

Autobiographical Inquiry at the Time of the Internet

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My timing in the history of technology has put me at the front of a flood wave. Technology has not crashed on me leaving me behind like older generations nor has it always been around like those younger. I started my quest for education right as it started its bid in education and I have found myself intertwined with how to use it ever since. Although at times limited I have found strength in autobiographical inquiry and through it I have found an answer about technology that I already knew.

Most young people pack themselves off to college to figure out their lives. I was no different, except that I had no idea that when my parents dropped me off in that tiny dorm that the direction of my life was not up to me. I was placed at the timeline spot in our history when everything changed, and I had to follow.

I was in college when Facebook started. Back then it was reserved for those of us with fancy college addresses. We were the test group. I was in college studying photography when one year they turned the lights on in the darkrooms and rolled in computers. We put down our hand-me-down Pentaxes and picked up shiny new Canons. I was in college when the first iPhone came out – I remember clearly as my friend's father worked for Apple and sent her one. I was in college when everything changed.

It all changed, and I embraced it. College provides an opportunity to try new things, the difference for my classmates and I was that it was new to everyone. It was a playground of technologies no one had seen before and we tried them all out like kids in a candy store. I tried every digital camera and recording device our school had to lend. I talked (typed) daily with my high school friends who were at different universities across the East Coast. I texted my roommate questions even when she was at her desk a mere 11.5 inches from me. I graduated with a job in a photographic field that was rapidly recycling its stock of film and taking digital reps out to lunch daily. I wore two pagers and (for its time) a smart phone.

I had embraced it all. Until one day I sat in my apartment in Sacramento California and put aside my laptop. I had been chatting to four different people across the globe. But I had no one, not a single friend, where I was. No actual human contact. For the first time I realized I was lonely in the real world.

So I left it all behind. I went and worked and lived on a sailboat. I spent two years sailing around the Pacific Ocean with different groups of college students. They came to research the ocean but found a much greater message in being unconnected. We'd sail for weeks without seeing any land. No phones or Internet, no news or TV, just actual people. Actual people studying and learning without any distraction. Those years became the defining moments and cornerstones in my philosophy on technology in education and in life.

After those two years I decided I wanted to stop moving. I also wanted a bathroom all my own and a bed that I wouldn't be thrown out of during storms. So I became a science teacher. And once again I found myself timed perfectly with change.

While iPhones came out during my college career it was their Internet ability and thus their mass prevalence in student backpacks that started when I first got my classroom and list of eager students. A fight against handheld distractions has defined my years of teaching. I would argue with my students that if the people who built cars, went to the moon, cured polio and smallpox, and invented the computer all learned off a blackboard then they could to.

A good teacher uses experience more than any other tool in their classroom. And my experience was to avoid dependence on technology. I had seen first hand the type of learning done when surrounded by it and the type of learning done when there wasn't a single electrical object around. I found that in the presence of technology the student was gone. Sherry Turkle, in a 2008 article, talks about the MIT cyborg and how "they were learning to walk and talk as new creatures . . . and yet they were fading away." Her emphasis is on the loss of the human with the influx of technology was right inline with mine. In the 2010 PBS documentary *Digital Nation* an MIT student is interviewed and talks about how everyone is so busy that if you are talking with someone and your phone buzzes its ok to answer it. Sherry Turkle in that documentary noted that students truly believe multitasking is not only ok but also effective.

I have fought with many a student about THEIR ability to multitask. Prior to watching *Digital Nation* I had read articles about the work Professor Clifford Nass was doing at Stanford and had always found his research to back up my assertions. He has been working on research into ability and productivity of multitasking and has proven that people who attempt too many things at once with added distractions are less effective than those who do one task at a time. I have been telling students daily that it actually takes more time to do two things at once than to finish one and then finish the other. Multitasking takes more time and the product has lower quality.

Do I think we should all then live as JRR Tolkien's Hobbits? No. Similar to Howard Gardner's theory about the virtue of Truth, that even though we can't fully understand it doesn't mean we should go to the other extreme and abandon the idea entirely; I begin to feel there can be an understanding between technology and education. There needs to be an acceptance of its validity in certain realms and an acceptance of its flaws in others.

Once such moment of its validity came to me while watching a class on a field trip. My own students were running amongst the river rocks collecting samples and playing with crayfish. This class all had their iPhones out. At first I was appalled. But then their teacher handed out portable probeware instruments and each kid plugged them into their phones. In just a few minutes they were collecting data from the water, rocks, and soil and instantly analyzing it through graphs that bounced from their phones to their teacher's. While my own students would make those same graphs it would be days later in a computer lab with data that was probably contaminated from bus rides spent stuffed in bags.

From that day I still banned all phones in my classroom but I began to research uses like I had seen. I began to agree with Steven Johnson's statement where in a 2012 article for Discover Magazine he claims "People who think the internet is killing off serendipity are not using it correctly." I feel there can be an

appropriate use for a student with a phone. While I often find myself purposefully losing my smartphone and yearning to be somewhere quiet, since coming back to the real world I have taken back up my generation's technological life. I use a computer and a smartphone daily, both for classwork, jobs, socializing, and entertainment. According to the Pew Internet survey¹ I am an Ambivalent Networker. This puts me in the ranks of those who use technology seamlessly in their daily lives but can often find it intrusive. For me, there needs to be a balance and I feel the same for students.

The answer is not in multitasking but in utilizing. Those students at the river were utilizing their phone as an amazing technological device. They weren't also on Facebook or texting. They were engaged with one thing and that one piece of technology brought their learning to a level much above my students. It is then up to me as the educator to not shun the technology but, as put in the introduction to Digital Nation states that we need to "empower students . . . to enable them to navigate a broadband world."

My plan for future use of technology in my classroom follows very similarly to the narrative scholar and teacher James O'Donnell put up on his own website. Although the article, *New Tools for Teaching*, chronicles his advances only up to 2001, it is his optimism and intrigue about what could be done next that I find promising. Again I link to Gardner and his definition of Truth: that it is the pursuit that is important. The significance should be in the pursuit of new technology that can be utilized to enhance and engage.

I take a pause to wonder if my personal battle with technology through autobiographical inquiry has truly led me on a proper search. There are many limits to this type of search for knowledge and once viewed from outside perspectives gaps can be seen. Mary Catherine Bateson chronicled one type of inquiry that goes beyond the limits of simple personal reflection in her book *Peripheral Visions*. In it she lauds the strength of inquiry through international experience. While I have had the opportunity to move around quite freely in search of ways to use technology there are many that cannot. And without the experience reflection tends to become very narrow-minded.

Another type of inquiry that leaves a much larger example of a gap in the practice of Autobiographical Inquiry is Practitioner Inquiry, the mainstay of Vivian Paley's research. Paley sought her answers to education while teaching and her pupils were more a source of answers than test subjects for her own theories. She stated in her 1991 book *The Boy Who Would be a Helicopter* that: "My habit of drawing invisible lines between the children's images is, I think, the best thing I do as a teacher." While learning solely from an autobiographical stance leaves gaps in reaching answers there are many uses for the practice.

While my personal quest into the appropriate use of technology has run the gamut of total emersion to total removal I feel I would not be able to settle out in the middle if not for personal reflection. Autobiographical inquiry has its strength in guiding someone to answers they already had. Inquiry through Ethnographic

¹ <http://www.pewinternet.org/Participate/What-Kind-of-Tech-User-Are-You.aspx>

Participant Observation has, at its core, the same structure as autobiographical. Michael Carruthers stated about fieldwork in the 1996 *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology* that: "Writing [once back home] is as much a part of fieldwork as any choice passage of travel or startling encounter". It is the idea that we take the experiences and contrast them with our personal experiences later once alone. It is this type of inquiry that led me to my beliefs on technology, answers I had all along, and through further autobiographical inquiry I am sure any technological changes will meet and be reevaluated.