Teacher Technology Adoption and the Philosophy of Fear

Jason Ribeiro

Recently, a new tension has begun to underlie classroom practice and instruction – teacher fears around use of technology. There is a growing movement to identify why technology is rarely used in meaningful ways in the classroom and why many teachers have an aversion to integrating it in their lessons.[1] This movement assumes that *teachers* are delaying schools' adoption of educational technology and that this resistance is not part of a larger issue: a systemic *philosophy of fear.*

Philosopher Lars Svendsen defines the philosophy of fear as a low-intensity fear that "surrounds us and forms a backdrop of our experiences and interpretations of the world."[2] While this current generation of students has no recollection of a world without the Internet, it is important to note that the hands that shape their future vividly recall a digital takeover of modern life.[3] The fear that I speak of is not monumental, but rather a constant force that causes us to protect and isolate ourselves from the consequences of technological advancement.[4] This creates a tense intergenerational division in contemporary education and further problematizes the work of educational leaders.

Consequences in Society: History, Risk, and Redefining Progress

As unique as the Digital Revolution seems, scholars Davidson and Goldberg argue that society has faced similar conditions before. Humanity has seen three separate *Information Ages*: the invention of writing, the shift from scroll to codex, and the invention of the printing press.[5] As in earlier information ages, several bygone fears (e.g., subservience to new technological tools) are beginning to reappear in discussions about technology, which is often portrayed as "threatening" education.

The philosophy of fear surrounding the Internet and digital technologies has made educational reform increasingly difficult. Collins and Halverson assert that a

---

[1] Allan Collins and Richard Halverson. *Rethinking Education in the Age of Technology: The Digital Revolution and Schooling in America* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2009), 35.

[2] Lars Svendsen, *A Philosophy of Fear* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2007), 46.

[3] Cathy N. Davidson and David T. Goldberg. *The Future of Learning Institutions in a Digital Age* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2009), 13.

[4] Svendsen, *Philosophy of Fear*, 76.

[5] Davidson and Goldberg, *Future*, 19.

"revolution in education will not just alter the lives of students, but the entirety of modern society."[6] Furthermore, parents are becoming increasingly concerned that constant access to digital media through technology (estimated at over eight hours per day) is leaving their children overexposed and under protected.[7] Though I believe this pessimistic view is sometimes warranted, it serves to minimize the innovative potential of digital learning. How can teachers and administrators reap the benefits of the Internet in their personal life (e.g., Email communication), but ignore the opportunities for student learning? It seems as though a cognitive dissonance has formed, in which teachers feel conflicted about the *assumed* risks of using technology in the classroom (e.g., exposure to inappropriate content). While Anna Craft stresses, "This risk discourse exploits the fear of parents and educators,"[8] Svendsen argues that the portrayal of technology as 'risky' simply stems from our inability to gain an absolute overview of its consequences.[9]

Collins' and Halverson's work largely ignores the historical significance of *phenomena* as they relate to technology and the human response. These historical phenomena allow us to reflect on our fears surrounding new technologies and understand that our concerns are hardly new. Historian Sidney Pollard proposes that Western culture is still enamored with the Victorian phenomena of technological "progress" (and its other variations over the last 300 years) and it continues to have a strong global impact. He defines progress as "the assumption that a pattern of change exists in the history of mankind…that it consists of irreversible changes in one direction only, and that this direction is towards improvement."[10] Despite the fact that today's classrooms can house laptops and digital projectors, schools still exist in forms remarkably similar to those of medieval times.[11] This is not true progress. I believe that technology expert Dr. Mark Bronson's description of *technophobia* – how and why people become afraid of technology – outlines how the philosophy of fear is stifling innovation. He asserts, "Education, work and leisure are all becoming dependent on being able to interact with technology."[12] With student engagement plummeting and schools adapting to the complex demands of their learners so slowly, Bronson advocates for technology in schools. It is needed to enhance traditional teaching, but instead we're letting fear steer us into blindly replacing the role of teachers.[13] At a time when virtual, home, and

---

[6] Collins and Halverson, *Rethinking*, 6.

[7] Anna Craft, "Childhood in a Digital Age: Creative Challenges for Educational Futures," *London Review of Education 10(2)*: 177-78, accessed April 26, 2014.

[8] Craft, *Childhood*, 182.

[9] Svendsen, *Philosophy of Fear*, 49.

[10] Wright, Ronald. *A Short History of Progress* (Toronto: House of Anasi Press Inc., 2004), 3.

[11] Davidson and Goldberg, *Future*, 4.

[12] Mark J. Brosnan. *Technophobia*: The Psychological Impact of Information Technology (New York: Routledge, 1998), i.

[13] Brosnan, *Technophobia*, 128.

workplace learning are all gaining popularity,[14] traditional education needs to evolve in order to remain a viable learning environment for students.

Consequences in the Classroom: Authority, Safety, and Redefining Work

The philosophy of fear surrounding technology has distinct implications for student learning and classroom practices. While the current education system relies on the hierarchical relationship between "teacher" and "student," computers have begun to allow children to question the authority of adults.[15] With education reformers drawing attention to the coercive nature of traditional education and its undesirable presence in 21st century schooling,[16] I believe it is important that more organic relations between teachers and students are fostered. These can be supported through technology (e.g., flipped classrooms). Using Svendsen's logic, a failure to adapt would mean fear is infringing upon our freedom.[17] It is conceivable that just because we fear something does not necessarily mean we *ought* to fear it. Svendsen writes, "We ought to fear *fear* because it undermines so much of what is really important in our lives."[18] With teachers needing to be confident role models for their students, success in the classroom now relies on educators becoming aware of this tension and making strides to address/overcome it.

When children are the focus of your organization, safety is always a primary concern. With threats against them shifting from physical to virtual, the protection of children is necessary for online learning to occur. However, Anna Craft argues that the "childhood at risk" narrative that persists when describing young people's uses of technology often overshadows the "childhood empowered" narrative.[19] Furthermore, the angst that children who have access to technology will use it in 'unsafe' ways has existed for centuries. Despite this, school leaders have relegated the use, access, and enjoyment of technology primarily to the environment outside school, which might provide less, not more, protection for their students. Institutionally limiting students' opportunities to learn is both ineffective in protecting children and has presented numerous drawbacks: deters students from preparing themselves for work, undervalues creativity, stifles the formation of identity, etc.[20]

---

[14] Collins and Halverson, *Rethinking*, Chap. 3

[15] Collins and Halverson, *Rethinking*, Chap. 3.

[16] Renita Schmidt and Paul Lee Thomas, *21st Century Literacy: If We Are Scripted, Are We Literate?* (Greenville: Springer, 2008) 184.

[17] Svendsen, *Philosophy of Fear*, 7.

[18] Svendsen, *Philosophy of Fear*, 125.

[19] Craft, "Childhood in a Digital Age," 176.

[20] Craft, "Childhood in a Digital Age," 176-77.

The philosophy of fear also impacts education in that it limits the changes to the nature of the work and responsibilities of teachers.[21] I believe a philosophy of fear leads to an aversion to change among educators. Though the constraints teachers face are hardly minute (e.g., large class sizes), their aversion can at times be puzzling, especially when it undervalues the needs of students. With education largely governed by tradition and well-established teaching practices, researcher James Boyle asserts this attitude is a "cognitive bias" people need to overcome in order to embrace an open system.[22] Perhaps it is time that conventional education allows technology to redefine their work to stay relevant.

Conquering Our Fears

Though fear is a common element of human nature, Svendsen argues that the philosophy of fear typically emerges at a stage when we are living in relatively secure times.[23] Overcoming this fear may prove to be difficult; emotions are powerful forces. However, in such a meaningful institution like education, we need to inspire hope of innovation and exploration. Philosopher Ernst Bloch writes, "Hope is superior to fear because it is neither passive nor caught up in nothingness. The effect of hope broadens people rather than restricts them."[24] In a sphere that prides itself on research, our schools and their leaders need to be receptive to the growing digital movement. Failing to acknowledge our triumphs over fear in eras past will only hinder our students of the future.

Biography

Jason Ribeiro is a Master of Education candidate in the Faculty of Graduate Studies at Brock University. His research aims to understand how school leaders in Ontario make decisions regarding educational technology acquisition.

Correspondence regarding this article may be addressed to ribeirja@gmail.com

---

[21] John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid, *The Social Life of Information* (Harvard Business School Press: New York, 2000) xv.

[22] Davidson and Goldberg, *Future*, 23.

[23] Svendsen, *Philosophy of Fear*, 7.

[24] Ernst Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, vol. I (Frankfurt am Main, 1985), 1.