

SPECTRES OF EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGY: GHOST-BUSTING AS A CURRICULAR RESPONSE

Laura Elizabeth Pinto

“Haunting belongs to the structure of every hegemony.”
(Derrida, 1994, p. 34 in Kenway, Bullen, Fahey & Robb, 2006, p. 6)

A spectre is haunting education. According to Derrida, “ghosts haunt places [discourses, ideologies, etc.] that exist without them; they return to where they have been excluded from” (Derrida, 1994, p. 152, in Kenway, Bullen, Fahey & Robb, 2006, p. 5). Derrida coined the term “hauntology,” a playful homonym for “ontology” (the branch of metaphysics dealing with what entities exist, and how they are categorized), as a mode of analysis. Hauntology explores fundamental questions about how “ghosts” or “spectres” attend to the responsibilities to the past, present, and future. The spectral presence problematizes our ontology by confusing understandings of existence as presence and time – ghosts are spirits that have a haunting influence on ideological positions (Kenway et al., 2006). Conversing with (and about) ghosts through hauntology addresses responsibilities that lie beyond the present moment to signal the future (Kenway et al., 2006).

This article proposes ontological \Leftrightarrow hauntological inquiry as a potentially useful and productive curricular response to educational technology. In doing so, I attempt to define the spectral effects of educational technology’s current (and dominant) ghostly incarnation, and how educators might use the spectre as a curricular response to take on its use and misuse. The seemingly common-sense base upon which popular educational technology discourses are built are challenged by the logic of hauntology, potentially causing their “‘sedimented meanings’ to crumble and collapse” (Kenway et al., 2006, p. 5). By naming and challenging the spectre, students and educators can begin to reveal its internal inconsistencies and untruths.

The Spectre and the Never-Ending Quest for the Killer App

The spectral is a restless presence that haunts and returns, both unfulfilled or unfinished from the past, and signaling the future (Peim, 2005). The spectre of educational technology is rooted in a long history of the never-ending quest for the latest solution to enduring educational problems. “Every major technology that became pervasive in the 20th century,” Kuehn (2010, p. 130) observes, “was going to revolutionize education. Film, radio, television – all were hyped as the silver bullet that would make education both more effective and more accessible.” The future, the spectre tells us in its present incarnation, is to be found in the yet-to-be found “Killer App”¹. Yet, “much of what is written and discussed about educational technology is...more a matter of faith than it is a matter of fact” (Selwyn, 2011, p. 714) – where

¹ According to *Merriam-Webster*, the term first emerged in 1988.

that faith largely amounts to ghostly beliefs about technology's potential that haunt education discourse and practice. In this way, the spectre is a pattern of entanglement between subject (educator/education) and object (technology), not quite bodily nor immaterial, but an entity of "uncertain nature" (Zekani, 2014, p. 7). This spectre is conjured in educational discourse, curriculum and policy – haunted by ghosts that whisper "21st Century Learning" and "Digital Native."

In its uncertain, in-between state, the spectre of educational technology is paradoxical. When conjured, it is simultaneously admonished and promoted for the same purpose: the improvement of education. Current technological fascinations justified by this spectre include tablet use, BYOD programs, flipped classrooms, and massive open online courses (MOOCs) – none of which have delivered on their promises. On one hand, the spectre is the centre of a hegemonic "digital romance," as Bigum (2012) characterizes it – unbridled enthusiasm for the ghostly presence of "the new" and "the latest" technologies constrain critique and debate, while educators struggle with "over-hyped, pre-configured digital products and practices that are being imported continually into university settings" (Selwyn, 2013, p. 3). Amidst the hype, the spectre obscures technology's weak and blind spots, its contradictions, and its precarious nature. Yet, denial is precisely the reason for technology's irrational pervasiveness as a problem posing as "solution" to education (Selwyn, 2013). As such, the spectre is cloaked in confusing smoke and mirrors: it attempts to deny that ghosts exist through its insistence that everything this "new," but preserves its presence by conjuring away its own ambiguous history.

Enlisting a medium: A hauntological curricular response

Only by understanding and challenging what underpins the technological hegemony can we uncover the ghostly dimensions of the present, and the possible spirit(s) of the future. In its haunting, the spectre disavows critical conversations about education and technology: "dominant discourses of education and technology work primarily to silence dissent and reduce most people to shutting-up and putting-up" (Selwyn, 2013, p. 5). Critical perspectives are thus politely ignored or dismissed as "a 'luddite' or 'technophobe' embodying a 'with-us-or-against-us' attitude" (Selwyn, 2011, p. 713).

One way to draw attention to the contradictions between the less-than-rosy realities of technology and education's dominant ideals about its potential is to conjure ghosts to create doubt in spaces that seem to be filled with certainty. Ruitenberg (2009) offers two hauntological strategies for education. First, teachers can act as mediums to conjure and challenge spectres and ghosts. Alternately, the curriculum can act as the "educational equivalent of a medium," similar to a Ouija board, to create curricular openings for ghosts to appear. These strategies allow for the identification of spectral activity in classrooms, while engaging learners in active interrogation of how spectres shape discourses and reinforce uncritical, hegemonic positions. While the educational technology spectre claims to be the definitive solution to education and learning woes, students may find that its ghosts have different stories to tell.

Educators-as-mediums can engage in spectropolitical analysis by challenging students to think about technology using hauntology as an analytic frame. This would open up discursive space to expose the spectre's shaky foundations, while providing the possibility for change. Spectropolitical inquiry could take the form of guided discussion at appropriate points during a course, such as discussion about failures and not-so-glorious histories of education and technology, and challenges to jocular "edspeak" that conceals problems (Selwyn, 2011, 2015). In mandated curriculum requiring "21st Century Skills," students might search for the spectral foundations upon which that curriculum is built, and interrogate the ambiguous (at best) evidence about educational technology's effectiveness.

The curriculum-as-Ouija-board (Ruitenbergh, 2009) can provide openings for critical exploration of spectres. Students can be sent on "ghost hunting" adventures through guided research, seeking out paranormal myths that underpin popular arguments, and locate specific examples of recent controversies when spectres have been conjured into questionable technology use in education. Students can also be required to either analyze or build counter-hegemonic case studies on those controversies, such as the iPad scandal in Los Angeles Public Schools (NPR, 2014) or the relationship between Class Dojo and student privacy. Students – especially those studying social foundations in education – can engage in contrapuntal readings, such as Selwyn (2011, 2013, 2015), and relate those arguments to spectral politics. Finally, adventurous educators may hold a public séance to bring attention to the spectres and their effects.

The modern preoccupation with fact and certainly (in education, this manifests itself as the rhetorical obsession with evidence-based everything) seems at odds with hauntology's disruption of certainty. Engaging in some of hauntological curricular responses suggested here might offer a much-needed mode of inquiry to identify and interrogate contradictions and the powerful spectral entities that reinforce hegemonic technology discourses and practices in education.

References

- Bigum, C. (2012). Schools and computers: Tales of a digital romance. In L. Rowan and C. Bigum (eds.), *Transformative Approaches to new technologies and student diversity in futures oriented classrooms: Future proofing education*, 15-28. Springer Netherlands.
- Derrida, J. (1994). *Spectres of Marx: The state of the debt, the work of mourning, and the new international*. (P. Kamuf, Trans.). New York: Routledge.
- Kenway J., Bullen E., Fahey J. & Robb S. (2006) *Haunting the knowledge economy*. New York: Routledge.
- Kuehn, L. (2010). So long constructivism: Hello smart! *Our Schools Our Selves*, 19(2), 129-134.
- NPR. (2014, August 28). The LA School iPad Scandal: What You Need To Know. Retrieved: <http://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2014/08/27/343549939/the-la-school-ipad-scandal-what-you-need-to-know>

- Peim, N. (2005). Spectral bodies: Derrida and the philosophy of the photograph as historical document. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 39(1), 67-84.
- Ruitenbergh, C. (2009). Education as séance: Specters, spirits, and the expansion of memory. *Interchange*, 40(3), 295-308.
- Selwyn, N. (2011). In praise of pessimism—the need for negativity in educational technology. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 42(5), 713–717.
- Selwyn, N. (2013). Digital technologies in universities: problems posing as solutions? *Learning, Media and Technology*, 38(1), 1-3.
- Selwyn, N. (2015). Minding our language: why education and technology is full of bullshit ... and what might be done about it. Paper given to the ‘Digital Innovation, Creativity & Knowledge in Education’ conference – Qatar.
- Zekani, E. (2014). The hauntology of media addiction. *FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture & the Arts*, 19, 2-15.

Biography

Laura Elizabeth Pinto is an Assistant Professor at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology (UOIT). She received a 2009 Canadian Governor General’s Gold Medal, and was a shortlisted author for the 2013 Speakers Book Award for “Curriculum Reform In Ontario” (UT Press). Her research interests include Education Policy Production and Enactment, Critical Thinking, and Democracy in Education. She can be reached at Laura.Pinto@uoit.ca