

**The Art of the Teacher:  
A Hermeneutic Self-Evaluation of a Polish-  
Canadian “Imaginative Education” Graduate at  
Simon Fraser University**

**by**

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## **Abstract**

I have spent most of this program reading, not just completing the course texts provided, but also doing a lot of varied reading from different contexts and directions of Action Research. In order to find the right methodology for presenting my particular narrative, I have explored an array of literature on action research, writing exploration, autobiographies of International and Canadian philosophers, SFU Policies, a/r/tographical works, and even constructivist and developmental counselling, all of which have shaped the designs and redesigns of my work, but has also helped me to understand into which ways Action Research can be realized.

My research has taken a multitude of forms since its inception. The first three proposals were written up for my cohort to view and the fourth was the seed of the direction into which my research had finally taken. The first idea would include a proposition, extended from a previous class, calling all cohort Imaginative Educators to consider partaking in a joint project. Due to time constraints for classmates, this project was understandably unrealistic. I reconsidered my proposal to, instead, have my cohort test out the efficacy of a Googledocs-like system for the collaboration of written pieces during the semester, especially as a consideration for the current web-system upgrades taking place in the university. Due to sensitivities to ethical codes and privacy in research policy, the project had to be abandoned, although I took the opportunity to partake in a web survey administered by the WebCT Replacement Project Team and emailed additional suggestions upon gaining new insights, such as considering a system that unifies email, an organized archival system, and word processing, research, scheduling, and project building forums, which could be shared and worked on collaboratively, in real time, from remote places. The third revision was entitled, "An Inquiry into the Efficacy of Critical Creative Activities Toward the Development of Curriculum for (Intercultural) Community Building". Although at the time this title represented a borborygmus of undigested ideas, I realize now that this project may take its place on the stage at a later date.

## **Dedication**

My mother and father have always had great dreams; with that came great learning. To my father who has found a way to be all these things in his spare time: historian, mathematician, economist, baker, thinker, walker, technician, researcher and to my mother who hones the gifts of an artist, reader, writer, storyteller, cook, giggler, naturalist, and animal-appreciator. An extra thank you to my mother, who met me half way in the collaborative effort of translating the beautiful Rumi poem, "Music Master", into the Polish language, so that I could hear it resonate within me in my mother tongue. Your timely manner in which to present me with my time-capsule letter, written in Grade 6, was what tied the piece together as it allowed me to, again, see whom I've always known to be. To my best friend, thank you for walking the path alongside me!

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to bring you back to the seed of the direction in which my research has unto this point been directed to, that of a phenomenological-hermeneutic nature. This path, as well, has taken many different forms while new concepts and ideas of phenomenology and hermeneutics were mediated to me. It was since the suggestion of this form of inquiry, in fact, that I was unable to put my research into words as the massive amounts of reading I had done continually shifted the expression of my research. In order to get a clear grasp on these philosophical concepts, I had asked Dr. Mark Fettes for extra reading examples to learn from and had read them all carefully, except for the writings of Jan Zwicky on Wittgenstein, although Dr. Fettes' description of her work was adequate enough to gain the essence of what such an example could impart to me. I do intend to look at her work in the near future as I think it could be of great use to understanding the creative ways in which philosophy can be presented and interpreted.

Thanks to Dr. Gajdamaschko's recommendation to create a Twitter account; I have also spent the term reading the various interesting articles she has shared through this technological medium, linking psychology to education and the issues that are being raised in this field of study. I have also taken the opportunity to share my own findings of articles and tools through Twitter. Both Dr. Gillian Judson and (soon to be) Dr. Kym Stewart have been helpful in presenting various resources and in answering questions regarding my professional, academic, and research pursuits. These, in many ways, have been related to the ongoing journey of my life-long research. Dr. Kieran Egan has been a mainstay supportive presence throughout the Imaginative Education program, answering questions promptly to direct understanding and also taking the time to support academic and professional visions.

The WebCT and Dialogue Central forums have been a wonderful source of collaborating on ideas and I have managed to read through every post, hopefully responding with thoughtful enough comments on the works of all my peers. The various projects that have been presented by the cohort, and also by external mentors, over the semesters, have imparted on me a deeper understanding of how action research brings enough flexibility to different educational disciplines so as to open doors, which all

persons involved may not have imagined at the outset, though now see the benefit of imagining further. In as much as I worked with my CFF's (my 'Critical Friends Forever') within the online forums and in-class study groups, I also tried my best to contribute to all other work that was posted or discussed. I am aware that my quota for posting my own work was not reached, and I found that responses were limited, as I was not able to clearly verbalize or write about what I was exploring in all its complexity. Realizing how closely my work is tied to my personal story, I also needed to find the courage to openly write out these complexities. To gain greater perspective (and possibly to find my courage), I pushed my collaborative learning experience beyond the classroom and into the larger SFU Educational Community to see what other people were talking about and presenting.

Early in the semester, I attended a workshop at SFU Burnaby where the National Film Board made a cross-country visit to share some of the innovative ways in which NFB films could be used in presentations using online editing tools. I also had a glance at new ways in which documentaries are being filmed for interactive web-based uses.

To understand better what steps were necessary in writing and finalizing a thesis, I attended a workshop at SFU Vancouver, led by Joanie Wolfe, Theses Assistant, who was able to give an overview of the template available on the library website and also provided the group with time saving tricks that she had built into the template program.

Scanning the vast amounts of emails that I've been receiving from SFU administrators, faculties, societies and groups, I came across the President's Faculty Lecture in which Laura Marks would be speaking on the films of Islamic Lebanese filmmaker, Mohamed Soueid. She demonstrated how such films have the potential of unfolding enfolded knowledge into new perceptions and equally enfolding unfolded knowledge into future questions to be asked. Later that evening at the President's Dinner, with the help of Dr. Fettes and (soon to be) Dr. Stewart, I was able to reflect on effective presentation styles and to see the importance of clarity and imagination within a presentation. That evening, I was also able to meet education graduate students from various faculties (and even nations) with whom I have since held contact.

Randolph-Dalton Hymen, a PhD candidate and a dancer whom I initially met at a talk being given by Dr. Sean Blenkinsop on the implementation of the outdoor environmental school in Langley, was sharing his ethnographic discoveries of the lives of the workers who provided the labour in harvesting and processing one of the most expensive coffees of the world, that of Blue Mountain in Jamaica. His presentation was discussed through economic concepts (with the help of Dr. June Francis), with which he was able to link his data to images and metaphors of dance, movement and body. Present at this Graduate Student Society meeting was Dr. Yaroslav Senyshyn of the Faculty of Music Education, who, following a presentation on Asperger's Syndrome, imparted on the group the perspective that some people may be tuned to a very specific wavelength that may not be shared with many, but instead of seeing this person as an 'other', to embrace the gift of his ability to connect to a unique space in which genius comes forth. Sitting to my right was a graduate student who has since introduced me to concepts of 'Embodied Cognition', inquiring particularly on how undergraduate students choose to express their understandings of mathematical concepts through the body as well as how interactive imagery can help students solidify mathematical concepts. His on-going discussions with me have taught me much on the importance of observing how and what one communicates through the body, and he has also provided me with challenging questions to help percolate my critical thoughts into action.

With attention back on Imaginative Education, I attended the NIET meeting at SFU Surrey, organized by the previous cohort. I was hoping to meet other imaginative educators who have had experience in teaching adults and to hear some of their ideas regarding Imaginative Education being used in their classrooms. In observing this meeting, I was able to hear the various definitions that others have of Imaginative Education and to learn about the continual formation of the theory and practice within an array of classrooms. It was inspiring to see how the group supported each other in their movement to bring Imaginative Education further into the educational world through the number of projects that they continue to build on.

"Constructing an identity through time: Implications for doctoral students and post-docs", was a research presentation, given by Dr. Cheryl Amundsen (SFU) and Dr. Lynn McAlpine (Oxford), which helped me to see what a hermeneutic presentation on qualitative research might look like. It was an extremely useful account of, mostly,

female PhD and Post-Doctoral students and how they fared in the process of such a challenging educational journey. This presentation allowed me to see the realities, in light of gathered personal narratives, of the life of PhD students and the difficulties that often emerge. The professors were also very helpful in suggesting tools that can help overcome these challenges, such as networking socially and inter-textually. This presentation gave me time to reflect on what my educational and professional goals might be and how I can go about learning more about them. It was wonderful to see two friends and professionals working, researching and writing together, in what felt like a supportive, healthy, and understanding partnership.

Coming to the semester's close, Dr. Heesoon Bai, read, in traditional philosophical style, her paper on the importance of cultivating wisdom in modern western educational practices; however, she broke this traditional recital when she peppered her paper with humorous and endearingly humanizing breaks of laughter and sips of water; further, she salted her notions with expressive presentations from her students. Two students shared the words of wise Eastern prophets in the Chinese dialect in which they were conceived, exemplifying the power of listening to wisdom in another language and from another culture, despite being defeated in finding the perfect translation that truly captures the essence of the words. In her recitation, Dr. Bai stated that intellect through knowledge is important, but, she stressed that birthing wisdom into a world of modern capital exuberance may also be required in upholding a more sustainable future. Despite the pain of birthing wisdom (as some of her graduate students exemplified through an interpretive dance to the beats of body-vibrating drumming and the words of ancient Persian poet, Hafez), a calm demeanour was exemplified, as if knowing that the pain was worth what gifts come from having birthed this long labour, wisdom. The President's Dinner following the presentation allowed me to (re)connect with students and leaders from other programs who have been, with frequency, appearing around my gradually growing academic community circle.

I was happy to find that student presentations moved beyond the campuses and into smaller community establishments, such as at the community-engaged Rhizome Café, off of Main Street, where PhD students are encouraged to share their chosen research or papers that they hope to propose for presentations at various conferences,

including the AERA (American Educational Research Association) conference being held in Vancouver (and Canada for that matter) for the first time in history in April, 2012.

The expansion of my learning from these talks and presentations has inspired me to continue looking for others that I know will contribute to growing my toolbox of understandings. Attending these presentations has brought to my attention many examples of the most effective ways in which to ask eloquent questions and in how to form creatively critical responses to various life works. In the near future, I will be attending a MITACS Networking workshop at UBC, an SFU Surrey mural project for youth, a two-day conference on Transformation in Collaborative Learning at SFU Downtown and a possible breakfast with the President, in which I look forward to learning a little about the issues that are felt in the SFU culture.



*You that love lovers,  
this is your home. Welcome!*

~::~~

Dearest Reader,

May I take a thoughtful moment to imagine whom you might be? You could be someone who cares about the values and knowledge that our children and communities are being taught. You may be an educator, an artist, someone who finds insight in learning about people's lives. You appreciate the artistry found in life and good teaching. You might be amused and moved by poetry, words, music, dance, artistic expressions and the various other 'forms' that penetrate vast amounts of worldly objects and subjects. You recognize the importance of developing consciousness and healthier wellbeing through profound transformative experiences. You are someone who wonders about the various cultures that meet in any given part of the world and are interested in finding entries for their cultural ways to intertwine, and for understanding to be made in the process.

Following along this sojourn of lived experiences, I encourage reflection upon the ways in which you express your inner self, your learning, your experiences and your potential future. If successful, I may stir in you a need to feel a depth to your own understanding of the world and yourself, and to find the empowerment to express yourself creatively after reading my words and story. May you gratefully accept any inchoately formed images in the poetics that will be scripted onto these pages and see how they connect you to your own experiences and identity of the past and present, and for a possible future. Wisdom, as does imagination, works through many mediums, even through those unsaid, as the creation of forms is as flexible as the combined meanings that shape them.

~::~~

*Wy kochając kochanków  
To jest wasz dom. Witajcie!*

*~ Rumi*

# Chapter 1.

## Introduction: A Personal Reflective Ethnography

Dear Karolina,

By the year 2012 when I will be 32 years old, I predict that I have just finished University and started a family. I have been married for 9 years and have 2 children already. One is 8 years old, she is very helpful and beautiful. My son which is 2 ½ is so cute and very noisy but co-operative. Their names are Danielle, maybe Katie and Fraser or Nicky. My family is wonderful. When I finished University I decided to be a Doctor. I work as a Plastic Surgeon, and also a family doctor, and sometimes I take jobs as a heart and brain surgeon. My husband is also a doctor, he is a heart and brain surgeon also. Our family travels a lot every year. My Mother and Father are still alive, healthy and well.

Love, Karolina  
June 23, 1992, 10:00 am  
Grade 6  
Do not open till 2012

Tree Pose. Standing Straight. Balancing on One Leg. Rooting into Ground.  
Resting Other Leg like Triangle on Inner Thigh. Hands in Prayer at Chest or Above  
Head. Breathe.

As my youthful new students sat in a circle in front of me, I slowly positioned myself, into tree pose, and, took a breath. It was our first day, our first morning, our first observation of each other. The room was an unsure silence that the stark white boards quietly absorbed. Behind me, one would see four questions: Is balance necessary? How do you find balance in your life? Do you feel balance in Canada? What puts you off balance? Smiling, I asked the students what balance meant to them and if they could define it. Words and gestures filled the room as they worked to express the word 'BALANCE', and to understand the strangely sounding phrasal verb, *to put off*. I watched as the forces around my body continued to push and pull to find that place we were so desperately trying to find and define, 'BALANCE'.

Into a time capsule we go and find ourselves a year and a half later in my parents' humble home, their seventh in Canada, I believe. It was on Good Friday that my parents passed me the white office envelope with my name neatly printed in the middle and a disclaimer in the top right hand corner that stated: 'Do not open till 2012'. "You got one thing right in your letter," my father smiled as I slipped my finger into the open end of the envelope. I couldn't remember what I had written. In fact, the event of putting the letter into a time capsule that my class had dug a hole for in a ceremony held at the back of my elementary school in Grade 6, had *totally* eluded my memory. Even more curious, how did it end up in my parents' safety deposit box when it had surely been buried under ground, the way that I now remember it had been? "Too bad life didn't work out like this," my mother said, while chopping vegetables for her well-loved *salatka* (pronounced *sa-wa-tka*: a potato-like salad with pickles and apples and peas) that we were all looking forward to eating at Easter brunch the next day. I slipped the letter into my bag, deciding that I had to give it the right place of opening and remembering something I had read Dr. Carl Leggo describe about cracks, which he had discovered in a Leonard Cohen poem.

"There is a crack, a crack in everything,

That's how the light gets in"

Leggo's reflection quite appropriately states, "When we are summoned by an obligation of fidelity to step into that crack, we cultivate the ground for a curriculum in which teachers and students can dis(e)rupt language, enter dialogues with others about their lives, school each other in thought, language, and ethical action. That is, Gadamer tells us, the very soul of hermeneutics". (Husebe-Ludt, Chambers, Leggo, 2009, p. 107)

Driving up the road, I exchanged short glances with the flower-printed bag in the passenger seat that held my letter, wondering what I had got right, and even more so, what it was that I had got wrong. I knew just the place. No, it wasn't my elementary school where this letter must have been, secretly in the middle of the night, taken out of the time capsule that was in the hole dug behind the school by my Grade 6 class. Intuitively, I knew it had to be the place where all my grandiose dreams were *thrown off* balance (another challenging phrasal verb) and one where I rarely return to.

It was in my fourteenth year of life that I turned forty, which is the atomic number of zirconium, the number of days and nights that the rain fell during the ancient floods (as written in the Torah), the number of days and nights that Jesus fasted in the Judean

desert, and the age that the Quran states a person is fully grown; it was the age of the Islamic leader, Muhammad, when he received his revelations from the archangel Gabriel. The number holds its place in the Arabic proverb, "To understand a people, you must live among them for 40 days", and for those who love anything to do with letters, the word, 'forty', is arranged in alphabetical order. At fourteen, my brothers were twelve and eight. At fourteen, I was the only person in my family working.

I come from an immigrant family. My parents came from Poland with not much in their pockets, only hopes and dreams in this new world of opportunity called 'America'. Well, 'Canada' for real, but where they come from, people don't really see it as different from America. Nonetheless, their dreams were what fueled their survival. Their dreams were the fuel that moved their traveling car from opportunity to opportunity, but despite the investment that was put into this new car, it seemed to have just been depreciating over time. I can see that life wasn't easy for them. I can also see that their life was so focused on attaining these dreams that they forgot to observe the world around them, the world that they now lived in, the world they have no choice but to live in and the world they had to teach their children to live in. But, how could they teach their children to live in this new world if they didn't even understand it themselves? How could they understand it for themselves if they weren't connected to anyone who could explain it to them? By fifteen, I was able to save enough money to buy my father a used car so that he could get to and from his new job.

The complexity in my (re)search begins with the idea that what, and whom I am teaching, directly relates to and is interchangeable with the work that I do outside of my classroom. Often, my classroom and its dynamics reflect the layers of complexity within myself, which makes it that much more imperative to understand those peeling layers more clearly in order to more effectively unfold the layers of the group that I am working with. The complexity continues to reveal itself when having understood something profound, at times, through a serendipitous intervention that brings forth something, the perfect thing, whether it be a poem, a picture, a rainbow, a hummingbird, or a letter (which must have at some point been held for ransom by the person who dug it up) to mediate not only understanding in myself, but also in what we are meant to understand together.

I started to recognize that I was transferring my own experiences of growing up in an immigrant family and knowing first hand the confusion, isolation and difficulties that came with such a life. One, into which I am only coming into knowing as I reflect on how little anyone spoke to me about journeying through a culture I didn't understand, and, one, into which no one questioned that I might not understand, seeing as I've always been here. Growing up without television, as I did, may isolate one from popular culture, but what of not knowing the subtleties in language with which cultural information is transferred? This may be the most crucial imbalance for those entering a culture that is not understood, and especially, when their children are in need of understanding.

When balance is found, we are standing on a solid foundation, one that we can build on and that gives a sense of nourishment to the soul, replenishing our strength to continue managing all the different imbalances that surround us. It is in exploring the extremes that the world and life offer that we can better find a place on the continuum that feeds our balancing centre. If we can consider that there are varying extremes to the ways in which we live our lives, then, we may give way to venturing into the task of colouring in all the in-betweens, the places where new meanings are made and new emotions, and their expressions, are discovered. We are a knob, continuously trying to find the belly-button of a colour wheel with an infinite spectrum of colours, navigating around and through it to find our resonating colour at any given moment as we adjust to the newly coloured information and understanding that is acquired in our exploration. Balance is found when we continue to move with the changes, like roots that venture in different directions and through unknown terrain to find the best sources of nourishment, to intertwine with other living entities, as if instinctually knowing that they belong to a very complex system of survival. A contented depth may potentially be achieved when there is an understanding of the (un)resolvable complexity of the situation being observed and the potentiality stored in the moving parts within it, those that contribute to the working whole.

I was sitting in the Mac Shack, directly across from Point Grey Secondary School, eating a West Coast salad and deliberating whether I should pull out the folded green paper that was exposed by the torn envelope handed to me by my parents. There was no doubt in my mind that, at some point, the person who had held the letter for ransom was found and tackled to the ground where a protruding nail caught the slight

opening in the seal of the envelope and tore it open. I pulled out the green paper and before unfolding it, I took a moment to look at this educational institution in the heart of Kerrisdale, with its pristine castle-like exterior and spacious green sports fields on which fluffy pink cherry blossoms added to the picturesque drawing of a place that creatively allowed the imagination to flourish in all aspects of worldly knowledge. This place, where privilege reigns, is where I am from, not because my family fit into its social, political or economic makeup, but because there was a promise of excelled education and opportunity for a future generation. In that building across the road, across the old railroad tracks, and across the next road over was where I made my first dream-catcher in learning about those whose land I am visiting, where I relished in mixing chemicals in the darkroom of the photography lab and watching images magically appear, and where my favourite physics teacher taught me about the forces engaged in finding equilibrium, precisely at the time that I needed to learn this lesson. It is the place where I had to let my dreams go of becoming an Olympian, of continuing to play the piano or possibly of going to university. The last year of high school, I had made just enough money to put myself through my last year of piano lessons (after a two year break) with my life long piano teacher and the only woman who had resembled a grandmother to me. She was the one for whom I quilted a quarter note fabric patch in my third grade class that was pulled out yearly as a show of appreciation. She was the one who lent me her beautiful golden prom dress from the 30's so that I could attend my graduation wearing something special. She was the one who taught me how to communicate and express myself through the language of music when any other voice did not suffice.

My language is Polish. My language is English. But, I do not speak or understand either in the full grasp of their cultural meanings. How can a dancer not dance, a musician not let the vibrations of sound take over her body or a photographer not capture life with the intention to put it on her walls if this has been her way of communicating, not only with the 'other' world, but also with her 'inner' world. How can one not take part in these forms of thought, when, for the lack of shared words and understandings, they were the language that connected her to her family and to a voice.

Through movement and poetry, my students would slowly become more comfortable with manipulating words, extending them beyond their bodies into a little something that we could read and reflect on. The words we so studiously worked on in

our eight months together started to form meanings that acknowledged us as knowers of something that others may not know, and that we all had the power to teach. It was like the writing of a musical piece. The first stretch of our time together presented messy exaggerations of fumbling variations, although slowly the chords, notes and rhythms started to move together, each saying something different, but in becoming conscious of crossing wavelengths, able to meet at points of harmony.

I unfolded the green-papered time capsule letter eagerly and read it slowly, looking for what I had predicted incorrectly, only to find that I had one thing wrong. What I had not yet managed to do is find marriage or children. I did, on the other hand, predict correctly that I would be finishing university and that my family was wonderful, alive, and healthy. As for becoming a plastic surgeon, a family doctor and in my spare time, a heart and brain surgeon, well, I would say that I wasn't that far off.

From Latin *plasticus* – to form or mould – one might attribute the word 'plastic' to the flexibility of manipulating form as is encouraged in the arts. In Poland, if you are studying '*sztuki plastyczne*', you would be studying to be a master artist. In that case, perhaps, I am on my way to becoming a doctor in learning how to form and mould people imaginatively and with unending perspectives in order to heal families through both hearts and minds.

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