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Unit 8: Autobiographical Inquiry  
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### Living and Learning in the Digital Age

When I discovered that ED 800 encompassed the study of educational inquiry, I was intrigued immediately. Every form of inquiry that I previously knew involved students utilizing hands-on learning in the classroom. How could an entire graduate class be about inquiry, nonetheless adult inquiry? I soon learned that inquiry can take countless forms, each equally significant and relevant to education today. The form of inquiry I would soon uncover for myself was autobiographical inquiry, focused in technology. Through my own form of inquiry, I was able to discover how technology relates to my life as a teacher and about how technology of all kinds raises questions about the way we live. Reflecting on these issues guided me to understand how autobiographical inquiry really works.

Technology is critical to education today for a plethora of reasons. Nowadays, it seems as though there is a push to teach children digitally, even the notion that kids learn best this way. Technology of all kinds surrounds children constantly, which is much different than previous generations. Everything seems to be moving faster, and everyone seems to be relentlessly multitasking. When I started teaching four years ago, I was in a low-income school right outside of Detroit. There was very little technology in the school, the most advanced technology was an overhead projector. There were also no computers for student use in the building. Therefore, my first experience teaching was not driven by the “latest and greatest” technological advancement. I found myself teaching in an “old school” fashion, meaning that books, pencil and paper were my primary modes of teaching.

That soon changed dramatically. After that first year, I moved to Minneapolis and got a job teaching in the number three elementary school in the state. Suddenly, technology was all around me. Not only was it everywhere, but the teachers I found myself working with were extremely motivated by technology in the classroom. I felt I needed to keep up with them, and therefore I pushed myself to not only learn these new tools, but utilize them immediately. I had a SmartBoard in my classroom, which is connected to a computer and has the capability of doing thousands of things related to the Internet. It took many hours after school “playing” with this machine to understand how it worked, and how it could assist me in teaching my students. I also enrolled in classes to guide me with how to use it. At first, I was completely overwhelmed. The SmartBoard could do thousands of things, ranging from acting as a whiteboard, to connecting to videos, links and opportunities to learn about a given subject. What drove me to learn how to use this form of technology was how thrilled my students were to use it. We began watching BrainPop videos that linked to our curriculum and I found myself using it not only daily, but for almost every lesson I taught. I linked videos, images, made PowerPoint-like presentations for my students consistently. The more I used it, the more comfortable I felt. I realized how much it impacted me when one day our computer system was down,

and I couldn't use the SmartBoard. When I heard the news, I had a miniature panic attack, thinking how in the world would I teach my writing lesson without it? I had begun to rely on this machine so much, that I was worried about how I would teach a simple writing lesson. I was forced to go back to basics, something that actually made me nervous! My confidence as a teacher was impacted because I was forced to teach without technology.

Learning how to use a piece of technology, like the Smartboard, enabled me to see and use information in a new way. Another way I learned to use technology more recently is through free teacher websites on the Internet. I discovered that brilliant lesson plans, student sheets, videos, books, and teacher blogs related to their own successes and failures were only a click away. If I was stuck on how to present certain information to my students, I could simply "Google it". Now that I have this instrument in my teaching toolbox, I could not see it removed. I have found that technology can help me significantly when I'm in a crunch for an idea, but I've also realized it removes my ability to think for myself. Instead of looking at the curriculum and thinking about how I want to present it that makes sense for my kids, I simply take someone else's idea from the Internet. As Nicholas Carr suggests in his article "Is Google Making Us Stupid?", the Internet is "reprogramming us". His article enabled me to see a new, more unpopular way of looking at the Internet and drew me to this conclusion.

I was especially captivated by Carr's article because to be frank, I hadn't thought about technology in that way. The "rainforest" of information, as Steven Johnson explains, can be a rich resource. But, one never hears that this great invention could actually be harming not only our attention spans but also our ability to think deeply. Carr states, "In Google's world, the world we enter when we go online, there's little place for the fuzziness of contemplation. Ambiguity is not an opening for insight but a bug to be fixed. The human brain is just an outdated computer that needs a faster processor and bigger hard drive". People are encouraged to use the Internet for everything from searching information, to ordering food from your favorite pizza place, to communicating through blogs, Email, chat rooms, Facebook, etc. I feel that Carr's article forced me to think more deeply about the way we use technology today, and also altered my opinion about technology in general. In this digital world, we have everything we need at our fingertips. It is convenient, yes, but is it what's good for us in the long run?

I find myself viewing technology in two different ways. On the one hand, I love my SmartBoard and having the ability to teach students using multiple resources. It has drastically enriched the way in which I teach, and I cannot imagine going back. On the other hand, I can see what Carr is talking about when he discusses the Internet. I can recognize how this could negatively affect our culture in the future, impairing our attention spans and overall thought processes. So, technology is like a double edged sword. It can help us and hurt us at the same time. It is also, however, important to note that different types of technology can affect us in different ways. For instance, the SmartBoard and Internet search engines (like Google) should not be directly compared. Although they are both significant technologies, we use them in different ways.

Similarly, the Frontline “Digital Nation” video showcased some of the more negative effects of the Internet. This video had several engrossing themes, including the downfalls of multitasking and the likely possibility that reading books will diminish. One particular theme that changed my thinking about technology was stimulation. The video explained, “They [students] need to be stimulated in ways they didn’t need to be stimulated before... It even changes how teachers teach because now the pressure is on teachers scintillating things that will distract them from the web”. In college classrooms today, teachers are having to change the ways in which they teach to be able to accommodate digital students. I can relate to this feeling, as even I have felt that I must keep lessons visually and audibly interesting in order to not bore students. Because they are accustomed to playing video games, texting, and participating in online activities, I feel as a teacher I must keep up with that. Technology in an educational career means having to stay current in order to stay relevant. Like the mother said on the video, “You need to learn from your kids”. Will parents and teachers always be two steps behind the younger generation? Will this trend ever cease? With new technology emerging every day, I don’t see how.

Through writing this assignment, I was forced to think more deeply about technology and the way we use it in our world and classrooms today. Autobiographical inquiry enabled me to positively reflect on my teaching and how I use technology in the classroom. It also led me to question the technological advancements that govern how we live. I have studied various forms of “adult” educational inquiry in which serve as a way of searching for knowledge related to teaching and learning. Autobiographical inquiry, when compared to these other forms, has its limits. The very fact that it is “auto” means it is done alone and doesn’t focus heavily on other outside influences, which can be crucial to meaningful learning and significant connections. Oftentimes the best learning comes from an exposure to multiple resources. For instance, Philip Cusick’s *A Passion for Learning* explored seven lives and through this was able to form inquiry. Similarly, Mary Catherine Bateson implored her experiences with different cultures to reflect and grasp greater understandings. Vivian Paley used her students’ actions and dialogue to facilitate her classroom environment. Autobiographical inquiry required me to tell my own story of how technology relates to my educational career. I was required to make sense out of this story, and thus lead me to inquiry. I drew conclusions by making sense of my personal experience after the fact. To me, autobiographical inquiry was engaging because I was the one inquiring. Each form of inquiry is significant, but actually going about it yourself makes it personal.

Through autobiographical inquiry, I was able to discover how technology relates to my life as a teacher and about how different technologies raise tough questions about our current “Digital Nation”. Reflecting on these issues guided me to understand how technology impacts education on a personal level. The process of experiencing and reflecting through inquiry was meaningful because it made me connect these issues for myself, and my life as a teacher.

