"The world's fundamental misfortune," Sören Kierkegaard writes, "is ... the fact that with each great discovery ... the human race is enveloped ... in a miasma of thoughts, emotions, moods, even conclusions and intentions, which are nobody's, which belong to none and yet to all."

*On The Internet: Thinking in Action* raises the following questions: Can we leave our vulnerable bodies while preserving relevance, learning, reality and meaning? Does life on the Internet achieve Plato's dream of overcoming space and time as well as body?

*On the Internet* is one of the first books to bring philosophical analysis to questions such as whether the Internet can solve the problem of mass education, and bring human beings to a new level of community. Dreyfus argues that the Internet deprives users of essential embodied human capacities such as trust and involvement in shared local concerns; and he believes that 'interactive' education leaves out the shared moods and risks that make learning possible.

Drawing on philosophers such as Sören Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the latest book by Hubert Dreyfus examines in detail the various perspectives of the 'Net through the "eyes of a philosopher." I will return to this point later in the review, where we will briefly see how this is done in *On the Internet*. 
In his criticism of "life on the Internet," Dreyfus argues that the more one lives one's life through the 'Net, the more one loses a sense of what is relevant. So in spite of its initial attraction as a source for finding information, Dreyfus believes that those who live on the 'Net face the problem of finding the information one they are seeking.

Dreyfus also considers the question of distance learning. He admits that distance learning might be economically attractive. However, he suggests that because this type of learning substitutes telepresence for real presence, it leaves no place for risk-taking and apprenticeship, which play a crucial role in all types of skill acquisition. Furthermore, without a sense of bodily vulnerability, one loses a sense of reality of the physical world and one's sense of trust in other people. Finally, he says that while the anonymity of the 'Net makes possible experimentation, the overall effect of the 'Net is to undermine commitment, thus depriving life of serious meaning.

The book is divided into four chapters:

In "The Hype About Hyper-Links," Dreyfus discusses the hope for intelligent information retrieval and the failure of AI. He shows how the actual shape and movement of our bodies play a crucial role in grounding meaning so that loss of embodiment leads to loss of relevance.

In "How Far is Distance Learning from Education?" Dreyfus discusses the importance of mattering and attunement for teaching and learning skills, the phenomenology of skill acquisition, and the need for imitation in apprenticeship. Without involvement and presence we cannot acquire skills, Dreyfus says.

The chapter "Disembodied Telepresence and the Remoteness of the Real" describes the body as a source of our causal embedding and attunement to mood. Dreyfus discusses how loss of background coping and attunement lead to loss of sense of reality of people and things. (I see something like you, but I don't see you and I hear something like you, but I don't hear you.)

Without physical bodies, people can attain only intellectual competence in skills, Dreyfus says. They cannot proceed further to mastery of those skills, which involves having an intuitive understanding of using the skills in real situations that entail real risks. Without the emotional investment and visceral connections that come only from actually being somewhere and doing something, people lack the commitment to learn as much as they can. Ultimately, physical presence and action are the only ways we have to acquire skills, learn what information is relevant, know reality, and have meaningful lives, he says.

The final chapter, entitled "Nihilism on the Information Highway: Anonymity vs. Commitment in the Present Age," discusses in detail Dreyfus's view that meaning requires commitment and real commitment requires real risks. According to Dreyfus, anonymity and safety of virtual commitments online lead to loss of meaning. This chapter of the book is likely to be of interest to many educators.
Dreyfus challenges the popular view of the Internet as a global classroom in which anybody and everybody can participate in a process of so-called "hyper-learning." The Internet promotes risk-free anonymity and idle curiosity, both of which undermine responsibility and commitment. Dreyfus considers how the 'Net would promote Kierkegaard's two nihilistic spheres of existence, the aesthetic and the ethical, while repelling the religious sphere.

In the aesthetic sphere, the aesthete avoids commitments and lives in the categories of the interesting and the boring and wants to see as many interesting sights (sites) as possible. In the ethical sphere, students would reach a "despair of possibility" brought on by the ease of making and unmaking commitments on the Net. Only in the religious sphere is nihilism overcome by making risky, unconditional commitments. Dreyfus concludes that only by working closely with students in shared situations in the real world can teachers with strong identities, ready to take risks to preserve their commitments, pass on their passion and skill to their students. In this shared context students can turn information into knowledge and practical wisdom.

Professor Dreyfus translates Kierkegaard's account of the dangers and opportunities of what Kierkegaard called the Press into a critique of the Internet so as to raise the question: what contribution - for good or ill - can the World Wide Web, with its ability to deliver vast amounts of information to users all over the world, make to educators trying to pass on knowledge and to develop skills and wisdom in their students? He then elaborates Kierkegaard's three-stage answer to the problem of lack of involvement posed by the Press - Kierkegaard claim that to have a meaningful life the learner must pass through the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious spheres of existence - to suggest that only the first two stages - the aesthetic and the ethical - can be implemented with Information Technology and 'Net, while the final stage, which alone makes meaningful learning possible, is undermined rather than supported by the tendencies of the de-situated and anonymous 'Net.

This fascinating discovery shows that the Internet has profound and unexpected effects. Presumably, it affects people in ways that are different than the way most tools do because it can become the main way someone relates to the rest of the world. Given the surprises and disappointments through the 'Net, Hubert Dreyfus explores the question, what are the benefits and the dangers of living our lives online?

This work is a clear discussion of the promises of the Internet. Can it really bring humanity to a new level of community and democracy and solve the problems of mass education? Dreyfus, a writer on philosophy and technology, brings a philosopher's eye to bear on an issue that affects us all. Drawing on a diverse array of thinkers, he draws parallels between the Internet and the birth of a media-obsessed public in the 18th century and the Enlightenment quest for a universal, abstract knowledge. He shows how the Internet ignores essential human capacities such as trust, moods, risk, shared local concerns and commitment. He also uses compelling examples from the experience of teaching to show what "interactive" education leaves out.
On the Internet is a sharp and stimulating discussion of the promises of the Internet. Going beyond the hype of the cybercrowd, Dreyfus, a celebrated writer on philosophy and technology, asks whether the Internet can really bring humanity to a new level of community and solve the problems of mass education. Ethical people might use the Internet to make up and keep track of their commitments but would be brought to the despair of meaninglessness by the ease of making and unmaking in any domain. Only in the religious sphere is nihilism overcome by making risky, unconditional commitment. But the 'Net, which promises a risk-free simulated world, would tend to undermine rather than support such a commitment. Hubert Dreyfus also argues that learning a skill requires the kind of commitment which is undermined by the anonymity of the Internet and that education at its best depends on apprenticeship which is impossible in cyberspace. According to Søren Kierkegaard, "The human race became afraid of itself, fosters the fantastic, and then trembles before it."

Hubert Dreyfus's critique of hyper learning provides much food for thought and raises the level of the discussions amongst concerned educators and technologists.

Following Dreyfus, I have pointed out very effectively, what 'interactive' education leaves out. This awareness should inform the planning and use of educational technology. However, there is another aspect to interactive technologies that needs to be included in the discussion. An interactive (networked) environment allows a person to reveal some aspects of himself/herself to a large community, which could not be done as effectively in a less interactive environment. In this sense, the new information and communication technologies involve an expansion of scale and scope over which one might exercise (assert) one's humanity. That is its key appeal for me. Clearly, the book discourages any blind faith on the technology of interaction. - Arun Kumar Tripathi