The Poetics of Blurred Boundaries:

Experiencing Technology Anew

Stacey O. Irwin
Millersville University
stacey.irwin@millersville.edu

In the lifeworld, experiencing often gives way to "using." We become "users" of the tool, "masters" of the technology, or "consum-ers" of a "brand." Experiencing our technology anew, without the advice of marketers and usability experts, might more authentically allow us to get back to the thing itself, for a second "look" at the variety of tools we plug and charge. This kind of reflection cultivates mindfulness of personal experience using technologically mediated tools, for pedagogical consideration. This abstract explores a scholarly reflection-in-progress, that will focus on experiencing technologically mediated space, with guidance from two texts: Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*, originally written in 1958, and Glen Mazis's *Humans, Animals, Machines: Blurring Boundaries*, published in 2008. In the fifty-year span between their publications, a lot of things have changed about the technological landscape. But the consideration of the openness of experiencing the lifeworld remains the same. Bachelard and Mazis provide insights that allow for a new look at the familiar questions, for a clearer, more understandable focus.

> *An invocation to openness of experiencing often invites the question, 'whose experience.' Experiences seem to vary so widely given personal, historical, cultural, ideological, and other differences.* (Mazis, 2008, p. 13)

> *Every corner in a house, every angle in a room, every inch of secluded space in which we like to hide, or withdraw into our selves, is a symbol of solitude for the imagination: that is to say, it is the germ of the room, or of a house.* (Bachelard, 1958, p. 136)

> *Increasingly, when we approach something new our first question is about how it functions. Our culture is saturated with information, which stubbornly refuses to come alive with understanding . . . We learn to close ourselves off, and we think of our souls and minds no longer as a presence but more in terms of apparatus and function.* (O'Donohue, 1999, p. 75)

This reflection started with three orienting quotes that open up my thinking about teaching today's new media software programs and environments to my students in a new way, one that invites them to think about experiencing their technologies anew, to capture a germ of creativity, to move forward in learning and imagination. Teaching today's software programs in a creative environment requires, even demands, a focus beyond form and function, to explore experience and space in the making. This exploration often comes through notions of place, ori-

entation, and articulation. In the lifeworld, experiencing often gives way to "using." We become "users" of the tool, "masters" of the technology, or "consum-ers" of a "brand."

Experiencing our technology anew, without the advice of marketers and usability experts, might more authentically allow us to get back to the thing itself, for a second "look" at the variety of tools we plug in and charge. This kind of reflection cultivates mindfulness of personal experience using technologically mediated tools, for pedagogical consideration as well as an expanded sense of self. This is a scholarly reflection-in-progress that will focus on experiencing technologically mediated space, with guidance from two main texts, Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*, originally written in 1958, and Glen Mazis's *Humans, Animals, Machines: Blurring Boundaries*, published in 2008. In the fifty-year span between their publications, a lot of things have changed in our technological environment, but the exploration of our lived world experiences can be interrogated through both Mazis's and Bachelard's considerations of the openness of experiencing, which invite us to meet at the crossroads and think a different path for exploring pedagogy for students learning new software environments.

Each of the two main texts in this reflection has a conversational style that invites me to make philosophical connections. When I read these works I am often putting sticky notes in the margins because they give me "philosophical advice" concerning my questions. One day they found themselves on my desk at the same time and they helped me work through a project. I thought it would be interesting to use the two together in a reflection about an area of interest to me concerning the way my students think about learning new media software environments and digital media programs like Final Cut Pro®, Flash®, and Dreamweaver®, to name a few.

Initial Renderings

I teach media production classes. I have recently noticed that my students are surprised at the longer than expected learning curve for learning the new software programs we teach in class. Sometimes they quit too early because the program is not user friendly enough, and they generally are not interested in opening a manual for increased understanding. They use template options and muddle through the process. And I do understand it. I have had three iPods and never cracked the iPod manual, and consider myself fairly comfortable with all things Apple. However, working in media production and new media design require artists and designers who keep working away until they learn the software, adapt it to their use, and seek answers in user groups and large, somewhat technical manuals. I have one for every software program I teach and I refer to them often. This is the leap I'd like my students to make.

So there is a disconnect. I do not believe all students are this way, but it used to be that 40 to 50 percent of the students in my class were willing to engage with new technologies for 24 hours at a clip, sleep on the lab couch, and edit their visuals with all of the tools available to them. I'm not seeing this as much now. I see 10 to 20 percent interest in plunging in and many more "good enoughs." Of course, there could be a million reasons for this. But what I hope to cultivate in my students, is an "openness to technological experience." You might think that students are open to this experience, but I actually think they are open to already knowing, not learning. They expect that they can muddle through. They do not like to be challenged by their technology. I am going to go out on a limb here, but I'm thinking students feel that they already know technology, so if they need to learn it, it must not be designed well enough. I'm searching for a way to light a new spark.

My perspective here is phenomenological, to question the relationship between students and their software environments toward openness in learning. A way to start might be to equip

students in an activity that invokes a phenomenological description of their experience using some kind of creative software program. Equally interesting might be an autobiographical reflection or engagement with a group of readings that softens the preconceived notions of these software programs that promise much quickly. Mazis (2008) provides a synopsis of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology that reminds us, "we make sense of the world in ways in which both reason and emotion, both sense experience and memory, and both logic and imagination resonate together and among themselves in the fullness of the ways we perceive the world" (p. 13). This expanded definition attempts to cut through the marketing rhetoric and branded promises of our technological machines—be they Mac or PC—to bring around the fullness of the experience of perception that can be considered when learning technology. Additionally, "[o]ne aspect of this perception of the world is shaped by the ideas and frameworks of interpretation we have been taught by our culture, family, and other institutional forces" (Mazis, p. 13). Overall, "rational frameworks" (the stories we've been told by the advertising agencies) can also restrict and distort these other levels of apprehension: "Merleau-Ponty called the imposition of our ideas onto perception in occluding ways as screens to the particular and unique sense of meaning at the moment, 'the experience error'" (p. 13).

How might I work to open students' perception to a new relationship with their media technology, when "gaining access to what we really experience can be a difficult task when we see, hear, touch, feel, smell and so on, through the filters of abstract preconceptions" of the world (Mazis, p. 14)? Many of these preconceptions are about technology. But not all technologies are created equally. And not all of these digital experiences are about plug in and play. Some technology experiences involve learning sophisticated software programs that design and create the media around us. Mazis's work allows me to open up a way to approach an exploration of helping students experience technology like software environments anew.

One of the thoughts that has come up in conversations with my students is that of expectation. They have been barraged with plug and play technology, so anything more than that is an instant frustration for more than a few. The promise of technological ease, this enframing, is my starting point. I am thinking that a philosophy of technology discussion might be one way to start my production classes off in the right direction. Certainly a philosophical pep talk in the first week of a media production course is unorthodox, but blurring boundaries to forward experiencing technology anew is worth it. It will be a pedagogical experiment.

Exploring Space

The Bachelard and Mazis texts share references that allow for fruitful reflection on the blurred boundaries of terrestrial space and technological space, and unearth the taken-for granted in the lifeworld. Both question and interrogate openness, space, and perception. Mazis notes that perception is our way into the world. He says, "our perception and overlapping feelings, emotions, memories, imaginative echoes, and so on are not 'our accomplishments but co-accomplishments' with all those beings to which we relate. Perception is a gathering together of all of those levels of meaning" (p. 15). How might our software environment change the space of our perception, our surround? How might we experience different dimensions of the lifeword through the Web, the iPod®, the Nintendo DS®, the creative software environment like Dreamweaver®, Final Cut Pro®, and Flash® as co-accomplishers? As my foreground and background perceivably shift, am I shutting out, bringing in, or just apprehending the world differently as I experience different kinds and types of technologies and their computerized environments? What might be the residue, the remainder? Mazis says, "In order to have real communication among

realms, there has to be seen both overlaps and boundary" (p. 27). What might our experiences be toward an openness that meets these edges and plateaus? Bachelard (1958) notes that "[t]he dialectics of here and there has been promoted to the rank of an absolutism according to which these unfortunate adverbs of place are endowed with unsupervised powers of ontological determination" (p. 212), and that, in technological mediation, the familiar may seem strange, opening up new worlds of understanding. This notion of the familiar seeming strange might be an appropriate jumping off point. Mazis (2008) notes, "Cyborg being—a sense of incorporating tools, and becoming interwoven with machines within us, about us, and within the meshes of how we organize the world, has always existed—it is just becoming more literal and extravagant" (p. 6).

Articulating Space/Place

In some way, it seems interesting to create an opening in the media production classroom, to discuss what Mazis (2008) calls the "work of articulation"—the work of integrated feeling, thought, and articulation, about digital environments, to explore the literal and extravagant and name them. "However, this work of articulation cannot happen if we cling to a notion of being both separate and above as required by an ego insecurely built into our cultural thinking. . . . It is necessary to be open at least to the possibility of this interconnectedness. If we are open to feelings that suggest these insights, then we can better explore the depths and complexities of how we are related to other beings" (p. 10).

For Bachelard, in *The Poetics of Space*, the phenomenology play is about going beyond the phenomenological description "in order to attain to the primary virtues, those that reveal an attachment that is native in some way to the primary function of inhabiting" (p. 4). He notes that "the phenomenologist makes the effort needed to seize upon the germ of the essential, sure, immediate well-being it encloses. In every dwelling, even the richest, the first task of the phenomenologist is to find the original shell" (p. 4). I wonder what this might mean to my students, to invite them to find the original shell of their inhabited technology? Bachelard would call this a rough outline of shading. He notes, "We should therefore have to say how we inhabit our vital space, in accord with all the dialectics of life, how we take root, day after day, in a 'corner of the world'" (p. 4). One way I might invite my students to think about inhabiting their technology, is by thinking about "intimate space" and "exterior space." Bachelard suggests that thinking this way invites poetic space, "because it is expressed, [it] assumes values of expansion" (p. 201). "To give an object poetic space is to give it more space than it has objectivity; or better still, it is following the expansion of its intimate space" (p. 202). Thinking about space, the space of the software environment, is an existential experience of opening oneself up to experiencing technology anew.

Students who use technology for artistic pursuits feel the texture of lived space differently in the software environment. To do something in "different ways" is to bring one's personality into the habits, practices, techniques, customs, and direction of the space where one works. Creative space happens to be within a students' mind and the technology. "Lived space is felt space," (van Manen, 1990, p. 102), the space where one feels comfortable and at home. When I use a creative software environment, I turn on and boot up the computer without really thinking about it. I open up my hard drive partition with the mouse, click through the initial process of building my workspace and saving it in a folder, and open up my bin, timeline, window, and put them in specific places on the desk top. I inhabit my space. I arrange the mouse to accommodate my left hand. I expand the audio tracks and add the audio monitor to the desktop or palate. I shrink or expand everything to take up the right amount of space on the screen. My hand automatically

makes it the way I like it. I do not really think about this arrangement until I help someone from my class and I re-arrange their desktop automatically before I answer the question. I have not created anything yet, but my special environment has been set. For me, to be in front of the computer is to face this kind of spatial arrangement and orientation. I make everything look the same way each time. It is a ritual born of habit from the very first day I learned how to create with technology in my first digital media class. I encourage my students to explore their place within the technology. Drew Leder (1990) notes that "[o]ur relationship unfolds in the space created by our technologically supplemented bodies" (p. 34), to extend our personal and natural body.

One way of explaining the actions of using a software environment is to say that the tool is an "action-within-a-system" (Ihde, 2002, p. 98). The flexible way that I can display a clip on the screen, or place two or three clips on the timeline and move them around using a rubber band technique of pulling and pushing, gives every choice a virtual feeling of unendingness within a system of functions and finite possibilities. A digital project is always in a state of flux, never really there as a material object, and often transported through the Web to continue its virtual life. This kind of interaction has an effect on the artist, the builder, and in some ways, transforms the goal of making a material object. Because often, the object is never material and remains digital through the duration of its use.

The technical space of the computer environment is transferred into personal space once the student user feels at home with the software. Heidegger explains space in this way: "Space is not to be found in the subject, nor does the subject observe the world 'as if' that world were in a space; but the 'subject' (*Dasein*), if well understood ontologically, is spatial" (Heidegger, 1962, p. 146). Space turns to place when it becomes named. Space shifts to place through perception. Using digital software is an experience of space and place, orienting oneself in one place then moving to another named place. Understanding orientation, how to get from one place to the other in the software program, is negotiating space.

From Space to Place

A computer environment has a certain way about it that places the body in a specific place perceptually. The student, once oriented, refers to the software environment as a place. Being in place, or implaced, is being in, with, within, at, on, and through the software environment:

> {T]o be "herein—is not only to not be in the room down the hall or in a room in the next building. It is to be *somewhere in particular*: a particular somewhere in space that situates the "somewhen" in time. Whereabouts pin down whenabouts. . . . To be somewhere is to be in place and therefore to be subject to its power, to be part of its action, acting on its scene. (Casey, 1993, p. 23)

Merleau-Ponty's (2000) notion of place is a joining of the body and its movements with the space it inhabits to form place. The movement the student learner experiences is action-oriented. My relationships to objects are seated in the understanding of my spatial relationship to them, how I act when around them, how I see them and move around them to orient my world:

> Movement is not thought about movement, and bodily space is not space thought of or represented. Each voluntary movement takes place in a setting, against a background which is determined by the movement itself. . . . We perform our

> movements in a space that is not "empty" or unrelated to them. (Merleau-Ponty, 2000, p. 138)

A student's background setting, the software environment, textures that user's movements and thinking in a relational way. If creative thoughts about spatial environment are based on nearness or farness, inside and outside, how might this change when our context of lifeworld movements occurs within the software environment? These movements are the concrete things "I can" do (Leder, 1990) in the lifeworld.

The act of brand identification constructs boundaries that make an "abstract" space into a "concrete" place (Walter, 1988, p. 142). "A place gathers experience and must be understood as one of the unities of experience" (Walter, p. 133). This gives the student user a place specifically to be situated in the world for the creating experience. The place-names used are the names of the brands that the industry understands, with a certain reputation and sense of things that come along with the names. The place where creativity happens, the location where techné binds, is the landscape of the computer interface. This "placescape" (Casey, 1993, p. 25), where the body is the primary mediator of the landscape, is negotiated based on markings and other signs or landmarks created by the student. This "pure, expressive meaning of a location [is] a concrete image that represents its quality of expressive space" (Walter, 1988, p. 145).

The intertwining of student and software environment occurs in the orientation process. Once oriented, the student can find his or her home, not only in that specifically named software, but in all creative digital software environments. What kinds of things orient the student learner, regardless of the "brand name"? Because the orientation process is about motility, and encompasses both body and time, student learners learn the placial orientation through investment of time spent with the software. "What matters most is the experience of being in that place and, more particularly, becoming part of the place" (Casey, 1993, p. 33). Indeed, it seems as though students need to become part of the environment to understand the software most fully. This is fulfilled through fully being in that place. Notes Casey:

> The Body Arc—By means of arc, one moves not just from the body to a place—such is the main vector of corporeal intentionality—but more actively away from the body and fully into a place. The body opens out onto a world. . . . The "tensional arc" sets forth the sheer difference between here and there, whose dialectic teases apart the densely woven fabric of place itself. (p. 111)

When the student-user moves from body to place, it is like magic happens in the learning. The experience is implaced with the Technological Other (Irwin, 2005).

> It is *placial*, for it is in place that we are beside ourselves, literally ec-static. In becoming implaced, we emerge into a larger world of burgeoning experience, not only by ourselves but with others. (Casey, 1993, p. 111)

To be inside is to know your place intimately. Heidegger (1962) states that Being-in-the-word is a kind of Being-in. "We are certainly not to think of the subject's 'inside' [Innen] and its 'inner sphere' as a sort of 'box' or 'cabinet'" (Heidegger, p. 87), but understand it as a way of knowing the subject intimately. "Knowing is a kind of Being that belongs to Being-in-the-world" (Heidegger, p. 88). Heidegger clarifies:

> Being-already-alongside is not just a fixed staring at something that is purely present-at-hand. Being-in-the-world is fascinated by the world with which it is concerned. . . . When concern holds back from any kind of producing, manipulating, and the like, it puts itself into . . . tarrying alongside. (p. 88)

Part of being human is the ability to make meaning out of life:

> Places built for residing are rather an enlargement of our already existing embodiment into *an entire life-world of dwelling*. . . . the longer we reside in places, the more body like they seem to be. As we feel more "at home" in dwelling places, they become places created in our own body images. (Casey, 1993, p. 120)

The embodiment relationship becomes more complicated as the technology becomes more complicated, thereby enlarging the enhancement and reduction processes and revealing them to become more dramatic. This is more than plug and play or wearing technology. New media software environments are "complex, compound contemporary technologies that involve virtuality, simulation, and computer modeling . . . These technologies—and the hype that goes with them—have special implications for embodiment and perception" (Ihde, 2002, p. 127). The implications for student learners are notions of a changed perception through the technology and a changed relationship with the body through the use of the technology. The body no longer possesses the work at the end of each day. Instead of putting it on the shelf until the human hands take hold of it again, the edited work is "stored" in a place within the computer. The perception of movement within embodiment might be described as "action at a distance" (Leder, 1990, p. 130), because the students use the mouse or keystrokes or pen to manipulate the information in the virtual space of the software and view it on the desktop through the software application. This "visualization occurs through the instrument" (Leder, p. 130) in a translatory way, and is different than the tactile and physical experience of editing in the historically more tactile way. This changes our perception of our activities and we feel bodily lost.

The pen becomes a translatory tool that operates between our bodies and the technology in a lacing and interfacing way. "The body of the thinker, the body of the sign, the body of the referent, are all experientially effaced" (Leder, 1990, p. 125), which encourages student learners to feel their bodies are gone, lost. This new place is foreign, a kind of unknown territory for a learner. This process for the student learner becomes more than negotiating nuances and can be a confusing and exasperating experience of orientation. Student learners have not learned "being in," so they are unable to get "back" in. They do not know they are lost because they have never had the opportunity to find their way around yet. Sometimes, the student learner can be displaced and not know how to get back into place.

> The desolating action of displacement consists, I believe, in an exterocentric movement from a real or imagined place of familiarity into unknown marginal areas where desolation is prone to be found and experienced. (Casey, 1993. p. 194)

For a student learner who is just learning the software, the interface is foreign, and the software environment itself also may seem like an unknown space. Once the student learner is familiar and spends time "in" the software environment, this place becomes joyous and fun. The orientation and the practice help build an environment of comfort. Bachelard and Mazis, along with

others, provide insights that allow for a new look about place, orientation, and articulation to point to a way to move toward a pedagogy that understands. One that experiences technology anew.

> A person who "understands" . . . has not only projected himself understandingly toward a meaning—in an effort of understanding—but the accomplished understanding constitutes a state of new intellectual freedom. It implies the general possibility of interpreting, of seeing connections, of drawing conclusions, which constitutes being well versed in textual interpretation. (Gadamer, 2004, p. 260)

References

Bachelard, G. (1964). *The poetics of space* (M. Jolas, Trans.). Boston: Beacon Press. (Original work published in 1958).

Casey, E. (1993). *Getting back into place: Toward a renewed understanding of the place-world*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Casey, E. (1997). *The fate of place: A philosophical history*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Gadamer, H.G. (2004). *Truth and method* (J. Weinsheimer & D. Marshall, Trans.). New York: Continuum. (Original work published in 1960).

Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time* (J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Trans.). San Francisco: Harper & Row. (Original work published in 1926).

Ihde, D. (2002). *Bodies in technology*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Irwin, S. (2005). Technological other/Quasi other: Reflection on the lived experience. *Journal of Human Studies, 28* (4), 453-467.

Leder, D. (1990). *The absent body*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Mazis, G. (2008). *Humans, animals, machines: Blurring boundaries*. New York: SUNY Press.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (2000). *Phenomenology of perception* (C. Smith, Trans.). London: Routledge. (Original work published in 1962).

O'Donohue, J. (1999). *Eternal echos: Celtic reflections on our yearning to belong*. New York: HarperCollins.

Van Manen, M. (1990). Research lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy. New York: SUNY Press.

Walter, E. (1988) *Placeways*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.

This page intentionally left blank.