

Catch only what you've thrown yourself, all is
mere skill and little gain;
but when you're suddenly the catcher of a ball
thrown by an eternal partner
with accurate and measured swing
towards you, to your center, in an arch
from the great bridgebuilding of God:
why catching then becomes a power--
not yours, a world's.
- Rainer Maria Rilke

Education 809: Master's Seminar in Education and Technology
Reflective Essay

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Introduction

Intertextual (adjective):

Relating to or deriving meaning from the interdependent ways in which texts stand in relation to each other

(From <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/intertextual>).

First and foremost, this reflective essay is about the intertextual nature of personal learning and growth. Hence the first task of this essay will be to tackle the question which has arisen in the reader's mind, "what does this mean?" As I sat down to try to formulate how I would attempt to share my experiences in the Education and Technology (E&T) program over the past two years, I was struck with the very real anxiety of not knowing how best to go about this task. For while I may have come to some conclusions regarding the role of technology in teaching and learning, my very personal journey to achieve these conclusions is marked with numerous obstacles and pitfalls which not only caused me to pause in many instances, but also resulted in my changing of direction repeatedly – and not always toward the same goal. However, there was one constant throughout this journey which provided me some guidance: my history through the program and the artifacts which became seminal to this history. But it is important to impart that this was by no means a static history, for at each obstacle and pitfall, I found myself revisiting and rethinking every artifact up to that point when trying to come to some greater understanding with which to move forward. This is how I have chosen to define the intertextual nature of personal learning and growth – the constant influence of past history on current understanding, and the revisiting and rethinking of past history during times of challenge.

Once I came to understand that this essay as well as all of my experiences in E&T were of an intertextual nature, I was struck with my second point of anxiety – how best to organize

this essay to impart my journey and address the four major topics called for in the goals of the portfolio? Could a chronological account or breaking the journey down into the four major topic headers do justice to all I wish to achieve? If I chose another format of organization, could I reasonably expect a reader to follow my argument as I weaved back and forth between artifacts and the four major topics? The simple answers to these questions were: a chronological account would be ineffective by itself; using the four major topics as headers would be ineffective by themselves; and weaving back and forth between artifacts and the four major topics was far too burdensome on a potential reader.

I have therefore developed the following format for the remainder of this essay which should help the reader better understand how I am building my arguments. First, I will address each artifact individually, moving chronologically from one to the next without an in-depth discussion as to their importance to the four major topics, but rather providing context as to my motivations and constraints when producing them – this should provide a level of understanding to the reader when analyzing the artifacts. Second, the essay will turn to each of the four major topics for discussion in the portfolio. However, each topic will be organized with what I believe were my initial understandings, how this initial understanding changed as evidenced by a particular artifact, and where I currently believe I have arrived in my understanding. Finally, I will conclude with the personal shift in my ontology of self as learner.

Chronology of Artifacts

During the course of graduate school at SFU, I have come to appreciate that much of the experience of learning and the production of academic work is in fact dependent upon the context of the moment – for it is the context which influences a particular belief. I therefore felt

it was absolutely necessary to share with the reader the contexts from which my artifacts emerged.

My first artifact was actually produced before my acceptance into the program, but I felt it important as it best represented some of my naive views toward technology and the learning experience. At that time, I was working for the Department of Family Practice at UBC as a Program Assistant and had been tasked with preparing the Department's undergraduate program for the influx of a greatly increased number of new students and the commencement of video conference enabled lecturing. It was this new video conference initiative which immediately struck me as being an important innovation which I had an interest in studying, for I had discovered that many of the questions I was asking as to its effectiveness were relatively unknown and understudied.

The second artifact I have chosen is actually a confession of sorts. For having completed EDUC 851 with Janet McCracken in the spring previous, I found that I still did not have a complete understanding of a mind tool and its implications on the learning experience. The iMovie, which was completed as part of a Western Dean's Agreement course at UBC, with a visiting scholar from the University of Toronto, Megan Boler, represented the first time I had consciously used a technology to produce something to organize my thoughts and share a particular view.

The third artifact was a reflection I wrote for EDUC 809 after the EWOB conference in October 2005, but never posted due to my discomfort with sharing these frustrations with my peers and instructors. However, the act of writing this reflection, and its subsequent sharing with select peers had the end result of allowing me to work through many of the feelings of frustration I had felt up to that point in the E&T program.

The fourth artifact represents a shift in my research interests, for having discovered that UBC Medicine was not particularly interested in research pertaining to video conference enabled lecturing, I turned my attention to a curriculum initiative of teaching reflective practices several of the faculty I had worked with were implementing. This represented my first experience with data collection and the role of researcher, as well as my first direct experience with qualitative research methods. The fifth artifact was a reflection I again wrote for EDUC 809 after the completion of a presentation my group gave on socio-cultural perspectives, and represents the first time in the E&T program when I was not working a fulltime job, but rather spending almost all of my time as a grad student at SFU. This was a noteworthy period in my journey through the program, for having been unburdened from my usual 60 hour work weeks, it represented the first opportunity I had encountered where my mind was exclusively committed to what I was learning in my studies and the reemergence of what I then termed “the ah-ha moment” (or moment of understanding).

The sixth artifact was a website I created to represent my portfolio for EDUC 867, Qualitative Methods in Education with Susan O’Neill. During this period, I was also enrolled in a course in the School of Communications with Andrew Feenberg, and found that many of the ideas I developed for the website were vetted during discussions had with my peers in Communications. This was a fascinating period for me in the program, for I was immersed in theories and frameworks of understanding which for the first time I felt totally comfortable within. The seventh artifact was a reflection I again wrote for EDUC 809, but this time with a distinct difference – I finally felt comfortable with my ideas and this reflection simply served to clarify them for myself. Up to this point in the program, I had always prescribed to the idea that I was writing for the sake of an audience, namely, the professor, and often wrote accordingly.

However, this artifact marked my departure from this personal need to please others and the underlying self-doubt in my ideas it created.

The eighth and final artifact is the thesis outline I developed in the spring of 2006 and which allowed me to meet Charles Bingham, my current Senior Supervisor. With the aid of many of the artifacts which came before it and their help in allowing me to expand my understanding of the meaning of technology in a post-industrial society, I began to understand technology as an organizational framework as well as its traditional definition as a tool. The influence technology has on the organization of a discourse (i.e. education, medicine, etc.), and how instructors and learners cope and at time challenge this organization, became the framework for my further explorations and research.

The Role of Technology in Learning

Even before I commenced the E&T program, I felt I had a firm understanding of the role of technology in a learning environment. Technology's primary purpose was to organize information so as to be easily accessible by a learner. There were however, several key flaws, or rather gaps in my understanding at that time. First, if technology organized information in easily accessible chunks to be consumed by a learner, where exactly did *teaching* and *learning* take place? During my experiences with technology up to the commencement of the program, I could not recall an instance where I was being taught by the technology or learning from the technology. Rather, the instructor remained foremost in my mind as being the primary enabler of my own learning. At the time, this was an important realization on my part, for without the instructor-learner relationship, I had quite a bit of difficulty understanding how technology on its own could enable learning. This is perhaps the main reason I chose Artifact #1 for this portfolio, for I now see that when I wrote this letter of intent, my understanding of technology was as a

simple conduit to connect instructor and learner. At no time did the technology itself, through its affordances, ever allow for learning to take place, but rather the relationship between the instructor and learner determined the net learning which resulted. This lack of understanding in the teaching and learning aspects of education became the first obstacles I needed to overcome and will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

My second flaw in my initial understanding was the use of the word *purpose* in my definition above, though the topic to be addressed was the *role* of technology in learning. I believe this to be a noteworthy misuse on my part when I began the program. For in my initial understanding of the *purpose* of technology in learning, I simply accepted the technology for its assigned purpose and never critically interrogated whether it was in fact achieving this ideal. However, the *role* of technology in learning has distinctly different connotations, for it presupposes that there is no definitive relationship of technology to learning, but rather possibilities which may exist in a proper environment.

I made note above that I had difficulty understanding how a technology, by itself, could enable learning. While a discussion of the nature of teaching and learning will ensue in the next section, I feel that Artifact #2 might best represent an example of how a technology enabled my personal learning, and might help situate what I think a potential role for technology in learning might be. As I wrote in the Chronology of Artifacts, at the conclusion of EDUC 851 my understanding of mind tools was incomplete. Not having a background in education, I struggled with just how a particular technology (be it a spreadsheet or even a flow diagram) could help an individual better master a particular topic area. This deficiency in my own understanding plagued me, for I could not see the benefit of a mind tool and therefore the beneficial role a technology could play for one's own learning. However, the goal of the iMovie project with

Megan Boler was to take a particular media representation and redevelop it to share your own personal views on the topic. At first, I saw this project as little more than a manipulation of existing media forms to tell a different story – essentially moving the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle to make a new picture. But as I commenced work on my retelling of the Air India Bombing and its influence on what it meant to be Indo-Canadian, I found my initial ideas shifting into something quite different and new. The straightforward definition of Indo-Canadian I started with quickly took on new meaning as the iMovie software allowed me to move distinct ideas around and insert audio, music and differing effects to create something unexpected and which furthered my existing understanding.

From my initial and incomplete understanding of the role of technology in learning, I think I have gained some valuable insights which have allowed me to better understand that the affordances of a technology are a major factor in enabling learning. From Artifact #1 to #2, I moved from my immediate critique of a technology for its inherent limitations as being an obstacle to the instructor–learner relationship, to a need to explore the possibilities a technology may offer as the determinant factor in assessing its role to the instructor–learner relationship.

The Nature of Teaching and Learning

As I indicated in the previous section, my understanding of the teaching and learning aspects of education was quite limited from the outset of the program. This presented quite the challenge at first, for when my peers provided examples from their own teaching, I often found myself at a complete loss as to how to respond. More often than not, I would return to my own experiences as a student and use these instances as a way to reconcile their teaching experiences with my learning experiences. I soon discovered that while this tactic allowed me to engage in some conversations, I often found myself never fully able to understand the perspective of my

peers as teachers and therefore never able to provide much in the way of insight. I always felt I was learning from my peers and never contributing to their learning, which filled me with a sense of deep shame.

However, these experiences seemed to reinforce my initial thoughts regarding the instructor-learner relationship, for I took on the role of learner in these experiences and had my learning enabled by my peer who took on the role of instructor. This was a problematic relationship however, for beyond the shame I felt for not being able contribute to my peers' learning, I was overwhelmed with a sense that my ideas and thoughts were not only marginal, but irrelevant. Artifact #3 perhaps best describes the effects upon me as I continued to struggle with my understanding of the nature of teaching and learning. Without any clear instances of teaching to draw upon, and the learning I was engaging in being subject to doubt, I grew not only frustrated, but seriously contemplated leaving the program.

As I shared Artifact #3 with a select group of my peers, I heard over and over again that my contributions to their learning was profound, for my perspective, as the outsider, forced them in many instances to rethink their original views. This was something which caught me almost entirely off-guard, for I had not put much thought into the dialogue we as learners and peers were engaged in. My initial understanding of the instructor-learner relationship, which could be seen as an uneven dialogue where the instructor taught and the learner learned, began to move toward a more fluid understanding in which a dialectic existed between teaching and learning.

I firmly believe that Artifact #5 best captures this dialectical relationship. This reflection, based upon my experiences working with Carl and Xin as we prepared for our EDUC 809 presentation on socio-cultural perspectives, represents one of the most taxing yet rewarding experiences of my journey through the program. The negotiated nature in which we addressed

the teaching and learning divide of this topic, which became evident to us all after our first meeting, helped me further expand my understanding of the nature of teaching and learning. From our initial discussions which took on the form of an uneven exchange, where I was in a way *teaching* my group members about certain topics, we moved to a place where I was simply accompanying them on their own exploration of the topics – providing assistance when asked or needed.

When I commenced the program, my understanding of the nature of teaching and learning was limited to say the least. However, through my experiences with peers and several instructors, I have come to see teaching and learning as being a part of an ongoing dialogue. This dialogue has the characteristic of at times being uneven, one voice overpowering another, but all the while being responsive to the other and changing to suit the needs of the occasion.

The Functions and Methods of Research on Learning

I will admit that I had spent little or no time trying to understand the functions and methods of research on the learning experience before commencing this program. This is not to say however, that I had not put thought into the role of research in education. However, much of my initial thoughts centered upon the role of research on teaching, in particular effective teaching methods. I could argue this was due to my interest in video conference enabled lecturing, but the truth is that I usually looked at the instructor-learner relationship and rationalized poor learner outcomes as being due to ineffective teaching by the instructor. Things seemed clear when I commenced the program, for if learners were achieving poorly, fault must lie with the instructor and therefore warrant ‘research’ to determine the cause.

This narrow understanding of the role of research on learning soon began to expand however, for my pro-tem advisor Jan van Aalst, continually challenged me to make my research

interests relevant. With my interest in video conference enabled lecturing foremost on my mind during the first year of the program, Jan repeatedly pointed out that an exploration of the instructor's effectiveness, needed to take into account and start with, the experiences of the learner – 'why is what you are asking important?' was a question Jan would continually challenge me with. As my interests shifted to the teaching of reflective practices in my second year in the program, Jan encouraged me to better understand the learners I was interested in, before proceeding to critique the instruction. Artifact #4 represents this influence, for more than simply being my first instance of actual research, I was put in a position where I had to explore not only the learners' personal experiences, but needed to reconcile this with my experience as researcher. I had never undertaken this type of reflexivity in previous work, but soon came to realize that a researcher absolutely needed to determine where s/he situated themselves in the process of research, before undertaking an interpretation of the data collected. This was yet another humbling experience for I began to see the inexorable links between the hypotheses I formulated, the questions being explored, and my inherent biases toward the collection and eventual interpretation of data. Whether undertaking a quantitative or qualitative research method, Jan's insistence that I understand myself in this process helped me realize that no function or method of research on learning is absolutely neutral, but rather influenced by a multitude of factors, most notably, the researcher.

With this greater understanding, I found myself gravitating toward the qualitative research paradigm and its insistence upon the understanding of context before interpretation of experience. I admit that this type of framework came quite naturally to me, for a part of me could never contemplate researching an experience or phenomenon without an exhaustive understanding of the context of the participants and the histories which had influenced them up

to that point. I chose to include Artifact #6 in this portfolio accordingly, as it documents my exploration of contexts through several differing qualitative methodologies, before the analysis of a particular phenomenon. This entire experience was invigorating, as I began to feel that perhaps my research interests could be best explored using qualitative methods. My desire to understand the learner's journey began to closely mimic my interest in understanding and reconciling my own journey through the program.

When I concluded the last section on the Nature of Teaching and Learning, I used the metaphor of an ongoing dialogue that was always "changing to suit the needs of the occasion." However, the types of changes to teaching and learning that take place to suit the particular needs of the occasion, is in my mind one the main purposes for undertaking research on learning. The functions and methods of research therefore should first explore the context or needs of the occasion, then look to analyze the changes which take place accordingly.

Incorporating Technology to support Teaching and Learning

I will admit that I was not relishing the opportunity to discuss this particular topic of the portfolio, as it represents the one section with which I have the least confidence in my own abilities. While having completed the course work for the E&T program and having gained a greater understanding of the major concepts in the field, I still have trouble believing that I am able to design or evaluate curricula, tools, systems or practices which incorporate technology, for I know I still lack the background of an instructor which I think important when assessing teaching and learning. However, something I have gained through the program is the sense of being a researcher, novice as I may be, and with it a belief that I can critique these curricula, tools, systems or practices along the lines of what is deemed relevant by the current scholarship in a particular field.

Jan was the first person to instill this belief into me, which is why I have chosen to cite Artifact #4 in this section. Through a semester in Field Work, I gained the important ability to assess a particular curriculum and design research methods to evaluate its effectiveness. Artifact #6 also helped me gain confidence in my own abilities, for it allowed me to explore one particular research paradigm within which I was most comfortable. It could very well be that in my particular case, with comfort comes ability.

However, my journey through the program has also allowed me to explore a type of creativity which I did not think possible when I began. As I learned more about the traditions of E&T as a discourse, I began to realize that an understanding of its underlying assumptions was only the first step to my growth in the field. An interrogation of these assumptions seemed warranted as I expanded my definition of technology to include types of social organization. Artifact #8, which is my thesis outline, represents my first steps toward exploring the assumptions which empower technology as a driving influence in not only education, but all facets of modern society. I believe this is an important part of my growth in the program, for not having found a framework which allowed me to explore the underlying contexts and motivations of technology in education; I began to realize that perhaps social theorists might be able to provide a framework which could be borrowed to provide a unique insight on the discourse of E&T.

As I indicated previously, this section of the essay is perhaps the most problematic, for it attempts to link ability to artifacts which impart my comfort with particular ideas. However, I stand behind my assertion that with greater comfort comes ability. My demonstrated understanding of certain key methods and concepts is what provides me with the belief that I can

look upon instances of technology being incorporated into teaching and learning, and provide sound critiques as to their effectiveness.

Ontology of Self as Learner

When I first contemplated applying to the E&T program at SFU in spring 2003, I was working fulltime for the Faculty of Medicine at UBC as a web and content programmer. Though the position I held was at times interesting, I generally felt quite unsatisfied as there appeared to be few challenges and even fewer chances to engage in meaningful dialogue with my peers. One late Friday afternoon, I called the Director of the E&T program at SFU, Kevin O'Neill, expecting to leave a message. However, to my surprise, Kevin picked up the phone and we spoke about the character of the program for almost an hour. One bit of advice Kevin imparted to me which I subsequently attempted but repeatedly failed to fully appreciate was 'the need to understand that many who graduated from the program did not necessarily gain what they had initially expected'. Since that initial conversation with Kevin, I have revisited this piece of advice many times and only realized recently that I did not understand the most important part of Kevin's words: 'what they had initially expected'.

For myself, when I entered the program I brought with me many of the expectations which had carried me through my undergrad. Namely, I had a strong sense that I would be learning *from* experts in the field of E&T. I never realized that I might be learning *with* experts in the field. This was an important element of my growth in the program, because for too long, I held on to this out-dated model of learning from others, especially instructors, in some type of spoon fed fashion. The realities of grad school have taken me quite some time to grasp, for I never fathomed that while there might be others to turn to for support, in the end, this is an extremely personal journey.

When I wrote the reflection for EDUC 809 which is Artifact #7, I believe I was beginning to understand the solitary nature of grad school. This particular artifact, though submitted to Cheryl Amundsen, was written purely for me as a way to provide not only greater clarity for my ideas, but also to exorcize some lingering demons.

However, as I commenced the concluding section of this essay with some of Kevin's words, I feel compelled to finish on the same note. Earlier this summer, Kevin and I met in the Highlands Pub at SFU to discuss my future academic interests, as well as for him to sign off on my thesis outline (Artifact #8). During the course of our discussions about the thesis outline, I repeatedly found myself explaining my motivations for making certain decisions, trying to elaborate on my underlying assumptions and feeling at times apologetic for my departure from the norm. Finally, Kevin cut me off and said "Beev, you don't have to justify your motivations to me or anyone else." I have had quite some time to ponder these words since they were uttered, for I think they represent the full circle in my understanding of myself: having commenced the E&T program thinking this entire experience would meet some predetermined expectations of learning from others; and now finishing, knowing that in the end, only my personal expectations for myself are relevant and will determine my future achievements.