

The Role of Education in Constructing the Individual Identity in Internet Era According to the Existence Philosophy

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Abstract

The present study aims to investigate the role of education in developing identity in Internet era and the cyberspace. Today the spread of Internet and the cyberspace and the establishment of information society have created particular arguments regarding the manner of using these technologies. One of the arguments raised is the individual identity in relation to this technology. Therefore this study tries to examine identities in cyberspace through analytical and descriptive method as well as the philosophical inquiry. This investigation is conducted from an existential attitude and based on ideas from existentialist philosophers. The presented discussions revealed that people might adopt multiple identities in cyberspace; that is the individuals might take on several identities and lack a fixed identity. Considering the existential aspects in the field of education could help the development of individual identities, therefore the present study offers some recommendations including raising the individual awareness about "self" and the specific conditions and aspects of cyberspace that differ from those of real life, facilitating and encouraging cooperation, and creating an interactional environment for exchanging ideas about cyberspace experiences and engaging with the real world. Additionally, focusing on "I-Thou" and mutual relationship in the field of education could provide the possibility for mutual and improved understanding of the individual from self. Finally, by valuing the arts in the curricula the educators could facilitate the students' existence and individual identities to flourish and grow.

Keywords

Identity; Education; Existence Philosophy; Internet

Introduction

Nowdays, with the development and influence of Internet throughout the world and the advent of cyberspace as well as the information society, there has been increasing discussions about the manner and amount of using this technology and the potential effects it bears on human life (for example see Floridi,

2009; Zhao, 2005, and Turkle 1998). Consequently, several studies have been conducted in the field of education about the role and effects of cyberspace and Internet (for example see Seery, 2010) indicating the significance of these arguments to the researchers and educators. The studies show an increasing use of cyberspace in the societies (Blau, 2011). Mentioning the Copernican Revolution, Darwin and Freud theories as the sources of great changes, Floridi (2009) referred to the information age as "The Fourth Revolution". He suggested that the existentialist view of people has changed in this age and we are experiencing a non-physical and digital world in the Internet beside the real and material world.

Incidentally, Internet heavily influences the human life and we cannot deny the role it plays in facilitating the communication and accessing the information. Following the concept of "being-in-the-world" coined by Heidegger, Walters and Kop (2009), believed that the transform in the cyberspace is worth considering and examining. It could be said that the term "being-in-the-world" that Heidegger (1996) introduced has undergone changes in two worlds that people are experiencing as real and cyber worlds. In the cyberspace people find themselves in conditions that might encourage them to communicate with various and multiple identities and they might communicate with several stranger others with unknown identities.

Castells (2000) held that Internet leads to the development of new identities through application and imposing power, building a network society, and transmitting cultures. With regard to the wide span of cyberspace, in fact the process of socialization and development of children and adolescents' identities in cyberspace are constructed and influenced by others who are generally unknown. "... for the first time in human history, anonymous and disembodied strangers become important agents of socialization, interacting with youngsters in their homes on a daily

basis, and thereby affecting the formation of their self" (Zhao, 2005, p. 395). As Miller (1995) explained, taking on different roles and identities and shifting between real and cyberspace might lead to instability of identity. Therefore, it could be said that the cyberspace could play a role in the identity construction process. In addition, from a psychological point of view, the individuals' need to be special and excellent and the manner of interaction and communication are integral components of identity. Besides, identity and identity construction process are among the prominent issues considered in the field of education. As a result, the issue of identity construction and the possible effects it receives from the cyberspace is worth examining from an educational standpoint.

According to the discussed points, the conditions of education have undergone changes during the last decades. With the growth of informational sources and the advertisements on the Internet, which affect the identity and personality construction, there is a growing need for a new attitude towards the process of education and the development of identity. Furthermore, existentialism highlights the individuality and individualism and the existentialist philosophers underline the appropriate interpersonal communications and self-awareness. This philosophy focuses on answering the fundamental questions that are central to the philosophy: why do we live? What is our goal in the life? What and how is our relationship with the universe and other human beings? (Gravil, 2007, p. 7). As the existentialist philosophers believe, being in the public and with other people distract human beings from their own specific being and put them in a pathway which leads them toward defining their own being through the public and being with others. The capability of being and staying individual in the mass society could be considered as a success.

The main point is that being affected by the society and public distracts the human beings away from individuality and towards conformism (Flynn, 2006). Two significant elements that influence individual identity include the relationship with other people and being different and unique (Castells, 2000; Brown, 1999), that are addressed by the existentialist philosophers. The existentialist thinkers highly emphasize the individuality (for example see Kierkegaard, 1959; Heidegger, 1996) and they also focus on the authentic relationship that is mutual and is the ground for human growth and excellence (for example see Jaspers, 1955; Buber, 1970).

Time and place are among other factors that play a

role in identity construction and are considered from an existentialist point of view as well. According to the presented discussions, this study investigated the identity construction process in the cyberspace with regard to the ideas of existentialist philosophers. Therefore, this study examined the identity conditions in the cyberspace and the role of education in individual identity construction from an existentialist attitude. Accordingly, the present study addressed first the concept of identity and the conditions that affect identity construction in the cyberspace. Second, in line with the philosophical teachings of existentialism about human beings' existence, individuality and the concept of relationship, this study examined the conditions and commitments of education in the construction of individual identity in the Internet era and growth of digital technologies.

Method

This study applied a descriptive/analytic method. As the process of conducting the study first the conditions of individuals in the cyberspace were described and analyzed; then the method of concepts and text analysis were employed in order to analyze the existentialist ideas. In addition, this study used philosophical inquiry (Haggerson, 1991) in which the issues are critically examined and rooted in criticism and clarification. This method focuses on clarifying issues, raising the awareness, offering alternatives and finally enhancing the educational tasks (ibid.). In general, the aim of this study was examining the role of education in identity construction after describing and analyzing identity in the cyberspace according to the existentialist ideas.

Identity

In the discussions around education, identity and individual identity construction are among the significant issues which should be attended in this field. As Vandenberg (2001) mentions one of the main goals of education is developing and constructing the identity. He believes that self-realization is one of the most important goals of education. What does identity basically mean? And how does the process of identity development and construction occur? One of the prominent issues in the field of identity is recognizing oneself from others and gaining a unique identity from others while belonging to the public.

Brown (1999, p.790) believed that identity is related to recognition of the borderline between self and strangers. Rimiskiii (2010) notes that:

“Identity is the state of the individual’s consciousness in which, on the basis of the aggregate set of personal characteristics, one knows oneself, one recognizes the stability of one’s own personality, one separates oneself from the surrounding reality, and one determines one’s membership in a particular social group” (p. 12).

Castells (2000) defined identity as the who of individuals, society, and nation as well as the process of constructing meaning on the basis of a set of cultural characteristics with superiority over other sources of meaning. Hekman defined identity with two contradictory concepts, Similarities and differences, claiming that something or someone has a special identity that means something or someone is like no other in its identity as something or someone, (Hekman, 1999, p. 5-11).

It seems that drawing a borderline between “self” and others is an important point and the individuals should maintain his authentic “self” and identity. Otherwise with removing the mentioned borderlines, the individuals would face an ambiguous and unclear identity and lose their authenticity. Hence, in his definition of inauthentic Da-sein, Heidegger (1996) suggested that individual’s “self” might be dominated and conquered by “they” so that he loses his unique self. It could be said that identity is nothing except what human beings uses for recognizing himself from others and defines his own nature in the light of this identity.

This shows that examining the elements composing identity and what elements and factors affect the construction of identity are considered among the issues worth investigating. As it was mentioned earlier, one of the elements is related to individuality, being unique and excellent. The other important element is maintaining a borderline between self and others while being in the public. And the other intervening elements include time and place. Time is one of the factors that play a role in constructing identity and most of the theoreticians accept that time and place are necessary conditions for identity development and the process of identity construction would be impossible without these two factors. As Hall (1996; p. 301) suggested that, if identity is taken as a kind of representation system, the time and place will be the main coordinate and backbone of this system. Life world and place are significant factors in identity formation and they lead to encounter between human being and world and explain the physical and environmental atmosphere, events, and human life.

Casey (1993) holds that place, with all its limitations, is the condition for being and being in fact means being in a place. On the other hand, the environment, specifically Media, plays an important role in the formation and development of identity which have been investigated by several studies (for example see Hall, 1996).

The other element involved in the process of identity construction is communication. In the discussions about identity construction, it is important to address the social and interpersonal relationships. In this regard, many thinkers believe that identity is formed based on the relationships with others and the life experiences gained through interpersonal interactions. Johnson (1995) discussed that the individual identity is the individual’s relatively enduring perception of his/her own personal nature as well as in his/her relationships with other people and groups that is developed through social interactions during the process of socialization.

Webster (2005) explained that how the individual interacts with other people and how he evaluates these interactions could define his identity. Liu (2010) stated that Identity is always made via a product, words, tools, and interactions with others (p.18). He adds that identity results from facticity of individual’s relationships. That is how other people interact with and behave toward the individual form and affect the individual’s identity (ibid.). The attitudes we maintain toward ourselves arise from the manner of our interactions with other people. Throughout the social interactions with other people we present ourselves to others and when the other people interact with us we manage to know ourselves. When we find out about the how other people see us, we understand who we are and we obtain this understanding from the interpretations and reactions we receive from other people (Zhao, 2005).

On that account, the relationships and interactions that individual has with other people and groups affects their identity construction. Generally, it seems that the individual identity of human being derive from his unique and different nature and on the other hand individual identity does not develop in solitude; rather it could be said that identity is the result of individual’s interactions with others and society.

Identity Construction and Individuality According to the Existentialist Ideas

Although the thinkers and philosophers categorized as

existentialist hold different ideas in some ways and some of them even believe that they should not be placed in this category; they have some fundamental intellectual orientations in common that put these thinkers in the same school of thinking. Existentialism deeply addresses human existence and probes the human being conditions in the world and his interactions with other people. In other words, it raises and answers deep existentialist questions. One of the most significant questions that this philosophy raises is: "who am I?" (Webster, 2003). From an existentialist point of view, the people play an active role in assigning meaning to their own identity. In order to assign meaning to identity the individual needs to face the question: "who am I?". This philosophy also puts emphasis on individuality, authenticity, and the interactions among the human beings.

As it was explained earlier, excellent individuality is considered as the main elements of identity. Farner (2008) explains that the identity of an individual called x is something that x has and makes x an individual. This issue is addressed and discussed by various existentialist thinkers in different ways. Heidegger (1996) discussed about authentic human being and adds that authentic human being is someone who preserves his own being and does not follow others and public. Other thinkers including Buber and Jaspers paid specific attention to relationship and interaction among human beings. Kierkegaard (1959) believes that human individuality is of greater significance than his species. Kierkegaard writes: for in the animal world "the individual" always less important than the race. But it is the peculiarity of the human race that just because the individual is created in the image of God "the individual is " above the race " (ibid., p. 187). As a result, it could be claimed that human perfection lays in his individuality. Kierkegaard regards press as an instrument for destroying individuality because it prevents individuals from thinking independently for themselves. In his opinions, press forces people think in the framework defined for them; in other words, it is the press that think for people (Flynn, 2006). Nietzsche suggested that each individual has a unique individuality and is a unique miracle and this absolute uniqueness is related to the uniqueness of his being (Nabais, 2001). "Nietzsche sees individuality in a manner that is understood and constructed by every individual and every individual develops his own pattern" (ibid., p. 142).

In his explanation about the relationship between

Dasein and the others, Heidegger states that humans do not recognize himself from others by immersing in the communications with others: "The others does not mean everybody else but me-those from whom the I distinguish itself. They are, rather, those from whom one mostly does *not* distinguish oneself, those among whom one is, too" (Heidegger, 1996, p. 111). He added that being in the world for human being means "being with"; that is human being shares the world with others. Hence it could be said that the interactions with other people constitutes part of Da-sein: "On the basis of this *like-with* being-in-the-world, the world is always already in the one that I share with the others. The world of Da-sein is a *with-world*" (ibid.). He also added that: "we are also using the term *Mitda-sein* as a designation of the being to which the existing others are freed within the world. The *Mitda-sein* of others is disclosed only within the world for a Da-sein and thus also for those who are *Mitda-sien*, because Da-sein in itself is essentially being-with" (ibid., p. 113).

In general, being with others and being in the world make Da-sein possible in Heidegger's point of view. Da-sein could be merely understood through dwelling in the world that necessitates sharing with other similar "beings" (Mul hall, 2005). Heidegger used the word "falling" for elaborating on the characteristics of Da-sein in the world and states that human beings experiences falling (in the world) every day. Mutual interactions and reactions are considered as the natural characteristics of Da-sein. In these interactions, the individuals could either interpret the world for themselves or follow the public in their interpretations.

Buber and Jaspers are among the thinkers that specifically emphasize interactions. Buber (1970) believes that human beings develop and grow through interactions. He defines two kinds of interactions including "I-Thou" and "I-That". He introduces "I-Thou" relationship as an authentic and real relationship and underscores the interactional nature of relationship. In this kind of relationship both sides have mutual effects on each other and both are in the same level with none trying to dominate the other. In fact, mutual interaction could be attained in the "I-Thou" relationship. "I-Thou" relationship, unlike "I-That" relationship, is not unidirectional and requires the participation and cooperation by both sides. "Thou" faces "I" and they encounter in a direct relationship; therefore, the "I-Thou" relationship involves choosing as well as being chosen and it is both active and passive. Martin Buber regards the relationship among human beings not as a human

being dimension but as an existential reality in which human beings find existence, evolve, and, make themselves authentic. Although he defines real life as the encounter of human being with others; he accepts that this does not mean immersing in others and losing their unique individuality. Jaspers calls human being a relational creature whose being takes on meaning in the interactions with others and human being (Jaspers, 1955). He talks about the concept of existential communication which requires specific conditions. He argues that existential communication necessitates happiness, mutual understanding, asking questions, leaving conservatism aside, avoiding taking dominance over others, unlimited clarification and avoiding misleading.

What Jaspers explains about communication is related to the real relationship that he calls existential. "Having experienced existential communication, my sense of shortcoming in the communication I have realized in existence [i.e., the non-existential mode] is the sting that will arouse me for the deeper existential communication." (Yare, 2005, p. 42). Jaspers holds that existential communication has specific features in different conditions and it takes a unique form in each condition so that it is not possible to extract a pattern for it (ibid.). Furthermore, he reminds us about avoiding dogmatism and having humbleness when discovering the reality during the communication.

Art and Interacting with the Real World

One of the issues that Heidegger addresses is art. Heidegger compared human and art and suggested that as human being does not merely involves being human and the art work is also something beyond merely an object. Human being is a living being plus, human being by nature and primarily is not a living being in the world; rather existence in the world is his fundamental status. Human nature is something beyond merely being human. Human presence is rooted in his existence; that is staying away from animal existence and maintaining the openness of being. The art works are an object plus too. Therefore, the art works are not merely representations of things. They make possible a world where beings with a variety of characteristics could have existence. That is a kind of openness and revealing the nature and truth of the objects; rather than a mere representation of them (Glendining, 2001). Heidegger added that works of art creates a springboard from which "that which is" could be revealed, and then he indicated that the environment primarily appears through the art works;

for example stones or rocks become stones and rocks (ibid.).

Art and art works could provide the background that is necessary for explicit representation in the world. In fact, Heidegger did not refer to using the art techniques but a kind of confrontation with the world, a poetic existence, and passionate residence in the world; in fact, human being creates an artificial world by applying new techniques. The artificial world gradually extends and it approaches human soul which makes it capable of becoming destructive. The art works pick out an ordinary object not even noticed by human being and provide this object with a world which brings it out of the usual state and gives it a being so that this being enters the human awareness. As a result, it could be claimed that the art works by nature involve awareness and wisdom (Madadpour, 2005).

Seemingly, in contrast to the virtual world that is a shadow of the real world, objects takes on reality in the field of art which is even more real than the real world. Because the art works maintains a kind of clarification and attract human attention to the world, they might raise human awareness. Consequently, for the human being who is living in the virtual (or cyber) world, or the digital human being, the art is capable of serving as an instrument raising his awareness about the real world and being and "being-in-the-world" which is, in Heidegger's ideas, the fundamental state for human being. In this way, art creates a world of realities which opens up the possibility for encountering with the real world; the possibility not offered by the digital and cyberspace through the computer monitor. In this fashion, human being could gain an improved understanding of his being and identity through increased awareness about the real world and his own being.

Identity in Cyberspace

As one of the modern life reality, cyberspace is achieving a significant place in the human life. People spend a part or most of their time in cyberspace for different purposes and needs including entertainment. With the emergence of social network such as Facebook and online chatting, it seems necessary to add the concept of "being-in-the-cyberspace" to the concept of "being-in-the-world" by Heidegger (1996). It appears that today human being has two worlds and his being is divided to real and virtual beings. The dashes that Heidegger uses in his concept shows that Da-sein could not be separated from the world.

(Webster, 2003). Apparently, nowadays the cyberspace constitutes a part of Da-sein and adds a particular type of being to the being of Da-sein. Digital technologies are complex phenomena that draw a new kind of human being and digital media is the new hidden curriculum that teaches children and adults with a new kind of knowledge, understanding and practice (Adams, 2012). For that reason, identity in the cyberspace might differ from that of real world. "The digital self is constructed solely through online interaction without the intervention of nonverbal feedback and the influence of traditional environmental factors" (Zhao, 2005, p. 395).

Obtaining information from Internet has specific conditions and expansion of the cyberspace as well as the abundant advertisement Websites makes it difficult to recognize useful contents from non-useful data that takes on considerable importance for children and adolescents. Along the same vein, Rimskii discusses that Internet could affect people in different ways:

"The information found on the Internet is so varied that users are able to find whatever is most in tune with their interests. In this regard, the information environment of the Internet shapes certain qualities of identity of each of its users via the procedures by which the information is selected, participation in the formation of values and the exchange of information with others, in commentaries, keeping blogs, diaries, and so on. Internet users may feel that they are in complete control of what information they get from it or create on it." (Rimskii, 2010, p. 26).

Hence, this abundance of information seems to bring about destructive effects for identity.

The other discussion that is raised regarding identity in cyberspace recommends that identity in cyberspace takes on multiple, indeterminate, and fluid forms. The cyberspace is an environment in which a person could assume and pretend various identities; therefore Turkle (1998) called this type of being as multiple, unstable, and continuously developing self. He believes that in these conditions the human "self" is fluid and multiple and which is far from stable and unique. It could be even claimed that identity in cyberspace is characterized with fluidity, instability, and lack of durability; the factors that might result from the particular features of communication in cyberspace. Cyberspace provides the possibility for the individuals to simply adopt multiple identities through online chatting, emails, and other facilities

that Internet offers.

In the cyberspace there is no stable "self" with center and essence and each individual is capable of choosing various identities (Walters and Kop, 2009). This new and emerging phenomenon might create problems for the human beings in real world that are rooted in the multiplicity and instability of individual identities. This individual reminds us of the concept "Dasman" that Heidegger proposed. As Heidegger explains Dasman lacks a "self" and in fact he is others; or in other words he is lost in "their selves" and maintains no particular individuality.

The other issue that should be mentioned is the anonymity in the cyberspace which is another feature of being in the cyberspace. That is, in the cyberspace the individuals can remain anonymous and their presence in the social networks and virtual communications can be established by multiple identities and they face no limitations in expressing their ideas and beliefs. In such conditions, the individuals can say and hear whatever they like without being identified and known by others. In this virtual environment, where the individuals might lack a clear and true identity, the anonymity might be valued because it helps the people to express their feelings and affections with no limitations and free from social constrains.

Although the phenomenon of fake and multiple identities might be common in the cyberspace, it creates contradictions for individuals when they enter the real world. They might encounter difficulty expressing the same feelings, ideas, and beliefs in real communications that leads to frustration and creates problems in recognizing and identifying the reality. Anonymity also leads to other consequences including lack of commitment, and weak and destroyed internal controls such as feeling guilty and ashamed. The effects that anonymity brings about for behaviors create a kind of "deindividuation" which means the individual is not regarded as "individual" any more and his real identity is not identifiable. This deindividuation prevents the individuals from self-observation and self-evaluation and inhibits the mentioned internal controls (Christopherson, 2007). The anonymous identity in the cyberspace means lack of responsibility and commitment that is somehow escaping from the reality. In fact, anonymity, adopting multiple identities, and lacking stable and clear identity are considered as specific features of cyberspace.

The other feature of cyberspace and the conditions

that this virtual environment creates for the identity is that it lacks two main factors, time and space, that play significant roles in identity construction. In fact, in the place loses its meaning in this environment. Dreyfus (2009) states that human presence in place and time of events and being concerned about them is part of human experience that is removed in virtual experience. Appadurai (1996, p. 147) held that Internet compacts time and place makes the national and local borders penetrable so that the social communications expand progressively and go beyond the national borders. This way, the link among various societies with real and specific place decreases significantly. In the virtual environment of Internet the individuals are placed out of geographical limitations and time (the history of societies) which affects their identities. Heidegger suggested that human has no existence beyond and out of the world because their existence is connected and there is an unbreakable unity between human being and the world (Stewart and Mukunas, 1990).

Cannatella (2007) defined a relationship between being and place and added that the place where the individual situates is a fundamental factor in establishing comprehensive and deep relationship with the world as well as the basis for understanding human existence. He explained that the manner of understanding the surrounding world and cooperating in that world depends on the place and gaining a deep and comprehensive experience of self requires the physical presence in place. In addition, there is a common belief that the locations and places cognitively or emotionally help us to create a fundamental element of phenomenological self and they are basically factors intervening in our relationship with the world and a scale for our existence. We construct ourselves through creating space and place and then obtain most of our interactions from our experiences in places and our links to places and living in a place determine a part of our being in the world. Thus, it seems that the cyberspace could change the type of being for human; being-in-the-world changes to being-in-the-virtual-world. Being-in-the-world involves a comprehensive being, being in the place and time with the body, interaction, and communication with surrounding environment.

When existentialism talks about human falling to the world, the world is considered with all its realities, other human beings, natural realities and etc. But the virtual world and being-in-the-virtual-world differ

from the real world and lack many aspects of human communications. As it was discussed earlier, Heidegger believed that understanding Da-sein is possible through being with embodied others and being-in-the-world and living in the world. But being and living in the virtual environment and cyberspace is a different experience from that of real world with different characteristics including the compactness of time and place and the disembodiment. In Floridi ideas (2002), when the world takes on a disembodied essence, the nature of the physical world that holds various objects such as trees, cars, and etc. assume a virtual nature and the sensory experiences, including the sense of touch, are placed within the virtual framework. Beyond the virtual framework, the objects and individual are capable of relocating and they are ideally unidentifiable which bring about changes in time line and present, past, and future.

The other point that is worth mentioning is the communication of human with "others" in the cyberspace. "Others" who are present in the cyberspace and virtual environment generally differ from "others" in the real world. First, "others" in cyberspace mainly stay unknown and anonymous and their real identities might be unclear to us. Second, the virtual communication is not comprehensive with the necessary physical and situational conditions required for real communication. The "self" in cyberspace is a "self-in-relation" [with others] but the others in this type of communication are the "generalized others" (Kasket, 2012). In other words, the others in cyberspace are somehow all or none. In his discussions, Heidegger talks about the fascination of Da-sein by the public and explains that Da-sein is engaged in and obsessed with everyday life. Many scholars believe that this issue reaches the highest possible point in social networks in the cyberspace (ibid.).

In addition, the kind of being in the cyberspace differs from that of real world in other ways. "Digital beings can either endure forever, without any change, or disappear instantly without leaving a trace. Digital-beings have two contradictory possibilities simultaneously: eternal endurance and instant vanishment" (Kasket, 2012, p. 256). The same discussion of omitting of time is also raised here and the "being" is a kind of being that could be called as "arbitrary being" which could be either temporary or permanent for example, the Facebook profile of an individual could resist and stay forever even after his death. The concept of "being-in-the-world" and the

concept of “being with” that Heidegger (1996) introduces underline the importance of communication with others. But the communication in the online social differs from the communication in real world and the “being with” others experienced in real world might not occur in the cyberspace. In fact, “Digital-beings are actually part of the world in which the Da-sein can dwell and reside.... ‘being together’ does not mean physical proximity... other...[digi-]being-in-the-World-Wide-Web would be another authentic mode of Da-sein’s being-in-the-world” (ibid., p. 257).

The last point regarding the presented discussion is related to the features of communication in cyberspace that is among the significant issues to be addressed. In “face-to-face” communication, the human being experience a comprehensive communication with others characterized with non-verbal, gestures, and postures as the main components. But the conditions are totally different in the cyberspace. “Differing from face-to-face interaction where verbal exchanges are sustained by the presence of nonverbal behaviors, face-to-device interaction in telecopresence is characterized by the absence of the corporeal body, a phenomenon known as “disembodiment.” (Zhao, 2005, p. 390). In the real world, communication among individuals always contains a nonverbal component, even if the basic information is transmitted in verbal form. In human communication, nonverbal information makes it possible to impart a more precise meaning to verbal messages and to interpret their content more accurately. Communication on the Internet deprives users of the nonverbal component of communication, with consequences that are far from unequivocal. In particular, communication on the Internet can distort the meaning of messages; there is more opportunity to manipulate the consciousness of those who receive information sent by some user. (Rimskii, 2010, p. 26).

The Internet users construct their identities by means of internalizing elements they obtain from Internet; from the attitudes, perceptions, judgments, beliefs, clichés, evaluations, preferences, interests, life styles and etc. (ibid.). Traditionally, the process of constructing “self” involved the interactions between public and personal domains. The personal domain, which included family, teachers, and etc., was geographically limited with a high degree of commitment and mutual trust. The public domain

involved Media and the social atmosphere that it encompasses Internet as well. In the public domain the negotiation atmosphere necessitates incorporates interpretation and correction. The individuals encounter with the conditions such as being known and confirmed that could provide a background for their development. But the Internet which is related to the public domain includes fragile and stable groups established on the basis of temporary interests rather than committed values (Seery, 2010). Literally, although Internet and the cyberspace might resemble real community in some ways such as communicating and exchanging ideas with others, the conditions it create differ from those of real world and community that facilitates human development and identity construction.

Jenkins (2004) reminded us that identity is based on continuity and continuity takes on meaning over time. This time continuity of the identity construction is captured in the frame of history. Jaspers argues that the technological progress and hence the constant changes destroy the peace and unity of traditional societies and lead them toward fragmentation and dispersion. He explained this phenomenon by comparing community and society. Community is developed and formed over the time and through historical evolutions and it maintains specific traditions, customs, and a clear past; hence it is unique and different from other communities relating and referring to its past frequently (Jaspers, 1963). The human individual in the community finds individuality through communication and sympathy with others. Strictly speaking, in community being means sympathy and coordination; that is the reality of individual. But in the society becoming a member of a group entails missing individual characteristics (ibid.). We could easily find the illustrations and examples of societies in the cyberspace and online social networks; an atmosphere in which despite the fact that the individual communicates with others, it does not seem that such communications do not play a supporting role in the process of identity construction and producing individuality because there is no history and its unity that is characteristic of the community. In general, it could be claimed that the cyberspace and the conditions that it provides might lead to multiple and fluid “self” which is more probable for the children and adolescents since they have no fixed identities yet. Additionally, the communication with other that plays a principal role

in the process of identity construction takes a new and specific form that is far from that of real world.

Existentialist Education

As it was mentioned before, identity gains influences from various factors in the cyberspace that might be destructive and disturbing to this process. Therefore, education, as one of its main responsibilities, should establish conditions which result in improved identity construction. Today individuals spend increasing amount of time in the cyberspace missing the real and face to face communication and these electronic communications with dangers such as cheating, deception, and etc are replacing mutual trust that could be found in real communication (Walters and Kop, 2009). In such new and emerging situations education assumes a critical role in helping the development of individual identity, raising individual awareness, exploring and criticizing the cyberspace and its consequences. Attending to the existentialist dimensions could be useful and constructive not only in this regard but also for other issues which is summarized in the statement "being human means having existentialist ideas" (Broudy, cited in Vadenberg, 2001, p. 265). Today and in the Internet era this appears to take on significant importance. The role of existentialist education in dealing with students' authentic existence gains greater prominence with the expansion of cyberspace and virtual world. This study recommends that education could play an effective and active role in improving the process of identity construction and growing authentic individual in the Internet era in three ways: promoting awareness about "self" through expediencies from real place and community; facilitating and developing mutual communication (I-Thou); taking into account the role that art plays in raising awareness and identity construction.

Developing "self" Awareness through Experiences from Real Place and Community

One of the issues addressed in existentialist education is raising individual awareness about self and the conditions of individual existence which is called intensifying awareness, that requires achieving knowledge and cognition about "self". Teaching methods that will pursue this goal should have specific knowledge of self (Morris, 1996). The fluid and unstable, or in other words multiple, "self" that were discussed earlier might lead to identity crisis. Consequently, education can play a leading role and

promote individual awareness regarding the identity issues; that is to say the role of education is to raise individual awareness about his "selves" that grow in the cyberspace and should be placed in one real and single "self". Education can complete and criticize the social "self" in the cyberspace (Seery, 2010). Completing and criticizing the multiple "self" could be achieved through the physical and immediate public spaces that provide the possibility of a unique experience of stability and continuity. The cooperation with a group of individuals in the classroom in real place and time creates the developed and real communications which could not be found in the cyberspace (ibid.).

As mentioned earlier, Internet is part of the public domain and encompasses fragile and unstable groups formed based on temporary interests lacking the real world commitments and values. Consequently, these virtual groups and the virtual society do not offer an appropriate and constructive context for human growth and development. Moreover, as discussed earlier, the cyberspace is a society lacking history and identity which does not facilitate the construction individuality of "self" and development of individual identity. Jaspers (1963) recommended that we should awaken the *Zeitgeist* in the children and believed that this goal could be achieved through everyday life, social interactions, the manner of speaking, and communicating with the teachers' personalities. If the individuals are obsessed with the cyberspace, they would be deprived from this positive and constructive condition. In the same way, the virtual education, or electronic learning, is criticized for reducing and removing the real life and face to face interactions. In other words, it could be said that in spite of the advantages that electronic learning offers, it is not capable of totally replacing real education done in real place and classrooms. Education in real time and place that necessitates interactions with other individuals in the same place is one of the potential conditions that could help the development of identity. As a result, strengthening the social groups, establishing appropriate relationships, exchanging experiences in real social environment, and, "being with others" are necessary conditions for the individuals to related to the community as Jaspers recommends. As such, by increasing the group activates, cooperation, and interaction for exchanging ideas in the real place of classroom we could approach the mentioned ideal goals. The individual presence in real time and place and the face to face interactions and communications

enrich the experiences that raise individual awareness regarding oneself and others and the realities of life and it could facilitate the process of identity construction.

The existentialist education should raise the question "who am I?" in the individuals. Webster (2005) believes that children should search about this question. Following Noddings, he states that the existentialist questions should be the backbone for curricula. Particularly, in the present conditions with the development of information technology this statement assumes crucial importance. suggests that we should encourage the children to ask themselves this question that: "what personality should I have?"; rather than: "what rules and regulations should I follow?" (ibid.). By the way, raising individual awareness and explaining the human conditions in the world and society could be mentioned as responsibilities that education should fulfill.

The existentialist teachers make an attempt to stimulate the students' knowledge, instead of transferring knowledge to students' mind; so that they adopt an evaluative and interpretive attitude toward life and recognize the factors affecting their identity construction (Aloni, 2007). The same goals should be followed for the cyberspace and virtual communities; because exchanging ideas in this regard and encouraging the children and adolescents to share and examine their experiences from the cyberspace could enrich their awareness. One of the other characteristics of existentialist education is encountering the individual with real world and realities of life; since the existentialist thinkers criticize education for merely presenting the desirable sides of life to the individuals (Ozman and Craver, 1995). By entering the cyberspace, the individual is deprived of some of the realities of the real world and even some individuals spend time in the cyberspace in order to escape from the realities. And even most of the games that are played in the cyberspace differ from that of real games in several ways. Because of this fact, education should try to increase the individual awareness and knowledge regarding himself and the conditions of "self" in the virtual space and increasingly relate the individual to the real life.

Improving the Mutual Relationship (I-Thou)

As it was presented earlier communication is one of the key concepts in existentialism philosophy and the existentialist thinkers, who strongly stress individual

and individuality, introduce communication as the essential prerequisite for the development and growth of human existence. For Jaspers communication is not only the general background for flourishing the human authentic existence, but also the precondition for expanding the human natural capabilities. Nevertheless, as Jaspers and other existentialist thinkers point out, not any communication facilitate the development of human existence. For example, communication and being in the Web space do not resemble the "being with" that Heidegger had in mind, because being in the cyberspace is mainly being with strangers and even being with familiar people lacks specific aspects of real life communication.

When Heidegger (1996) talks about "they" and "dasman", he means the aliens and anonymous others who affect Da-sein that nowadays could be found in cyberspace more than real world. Clearly, many physical postures and gestures and the physical space that are characteristics of real life communication play a prominent role in the process of communication and, on the other hand, people adopt arbitrary identities in the cyberspace and perform roles different from those of real life which reduce the mutual trust and respect present in "I-Thou" relationship. In Buber (1970) opinions, the direct communication entails a comprehensive participation; a condition that is merely found in the cyberspace. Buber adds that humans change to "I" through "Thou" and the communications events develop and break down which gradually improve our permanent awareness of ourselves.

Evidently, a close relationship could be defined between my awareness and "Thou". Due to the expansion of cyberspace and Internet, people might spend a great deal of time in this virtual environment and miss part of the interactions in real world. Accordingly, the "Thou" that forms their "I" would be a virtual, unreliable, and mostly alien "Thou" which exposes the development of real "I" to serious dangers. Walters and Kop (2009) argue that the discussions in online groups are not sufficient for investigation and criticism and there is a need for face to face and personal communication. Evidence even shows that some people have many friends in the cyberspace; in some cases about one and half million friends (ibid.). It is predictable that most of these friends are strangers whom the individual does not know in offline communications; hence the interactions with them would not be the same as the real interaction with "Thou". The "I-Thou" relationship helps the

individual to experience an open, comprehensive, and multi-dimensional encounter with the humanity of other people (Aloni, 2007).

In the field of education, by establishing the "I-Thou" relationship between teacher and students we could take a step toward the evolution of students' existence and it leads the students to gain a better understanding of themselves. Vadenberg has suggested that we should set a context in which the existence flourishes in the framework of teacher-student relationship (Ozman and Craver, 1995). Since education is supposed to help the students recognize and reveal their talents, and thus constructing themselves and becoming "self", it should create the "I-Thou" relationship between teacher and students which could be pursued as a major educational goal toward an enriched identity construction.

The Role of art in Developing Awareness and Identity

As discussed, the identity construction could be achieved with the evolution of human authentic existence. From an existential point of view, art is among the main factors that reveal human existence and could facilitate the identity development. Art can lead to the expansion and development of the world and offers a kind of awareness to the human that saves him from ignorance toward his being and surrounding. This awareness toward the world and being and the personal encounter with the real world help him to gain an improved understanding of being-in-the-world which could increase awareness toward self and existence. Apparently, art is considered as an instrument capable of creating the chances for the personal encounter and close interactions with the real world. Therefore, it seems that devoting greater attention to art is necessary and useful in the field of education. For Heidegger's work of art the true nature of man has been revealed (Kneller, 1958, p. 125).

Because art works involve expressing feelings, emotions, and creativity, it could flourish the human existence. The existential education aims to apply methods in the curricula that are rooted in feelings, emotions, creativity, and the deep meaning of life. Existentialism proposes that working with the objects and instruments expands the world for the individual and human and world reveal each other (ibid.). Education could offer opportunities where students experience the world personally through the art and crafts. It is important for the students to reveal and

share their personal experience by means of paintings and crafts (Morris, 1966). The art of drama and theatre could also be effective in increasing existentialist awareness. Morris (ibid.) believes that theatre is probably the most powerful art in developing existentialist awareness.

Some thinkers suggest that on-line chatting could lead to emotions and feelings and facilitate the construction of "self" due to lacking some specific limitations (Zhao, 2005). But if this is a true claim, the individual, specifically the student in the present discussion, should be able to express his feelings and emotions in the real world. The individual who expresses feelings and emotions in the cyberspace might not be able to do the same in the real world. Art provides this opportunity in the real world and helps the construction of "self" and human identity.

As such, it could be said that including the art in the educational environment could facilitate the process of identity construction. The student who spends a great deal of time in the cyberspace and misses part of experiences from natural and real environment could experience the real world through working with instruments and objects while engaging with art. Art could, on the whole, fill the vacancy caused by the lack of real life experience, creativity, and human existence revealing that occur in cyberspace and finally lead to human growth and evolution and a better understanding of self and the world; all considered as effective factors for identity construction.

Conclusion

Nowadays, the cyberspace and virtual environment expand increasingly and replace part of our real world. And today children and adolescents spend some, or most of, their time in this new virtual world which might endanger their identity construction process because in the cyberspace, real and personal communications are replaced by virtual communications with anonymous ones. Applying the teachings from existentialism philosophy and ideas in the field of education could be a way toward confronting these emerging issues and conditions regarding the identity construction. Since the existentialist thinkers primarily focus on unique characteristics of human being and the interpersonal communications, that are two main intervening factors in developing human identity, the guidelines obtained from existentialism could be instructive and enlightening in the field of education.

Identity in the cyberspace is likely to adopt specific features including the multiplicity of “self”, a tendency to remain anonymous, and elimination of time and place dimensions which are accepted as factors affecting identity development. Likewise, the communications with others, as another key factor, takes a different form in the cyberspace and lacks some aspects and features characteristic of real life communications. Therefore, integrating the existentialist education and teachings, such as attending to the “I-Thou” relationship and developing individual awareness regarding his existence, could produce positive and satisfactory results for the identity construction process.

The education can contribute to the identity construction and existence growth for children and adolescents by making students aware of their unique existence, the realities of virtual “self”, and creating the opportunities for mutual “I-Thou” communications between teacher and students. The students achieve a richer and deeper understanding of their place in the world through participating in real life experiences and group work and develop their identity by real and appropriate communications and sympathizing with real others in real place. Besides, incorporating the art into the curricula is another way to improve awareness and maintain personal and direct contact with the real world and it results in the rich the process of identity construction.

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