

Contesting BC's vision of '21st-century education':

A critical discourse analysis

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I. Introduction -

In recent years the Premier's Technology Council has drawn on the rhetoric of '21st-century education' to frame discussions of educational policy and reform in British Columbia (Allen, 2010; Premier's Technology Council, 2010). Notable for its emphasis on 'creativity' and '21st-century skills', '21st-century education' is also representative of neoliberal social agendas driven by economic efficiency. Under the guidance of some of the world's largest transnational corporations, politicians in the UK, Australia, USA, and Canada have referenced '21st-century education' as an "essential" step in maintaining personal and national economic advantage (see, for e.g., P21 & AACTE, 2010; P21, 2008). Nevertheless, researchers writing for the British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF) have challenged the appropriateness of '21st-century education' for BC's youth, and have called for a more systematic interrogation of the contours, coherence, and value of the '21st-century' policy initiative (Naylor, 2011).

Acceding to this warrant, I took the Technology Council's (2010) "special report" on '21st-century education' as the embodiment of a set of desires - and a situationally relevant site of analysis. Drawing on Barker & Galasinski's (2001) approach to critical discourse analysis, I attempted to identify and problematize instances of agency, desire, and validity in the Technology Council's vision for '21st-century education'. To constrain the horizons of my analysis I scrutinized the 'executive summary' of the Technology Council's (2010) "special report" on '21st-century education' while asking: (i) How is agency reified and which actors are privileged? (ii) How is modality used to articulate (un)certainly? (iii) Is the construal of students' subjectivities valid? In sharing this ongoing inquiry, I hope to highlight the need for sustained critical engagement with educational policies in BC.

II. Historicizing '21st-century education' ¹

Whereas '21st-century skills' have only recently begun to frame discussions over educational policies in British Columbia, the '21st-century' narrative is neither new nor native to BC. Rather, it's historical roots lie in the UK, and stretch back decades.

With the 1983 establishment of a trust called Education 2000, the '21st-century' movement began as an attempt to accommodate for the academic/vocational divide in England's two-tiered education system (21st Century Learning Initiative, 2005). Believing that "sometime between the ages of 14 and 16 young people [could] be divided into two groups - the academically gifted (at least relatively), and the rest" (Young, 1993, p. 205), '21st-century skills' provided a means of systematizing and normalizing social hierarchies. For instance, Education 2000 argued against equitable access to education and suggested an emphasis on 'core skills' (instead of 'core content') would simultaneously be more relevant to today's students and more effective as a means of managing and cultivating an 'adequate' workforce (21st Century Learning Initiative, 2005). In so doing, Education 2000 unambiguously asserted that using schools to manage the labour pool was essential to extending England's advantage in a 'competitive global economy' (Young, 1993).

While the '21st-century' agenda's roots lie in the UK, it is important to emphasize that reform-minded entrepreneurs in the United States are largely responsible for its current popularity. The two leading '21st-century' advocacy groups - the Partnership for 21st Century Skills and the 21st Century Learning Initiative - have distinctive approaches to '21st-century skills', and yet both privilege skills over content and justify educational reforms on the basis of

¹ Adapted from Steeves (2011).

‘the needs of the global economy’. For instance, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (P21) attempts to harness the desires of the business community, policymakers, and ‘education leaders’ to “define a powerful vision for 21st century education to ensure every child’s success as citizens and workers in the 21st century” (P21, 2008). The 21st Century Learning Initiative, on the other hand, sees ‘21st-century skills’ as a science-driven framework for managing “the functioning of human societies” (21st Century Learning Initiative: About). In spite of differences in method and scope, the 21st Century Learning Initiative and P21 both see economic ‘reality’ as the basis of educational reform.

Whereas different approaches to ‘21st-century education’ emphasize different skills, there are significant overlaps. According to the Premier’s Technology Council (2010), for example, ‘21st-century education’ consists of functional numeracy & literacy, critical thinking & problem solving, creativity & innovation, technological literacy, communications & media literacy, collaboration & teamwork, personal organization, motivation, self-regulation & adaptability, ethics, civic responsibility, and cross-cultural awareness. In contrast, BC’s School Superintendents’ Association (Allen, 2010) describes ‘21st-century education’ as gathering, synthesizing, & analyzing information; working autonomously with minimal supervision; leading autonomous workers with influence; thinking creatively & asking the right questions; being creative ... turning thought into action; understanding other perspectives; working ethically ... locally & globally; communicating effectively with technology; critical thinking & problem solving; creativity & innovation; collaboration, teamwork & leadership; cross-cultural understanding; communications, computing & ICT literacy; career & learning self-reliance; caring for personal health & planet earth. Likewise, P21 and the American Association of

Colleges for Teacher Education (2010) outlines '21st-century education' as targeting learning & innovation skills (critical thinking, problem solving, communication, collaboration, creativity); information, media & technology skills (information literacy, media literacy, ICT literacy); and life & career skills (flexibility & adaptability, initiative & self-direction, social & cross-cultural skills, productivity & accountability, leadership & responsibility). In characterizing the skills that '21st-century education' privileges, Naylor (2011) writes:

Such skills look towards a brave new world of new economies and new work, or envision dire consequences if education systems fail to move towards such worlds. They focus almost exclusively on educational means and have little time for any discussion of ends, unless the ends are either linked to human capital or are perhaps assumed and implicit. The focus is primarily economic, and the skills are identified and promoted so that the interests of the individual, corporations, and the state are assumed to be common. (p. 10-11)

Over the last decade '21st-century skills' have become increasingly prevalent in educational reform initiatives in the US, and several Canadian provinces appear ready to follow suit. The Canadian government has traditionally delegated matters of educational policy to individual provinces, but in 2005 Parliament funded the development of the Canadian Council on Learning's version of the 21st Century Learning Initiative (CCL-CCA: 21st Century Learning Initiative). More recently, BC Education Minister Margaret MacDiarmid referenced Alberta and New Brunswick - provinces which have adopted '21st-century education' as policy - as templates for BC's push for '21st-century skills' (Steffenhagen, 2010). It was no surprise, then, when British Columbia's Ministry of Education asked the current president of the 21st Century Learning Initiative - John Abbott - to visit Victoria to describe his vision of '21st-century education' for BC's schools (Abbot, 2010). On this basis it should be clear that political momentum in BC currently privileges '21st-century education'.

III. Method -

The ‘21st-century education’ narrative encompasses all aspects of schooling - teaching, studying, curricula, assessment, professional development, etc. As a result, assessing the contours of ‘21st-century education’ requires a sustained multimodal engagement with lines of desire at the forefront of analysis. The analysis of policy documents, however, should inform any systematic inquiry into ‘21st-century education’. On this basis, the Technology Council’s (2010) “special report” on ‘21st-century education’ was seen as an ideal site for analysis. Critical discourse analysis, meanwhile, provides a methodological framework for foregrounding the desires entextualized in this document.

Critical discourse analysis aims to “uncover how language works to construct meanings that signify people, objects, and events in the world in specific ways (Rogers et al., 2005, p. 408). A wide and diverse field, critical discourse analysis has been applied in attempts to “unravel the ideological framings of discursive practices and is firmly grounded in the lexico-grammatical structures of language” (Barker & Galasinski, 2001, p. 25). Moreover, critical discourse analysis provides a potent oeuvre of interpretive and analytic strategies which can be systematically applied to linguistic data (see, for e.g., Fairclough, 1989, Chapter 5). Nevertheless, critical discourse analysis is an incredibly labour-intensive, “micro-linguistic enterprise” (Barker & Galasinski, 2001, p. 26). It requires a meticulous reading of texts line-by-line - coupled with rigorous attention to detail - and is generally unsuitable for large corpora of texts (Barker & Galasinski, 2001).

To delimit the parameters of my study I chose to focus on the ‘executive summary’ of the Technology Council’s (2010) “special report” on ‘21st-century education’. This four page

summary provides a rationale for the Technology Council's support of '21st-century education', and it also outlines 'major changes' which 'need' to take place in schools and communities across BC.

Since my interest was in how the Technology Council's vision of '21st-century education' accommodated for agency and embedded desires, a multileveled analysis was attempted. First, each sentence in the 'executive summary' was coded according to the directionality of agency. This phase of my analysis focused on 'nominalization' - a lexicogrammatical "transformation that changes the way processes are represented" and "makes it unclear who it is that actually does things" (Barker & Galasinski, 2001, p. 72-73). Second, instances of modality in the 'executive summary' were coded and counted. This allowed me to situate (un)certainty in relation to the Technology Council's vision of '21st-century education'. Finally, the 'executive summary' was read with attention to its construal of students' subjectivities. In particular, I considered whether the Technology Council's characterization of students' subjectivities was valid or a misrepresentation. This multi-focal application of critical discourse analysis made it possible to assess the Technology Council's vision of '21st-century education' for agency, desire, and validity.

IV. Analysis -

In the following section a sampling of this ongoing inquiry into ‘21st-century education’ will be shared in the hope of foregrounding critical undercurrents of educational policy in BC. First, to highlight problematic conceptualizations of agency within the Technology Council’s (2010) “special report” on ‘21st-century education’, examples of nominalization will be explored and contextualized. Next, examples of modality will be reified as (un)certainities. Finally, example statements from the “special report” which articulate preferred subjects will be discussed and assessed for validity.

Q: How is agency reified & which actors are privileged?

The directionality of agency is a vital resource for critical discourse analysis. According to Barker and Galasinski (2001), one way agency can be obscured or deleted is through nominalization - a lexico-grammatic strategy that transforms the representation of processes from verbs to nouns. By tracing agency, nominalization is an effective means of theorizing “who is the ‘doer’ and who is the ‘done to’” (Barker & Galasinski, 2001, p. 73). In the Technology Council’s (2010) “special report” on ‘21st-century education’ many of the most troublesome instances of nominalization obscure the agents behind processes.

On page 2 the Technology Council (2010) writes: “There are increasing expectations for more open government, education, and society.” Here it is notable that “increasing expectations”, a process, has been represented as a noun phrase and serves as the subject of the sentence. Who are the agents that are engaged in ‘increasing expectations’? Are they students? Parents? Teachers? ‘Society’? In nominalizing

“increasing expectations” the Technology Council obscures the agency behind their claims.

On page 4 the Technology Council (2010) writes: “[T]he pace of global change is combining with our shift to more a [sic] knowledge-based economy to create greater urgency around the need for change.” In this example the “pace of global change”, a process, has been nominalized. As a result, the sentence suggests the source of agency lies in the “pace of global change”, not the agents who give rise to change. So the claim that there is a “greater urgency around the need for change” is structurally linked with a nominalized process, and the agency of individual actors has been erased.

Also on page 4 the Technology Council (2010) states: “BC has discussed similar kinds of changes in the past and has made some steps toward implementation.” In this sentence the discussion, a process, arises through the agency of ‘BC’. This insinuates BC as an actor, and is a clear example of personification. How is it that BC can be said to ‘discuss’ something? What language does BC use when it ‘discusses’ something? With whom did BC ‘discuss’ these changes? This example does not nominalize a process, but it effectively obscures the agency behind claims. In other words, the Technology Council (2010) was found to use multiple lexico-grammatical strategies to obscure the voices behind claims to truth.

Q: How is modality used to articulate (un)certainty?

Modality “concerns judgements as to whether something is, might be, or must be the case, and whether one should, ought, or must do something (or alternatively whether s/he may do something)” (Barker & Galasinski, 2001, p. 77). I counted and coded instances of

modality in the ‘executive summary’ (Figure 1). This allowed me to situate (un)certainty in relation to the Technology Council’s vision of ‘21st-century education’.

Weak	Count	Strong	Count
could	0	should	4
can	4	must	7
might	1	need(s/ed to)	12
may	1	will	16

Figure 1: Counting modals & construing (un)certainty -

From this level of analysis it became clear that the Technology Council’s vision of ‘21st-century education’ is declarative and asymmetrically relational. In other words, the authors of the Technology Council’s (2010) “special report” on ‘21st-century education’ use modals to convey strong certainty in claims of what changes need to be made.

Furthermore, modals are used to position these changes as ‘common-sensical’, and it is strongly implicated that the role of the reader (and students, teachers, etc.) is to *obey*.

Although the authors state that the “intent of this paper is to lay out a vision for education in the 21st century” (p. 4), the distribution of modals suggests the authors’ objectives may be somewhat more forceful than ‘laying out’ implies.

On page 2 the Technology Council (2010) proclaims that “Instruction **should more consistently focus on the skills required** to find and use relevant content rather than on the delivery of pre-determined content.” Here the modal ‘should’ structurally links ‘instruction’ with ‘consistently focus on required skills’. On the surface this sentence can be read as instructional: the Technology Council knows what ‘instruction

should consistently focus on'. However, an under-acknowledged claim is that the Premier's Technology Council (2010) has the power to declare what instruction should focus on. In their use of modals, the Technology Council lays claim to the power to define the horizons of instruction while positioning (Davies & Harré, 1990) themselves as 'above' the understandings of teachers, educational researchers, parents, students, etc.

Further along in the Technology Council's (2010) "special report" on '21st-century education they claim that "Students **need to be able to** access information" (p. 3). While it must be acknowledged that students cannot meaningfully be said to be engaged in education if they do not have access to information, it might be helpful to consider a vision of education which suggested students need **not** be able to access information to show how relevant this command is. Moreover, which information do students need to be able to access? Do all students need to be able to access the same information? Do all students, for example, need to be able to access their banking details online? If so, only 85% of homes and 15% of schools in British Columbia have access to the Internet (Internet World Stats, 2011), so on what basis can this 'need' be justified? Equally important, how is it that the Premier's Technology Council came to know what individual children need to be able to do? Although the Technology Council's claim that all "students need to be able to access information" may seem quite 'common-sensical', it is loaded with ambiguities and assumptions. In summary, not only does this declaration use modals to produce problematic certainties and symmetries of power, but it is also conceptually bankrupt and functionally meaningless.

Within the Technology Council's (2010) "special report" on '21st-century education' the authors use modals to characterize what students should know, what teachers should emphasize, and what parents should do. One troubling example of this 'common-sense' authoritarianism comes on page 4, where the Technology Council writes: "[P]arents **have to recognize** their educational role outside the classroom." Here the Technology Council positions itself as having the power to define the roles of parents. After millennia of evolution and cultural development, at what point did parents lose the ability to recognize their educational role outside the classroom? More importantly, how do parents come to recognize what their educational role outside the classroom *is*? Is this role the same for all parents across contexts? Would, for instance, the educational role of parents include inculcating agency and personal responsibility? If so, how might the Technology Council's attempt to define the roles of parents, teachers and students inhibit the realization of agency and the practice of responsibility? Clearly, the Technology Council's use of modals is problematic. At the very least, by attempting to define the roles of students, parents, and teachers the Technology Council risks being construed as hegemonic and undemocratic.

Q: Is the construal of students' subjectivities valid?

Since the Technology Council (2010) privileged particular subjectivities in their "special report" on '21st-century education', it was important to consider how valid these subjectivities were in relation to the lived experiences of today's students. If the subjectivities preferred by the Technology Council could be found to be inconsistent or

unrealistic, then the ‘21st-century education’ project could be deemed structurally problematic and unsuitable for British Columbia’s youth.

According to the Premier’s Technology Council (2010), “Students must play a greater role in discovering their own content so the measurement of success will be related to how they find, use, and develop **accurate, relevant content**” (p. 2). On the surface this may sound like the Technology Council is endorsing student-centered education, but a closer reading indicates the quite the opposite: The Technology Council is advocating in favour of a top-down, hierarchically controlled education. To clarify, how is it that the Technology Council has the ability to define or identify accurate or relevant content? In effect, by positioning themselves as defending the development of “accurate, relevant content”, the Technology Council becomes an instrument of surveillance and accountability. They not only have the power to define the roles of other actors (e.g., students, teachers, parents), but also the power to define what content is accurate and relevant. In this way, the Technology Council can be said to reify a regime of truth in which they - or the ideologies they defend - are the dominant agents, not students.

Another problematic characterization of students’ subjectivities comes on page 3, where the Technology Council (2010) insists that “access to information will allow students to make informed decisions about their interests and understand the implications of new information for potential career decisions.” Admittedly, without access to information neither students nor anyone else can be expected to make informed decisions about much of anything, but is it necessarily the case that more information leads to

better decisions? Moreover, does more information necessarily lead to better understanding? And how is it that access to information can help students make better career decisions? Are career decisions constrained more by access to information or material realities? For instance, how many underprivileged students give up on careers not because of a lack of access to information but because of limited access to resources? More explicitly, how many girls and boys come to sublimate interests due to insufficient access to information? In construing students' subjectivities as contingent on access to information, the Technology Council privileges students as positivistic, enlightened subjects. To put it another way, for the Technology Council students' personal development is a linear, causative process which begins with ignorance and ends with mastery. In effect, by positioning students as rational subjects the Technology Council is attempting to "objectify, shape, and control students" by substantiating access to information as a 'dividing practice' (Jabal & Rivière, 2007, p. 198). By that I mean that the Technology Council situates access to information as the means with which students achieve respectability. Given that access to information is structurally linked with "career decisions", this positioning of students' subjectivities is far from innocuous. Rather, it firmly implicates the Technology Council's attempt to privilege a vision of students as essentialized capitalist subjects.

In considering the validity of the Technology Council's (2010) articulation of students' subjectivities, it is worth emphasizing that at least one dimension of the educational experience was completely omitted: gender. This omission is especially problematic because research has repeatedly shown that boys and girls do not have

symmetrical dispositions or understandings (see, for e.g., Laaksoharju & Rappe, 2010; Barton, Tan, & Rivet, 2008; Solomon & Harrison, 1991; Spear, 1989). Students cannot be essentialized within static identities - gender, ethnicity, age, etc. - and it is critical that educators avoid conflating students' experiences into the same category. Without acknowledging these differences the Technology Council risks being construed as elitist, socio-culturally regressive, or hegemonic.

An important example of conflated gender categories comes on page 4, where the Technology Council (2010) writes: "Most students have known only the digital age, are fully conversant with technology and capable of using it as part of learning." In this sentence the subject, "most students", presumably encompasses boys and girls. Under those circumstances it seems reasonable to ask: Do boys and girls across BC have symmetrical experiences with and exposure to technology? Does the "digital age" mean the same thing to boys as it does to girls? For that matter, what is the "digital age" and when did it arrive? As well, do students across BC have equal access to the "digital age"? Given that most of BC is rural and penetration of high-speed Internet is uneven, is the Technology Council's idea of "most students" representative of students outside the province's cities? At a minimum, the Technology Council's understanding of students subjectivities seems simplistic and under-theorized. In that case, the Technology Council's vision for '21st-century education' may be 'new'² but it is not necessarily 'better'.

² "We know full well that some values are born old and from their birth exhibit their conformity, their conformism, their inability to upset any established order" (Deleuze, 1965/2001, p. 81).

V. (Contra-)Conclusion -

As illustrated by the mere existence of the Technology Council's (2010) "special report", the '21st-century' narrative enjoys broad support from BC's Liberal party. This same party, over the course of a decade of 'leadership', has presided over the closure of nearly 200 schools across BC (BCTF, 2010a). Likewise, under Liberal 'leadership' class-sizes have ballooned (BCNDP, 2010), class compositions have become burdensome (BCTF, 2008), and teachers' bargaining rights have been demolished (BCTF, 2010b). Any assessment of the push for '21st-century' reforms should bear these realities in mind.

In this study I have drawn from the tools of critical discourse analysis (Barker & Galasinski, 2001) to extend my ongoing inquiry into educational policy in British Columbia by identifying and problematizing instances of agency, modality, and validity in the 'executive summary' of the Technology Council's (2010) "special report" on '21st-century education'. In summary, I found that the Technology Council's vision of '21st-century education' resorts to: (i) nominalization in order to obscure the agents behind processes; (ii) modality to express strong certainty in dubious claims of truth; (iii) invalid, essentialized representations of students' subjectivities. On this basis, British Columbians may see warrant in resisting the push for '21st-century education' in favour of a less problematic approach to educational reform.

VI. Delimitations -

Researchers attempting to assess the contours of educational policies benefit from multi-faceted analyses. To that end, it should be understood that the current study does not attempt to offer a comprehensive evaluation of the '21st-century education' narrative. Instead, I have attempted to

harness the micro-textual orientation of critical discourse analysis to focus on key aspects of the ‘executive summary’ - agency, modality, and validity. In excluding the text’s main body from my analysis I narrowed the field of study to a manageable chunk, but a thorough interrogation of the ‘21st-century’ narrative would not only include this data, but the understandings of students, teachers, parents, administrators, etc. Moreover, no attempt was made to evaluate ‘21st-century education’ in relation to curriculum development, professional development, or economic feasibility. Nevertheless, it was hoped that a tentative analysis, however incomplete, might highlight the need for sustained interdisciplinary engagement with educational policies in BC.

VII. Reflexivity -

Like many British Columbians, I think our schools are in dire need of reform. While working as a chronically under-employed on-call substitute teacher for the Vancouver School District I have witnessed the pressing need for change first-hand: crumbling schools, laughably outdated technology, dwindling or squandered resources, etc. The ‘answer’ to this reality, according to the Liberals, is ‘21st-century education’ - and this is where my inquiry gains a sense of urgency. If the Liberals have led BC to its current level of educational ‘success’ I fear the consequences of a Liberal-led overhaul of the province’s k-12 public education system. At the same time, I am mindful of the fact that the ‘21st-century education’ narrative is thick with ‘feel good jargon’ (e.g., “creativity”, “innovation”, “ICT literacy”) and critical treatments of the initiative risk alienating well-meaning reformers. To compensate for these tensions I have attempted to avoid philosophical and technical terminology while emphasizing the need for democratizing access to power, protecting the agency of teachers, and implementing student-centered reforms.

By the same token, it was hoped that the current study could inform my ongoing inquiry into '21st-century education' while drawing attention to the importance of explicitly conceptualizing the processes of subjection in education policies.

VIII. Discussion -

Above and beyond critical discourse analysis, another viable means of assessing '21st-century education' would be to generate and analyze interview data. For instance, semi-structured interviews would be ideal for exploring whether students and the Premier's Technology Council have complimentary understandings of '21st-century' skills, identities, and values. In like manner, how about teachers? How might teachers resist or subvert '21st-century education'? Similarly, how do parents relate with and account for the Technology Council's emphasis on education as an incubator for capitalist subjectivities? In exploring these and other aspects of the '21st-century' narrative, British Columbia's schools "might be more worthy of and not betray those who come to it with hopes and dreams of splendid transformation" (St. Pierre, 2004, p. 294).

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