

# Thinking/Teaching in Multiple Tongues The Interdisciplinary Imagination

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## Introduction: Locating Interdisciplinarity, Fear, and Multiple Tongues

**I**N THIS PAPER I reflect on a secondary fine art teacher education curriculum course I taught several years ago in which the concepts of interdisciplinarity, fear, and multiple tongues bumped up against each other in unexpected but powerfully productive and meaningful ways. Spurred on by an administrative initiative in our teacher education programme to incorporate an additional subject content area (or what we termed *second-teachables*) for all teacher education students in our secondary stream (grades 7-12), my students and I were challenged to consider how we might cultivate predispositions and attunements to teach in and through multiple subject areas.

Against the backdrop of a two-year after degree programme<sup>1</sup> (an undergraduate degree leading to a Bachelor of Education), focusing on inquiry-based, student-centred, and field-oriented experiences and contexts for preservice teachers, this curricular and pedagogical undertaking was intended to provide a way to look beyond the strict and bounded nature of disciplinary subject areas to embrace the imaginative and creative potential of interdisciplinary inquiry and integrative studies.

As a devoted and practicing interdisciplinarian I was elated about where these ideas might take us. My fine arts teacher education students, a group of 14 visual arts specialists all with Bachelor of Fine Arts degrees, in their second semester of the first year were keen to pursue this pedagogical work as for many it held curricular, creative, and practical promise. I proceeded to shape a fine arts teacher education curriculum course—two, three hour segments each week, around the following five themes: the nature of knowledge; the nature of curriculum; teaching for understanding; assessing learning; and interdisciplinarity. Under the theme of interdisciplinarity a series of guiding questions were threaded throughout our on-going discussions: What are the tensions of being a disciplinary and interdisciplinary educator? What is it about your discipline and your involvement with it that would embrace an integrative approach? How might an integrated curriculum live in your classroom and what might this say about your teaching practice? I was excited and eager to proceed, energized about my students (and my own) possible

learning that semester. I was also gripped with fear, worried about the inevitable fears my students would express about the task of learning the fine arts curriculum. How will I explain and advance this interdisciplinary approach to my students? Although enormously rich and sustaining, interdisciplinary work is demanding, rigorous and exceedingly time consuming. It is fear inducing. How would I quell these fears I wondered—my own included? I decided to begin the course talking about our unspoken fears about the curricular world we inhabit together.

Then one day, in describing interdisciplinary to my students the term “multiple tongues” slipped from my lips and everything changed for us. Captured by an incidental but evocative reference to multiple tongues (and its biblical trope the Tower of Babel), we found ourselves in unforeseen places as we followed the historical, cultural, and contemporary sense-making around multiple tongues as a way to pursue our understandings of interdisciplinary and to confront our fears of “curricula mastery” and the enactment of the “formal authorized program of studies.” The themes of interdisciplinary, fear and multiple tongues reverberated throughout the semester, offering us glimpses not only of integrative curricula and pedagogy, but more significantly of who we were, who were in relation to the other, what we believed and valued, and who we might become as artist-teachers and life-long learners.

In what follows, I begin by describing how “fear,” “fearfulness” and eventually “fear/lessness,” interlaced our pursuit to interpret and understand Interdisciplinary inquiry more fully and to consider what this might mean for our work in teacher education and our continued striving to have us think differently about curriculum and its always malleable borders. In the section “Attending to the Disciplines,” I reflect on the interruption that occurred in the class with a passing reference to “multiple tongues.” It was this occasion that seemed to transform our ongoing contemplation of fear, fearfulness, and fear/lessness in relation to curriculum knowing in teacher education. Following multiple tongues, down scraggly paths and meandering roads we were confronted by the always diverse and different worlds in which we live (in and outside of school) and that education must necessarily embrace. In multiple tongues we saw not only a curriculum to be taught but we saw each other.

Through a post-structuralist approach I have brought together multiple tongues (theoretical and interdisciplinary) to interpret how we might attend to curricular and pedagogical transformation in teacher education. In imagining new ways to take up curriculum knowing through multiple disciplinary tongues we should be prepared to listen with “multiple ears,”<sup>2</sup> in thoughtful contemplation and as Hannah Arendt (1958) has noted in “a mutuality of caring” (p. 47).

## Weathering the Storms of Fear and Fearfulness

*I am not afraid of storms for I am learning how to sail my ship.*  
*Louisa May Alcott (1832-1888)*

Coming upon the above quote recently I was struck with its rich and nuanced applicability to an inquiry-based and interpretively grounded form of teacher education. In part, it signals and gives credence to a journey/passage/voyage over its eventual destination/objective/end, enacting a dialogic relation between theory and practice. More importantly, the quote seems to speak knowingly about fear—the fear and anxiety that seems to pervade all teacher education practices, particularly those not embedded in pre-defined technical efficiencies, controlled orientations to skills, content, management, testing, and outcomes. We forget that “in learning to sail our ship”

or becoming teachers, we will undoubtedly encounter “storms”—complex questions, aporias, social and cultural debates, and the harsh awareness of our own conflicted perceptions and understandings, that will occasion our own metamorphoses as reflexive subjective selves. Learning over practical mastery defined as a technical rationalist teaching project must take precedence in the conceptualization of teacher education, for it might provide a measure of acceptance amidst the fragile, uneven, and multifarious terrain that is an inquiry-based form of teacher education.

Such understandings have critical implications for my students and me. Setting out on a new term recently in the fine arts teacher education curriculum class I teach in the Master of Teaching (MT) programme every winter, I pointed to Louisa May Alcott’s elicitory quote as a way in which the students and I might consider our work together around the broad theme of “curriculum orientations and ideologies.” The seemingly monumental task of learning to teach the curriculum often-times creates a state of *foreboding* for students who see it as a mammoth entity. Covered in minute detail it must be swallowed whole to be regurgitated to their future charges. Fearful of not being ready to teach the curriculum and uncomfortable with the contradictory ideologies it gives rise to, students take refuge, despite their best intentions, in efficient safe havens: Rote learning and memorization, a privileging of practice over philosophical and historical understanding, and outcomes and techniques in place of more meaningful interpretive inquiry. Fearfulness, a condition amplified in our current “culture of fear,” impedes a learning process that is richly fraught with challenges, difficulties, complexity and bouts of joy, suffering, and satisfaction. Fearfulness should have no place in teacher education and significantly, it should not stop us from “hearing beyond what we are able to hear” (Butler, 2004, p. 18).

A deeper and fuller understanding of *fear* (Φοβος [phobos] in Greek) may lead us to new ground. Etymologically, fear is connected to the classical Greek notion of *peira* or “experience,” in which “risking,” “trying,” “attempting,” and “going through” are crucial characteristics of learning or undertaking a new experience. Fear thus is a “sense of uneasiness caused by possible danger.” Foreboding meanwhile is an “omen,” it “presages,” and “perceives beforehand.” In Greek mythology, the twin brothers Phobos and Deimos are sons of an adulterous union between the Olympians, Ares, the God of war and Aphrodite, the Goddess of love and beauty. Accompanying their father into battle, the twins were said to sow fear and loss in their wake. Yet the joining together of these seemingly parental opposites suggests the limits of strict categorization, the hierarchal privileging of the masculine and the opening up of a possibly more generous inheritance.<sup>3</sup> Classical scholar Emma Griffiths (2005) suggests that “Aphrodite...is much more than the Goddess of love...but also attests roles [as] varied as patron of the citizen body (Pandemos ‘of all people’) and protectress of seafaring (Euploia, Pontia, Lemenia)” (p. xii). So what are we to make of *fear* if Phobos and Deimos, were seen as assimilating both their parents characteristics of fear, loss, beauty and love? Perhaps meeting fear more richly as an element in every new experience of learning, in our “risking,” “trying,” “attempting,” and “going through,” might allow us to feel its bodily exhilaration and its creative potential. To incite a conversation amongst fear, loss, love, and beauty is to glimpse our work in teacher education in vastly different ways. For to meet fear, of the dangerous text that is curriculum and all that it entails, is to acknowledge the risk and loss inherent in letting go of our firm and fixed pre-conceptions and understandings, to embrace the beauty of new and unknown vistas about the world we live in together as they open up into the future, allowing us to embrace the love of teaching, which is in the first instance what brought many of us to this place.

Fear is always present in our excitement, our exhilarations, our dreams, and imaginings. Fear claims the anticipatory moment of any curricular inquiry when we don't know what may happen or where it might take us. Fear is there when we lose our way. Fear travels with us unsettling us, tempering our need to organize, direct, and resolve the world, once and for all. Fear can prompt our intuition, provoking us to "look at" in further "consideration." Fear, is not simply a psychological state<sup>4</sup> that must be avoided to construct normative behaviors of self-esteem and self-growth. Fear is an emotion (with both conceptual and embodied aspects) that we must embrace in the teacher education classroom as it has much to offer us in its always unnerving and uncomfortable sensations.

Fearfulness is quite another matter. Judith Butler's (2009) and Susan Sontag's (2003) recent scholarship has been useful in my thinking about our current "culture of fear" and its neo-liberal, imperialistic, and authoritarian frameworks, particularly its implications for how, in the process, we grieve for the loss of the other. The provocative issues raised by Butler and Sontag about the allocation of differential human value and their dehumanizing effect bears some consideration from teacher educators and pre-service teachers. For Butler our contemporary notion of fearfulness shapes the frameworks which shape our judgments of the world and those around us. Fearfulness has become a political exigency. A way to marshal our emotions in the name of partisan notions such as "democracy" and "freedom," casting indefensible dualities between us and them, east and west, elite and marginal. Significantly, fearfulness has its own manifestations in educational contexts in imposed practices and policies around testing, outcomes, and standards. The fearfulness of not meeting arbitrary and pre-defined targets has silenced students, teachers, and parents and forged educational systems which pander to corporate agendas and often shorted-sighted, neo-liberal governmental directives. In teacher education classrooms, fearfulness is often cut along lines of theory and practice and particularly around curriculum knowing. So if we attempt to eschew the culture of fearfulness from our classrooms, exposing its political and sanitizing agendas, how do we reclaim fear for its creative potential and invoke a sense of fear/lessness in ourselves and our students?

At the end of our introductory class I drew students attention to Alcott's quote, prominently emblazoned at the top of the course outline and spoke about how I imagined its relevance to our learning during the semester. Remember this when you become unsettled I told students: "Fearfulness has no place in this class," we are "not afraid of storms for [we are] learning to how to sail [our] ship." Yet, as I said this I was reminded that "in the end [interpretive work] does not lead us back to safe shores and terra firma; it leaves us twisting slowly in the wind. It leaves us exposed and without grounds" (Caputo, 1987, p. 290). Scanning the faces of my students I sensed that they might know this as well.

I am not immune to such anxieties as I too struggle with how best to speak about and name this fearfulness and its effects in the classroom. Although on a research leave last semester, I became preoccupied with questions of how I might weather the storms of fearfulness, my own included. I have taught this fine arts teacher education curriculum, what we call a "case" class, countless times over the last ten years but I know that each iteration is a unique happening—a new constellation of imaginative possibilities, challenges, inquiries, and identities. Who are my students I wondered and what do they believe about the world? What interests them, what are they passionate about and why do they want to work with young people, at least primarily through the fine arts? Until we meet, the outline I have produced is but a malleable place-holder, an opening, an invocation and a call to inquiry. Every course I teach brings me up short as I recognize my own insatiable need to penetrate the surface of things and be part of a broader

community of inquirers. I am the hidden learner lurking in the classroom. As Freire (2005) has noted, “teachers first learn how to teach, but they learn how to teach something that is relearned as it is being taught” (p. 53). Although I am always affected by pedagogical encounters in the classroom (Panayotidis, 2007, 2009) every so often I find myself “addressed” in ways I can’t avoid or easily contain. Before I know it, a topic of investigation has taken hold and the ‘play’ has begun. We are “played,” Gadamer (1989, p. 102) would say as we lose ourselves in something more sustaining than the finite technical requirements and procedures of the moment.

With each new fine art curriculum course I teach “I want to be back in the game” (Poscente, 2009, p. 5). In every class I participate in I am struck with wonder, loss, longing for a palpable embodied need to “make art.” It is a siren call, an irresistible lure to which I inevitably heed. In those moments, words don’t seem enough and cannot restrain my own desirous embrace for aesthetic play. In so doing, my own art school days flood back, and the elation, complexity, and sensation of artistic practice and the conditions of art making seem to envelope my soul, as does the *place* in which these things became visible to me. I grew up by an ocean and spent my art schools days by another. One of my lasting memories is of spending the night working in our art school’s student studios and waking from a light sleep at dawn to see a submarine from the local navy base submerge in a thick fog as it made its way out to the open sea. Its uncanny stillness a kind of mirage. It seems that oceans, ships, and the myths, metaphors, and tales told of them continue to murmur to me. The hermeneutic circle collides for me in these curriculum spaces as the past rushes up to meet me.

It is these, memories, attachments, and understandings that connect me, in part to my fine arts teacher education students. Every pre-service teacher in my classroom is also a devoted and zealous artist/musician/ actor/dancer, with their own histories, biographies, cultures, genders, ethnicities, and ways of making sense of the world. While diverse, over the years I have come to see profoundly that after Hannah Arendt we are all committed to the political renewal of a common world, through the arts (Curtis, 1999). The arts provide an “imaginal” component that can transcend language itself, promoting “a mythopoetic approach to the aesthetic.” Recent work by Peter Willis and Tim Leonard (2008), highlight how an imaginal pedagogy summons our reflexiveness in diverse and always imaginative ways.

Such considerations are particularly crucial in this iteration of the fine arts curriculum course because the students and I are informally “piloting” a potential new secondary course segment for the programme, intending to support students to cultivate a pre-disposition to an inquiry practice that is multi/interdisciplinary in scope so that they might engage in multi-curricula teaching. I should qualify what I mean by “informally piloting” a new secondary course segment. While a committee of secondary instructors met throughout the year to discuss the possibility of how a subject content area option (a second teachable) might look, no “pilot” was actually required and I was not asked to take this on as an official project or as part of my teaching duties.<sup>5</sup> Anxious that this initiative not be reduced to a technical and cursory task and an eclectic potpourri I took this task on, with the encouragement of the head of our Division of Teacher Preparation and on behalf of my class for two reasons. In part I was fascinated by the pedagogical potential this teaching and learning opportunity opened up for my students and me, and by extension their current and future students. My intent was getting students to cultivate a passion for teaching and learning in integrative ways not simply promoting the study of an *additional* programme of studies like social studies or English. I was interested in what qualities and predispositions students expressed about integrative studies and what conditions for teaching and learning made such a practice fertile. Practically, I was sorrowfully aware of the lack of new fine

arts positions available each year and I wanted to prepare my students in ways that might help them “get their foot in the door.” Concerned not to disadvantage my students relative to their peers across the secondary stream, in the first class I carefully explained my reasoning to the students for taking up this “very interesting possibility” and sought their permission to proceed. Perhaps not surprisingly, students first and foremost were taken with the possibility of enhancing their employability. I sympathized and understood.

Preparing for this course I have feared the fearfulness to come! I’ve been wondering: It is an intricate undertaking to engage students about how to take up/interpret/plan for/enact the Fine Arts Programme of Studies, how will I account for the necessity to learn to teach multiple curricula? How will I unpack the nature of (and the unnaturalness) of knowledge, curriculum and its relation to ideology, power, interests, and agency in the shaping of a fixed and uniform school curriculum? And, how might I reveal the historical, social, cultural, and political agendas concealed in our present curricula orientations? Past values, morals, and beliefs are subtly embedded in curricula rationales and descriptions yet we hardly attend to their historical antecedents. We often re-present curriculum as if it has no history and no lineage in the world apart from its present incarnation. Meanwhile, vague and hackneyed claims to the “factory system of schooling” and Taylor’s technical rationalist influence on school curriculum play out (and badly I might add) as common-sense understandings, grounded in nothing more than discrete and allegedly-knowing sound-bites. Attending to historical curriculum revision in Canada may provide a more critical way to consider our present conditions.

Adding to this complexity is the integrated amalgam of drama, music, and visual art student cohort in this particular course. While our secondary fine arts cohort generally focuses on visual arts, drama, and music, over the last several years we have opted for more specialization and divided the cohort (usually a group of 30–35 students) between visual arts in one pedagogical group and music and drama in the other. Given my background I work with the visual arts students. Having taught both integrated and specialized versions of the fine arts curriculum class I am cognizant that paying attention to the specific and the particular clearly allowed for more evocative conversations amongst class members who often came to see themselves as part of an interpretive committee. Paradoxically, specialization seemed, at times to provide more expansive and cross-disciplinary deliberations about the teaching and learning of the visual arts in schools and in society more broadly.

However, there was nothing cumulative, evolutionary, or linear about our work in this curriculum class. As Abram (1996) has observed, the “occasional bursts of illumination” were buttressed with the everyday contextual and contingent realities of the classroom, “always finding ourselves in the midst” (p. 49) of a bodily “reciprocity” that we could not exhaust (Merleau-Ponty, 1968). Although a “fine arts teacher education class,” language was always at the core of our gatherings, we spoke it and it spoke us. More than a mere expressive conduit, language caught us, committed us, and betrayed us, it highlighted our misunderstandings, our insights, and our personal/professional vulnerabilities, transforming us in ways we had not expected. It elucidated for us how “our acts are not self-generated, but conditioned we are at once acted upon and acting, and our ‘responsibility’ lies at the juncture of the two” (Butler, 2004, p. 16). As we spoke about the place in which we found ourselves and the bodies and minds we had come to inhabit, troubling and vexing ideas suffused our considerations and we came to see that courage lives in self-knowledge. As we cultivated our understandings of the present we were reminded that we were living among ghostly inheritances (Moules, 2002). As Smith (1994) notes, “In a deep sense our language contains the story of who we are as a people. It is reflective

of our desires, and our dreams; in its silences it even tells us of what we would forget” (p. 122). We dwelled in language and while we always seemed to say much, there were many things left unsaid. We might say: We speak languages which have already spoken us into existence.

### Attending to the Disciplines

Thinking about the disciplines and language I have come to wonder: If a discipline is articulated in a particular language(s), or rather a discipline is a way of languaging the world, then I am asking students to think and teach through multiple tongues. Perhaps, in taking up our work in/through a multi/interdisciplinary perspective we will learn to think and teach in multiple tongues I suggested to students, in one of our early classes. I was ready to unfold the histories of secondary school teaching: The “origins” of academic disciplines and their morphing into insular school subjects (Aoki, 1993; Grumet, 2006); the boundaries they forge and the worlds they silence; and the way scientific technical rationalist bureaucracies have in many educational jurisdictions trumped human interpretive inquiry. I was going to highlight the rich body of research produced by educational theorists which has grappled with curriculum integration at the elementary and secondary school level. I wanted to highlight the way school schedules constrain our capacity to imagine our creative, bodily and always multiple engagements within the intersubjective world. A world we share together. As Abram (1996) has noted:

The ‘real world’ in which we find ourselves, then—the very world our sciences strive to fathom—is not [a] sheer ‘object,’ not a fixed and finished ‘datum’ from which all subjects and subjective qualities could be paired away but is rather an intertwined matrix of sensations and perceptions, a collective field of experience lived through many angles. (p. 39)

“Multiple tongues...An interesting term,” remarked one of the students. She added mischievously: “you do know that in the biblical story of the Tower of Babel, the people were struck with multiple tongues so that it might create confusion and disorientation?” Her peers began to look worried and fearful. We were all on unfamiliar ground.

Serendipitously I did not know that day the way in which the symbol of the Tower of Babel and its multiple tongues would circle us, encircle us, and imprint us on each other. Despite my intentions, and those of my students, beyond the planning and enacting of learning possibilities and occasions—I am never altogether sure how things will unfold in the classroom. Davis (cited in Poscente, 2009) notes that the “complex framework of events highlight that there are no generic teaching methods and no perfect lessons” (p. 93). So while the students looked worried and fearful, I was grateful for the interruption and the unexpected nudge from Hermes, alerting me out of my sleeping wakefulness and habits and conventions. As a teacher I long ago learned through experience and through the reminiscent re-telling(s) by other interpretive scholars (George, 2009), the value and intrinsic possibilities of being thrown off a well beaten path. As Smith (1994) reminds us “the world is always a world I share with others with whom I communicate, so my descriptions of the world are always subject to modification on the basis of what I share communicatively” (p. 108). Butler (2004) might add provocatively, “[I]et’s face it; we’re undone by each other and if we’re not, we’re missing something” (p. 23).

So was there another way to interpret multiple tongues and to re-imagine its connection to multi/inter disciplines? Why did I choose this term over others? What did I mean to say by it? And how did it so naturally slip from my lips? As a former art history student I was familiar with the Judaea-Christian Genesis story—myth to some, historical account to others—of the Tower of Babel through the paintings of Renaissance artists like Hans Holbein the Younger (1497–1543), Pieter Bruegel the Elder (1525–1569), and Abel Grimmer (1570–1619). While there are multiple renditions across different religious/spiritual traditions, the most oft-cited account comes from the Book of Genesis (Chapter 11: 1–9, King James Version). The tower, built in the then thriving and cosmopolitan city of Babylon (Babel in Hebrew), by the united descendants of the Great Flood, was built to reach God in the heavens. To halt their efforts for their effrontery, God was said to confuse their languages so they were unable to understand each other, thus ending their building and causing linguistic divergence, the dispersal of the people, and the beginning of nations.

Interestingly, in the Greek myths, “the confusion of languages” has also been attributed to Hermes, who entering a room causes silence. Descending on the conversation he introduces a new dimension into the gathering. Whenever things seem fixed, rigid, stuck, Hermes introduces fluidity, motion, new beginnings—and the confusion that almost inevitably precedes new beginnings. The story of the Tower of Babel and its multiple tongues or the confusion of the languages (and the fearfulness that it evoked) has figured prominently in contemporary scholarship in linguistics and in acrimonious debates between Christian creationists, adherents of the “intelligent design theory,” and secular evolutionists (Pennock, 2000), trying to account for a supernatural, genetic, or cultural origin to the multiplicity of languages.<sup>6</sup> The Tower of Babel has also been the subject of efforts to understand and deconstruct the difficulty of translation. Derrida (1985) translates Babel as “confusion.” Recently the notion of multiple tongues has also been implicated in contemporary discussions around cultural divergence and the acquisition of second and third languages and its relation to globalization. “The polyphony of languages...is a constitutive yet ephemeral aspect of the ‘urban global...made manifest in the metropolitan clash of languages’” (Durovicavá, 2003, p. 60).

“Tongue” has an interesting and polymorphous history etymologically. From the Greek it is glossa: Polyglottos if you speak many languages and glossolalia if you “speak in tongues.” In Latin it is lingua. From old French (c.1290) comes our current term Language. In old English tongue is referred to interchangeably as “an organ of speech,” “speech” itself, and “language.” Bakhtin (1984) used the term *heteroglossia* (or interchangeably ‘polyphony’ or ‘polyglossia’) to speak of the different voices that can be heard in a single text or to distinguish the multiplicity of voices (male, female, high, low) that exist, in popular imaginings. There is a multitude of metaphors and analogies about the tongue as an instrument of our conceptual and corporeal behaviors, emotive acts, and alleged truth-telling. Gordon (1996) remarks that “metaphors both conceal and reveal...they express much, but also lose and overlook. They clarify and confuse” (p. 303). Things are on the tip of our tongue. People speak with a forked tongue, serpents’ tongue, and thus have an evil tongue. We find ourselves tongue tied trying to solve this or that tongue twister. We give someone a tongue lashing with our sharp and cutting tongue. At times, rather than uttering the unsaid we hold and bite our tongue. We speak with a privileged silver tongue and worry about our slips of the tongue. We claim a mother tongue and we speak of language as a tongue. “That’s a fascinating list,” offered one of the students. She spent the remainder of the term drawing tongues in her curriculum casebook.<sup>7</sup>

This is where the story entangles me. I claim a mother tongue which claims me to this day. I am a polyglot who speaks in multiple tongues in both personal and professional contexts. As an eight-year old immigrant child to Canada my learning of multiple tongues was expected and compulsory, a requirement for my citizenship in my adopted country. To think and speak in multiple tongues (sometimes at the same time; a common feature in ethnic families sometimes referred to as code-switching or interlanguage by second-language scholars) was both fear-provoking and enlivening. As a child I was fascinated that I could work out some words and their meanings because of their Greek roots. Having attended grade 1 and 2 in Greece there were things I already knew: I knew that the planets and their moons, and many of the constellations were named after classical Greek and Roman gods and goddesses; I knew the two moons orbiting Mars (the Roman God of war, in Greek Ares) are named Phobos and Deimos; I knew the school subjects such as history (Gk. *historia*), mathematics (*mathematike tekhnē*) and geography (*geographia*), although I confess to being a little puzzled by “English.” I knew who Hermes was. He is not the Hermes I know today who shapes, shifts, and soars through my writing. Then he was the young god; playful, mischievous, childlike, a fibber, who with his winged sandals and cap could fly to Mount Olympus, the home of his father Zeus. My teachers, at least in the early years, seemed impressed, and I was at times elated to be noticed, despite my ostensible classification as a “new Canadian.” It would be a long-time before I came to understand that a white child from a “classical” Western nation and from continental Europe held a different cultural capital than immigrant children from other parts of the world. Yet, I remain grateful to the worlds it opened up to me (or I rushed out to meet), the privileged possibilities it has produced in my life, and the *polyglossia* it has engendered. Our actions are situated and temporal—and our lives are always storied. Philosopher Richard Kearney (2002) opines that, “narrative [is] a stay against confusion” (p. 4) “Stories,” however, “are never innocent” (p. 81) as they are visceral vestiges of how we attempt to “imagine...ourselves otherwise” (p. 83). I remember now why the term multiple tongues slipped so easily from my lips.

Perhaps not surprisingly, my academic work has also been marked by a deep scholarly commitment to thinking, speaking, and writing in multiple tongues or to be more theoretically precise—interdisciplinarity. It is a troubling and often dangerous and fearful term with multiple interpretations depending on your academic philosophical predispositions and scholarly orientations.<sup>8</sup> Klein (1990) writes that although difficult to define and “subject to wide confusion...all interdisciplinary activities are rooted in ideas of unity and synthesis evoking a common epistemology of convergence” (p. 11–12). Interdisciplinarity is a challenge to the “modern connotation of disciplinarity [which] is a product of the nineteenth century and is linked with several forces: the evolution of the modern natural sciences, the general ‘scientification’ of knowledge, the industrial revolution, technological advancements, and agrarian agitation” (p. 21).

To strict disciplinarians, interdisciplinarity is an epistemological travesty to the integrity of the discipline(s), a fashionable fixation of the “untrained,” and the unfocused pre-occupation of the “generalist” and the “academic dabbler.” I’ve often wondered: Who do I become through interdisciplinary study? Yet, like many others I became an interdisciplinarian through studying a discipline(s). As a visual art and later art history student, I was oriented to see the past (and by association the present) as a complex, connected, contingent, contextual and cultural world that was more than its predetermined and enclosed parts. Prior to the disciplinary revision of the 1970–80s, and the onslaught of the social-culturally infused “new art history,” the study of the European male “masters” was the mainstay of the Western art history curriculum. Sitting in darkened classrooms, for a two-hour lecture, it was not unusual to face a dizzying barrage of

100–250 images of “great works” which you were to expected to expertly organize, classify, and regurgitate on exams. It went like this:

**SLIDE:** Pieter Bruegel the Elder was a renowned master painter and printer maker of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Flemish school (Dutch/Renaissance). He specialized in landscapes and scenes of “everyday life” hence his attribution as the “peasant Bruegel.” His work showed “human weakness,” the “absurd” and the “vulgar.” One of his most famous paintings is the *Tower of Babel* painted circa 1563. Painted on oil on panel it hangs in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. He also did the Little Tower of Babel (circa 1563). *I’m sure you all know the biblical story of the Tower of Babel.*

“What’s the Tower of Babel?” my friend Nokkao, the Japanese exchange student, whispered in the dark.

**SLIDE:** Hans Holbein the Younger, a German who practiced in the Northern Renaissance style. Although known as a portraitist of elites he also contributed to book design, illustrating Martin Luther’s German translation of the Bible. He also painted scenes from the Old Testament. He drew this scene entitled, *Builders at Work on the Tower of Babel*, circa 1525.

**SLIDE:** Abel Grimmer, a Flemish Baroque era painter worked with his brother Jacob. He painted mostly landscape, genre subjects, as well as religious scenes. Following Bruegel the Elder he did a very interesting painting of the Tower of Babel in 1604. Here we see the Flemish and Northern Renaissance convention, drawing the tower as a conic shape, cut off at the top and with a corkscrewed ramp on the outside.

“Excuse me” ran out a voice from the dark. “Why was everyone depicting the Tower of Babel during the Renaissance?” In “Los Toquis, or Urban Babel,” Durovicavá (2003) suggests that,

[in the] Middle Ages the perennial threat of dispersed, failed communication must be overcome by a religious adherence to a perfect language, to a non-vernacular *lingua franca* i.e. to the artificial meta-language of Latin, which is the exclusive tool—indeed home—of the Global Church itself. But with the Reformation after mid-16<sup>th</sup> century legitimizing the spoken vernaculars in their full arbitrariness and variety, over and against the unifying force of Latin, it was iconic medium of painting that became a necessary or at least a particularly suitable strategy and representational supplement for rendering the polylinguality in the North-European countries (p. 62)

Half way through the term I brought in a series of images of “Tower of Babel school” from the Northern Renaissance and we discussed the place they held in representing the Reformation and interrupting the dominant discourse of the Latin Church. “This was not mere nostalgic spectacle,” I suggested to the students. “These paintings were used to argue” for a new way to interpret the world and one’s place within it. “Art is its own language,” a student added. We all nodded our heads in agreement—it was after all a language we were fluent in. Referencing Durovicavá’s work to the class brought an unexpected burst of excitement from students. In part we had circled around and found our way back to art. The student drawing tongues had switched

to drawing contemporary expressions of the Tower in the guise of global corporate entities. The idea of multiple tongues and the Tower of Babel had inaudibly captured our attention. Curious about the historical, cultural, religious, and symbolic iconography of the Tower and its contemporary manifestations in popular culture, students began to detail where they had come across the Tower and perhaps more importantly what this might mean. “Does anyone know Tower of Babel.com?” Asked a student one day. “It’s an on-line journal of art and ideas, blogged by people around the world.” On their website they say:

Babel. That’s right, finishing where we left off. Making tower meet sky so you can play dice with the Man and Woman Upstairs. Our building plans are universal, so just tear your tongue out right now ’cause you won’t need it...utilizing the new media of the web to reach out to as large and inclusive a world community as possible and celebrate human enlightenment regardless of language, cultural or social restrictions. (<http://towerofbabel.com/about/>)

We spent some time discussing whether the Internet was the contemporary Tower of Babel with its multiple and often confusing tongues. “Hmm, this is really a different way to think about kid’s technology use in the classroom, don’t you think?” Someone asked. I was reminded of John Dewey’s comment: “The prime difficulty...is that of discovering the means by which a scattered, mobile, and manifold public may so recognize itself as to define and express its interests” (as cited in Slater, 2004, p. 47). Several weeks later a student eagerly reported watching her “favorite movie of all time: *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*” (1977) and seeing the *mountain* (Devils Tower) a potent symbolic representation of the Tower of Babel) where humans and aliens would communicate (speak) for the first time. “No way,” yelled one of the students excitedly “I’ve seen that movie and I never made that connection!” Film scholar Vivian Sobchack (1987) confirms that in the movie,

Devil’s Tower resembles the Tower of Babel painted by Bruegel the Elder. Upthrusting from the barren Wyoming landscape, its flattened top an aborted reach to the sky, it is an iconic figure that both represents and reverses the biblical narrative of failed communication. (p. 189–90)

Durovicavá (2003) notes that,

like all myths, that of Babel is reversible, a coin with two sides, a story both of the aspiration for a universal language and of the fatal curse of such aspiration...the Babel Effect...resonates of both fear and the excitement of linguistic difference” (p. 60–61).

In education, the diversity of tongues and the difference(s) it may stir up has been variously interpreted as a technical problem to be fixed by our scientific gaze or a rich cultural and contextual heritage which leads us to greater and deeper understanding. Perhaps as Viv Edwards (1998) suggests, the power of Babel stands for the possibility of promoting greater linguistic and cultural diversity in the classroom. One day, during a rousing discussion over coffee, a student looked at me and said: “all this talk of multiple tongues... we’ve really been talking about diversity and difference in the classroom, haven’t we?” Not to understand, to communicate, to be heard is a fearfulness that we have all experienced. Immigrant children in classrooms unable to

communicate often live in heightened fearful and emotional states. Curriculum knowing and enacting in schools cannot simply be about how to deliver content abstractly and devoid of the contextual and situational realities of particular classrooms of children and young people. In multiple tongues, we not only find interdisciplinary curricular inquiries that open up to the world, but we find one another.

I remember now why the term multiple tongues slipped so easily from my lips.

### “A Coin with Two Sides” and the Liminal Spaces In-Between

Our last class was spent reflecting on the nature of teaching and learning and its utopian possibilities for a new world in which art was valued, esteemed, and desired each and every day in schools. We talked about the term to come and student teacher’s ethical responsibilities in classrooms alongside partner teachers and students. We talked about art historian Mieke Bal’s (1999) assertion that “a theoretical link between linguistic, visual and aural domains that blend so consistently in contemporary culture...remain so insistently separated as fields of study in the academy” (p. 10). As we talked hopefully about the world that awaited them as artist-teachers, students amusingly peppered their conversation with allusions to multiple tongues. The student drawing tongues earlier in the year presented an impromptu exhibition of her images, much to her peers’ enjoyment. Someone wrote a poem about the confusing tongues of teenagers and I shared the research I was doing on “multiple tongues.” I read (in my best dramatic voice, enunciating every word) the list of metaphors I was gathering related to the tongue. “Things are on the tip of our tongue. People speak with a forked tongue; serpents’ tongue, and thus have an evil tongue. We find ourselves tongue tied trying to solve this or that tongue twister...”

We agreed with Kearney that we live in a “Babel of stories” (Kearney, 2002, p. 28).

After a pause I asked: How did we find our way *here*? And what might we know today about the fearful text of curriculum, integrative studies, diversity, and difference? After a long silence a student remarked:

Well, I feel better. Early in the term I thought we were going to have to learn the other programme of studies to say we have a second-teachable. I guess what I’ve learned is that I can teach in other subject areas, but it’s not just content that matters...it’s how I approach it and what I believe about it that makes a difference.

Someone else spoke: “Weren’t we doing integrative work after all?” “Talking about multiple tongues, all term,” added another student, “made me really conscious of all the ESL kids in my classroom—I spent all of my time with them and they always sought me out!—I’ve been thinking a lot about how to celebrate diversity and be inclusive in my future classroom.” We all nodded in agreement, perhaps conscious of how our fear slipped away as we extended our thinking beyond the predetermined boundaries of disciplinary subject areas.

Our generative pursuit of multiple tongues had suspended fearfulness at least in this space and time, in favor of a rich quest for interpretation and meaning. Thinking of language as a living entity, I was reminded of Gayatri Spivak’s (1988) notion that words can clear spaces for multiple voices and allow us to glimpse something new, unexamined, or taken-for-granted. Fear was transposed into a pedagogical inquiry, in which we “risked,” “tried,” “attempted” and “went through”— all crucial characteristics of learning or undertaking a new experience such as the

study of the fine arts curriculum. As one student said to me a year later, “you kept us so busy asking what this and that meant...I forgot to be scared of the curriculum.” While conscious of the sins of forgetfulness I wonder how it might, in this context, allow students to take up fear as a welcome summons to the unknown?

Something happened to us. “Above our own wanting and doing” (Gadamer, 2004, p. xxvi), my class and I found our way to some unanticipated places as we followed the historical, cultural and contemporary sense-making around multiple tongues. Along the way, we thought, debated, and wrestled with the significance of our findings and particularly how our topic pointed us to the educational realities in our midst. As we unfolded our inquiry about multiple tongues, within the confines of our curricula investigations, and within rich and sustaining conversations, things were exposed and simultaneously concealed and unconcealed. Our considerations, acts of collaboration were always enframed (Butler, 2009) as we considered human inquiry in our daily practice. Facing the utter interpretability of the world we came to see the necessity of situating ourselves in the world and in relation to each other, our partner teachers in schools and the children and young people to whom we are entrusted. We realized, perhaps after the fact, that “to conduct a conversation means to allow oneself to be conducted by the subject matter” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 361). Yet we saw that “conversations are not conducted by people, but rather in a good conversation, people are conducted by conversation” (p. 363). It was in those moments that we discovered how much we didn’t know about the world, tempered with our understandings that we were entering dialogues which were already in progress and would continue long after we are gone. While our discussion may have begun as a curricular and pedagogical inquiry we came to confront diversity, difference, and question the margins, boundaries, and limits that schooling, curricula, and technical rationalist policies and practices impose upon us. So, remember I said to my students, as they were packing up to leave the class for the last time, “tell your students that school should always be a place of discovery, creativity, and as often as possible a place of joy. So they should not be “afraid of storms for [they are] learning...how to sail [their] ship.”

“What did you learn about the possibility of incorporating second teachables into the programme?” The head of our teacher education programme asked one day, shortly after the class was over. His question stayed with me. Thinking back now, I realize that there is nothing fixed, definitive, or generalizable that I might say about how we might orient teaching additional content areas (second-teachables) across our secondary stream, because the application of methods cannot simply and efficiently override the contextual and contingent worlds in which we find ourselves. That was precisely the problem from the beginning. Perhaps what I might share with my colleagues is our continued striving to have us think differently about curriculum and its always malleable borders; to seek in language and observation (and other texts) ways to make the familiar strange and the known re-understood. To disturb the way in which we so discretely organize secondary subject areas, much for our benefit as for students. To treat all knowledge as active and organic and to resist the urge for closure and finality. Alternately we might try to cultivate in students (and in our selves) a “deep puzzling” and an insatiable urge to pursue whatever is over the horizon or what so easily slips from our lips.

### About the Author

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of Education, University of Calgary, where she teaches courses in fine arts, visual culture, and spatiality in education.

## NOTES

1. Due to a new administration, the contingencies of global recession, and other institutional directives and exigencies, the Master of Teaching Programme (MT) at the University of Calgary programme was re-organized in 2009/2010. For elaborated discussions on the origins, philosophical, conceptual and practical aspects of the former MT programme see: Lund, D., Panayotidis, E.L., Phelan, A. P., Towers, J., & Smits, H. (2003); Lund, D., Panayotidis, E. L., Smits, H., & Towers, J. (2003, 2006); Panayotidis, 2007; Phelan, A. (2005, 2009); Smits, H., Towers, J., Panayotidis, E.L., & Lund, D. (2008); Towers, J. (2008).
2. I wish to thank an anonymous reviewer for bringing the notion of “multiple ears” to my attention.
3. Griffiths (2005) and Butler (2000), in their psychoanalytic studies of classical figures Medea and Antigone, highlight the malleability and emblematic work of gender in the classical myths and the performative subject positions they inhabit historically. Contemporary interpretations by Griffiths and Butler offer new ways to consider these classical women and their storied conduct.
4. From a scientific clinical perspective, phobia(s) are recognized as sub-types of anxiety disorders in *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV)*. As such I am aware that fear, stress, and anxiety are emotive expressions and acts (at times highly gendered) that are located in the body. “Teachers [and pre-service teachers] feel their work in their bodies” (citing Burkitt, Estola, 1999, p. 706).
5. In the end a “second teachable” course in curriculum for secondary-stream students was never implemented in part due to lack of resources.
6. Where languages were once proliferated, today languages are being lost at an alarming number. Anthropologist Wade Davis (2009) estimates that among the 7,000 languages in the world today, 50% will disappear in our lifetime. With the loss of language would precipitate the disappearance of poetry, songs, knowledge, and voice.
7. The curriculum case book, one of the key assignments of this course was conceived as an on-going project in which students were invited to *draw* together ideas discussed over the length of the course, addressing the theory and practice of arts teaching in the schools and its socio-cultural and historical contexts. Students were invited to draw, doodle, and sketch during our classroom discussions, as one way to capture fleeting ideas, memories, research, and conversations.
8. Interdisciplinary practice is often politically fraught with difficulty at the institutional level and is *fear*-inducing, particularly for untenured scholars, concerned with professorial advancement.

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