

*Untitled*

- by Bhuvinder S. Vaid: 6-May-2006

On this past Thursday evening, I had the privilege of attending a lecture by Michel Serres ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michel\\_Serres](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michel_Serres)), a noted French Philosopher and intellectual. However, attending a lecture by someone so well regarded in academic circles without a familiarity to his writings seemed a waste, so I found myself reading up upon this work Thursday morning. It was during this exploration of his work when I came across a few of his thoughts on the nature of academia, namely, the institutionalized and static character of dialogue between differing disciplines. The phrase which stuck out in my mind, which was attributed to his work, was the 'discipline induced ghettos' of academia.

Later that evening, after the lecture and during the wine and cheese reception held in his honour, a former professor of mine, offered to introduce me to his good friend Michel Serres. As I joined the discussion, I was introduced to Michel as an education graduate student, the only education student whom chose to attend the lecture. The discussion quickly turned to what I was doing there in a group of philosophy, environmental science, French and communication faculty/students, and I offered the weak explanation of being one drawn to interdisciplinary discussions. Perhaps it is the French in general and their flare for language, or Michel in particular, but he pointed out that I must be *la putain d'universitaire* of education circles. Not knowing what this was, I nodded and smiled, to great laughter in the group. One of my communications colleagues translated for me and informed me that I had just been labeled an *interdisciplinary whore* to the great enjoyment of Michel. Seeing the uneasy look upon my face (should I be ashamed or proud of this label) Michel began with an explanation in

French, which was translated by one of the organizers: the love affair is at the centre of the academy, starting first with one's own work and becoming the life-long relationship which sustains and nurtures us...but eventually, the need arises to take a mistress! The passion, the fire and the taboo nature of these extra-disciplinary affairs provides new vigour and excitement to the mundane realities of our chosen discipline...Mark Antony and Cleopatra, Romeo and Juliet, and Tony and Maria (West Side Story) are all examples of the interdisciplinary love affair...

Only a Frenchmen could say it so eloquently! ☺

But how is this important and why have I chosen to share this charming story in this reflection? I would like to propose that these love affairs do not just take place amongst members of disparate disciplines, but also within particular disciplines. Taking the ghetto of education as the neighbourhood within which this reflection will traverse, I would invite the reader along as I wander the streets.

As I walked to the 809 seminar on Friday 28-April at BCIT, I found myself wondering aloud why we were meeting at BCIT and not SFU. As I walked away from that evening's seminar, I found myself wondering aloud what exactly I had just taken part in. Beyond the BCIT context – how they do things at BCIT – was there any reason to be situated at BCIT? It seemed as though all we had needed to participate in this session was an active internet connection – so couldn't we have stayed at SFU? Moreover, where was the marriage of theory and practice? Stephan had mentioned, from the onset, that BCIT was about doing – that was the purpose of the institution. So does that mean a discussion of *what* we were doing and the underlying reasons was unwarranted? The one time the discussion turned to an academic piece of scholarship (“Innovations in Online

Learning: Moving beyond No Significant Difference. The Pew Symposia in Learning and Technology”), there seemed to be this artificial need to consummate the research to a practical example – regardless of its worth – gratification for the sake of gratification. I have to admit that this reality has constantly plagued me since entering grad school – the casual nature with which theory is pushed into the back alleys and repeatedly accosted by practical technology usage is chilling. This brutally casual propensity toward the coupling of theory and practice within education and technology, with its uneven distribution of power and control to practice is tantamount to a type of discursive rape! It is enough to make one wary to walk the streets alone, to engage in discussions which are noticeably and outwardly theoretical for fear of being dragged from the main thoroughfares and having one’s chaste nature compromised.

The question must be asked: How did the idealized and romanticized notion of the love affair between theory and practice denigrate into this current reality of the *battered academic syndrome* (BAS)? I think this is a situation which has frustrated me for quite sometime, as I have been unable to provide a suitable answer or remedy. However, as I have reframed this question along the lines of a traditional courtship and/or relationship, I have begun to understand that the expectations of the two potential partners – theoreticians and practitioners – to the impending coupling is very different due to their respective histories. While the theoretician has come of age along the pristine avenues of constant dialogue and discussion amongst peers, the practitioner has matured on the other side of the tracks, where the reality has meant that they have been the experts imparting knowledge to the novices – there is very little in the way of dialogue in this world – but

rather a necessitated monologue to ensure dominance and control. The free exchange between equals is placed in stark contrast to the realities of dominance and control.

The value practice places upon dialogue and discussion is at the heart of BAS. The abusive character of the eventual relationship is uncanny, and can be witnessed in comments such as:

- Why should I value what this author (academic) is writing – where are their credentials?
- What does the tenured instructor have to add to the current discussion taking place in the seminar?

These types of comments, which have littered the ground during my wanderings through grad school, have only recently been subjected to a discursive analysis. What have I discovered? Both types of comments are invariably indicative of the latent and legitimate notion of a power dynamic in the learning process. In a traditional non-graduate level classroom, there exists the authority of the instructor over the content and thereby over the learner. When an instructor from this type of learning paradigm enters the seminar and dialogue based environment of a graduate level classroom as a learner, there can be a need to seek out, expect or impose a comparable type of authority. Contrary to the traditional graduate level classroom however, this is not an equal (or at times even fair) power dynamic, but one in which a particular perspective is privileged with the role of authority over all other perspectives. The traditional role of free and open dialogue in academic discussions is sabotaged from the outset, for the privileged notion of, need for, and expectation of authority which is projected by the practitioner is transposed upon the graduate school experience. Gone is the hand-in-hand walk into the sunset which sees

our two lovers, theory and practice, live happily ever after. Instead what we see is practice grabbing hold of theory and dragging it, kicking and scream, calling for help, into the darkness of the night. As bystanders, our actions, or rather inactions at trying to stop this brutal assault, damn us with the complicity of the abuser and make us more susceptible to eventual abuse.

So how do we work to address BAS and root out its ugly nature from academia? I have no easy answers to this endemic problem. However, I think I have stumbled upon a starting point, a way to explore this abusive relationship and perhaps begin the healing process which may allow for a healthy happy affair to once more resume. As academics and academics in training, we need to ask ourselves what is the difference between Grad School and Grade School. When we gain a firmer and more confident understanding of the unique character of Grad School which sets it apart from other learning environments, perhaps we can move forward and help the theory – practice relationship regain a healthy balance.

*Disclaimer: The preceding was a work of pseudo-academic reflection influenced by my current readings in feminist theory, critical discourse analysis, Michael Foucault, Michel Serres and Romeo Dallaire's account of the Rwandan genocide (Shake Hands with the Devil, 2004).*