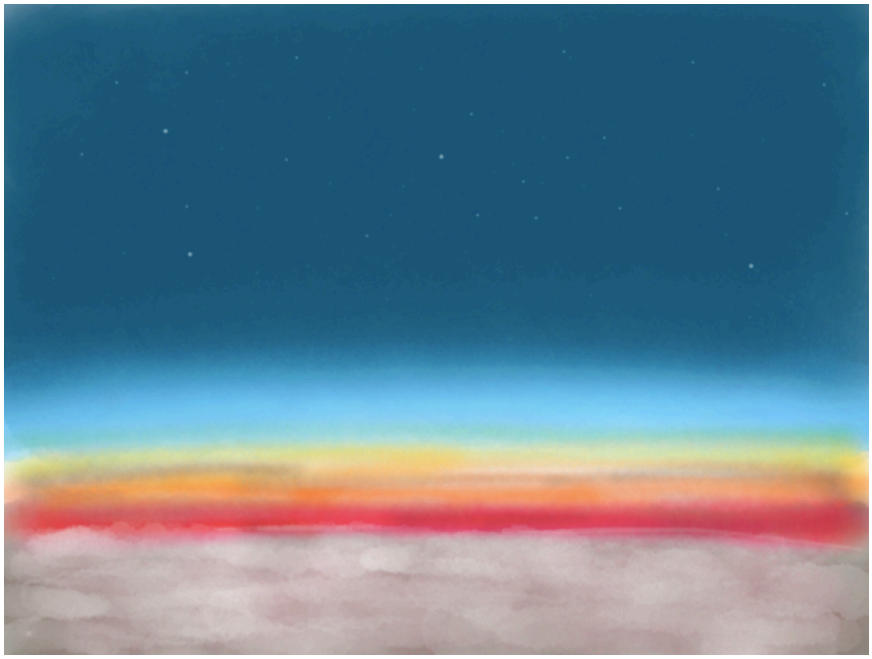
Draft: (re)imagining education as an un-coercive re-arrangement of desires.

Vanessa de Oliveira Andreotti, University of British Columbia



This text was first performed at the International Association for the Advancement of Curriculum Studies Conference in Ottawa on 29 May 2015, where I took the liberty and the risk of deviating from the academic genre. However, I modified the text in written form to adjust expectations to this form of communication.

In this text, I will use story telling, metaphors and poetry to introduce an argument that is not self evident and that does not produce a single normative claim for the way forward. The stories and metaphors I use come from different teachings from multiple locations and what they have in common is their performativity: their potential to re-orient logos/logic in order to make room for the ineffable. In other words: echoing Ted Aoki's insight of curriculum as lived experience, instead of *talking about* an un-coercive re-arrangement of desires, we are going to try *doing* it.

Please note that 'performative' texts are very different from texts that claim to represent something literally. As an expression of an aesthetic force the text has a life of its own and is out of my control – in the artistic sense, I cannot claim responsibility for what it does. My experience with this force is that it intends to 'touch' each reader differently, in order to bring forward something that needs to surface and become visible. In this sense, I invite you to observe yourself reading the text and to hold your response before you as a gift in your hands (literally) – as something you need to be present to. That is the work of the text.

Readers will read it differently, selectively and abusively, even. Some will be offended by it, some will have something triggered by it, others will domesticate it and make it fit whatever it is that they are for or against. Just hold your response in front of you and let it be your teacher. There is no use asking me what I intended with this text: this text wrote itself into being, so my relationship with it is the same as that of a reader – what it did to me will be different from what it does to you.

Hummingbird

Earlier this year I was leaving the main education building at UBC when something near the ground outside of the building called my attention. There was a very low lying branch of a tree with an upside down hummingbird with his head almost touching the sidewalk. I nearly stepped on it. It was a very unusual sight, to put it mildly. I poked the body of the hummingbird and declared it dead. I

didn't want other people to step on it, or our resident coyote to eat it, so I faced a dilemma. I knew that Cash, my Cree partner would not leave the body exposed, I knew my grandmother wouldn't either, but as I pondered about what to do in that context I was also concerned that if people saw me collect the body, they could consider it unsanitary or wrong in some way or another. Anyway, I picked the hummingbird up and wrapped it with my scarf. I sang it a couple of songs and put it in my bag with the intention of taking it to my partner Cash for smudging and a proper send off.

However, I had to go to a meeting on the other side of the campus before going home. So, with a dead hummingbird in my bag, I proceeded to my lunch meeting, where I forgot about the body until the end of the meeting when I remembered to show the little bird to a colleague from Latin America. When I opened my scarf the body was still there, but one leg of the hummingbird was twitching. First I felt shocked with her resuscitation, and then really guilty because I could have harmed her. I also panicked because I did not know what to do. I ran to my office and got my partner Cash on skype to watch an awakening hummingbird who was slowly regaining strength.

Cash told me to wait for him at the office because he wanted to bring her food. But as the hummingbird started to rehearse flying, I decided to walk her back to the tree. On the way to the building we had to walk up a hill, counter-current, through a mass of students leaving their classes. She kept rehearsing her flight and seemed to hover over my scarf. I was walking in absolute awe, carrying a small miracle in my hands and I wanted everyone to see it. But, to my astonishment, nobody looked. I couldn't believe it. People seemed absolutely absorbed in their own minds, as if their bodies only existed to take their heads from place to place. Dwayne Donald's definition of colonialism as a denial of relationship and an as an atrophy of the senses came to mind.

As I approached the building, she took off and vanished. I walked back to my office blown away by the experience, to find my partner Cash disappointed he was too late to meet her in person. He looked at the incident, as I did, as a very special gift, and he asked me what I thought the hummingbird came to teach me. I started to look for that answer. This included some research about hummingbirds where I found out that 'she' was a 'he' and that he had come all the way from Mexico. I also found out that when hummingbirds are exhausted or when it is 'too much' they fall into a state called 'torpor', where they have a system shut down keeping only 8% of their metabolism to conserve energy. When I found him, he was in a state of torpor.

As I reflected on this event I have come to believe that my teacher hummingbird came to teach me about torpor, more specifically the torpor of the students who could not see him hovering over my scarf, as well as *my own* torpor. He gave me deeper insights into how our system of education makes us shut down our senses to the world and focus our energies on what goes on in our minds. We want the world, which is complex, dynamic and plural to fit the pre-defined scripts we have in our heads for interpreting reality. We firmly believe we can think our way out of the problems that our thinking itself has created. No wonder there is so much anxiety, depression and conflict if our thinking has severed our sense of connection with the world, in its attempt to over-determine it.

Boxhead

However, re-imagining education as an awakening of the senses in ways that do not fall into the trap of dishonouring reason requires a deep understanding of what triggered torpor in the first place and perhaps this is where reason has an important role to play. In this sense, it is important to remember that, unlike Descartes himself, our contemporary version of the Cartesian subject reproduced in schools is actually not very keen on thinking or meditating. Thus, as an invitation to a Cartesian meditation I helped give birth to an exteriorization of a Cartesian subject, which I adopted and called 'Boxhead'. This is his picture.

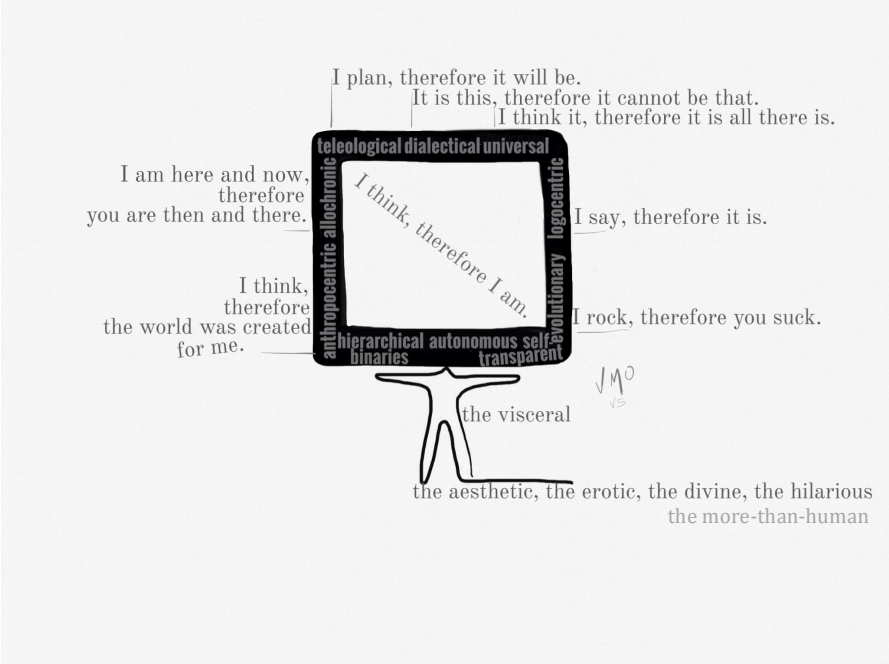


Figure 1: Front picture of Boxhead

You can see in this picture that Boxhead juxtaposes modernity's frames of reference on a square-headed being with an atrophied body whose relationships with the world and others are mediated by logical 'sense making' – rather than 'sense sensing'. Each side of the square head represents different and enduring referents that circumscribe his possibilities for knowing and being human. This matrix captures the dominant model of education of modern subjects that aims to expand the mind at the expense of the body, and that attempts to tame or repress forces deemed unreasonable such as the aesthetic, the erotic, the more-than-human, the divine and the hilarious. The face frame of Boxhead speaks of a number of his characteristics:

- Logocentrism compels him to believe that reality can be described in language (i.e. 'I say, therefore it is').
- Universalism leads him to understand his interpretation of reality as objective and to project it as the only legitimate and valuable worldview (i.e. 'I think, therefore it is all there is').

- Anthropocentric reasoning makes him see himself as separate from nature and having a mandate to own, manage, exploit and control it (i.e. 'I think, therefore the world is mine').
- Teleological thinking makes him want to plan for the engineering of a future that he can already imagine (i.e. 'I plan, therefore it will be').
- Dialectical thinking makes him fall in love with a linear logic averse to paradoxes, complexities and contradictions (i.e. 'It is this, therefore it cannot be that').
- Allochronic and evolutionary thinking make him judge others according to a criteria where he is represented as being in the present of (linear) time while others are in the past, and where he leads humanity in a single path of evolution (i.e. 'I succeed because I am intelligent and strong, therefore you perish because you are stupid and weak'), in other words: you shall not remind me of the violence I inflict on others in order to survive.

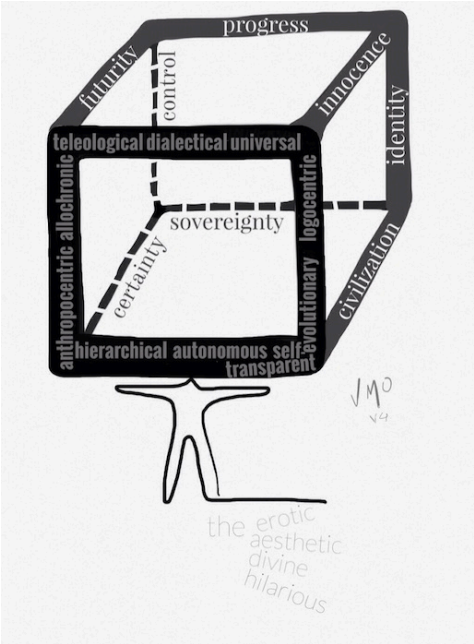


Figure 2: Profile picture of Boxhead

When photographed in perspective, the Boxhead reveals that his head is actually a cube with a number of sides and hidden faces which articulate some of his modern desires and attachments, including desires for sovereignty, security, certainty, control, and futurity upheld through long held dear narratives of development, identity and civilization.

At first glance, the picture of Boxhead suggests that there is an outside and an inside of a box. However, if we imagine his life-force as the line that draws the box, we may gain three important insights. First, that the very desire for an outside of the box comes from within the box itself; therefore escaping the box is not really an option as it only re-inscribes the box. Second, that we are already free to draw different things – but as a line that draws, we are viscerally entangled with each other and entrapped within historical/collective choices. So, third, in order to draw different things, we need to use reason itself to analyze the existing angles of the box and consider the full extent of these choices for the past 500 years and seven generations to come. In this sense, we might hold our Boxhead modern subject not as a pathology to be demonized, *but as a teacher offering important lessons*. [1]

[1] This paragraph tends to be overlooked if you are either enchanted or distressed by Boxhead, please read it again. I have noticed that some people tend to get upset with Boxhead if they read it as a moralizing critique of something that they hold dear. Although this is an interesting reading if it has emerged for you, I invite you to read it differently too.

Looking Boxhead in the eye, as a stern teacher, would involve the difficult task of facing our relationship with it, including the benefits and satisfactions we derive from it, such as our attachments to prestige, affluence, the ownership and control of our self-image, as well as our self-infantilizing moments (our tantrums, traumas and addiction to self-affirmation). Here I draw particular attention to our modern desires for linear teleological progress, innocent heroic agency and the pursuit of emancipation through knowledge and normative claims. The satisfaction we have with these attachments and desires make the work of allowing Boxheads to teach really difficult because we may identify too much with him and cling to him when he has finished his job and is ready to go.

Buckets

This identification and the process of denaturalizing it can be also thought through a lived curriculum story I was told when working with a Quechua community in Latin America. It is a long held tradition amongst Andean and Amazonian people to walk the talk of their non-anthropocentric relational ontology through communion with plants. When they are seeking important knowledge, they ingest a brew that mainly consists of a combination of two plants. One plant induces visions, but if ingested on its own, it is destroyed by stomach enzymes before it can produce any effect. The other plant is a poison. When this second plant is ingested together with the first plant, it stops the stomach enzymes from working just long enough for the first plant to reach the bloodstream. When the body recognizes the poison, a purging process ensues and the person starts to vomit, often violently. This vomiting is perceived as a cleansing process not only for expelling the poison that has just been ingested, but of all other poisons the person has ingested before, including the poisons of arrogance, vanity, indulgence and ego.

The communion with the plant is perceived to offer an opportunity to liberate all senses beyond the body for two purposes: 1)to allow the unmediated visceral experience of our connection with all things (which invokes a deep reverence to being alive); 2)and to interrupt the delusion of individualized reasoning enabling access to a collective unbounded creative potential that can provide clarity and answers if approached respectfully. This cross-border plant curriculum involves the death of egological framings and re-awakening to entanglement, a process that is also talked about as the transformation of poison into medicine. Assisting people through the process, especially

holding the bucket for people vomiting is framed as a sacred task – the task of teachers. This got me thinking about what a bucket holding international curriculum studies would look like.

Working with impossibilities

So far we have talked about hummingbirds, boxes ,vomiting and substances considered in Western law and science to induce *delusions*, therefore they are prohibited. And since researchers have been charged in Europe for even mentioning these things in conferences, it is legally important to emphasize that I am not promoting the ingestion of any substance in education or at this conference. So let's just make this clear: my point in using these stories, if there is one, is that some international lived curricula operate in ways that are unintelligible to our Boxheads. In other words, I m arguing that the most important task of internationalization is to sensitize us to the limits of our knowing and being – it is not about what we don't imagine, but about what we can't imagine – as our imagination is restricted by our projective ontological referents, and our desires are allocated accordingly. In this sense, translations are always equivocal and the first task of the curriculum is to take ourselves to the edges of the reason we are used to by interrupting our satisfaction with the idea that our ways are limitless and innocent. From there, thinking at this limit, looking from that edge, at the abyss, we can start to face and work with impossibilities. What the stories and metaphors try to show is that it is precisely this work with impossibilities that is the main task of a curriculum for re-arranging desires un-coercively.[2]

Poems

On that note, I would like to finish this text with two poems: one written for Boxheads and another one for hummingbirds.

I will start with my poem for Boxheads:

Dear Boxhead teachers,

Thank you for teaching us that
fuelling narcissistic competitive individualism
is harmful, unsustainable and irresponsible

Thank you for teaching us that
justifying hierarchical separations from each other
is harmful, unsustainable and irresponsible

Thank you for teaching us that
reproducing desires for metropolitan consumerist affluence
is harmful, unsustainable and irresponsible

Thank you for teaching us that
the delusion of a single story of progress as scientific and economic advancement
is harmful, unsustainable and irresponsible

Thank you for teaching us that
feeding fantasies of imperialistic benevolence
is harmful, unsustainable and irresponsible

Thank you for teaching us that
denying our entanglements with each other and implication in on-going violence

[2] This paragraph also tends to be overlooked if you are distracted by the image of vomit and buckets, please read it again.

is harmful, unsustainable and irresponsible

Thank you for teaching us that
insisting on solving problems through the very imaginary that created them
is harmful, unsustainable and irresponsible

We are slow learners
We apologise if you have to
Repeat your teachings
Again and again
But we are getting there
Obrigada. Solpayki.

Now I turn to hummingbirds.
Dear hummingbirds

Violent processes of socialization
and self-colonizing addictions
have caused your body to numb
most of your senses

awakening from this torpor
means remembering how to feel again
how to strip down and surrender
to the joy and the pain of entanglement

You need to recall
how to listen with your guts
how to see with your eyes closed
how to grow with your heart
how to connect through your flesh
how to heal with your breathing

some useful advice my help…

remember the sense of resonance
of being in unison with
the vibration of the universe
[whisper](feel it in the pit of your stomach)

remember the sense of awe
of the unexpected sanity
of a void filled with silence
[whisper](feel it in that tingling sensation in your joints)

remember the sense of scaling up
of instantly expanding your capacity
to withstand pain and dispel fear
[whisper] (feel it when your heart shoots out of your chest)

remember the sense of fusion
of liquefying into
an infinite melt of oneness
[whisper] (feel it when your flesh crosses the skin to entangle with another's)

remember the sense of possibility
of being born out of dreamtime,

of belonging to unbounded creativity
[whisper] (feel it every time you blink)

remember the sense of form
of being-in-breathing-in-time/space
that is about being present
to acknowledge the miracle,
the privilege and responsibility
of being alive: both entangled and free

You have known all these things forever
You have slept long enough
There is no need to be afraid
Now wake up and fly

Thank you.[3]

[3] For the sake of transparency, if you are interested, here are four of my readings of the text (there is no 'right' one, and I am still counting): 1) I read Boxhead as the contours of my own ego – a ruthless teacher, I see the hummingbird as the part of me that is totally unbound *and* entangled (the force behind the force of the aesthetic, the erotic, the hilarious, the more-than-human, and the divine), the force that can give me both the courage to respect Boxhead as a teacher and to draw different things out of it; 2) I see in the text a critique of modernity (in both Marxist and capitalist orientations), of identity/authenticity, of agency and politics (of liberal modern subjectivities), and of a single rationality over-determining existence; 3) I see the text as a yearning for sense-full connections: a call for unconditional recognition of visceral entanglement with each other and the land, 'before will'; 4) I also see the text as a trickster; 5)…