NextGeners bring vibrant life experiences, risk taking, and creativity into the classroom. They demand to be included in the ‘why’ and ‘how’ of learning. Teachers bring a love of learning, empathy, content and theoretical perspective that serves as a setting for how the classroom should operate. This book addresses two concerns arising from this dichotomy. First, teachers may have a theoretical perspective but not explicitly embedded in practice. This needs to change. The author argues that NextGeners understand personalized viewpoints but often miss that teaching and learning are grounded in a process of historical interactions. Second, NextGeners are social beings living in and defined by social media and the web. We must invite both to share how to construct shared understanding and build a learning community that makes sense in our emerging paradigm.

This is about self-knowledge as well as knowing others, and for me the two are interconnected on many levels. The acts of knowing are also the fabric of learning and teaching, and teaching is an act of many parts. I argue that if you are approaching a career in education at any level from the primary perspective of imparting knowledge and being the subject matter expert, you have one part of the puzzle. Another perspective is to see your role as a caring, loving person who interacts with and guides students as they set the pace of learning.

This set of ideas offers you the view that all of this is becoming increasingly intertwined. The world, at least the Western world that we inhabit, has always been changing and in flux. There have been relatively short periods in which matters appeared stable but that has usually been a matter of perspective. Today our challenges are the same: how to know ourselves and how to know the world around us. In the last century and a half, public education has been given the role of answering these two questions and while one can argue that the task was misguided, there is little doubt that for some education has been the vehicle to enhanced self-knowledge, to grand discoveries in science, and to entrancing acts in all the arts stretching our imaginations. Those goals remain unchanged; what has changed is the ability to access information and that calls for an in-depth consideration of the notions of teaching and learning. Our information societies, and there are many, are often personal and relative to our immediate interests, such as where can I buy a product, find a factual answer, or check on what a friend is doing.
NextGeners
NextGeners

Pedagogical Considerations

Bryant Griffith
Texas A&M University – Corpus Christi, USA
She looked at the map on the bed. It’s as if that map they gave us is nothing to do with the actual experience of being here she said. They’d been wandering about getting lost the whole day even though they had the map the hotel had given them. Things that looked close by on the map were, when they tried to get to them, actually quite far away; then they’d try to do something that looked like it would take them a very long time to do and they’d find themselves arriving almost immediately.

— Ali Smith, How to Be Both
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I want to thank Sense Publishers for permitting me to use parts of previous books I have published with them. Those texts outlined a theoretical perspective that is still worthy of consideration. My purpose in this book is to take those concepts and to further argue that understanding is personal and not fixed: we ought to feel an obligation to share and negotiate meaning and its application.

My close friend and collaborator, Tom Rose, has made the artwork for this book possible. Once again, I wish to thank him for his continued support.
CHAPTER 1

WE THINK

I know that I wasn’t born to be a writer. I learned to write through hard work. I’m sure I’ve devoted the ten thousand hours Malcolm Gladwell prescribes, and I can honestly say that I’ve never worked so hard at anything. As a sick kid I tried to make personal sense of the world. I wasn’t concerned with sharing ideas or how to craft elegant arguments. I spent my time reflecting on how I was feeling at that moment, what to watch for medically, and what to do when the expected or unexpected happened. These were my major concerns until about puberty. I was driving myself back into my head. Sometimes this dialogue was verbal, which was a great concern to my parents, but mostly it was internal and often not conscious.

What I did enjoy was reading and being read to, and because I saw it this way, literacy was always interactive. I could be taken away to other places or times, to anywhere my imagination might transport me, but also I could follow my curious mind wherever it might wish to travel. My mind was my playground and it has always remained so. Writing became a skill I had to master in university because I was lucky enough to interact with professors who demanded to know my opinions on the various ideas discussed or the books read. It isn’t easy to come out of the cave and to attempt to make personal meaning public. My way of tackling this project was to try to emulate the writing style of other authors, and as I saw myself as an historian, I was drawn to the narrative school of Thomas Macaulay and George Trevelyan. Later, I was influenced by Peter Laslett, Quentin Skinner, and R. G. Collingwood. This was a two-fold process. In university I was trained to think and write in a linear way, but my personal history was reflective and perhaps circular. Discovering this has taken me most of my life and it is what brings me and drives me to explore the ideas in this book. It is a process in which I am discovering how I think and the cautionary tale about who I am.

I want to address the process of writing that I employ because it is tied to my motives and intentions in writing. Stephen Dunn’s (2015) thoughts on writing are much like my own. I think one of my early motivations for writing was that other people’s versions of experience didn’t gel with my own. It was a gesture toward sanity to try to get the world right for myself. I’ve since learned that if you get it right for yourself, it often has resonance for others.

I see myself in the tradition of writers who are migrant spokespeople. In some sense, I’m a writer in exile. I no longer live in the land of my birth and I no longer inhabit K-12 classrooms. Today I am speaking to different people about different things and yet my experiences as a classroom teacher in a different land bleed
through and I want them to. It’s not that I wish to become a spokesperson for that former role or for that country, but that my experiences continue to inform me. Writing, then, is the process of reflecting on my past experiences and discovering a form of discourse that gives this voice. This is not dialectic of place because my mind interacts between these past and present voices and interacts with them in a dynamic manner. The literary scholar Lin Yutang (1935) wrote:

    The only way of looking at China, and of looking at any foreign nation, is by searching, not for the exotic but for the common human values, by penetrating beneath the superficial quaintness of manners and looking for real courtesy…
    the differences are only in the forms of social behavior. (p. 88)

This is one reason my brushstrokes are so wide and my style does not conform to the borderlands of traditional academic discourse. I purposefully place myself outside of those borderlands in an effort to connect and to encourage dialogue. For me, it’s the questions that emerge for this process that interest me, not the answers. Like V. S. Naipaul and Ha Jin, I can no longer return to my safe harbor. I’ve realized that I share this with other travellers in both a real and metaphoric sense. Every artist, every teacher sets sail each time they engage in their work. Whether it is at the computer, on stage, or in the classroom we are on our own in a new place and we have to figure out how to live there.

Many people continue to think of teachers and learners as groups, rather than as individuals. Curriculum and evaluations are designed from that perspective, yet the reality is that the complexity of our world has made it meaningless to put this into practice. Few of us will go about our work today knowing for certain what will happen in the future and I believe my writing reflects this. This is all the more reason for us to take a close look at the concept of work and how it plays out in the ongoing search for coherence and meaning.

REFLEXION (X MARKS THE SPOT)

As I thought about reflexion, I recalled being told by my grade school teachers that my work had to be done before I could go to recess and have fun. In my mind, “work” was the same as task completion. There was no sense of doing something for intrinsic pleasure. Work was hard and it was mandated. My sense is that many of us think of what we do during the day in this way. Our lives are filled up with tasks that have to be finished before we can get on with the things we enjoy. I’m not suggesting for a moment that learning has to be fun in the sense that there is nothing to strive for or that learning has to be easy. Neither of these is true in all cases. But it is the case that some of us love mathematics and that mastering mathematics is an example of working for love.

I can extend this further. Many students find their passion in the arts, sports, or the manual arts of carpentry. In formal schooling, these areas are often not taught
especially to those considered to be “college material.” If you are college-bound, then perhaps you have to come to the realization that your life’s work, your occupation, is something you can do but have no passion for. Is this because all, or almost all, of our teachers fit this mold? These thoughts are small parts of a very complex subject and I’ll make no claims that I’m about to cover it all, but I do have some ideas about how we can get out of this loop, and the good news is that it’s not that high a bar to jump. My point is that by unravelling discourse we construct gaps where difference might allow us all to contribute positively to the creation of a society where we acknowledge and applaud diversity.

This is why I want us to think about how we use the word “work” as teachers and learners, but also in our wider discourse. Throughout this section, I will refer to examples of people from different walks of life who have each defined what work means to them. These are personal narratives collected by me in conversations with these individuals. These references are here to support the notion that what we mean by work can be ambiguous and can have either a positive or negative meaning. We need to be clear about this. The teacher who uses work to be a denial of imaginative play is performing a disservice to all of us, as we all can recognize, but the one who ignores the power of discourse is just as guilty.

TELLING TALES THROUGH DISTINCTIVE DISCOURSES

This, then, is a book about thinking and acting in the context of teaching and learning. It’s intended for those of you not just interested but immersed in the world of teaching and learning. Not only the act itself, but what lies behind and under it; what we can call its presuppositions. So that we can do this thoughtfully we need to become historical archaeologists. I want to unearth the artifacts in such a way that you can understand the complexity of this and construct meaning that is centered on self-understanding, on reflection, but a form of understanding that builds shared meanings that can be discussed and debated.

Why does this matter? It matters because today we have at our fingertips the ability to access more information than at any other time and to make what sense of it we wish. It matters because this isn’t just about what can be measured or what the bottom line is; it’s about emotion, connection, and community. And that is why our journey takes us closer to the heart. I want to begin by exploring how we think about the past and present and how we are situated in the construction of meaning.

This is about self-knowledge as well as knowing others, and for me the two are interconnected on many levels. The acts of knowing are also the fabric of learning and teaching, and teaching is an act of many parts. I argue that if you are approaching a career in education at any level from the primary perspective of imparting knowledge and being the subject matter expert, you have one part of the puzzle. Another perspective is to see your role as a caring, loving person who interacts with and guides students as they set the pace of learning.
CHAPTER 1

This set of ideas offers you the view that all of this is becoming increasingly intertwined. The world, at least the Western world that we inhabit, has always been changing and in flux. There have been relatively short periods in which matters appeared stable but that has usually been a matter of perspective. Today our challenges are the same: how to know ourselves and how to know the world around us. In the last century and a half, public education has been given the role of answering these two questions and while one can argue that the task was misguided, there is little doubt that for some education has been the vehicle to enhanced self-knowledge, to grand discoveries in science, and to entrancing acts in all the arts stretching our imaginations. Those goals remain unchanged; what has changed is the ability to access information and that calls for an in-depth consideration of the notions of teaching and learning. Our information societies, and there are many, are often personal and relative to our immediate interests, such as where can I buy a product, find a factual answer, or check on what a friend is doing.

However, all of this becomes cloudy in the formal world of education. In this context, what is learned is set to various degrees. Society has viewed public education as a vehicle for the establishment of good citizenship and to provide a continued supply of people ready and able to do whatever role they are called to. Our context is different. With the ubiquity of open access to information, schooling, broadly conceived, must adapt as it is no longer a matter of the either/or dichotomy. It is essential to know the factual history of your field so that you can draw the map from what is known to what is to be explored. It is also essential because this story is also about what has counted as a fact and what it has meant to know about ourselves and others. However, mastery alone is not sufficient. To have meaningful learning occurring in your classroom it’s essential to be able to listen, collaborate, motivate and enable autonomy. This calls for purpose.

This is not an exercise in linear thinking. Instead, it is circular and one of parts. It also isn’t linear in that Chapter 1 must be read prior to Chapter 2, even though I have given some thought to the sequencing. These are thought pieces, strands for you to sample, think through, discuss, and then form opinions to be tested and acted upon. For example: What do we mean and understand when we say that we know what happened or that we know that person?

To speak of learning raises a series of prior and fundamental questions that would not have been raised a generation ago in a text on this topic. These questions could take the form of: What does “learning” refer to? How does one decide the issues for discussion? What does it mean to be able to classify ideas, trends, and issues as belonging to a particular area and era?

The answers to these and many other related questions lie in the transformation of how we think of ourselves and the world we live in. In very broad and sweeping terms, Western philosophy has used the debate between Plato and Aristotle as its crucible. Knowing “what,” knowing “how,” and knowing what constitutes necessary or sufficient conditions for proof have revolved around the same presuppositions for almost two thousand years.
This book takes the form of a discussion. It is written as a conversation; a conversation with my mind as I reflect on the ideas that my conscious mind presents to me. Through this dialogue, I come to understand myself through what Collingwood called “re-enactment.” In this process, as I conceive it, I am part intellectual historian and part auto-ethnographer. My initial contemplation is: What was in the mind of the person who wrote these words? After considering the presuppositions of that person’s world, I construct my understanding. The next step is to ask myself if and how these various ideas have importance to the world in which I live and, if so, I try to make meaning. My frame then is just that, a frame, a shifting set of ideas that I conceive of and regard as pertinent to the present. I argue that this is a form of dialectical reasoning with a long and substantial history. What I am adding to this is rendering the process translucent and even transparent. My contribution to this process is to make it evident, to make it visible. This is my mind at work.

The process of educating is grounded in thinking about who we are and what we want to become. To begin the process, educators must engage others in explicit discussions of what learning requires. For this to work, it is imperative that learners be invited into the process since neither learning nor teaching is a passive process. In fact, they are two parts of a single process—that of “coming to know.” Learners ought to take an active responsibility for this process, by thinking and reflecting critically on the materials presented to them, and they must also become fully engaged in the process of how learning is evaluated. During any discussion of what constitutes learning, it is the learner who ought to map the progress of his or her new understandings.

In this way, teaching is a learning experience for both the educator and the students. By pointing out what is difficult to understand and where they need help, the students provide invaluable insights to their instructor. As educators, we are often accomplished at perceiving the whole, but the meaning of the whole often eludes us until we engage in the process of capturing the essence of the whole, at which point full understanding occurs.

MEDIA LITERACY

In presenting content to students, it is not enough just to put information online. There is plenty of information online, but it often does not engage students to think and learn. NextGeners do not think of learning as a linear process. For them, it is an on-going process of coming to know about themselves, others, and this transitory, fragmented, and complex world. It is an on-going conversation between the student and the content. We, as educators of this next generation, need to engage and reframe our thinking about what it means to learn and to understand. Presently, each one of us has at our fingertips the ability to access more information than at any other time in history. Our role as teachers and learners is to channel that ability in order
that each person discovers his or her purpose through a negotiated process where learning about self, content, and the world are rooted in what Robert Bjork coined a “desirable difficulty.” Just as we are not only what we read and how we read, concluded Maryanne Wolf, we are also how we think and how we understand ourselves.

Today’s learners want engagement. Although it is undeniable that the internet engages and opens us to a world of data never before available or imaginable, it is also clear that when we hold a printed book in our hands, we engage in the process of learning and understanding, albeit in a different way. The two are not incompatible and may be complimentary. It is also likely that the combination of digital and print is an individual matter subject both to area and person. We also need to re-envision what we mean by “curriculum.” What is considered as curriculum in today’s multimedia world? Can the curriculum of today be founded on prior curriculum theories? Has the need for the educator and the learner to both be engaged in the process of learning changed our perspective of curriculum?

In 1964, Marshall McLuhan claimed: “The medium is the message.” This means that the personal and social consequences of any medium—of any extension of our self—results from the new scale that is introduced by each extension of ourselves, by any new technology. In the field of curriculum theory, the emergent importance of technology can neither be overstated nor ignored. Learning and teaching has reached the point at which the medium (the technology) is no longer just a tool for learning, but has become learning itself. It has now become another process through which we understand and define the self. The medium has now become the curriculum. This phenomenon must be examined both from the theoretical and the philosophical perspective.

This book will pursue this line of thought and the questions that arise from it in relation to thinking and acting in the wider context of teaching and learning. It’s intended for those who are immersed in the world of teaching and learning. It’s also about the archaeology of knowledge, about what lies behind and under the acts that encompass education and what we can call its presuppositions. So that we can do this thoughtfully, we need to become historical archaeologists wearing philosophical glasses. I want to unearth the artifacts in such a way that you understand the nature and necessity of the complexity and construct meanings that are centered in self-understanding and reflection. Forms of understanding that build shared meanings can be negotiated, discussed, and debated. So, that’s my plan. But a few words of caution. I would like you to think of the chapters in this book as thought pieces. They don’t stand alone but you may read them in any order you wish. This isn’t a book written in a purely linear fashion. It’s a representation of my mind at work. The sources I have chosen are relative and they reflect my interests. This is not a survey text. Instead, it’s a cautionary tale about ideas that I hope will spur you on to re-think your own theoretical position. I call this speculative philosophy.

I am issuing you an invitation to think about the possibilities I offer in this book. To do what Collingwood described as re-enactment, that is to take ideas and make
WE THINK

them your own by knowing why they were considered and how they were used. When you do this, you aren’t reinventing the wheel. What you are doing is “coming to know” the process of understanding. It’s my expectation that you will understand that the questions of today are based in the way that people perceived issues in the past. Knowing that and how things are different today ought to enable you to make wise and thoughtful decisions about your actions and become critical, reflective teachers and learners. This invitation is also an opportunity for you to interact with me and others about what I have written in an effort to put into action my ideas and to construct community. I’m on LinkedIn and Twitter as well as email. Jump in, the water’s fine. Thank you for considering what follows.

DOES THIS MATTER? (OF COURSE IT DOES!)

If information is just bits of data, then knowledge is putting them together. As Ram Dass (1971) asserted, wisdom is transcending them. We often assume that the artistic tradition has disappeared from our culture, but has it? Today that critique is focused on technology. In all we do there is an implicit contrast between illusion and truth, fantasy and reality; and nowhere is this more apparent than in teaching and learning. Learners have at their fingertips access to more information than any library in the world a century ago, yet too often this information is not translated to knowledge and then wisdom.

Engage with this text as you read but I also invite you to engage through social media and email. Let’s make this a dialogical encounter, a conversation. I’m not aiming at big theory. I see the world as fragmented and de-centered and in the process of shifting from one paradigm to another. We are so diverse that is difficult to conceive of any set of presuppositions that might define and describe us; a task that seemed so easily accomplished just two or three generations ago. Technology affords us the possibility to make relativistic claims and judgments without being critical. We can choose what we want to be, to see, and to believe and discover followers to tell us we are right. But when we bring that set of beliefs to formal education, there is a clash. Schooling is an attempt to inculcate the values of the culture. In all but a few times and places, this hasn’t been an invitation to disrupt but to acknowledge and find one’s place in line. Now the rabbit is out of the hat so to speak, the jig is up, and critical thinking is often an obstacle seen to be overcome and ignored.

DANGEROUS STUFF THIS, BECAUSE…

The move from information to knowledge to wisdom is a slow path of awakening. Its demands self-awareness, or reflection in a historical and philosophical sense. This is why I am attracted to thinkers like Collingwood. But as insightful as he was, these are different times and they call for different voices. So let’s think about how we come to understand our selves. I don’t know how many of you have considered
the link between teaching that learning. It’s not a linear causality but rather a break in causality. Scientists have been playing around with this ever since quantum physics. Among other things quantum physics argued that scientists don’t always deal with certainties and definite knowledge. What they do is work in the borderlands where there is anything but certainty. It’s a fun space full of adventure. Much like teaching, I argue.

LET ME PLAY WITH THIS

One way I learn is by writing things down, mind mapping. It’s matter over mind. What you do, how you behave affects your practice. Buddhists know this. They value praxis, ritual, and performance. For me, mind mapping by writing down my thoughts is a kind of meditation. I’m doing that right now in fact, and it helps me overcome personal constraints. It’s a risky business this, but it’s only risky if there is something at stake and for teachers that’s the case every day. Educators must find ways to expose students to a range of culturally significant curricula so that graduates will no longer perpetuate the culture industry of design education (Beirut, 1988; Kellner, 1989).

Did you know the story, the personal narrative, is the most dangerous thing in the world? That’s because personal narratives are cautionary tales in the form of metaphors. Think of Plato’s cave. Perhaps we don’t know a lot about Plato but we understand what he’s all about when talking about shadows. The image is so good that it has broken free and is rooted in our minds and in this same way action becomes purposeful. Crafting a story gives us space and perspective and invites us to strike out and act, but this action has to be driven by the desire, the need to blend theory into practice and then bend it back into theory itself. This is what I mean about teaching informing learning.

We seem to be faced with certain choices, for example, “How will I teach the required content so my students can pass the exam?” There are also other choices you may not be aware of, such as “What can I learn about myself by teaching this lesson?” and “How can I use the content of this lesson to get my students to think critically about themselves and the others in the room?” This is a break in causation. It places you on the frontier. Philosophers think about dissolving problems, or as Wittgenstein put it, the problem confronting us is no problem at all. Instead of trying to restore things to what you might think of as their natural place, try to think of the problem as an opportunity to do something different. After all, trying the same “logic” on that problem will probably end up with the same solution. For example, trying to get your students to think critically in the way I have described by assigning more rote homework isn’t going to solve your problem; but inviting your students to pose the questions and possible outcomes just might. This is what I call flipping the classroom. These gaps, as I have called them, aren’t just epistemological in the sense that the modernist paradigm’s presuppositions are under stress, which I think
they are. What is also being re-thought is one of the basic ideas of Western thought, namely “causality” and its building block the “dialectic.”

Aristotle’s view was not the dominant one of his time, that lot fell to Plato who taught in his Academy that seeing was the highest sense. He argued that sight was the most theoretical, holding things at a distance to gain perspective and not affected by human emotion. Aristotle countered that this was exactly the point that had been missed. It is our ability to be tactile that allows us to evaluate and discriminate and make decisions, and in doing so we become wise. As we all know, Aristotle lost this battle of ideas. The Platonists prevailed and the Western universe became a system governed by “the soul’s eye.” Sight came to dominate the hierarchy of the senses and was quickly deemed the appropriate ally of theoretical ideas. Western philosophy thus sprang from a dualism between the intellectual senses, crowned by sight, and the lower “animal” senses, stigmatized by touch. Thus, opto-centrism prevailed for over 2,000 years, culminating in our contemporary culture of digital simulation and spectacle. The eye continues to rule in what Roland Barthes (1957) called our “civilization of the image.” The world is no longer our oyster, but our screen.

The neo-Platonic influence in pedagogy is striking for its impact and its influence. We are moving towards what is becoming a society where there is no real contact. Richard Kearney emphasized that we have moved from a “bedside manner” to the anonymous technologies of imaging in diagnosis and treatment. The same is true in war, where hand-to-hand combat has been replaced by “targeted killing” via remote-controlled drones. And from schooling to personal spaces, detached knowledge-telling and multiple choice testing routinely replaces hands-on learning and discovery inquiry.

Moreover, certain cyber engineers now envisage implanting transmission codes in our brains so that we will not have to move a finger—or come into contact with another human being—to get what we want. The touch screen replaces touch. The cosmos shrinks to a private monitor; each viewer a disembodied self. Full humanity requires the ability to sense and be sensed in turn: the power, as Shakespeare said, to “feel what wretches feel,” or, one might also add, what artists, cooks, musicians and lovers feel. We need to find our way into a tactile world again. We need to return from head to foot, from brain to fingertip, from iCloud to Earth. To close the distance, so that eros is more about proximity than proxy. Such a move enhances the role of empathy, vulnerability, and sensitivity.

Such a move encourages us and provides justification for the need to shift away from a singular focus on mastering content and recipes, toward an ongoing, unifying, autobiographically specific, and self-questioning of the student’s thoughts and actions. We need to undertake research on the implications of this for the wired world of our classrooms, the “messiness of education” in the digital age. Thinking is a messy business, as is life. Even though we try to make it a linear flow it’s often anything but certain. We may measure what was set out in class to memorize, but it’s much more difficult to assess how it’s applied and if that’s a useful exercise. Not
only is thinking by its nature often complex but we also get in the way in schooling by making it appear to be much more straightforward than it is. Miles Davis (1989) once said that there is no such thing as a mistake in music, there are only mis-takes. That’s not quite the case in life, but neither is the rigid delineation of right and wrong in essays or discussion questions. We need to permit and invite more shared conversation into the process of learning and the construction of opinions. The web is neutral on this. It’s humans who get in the way by going back to the question and answer response. That logic helps us as we uncover why we believe what we do.

Teaching and learning in their many variations are powerful tools capable of publicizing, informing, and propagandizing environmental, social, and political messages. However, little reflective thinking about the impact of how curriculum is conceived or presented has been done in the way of which I have referred. According to Heller (1994), the way we design our curricula is often not understood. Instead it is accepted as given. It is consumed in the same way we absorb a television commercial or a magazine advertisement. Like Heller, I argue that the materials in our curricula are part of a larger social, commercial, and cultural context. This is particularly important in the context of the rapid development of social media and new internet capabilities that I refer to in this book.

If we are to be relevant to learners and responsible to ourselves and to society in general, then it is imperative that we design curriculum which allows for critical dialogue, personal identification and expression, and consideration of cultural significance in a student’s body of work.

A CAUTIONARY TALE (SLIPPERY ROAD AHEAD)

Philosophers ask questions about the nature of things. That’s one thing that frames Western civilization. The questions aren’t ones that have easy or forthcoming answers. Since Plato, philosophers have argued about the importance of self-reflected thought and personal knowledge. Much of what goes on in the name of education is based on our ability to become knowledgeable about ourselves and the worlds we live in. The ideas that frame our world are presuppositions that are historical in nature. They are relative to time and place. They aren’t absolute and that’s where the role of the public intellectual comes in and that presupposes purpose. Important questions such as: How do we teach and learn to prepare students to become full participants in our contemporary world? and How do we, as members of a participatory culture, demand new educational theories and practices?

A CURIOUS PERSON

I was rigorously trained to research and write as an historian. Throughout my undergraduate years, history was often a repetition of facts, but in graduate school I came across a particular book, An Autobiography, by Robin George Collingwood. This was an intellectual autobiography with a difference. Collingwood didn’t sketch
out his intellectual development, instead he described how as a child he had walked
the ancient Roman roads and tried to re-enact what the Romans that been thinking
when they constructed them. He pondered why Hadrian’s Wall was built where
it was. This is the nature of historical knowledge, the rethinking for yourself the
thoughts of people in past actions and then by analogy the reasons why “I” ought to
act. The study of history for Collingwood collapsed both philosophical and historical
thought. It is philosophical because it is reflective and it is historical because it seeks
to discover the thoughts of people in the past. Through this process, the relative
presuppositions of an age can be uncovered.

This was my discovery and it made sense for me. As I pursued Collingwood’s
methodology I came more and more to understand my past actions and to see
them as a process of self-discovery. This has come to frame my epistemology. As I
continued my formal education I began unconsciously, it seems to me now, to weave
my remembered past into a series of personal stories. This was a process I would now
call reflexion, a path to the construction of personal meaning. Later I would come to
see this as what Jean Clandinin (1987) termed “personal practical knowledge” and
the process what Collingwood (1946) called “re-enactment.” In my professional life
these various strands came together through my writing and teaching. I collapsed
teaching and learning into a single process and began to talk with my students about
the nature of knowledge as well as course content. As I became brave enough to
share this, I discovered that what I was engaging in was auto-ethnography.

So I invite you to “as-if.” That means actively engaging in the praxis of ideas
about ideas. I identify this as a rapprochement, a blending and fusing to suppose
that it is the case that we are in the midst of an emerging paradigm, one in which
context is a presupposition, as are fragmentation and personal decision making
through interaction. Some of this occurs as it has for the past three or four hundred
years through listening, reading, memorization and then application; but other types
of interactions are superseding those. Digital collaborations can occur through
Facebook and other social networking but may also include avatars, augmented
reality, and numerous other variations. All of these presuppose a certain sense
of uncertainty in that they allow for personal reality to be constructed in varying
forms and spaces. This is not a linear conception of our selves but an evolving
and interconnected sense where, as in the case of “The World of Warcraft,” tens of
thousands of players interact as types of shift shapers.

We are beginning this voyage with a look at one of the most important issues
in education and in fact in all our lives, and that is, “How do we make sense of
the rapid changes in teaching and learning brought about by the internet and social
media?” This is not a book about the glory of the internet or of change per se, and
it is not a condemnation of it. What I am arguing for is an understanding that rapid
change is grounded in the story, the history, of the ideas that frame a time and an
issue. As we progress I will set out for you a description of how these framing ideas,
or propositions, can be described and their function. I will present people with
philosophical ideas, in the widest sense, who I believe are worth considering in our
quest to find out how to navigate through these waters. I will also suggest ways we can implement this.

Today the conversation about what we believe and why is different because of the shifting strands of our relative presuppositions, but there are also threads that tie this together. This is the role of the historian. How these are relative to time and place and have meaning is one of the roles of the philosopher. It is my intent to combine the two by addressing the task of doing well in the world; in this case, by thinking philosophically about technology as a public intellectual.

I am laying out some of the historical or relative presuppositions that I believe characterize our modernist paradigm. We seem to live in a world where what we have characterized as shared discourse is breaking down. Let’s consider this. Western civilization has been based on the ability of its peoples to create, share, and build on narratives, like “The Odyssey,” which give foundation and meaning to our personal lives and shaping our personal history.

We ought to re-enact with some of the historical and philosophical texts that we appear to have forgotten or cast aside. As Alex Ross (2007) described it, “Economic and environmental crisis, terrorism and counterterrorism, deepening inequality, unchecked tech and media monopolies, a withering away of intellectual institutions, an ostensibly liberating Internet culture in which we are constantly checking to see if we are being watched: none of this would have surprised the prophets of Frankfurt, who, upon reaching America, failed to experience the sensation of entering Paradise” (p. 542).

THEORETICALLY CRITICAL (OR IS IT CRITICALLY THEORETICAL?)

Ross is, of course, referring to the Frankfurt School of social theory and philosophy and its notable theorists, such as, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Walter Benjamin. Their work was foundational for what is referred to as Critical Theory, which would later morph into Critical Pedagogy in the Americas under the guidance of Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, and others. I want to start with critical theory and then tie it to several other strands of thought.

Critical theory is a methodology that concerns itself with “forms of authority and injustice that accompanied the evolution of industrial and corporate capitalism as a political-economic system” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 52). I’ve been arguing for the last five years that we are living in a fragmented, de-centered, and emerging paradigm that is far different and not yet explicit. If we think of critical theory through the lens of postmodernism actions problems become situated “in historical and cultural contexts, to implicate themselves in the process of collecting and analyzing data, and to revitalize their findings” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 52). Viewed from this perspective, making meaning can be non-linear and is relative to the context of social structures, where place becomes a major driver.

In the past, for the most part, educational researchers have taken it as a given that their research was objective and that the “other” could be objectified; that
motives and intentions were on-going. Lindlof and Taylor, among others, point to a perspective that is multi-faceted and situated in contexts that fragmented, decentered, and continually in flux. This postmodern twist presupposes that both the researcher and the subject are reflective collaborators. Both Lindlof and Taylor are anthropological ethnographers, and in the past there has been considerable transference of ideas between anthropology and disciplines like history and philosophy, take for example the work of Collingwood. My aim, as always, is to bring these connections and ideas to the surface and widen our discourse possibilities. Statements such as, “Ethnography of communication conceptualizes communication as a continuous flow of information, rather than as a segmented exchange of messages” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 44), reflect a methodological framework with roots in the early twentieth century. Often educational researchers could benefit from attending to Gadamer’s argument that every concept has a history. Today, postmodern critical theory builds on theory and practice of the past and by tracing and reflecting on it reinforces the claim that the history of ideas is an on-going process. It also implies that it is important to uncover the presuppositions that underlie each theoretical strand and trace the development of the ones that replace them.

Critical pedagogy goes beyond situating the learning experience within the experience of the learner: it is a process which takes the experiences of both the learner and the teacher and, through dialogue and negotiation, recognizes them both as problematic. It allows, indeed encourages, students and teachers together to confront the real problems of their existence and relationships. When students confront the real problems of their existence they will also be faced with their own oppression (Grundy, 1987). Our present system of education is currently at odds with the views of critical pedagogy, as many of our classroom teachers are responsible for “delivering” the knowledge that is based on a set of state regulated standards and objectives. The result is the construction of a curriculum that is of little interest to teacher or students; one which is reinforced by standardized testing. Neither Freire nor Whitehead would have approved of a curriculum driven by assessments, created to profile how well a student has memorized test-taking strategies. What they argued for was a curriculum that would prepare both teachers and learners to analyze, synthesize, and apply the knowledge learned in their classrooms to the world in which they live and the one in which they hope to inhabit. How might this look and work in a decentered, deconstructed world?

Peter McLaren’s (2006) Life in Schools is also an attempt to name the forces that underlie this Hell. By making the implicit explicit, McLaren allows us as teachers and learners to continue to construct our new road map of curriculum. McLaren has been able to introduce the term critical pedagogy into everyday pedagogical language through his writing. He did not invent the term, but he certainly has popularized it. Critical pedagogy is a more recent adaptation of critical theory. Critical theory holds that facts and theories are part of an interrelated and ongoing historical process. It is based on the conception of the dialectic where one idea, an accepted theory, is
opposed to a newer theory. The interaction between these two presents a synthesis that sets up the next dialectical struggle and thus history progresses.

Critical theory rejects the idea that facts are fixed and independent of theory. Among critical theory’s first and brightest lights are the philosophers Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, as has already been noted. More recently, Jurgen Habermas (1989) reworked critical theory. His theory, called “structural transformation,” provided us with a brighter picture of our ability to transform our culture. With structural transformation, Habermas widened the conception of ideology to include functional false beliefs that are not only taken to be the case but which we are coerced into believing. By refining the Hegelian dialectic, Habermas created an historical antithesis and the necessity that there is always an ideology. Along with the concept of ideology is the concept of the disintegration and decline of the public sphere (Habermas, 1996). Clearly, the history of public education falls under this umbrella for both Habermas and McLaren. Structural transformation allows for a brighter picture than critical theory because of the power of rationality and the growth of community, where all voices are equal. This is one of the intellectual spaces Peter McLaren (1991) inhabits. He “outs” ideologies and applies Marxist dialectical analysis to public education, offering us solutions where the future is determined in a community of free and equal partners.

It is in these boulevards of broken dreams and streets of despair and desperation where critical pedagogy can make a difference. (Peter McLaren)

Where McLaren differs from Habermas is in describing himself as a Marxist humanist. This he has adapted from Freire and Giroux; this is where critical pedagogy breaks from other variants of critical theory. In McLaren’s (2006) view, working class students don’t do well because of the force of capitalism. His response is to empower students and transform the larger social order in the interest of justice and equality. The central task, as he sees it, is to “develop a language through which educators and others can unravel and comprehend the relationship among schooling, the wider capitalist social relations that inform it, and the historically constructed needs and competencies that students bring to schools” (p. xvii).

McLaren’s “revolutionary praxis” is based on the premise that the present social structure must be changed from the roots up. It cannot be saved nor restructured. *Life in Schools* (2006) is an open indictment of our system and it invites teachers and learners alike to examine our discourse and to uncover its complicity in the dominant myths about people of color and working-class people from a new critical perspective. McLaren also sees critical pedagogy as an outgrowth of critical literacy. This praxis – oriented pedagogy bridges the gap between critical knowledge and social practice by permitting students to question the relationship between theory and practice in social justice. It also serves to introduce students to ethnographic research as they interview family members, friends, and people in their neighborhood. In this way, students can focus on local issues and link them to the wider scope of social reality.