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**Reconceptualizing relationships within high-tech  
social and educational contexts**

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**Abstract**

Technologies have provided many benefits to society but have also provoked many concerns which engender both philosophical reflection and personal action. Our paper is written in response to the growing crisis of depersonalization in modern westernized society where our primary mode of communication is technology based and characterized by the depersonalization of human relationships. Depersonalization defines the extent to which human relationships have substituted face-to-face human interchange in preference for technologically mediated communication. This presents itself in forms of social disconnection, alienation and dehumanization, which is evident in our communities and schools. The educational and social ramifications of the commitment of western culture to a form of knowledge as power serve to provide the social conditions within which depersonalisation thrives. We argue that there is a need to reconceptualize the educational epistemology of power in such a way that the repersonalization of human relationships becomes a primary goal of the learning process. Such reconceptualization of power and resulting interrelationships would enable us to repersonalise relationships within high-tech social and educational contexts to eliminate depersonalization from our lives. We can develop deep and sustainable personal relationships by immersing ourselves in high-contact personal environments, reconceptualize knowledge as connectivity, expressed empathetically and repersonalize educational environments to find a personal sense of purpose and more meaningful pedagogy.

**Introduction**

People have always used technologies and there have been many benefits to society that are associated with technological advances. Today there are concerns about our use of contemporary technologies as we live in a world of incomparable natural beauty, which is fast becoming overpowered by unnatural super technologies. Are we cognizant of the deficits of technological influences to human health, social relations and educational pedagogy (Kraut, Lundmark, Patterson, Kiesler, Mukopadhyay, & Scherlis, 1998; Laura & Marchant, 2002; Marchant, 2006; Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training & Youth Affairs, 2005; Naisbitt, 1999; Newhouse,

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Trinidad, & Clarkson, 2002)? Concerns regarding the quality of our social and learning relationships engender philosophical reflection and personal action.

Our paper is written in response to the growing crisis of depersonalization in modern westernized society where our primary mode of communication is technologically based and characterized by the depersonalization of human relations (Laura, Marchant & Smith, 2008; Marchant, 2006). Depersonalization defines the extent to which human relationships have substituted face-to-face human interchange in preference for technologically mediated communication. We argue that the implications of this social development are profound.

Western culture's overarching commitment to a form of knowledge as power serves to provide the social conditions within which the condition of depersonalization thrives (Ashton, & Laura, 1998; Marchant, 2006). Given the degree to which ICTs continue to evolve exponentially and our commitment to cyberspace technology as our major source of information and communication, we have allowed the cultivation of depersonalization and the negative social consequences which follow from it. The result is forms of social disconnection and alienation, resulting in loneliness, depression, social isolation and a rise in uncivil behaviors based upon frustration, hopelessness and the devaluation of human life, evident in our communities and schools (Ashton, & Laura, 1998; Greenfield, 1999; Laura, Marchant & Smith, 2008; Marchant, 2006; Naisbitt, 1999).

There is the need to reconceptualize the educational epistemology of power in order to reconceptualize relationships within high-tech social and educational contexts. To achieve this task it is necessary to reconceptualize knowledge itself as a form of connectivity, and participatory consciousness in repersonalized educational environments (Laura, Marchant & Smith, 2008; Smith, 2006). Such a reconceptualization would enable us to eliminate the unnatural disease of depersonalization from our lives, find a personal sense of purpose, develop deep and sustainable personal relationships by immersing ourselves in high-contact personal environments, reconceptualize knowledge as connectivity, expressed empathetically and repersonalize educational environments for meaningful pedagogy (Laura, & Cotton, 1999; Laura, Marchant & Smith, 2008; Marchant, 2006; Smith, 2006).

### **Western culture's commitment to cyberspace technology**

Undoubtedly, technology has a salient role to play in our lives. Technological communication systems, for example, have greatly facilitated globalized networked interactions with cyber-connectivity increasing communication capacities across huge distances where they were otherwise non-existent (Haddon, 2006; Madden, 2006; Mesch, 2003; Mezaros, 2004; Wellman & Haythornthwaite, 2002). While technology has made more and more forms of communication available to us, the forms of communication upon which we increasingly rely have become less and less intimate. Likewise, while the benefits of technology in education are clearly elaborated in a variety of media modalities, concerns about the impact of technologization on education and personal communication need to be illuminated in order to plan for a more balanced approach to the use of technological communications (Greenfield, 1999; Laura, Marchant & Smith, 2008; Ministerial Council on Education,

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Employment, Training & Youth Affairs, 2005; Newhouse, Trinidad, & Clarkson, 2002). Schultze (2002) reiterates that, *cyber culture nurtures primarily superficial messaging and highly monologic discourses that lack the richness, quality and spontaneity of conversations. . . . It should not surprise us, then, that the Internet has probably generated more anti-social communication than any earlier media.*

The technologization of relationships by way of high tech communication and cyberspace interchange serves to undermine empathetic social and educational relationships (Laura, & Cotton, 1999). The more time we spend attempting to communicate with each other by way of our computers, the less time we actually spend communicating personally, attempting to foster strong social ties or undertaking other spiritually rewarding tasks, resulting in lonely internet users in mechanically mediated relationships (Anderson, 2005; Bargh, & McKenna, 2004; Bickham & Rich, 2006; Engelberg & Sjöberg, 2004; Laura, Marchant & Smith, 2008; Marchant, 2006; Naisbitt, 1999; Setzer, & Monke, 2001). We spend so much time communicating through technologies that we find it difficult to communicate, other than in the superficial ways that they make available to us. It is therefore not surprising that there now exists a new generation of adept surfers connected to the net who at the same time are sadly disconnected from the real world in which we live. For example, given that the technologization of nature has led to the decimation of so much of our natural forest reserves, we actively teach children about rainforests and the living environment generally through the computechonology of ecosystem virtuality. The pretense of connecting with nature is mediated via a kind of video game which itself is a profound form of disconnection. Consequently, our increasing use of such technologies, for general communication and education, has covertly encouraged the construction of depersonalized and highly technologized learning contexts which are themselves fundamentally alienating.

### **Dehumanization through computechonology**

We have no wish to deny the many benefits which computechonology makes available both inside and outside the classroom. Yet, the persistent claims and promises for the most recent innovations in computer mediated communications are inescapable. This technological ‘advance’ will bring to our lives, knowledge, power, pleasure, personal liberation, even personal salvation (Brook & Boal, 1995, viii). On this rationale, whatever is lacking in our lives can be provided by way of greater access to new forms of communication, entertainment and information. While in certain contexts computechonology may both encourage and facilitate the cultivation of personal relationships across the continuum of human interchange, the problem to which we are alluding is a different one, and its resolution depends firmly on qualitative considerations, not on quantitative ones.

The first consideration to be addressed relates to the fact that while it is to be admitted that appropriate contexts may exist for the use of computechonology, we have as a culture, partly due to vested political and economic interests, generalized the specific cases of acceptable use in such a way that the application of the technology in question becomes universal (Laura, Marchant & Smith, 2008). For example, it has been only a few years since it was acknowledged that enrolment procedures for some students could be facilitated and thus made more administratively ‘efficient’ by

enrolling ‘on-line’ (Gan, 1998). Shortly thereafter, however, it was legislated that enrolments for all students would have to be organized on-line. From a specifically justified principle for the use of computechonology in one context, as almost imperceptible extrapolation is made which universalizes the principle in other contexts in which it has not been justified. We thereby diminish options for students by standardizing procedures, which by their very nature discourage face-to-face interchange (Stevens, 2004). Because provision of on-line courses for distance students may be justified, by parity of reasoning, it clearly does not follow that any justification has been provided to show that all university courses should be offered on-line and only on-line.

We have marginalized and compromised the value of face-to-face interchange (Stevens, 2004). *The more that the use of computers is demanded of us, the more we shall be taken away from truly deep human experiences. That does not mean that if you spend time at a computer, you will never have deep human experiences. It just means that current developments tend to put pressure on people to live less humane lives* (Lakoff, 1995: 124). This being so, our reliance upon computechonology and its various modes of communication (e.g. mobile phones, video games, internet transactions etc) become ever more embedded, takes for granted, and thus is socially ubiquitous, without philosophical reflection for why this should be so. Should we not be asking whether our resolute commitment to computer-based learning serves unwittingly to devalue the qualitative experience of our children’s education by increasingly substituting face-to-face classroom interchange with mechanically mediated informational transmissions characterized primarily by the processing of data (Setzer, & Monke, 2001; Stevens, 2004)? Is it not worth considering that the more time we encourage school children to spend in the isolated context of the computer screen, the less time they spend actually interacting with their teachers and the less time they spend learning how to interact with them and others to forms bonds of trust and loyalty (Setzer, & Monke, 2001). Should we not be concerned philosophically that the pedagogy of computopia may in the end serve inadvertently to propagate contexts for depersonalization not only in schools, but in both the workplace and the wider community (Laura, Marchant and Smith, 2008)?

### **Depersonalization due to computechonology**

One significant facet of the depersonalization associated with computechonology is well illustrated in the paradox that as a culture, we have developed metaphorical idioms for personalizing and anthropomorphizing our computers, while we depersonalize humans by speaking about them as if they were machines. This way of speaking is by its very nature dehumanizing. If a computer is not fully functional, it is not uncommon for the user to rationalize and ‘forgive’ its dysfunctionality by anthropomorphizing its mechanical features as if they were human forms of behavior. It is not unusual, for example, to hear a user excusing his/her computer by saying ‘it has a virus’, ‘is not warmed up’, is just understandably ‘slow’, ‘lazy’ or ‘on strike’! We thus accept the shortcomings of the machines by speaking in ways which makes it seem as if their faults were human. The rub is that all too often we expect humans to behave as if they were machines and respond unforgivingly when they do not. In a tone of remonstrance for a job not so well done, for instance, we create idioms such as, ‘get with the program’, ‘get your engine running’ or ‘it’s time you plugged in’. On

the other hand, we often compliment someone who works particularly hard by ascribing accolades associated with our conventional descriptions of machines. In this context it is not uncommon for a person's hard work to be complimented by using mechanizing metaphors (e.g. 'He works like a machine', 'his engine never stops running', or 'she clearly got with the program'). In the foregoing cases the issue of depersonalization is conflated with dehumanization, since the expectation is that the value of a human being can be judged without moral impropriety by assessing the work a human can do against well-functioning machine.

### **The loss of the human face**

That computechnology has facilitated and proliferated the forms of communication now available to us is incontestable. However, that the more forms of communication we increasingly embed to expand the culture of computechnology, the increasingly less intimate and depersonalized the face-to-face human interactions become that they were designed to replace (Stevens, 2004). The argument advanced here affirms that the depersonalization of human relationships, and the dehumanization which follows from it, are an inevitable consequence of universalizing the highly mechanized modes of communication which characterize computechnology. Compuphilia thus comes to represent socially legitimated syndrome which implicitly encourages the love of computers, without adequately understanding the extent to which their universality is by its very nature a threat to the love we have for humans. This is why as a culture, we tend to anthromorphize our machines while dehumanizing each other. Consequently, these contrary dispositions give rise to serious moral issues which have been badly neglected. For example, humans are expected by their employers – or we demand it of ourselves and our students – to work at our computers, not only throughout the day but sometimes tirelessly into the night and on weekends and during holiday breaks! One promise of computopia was to give us all, even school children, more leisure time, but the truth is that if we have more leisure time, we all too often spend it working or 'playing' at the computer in *virtual isolation*. I-Pods are just another symptom of this growing trend towards 'technological isolation'. It is well worth noting that to date insufficient attention has been paid to the deleterious physical and mental effects of these new forms of social isolation (Laura, Marchant & Smith, 2008; Naisbitt, 1999).

Because we spend progressively more time communicating through or working in isolation at our computers, we tend not to notice that we are spending less time, and certainly 'less quality time' with each other. In particular within such technologically structured contexts of learning the potential for creating deep and bonding relationships between teachers and students is decidedly diminished. Potentially intimate and vital personal relationships are in essence being channeled without much, if any notice on society's part, into impersonal one dimensional, mechanistically mediated ones. We have slipped almost imperceptively into a new condition or culture of human relationships, which structurally encourages the substitution of face-to-face forms of human interchange with technologically mediated forms of communication, even when face-to-face communications is available (Stevens, 2004).

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When we treat each other more and more as machines and treat our machines more and more as humans, there is no doubt that the time has come to rethink the nature of our relationship with each other and to redefine the nature of our commitment to computechnology, especially as it impacts upon us educationally. When people young and old, log-on to distant relationships mediated through computer cyberspace, the illusion is fostered that these relationships are comprehensive and deep, when in fact they are only a one dimensional slice of a multi dimensional form of human interaction (Laura, Marchant & Smith, 2008). Loyal friendships and loving relationships depend upon the bonds of understanding, trust and intimacy, few, if any of which can be satisfactorily provided by a single ‘facet – experience’ from a multi-faceted person.

Given western society’s commitments to electronic technology, it all too frequently goes unnoticed that we have come to rely increasingly less upon face-to-face contact. Because we are able to converse over the telephone, we often choose not to meet people in person, even when we can. Indeed, we often use our answering machines to screen calls from both loved and unloved ones, just as many would rather text than make a call. ‘Conversations’ take place but they are increasingly no more than conversations with far removed or absent others. Because it is easier to communicate with people at a distance, we feel less compunction in distancing ourselves from them. The distance we create, encourage or tolerate represents a form of depersonalization and dehumanization which gives rise to personal alienation and social isolation (Ashton, & Laura, 1998). *Whilst the internal workings of a child’s mind remains shrouded in some mystery, it is palpably clear that protracted periods of social isolation do little to encourage a child’s overall development* (Laura & Marchant, 2002, 113).

### **Ramifications of the commitment to a form of knowledge as power**

The epistemic obsession with power and control over our world and each other has become an elemental facet of our physical existence. Our insatiable appetite for power and control spawns a competitive mode of interaction that impacts every aspect of our lives. Not only has it led to the desanctification of our natural world through the increasing expropriation of the earth’s resources, it serves to undermine and depersonalize our human relationships on all levels. For example, the human predisposition for power and control may impact upon the harmony of relationships between two superpower nations, or between classes, races, and sexes. Similarly, it may impact upon the intimacy between a married couple, between brother and sister, between school peers, or among friends. Put simply, power for the sake of dominance and control disrupts the natural patterns of human interaction that would otherwise be defined in terms of empathy, care and love (Laura, & Cotton, 1999). All of which are vital for the quality educational, emotional and spiritual growth of our children (Laura, Marchant & Smith, 2008).

A reconceptualization of the very concept of knowledge is needed. If there is a task of critical urgency confronting society, it is to redefine our relationship to nature and to each other by redefining the fundamental concept of educational knowledge in a way that it dignifies rather than diminishes our humanity by doing so.

## **Reconceptualizing knowledge as connectivity**

When the concept of educational knowledge is motivated by our faith in the virtue of connectivity as the ultimate form of security within nature, our interactions with each other will reflect a participatory mode of personal interchange which cannot be reduced to mechanistic substitutions for it (Smith, 2006). The measure of security is shifted in epistemic terms from how well we know how to dominate and control each other to how well we know how to connect with each other. This shift of epistemic vision encourages a transition from doing battle with each other to being in empathetic partnership with each other (Laura, & Cotton, 1999).

Once the knowledge as power paradigm is shifted from its position of epistemic priority, however, and substituted by an empathetic knowledge of participatory consciousness, then the real work of cultivating human relationships through intimacy of face-to-face exchange can begin (Laura, & Cotton, 1999). Appreciation of the need for empathetic connectivity with each other provides a new sense of the domain of our relationship and civic responsibilities, which emerge from our interactions with the tools of our technology. Technologies that derive from the presumption of an epistemology of power are never neutral. Motivated by power and the human desire that technology should enhance our own interest, technologies will by their very nature be tools of power, expropriation, exploitation and manipulation. The technologies we create are thus saturated with power. Given the fundamental interconnectivity of all of nature, for every increase in power brought to us by technology, there will be a diminution of power and consequent disruption somewhere in nature which results. If technologies are motivated by the participatory mode of epistemic consciousness, however, it is possible to develop technologies which connect rather than alienate us from nature and separate us from each other. Considering the high-tech contexts in which we live, work, learn and play, reconceptualizing relationships within such high-tech social and educational contexts is paramount.

## **Reconceptualizing relationships within high-tech contexts**

*We live in an era of uncertainty with instability and rapid change presenting both major problems and profound possibilities. Today's children will live their entire lives in change, with their experiences of environments—natural, social, cultural and virtual—very different from those of just one generation ago. . . . There is mounting concern, nevertheless, about the consequences of lifestyles that focus on materialism, technology and individualism, and which ignore social cohesion while marginalizing natural systems. It is a mistake to confuse the vibrancy of the virtual world with the increasingly troubled state of the real world (Davis & Elliott, 2003:2).*

Depersonalizing forms of technology have permeated our educational institutions, and the ways in which we teach and learn. The more time we dedicate educationally to our technological conveniences; the more time that is, for example, spent at a computer, the less time we may be spending building personal relationships which in turn make us *more* rather than less alive and *more* rather than less like the inert

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machines with which we surround ourselves (Laura, Marchant & Smith, 2008; Marchant, 2006).

Education has jettisoned from the curriculum the teaching of the reflective habit of mind for the acquisition of values, which guide our children to personal wholeness and a sense of purpose within society (Laura, Marchant & Smith, 2008). Today teachers are expected to coalesce the dual demands of developing students' basic skills, while fostering creativity and intellectual excellence within a globally technological and economically demanding society (Smith, 2006). However, such skills-based training, combined with ever-growing technologies have overshadowed personal creativity, humor, imagination, intellectual excellence, dialogue, collaborative learning, compassion and spiritual sensitivity, which, in turn, have diminished our educational purpose, the value of community connectedness; the holistic and mutual purpose of living (Laura, Marchant & Smith, 2008). *Children need to live lessons that engage their hands, hearts, bodies, and minds—not computer simulations* (Cordes & Miller, 2000:4)

For those amongst us who educate others or are ourselves educated within the framework of high tech environments (an ever increasing majority), there is the necessity to redress the imbalance of the high tech educative experience with high-contact educative environments. The type of learning experience proffered here involves more than the provision of skills in readiness for work. It involves a form of intimate connectivity, connectivity with other human beings and connectivity with the living things of this planet. Davis and Elliott (2003:3) suggest that there is a need for, *deep seated cultural change [that] involves core values, so our ethics and values must change, along with our lifestyles. While not the complete answer, Education 'must be a vital part of all efforts to imagine and create new relations among people and to foster greater respect for the needs of the environment* (UNESCO, 1997:15). Education must reaffirm its commitment to preserve the more personalized educative contexts of face-to-face human interchange, which serve to humanize rather than dehumanize us.

### **In search of a personal sense of purpose**

While technological media in all its forms are woven into the central fabric of society, both locally and globally, it is the warm blanket of a personal touch and purpose that enfolds us and personalizes the otherwise depersonalized beds in which we lay (Laura, Marchant & Smith, 2008). Unless there is a personal sense of purpose in what we do with our lives, we will always be less than whole and we will always be less than fulfilled. If we are less than whole, we are bound, in varying degrees, to be less than healthy, for it is our belief that the state of one's personal health both physically and mentally, is intrinsically associated with the state of personal wholeness.

### **Developing deeper personal relationships**

Those who live, learn, play and work in high tech environments should be concerned to balance their high tech impersonal experiences with high-contact personal environments. Find a place where you can feel your feet in the sand; feel your hands in the earth—let your hands plant seeds and give life back to an earth from which we

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have taken so much life away. Learn to cook with care and take pride in the things which you or others grow or raise. Share the creative skill of bringing slowly prepared food to the table with those who will be nourished not only in body but also in spirit by what they eat. We must also seek the sounds of nature to compensate for the assault upon our senses of the noise of technology. Find a place where you can truly hear the voice of the wind, the song of the birds, and the whisper of a flower in bloom. Hug the earth, hug others and hug yourself. With every touch of a living thing—plant, animal or human—we breathe life into ourselves and we are better able to give life to others. If we live our lives with love, we can live our lives with a sense of purpose. If we seek truly to help others by what we do, the work we do is the work of love and we will do it well and with integrity. The intimacy of the shared world inspires the intimacy of the shared life. Loneliness has no place in a world in which we are so deeply connected to each other (Laura, Marchant & Smith, 2008).

### **Repersonalizing educational contexts**

As educators we can nurture the repersonalization of educational contexts in many ways. We can vary the teaching and learning environment so students experience learning in contexts outside the four walls of the classroom. We can nurture their social and affective needs through provision of time for dialoguing their concerns and reflecting on their needs. We can challenge our children's thinking and provide times for soul searching (Healy, 1999). We can provide times for silence, times for marveling at the wonders of nature, times for laughing for the sheer joy of it and experiences that help us appreciate the wonders and mysteries of the world. We can teach our children strategies for dealing peacefully with conflict, and be role models showing respect for all cultures and religions. We can nourish the spirituality of each individual by showing kindness to all in all ways. We can connect with our students through providing a fear-free environment, a thoughtful response to a child's question, a caring word, a gentle tone of voice, a sensitive touch, a smile, to allow repersonalized moments to occur (Marchant, 2006; Smith, 2006).

### **Conclusion**

Our prime objective in this paper has been to reflect upon the impact which computechnology has had in the arena of interpersonal relationships. Our central concern has been to explore some of the neglected implications of the computer revolution as they pertain to education and society. While computer technology can serve to facilitate communication with others who are remote from us, the potential for integrated well-being and the forming of deep and trusting relationships between teachers and students, so integral a factor in educational outcomes, is being jeopardised by the increasing reliance on computechnology as the predominant medium within which education is administered and mediated at virtually every level of teaching. Such electronic technologies become dehumanizing and depersonalising when the relationships they simulate are substituted for the face-to-face personal modes of human contact and interchange, which by their very nature have the potential to be intrinsically richer than electronically mediated ones.

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Notwithstanding its many benefits, the much applauded technologization of the modern world is leading to the depersonalization of fundamentally intimate aspects of human relations. By legitimizing the culture of computechological communication, we implicitly encourage the progressive substitution of technological innovation for forms of interchange characterized by the physical presence of another human. Not only have we come to mediate our natural experiences of human relationship via mechanistic interactions, but we have technologized our lives in such a way that it is becoming even more difficult to conduct the vast array of our communications with each other in any other way. This is the lamentable legacy of compuphilia which now confronts us.

While computechology may have a salient role to play in education, compuphilia serves inadvertently to weaken the unions of loyalty, commitment and trust between teachers and students which would otherwise enhance educational achievement and student satisfaction. The bonds of loyalty and trust, stemming from genuinely intimate relationships feature as essential elements in the dynamics of all human relationships, but they are absolutely critical to loving and truly creative ones.

We have endeavored to show that technology has made electronic modes of communication increasingly accessible to us, but the forms of communication upon which we have come progressively to depend are themselves decreasingly intimate. This being so, the ensuring loss of intimacy alters the nature of education irrevocably, and not necessarily for the best. Having surrounded ourselves with machines, and having now brought the computer into our homes and schools, technology has itself become a value which we can use as a measure of the worth of the world around us. The substitution of technological innovation for the phenomenon of human interchange represents a deep wound to the human spirit.

Our philosophical aim, therefore, should be to reconceptualize knowledge as connectivity. It is of monumental importance that our educational endeavour is to reconceptualize educational epistemology as connectivity, which is then expressed empathetically so that the repersonalization of human relationships becomes the primary goal of the teaching and learning process. Personal action, therefore, lies in immersing ourselves in high-contact personal contexts and repersonalized educational environments which enable the development of deep and sustainable personal relationships, engenders an interpersonal sense of purpose, and supports the development of more meaningful pedagogy.

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