Traveling the Road of Research: Stories of Teaching and Technology

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Abstract

This autobiographical account relates the journey of becoming a critical teacher researcher.. Through critical refection and analysis, the cultural, historical, and social contexts of research, teaching, and technology use are described as lived experience. Rich narrative accounts exemplify personal and professional experiences before and during the professoriate in a tenure track position.

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It is a Sunday evening in March and I am watching the first segment of a four part series entitled, *The Irish in America: The Long Journey Home*. The scene opens with the music of a Celtic flute, the camera panning the rocky, yet lush country-side of Ireland. The camera then focuses in on an elderly gentleman. He stands directly in front of the camera, the fog-covered mountains behind him. He is speaking Gaelic. The voice-over of the narrator translates, "*The Irish are old hands at telling stories. They like talk. They're word hungry. Their oldest stories in Gaelic can take days in the telling*." My husband, David Majewski, sitting next to me on the couch, turns to me and says, "I wish someone had told me that before I got married…"

I enjoy listening to a good story perhaps more so than telling one. Apart from the shared experience, I find myself drawn into the telling itself; the tone of the speaker's voice, the cadence, the sound of particular words, certain expressions, analogies, metaphors, and alliterations. There is a scene I love from the movie *Harvey*, in which Jimmy Stewart, as Elwood P. Dowd, explains, "At first Dr. Chumley seemed a little frightened of Harvey, but that gave way to admiration as the evening wore on. *The evening wore on.* That's a very nice expression, isn't it? With your permission I'll say it again. *The evening wore on.*" Like Elwood, I savor words. And in hindsight, I realize that many of the stories I listened to, the words I savored, were through music.

As a teenager, I immersed myself in songs from British bands, American folk rock, country, blues, jazz, and the "oldies" of the fifties. One of my greatest joys was discovering that the record album I had just purchased included lyrics. With lyrics printed in stanzas on the album's jacket, I no longer had to painstakingly drop the needle, over and over again, in certain spots on the vinyl, attempting to discover words that I failed to uncover from listening to the vocalist; words that ultimately represented a moment in my life or a moment yet to come. Words like a screenplay, interspersed with pictures, making movies in my mind.

The soundtrack of urban schools

The line for those waiting to pass through the high school metal detector spills out onto the sidewalk. It is half past nine and the heat of the morning sun is strong. "I bet ya it's going to be 100 today," I hear one of my students say as I walk along the curb, balancing with one step in front of the other, passing by the crowd. Many of the students waiting to enter the building are holding Smartphones, iPods, or Mp3 players. As I walk, I can hear music reverberating through their ear phones. Some students dance in place while others sing aloud. A few simply mouth words into the steamy air. Still others stand against scaffolding poles or street sign posts, with eyes closed, listening to the melodies, to the stories, perhaps making movies in their mind.

In a 1971 debate between Noam Chomsky and Michel Foucault on the origins of human nature, Chomsky states:

> A fundamental element of human nature is the need for creative work, for creative inquiry, for free creation without the arbitrary limiting effect of coercive institutions, then, of course, it will follow that a decent society should maximize the possibilities for this fundamental human characteristic to be realized. That means trying to overcome the elements of repression and oppression and destruction and coercion that exist in any existing society, ours for example... (Cook, 2010)

The urban classrooms in which I have taught and the schools in which I now work, possibilities for creative work and creative inquiry are rarely maximized. Budget cuts have removed art and music from the curriculum. Engaging in interdisciplinary aspects of the arts rarely occurs inside secondary classrooms. In fact, the physical makeup of the rooms themselves lacks the colorful displays of student work, or the inviting décor of drawings, reproduced prints or photographs. In reality, many urban classrooms are even void of basic resources; working electrical outlets, window shades and chairs. The creative experiences found within New York City schools are starkly different from what we experience in our lives outside of schools.

Outside of school, music is played from radios in the home or in the car and on personal players while on the train and the bus. The walls and shelves of homes are often speckled with images. I think about my own home; in addition to framed photographs or prints, I have areas in which I have taped photographs alongside quotes and snippets of text from newspapers or magazines; even printed email messages. Not a traditionally decorated space but the mixed media collage is comforting to me; small representations of my life.

As a middle and high school teacher, technology enabled me to bring music and photography into my classroom. I would create music montages on cassette tapes to be used as a prompt for students' personal narratives. I would bring in personal photographs, photocopies of pictures, and magazine clippings to inspire the start of stories in creative writing journals. And, I would videotape students' original interpretations of "classic" novels, poems, and plays. This type of teaching enabled me to know my students, learn from them, and help create a learning community in which sharing of knowledge was encouraged and valued. The community created then directly gave way to sharing and discovery. Semali & Kincheloe (1999) speak of encouraging teachers to seek out and analyze indigenous knowledge that may be salient to students. I was blessed with students that were brave enough to share information about their families, the way they acquire knowledge, and the various traditions that they practice in their lives.

In my current position as an assistant professor, I guide teachers in the design of curriculum that integrates technology in a way that positively impacts their instruction, and their students' learning. This positive impact underlies the term "effective use." I draw from Chomsky's concept and urge teachers to use technology as a way to maximize possibilities for inquiry, thus overcoming the elements of repression and oppression through a fundamental human characteristic; the need for creative work. I believe that effective technology use, grounded in criticality, can be just the vehicle for our liberation.

Teaching with technology

Technology as a tool for teaching and learning offers users opportunities for creative work. Although access was limited, technology in my Bronx middle and high school classrooms offered me and my students a means for creative expression through digital pictures, video, interactive applications, multimedia presentations, and hyperlinked text that opened new possibilities and clarifications.

My graduate students that are teaching in urban schools also use technology, the Internet in particular, to build creative fields, online communities for knowledge sharing. Through web pages, blogs wikis, digital flyers, and shared presentation applications, collaboration, creativity, their students' learning flourishes.

However, despite the positive potential of technology use, technology itself is not the panacea for the ills plaguing urban schools. The way in which we use the technology, and view technology, is fundamental. Technology in schools can be used as means of repression and surveillance. It can be used to perpetuate the status quo; an aid in scripted and narrowed curriculum, and the deskilling of teachers. Conversely, technology such as digital stories, blogs, and interactive presentations, can also serve as an alternative medium of knowledge production, offering students an opportunity for collaboration, critical reflection and creative inquiry about issues that are often left out of current classroom dialogue or accounts that have been typically silenced or marginalized.

And, even though the use of filtering in school buildings may impact the possibilities for knowledge sharing and production (O'Hara, 2014) an awareness of the greater power structures which have negatively impacted classroom practice is essential. The power laden layers are thick and concealing; they need to be stripped away so that we can undo what the culture of schooling has created. In school we are trained to be a "student." Likewise, the culture of schooling trains teachers in dominant discourses and practices. Shor (1992) suggests, "Teachers and students alike need to desocialize from the dominant influences on their development" (p. 203).

Effective use of the Internet and web based applications can challenge the status quo, changing the unjust social context, and move present understandings to a more complex view that includes transformation and cultivating of the intellect.

Reflection, action, transformation

It was my doctoral advisor, Joe Kincheloe at the Graduate Center, CUNY, who introduced me to the work of Paulo Freire. Joe helped me put into words my own work as a teacher. He helped me give voice to my lived experience (van Menen, 1990). With Joe as my mentor, I began to look at my teaching in a different light. I began researching instructional technology beyond my personal experiences. I began to make sense of the overlapping and interconnectedness of teaching and learning with technology use as well as the positionality of technology at the micro, meso, and macro levels. In particular, finding correlations and contradictions with what happens at the classroom level, in the world of the teacher and student. Through my research, I began to make parallels and contrasts between what I read and what I did.

Alvesson & Sköldberg (2000) talk of text as what is interpreted, not necessarily facts or data. The facts emerge as a process of interpretation, as meaningful signs that influence the pattern of interpretation. The text itself must be placed in a "con-text" (p. 62), or an external weave of connections, with author's work being read within. I began to interpret my teaching with technology and also literature related to instructional technology. And, I began to use critical and social theory to explain the "facts" and concepts I uncovered and discovered.

Teacher as researcher

My research employs Joe Kincheloe's critical notion of "bricolage" which, in the context of teacher as researcher and knowledge worker (Kincheloe, 2003) draws from a multilogicality that values diverse perspectives and insights. Moving beyond a unidisciplinary approach, I use Kincheloe's overarching concept as a rigorous interdisciplinary approach, and incorporate the theoretical and philosophical with sociocultural theory, critical theory, and critical pedagogy. I

make use of differing methods of inquiry such as autoethnography, hermeneutics and phenomenology, in addition to narrative inquiry.

Although my scholarly writing is narrative, my narrative is more than story recording. My narrative accounts serve a significant means for the sharing and the construction of knowledge. As a critical teacher researcher I feel it is imperative that I create multiple dialogues reflecting diverse truths.

Drawing from autoethnography, a cultural accounting of my experiences as well as the experiences of others, I reflect with an awareness of the non-neutrality of my words and aim at engaging "with suppressed aspects of history" (Pratt, 1991, p.40).

Critical qualitative research

My qualitative research is a story; a journey unto itself. As my story unfolds, I have uncovered more than I originally anticipated. When I began my doctoral work, telling a story about the classroom was my comfort zone but I was naïve to think that is was where the narrative would rest. The process of teaching with technology, the process of learning with technology, the relationships that exist within that locality, the resources used for instruction and the decisions intermingled within educational structures are complex and fluid.

As I enter my tenure year in the professoriate, I reflect on how my research has evolved. My phenomenological approach begins a dialogue that discounts "one truth" about the act of using technology as a learning tool. Through hermeneutical analysis, I continue to tell stories that reflect multidimensional act(s) within cultural, historical, and social contexts. My research has moved me beyond the urban classroom to societal frameworks and neoliberal educational policies. And, in the process of making sense of technology use at the micro, meso, and macro levels, not only has the story of instructional technology evolved, but my personal story has as well.

As a critical teacher researcher and more specifically through the research and the writing I have accomplished as an assistant professor, I have gained insight into the forces that have shaped my identity and consciousness. Through personal transformation, I continually develop a critical ontology; new forms of self awareness, the recognition of power's complexity in ideologies and discourses and the conceptualizing of my emergent self as ever changing as I interact with others and the world. My scholarly writing has helped me gain new levels of consciousness and new ways of being. Similar to technology use, this process did not occur in isolation. In this journey I have joined a network of scholars that have introduced me to their own work, as well as the work of others. A new awareness of philosophical and critical perspectives have broadened my perspective and helped to inform my construction of self. I have been introduced, informed, and urged to question issues and concepts that, for lack of a better term, never occurred to me. With Joe as the forerunner, the guidance of others has helped me to develop and exercise critical agency. My sense of agency permeates my research and writing. However, my ongoing development of critical scholarship in the professoriate has not been without challenges.

Publishing critical qualitative research- or perishing

As untenured faculty, one continually walks a tightrope, yielding to what is valued and accepted by colleagues, even if it is in direct contrast to one's own personal and professional beliefs.

As well known, the life of a professor revolves around teaching, scholarship and service. But balance is difficult, if not impossible at times, when focusing on meeting the expectations for yearly reappointment in a tenure track line and attempting to maintain any semblance of a personal life. Of the three areas, the coined phrase "publish or perish" rings the loudest. Writing for me has always been a creative endeavor and multiple administrative responsibilities, the mentoring of students, and the continual stream of ominous deadlines, kill the muse.

Writing within a qualitative framework further complicates things when working with colleagues that draw from a positivistic mindset. My second year in the professorate, a tenured colleague offered me words of ignorance when advising me about my research and publication acceptance rate: "You see your 'n value' is too small…the field will not respond to that...you're not really doing anything." As the words "n value" and "not really doing anything" hung in the air, they furiously collided with autoethnography, narrative inquiry, phenomenology, hermeneutics, bricolage and critical theory. And, with my untenured faculty balancing act center stage, I nodded, feigned acceptance, and drew from a new stronger need to be true to myself and my scholarship. I developed a clear and distinct focus on developing and exercising critical agency—taking a risk by pushing back against the threat of perishing, engaging in reflexive dialogue, and acknowledging my responsibility to the field of qualitative scholarship.

I realized what I was teaching my own graduate students, I needed to practice myself. "Pedagogy is not about training; it is about educating people to be self-reflective, critical and self-conscious about their relationship with others and to know something about their relationship with the larger world" (Giroux, 2011, para.30).

My critical reflection allowed me room for hope in an academic environment that felt in conflict with my own professional and personal beliefs.

> One of the tasks of the progressive educator, through a serious, correct political analysis, is to unveil opportunities for hope, no matter what the obstacles will be. After all, without hope there is little we can do. (Freire, 1992, p. 3)

The narrative accounts related in my research in the professoriate continue. Like scenes from a movie, complete with a soundtrack, new releases continually emerge from the classroom to the national level, as educators feel the impact of the *Race to the Top* initiative, flawed measures of student achievement and teacher evaluation, and the impractical implementation of standardized testing. In all of the aforementioned, technology use for creative work and critical thought has been lost.

From here, where do we go when aiming to make sense of the implications of technology use for teaching and learning in the K-12 classroom? And equally as important, making sense of the implications of technology use for teaching and learning in higher education? An essential part of the professoriate needs to be the incorporation of technology as a means for generating creative fields, fostering knowledge production and critical thought—not only for our students, but ourselves as well.

For faculty in schools of education there are intriguing possibilities for helping our teachers understand the complex relationships related to the use of technology. For example, as educators how might we use the Internet as a transformed public sphere, a place for critical debate, leaving aside the bias and manipulation of the media?

Or how as teacher researchers can we think beyond traditional notions of literacy? What is it like to experience and engage with a text—or more specifically, hyperlinked text? How does the act of reading for information online evolve into an emotional, aesthetic, and intellectual experience?

As teacher researchers how might we begin to use video games as problem solving spaces? And again, what happens when we "read" these games or engage in online activities? What sociocultural situated discourses do we encounter in gaming experiences and how do they affect out notion of literacy?

And perhaps the most hopeful and fascinating are our ideas about "disruptive technologies," a term which refers to innovations that improve a product or service in a way that was not expected by the market. What impact do these technologies have on the "business" of schooling? How can these technologies be used by students and teachers to empower both parties to be agents of educational and societal change? We need to explore the ways in which these disruptive technologies can serve as a conduit for developing a critical consciousness and critiquing the frameworks which impact our lived experiences.

With all of the above there are implications and ramifications but yet possibilities and positive potentials of technology use. The following is an email I received from one of my former graduate students, a New York City school teacher.

Subj:	**Technology update from your past student..**
Date:	10/27/20__ 1:05:24 PM Eastern Daylight Time
From:	Student.s.m.@yahoo.com
To:	kohara@

Dear Dr. O'Hara,

I hope this finds you well. I took your course last semester. I was just emailing to express my gratitude for the lessons learned in that course. I never felt very connected to course work throughout my graduate studies. Your class however inspired me to really push for technology in my classroom. I squashed all the excuses I used to give for why my students didn't use any of the six computers in my classroom beyond simple Word processing and Internet keyword searches. Currently, I am working with a 30k grant from Adobe software for my students to use. They love it, and although it is a daily challenge, I find that the learning that is happening every moment is well worth the upkeep.

Keep inspiring, Teach.

Best,
s.m.

As Freire (1992, 2005) reminds us, transformative possibilities and opportunities can be achieved though praxis; action and reflection. We need to do this through dialogue, criticality, and in solidarity. Teachers need to share their successes, give hope to one another, and inspire one another as we move toward a critical awareness. Together we need to be "motivated by the power of ideas to reshape the world in which we operate, the notion that human beings can become far more than they presently are, and the belief that ultimately the fate of humanity is related to these ideas" (Kincheloe, 2009, p. 34).

The journey continues

My research is a lived experience; I cannot separate who I am, from what I do. I am a teacher and a teacher educator. I use technology when I teach and I teach teachers to use technology in their practice. And now, thorough the use of technology, my qualitative research can be disseminated in the spirit of knowledge sharing and critical thought.

The professoriate has now seen the emergence of digital, open access peer reviewed journals, online professional networks, and publishing houses that include full electronic production of a book to be purchased by libraries and individual for use on eBook readers. In the coming months I will be preparing my tenure portfolio. I am fortunate to work at a university that utilizes electronic portfolios. My work, once reflected in stacks of paper, tucked inside tabbed card stock folders, and bound by metal spiral rings of a plastic binder, is now digitized.

In this online space I will demonstrate excellence in teaching, scholarship, and service through uploaded documents, screenshots, and photographs, embedded video and hyperlinked web resources and journal repositories. My online tenure portfolio serves as a creative field; one in which I share knowledge, my critical reflections, my lived experience—a technology integrated story of a critical teacher researcher.

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