and hence worthy of our attention, study and care.

For this to happen, we need teachers who are experts not so much in the art of teaching as they are experts in a particular subject matter: people who are in love with, care for and are devoted to cooking, math, music, etc.<sup>1</sup> This love, care and devotion is something that is typically conveyed in a very physical manner: the teacher who stows away her textbooks in her satchel at the end of a class in a careful way (as opposed to the one who handles those without any care whatsoever) puts on display that her subject matter is of importance. Likewise, the teacher who puts together with precision a theorem or an anatomical drawing on the blackboard testifies to a similar care for the subject matter. To a cooking teacher, it matters very much to carefully handle the ingredients, according to the specific demands the ingredients make of the cook, and it matters all the more to put this vividly on display to the next generation. Good teaching seems to be related to drawing attention to the 'matter' (the materiality, the stuff, the literal thing-like qualities) of the subject matter, and how the thing in question is grammatically constituted (in Lahire's sense). But sometimes, the same attitude of love for things is also displayed in involuntary movements and gestures (for instance in acts of forgetting about herself, as well as in the many jerky, loony and nerdy behaviours she might display when she is totally taken with the thing she teaches), which also signal a deep love for an aspect of the world and which invite everyone –all the members of the new

<sup>1</sup>This is of course not to argue that love is a sufficient condition and that the strong pedagogical account laid out in this article is opposed to teacher training. Rather, this account implies that a study of didactics in view of developing a set of professional competences is not sufficient for becoming a teacher. Instead, I have argued elsewhere (Vlieghe and Zamojski 2019, Chapter 7) that we can reconceive of teacher education in terms of love for the world, and that developing didactic competence can play a part in establishing a teacherly ethos.

generation - to partake in the love for this thing. Obviously, I will not deny that some of the things mentioned here can also be very convincingly conveyed at a distance, e.g. in YouTube manuals or television shows with expert-cooks, but distance education as we have known it during the recent pandemic has made clear that there are serious limitations to conferencing technologies in this regard (Vadivel, Mathuranjali, & Khalil, 2021; Williamson, Eynon, & Potter, 2020).

The same applies to a second pedagogical operation. Teaching is also about *showing to the newcomers that there is a common world*. As Arendt says, the essential gesture of teaching consists of pointing out: 'this is our world' (Arendt, 1961, p. 189). Educating as a human practice only makes sense if it is about welcoming and introducing the new generation into a world that we share. The concern is exactly not to lock away students in their own world, but to force them out of their private life-worlds, based on their contingent interests (mostly defined by the family, the tribes, the social class, etc. they belong to), so as to show to them that there are other things of worth in the world we commonly inhabit, and that these things can be admired, studied and taken care of by literally everyone. Moreover, as Arendt makes clear, it is important that the newcomers get a chance to become acquainted with what matters in this world, so as to ensure a continuation of this world, which is simultaneously a rejuvenation of it, as the next generation can go on with the world in radically new and hence unforeseeable ways.

Again, for this to happen it seems crucial to draw attention to things in the world in a most physicalist sense (Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2019). When the world only appears on a screen, and when the teacher appears only in a small box while talking through a PowerPoint presentation, this can hardly be called an act of showing, of leading others' attention to a thing we have in common. On the contrary what students experience under such conditions is above all that the screened stuff they encounter is but an element they might need in order to grow as individuals, to get the grades they need and hence to become agents that can make a productive contribution to future society. Students that are forced into this kind of screen-based learning still obtain information about the world that will help them to develop individually and to build a personal and private career and hence a world of their own, but they are no longer given the chance to become exposed to a world, i.e. to our common world.

This brings me to a third fundamental pedagogical operation: *generating attention to things that come to matter to students*. Now, in line with the dominant discourse that defines education in psychological categories, attention is more often than not defined as a fixed and individual feature. Some have stronger attention spans than others, and on average – as randomized controlled trials in laboratory conditions show – students only stay focused for about 15 minutes. This is then often used as an argument for digital education, as digital tools allow much more easily and efficiently for quickly switching between diverse learning activities, which is tailored to the individual student's personal situation and which secures attentive engagement with the course. However, as Citton (2017) has recently argued, we might also conceive of attention in an *ecological* way. This means that attention is not a fixed given and an individual fate, but a capacity that we need to build collectively and to take care

of in common. Hence, being physically together in the same classroom or lecture-hall is a technological condition (in Stiegler's terms) that fosters and sustains attention. When a student is distracted and all of a sudden her peers start jotting down something important that is being said by the teacher, she becomes attentive again, just to give a simple example (Marin, 2020). All this dovetails with the idea that the school should be conceived of as a technology itself, as an apparatus that makes us attentive to things that matter. However, this analysis suggests again that taking classes as individuals at home and with the help of conferencing tools is a highly inappropriate means for school, in the profound pedagogical sense of this word, to materialize.

This connects to the fourth pedagogical operation I want to highlight here, and which is in jeopardy today: *that education also consists of experiencing belonging to a new generation*. As I hinted at above, it seems vital that we literally 'go to school', i.e. that we leave behind the safety of the home sphere and our friends, in order to be gathered with peers and teachers (often people we haven't chosen ourselves) within the confines of a specially developed architectural arrangement. In so far as students find themselves together with and exposed to strangers, and in so far as they are within an unfamiliar place that stands in stark contrast to the coziness of their homes (but which is also distinct from adult society), they are given the opportunity to have a strong educational experience. That is to say, they are addressed as students, and not as singular individual learners with their own singular interests and needs (Lahire, 2008; Masschelein & Simons, 2013). *Only then may they sense that they are the new generation*. In other words: they are allowed to have the experience that school is there not for themselves individually speaking: education is for everyone and for no one in particular (Masschelein & Simons, 2013); the centre of educational attention is not the individual student (let alone the teacher), but the world we commonly inhabit. Again, it is to be feared that the digital tools that are massively employed because of enforced distance education work against having this experience. They literally lock students (and teachers) up in their private spheres and install a screen between themselves and others and the world. This hinders any exposure to that which is alien to their individual lives. Here, screen technology operates according to what the etymology of the word suggests (Agamben, 2017): the screen 'screens off'.

## 7 EDUCATING UNDER CONDITIONS OF "MAINTENANT"

By way of conclusion, I want to add, very briefly, that the analysis presented thus far can be connected to a larger cultural phenomenon, which we could describe, in common with Serres (2014), as a new condition, viz. the 'Maintenant'. Conforming to the strong technocentric perspective defended in this text, Serres too holds that the newest digital technologies that have come to abound in our existences (as a matter of fact, long before COVID-19) –the ubiquitous hand-held digital devices– have brought about a new form of subjectivity. And, I would add, they have caused a new sense of that which counts as real, i.e. as ontologically relevant. Put in an Arendtian vocabulary: they have redefined what the world is, and what our relation to the world is.

The specificity of hand-held devices is that they no longer give us the feeling that we are transported to a realm beyond the screen (as in cinema or television; See Carbone, 2013). The screen of our cellphone doesn't operate as a metaphysical apparatus that confronts us with something beyond. This is to say that the age-old metaphor of the screen-as-window no longer makes sense today. This is because, phenomenologically speaking (Cooley, 2004), in the palm of our hand, where we hold the device, tactile and visual senses completely merge: what we *see* is simultaneously what we *tactically sense* to be ours. Or, as Serres (2014) puts it: we have the direct feeling of having the world under our thumb.

Hence, the only things that count, that appear to be of relevance, i.e. that are meaningful and real to us today, are the things that appear on our screens. For instance, the photograph we take with our own private phone and that we keep there is more important than the Monet painting in the museum we visited. What counts is that we have it in our hand (which in French reads as 'main-tenant'). This comes with a total redefinition of what we understand about reality –and hence about what it means to be inhabitants of a common world. 'Maintenant' obviously also means 'now', and hence what Serres suggests is that the new generation has entered an era in which only the now counts, i.e. what we –as private individuals– possess as images in our hand, what we own here and now. *Reality has become an entirely immanent affair*. If it is true that such an ontological shift has taken place today in the generations of screenagers, this is certainly a challenge to educational thought that wants to pay tribute to Arendt's idea that education is about exposure to a truly common world, going beyond the private sphere of the student's own singular life-world (Vlieghe, 2019).

To conclude, the argument developed in this last section does not come with a principled objection against using and relying on the latest digital technologies. It is precisely an invitation to look for ways to relate anew, in educationally worthwhile ways, to this new condition (Koopal & Vlieghe, 2021). This is also to point to the fact that the digitization of education that we have so easily embraced as a result of the pandemic is a *pedagogical* issue of the highest relevance. If what is (potentially) at stake is a complete redefinition of reality as such (i.e. of what it means that something is real, relevant, meaningful, and hence worthy of attention, study and care), this might come with a complete transmutation of what it means to educate and to be educated (in the broad sense of education as something that exceeds learning). If we care about education, we are, in other words, today more than ever, called on to seriously take up care for the educational technologies we employ (traditional school technologies or digital ones), out of care and love for our common world.

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